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## POPULISM REACHES NEW HEIGHTS IN NARENDRA MODI'S INDIA

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**India's prime minister Narendra Modi, who has been in power for ten years, is seeking a third term in office. His goal is to restore the country to the preeminent position it supposedly lost due to previous Muslim and British rulers.**

**He is kicking off the 2024 election year with the inauguration of the Ayodhya temple intended to liberate Hindus from the alleged enslavement they endured for 1,200 years.**

**His supremacist ideology aims to transform the Hindu majority into an electoral majority. By intertwining politics and religion, it turns Muslims and Christians into aliens worthy only of the status of second-class citizens.**

**R**arely has Hindu nationalist pride been so deeply flattered in India as at the start of 2024. With general elections looming in the South Asian giant – a huge ballot set to stretch over the months of April and May to allow hundreds of millions of voters to go to the polls – Narendra Modi is running for a third five-year term. He aims to make the religious question the common thread running through his campaign. On January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2024, before an audience of 8,000 devotees, the head of government of the world's most populous country (1.43 billion inhabitants) led **the solemn consecration of the Hindu temple currently under construction in Ayodhya**, a holy city located on the Ganges plain. Boycotted by the opposition, this surreal piece of stage management is one of the most significant political events in India's contemporary history since the country gained independence in 1947.

This inauguration marks the fulfilment of the Hindu supremacist fantasy formulated almost a century ago by the **Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)**, the association of the nation's volunteers founded in September 1925 in the city of Nagpur, at the exact geographical centre of the Indian subcontinent. The apparatchik Modi, born in 1950, was indoctrinated in the organisation from the age of eight and made his career there, before winning election mandates from the 2000s onwards. As the central core of the Hindu nationalist constellation around which dozens of student, workers' and farmers' organisations, publishing houses and charities orbit, as well as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Indian People's Party – its political showcase –, the RSS considers the Ayodhya temple its ultimate Holy Grail. Narendra Modi made it happen. Ayodhya is becoming what Mecca is to Islam: the holiest place in Hinduism. The prime minister opened an international airport on December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2023, to draw millions of pilgrims from all over the world. In the eyes of the Indian people, the far-right leader is now either a timeless sage, detached from the material condition, or a fanatical guru.

### **An authoritarian regime with theocratic overtones**

Never had an Indian prime minister indulged in such a masquerade, but the West was unmoved. After receiving Narendra Modi in Paris with the greatest possible republican decorum for Bastille Day on July 14<sup>th</sup>, the French national holiday celebrating the homeland of human rights, Emmanuel Macron was

1. Guillaume Delacroix is co-author with Sophie Landrin of the essay "Dans la tête de Narendra Modi" (Actes Sud, in press).

the guest of honour of his Indian “friend” on January 26<sup>th</sup>, 2024, in Delhi. Initially, Joe Biden was to have been invited to the Republic Day military parade marking the anniversary of the Indian constitution. The US president reluctantly declined to attend in the wake of the recent attempted assassination of an American citizen of Indian origin in New York, an opponent of the Modi regime. Washington accuses the Indian secret service of being behind the attempt on his life.

Yet India is well and truly in the process of exiting the democracy camp and sliding into an authoritarian regime with theocratic overtones, and not because prelates are taking the reins of the country – Hinduism has no clergy whatsoever – but because the policies pursued at the top of the state are driven solely by religious considerations, in defiance of the secularist thinking of India’s founding fathers, Mahatma Gandhi and Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru in particular. The current government is at pains to consign them to

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the dustbin of history, as well as other figures who are less well known in Europe, such as Nehru’s right-hand man Vallabhbhai Patel and Babasaheb Ambedkar, the principal drafter of the constitution enacted in 1950.

Like Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey, Narendra Modi is striving to merge religion, nation and leadership, flying in the face of India’s secular constitution. Describing India as “the world’s largest democracy” no longer makes much sense today. More or less free elections are still held at the national and state levels, there is still a multi-party system and political changeovers occur regularly. But the foundations of democracy and the rule of law that typically accompany that are being eaten away and undermined one after another. **The judiciary has been brought to heel, all the way up to its highest level, the Supreme Court.** India’s election commission, which is supposed to guarantee the pluralism of universal suffrage, has been placed under executive control; as recently as December 2023, the reform of the procedure for appointing its members made them entirely dependent on the government. In ten years, **17,000 international NGOs have been expelled from the country;** opponents and what remains of the independent press has been severely repressed, and history has been completely rewritten in school textbooks. Fear reigns everywhere.

The latest figures released in 2023 show **that the ruling party attracts more than two-thirds of private donations to politics**, and in a very opaque way. It has an unrivalled strike force, both human and financial, which it deploys without limit, particularly on social media. The BJP has become a bulldozer against which opposition parties have virtually no resistance in the northern half of the subcontinent, with the notable exception of Punjab state in the west, and Bengal state in the east, the traditional stronghold of Indian communism. Only the southern half of India holds its own, with the BJP proving unable to make inroads in most of the Deccan states, from Kerala to Telangana, taking in Tamil Nadu.

Three heavyweight institutions have taken note of India’s worrying new situation, downgrading it on the scale of democracies. For the past three years, the Swedish V-Dem Institute at the University of Gothenburg has **classified India as an “electoral autocracy”**, a regime

that looks like a democracy but which one by one scuttles all the checks and balances that could safeguard the balance of power. The American NGO Freedom House **counts it among “partially free” countries**, while the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, an

intergovernmental organisation based in Stockholm, **places it among the “declining” democracies.** In the World Press Freedom Index compiled and published by Reporters Without Borders, India has dropped to 161<sup>st</sup> place out of 180.

Iniquitous laws, often inherited from British occupation, on the offence of sedition or religious conversion are used to silence any dissenting voice. Anyone who is not on Modi’s side is automatically considered an enemy of the prime minister, an enemy of Hindus and an enemy of the nation. Renowned political analyst Pratap Bhanu Mehta said as much recently **in an interview with *The New York Times*:** Indian democracy is under “very worrying” assault and “a sense of fear” is spreading about “the direction it is taking”.<sup>2</sup>

Back on August 5<sup>th</sup>, 2020, for the laying of the foundation stone of the Ayodhya temple, Narendra Modi was transformed into a high priest, **dressed from head to toe in a gold-coloured tunic and draped with a saffron stole**, the orange fetish of Hindu nationalists. The date had not been chosen at random. Exactly one year earlier, his government had brutally placed Jammu and Kashmir, the

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2. “India is transforming. But into what?”, Pratap Bhanu Mehta, *The New York Times*, December 12th, 2023

only Muslim-majority state in the Indian Union, under siege, blocking internet access, imprisoning local leaders, abolishing the regional executive and parliament and banning all foreign journalists. A year later, surrounded by priests and ascetics, the Hindu nationalist leader performed a Vedic liturgy, chanting endless mantras before unveiling the foundation stone of the future edifice.

On many other occasions, Modi has shamelessly mixed politics and religion. On December 13<sup>th</sup>, 2021, the member of parliament for Varanasi (formerly Benares), the holy city with its famous funeral pyres where the most fervent believers dream of achieving moksha, the end of the cycles of reincarnation, inaugurated an architectural complex leading to the Ganges by **immersing himself in the river, again dressed in saffron, his forehead crossed with the tripundra**, three horizontal lines drawn in ashes that symbolise the god Shiva.

More recently, on May 28<sup>th</sup>, 2023, India's strongman took religious symbolism a step further by unveiling the interior of the new parliament building in Delhi. Drawn to the theatre since early childhood, the septuagenarian leader indulged in a totally inappropriate show. He did not see fit to invite the president of the republic, Droupadi Murmu, even though, according to the constitution, parliament is the product of the people and the head of state, however symbolic the latter's role may be. Narendra Modi lay on his stomach in front of around 30 half-naked sadhus, contemplative recluses, before entering the new hemicycle with his face deep in contemplation, carrying a long golden sceptre against his chest, which he religiously placed next to the high chair of the speaker of the house. That day, for all to see, the temple of democracy was converted into a Hindu temple.

The monarchical ceremony enabled Modi to appropriate the symbolism of a relic dating back to the Cholas, the Tamil dynasty whose Hindu empire (300 BC-1279) gloriously resisted the Muslim invasions that swept across the north of the subcontinent from the 7<sup>th</sup> century onwards. It was also used to stage a hoax. According to the prime minister's entourage, the sceptre in question was given to Nehru by the British on the day they left India. Vehemently contested by historians, this account was a means of legitimising an Indian right wing invested with an allegedly divine power. All the better to make people forget its past collaborationist activities with the British crown. In the three decades leading up to 1947, the Hindu Mahasabha (Hindu Grand Assembly), a forerunner of the BJP, had distinguished itself for its involvement in the workings of the occupying power's administration.

## An outrageous cult of personality

A century later, it is a question of concealing this fact and acquiring new virtue, at a time when the 21<sup>st</sup> century is shaping up to be "India's century", as Modi is convinced. This is why he worked so hard to ensure that his country took over the rotating presidency of the G20 from Indonesia in 2023, when it should have held it in 2022. It was a ploy designed to make Modi look like one of the world's leading politicians in the run up to the Indian general elections. The pomp with which the leaders of the 20 countries in this club were received at the Delhi summit last September was only matched by the propaganda deployed by the Indian authorities to capitalise on it.

Accustomed to an astonishing cult of personality, Modi's face is everywhere: in railway stations and airports, on bags of food rations distributed to the most destitute, on Covid vaccination certificates, in the press to the point of overkill. One figure speaks volumes:

**To inaugurate the new parliament in May 2023, Narendra Modi lay on his stomach in front of around 30 half-naked sadhus. That day, for all to see, the temple of democracy was converted into a Hindu temple.**

his government spends the equivalent of €230,000 a day on buying advertising space in the media. Since the end of December, life-size cardboard cutouts of Narendra Modi have been set up in all railway stations and schools so that Indians, from the youngest to the oldest, can take selfies with him. It is an election stunt, financed with taxpayers' money. For the G20 summit itself, it was impossible to take two steps on the capital's streets, or in any of India's major cities, without coming across a giant portrait of the prime minister bearing the logo of the world summit and the slogan chosen for the occasion: "One Earth, One Family, One Future". In other words, the future of the planet will not be played out without India.

For the Hindu nationalist leader, the primary goal is to restore the country to the first-rate position it lost because of the Muslims and the British colonists of the East India Company. First-rate, because India invented not only yoga and Ayurvedic medicine, but also, and millennia ago, aviation, cosmetic surgery, in vitro fertilisation and the internet – at least according to several BJP leaders, who spout such nonsense with the utmost seriousness at scientific conferences. If Modi wants to free Indians from the slavery of which he claims they have been victims for 1,200 years, it is because he believes the time has come to heal what the writer Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul (in 1976) called the "wounded civilisation". According to the winner

of the 2001 Nobel Prize for Literature, India's decline began in 1565, when the sultanates of the young Mughal Empire brought down Vijayanagar, capital of the last great Hindu empire, now an archaeological site known as Hampi, in Karnataka.

This saga, seen as an unmitigated disaster by RSS militants, is analysed as the inescapable culmination of Hindu vanity by Salman Rushdie in his latest novel, *Victory City* (2023). A native of Bombay, the American-British writer spins a mythical tale of the rise, then decline and fall of Vijayanagar after it became a reactionary dictatorial regime, which the reader might take as an allusion to the current situation in India: "Many people are suffering from this new hard line but they are keeping quiet, because (the king) has created a squadron of henchmen who react harshly to the

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slightest sign of dissent. There is a hard core, a small group that rules, and most people of a certain age fear it and hate it. Unfortunately, a significant proportion of young people support it, saying that the new 'discipline' is necessary to safeguard their identity."

### **The principles of secularism trampled underfoot**

Whatever the historical interpretation, the erection of the monumental Hindu temple at Ayodhya is presented by the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), the World Hindu Council, an association linked to the RSS and responsible for the work, as a victim-based interpretation of this distant past. It is intended, it says, to "save the world from Christians and Muslims".<sup>3</sup> The consecration of the temple could have passed for a political act like any other had Narendra Modi been inclined, since he came to power ten years ago, to cut the ribbon on a new mosque here, on a new church there. Given India's religious diversity, doesn't the secularism enshrined in the preamble to the Indian constitution establish a secular model in which the state authorises the presence of all faiths in the public arena and ensures each individual can express their beliefs, whatever they may be?

Modi, however, has done nothing of the sort. **Accused of having allowed anti-Muslim pogroms** of an exceptional barbarity to take place in 2002 in his native region of Gujarat, a state bordering Pakistan he had taken charge of a few months earlier (the United States banned him from the country for years over the violence), he has only one idea in mind: to establish the superiority of Hindus over the rest of the population. And to assimilate the Indian nation to Hinduism, seen not as a religion but as a millennia-old culture, a philosophy, a way of life and even, for the most radical, a race. His political family sums up this vision in the term "Hindutva", a concept coined by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar. According to the ideologue to whose ideas the founders of the RSS subscribed, to deserve Indian nationality it is imperative to be Hindu. And a Hindu can only be someone who considers the territory of India not only as their homeland, but above all as their holy land.

This view effectively relegates to the rank of second-class citizens all those who belong to a religion described as "foreign": Islam and Christianity, of course, as well as Zoroastrianism imported by the Persians,

and Judaism, whose representatives are now very few in number in India. In contrast, the BJP regime, which has been in power since May 2014, is much more tolerant of religions closely or distantly linked to Hinduism, because of their indigenous character, like Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism. In this respect, the policy pursued by the autocrat Modi is populist, since in the name of a supposed homogeneity of the people, in this case the overwhelming Hindu majority, it fosters popular resentment against real and above all supposed foreigners, in order to promote a policy of exclusion by authoritarian means. Arbitrary arrests of Muslims and Christians, as well as **the destruction of their homes and businesses, have become commonplace**, generally under the eyes of an impassive police force.

This policy, incidentally, confirms the disturbing affinities observed for nearly a century between the Hindu nationalism promoted by the RSS and Zionism, affinities that have been strengthened by the emergence of Islamist movements on a global scale. As the French researcher Christophe Jaffrelot has analysed in a number of recent publications, **"majoritarianism", whether Hindu or Jewish, feeds on "ethno-nationalist ideologies that give priority to factors such as race, territory and nativism"** and sees the individuals who make up the Muslim minority as "sub-citizens".<sup>4</sup>

3. According to Triloki Nath Pandey, a VHP leader, in an interview with the author in 2019.

4. "From Savarkar to Golwalkar, why Hindutva admires Zionism", Christophe Jaffrelot, Kalrav Joshi, *The Indian Express*, December 7th, 2023

It is no coincidence that Israel, a strategic partner for more than 30 years and a leading arms supplier, has grown considerably closer to India since Narendra Modi took office as prime minister and Benjamin Netanyahu has been in power in Israel. After the Hamas terrorist attack on Israel on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023, the Indian leader drew parallels with the Mumbai attacks and hostage-taking perpetrated by Pakistani Islamists in November 2008. With just a few months to go before the Indian general elections, he has found a fresh opportunity to wave his Islamophobic red rag to rally Hindu voters around him.

## Emigration on the rise

Maintaining the confusion between Islam and terrorism is a tried and tested practice for him. When he was elected Gujarat chief minister in 2002, he referred extensively to the September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, attacks in the United States, as well as the terrorist attack on the Indian parliament in December of the same year. In 2019, when he was up for re-election as prime minister at the end of his first term, he made security the central theme of his campaign in the wake of a terrorist attack on an Indian army convoy in Kashmir, ordering surgical airstrikes on Pakistan in retaliation. This operation won him re-election by a landslide, with a record absolute majority for the BJP: 303 seats out of a total of 543.

If Modi can bring the religious question to the fore in 2024, it is because he holds all the power in his hands. In 2014, he masked his intentions to reach the top. With the Hindu nationalists behind him, he preferred to seduce the rest of the electorate, on the sound advice of his communication experts, by promising them “development”, in the image of the Gujarat model that he prided himself on having put in place in his home region, after ensuring that he had the employers and a number of prominent billionaires in his pocket.

The promise of better days (“achhe din”), of economic growth and its expected benefits, has nevertheless fizzled out. Over the last ten years, India’s gross domestic product (GDP) has grown by more than 60%. But in the previous decade, **when the Indian National Congress was in power, it grew by nearly 100%**. Narendra Modi says he is in charge of “the fifth-largest economy in the world”, except **that on a per capita basis, the wealth produced is no better than that of Bangladesh or Zimbabwe**. Since he took office, public debt has soared to exceed the value of GDP, unemployment has reached record levels (to the extent that the publication of official statistics has been

banned), **causing more and more young people to flee abroad** in search of a good education.

Hundreds of thousands of people desperate to find work are also leaving the country, as highlighted by **the plane intercepted on French soil before Christmas 2023**. The aircraft belonging to the Romanian charter company Legend Airlines, was taking educated Indians, many of them from Gujarat, to Nicaragua, from where they hoped to go to Mexico and then into the United States. **In 2023, no fewer than 100,000 Indians attempted to enter the country illegally**, compared with 64,000 in 2021 and 20,000 in 2019. Currently, 2 million Indians leave their country every year. And since Narendra Modi came to power, **1.4 million Indian citizens have renounced their nationality**.

The tragedy of migration comes on top of an unprecedented widening of the gap between rich and poor, **with 1% of the Indian population owning three-quarters of the national wealth**, while the poorest half

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owns just 3% of that same wealth. **India ranks 132nd in the UN Human Development Index**, and according to the World Bank, 30% of its inhabitants live on less than \$1.90 a day. When the government renewed the basic food aid programme last year, aimed at families who were not getting enough to eat, it was forced to recognise **that there were 800 million beneficiaries**. More than one in every two Indians.

## An openly Islamophobic discourse

One thing is certain: the completion of the Ayodhya temple brings to a close a sequence of three decades of debates, crises and bloody riots between the Hindu majority on the one hand, who make up 80% of the population and who Narendra Modi’s BJP needs to turn into a majority at the ballot box, and the Muslim minority on the other, which accounts for “only” 14% but represents 200 million people, the third-largest Muslim population in the world after Indonesia and Pakistan. To appreciate the political stakes involved in this Ayodhya affair, one needs to know that the supreme holy city is the birthplace of Rama, the mythical ruler of antiquity who became a deity in the Middle Ages. Rama, whose epic Ramayana recounts the quest for his wife Sita kidnapped by the devil, is as important to Hindus as the trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. In the highest echelons of the BJP, it is not uncommon to hear it said that **Modi is “the new Rama”**. As if the

prime minister were a living god relegating all the great national figures of the past to insignificance, first and foremost Nehru, whom Modi has vowed to beat in terms of longevity in power (almost 17 years).

The commemoration of the return of the royal couple Rama and Sita to the city of Ayodhya, illuminated by millions of candles, gives rise every year to Diwali, the festival of lights considered in northern India to be the Hindu New Year. Diwali is another way of forgetting the era when India was ruled by Muslims, which it was in whole or in part until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Ayodhya, an ancient town on the great plain of the Ganges, was chosen by the founder of the Mughal Empire, Zahīr ud-Dīn Muhammad, Babur, to build a mosque at the beginning of his reign. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the building began to cause controversy, with some Hindus claiming that before Babur's mosque a temple dedicated to Rama had stood on that very spot, an assertion that has never been confirmed by any archaeological excavation, or even by his birthplace.

In the early 1990s, the leaders of the BJP organised a procession covering several thousand kilometres in the north of the country, from the west coast of Gujarat to Ayodhya, with the aim of rallying crowds around the idea of demolishing the mosque and building a grandiose Hindu temple in its place. The nationalist parade drew in 75,000 volunteers and sparked outbreaks of violence in many places, under the leadership of the party president at the time, Lal Krishna Advani. This unprecedented operation culminated on December 6<sup>th</sup>, 1992, in dozens of rampaging fanatics climbing the domes of the mosque to demolish it with pickaxes and hammers, triggering a period of riots that left 2,000 people dead, the vast majority of them Muslim, and thousands injured in various parts of India. Behind the scenes, a local BJP boss in his forties with a chubby face and black beard meticulously organised every detail of the procession. His name? Narendra Modi.

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