

Democracy or demagogracy?

Is the world's largest democracy sliding towards autocracy?

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Police forces used to suppress democratic dissent - intensifying under the current regime @ Ashish Kothari

Travel through any of India's cities these days, and you will be struck by posters of Prime Minister Narendra Modi with slogans on why India is the right choice for the presidency of the G20. One of the most repeated is how we are the 'mother of democracy'. When India took on this position on 1st December 2022, Modi penned [some of his thoughts](#) on what this could mean. He wrote about India's ancient democratic traditions, and how "We have tried to make national development not an exercise in top-down governance, but rather a citizen-led 'people's movement'."

Every day, India's citizens are faced with the supreme irony of these statements. How many countries are likely to see the shameful spectacle of Olympic awarded wrestlers being [violently dragged away](#) by a few dozen police personnel, as they peacefully protested official inaction regarding their complaint of sexual harassment by the head of the Wrestling Federation of India, Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh? The fact that Singh is a member of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is surely not unrelated.

There is depressingly frequent news on the Modi government's crackdown on democratic dissent, on the freedom of the press, on the Constitutional right of 'freedom of speech'. People who ask uncomfortable questions about official policies, or point to the increasingly authoritarian nature of governance, or call out the ruling party for its support to the politics of religious hatred, are harassed and charged with violations of tax laws, funding procedures, criminal acts, and more. The label of being 'anti-national' is liberally used against people who protest the forcible takeover of their lands, forests, water, and other resources for so-called 'development' projects. They face not only harassment and intimidation from the state but also violence leading to injury or death; the Business and Human Rights Resource Centre reported that in 2022, "Brazil, India and Mexico have the [highest number of attacks](#) against defenders" of human rights (including those defending their territories and ecosystems). Legal provisions such as 'sedition' that were used by the colonial British government against freedom fighters, including Mahatma Gandhi, are used against particularly troublesome dissenters. Civil society groups and even individual lawyers who have had legitimate access to foreign funds are charged with violations of the Foreign Contributions Regulation Act (FCRA), and their access blocked.

According to the Economist Intelligence Unit's [Global Democracy Index](#): "In India, democratic norms have been under pressure since 2015. India's score fell from a peak of 7.92 in 2014 to 6.61 in 2020 and its global ranking slipped from 27th to 53rd as a result of democratic backsliding under the leadership of Narendra Modi, a member of the Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) ... The increasing influence of religion under the Modi premiership, whose policies have fomented anti-Muslim feeling and religious strife, has damaged the political fabric of the country. The enactment in December 2019 of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2019 continued to fuel riots in 2020, with several left dead following clashes in February in the capital city, New Delhi. The Act introduces a religious element to the conceptualisation of Indian citizenship, a step that many critics see as undermining the secular basis of the Indian state."

As historian and author [Ramachandra Guha](#) says, India has taken a "dangerous, divisive and self-destructive direction" under the BJP government. It is worth mentioning here that Guha has been a strong critic of India's other major national party, Congress (I), which ruled the country for several decades. It was indeed under that party, with Indira Gandhi as Prime Minister, that India has had its first and so far only political 'Emergency' (1975-77), when civil rights and media freedom were severely curtailed.

Many observers are saying that under Modi, there is an undeclared emergency in place. Amongst its indications are the spate of actions by the state (and institutions that have become subservient to it) levelling serious charges against people raising a voice, including people's movements against destructive development, those in or supporting the [16-month farmers' movement](#) against what they called repressive, anti-farmer laws promulgated by the government, journalists who dare to report truthful accounts of what is happening on the ground, academics and civil society

groups that support or even just bring out research reports on injustice. Also, against individual activists and civil society groups that raise a voice about religious communalism or human rights and environmental violations, such as [Aman Biradari](#), which has been working for communal harmony, [Greenpeace India](#), which has exposed many an ecological violation in India's development process, and [Amnesty International](#), which has recorded grave human rights violations.

Also targeted are members of opposition parties who challenge the ruling party (such as a young Member of Gujarat's Legislative Assembly who has been a very vocal critic of the BJP, [Jignesh Mevani](#)), even lawyers who regularly take on the state (the latest being [Ritwick Dutta of LIFE](#), whose cases against environmentally destructive projects have made him one of India's most respected lawyers for ecological sustainability). While a number of court orders have [castigated the government](#) for arbitrary and unlawful detentions, or for unconstitutional actions such as freezing bank accounts of NGOs like Greenpeace India, and upheld the freedom of the press and its "[duty to speak truth to power](#)", the party in power does not seem to care.

Its latest actions seem to be particularly aimed at individuals and organisations that have challenged how the Adani Group, whose founder is said to be close to the Prime Minister, has been given undue favours and helped it to become one of India's most powerful and rich corporations. This is especially in the wake of the global controversy created by the [Hindenburg group's report alleging](#) the "largest con in corporate history." Dutta, for instance, had filed cases on the illegalities in environmental or forest clearances given to Adani Group's thermal power and coal mining operations; the research group Centre for Policy Research, which had its foreign funding permission revoked in early 2023, had involved groups in its studies that are linked to long-standing Adivasi (Indigenous) protest against coal mining by Adani Group in forest-rich Chhattisgarh state; Greenpeace India, which carried out a visible campaign [against coal mining](#) in India including by the Adani Group (and whose Australian counterpart did the same against Adani's coal mining near the Great Barrier Reef on Indigenous lands), has for years been harassed on multiple fronts by the government; Oxfam, which has been releasing hard-hitting reports on inequality and on the enormous contribution of the world's billionaires ([including, specifically, Gautam Adani](#)), also had its foreign funding permission revoked in early 2022.

While this situation could indeed be thought of as an 'undeclared emergency', I think that it is actually worse than what Indira Gandhi did. While the 1975-77 Emergency was more visibly a case of a political leader with a small political clique vs. much of the rest of the country (and this was clearly shown when, forced to declare elections, Mrs. Gandhi's Congress Party was overwhelmingly voted out of power), what the BJP is doing underneath visible actions such as those mentioned above, is a more insidious subversion of democracy.

One of these is infiltrating the most important institutions of democracy (including those with independent Constitutional powers, and the judiciary), putting into powerful positions those who will tow the official line. This is very visible in the

committees that provide guidance on which development projects to allow, keeping in mind their environmental impacts. For instance, the environmental appraisal committees of the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change (MOEFCC) are filled with mostly yes-men (and I use this gender deliberately). It is visible in the utterly shameful way in which [complaints of sexual harassment](#) made by the wrestlers mentioned above have been dealt with by India's Ministry of Sports and the Delhi police. And observers say it is dramatically visible in the recent judicial pronouncements on Rahul Gandhi, India's most prominent opposition politician who has recently made waves by a marathon foot-march across the country and some [sharply worded questioning](#) of PM Modi's ties with Gautam Adani (in a speech in the Indian Parliament that was later expunged from the records, itself a sign of the distortion of institutional powers). Gandhi was found guilty by a lower court in Gujarat (the state that the current Prime Minister was Chief Minister of, for three terms) of criminal defamation for a remark he made in 2019, in an order that many senior legal [experts have found to be flawed and excessive](#).

Another process, with possibly the most long-term dangers to India's democracy (and indeed, its civilisational ethos), is to turn people against people. The most visible manifestation of this is the way in which the politics of religious hatred has been fanned; while elements of this have been in existence for centuries, and other parties have been responsible for extreme violence in the form of religious riots (e.g. the Congress Party for [anti-Sikh riots](#) after Indira Gandhi was assassinated by a Sikh bodyguard), the BJP and its allied networks like the Rashtriya Sevak Sangh (RSS) have sowed systematic, deep-rooted hostility amongst people of the majority religion against those of religious minorities. A recent report by the US-based [Hindus for Human Rights documents](#) the alarming spread of distortions about Islam and Christianity amongst the Hindu population, and how Hindu priests who question the misuse of Hinduism by the ruling dispensation are silenced.

This is certainly not to absolve those elements within minority religions that have also advocated (and carried out) hatred and violence against Hindus. Rather, it is to point to the dangerous divisiveness and the undermining of democracy engendered by a ruling party that supports, foments, and stays silent on acts of violence by one religion against others, as a systematic process of furthering the misguided notion of India being a 'Hindu Rashtra (nation)'. For many decades, India's leaders and people have denounced such tendencies in our neighbouring country Pakistan, in that case by the majority religion Islam against minorities including Hindus; ironically, in India we are now in danger of slipping into a similar theocracy-like situation. Unsurprisingly, PM Modi's inauguration of a new Parliament complex (itself highly controversial for its environmental impacts) was held on the 140th birth anniversary of Veer Savarkar, a highly controversial figure for his [strident right-wing religious and patriarchal views](#) and abject kowtowing to the British colonial government.

Meanwhile Dalits, for long the most oppressed part of India's people, continue to face [violence and oppression](#), and actions by the state to counter this are half-hearted at best. Professor Achin Vanaik, former head of the Political Science Department of Delhi University, has provided an incisive analysis of all of this in the recently updated version of his book 'The Rise of Hindu Authoritarianism'. All this also intersects in toxic ways with continuing patriarchy, the most shocking manifestation of which is the recent release of 11 men convicted of raping Bilkis Bano during the horrific anti-Muslim riots in Gujarat in 2002, and how the central government is trying to [delay hearings of petitions against this release](#) in the Supreme Court. The case of the wrestlers mentioned above is another instance.

The Indian state under BJP has also been systematically reducing democratic spaces in decision-making relating to development, environment, social welfare, and other crucial sectors. In her 2023-24 national budget speech, the Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said: "For enhancing ease of doing business, more than 39,000 compliances have been reduced and more than 3,400 legal provisions have been decriminalized." Most changes in the last few years to environmental and labour laws have been in the direction of weakening safeguards and regulations, including provisions for public participation such as hearings and issuing public notice seeking inputs to proposed legal changes, the availability of documents for public scrutiny, and others. The phrase 'ease of doing business', originating in the World Bank, is a euphemism for making things easier for corporate interests to grab lands and resources and labour power with minimal cost. Not surprisingly, from a 'low' rank of 142 (out of 190 countries ranked by the World Bank) in 2015, India's rank 'improved' to 63 in 2020. Great news for profit-hungry corporations, but terrible for communities whose lands and resources are taken away, the wildlife that lives on these lands, and workers whose conditions become even more precarious.

The dilution of environmental regulations was carried out at rapid pace even [during the COVID pandemic](#), when people were busy struggling with health and economic breakdown. Again not surprisingly, India's ranking in global environmental performance measures has dropped to rock-bottom. Though the methodology of one of these, carried out by Yale and Cornell Universities, [has been faulted](#) on a number of dimensions, the sharp decline in environmental governance and regulatory performance is quite visible to anyone who has followed trends in this over the last few decades.

The ruling party has also brazenly undermined the freedom of the media, for long one of India's most cherished pillars of democracy. As articulated by Supreme Court senior advocate [Chander Uday Singh at a recent lecture](#), such freedom is facing its greatest threat since the political emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi. This includes repressive actions against outspoken journalists (such as those covering the farmers' movement in 2021), while BJP is funding an enormous 'social' media team that is able to bombard inboxes and screens of hundreds of millions of people with tailored content (some of its architects have subsequently testified to kind of [distortions and abuse](#) involved). It also involves a takeover of relatively independent news channels by corporate houses friendly to the ruling establishment; Adani

figures here too, his company VCPL recently [acquiring enough shares to take over control of NDTV](#), one of the few channels that was reporting stories others were scared to, or had fearless and widely respected anchors like Prannoy Roy and Ravish Kumar.

It involves thinly disguised harassment; for instance, soon after the BBC aired a 2-part documentary that was critical of Modi in his stint as both Chief Minister of Gujarat (when anti-Muslim riots left over 1000 people dead) and as Prime Minister, [tax authorities and the Home Ministry's Enforcement Directorate](#) began investigations into alleged violations of Indian financial rules. Unsurprisingly, India's rank in the [World Press Freedom Index](#) is an abysmal 161st out of 180 countries (slipping down from an already poor 150 in 2022). This is likely to fall further if the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules 2021 are passed, giving the [government unbridled power](#) to censor online media "in respect of any business of the Central Government" that is considered "fake or false or misleading".

Academic freedom, another hallmark of Indian democracy, is also under attack. Harassment, transfers, false charges, public vilification, and other tactics are increasingly in use, often supported or initiated by the state, against academics who continue to use long-cherished freedom of speech. In this too, India has fallen in the global standings; according to the V-Dem Institute's [Academic Freedom Index Update 2023](#), it is now in the bottom 20-30% rank. The report notes what it says is a move towards 'autocracy', and states: "In India, academic freedom started to decline in 2009 with a drop in university autonomy followed by a sharp downturn in all indicators from 2013. Around 2013, all aspects of academic freedom began to decline strongly, reinforced by Narendra Modi's election as prime minister in 2014. Campus integrity, institutional autonomy, and the freedom of academic and cultural expression declined more strongly over the following years than the freedom to reach and teach and the freedom of academic exchange and dissemination". Shockingly, teachers in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, whose Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath is a strident right-wing religious zealot, have been [harassed and prosecuted](#) simply for encouraging children to sing songs of Muslim poets.

Through all this, the populist rhetoric of PM Modi and party colleagues like Home Minister Amit Shah and Yogi Adityanath, has carried the party to electoral victories, nationally and in many states. One visible aspect of this is a subtle and often not so subtle use of majoritarianism, including by stoking fears of the 'other' (especially Muslims) taking over the economy, culture, etc. The BJP is also by far the richest of the country's political parties (with considerable funding from business houses and [opaque electoral bonds](#)), and can sway public opinion through sheer money and 'social' media power. Hypocritical rhetoric is very visible in the way the government is tom-tomming its supposed global leadership on 'democracy' and 'sustainability' leading up to the G20 summit in September, even as it [tears through the homes](#) and livelihoods of vulnerable urban poor in a bid to 'beautify' cities for this summit.

BJP's well-oiled electoral machinery, clever demagoguery, populist measures, and

financial power will likely keep giving it victory for some time to come, a situation made easier by a thoroughly fragmented political opposition. But there is hope. It lies in the long history of and continued ability of people's movements and civil society to 'speak truth to power', a much more meaningful manifestation of India as a 'mother of democracy' than the one Mr. Modi is projecting as President of G20. It lies in the satyagraha traditions of Mahatma Gandhi or of the politics of protest inspired by others like Ambedkar and Marx and Adivasi and feminist and ecological mobilisers.

If political leaders like Rahul Gandhi can transform his innovative [Bharat Jodo Yatra](#) (Unite India March) into continued mobilisation of ground level democratic forces (rather than get stuck within the choked confines of the Congress Party), there is hope. If more of the electorate can also realise the dangerous hypocrisies of the ruling party as it did in the recent elections in Karnataka state, there is hope. If at least some elements of the judiciary and media can continue to be truly independent, there is hope. Throughout history, the most dictatorial regimes across the world have fallen at some point; the question is how much damage the current one can do to the civilisational ethos of India before it too bites the dust.

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[Ashish Kothari](#)

Founder-member of the Indian environmental group, Ashish studied Sociology and taught at the Indian Institute of Public Administration. An environmentalist based in India, Ashish has helped found several national and global organisations and networks. Views expressed in this column do not necessarily represent the views of any of these.

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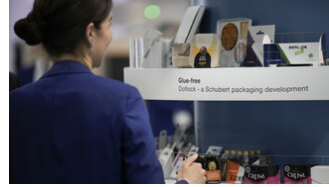
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