

# NATION-BUILDING AND DEMOCRACY-BUILDING: THE ROLE OF POLITICAL TOLERANCE IN INDIA

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India, regarded as the world's largest democracy, and a fractious but multi-ethnic nation, remains a puzzle when it comes to its ability to either maintain the status of a united multi-ethnic nation or nurture a well-functioning liberal democracy. As far as nationhood and democracy are concerned, 'modern' India's journey did not begin propitiously. When the British colonists finally withdrew from India in 1947, they left behind a divided land: the largely Hindu but secular state of India and the largely Muslim theocratic state of Pakistan. The 1947 Partition was accompanied by horrific rioting and suffering.

A prominent individual who advocated for the division of India was Muhammad Ali Jinnah, who subscribed to the two-nation theory and advanced the idea that the British Empire in India consisted of two distinct cultures, and thus two different nations, the Hindu and the Muslim. Jinnah was worried that in an undivided India the minority group, the Muslims, would be forced to live under the oppression of the majority group, the Hindus. Mahatma Gandhi did his utmost to convince Jinnah

and his followers that Hindus and Muslims could live in harmonious coexistence in an undivided India, but he was unsuccessful and paid the ultimate price for his conviction with his assassination in 1948. In January 1950, India adopted a written constitution that describes the Indian Republic as 'democratic, secular and socialist'.

The idea of the two-nation theory, where 'religion equals nation', was dealt a fatal blow with the division of Pakistan in 1971 into two nation states: Pakistan (on the north-western side of India) and the new nation of Bangladesh (on the eastern side of India). On the other side of the border – and despite massive poverty, very low levels of literacy and education, a miniscule middle class, and a weak state apparatus – postcolonial India has remained united and also made a remarkable journey: it has continued to move from democratic regime to democratic regime, interspersed with regular (mostly free and fair) elections, from independence until the present (except for a short phase of twenty-one months in the 1970s).

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Protest by farmers against the central government's economic reforms in the agricultural sector.

Source: Randeep Maddoke



In my view, two features of Indian democracy over the last seventy years or so are important for our consideration here.

First, despite the fact that India has a number of political parties that span the entire spectrum, only two political parties have captured the national imagination and established some sort of hegemonic rule in this seventy-year period: the Indian National Congress (Congress, for short) exercised its dominance from 1947 to the mid-1990s, and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been realizing its hegemonic dominance from circa 2010 to the present. Congress's hegemony was characterized by an adherence to the principles of secularism (defined in Indian terms as equal respect for all religions, rather than the separation of religious institutions from the state) and welfarism (with the strong presence of a public sector). On the other hand, BJP hegemony is characterized by a commitment to the ideology of *Hindutva* (Hindu supremacy), which aims to create a Hindu state where citizens who follow other religious faiths are tolerated but have second-class status.

The second important feature of Indian democracy has to do with its heritage of extraordinary cultural diversity. Paul Brass has argued that it is India's cultural heterogeneity that prevents it from becoming a fully fledged dictatorship. As Indian society has many different political parties, politicians and social groups who make varying political demands all the time, a pattern of offsetting forces arises that prevents any group from taking over completely. However, Sten Widmalm has expressed misgivings that India's diversity may not be enough of a bulwark to prevent the BJP and other forces of *Hindutva* from turning India into a state where a tyrannical majority (those Hindus who are mobilized by *Hindutva* groups) oppresses those who follow other faiths.

The BJP won the 2014 national elections on the platform of development for all sections of society, while downplaying the message of *Hindutva*. The Indian journalist Swaminathan S. Anklesaria Aiyar has stated that after the BJP won the 2014 elections, however, *Hindutva* or the establishment of a Hindu state emerged as its main goal, and this has continued since the BJP's re-election in 2019. To cultivate a 'strongman-nationalist' image and to soothe Indian nerves frayed by persistent cross-border terrorism, the current administration promotes hostility with Pakistan, which has led to new phenomena such as ordinary Indian citizens expressing anti-Muslim hate speech on social media.

While Hindu-Muslim riots have become rarer, individual-level lynchings and killings of Muslims by Hindu vigilante mobs have become more common in India. Despite these incidents, Aiyar argues that India continues to be a "lively democracy where dissenters, opposition parties, NGOs, and civil society institutions are fighting back against extreme Hindu nationalism".

Aiyar's tag of a 'lively democracy' does apply to today's India – for example, if one examines the massive protest movement by farmers against the central government's economic reforms in the agricultural sector. The farmers' protests against contract farming and other elements of agricultural reform indicate that the juggernaut of the *Hindutva* forces may have finally met its match. I hope that the mobilized Indian farmers will convince the government that in a democracy all reforms should ideally proceed by respectful persuasion, not by intimidation, threats and violence. If those Indians mobilized by the *Hindutva* forces cannot be politically tolerant of those of other opinions and

faiths, then the seventy-year-old experiment with democracy in India will falter and fail.

In the last thirty years, many of those left out of neoliberal globalization processes have joined the ranks of populist movements in many parts of the world, including the right-wing populist movement of

*Hindutva* in India. However, in their attempts to build a Hindu state in India, the right-wing populists risk losing both the decades-long experiment with democracy and the protracted attempts to create a multicultural nation where free and fearless self-expression is possible. Authentic democracy cannot survive in theocratic states. I fear that India may yet undergo many partitions or divisions in the twenty-first century (in the sphere of the mind at least, if not geographically) if Hinduism as a religion is made to fit the Procrustean bed of *Hindutva* politics and India is imagined as a nation state where the only ones who 'belong' and enjoy the status of first-class citizens are those Hindus who believe in the ideology of *Hindutva*.



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