

THE SOCIAL ROOTS OF THE AUTHORITARIAN TURN IN INDIA

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Introduction

The debate on democracy today has rather suddenly taken a turn for the worse. At no point in post-World War II history have so many democracies flirted with authoritarianism. While definitions of backsliding proliferate (Przeworski 2019), few would question that in many democracies today the fundamental liberal pillars of democracy – the separation of powers, the protection of individual liberties and the autonomy of civil society – have been directly threatened. Cases range from older and supposedly more institutionalized democracies such as Trump’s United States, to post-Soviet Eastern Europe (Orban’s Hungary and the PiS in Poland), and the younger democracies of the post-colonial world including Bolsonaro’s Brazil, Duterte’s Philippines and Modi’s India. In all these cases, democratically elected governments, riding a tide of some version of ethno-nationalist populism, have sometimes by stealth and sometimes more openly sought to weaken the basic legal and institutional conditions that support a constitutional democracy. As much as one might be tempted to identify a general phenomenon of reaction, closer examination reveals at least two types: those in which reaction has found a mass base in the disaffected ranks of lower socio-economic classes marginalized by globalization (the OECD cases), and others, such as India, that are clear instances of upper class revolts. It is certainly the case that across both types globalization is the common denominator, yet it has played out in very different ways, refracted by specific national histories and configurations of political forces. An increasingly rich literature in the OECD world has characterized these reactions as responses to the long-term effects of neo-liberal globalization that take the form of political closure, both by erecting new national boundaries of identity and belonging and repurposing liberal democracies, perceived to be increasingly ineffective, to be more decisive and representative of the “people”. But though globalization has also played a role in the driving reaction in India, the configurational sequence and the outcomes have been quite different. In India more than anything else, the authoritarian turn has been driven by a middle class seeking to consolidate its economic position and hoard its social privileges.

If the causes are different, so are the outcomes and the degree to which democracy is threatened. As Ziblatt and Levitsky (2018) have argued, democracies today are being undermined through democratic means. Reactions across the board have been marked by three

specific regressions: an assertion of executive power that actively undermines the independent functions (checks and balances) of representative, bureaucratic and juridical institutions, a discursive assault on independent civil society (media, universities, NGOs and social movements) and discursive and sometimes legal efforts to redefine citizenship along narrow ethnic or nationalist lines. Trump's presidency and failed coup is the prototypical case, but right-wing movements in Western Europe are animated by a similar logic. India and other democracies in the Global South – notably Brazil, Turkey and the Philippines (Heller 2020) – have all these regressive features, but the assault on democratic institutions and practices is much more severe because they are not just a response to perceived failures of liberal democracy but also efforts to reassert traditional configurations of elite power. Thus, beyond assaults on the institutional pillars of democracy, reaction in Modi's India has extended to concerted efforts to marginalize and exclude Muslims and others defined as anti-nationalist. This has included open repression of civil society, efforts to de-certify specific socio-cultural groups and the use of state-sponsored vigilantism. Though Brazil, Turkey and the Philippines (Heller 2020) all fall into this category, the case of India stands out. There is arguably nowhere in the developing world where democracy made such progress, particularly in redefining social power, only to be subjected to such a sharp counter-reaction.

The authoritarian turn in India

Those who have followed the rise of the BJP and its alliance of civil society organizations – the Sangh Parivar – have long detected sharp authoritarian tendencies (Fernandes and Heller 2006; Corbridge and Harriss 2000). Since the BJP came to power in 2014 the signs of an authoritarian agenda have been clear and by 2021 even the staid international guardians of quantifiable democratic bona fides were sounding alarms (Freedom House annual reports and V-Dem scores). The erosion of democratic institutions and practices predates the BJP's rise to power. The last Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government (2009–2014) was marked by widespread corruption and a downturn in democratic indicators (V-dem). The BJP's rise to power however marks a critical juncture at two levels. The first (and the most discussed) is that a clear political realignment has taken place. Analysts have pointed to three distinct political developments: the increasing personal authority of Modi himself and a shift from the politics of accountability to the politics of trust (Sircar 2020), the rise of the BJP's distinct brand of ethno-national populism (Jaffrelot 2019) and sharp electoral realignments driven in large part by the implosion of the once hegemonic Congress Party (Jaffrelot and Verniers 2020). Beyond these conjunctural factors on the political plane, the focus of this chapter is on the deeper socio-cultural transformations at play. The authoritarian turn in India is only in part a story of institutional decline and the BJP's electoral fortunes. It must also be understood as a social reaction, driven primarily by a middle class reacting to the democratic empowerment of popular classes of the last several decades. The contours of that reaction have been significantly shaped by both the economic and social forces of globalization.

To the extent that populism is a style and strategy of politics marked by plebiscitarian and personalist forms of leadership (Weyland 2001: 5), then Modi is a classic incarnation. But this personalization of power (Sircar 2020) is itself the instantiation of the BJP's long-term Hindutva (making India into a Hindu nation) project of redefining the "people" in national-cultural terms. In government this has taken the form of marginalizing and demonizing Muslims as well as castigating and targeting rights activists (dubbed "urban Naxalites") as anti-national. And if Modi's persona was carefully cultivated at the sub-national level in the fertile terrain of Gujarat (a particularly fortuitous fusion of corporate business power and toxic communalization) and

the BJP's Hindutva ideology has been long in the making, there can be no doubt that the BJP's electoral gains were made possible both by the collapse of the Congress and the BJP's own successes in broadening its appeal by building support among Other Backward Castes (OBC) and significant segments of the Dalit (previously referred to as "untouchable") and Adivasi (tribal) populations. But this convergence of an autocratic style of politics (populism), new cultural-political ideological framings (ethno-national) and broadened electoral alignments has to be understood as the political expressions of a deeper process of social transformation.

The effects of this reconfiguration of class and social power can be detected in three patterns of reaction that have marked the BJP's time in power. The first has been to redefine and to repurpose the welfare state from a right-based and universalistic logic to a logic of rationing and targeting welfare to those who "deserve" it. In an electoral context where being pro-poor is an electoral necessity, this is not a simple roll-back of the state, but rather a shift from public support and protection as a social right to benefits that are directly distributed by the central state (and often specifically in Modi's name). The BJP's language of moving from "entitlement" (associated with the normative goal of levelling inequalities) to "empowerment" reflects its direct appeals to an "aspirational" middle class. The second is muscular state support for a dominant identity built on the cultural exclusion of others. Though the Congress party itself has all too often compromised its secular and pluralist credentials for electoral expediency, the BJP's rise to political dominance has been forged largely on the strength of its efforts to redefine the nation in cultural-religious terms. This politics of cultural closure has been secured through state sanctioning of a dominant identity (especially curricular reforms in public education) and demonization of an "other", including the use of the police and vigilantes to enforce dominant cultural codes and contain the dangerous actors who threaten national values. The organizations of the Sangh Parivar (the group of voluntary associations that are the mass base of the BJP) have long aggressively promoted Hindu culture, but under the Modi government they have escalated their efforts, including sponsoring "cow protection" associations that have lynched accused beef eaters and launching a notorious campaign dubbed "Love Jihad" to combat the alleged scourge of Muslim boys seducing Hindu girls. These state-sponsored cultural practices of exclusion have now been legislated with the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) which recognizes all refugees from neighbouring countries as citizens if they are of any religion *except* Islam. The third prong of the reactionary project has been the valorization of traditional social relations and institutions, specifically the patriarchal family, the military, religion and the traditional caste order. The BJP itself is culturally and socially an expression of Brahminical authority and Modi has assiduously cultivated his image of religiosity (Sircar 2020) and virile asceticism. Most notable, as in all hegemonic cultural projects, has been the BJP's educational policies which have not only focused on re-writing textbooks but have also included direct assaults on the autonomy of the university that have specifically taken the form of targeting liberal rights and secular values as corrosive of traditional social and cultural practices (Bhatty and Sundar 2020). Taking these three prongs together, we can say that to the social contract rooted in the constitutional rights and secularism once associated with the Congress, Hindutva counterposes an organic contract embedded in ethnic solidarity and traditional social structures.

Indian authoritarianism in global context

Much of the literature on democratic backsliding in OECD countries draws a direct line between increasing inequality and working class precarity associated with neo-liberal globalization and the rise of right-wing populism (Przeworski 2019; Rodrik 2018). The relationship

between globalization and reaction is more complicated and refracted through a very different socio-class configuration in the case of India. The most immediate trigger of reaction and the most distinct and politically exploited point of opposition to globalization in OECD democracies – immigration – is a marginal factor in India. Ethno-nationalism has been essentially inward looking. Second, there is no direct, mechanical link between the economic effects of globalization and reaction in India. Indeed, in the two decades that led up to reaction the Indian economy grew at a record pace and poverty declined significantly. Third, in contrast to Brexit and Trump, for example, Modi has not sought to leverage opposition to economic globalization and has in fact been closely aligned with domestic economic elites (professionals and corporates) that have a strong stake in globalization. Yet, having said this, globalization has played a role. The forces at work are however quite different from those highlighted in the OECD literature. As I hope to show, reaction has not been driven by working class discontent with shrinking economic opportunity and security as in the OECD world but rather by elite revolts that are tied both to the ways in which increased global economic integration has reshaped emergent middle class interests and by how previous left-reformist efforts to manage global integration by expanding social protection fundamentally challenged traditional social hierarchies and privilege.

The specificity of the Indian case is captured in an electoral analysis of the social base of reaction. Electoral data (presented below) from the 2019 election shows that even as the BJP broadened its electoral appeal, including among Dalits and Adivasis, the core of its support is rooted in the fractions of the dominant classes (proprietary and professional) and the emergent neo-middle class (Heller 2020). This is also reflected in educational patterns, with the more educated being more likely to support Modi (the obverse of OECD populism). As with all ethno-nationalist movements, appeals to religion have played an important role, especially in mobilizing the neo-middle class, as have appeals to strengthening the patriarchal family. There is also a clear regional pattern to reaction. Most striking is that the BJP has limited electoral traction in India's South, long a bastion of anti-Brahminism and the region of India that has made the most progress on social issues, notably challenging traditional caste power and expanding the welfare state.

These regional patterns become even more pointed when one considers global cities. The BJP in India has long been a mostly urban party, with roots in the urban trading classes (the *baniyas*). In the past decade it has made inroads into rural areas largely through targeted patronage and selective caste appeals (Thachil 2014) so much so that by the 2019 election its support was evenly balanced across rural and urban. But if one looks at how cities voted, a striking pattern emerges. All of India's most globalized and most cosmopolitan cities – New Delhi (the capital); Mumbai (home to Bollywood and finance) and Bangalore (IT) – voted overwhelmingly for the BJP. This is the exact opposite of the OECD pattern where global cities (London, New York, Seattle) continue to lean liberal-left, even as rural areas and more peripheral towns supported reaction.

I believe this difference reveals the particular nature of reaction in India. Upper-class groups who are concentrated in cities and especially those who have benefitted the most from globalization, that is professionals and those who occupy management or strategic organizational positions in global commodity chains along with ancillary white collar workers, feel threatened by the progress that subordinate groups made in the past two decades especially with respect to expanding the welfare state and gaining access to historically class-rationed institutions, most notably schools and health services. These elites are determined to hoard opportunities that they have historically monopolized, opportunities whose returns have been amplified by globalization. Those opportunities have been threatened not only by the expansion of the welfare

state, but also increasingly vociferous subordinate groups demanding rights. The basis of elite privilege is narrow, fragile and predicated on blocking broader socio-economic inclusion. The huge inequalities that mark India, which, if anything, are amplified in its global cities through spatial segregation and the confinement of large swathes of the poor to slums, present an existential threat to the middle class and to the neo-middle class that, as explained below, has joined the reaction coalition.

From restricted democracy to democratic deepening

The transition to democracy in India was marked by limited ruptures with colonial-era social structures. Though India is unique in the democratic world of having moved directly to universal suffrage at the time of independence, political parties were monopolized by upper caste elites and the rural poor remained politically dependent on local dominant castes (Frankel and Rao 1989). Well into the 1980s, class/caste power continued to thwart genuine political, not to mention social, inclusion of the popular sectors (Heller 2019). Liberal and professional middle classes aligned with import substitution industrialization (ISI) interests (a nascent state-dependent bourgeoisie) to dominate politics all while protecting landed interests from threats from below. There were periods of popular mobilization throughout this period of restricted democracy, but dominant social and class interests prevailed and elite-led nationalist discourses of constitutionalism and modernity systematically misrecognized social hierarchy, suppressing the daily realities of class/caste exclusion. In retrospect, it is remarkable that outside of the southern states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu, lower caste mobilization in India remained episodic and did not disturb the political dominance of upper castes (Jaffrelot 2003). Second, limited mass incorporation underwrote a disarticulated developmental trajectory defined by a massive informal reserve army of labour sustaining a regime of labour squeezing accumulation.

The exclusionary pact began unravelling in the 1980s as India experienced an upsurge of lower caste mobilization that threatened the dominant pact. New political competitors emerged to challenge Congress party hegemony, expressing both regional and lower caste aspirations. As what Yadav (2000) has famously called the “second democratic uprising” saw lower castes and in particular other backward castes (OBCs) create their own political parties, the Congress lost its dominant position in a number of states and had to increasingly share power at the national level. The emergence of the BJP as a significant electoral force at precisely this time has been widely interpreted as an “elite revolt” and specifically an upper-caste response to mobilization from below (Corbridge and Harriss 2000). In an increasingly fragmented party system, the BJP and allies came to power in 1996. When a Congress-led coalition returned to power in 2004, the party was a shadow of its former self, more an assemblage of opportunistic rent-seekers and assorted political scions, than a party with a programme. A powerful faction of the party’s leadership however was close to leading figures in civil society, which itself had increasingly coalesced around demands for rights-based social reforms. This faction, with support from coalition parties, pushed through a remarkable set of rights-based laws that included the right to information (RTI), but also legislation and policies designed to universalize access to education, food and work (Chiriyankandath et al. 2020). Most notably, the second Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government pushed through the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), a rural right to work programme that guarantees government employment to all rural households. The programme has benefitted more than 100 million workers making it possibly the largest anti-poverty programme in history. A large body of research has clearly demonstrated not only that the programme has pushed up rural wages (Jenkins and Manor 2016), but that in some parts of India it has clearly disrupted

traditional relations of labour domination (Veeraghavan 2017). Despite corruption scandals and a lack of party discipline, the Congress managed to get re-elected in 2008 in part on the popularity of NREGA (Heller 2017). Though the Indian state still suffers from significant deficits in capacity and accountability (Evans and Heller 2018) there is little doubt that the UPA period saw an unprecedented expansion of a rights-based welfare state and marked a rupture with the elite-dominated patronage politics that had long defined India's restricted democracy.

The reaction

The BJP's *Hindutva* project has deep historical roots, is ideologically cohesive, supported by a highly organized and disciplined party and movement, and is being, as we speak, ruthlessly advanced by deploying every tool in the arsenal of democratic authoritarianism.

The Hindu right has always had a project of building a Hindu nation, but it was not until the late 1980s that this project took political form. In building a viable electoral majority, the BJP faced two formidable challenges. On the one hand, it had to overcome its identification as a party of the forward castes. On the other hand, it had to marry its project of nationalism and social harmony with growing support among its most powerful class supporters for more market and globalization-friendly policies. Modi resolved both tensions as Chief Minister in the state of Gujarat (2001–2014) by completely communalizing the movement. He in effect unified the Hindu vote base by systematically demonizing Muslims and directly appealing to what he himself labelled the “neo-middle class” that is, aspiring and mostly rural other backward castes (OBCs) (Jaffrelot 2019; Chacko 2019: 400). At the same time he championed Gujarat as a pro-business state attracting large scale investments from Indian corporates and multinationals, providing a new ideological home for class interests that had supported the liberalization of the economy in the 1990s. As Chacko has argued, Modi in effect overcame the inherent tension between the market and the social by “marketizing *Hindutva* with the positioning of the state as a facilitator of the creation of a middle class of consumers and entrepreneurs who are also disciplined by *Hindutva* values” (2019: 398). The “Gujarat model”, as it came to be known, produced high levels of growth but a dismal social development track record, with Muslims and Dalits largely excluded (Jaffrelot 2019). Building on his success in Gujarat and with the full-throated support of the business community, Modi rode to power at the national level in 2014 largely by portraying himself as Mr Development (*Vikas Purush*). As the 2019 election approached and it became clear the economy was sputtering, Modi reverted to the anti-Muslim playbook both by stepping up nationalist rhetoric against Pakistan and doubling down on traditional *Hindutva* issues (Varshney 2019). The electoral victory was resounding. During the first BJP government (2014–2019) Modi was cautious in pushing his ethno-nationalist agenda, franchising the Sangh Parivar's local cadres or sponsored vigilante groups to exert extra-legal power, but refraining from direct use of state power (Jaffrelot 2019). Since the BJP's return to power in May 2019 there is no longer any pretence. The state has been directly and quickly repurposed as an instrument of de-secularization. First, the government revoked Kashmir's special status and took direct control over India's only Muslim-majority state. Second, a supreme court widely seen as increasingly subservient to Modi then ruled that India's most disputed religious site where a mosque was torn down in 1991 was Hindu, all but sanctioning the violent tactics of *Hindutva* forces. A third and final blow to India's pluralist, secular and constitutional order was delivered in December 2019 with the passage of the CAA, which introduces “religion as a marker of citizenship” ... and “creates categories of citizens with differing pathways to citizenship based on religious identity” (Aiyar 2019).

Explaining the reaction

Modi's election in 2014 and re-election in 2019 represents an elite response to democratic empowerment from below. In India, democratic deepening was led by the rise of lower castes and a range of new social movements that coalesced into a loose but effective coalition under the UPA. Class interests are not given and building electoral coalitions is a messy and indeterminate affair. When and how coalitions produce electoral majorities is highly contingent. As Gramsci (1971) emphasized, historic blocs are formed of dominant classes that can exert hegemony over allied groups by actively coordinating interests. In India the period of restricted democracy was supported by a class alliance in which the three dominant factions of the propertied classes – business, professional and landed – were each guaranteed a share of public resources, much to the exclusion of the masses (Bardhan 1999). That began to change with the UPA government (2004–2014). Though the government did continue to push the liberalization of the economy, business interests became increasingly frustrated with the government's determination to expand social programmes. NREGA in particular invited widespread attacks as a wasteful, anti-market policy, especially from landed elites who resented the government's interference in local labour markets they had long dominated (Veeraraghavan 2017). But the opposition of these dominant economic interests alone was hardly enough to build an electorally viable coalition and specifically to expand support from a growing middle class.

Sociologists have long argued that material interests are intertwined with cultural practices. The durable categories through which inequalities are reproduced are rooted in group practices that marshal cultural and social resources to protect privileges and hoard opportunities. This intertwining is sharply revealed in the ideological project of the BJP which has been framed by a new discourse of forming a reinvigorated nation based in an essentialist and singular identity, a nation of virtuous citizens standing in opposition to the undeserving poor, criminality/corruption and the coddling or “appeasement” of minorities. In this casteless meritocracy, the virtues of an achieving and aspiring middle class have displaced the language of universalism and social rights. Traditional institutions of temple, the military, the nation and the patriarchal family have been resurrected. National capital and businesses are celebrated as champions of progress and the *elan vital* of a renewed national spirit is held up against the corrosive effects of human rights and a vaguely defined “globalism” as carrier of anti-cultural materialism and secularism.

The discursive shift has been critical to redrawing the boundaries and the self-identity of the middle class. The upper middle class of professionals has always had a fickle relationship to democracy, but lent significant support to the Congress in its hegemonic decades (Fernandes and Heller 2006). The professional classes had – per Bardhan – a clear stake in the expansion of the developmental state and secular nationalism, most notably state funded higher education. If this class has defected, it is because the expansion of welfare policies to include the poor has threatened its privileged status position, especially with respect to educational institutions. In India upper middle class/Forward caste opposition to caste-based affirmative action has been fierce (Heller 2018) and the same class that owes in global economic success to public higher education, is now pushing for privatization of higher education (Subramanian 2015). Though upper-caste mobilization crystallized around opposition to affirmative action policies in the 1980s, the BJP has supported “reservations” since the 1990s as a pragmatic concession to incorporating OBCs (Chacko 2019). But practices in institutions dominated by upper castes remain resolutely exclusionary (Vithayathil 2018). Economically, the upper middle class has grown and has come to depend less on the state than on globalization for its economic well-being, hence the pattern of global cities supporting reaction. But the upper middle class can

hardly sustain a winning electoral coalition. The pivotal shift has been the realignment of the neo-middle class.

The pattern of middle class reconfiguration in India has been dramatic, clearly delineated by caste boundaries. Historically, the electoral limits of the BJP were always its upper-caste identity. Yet by 2019 the BJP support base was resolutely and comprehensively Hindu, with every major caste category favouring the BJP over the Congress. The point spread went from a massive 41 percent for upper castes favouring the BJP over the Congress, to 29 percent for OBCs and 13 percent for Dalits with almost no Muslims (8 percent) voting for the BJP (Varshney 2019). In class terms, the income data is unreliable, but a survey that included occupational categories shows solid support for the BJP from white collar groups (services and professionals) and shop keepers and farmers. Unskilled rural and urban labourers aligned themselves with non-BJP parties (India Today 2019). In cultural terms, the BJP has mobilized the OBC neo-middle class by uniting Hindus against Muslims and by appealing to the social conservatism of a class that is “looking away from agriculture and towards the towns and cities” (Kaur 2014). In the northern states in particular, the BJP assiduously cultivated caste groups that aspired to forward caste status tapping into the deep aspirations of cultural distinction and upper caste/class emulation (sanskritization) that have always animated aspiring groups in deeply hierarchical societies (Bourdieu 1984). And it reconfigured the welfare state from universal entitlements such as the right to work (NREGA) to a series of discrete welfare programmes, often directly linked to Modi himself, that amount to the public provisioning of private goods (e.g., subsidized toilets and home cooking fuel). The BJP government has maintained NREGA because of its obvious populist appeal, a point Modi has made directly, but has also systematically reduced funding, centralized control and re-purposed the programme to appease landed interests (Narayan and Raja 2020). The government’s focus instead had been to redirect support to the middle class. Arguing that the neo-middle class “needs proactive handholding” (as quoted in Chacko 2019: 401) new welfare programmes also included an array of micro loans, subsidies and labour deregulation to promote small business and reward entrepreneurship (Chacko 2019: 401). As Kaur (2014) has argued, this “emerging” middle class saw Modi’s policies that emphasized economic growth over “entitlements” (coded as handouts for Dalits and Muslims) as opening the door to their aspirations, in contrast to the welfare policies of the UPA that largely benefitted the poor (and Dalits/Muslims). The reconfiguration of the welfare state was also clearly tied to a project of cultural transformation. As Chacko shows, a range of financialization schemes – including incentives for brothers to use a traditional religious ceremony as an occasion to open seed insurance schemes for their sisters – in effect marry neo-liberalism to Hindu nationalism by conjoining the family, the individual, and the state in the advancement of the nation (2019: 403).

So what’s globalization got to do with it?

In explaining OECD reactions, commentators have pointed to how neo-liberalism has fuelled the politics of austerity, which in turn have triggered right-wing populism. But if anything, India defied neo-liberal globalization and witnessed an expansion of the welfare state in the run-up to reaction. The protagonist of the reaction has not been an ethnically and economically endangered working class but rather an urban middle class that in fact has benefitted most from economic globalization and an aspiring middle class hoping to ride its coattails.

On the economic front the impact of globalization has had much less to do with neo-liberalism and austerity than with the impact of a post-Fordist economy. The displacement of manufacturing by services and of nationally organized production by global value chains has

fundamentally reconfigured class relations. Increased informalization and the decline of relatively stable occupational categories (including public-sector employment) has led to both fragmentation and precarization. This in turn has only increased the stakes of providing social protection and some compensation for job insecurity. The new services and information economy has also massively ratcheted up the returns to educational and organizational resources. The new premium on educational capital has fuelled new hoarding strategies, which has made global cities – where high-end educational institutions are concentrated – especially contested spaces. Simultaneously, and more directly linked to neo-liberalism, global commodification of urban land markets has driven up housing prices. The middle class's reproduction strategy is one of opportunity hoarding (Ferndandes and Heller 2006). When the welfare state is well developed and extensive the middle class has a stake in it, and is less inclined to ration social provisioning including access to education and health. Across Europe, resurgent ethno-nationalist parties have only pushed for denying welfare to immigrants and have not challenged the welfare state as such. Urban class compromises forged in the Fordist era have for the most part been preserved in the post-Fordist cities that have benefitted most from globalization. The pattern of reaction in India is reversed. In rapidly growing cities where access to good neighbourhoods and good institutions is the key to economic success in an increasingly information-driven and networked global economy, an upper middle class and its newly minted neo-middle class allies feel increasingly threatened by the encroachment of the poor (Muslims/lower castes). Hansen's description of the retrenchment zeitgeist of urban elites in the gated communities of India captures this politics of social status anxiety: "it is inside such upper-caste and middle-class colonies, carefully separated from the other parts of society, that one finds the deepest mistrust and resentment of popular politics, the government and democracy – generally denounced as the root of all corruption in the country and dominated by undeserving men and women who have risen above the station because of reservations [affirmative action] rather than talent and merit" (2015).

This sense of threat has been further heightened by the second dimension of globalization that has directly contributed to the destabilization of the traditional social order, namely the overlapping of domestic and global political fields (Paschel 2016; Evans 2020). Over the last three decades, international governance institutions, a new human rights eco-system and an expanding global public sphere have universalized the legitimacy of human rights and provided domestic groups with significant points of global leverage to advance their claims (Santos and Rodriguez 2005). In India, the democratic and rights-based normative and policy repertoires of Indian civil society – including women's groups, gay rights activists, right to the city movements, transparency movements, right to food campaigns and environmentalists – have strategically leveraged resonant global frames to make their demands on the Indian polity (Roychowdhury 2020; Mander 2018). In a world where communicative structures of traditional and social media are increasingly globalized these frames have become inescapable points of cultural and political reference that interrogate nation-based identities and social hierarchies. These frames are clearly perceived as existential threats by the BJP which has aggressively repressed CSOs with international ties as "anti-national" and has been especially hostile to international human rights and environmental movements (Mander 2018). In this respect, the BJP is, in Castell's sense, a quintessential "reactive movement" building "trenches of resistance on behalf of God, nation, ethnicity, family, locality, that is the fundamental categories of millennial existence now threatened under the combined, contradictory assault of techno-economic forces and transformative social movements" (1997: 2). Because Modi's government represents a social class that is by and large better educated, more globally oriented and celebrates itself as self-motivating and aspirational, it is clear that the cultural nationalism they cultivate has much less to do with "culture" in the

sense of some deep primary identity, than with protecting accumulated privileges threatened by the destabilization of traditional social structures (Fernandes and Heller 2006). It is striking that while Modi has championed global technologies and global capital, Hindu nationalists are hostile to secularism and international human rights. When they denounce globalism, it is political liberalism, not capitalism, that they are attacking.

Democratic resilience

The BJP government – Sangh Parivar combine has shown itself willing to use any tools in the democratic toolkit to secure its power and push its exclusionary project. Most notably the combine has made concerted efforts to politicize independent institutions including the electoral commission and the judiciary, two institutions that displayed remarkable autonomy in the period of democratic deepening. But it has gone further than just violating norms or pushing the limits of democratic institutions. At the national as well as the state level where the BJP is in power, the combine has launched a broad-based assault on civil society including the media and universities, made concerted efforts to curtail the rights of those who do not fit their dominant national identity and outsourced intimidation and violence to surrogates.

But as dramatic and alarming as the current conjuncture might be, a full unravelling of democracy is highly unlikely. Electoral democracy will likely be preserved for four general reasons. First, Modi came to power through the ballot box and has invested his legitimacy in the expressed “will of the people”. Second, unlike during the period of restricted democracy, the popular sectors have tasted the benefits of political participation and are unlikely to accept a full reversal. The massive mobilization of farmers to protest the BJP’s ham-fisted efforts to neo-liberalize the agrarian sector are a sharp reminder that the popular sectors retain significant capacity for political action. Third, in highly diverse and pluralistic societies such as India, even elites understand that democratic contestation is necessary to preserving the social order. The middle class, to paraphrase Marx, will only be willing to go so far in giving up democratic rights for the right to maintain its privileges.

If there is unlikely to be a full reversal, what is at stake is the capacity of subordinate groups, both lower classes and historically marginalized racial/ethnic/caste identities, to effectively pursue their interests. The danger at hand is a contraction of the participatory and substantive spaces of democracy, that is a hollowing out that would return India to its past condition of restricted democracy and exclusionary development. What outcomes are possible depends less on institutions than on how always volatile and malleable historic blocs get organized and reorganized. And there are clearly limits to the project of authoritarian hegemony. The middle class has always been a fickle political actor, and the neo-middle class in particular has aligned itself with reaction on terms that are inherently precarious. At the economic level, the problem is that populists promise much to the people, but hubris is no substitute for programmatic and sustained coordination of class interests. The sharp decline of the Indian economy even before the Covid pandemic may prove politically insurmountable. And on the ideological level preserving right-wing populist blocs requires stitching together disparate identities and interests that are inherently unstable, especially in a rapidly changing economy. Finally, if India’s democratic institutions are in a cycle of decline that predates but has been accelerated by the BJP’s rise to power, the culture and practices of democracy, cultivated by decades of a wide range of identities and interests asserting their rights and pressing their claims, represent a formidable reservoir of resistance.

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