



THE HINDU CENTRE

for

Politics and Public Policy

Interview

Majoritarianism is a pushback against political mobilisation by the marginalised: Thomas Blom Hansen



[SAPTARSHI BHATTACHARYA](#)



Voters in at a polling station in Palayampatti village that falls under the Virudhunagar Lok Sabha constituency in Tamil Nadu on April 19, 2024. India's seven-phase 18th General Election commenced on April 19 and will end on June 01, 2024. Photo: G. Moorthy/ The Hindu.

*Why do parties with ideologies corrosive to basic democratic values - liberty, equality, and fraternity - enjoy democratic endorsements in India and elsewhere? An easy observation is that there is popular attraction for 'strong' leaders, free-market policies, and promises of 'regaining lost glory'. **Thomas Blom Hansen, Reliance-Dhirubhai Ambani Professor and Chair, Department of Anthropology, Stanford University, U.S.**, and a scholar on Hindu nationalism, decodes the electoral success of majoritarianism to the multiple resentments created by deepening of democracies, which empowered marginalised groups but also created pushback from entrenched social hierarchies. These counter-acting forces, he points out, provides electoral space for such parties.*

*Prof. Hansen also explains how the Bharatiya Janata Party grew on criticisms of democratic expansion, why the Indian National Congress lost the political narrative, and the fallout of the Indian Left's failure to read caste and communal dynamics. The "old secularism" in India, he asserts, "has run its course". The way forward is to transcend mere "tolerance" of minorities, and "assertively embrace" India's diversity "as it is lived and experienced by the majority". Excerpts from a conversation with **Saptarshi Bhattacharya, Senior Coordinator, The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy**, in Chennai on April 03, 2024:*

Saptarshi Bhattacharya: Professor Hansen, a decade of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) rule under Prime Minister Narendra Modi has raised questions about the status of democratic politics in India. What are your thoughts on the eve of the 18th General Election?

Thomas Blom Hansen: There is democratic contraction in several countries; lesser access to the space for democratic politics and public debate. You see that also in the U.S. and elsewhere. Such contraction comes after long periods of [democratic] expansion, marked by a deepening of democracy where several groups that were historically less represented in the public and political realms, begin to gain more voice. This comes with more inclusive social and multicultural policies that recognise these groups and communities. It's very true in Turkey, it is very true in the U.S., and it's also true in India. In Europe, for instance, the rise of authoritarian populism is tightly connected with the sense of "too many

immigrants”; “our country is changing”; “we don’t understand what society we live in anymore”. The rise of [former U.S. President Donald] Trump, was in response to [the then-incumbent, Barak] Obama; to the years of democratic expansion, and the emergence of a lot of different voices and faces in public life that go back to [President] Clinton years.



It is likewise in India. I begin my 1999-book [*The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India*, Princeton University Press], by pointing out that one of the striking things about the rise of the BJP was how they pursued a particularly potent argument, even in the 1990s: the push against electoral politics. They said there’s ‘too much’ politics in India, politics has become ‘dirty’, and so on. This was a form of a dog whistle – a kind of implicit messaging - that politics was only for

Thomas Blom Hansen ‘proper’ candidates.

The rising criticisms of ‘dirty politics’ from the 1980s onward had a lot to do with the fact that many people in India, especially those with more privilege and property, nursed a great deal of resentment against the voice gained by a lot of people from lower castes, from more marginal communities. Many resented policies which promoted and assisted this ‘rise of the plebeians’ as Christophe Jaffrelot [a French social scientist and, along with Prof. Hansen, a long-time scholar on Hindu nationalism] has demonstrated. The immediate counter was to change the discourse of politics. They said it was “disorderly”. They didn’t like people who spoke differently and looked differently from them appear on TV or other media and represent their constituency, or their city, or their State. That’s the underlying sentiment that the BJP tapped into. If you look carefully, they tapped into it in many ways in the 1990s, and later with Mr. Modi’s rise in 2014. That’s a long trajectory where the BJP promises order, public discipline, and also

curtails space for articulation and freedom of speech. Let us not forget that lots of Indians support this.

This raises a fundamental question: in all those years when there was so much celebration of India as one of the biggest liberal democracies, how deep and

The idea of a strong state that enforces law and order appeals to both the privileged and the underprivileged. strong were people's commitment to true liberal values: respecting opponents' right to speak differently, social differences, and

so on? There was some tolerance in the public sphere but in the private sphere, which is governed by caste, it is very, very low. This reminds me of the famous words of [the Chairman of the Constitution's Drafting Committee] B.R. Ambedkar, in 1950 that the new Constitution gives equal political rights to all Indians but these rights are the mere 'topsoil' of a deeply unequal and hierarchical caste society.

Politics is one of the few spaces where Indians from marginal communities can rise, acquire voice, and visibility. Many have learnt to do that very well. But there is an equally strong, maybe even stronger, pushback against this. At the level of ideology such resentment has been mobilised by the BJP but directed against minorities [Muslims in particular], or what Mr. Modi and the Sangh Parivar stereotype as 'those with many children'. The BJP has also mobilised resentment among the so-called 'Extremely Backward Castes' against the dominant Backward Caste communities that have captured most of the benefits of OBC [Other Backward Classes] reservations.

At a practical level, the idea of a strong state that enforces law and order appeals to many, not just the privileged but also the underprivileged. There is an appeal in being a part of a strong nation. The BJP has systematically created the image of India being a large and important nation in the world that deserves respect. Last year's G20 spectacle—delegates being ferried around the country—was meant

for internal consumption, for the local population, to create a sense of the importance of India.

Political narratives become so much more important. After the 1990s, it was Mandal, open markets, Babri Masjid, to name some. Now, it is to make India great again.

In India, this 'Trumpian' idea has been around for at least 30-40 years. Here, the golden age is some kind of mythical past, colonial or even pre-colonial. One sees that in popular culture. In the past decade or more many Bollywood movies are framed as re-dos of history, fantasies of what history could have been if Hindus have been strong and manly and had beaten back Muslim invaders.

Reimagining India's past and its place in the world is a big sentiment, and it's not just for the rich and the privileged. It caters to a much broader sentiment that is also visible in countries like Turkey and Russia. It would be wrong, as has been often done in political analysis, to separate the domestic and the international because we live in the age of hyper-information and hyper-availability of news and images, so the projection of India abroad is intrinsic to the projection of India within.

Some anthropologists attribute what is being played out in India to "democracy fatigue". Do you agree?

Yes. There is democracy fatigue among the people who find, as I just said, that the 'wrong people' are now in charge, and that democracy has created a culture where those who were subservient earlier on, are now proud and are demanding their rights and voice. There's a great deal of resentment against that.

There's also a fatigue with public services and a government that seems to be lacklustre. That's also why you see a lot of policies are now being recalibrated away from rights and entitlement-based frameworks. The UPA [United

Progressive Alliance] I and II governments had new progressive entitlement schemes (such as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, the Right to Education and similar schemes) that were initiated without them necessarily having figured out how to effectively implement them. Now, under Mr. Modi, a lot of other schemes have been rolled out as ‘gifts from the great leader to the poor and to masses’, providing this sense of ‘being taken care of’.

Next, the dynamics of democracy may also explain the fatigue. There is no permanent leader, no permanent hierarchy. Power is always up for grabs. That can be very unstable. This can be exhausting and anxiety-producing for some. It’s like living in a place where you don’t know who’s going to be in charge next year. And people are tuning out of politics because they think it’s just a carnival that won’t stop.

A lot of people—including those not particularly interested in politics, those who encounter politics at its most inane, local level—have to pay a fee or approach some corrupt politician in order to get some public service that is otherwise owed them. They get angry with that, and they find the image of a more permanent leader, who promises to ‘take care of everybody’, appealing. That’s the appeal of strong men.

This is unlike previous emergence of strongmen earlier in the 20th century. Most of them who rose across the world before the World War II were never elected. Or, if they were elected (like the former Chancellor of the Third Reich, Adolf Hitler,) promptly cancelled all elections. Now everybody is elected. And they hold elections very diligently. So, an election is in some ways very important to the production of this legitimacy of representing the true people against corrupt elites.

India's first PM, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Indira Gandhi were also strong leaders when the Congress was a dominant force. After 1967, now there is another party that appears to have a similar hegemonic rule. How do you view the recurrence [of such dominant leaders]?

Indira Gandhi came to power when the Congress system, as it was known for several decades, was falling apart. The leaders in the different States and regions were also clamouring for more autonomy, especially after Nehru's death. It was like the throne was empty. So, she tried to occupy that but in a distinctly new fashion. Her new style of populism – one that reached directly to the poor, to women – happened in the context of a political ferment in the late 1960s and the early '70s, marked by militancy movements left, right, and centre.

There was also a large number of first post-Independence generation of educated young people with aspirations but nowhere to go. One sees the effect of this elsewhere too, the global "youth bulge" of the '60s and '70s. In Bihar, in remote areas, this helped produced the JP [Jayaprakash Narayan] movement. It produced oppositional politics. And then, it produced panic in the Prime Minister's Office. Eventually, it produced Emergency, and that was the end of the Congress as a system. With the re-invention of the Congress in the 1990s or in the 1980s as a much more technocratic machine in some ways, especially after [Mrs. Gandhi's successor and former Prime Minister] Rajiv Gandhi, it becomes a party that stops selling itself so much on the basis of ideology and much more on the basis of competence of governance. And that, of course, becomes their downfall eventually although the competence in governance was quite considerable up to UPA I and II.

Despite the Congress creating the frameworks of policies that governed India throughout the 70 years, including much of what are unfolding today, it lost the narrative and hasn't regained it. In politics you have to have both governance and a distinct narrative. With the deepening of democracy and pluralisation of the

public sphere, and with several other voices coming up, the Congress had difficulty developing a new and distinct narrative although the party decisively reshaped the country from 1991 to 2014.

Today the BJP is portraying that phase as a pandemonium of politics, as electoral politics gone awry. That's why the BJP has activated virtually every repressive

law that, interestingly, Indira Gandhi put on the books. They didn't need to do much more because there were already multiple laws that allowed the

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state to limit interactions with foreign entities, limitations on visa and public speech, emergency laws, all of that. Mrs. Gandhi created the RAW [the Research and Analysis Wing, India's external intelligence agency]. [She also created] the ED [Enforcement Directorate, a multi-disciplinary organisation to investigate economic crimes and foreign exchange violations], which is now being used selectively to harass people. These tools were all hers.

When I did my earlier work, I found it amusing and interesting that many people who were solid long-standing BJP-RSS [Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh] members or sympathisers, had much admiration for Mrs Gandhi's style of governance, although she was the one who put them all in prison! 'But madam was strong', they would tell me.

There was also an intervening phase of coalitions perceived as weak and pushing the electorate towards a 'decisive vote'. Prime Ministers Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh served full terms and with good growth trajectories disproving the strong-government narrative. What are your thoughts?

The old wisdom is that the best policies are always the ones that involve the most compromises with different kinds of interests because they have to incorporate varied constituencies. This is true in many political systems like most of the

multi-party European countries, where the policy development is very stable and gradual. There are no big jumps and starts and ruptures.

That's probably true for India as well. Some of the best policies were adopted during coalitions because they had to incorporate many different things. I know that those who favour a more centralised view of things would say, "no, no we have to have a strong, decisive vote". That's a sentiment that is also very deeply embedded in the Indian electorate.

We shouldn't be blind to the fact that Indian culture, as a whole, and Indian political culture have a distinct element of adulation of the leader. We sit here [in Chennai] next to the statues on the beach and the grand mausoleums of elected leaders from the DMK and the AIADMK [Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and the All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, respectively]. It has to do with the fundamentally hierarchical nature of the Indian society that favours forms of authority that are strong and decisive. They fit with people's general idea of how power, status, order is always hierarchical.

The underlying drama of Indian democracy is that such naturalised hierarchies are being dissolved or challenged in all kinds of ways. Strong forces that advocate

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for more equal rights and entitlements were always contested and often considered dangerous. I see those as the big subterranean forces in Indian politics: the simultaneous, but opposing, pulls of cultural hierarchy and egalitarian ideology. People feel that they should give each person their equal due, at least in principle, but it is very hard because it goes against many of their deepest dispositions. That's true of Indian politics across the board. You see this hierarchical structure of political power in all formations, right to left.

You mentioned ideology. The Congress was more of an umbrella organisation. The only party today that provides an ideological counter to the BJP is the Left. How important do you think is an ideology-based fight to dent the ruling party?

You cannot win in politics without a strong narrative of some sort. Like in America, you cannot win elections without being a strong nationalist and patriot. Even the most Left-leaning politician, even Bernie Sanders in the U.S., will have to praise the American Constitution, American freedoms, American exceptionalism, and all the other elements of American nationalism that people believe in deeply. Or else you have no part.

Similarly, all politicians in India have to be nationalists because the whole political discourse, the whole imagination of democracy is founded on the legacy of the anti-colonial tradition. But what kind of nationalism, what kind of narrative of a nation? There's still some adherence to the Congress' idea of this kind of multi-cultural, inclusive, tolerant approach, and many different people feel that it still is the most capacious approach. But it's also strangely underdefined in its vague umbrella-like formulation. It incorporates any kind of cultural difference but shies away from challenging any of the deep, hierarchical differences and prejudices in Indian society, and the often-violent way they are reproduced and enforced.

The Indian Left did a fantastic job over many years and that has really been a major force in creating a different set of arguments about equality, entitlements, basic rights of people. However, there were two issues where the Left never had a good response, both so salient in today's political world. One is a critical analysis of caste, caste dynamics, the histories of caste, how they manifest, how they may be convertible into political power. By insisting that caste belongs to a 'traditional' or 'feudal' order, the Left has not been able to respond creatively, neither conceptually nor at the level of political tactics, to caste politics.

The second is a deeper understanding of communalism. This is a force of religious community, of stereotyping, and of the historical nature of enmities between Hindus and Muslims, which is not something the BJP or RSS invented. It's much older and not reducible to class politics, or class interest, in any simple way. It has been a feature of India's public life for so long and a complex set of fault lines that created several nation-states in the subcontinent.

The BJP, and other Hindu conservatives, have a clearer narrative about both caste and the Muslim question. 'Caste is our system of difference and natural division of labour according to people's talents. It is intrinsic to our cultural tradition. In the West, you may have class or something, we have caste. So what's the problem?' That's a common response. The implication is of course that equality is an un-Indian principle and therefore inappropriate. While the Left saw caste as a remnant from the past that would be overcome by modernity and modern institutions, it was none other than Ambedkar who saw with unparalleled clarity that caste was the foundation of Hindu society and therefore had to be addressed and understood as a cultural and social force in its own right.

With regard to communalism, many progressives in India are willing to say, 'we defend secularism', 'we defend the rights of minorities'; but very few are willing to stand up and say, 'I defend the right of any Muslim to be a Muslim'. (We know this from America. It took a very long time for mainstream politics to embrace the idea that an African-American is as good an American as anyone else. It's still a contested question.) But I do not see many progressive Indians who stand up and say why wouldn't a Muslim, also an observant and deeply conservative Muslim, be as good an Indian as anyone else? Instead, one sees a cautious, generalised, vague language of tolerance.

The main parties cannot attract Muslim votes unless they stand up for them. That's why some Muslim parties survive.

I don't think Congress or other parties can attract any Muslim votes unless one is actually willing to stand up for them. That's why some smaller Muslim parties survive on this kind of programme saying, 'we are proud of what we are'. But if the opposition parties are serious about incorporating minorities – and it is not clear how serious they are, except the All India Trinamool Congress perhaps – the position has to be assertive instead of just cowering under a sort of vague umbrella of the eternal plurality of Hinduism. That was the old secularism, and it seems to have run its course.

After winning the 2019 election Mr. Modi said that the word 'secularism' was not mentioned even once by the opposition. 'Secularism' is not in the political narrative even now. What do you think will be the one or many factors that will play a major role in these elections?

The BJP will do many things, speak to many different constituencies simultaneously. Ayodhya, the new temple, national strength, but also development, issuing new 'guarantees' as in the slogan '*Modi ki guarantee*' [Modi's guarantee]. However, for the BJP and the RSS, the question of the Muslims is always there, because that is their whole basis, it's their biggest political 'trick': turning any narrative into one of 'recovering our pride in the face of historical humiliation'. That was what Ayodhya, Kashmir, projecting strength, and many other policies are revolving around.

The Congress and others are trying to show that the BJP's record of governance is dubious, that the economy is not doing well, etc. I don't know how effective such myth busting will be. I think many people are not necessarily expecting that much from political leaders, because people are accustomed to very high level of precarity and uncertainty. The poor don't necessarily expect things to change quickly for them. It's sort of endemic in the lives of the poor half of Indian society. So, while delivery of public services may be central to local and State elections, national elections are often powered by larger symbolic and emotional issues.

Instead of repeating old secular mantras of tolerance, there has to be a more assertive embrace of India's diversity as it is lived and experienced by the

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majority. Not just handing out reservations or schemes, which is a standard remedy, but also a more discursive recognition. It is not enough to say that Muslims and Christians are brothers, but actually acknowledging that within the Hindu fold, vast majority of people have not been given their recognition. [Former Congress President] Rahul Gandhi has made some gestures towards that...

... the caste census...

...the caste census, by talking about caste in a much more constructive way and in a way that acknowledges that caste is keenly felt and experienced by the vast majority of Indians.

If one wants to make an argument about the actually existing pluralism in Indian society, one must start with Hindus and how those at the lowest rungs of a caste society experience and navigate Indian society. So far, secularism has focused on religious minorities instead of recognising that there never was any clear 'Hindu majority'. It has to start 'at home' as it were, by recognising internal differences and by conceptualising what social justice in a caste society may look like and what it may imply. The BJP sees caste communities as 'natural' and discrete identities that should be incorporated into a larger 'Hindu fold'. They do not want to discuss caste and caste discrimination as a social justice problem. Therein lies their biggest weakness and limitation, and the greatest opportunity for the opposition.

[This article was editorially updated on April 26, 2024, to add clarity to the functions of the Enforcement Directorate, and to correct the year in the photo caption.]

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