

Indian Populism

By Sylvie Guichard

Since Narendra Modi, the strongman of Hindu nationalism, was elected prime minister, discrimination against minorities has increased in India and freedom of expression no longer seems guaranteed. Can Indian democracy resist the rise of an authoritarian and xenophobic right?

While the political parties that express Hindu nationalist ideology – the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS) from 1951 to 1977 and the Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People’s Party – BJP) since 1980 – have tended to waver between phases of extremism and moderation¹, the election of Narendra Modi as prime minister in 2014 has undoubtedly caused the BJP to shift into a new radical phase. What does this mean? How is this extremism manifesting itself in the political debate and, more broadly, in the public sphere?

The French philosopher Pierre-André Taguieff proposes defining extremism by its “authoritarianism in the sphere of ideology (doctrine and programme) and the use of violence in the sphere of action. [...] Around this hard core (which the extreme right shares with the non-libertarian extreme left), one initially encounters dogmatic intransigence and the dream of a mass revolutionary cleansing, followed by the desire to establish a ‘new order’”².

These elements appear consistently, albeit sometimes in slightly different terms, in the discourse and actions of the Hindu nationalist movement as a whole, also known as the Sangh Parivar. However, the political wing of the movement, the BJP, supports them and pushes them more or less directly according to the period in question. Now that the first two years of the Modi government are over, we can make an initial assessment of Hindu nationalist politics. Two points stand out. First, there are numerous signs that the Hindu far right is on the rise in

¹ Christophe Jaffrelot, “Refining the Moderation Thesis. Two Religious Parties and Indian Democracy: the Jana Sangh and the BJP Between Hindutva Radicalism and Coalition Politics”, *Democratization*, vol. 20, n° 5, p. 876-894.

² Pierre-André Taguieff, “Les nouveaux sentiers de l’extrémisme”, *Huffington Post*, 30 May 2015.

the political sphere. Second, extreme right-wing discourse is undergoing a kind of banalisation or acceptance that is being enabled by government support on the one hand and by the disqualification of the most troublesome critics, accused of being “anti-nationalist”, on the other hand.

In order to understand today’s dynamics and the changes brought about by the BJP’s rise to power, it is necessary to make a brief overview of Narendra Modi’s political career and then describe the way in which the ideological-institutional matrix of the Hindu nationalist movement (i.e. the Sangh Parivar) functions. After these clarifications, it will be easier to decode the Hindu nationalist dimension in key areas of public policy, and to better understand the scope of the attempts to establish a hegemonic ideology in the public sphere.

The political rise of Narendra Modi

Narendra Modi was born into a modest family. He joined the Hindu nationalist movement at a very young age. He first took part in the activities of the national volunteers’ association, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), from which the movement originated, and became a full-time worker there. He then joined the BJP, political party linked to the RSS, and rose quickly through the ranks. He was appointed Chief Minister of the state of Gujarat in 2001 and was re-elected three times as leader of one of the most industrialised states in India, with more than 60 million inhabitants.

During the 2014 national election campaign, Modi presented himself as a man capable of reforming and modernising the country. He has won the support of most Indian industrialists, who see him as the person who will propel India to the forefront of the major world powers and lift the country out of long decades of economic planning and protectionist policies deemed retrograde. However, Narendra Modi does not only represent the hope of rapid economic development. His image is also linked to Hindu ultra-nationalism and the anti-Muslim pogroms of 2002 in Gujarat, which earned him a ban on travelling to the United Kingdom until the end of 2012 and to the United States until 2014. There is an ongoing dispute over Modi’s exact role in the violence, during which between 1000 and 2000 people were killed, the majority Muslims. At best, he failed to put a swift end to the riots; at worst, he encouraged their organisation. Following complaints, the Indian Supreme Court has repeatedly called for investigations, only to conclude, on each occasion, that there is insufficient evidence to begin a trial. The last investigation dates from 2013; by 2014, Modi was prime minister and benefiting from the immunity that his position gives him.

Narendra Modi built his campaign around the promise of “good governance” and rapid economic development rather than aggressive Hindu nationalist rhetoric. However, his reputation as the strongman of Hindu nationalism was already established. During the election

campaign, the two sides of the candidate were pitted against one another in the media: his defenders praised his management skills and efficiency, while his critics recalled the part he had played in the communal violence.

Those elections saw the highest voter turnout since India's independence: 66.4% of voters cast their ballot. In May 2014, when the results from the 551 million voters came in, Modi's victory was unquestioned. The BJP found itself with an unprecedented level of influence. It obtained an absolute majority in the House of the People (282 seats out of a total of 543). The coalition he headed won 336 seats, while the Indian National Congress party, which had been in power for 55 out of the 69 years of India's independence, won just 44 seats (in contrast with the 206 seats it won in 2009).

The Sangh Parivar

The Sangh Parivar (the term means family of organisations) is often portrayed as an extensive network of organisations that includes a political party (the BJP), a students' association (the ABVP), a trade union and numerous organisations that adhere to Hindu nationalist ideology, but in varyingly aggressive forms and with actions ranging from historical research activities to physical, sometimes murderous, attacks. The movement originated with the RSS. It was founded in 1925 by Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, a high-caste doctor from Maharashtra. The RSS defines itself as a socio-cultural group rather than a political group, and aims to promote and protect the Hindu nation by carrying out in-depth reforms in society.

The RSS and all the Sangh Parivar organisations conceive the Indian nation as Hindu, while specifying that they see Hinduism as a cultural, non-religious identity. This implies that minorities are accepted on the condition that they recognise the nation as inherently Hindu and assimilate to – or at least submit to – the majority culture. This position is accompanied by a belligerent discourse that has been constructed against Muslims and Christians as well as against the westernisation of Indian values and way of life. Muslim and Christian Indians (14.2% and 2.3% of the population respectively³) are considered an internal threat to the Hindu population and culture, while the influence of foreign culture is seen as a form of neo-colonialism. This discourse maintains and is based firstly on resentment sparked by colonisation and, secondly, on the antagonism that has existed between India and Pakistan since their creation in 1947.

The RSS lies at the heart of this struggle for the Hindu nation. However, when Modi came to power it was uncertain what role the “mother” organisation would play in the government. Would the BJP establish its own policy or would it mainly implement the RSS agenda? The two organisations' interdependence has made their relationship tumultuous ever

³ According to the 2011 census (<http://www.census2011.co.in/religion.php>, consulted on 13 October 2016).

since the BJP was created in 1980. The presence on the entire territory of militants from the RSS and other Sangh Parivar organisations makes these groups precious allies when it comes to mobilising the electorate, but their activism can also prove troublesome for the political party, which has often criticised the RSS for failing to grasp not only the electoral requirements but also those of coalition politics. However, following the BJP's victory in 2014, the RSS has undoubtedly gained direct political influence. Several of its members were appointed to key government positions and others have been delegated to the BJP. These appointments are a good illustration of the RSS's control over the party.

Nevertheless, the RSS denies its indisputable influence over the other organisations in the movement, which are, strictly speaking, independent. The number of these organisations has increased over the last 15 years. According to Ram Madhav, former spokesperson for the RSS who became general secretary of the BJP in 2014, the Sangh Parivar now includes some 40 organisations. Some observers, however, estimate that there are between 125 and 150 organisations linked to the RSS. They are very active among certain sectors of the population, notably the Dalits, formerly called untouchables, and so-called tribal populations⁴.

Moreover, although the radical fringe of the movement has always existed, its activities have increased over the last decade, notably through a series of bomb explosions initially attributed to Islamic fundamentalists, but which have proven to be the work of Hindu nationalist groups. Some of these groups, in particular the Bajrang Dal, which played a role in the Nanded explosion in 2006, are part of the Sangh Parivar. Others are suspected of having links with the RSS or some of its leaders. This is true of Abhinav Bharat, which was responsible for several attacks between 2006 and 2008. Other groups are independent and often feel that the actions of the Sangh Parivar are too "weak", such as Sanatan Sanstha, of which three members were arrested in 2007 for a number of bomb attacks and two other members died while handling explosives in Goa in 2009. Similarly, two members of the sister organisation Hindu Jagruti Samiti were arrested in connection with the murders of Narendra Dabholkar and Govind Pansare in 2013 and 2014, two men who condemned certain Hindu practices as being superstitious. Another "advocate of reason", M. M. Kalburgi, was shot dead in 2015, but the investigation did not lead to any convictions.

The lack of transparency surrounding the links between the different organisations and the RSS's refusal to acknowledge its authority over the movement as a whole give the organisations protection against one another. When one of them is accused, the others can argue that they knew nothing, that they had nothing to do with the action taken and therefore bear no responsibility. This also allows a system of double discourse or a kind of division of labour that works in the BJP's favour. The Sangh Parivar's activity polarises communities according to their religious affiliation. The BJP derives electoral benefits from this, but can formally distance itself from the movement's violent actions and maintain the facade of a party

⁴ See John Dayal in particular, "Ghar Wapsi' and the Not-so-Veiled Threat of the Sangh", *Mainstream*, vol. 51, n° 26, 15 June 2013.

that is respectful of the state of law and supports democratic values. This division of labour also works within the BJP itself. For example, during Modi's Independence Day speech delivered on 15 August 2014, he called for a ten-year moratorium on violent activities, while just a few weeks later some elected members of his party (Yogi Adityanath and Usha Thakur) incited the same violence and yet were not called to order by the prime minister.

The various organisations of the Sangh Parivar perceived the BJP's rise to power as the government's *carte blanche* for their activities. This impression was further confirmed by the inaction or slow response by Modi and his cabinet when minorities were attacked. Just before Christmas in 2014, the Saint Sebastian church in New Delhi burned down. The police rapidly concluded that the fire had been caused by a short circuit. The capital's Christian population had to mobilise in order to demand a police enquiry. No arrests were made, but kerosene cans were found around the church, indicating an arson attack. Modi made no statement following this attack, perhaps because he was busy defending his government's proposal to turn the Christmas Day holiday into a day of "good governance". He did not speak out for another two months, after several other churches had been vandalised, condemning violence against religions in vague, general terms.

Statistics for 2015 show a 17% increase in communal violence compared with 2014, when there were fewer incidents than in 2013⁵. The high figures from 2013 were due to the violence that erupted during the election campaign in the district of Muzzafarnagar, in the north of India, which pitted Hindus, more specifically members of the Jats community, against Muslims. According to a report by an independent committee, the BJP and the Samajwadi Party, direct opponents in the district, fuelled tensions between the communities when they could have been controlled, to further their own electoral ends⁶.

The implementation of Hindu nationalist policies

Narendra Modi's government has not, however, taken up the BJP's traditional hobbyhorses: the entry into force of a uniform civil code, which would put an end to the application of specific religious rights in certain areas of family law, in particular Hindu law for Hindus and Sharia law for Muslims; the repeal of the special status of Kashmir, which limits the powers of the central government in that state; and the construction of a temple dedicated to the Hindu god Ram on the site of a mosque destroyed by Hindu nationalist militants in 1992. In 2014, many analysts also pointed out that the Modi government was pursuing several policies initiated by the coalition led by the Congress party, particularly with regard to the economy and foreign affairs. They considered that the real changes were to be found mainly in

⁵ Bharti Jain, "India Sees Rise in Communal Violence, UP Leads States", *Times of India*, 24 February 2016.

⁶ Mohan Rao, Ish Mishra, Pragya Singh and Vikas Bajpai, "Communalism and the Role of the State: an Investigation into the Communal Violence in Muzzafarnagar and its Aftermaths. A Report", December 2013.

educational and cultural policies. And indeed, in these areas, the government defends positions that are clearly part of Hindu nationalism. The issues it puts forward form the core of the movement's ideology since it was established: rewriting Indian history, particularly promoting the idea of a Vedic golden age in which a growing number of inventions originated, from cosmetic surgery to aviation and the atomic bomb; banning the slaughter and consumption of cattle; homogenising and Hinduising Indian culture and society; and a large number of measures that discriminate against minorities.

The Sangh Parivar's social reform project gives education a key role, which, through the re-writing of history and the promotion of Hindu culture, aims not only to restore a sense of pride among Hindus but also "win back" the lost "parts of the social body", particularly following conversion. The Sangh Parivar thus has many educational organisations working in so-called tribal areas. Their activities are aimed at "resocialising" these populations in Hindu culture and are accompanied by conversion campaigns (*ghar wapsi* – "homecoming") that counters Christian proselytism in these regions.

The presence of missionaries in the so-called tribal areas dates from colonisation and still continues through numerous non-governmental organisations, particularly evangelical groups. No figures are available but for the period 2001 to 2011, the percentage of Christians in the population remained unchanged while the fertility rate of Christian women declined. It thus seems likely that conversions contributed to this constancy⁷. However, the situation is still a far cry from the danger alluded to by the Sangh Parivar: that the Hindu population (79.8% of the population in 2011) could become a minority as a result of conversions and above all as a consequence of the lower birth rate among Hindus than among Muslims. While conversions to Islam by means of what Hindu nationalists call "love jihad" (a practice in which Muslim men seduce Hindu women in order to convert them) are at best anecdotal, it is true that the fertility rate among Muslim women, although on a downward trend, is currently higher than that of Hindu women. Between 2001 and 2011, the percentage of the Muslim population in India rose from 13.4% to 14.2%.

The field work done by Sangh Parivar organisations does not depend on the electoral success of the BJP. It continues whether the party is in power or not. This constancy has certainly allowed the Hindu nationalist ideology to spread and consolidate in Indian society. Nevertheless, while the BJP is in power, it can push the Sangh Parivar agenda by redirecting policies for education and culture, especially by filling key positions with individuals who are ideologically close to it, by financing certain projects and redefining certain public policies. Contrary to what might have been expected in view of the measures taken during its previous participations in the central and states government, this time the BJP has not attempted to change history textbooks, or at least not directly⁸. On the other hand, a new education policy

⁷ See Surjit S. Bhalla, "Census, Christians, Conversions", *The Indian Express*, 1 September 2015.

⁸ The first attempt to modify textbooks was made in 1977, when the BJS joined the government for the first time through its association with the Janata party. It was a failure. In 1990, the BJP succeeded in introducing changes in states where it held power. Then, between 1998 and 2004, while the coalition government was led by

(to replace that of 1986, modified in 1992) is under discussion, and a large number of Sangh Parivar organisations have been consulted on the matter.

Since Modi became prime minister, he has appointed supporters of the Hindu nationalist ideology to head teaching and research institutions, starting with the minister of Education and Human Resources Development, Smriti Irani, a former actress close to Narendra Modi⁹. The fact that the political leanings of the nominee play a role in his or her appointment is only to be expected, but the fact that they might not be qualified enough makes this politicisation a problem. In particular, the BJP and the RSS have interfered in the procedures for selecting the governing boards of highly prestigious academic institutions such as the Indian Institute of Technology, the Indian Institute of Management and the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library. They have given their members leadership positions in various educational and cultural institutes. In the case of the Film and Television Institute of India, the appointment as chairman of an actor with an inglorious career but member to the BJP, as well as the nomination to the institute's board of governors of three people linked to the Sangh Parivar, sparked a students' strike that lasted for more than two months. Another controversy followed the appointment in June 2014 of Professor Y. Sudershan Rao as head of the Indian Council of Historical Research. Rao is a defender of Hindu nationalist historiography that believes in the historicity of sacred texts whose content, according to this view, does not derive from myths or beliefs but rather is proven and should form the basis of historical research.

This project to re-write Indian history is part of a broader theme of protecting and purifying the Indian nation. In September 2015, Mahesh Sharma, the Minister of Culture, spoke to the media several times to defend the need to protect India against westernisation. Sharma believes that teaching English or another foreign language (such as German) at the expense of Sanskrit or Hindi constitutes "cultural pollution". According to the minister, the government should "cleanse every area of public discourse that has been westernised and where Indian culture and civilisation need to be restored – be it the history we read or our cultural heritage or our institutes that have been polluted over years"¹⁰. The threat of westernisation is a recurring theme for the Sangh Parivar, which reflects its deep-rooted fear of seeing the Hindu nation disappear if its purity and superiority are not restored.

This protection of "traditional" culture, a tradition largely reconstructed by Hindu nationalism, is frequently transformed into symbolic, verbal, even physical aggression. The Taj Mahal, built by a Mughal emperor, is presented as a Hindu monument, Western signs are

the BJP, a new curriculum and new school textbooks were introduced and used only for a few years. Although no measures were taken to change the textbooks issued by the central government since Narendra Modi's election victory in 2014, the states governed by the BJP have made several changes. In 2014, Gujarat distributed nine additional books on "moral education" in 42,000 state schools. Eight of those nine books were written by Dinanath Batra, who has been responsible for many of the educational policies conducted by the Sangh Parivar. These books were also used in Haryana. Furthermore, in May 2016, Rajasthan published a new social sciences textbook in which no mention was made of Nehru.

⁹ Following a ministerial reshuffle in July 2016, Smriti Irani no longer heads the Ministry of Human Resource Development. She is now the Minister of Textiles.

¹⁰ Sumi Sukanya, "Centre Targets 'Cultural Pollution'", *The Telegraph*, 8 September 2015.

attacked, campaigns are carried out against works considered irreverent towards religion or against certain historical figures, young women are assaulted in pubs, and in recent months the actions of the *gau rakshaks* have multiplied.

Cow protection groups now post videos online in which they are seen violently beating and humiliating supposed cow-killers for their “crime”, be it slaughtering cows, skinning them or consuming their meat. The cow is a sacred animal for Hindus and the ban on slaughtering cows is provided for in the Indian constitution, in a section (the guiding principles) that has no direct legal effect but whose articles were intended to guide the actions of future governments. The majority of states have created legislation prohibiting the slaughter of cows, anticipating up to ten years imprisonment in cases of infringement, and several states have extended the ban to cover the possession and consumption of beef. Despite this, since the BJP came to power, a growing number of militants believe it is their duty to intervene directly against those responsible for a cow’s death.

Before becoming prime minister, Modi helped to inflame the issue by criticising the Congress party for supposedly promoting a large-scale cow-slaughtering project with commercial purposes that Modi called the “pink revolution”. As Prime minister, he waited more than two weeks to comment on, without actually condemning, the lynching of a Muslim man for allegedly consuming beef. In September 2015 in a village near the capital, Mohammed Akhlaq was beaten to death by a mob following rumours that he and his family had killed a calf and consumed its meat for Id, the Muslim “festival of sacrifice”. It was only after the attack in July 2016 on a group of Dalits who had skinned a cow in Gujarat – a job traditionally considered unclean and performed by Untouchables – that the prime minister publicly condemned the *gau rakshaks’* activities. However, given the lack of an official statement up to that point, it is tempting to see his condemnation – which only came after an unprecedented mobilisation by the Dalits in the state of Gujarat – as a political gesture intended mainly to hold on to the community’s vote before the 2017 regional elections to be held in seven states, particularly in Uttar Pradesh, the most populated in India.

Whether actively or by keeping silent, the BJP supports the Sangh Parivar’s activities, provided that the tensions they cause do not become counter-productive in political terms. In 2015, therefore, Modi condemned the conversion campaign led by an organisation close to the RSS when the opposition it sparked blocked Parliament while the prime minister was trying to get through some long-expected reforms. Modi is certainly aware that in the next general elections his government will be judged, at least partly, on its efficiency. He also opposes the actions of the *gau rakshaks* when they put in jeopardy future electoral support among groups such as the Dalits. Even so, his disavowal of some of the Sangh Parivar’s activities is merely symbolic and does not usually translate into action. The division of labour within the Sangh Parivar makes it possible to divert the media’s attention without making any real changes.

Freedom of expression, hate speech and sedition

Since its creation, the BJP has practised the art of double discourse: virulent for its supporters and more reserved for those on the outside. Nevertheless, since 2014 it would seem that the consensus that under-pinned what was politically utterable – and which limited certain verbal attacks – has vanished. With increasing frequency and openness, the elected members of the BJP use, both publicly and in the media, a rhetoric of incitement to violence that is not usually condemned by the government, although it sometimes is by the courts. On 28 February 2016, for example, during a ceremony in memory of a member of the Vishva Hindi Parishad (VHP, a Sangh Parivar organisation) allegedly killed by young Muslims the previous week, high-ranking members of the VHP, the Bajrang Dal and the BJP, including a minister, spoke in turn. They repeatedly called for violence against Muslims, whom they accused of being traitors and likened to devils. This threatening discourse called on Hindus to take up their arms for the upcoming elections and warned Muslims of the “final battle”. In the weeks that followed, the police arrested a few of the spokespeople on the grounds of inciting hatred, but they left the leading figures alone.

The recurrence of this type of verbal violence illustrates the newfound political legitimacy of this rhetoric of aggression against minorities, the banalisation of radical Hindu nationalist discourse and the normalisation of intolerance that results from it. Inevitably, this is accompanied by a narrowing of the space for dissent and expressions of disagreement. Those who challenge the government’s position are considered “anti-national”, as was the case in the summer of 2015 for some Dalit students from the University of Hyderabad, and they may even be accused of sedition, as the JNU students were in 2016.

The tragic story of Rohit Vemula represents this narrowing and the risks faced by individuals who express their dissent. On the Hyderabad university campus in 2015, the Ambedkar Students Association (ASA) – mostly made up of Dalit students – organised a screening of a documentary on the Muzzafarnagar communal violence of 2013. After the screening, a leader of the students’ union with links to the RSS (the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad – ABVP) accused five PhD students who were members of the ASA, including Rohit Vemula, of having attacked him. The university administration withdrew their scholarships and expelled them from their hostel for engaging in union activity deemed “anti-national”. In January 2016, Rohit Vemula committed suicide. He left a letter, widely circulated in the press, which sparked outrage and a number of demonstrations against the university administration and the government.

In a speech, Narendra Modi expressed his regret that India had lost a son, while his Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sushma Swaraj, cast doubt over whether Rohit Vermula really belonged to the Dalit community. The minister’s accusations worsened the situation for the government, which did not want to attract any further attention to the discrimination suffered by the Dalits in universities, or to lose the votes of the Dalit community. Another timely crisis

then turned people's attention towards Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), which the RSS had long accused on being a bastion of leftists and communists.

In February 2016, Delhi police arrested Kanhaiya Kumar, a PhD student and president of the JNU All Indian Student Federation, after members of the ABVP claimed to have heard him making anti-national speeches during a demonstration organised a few days earlier on the campus. The aim of the demonstration had been to protest against the “legal murder” of Afzal Guru, sentenced and hanged three years earlier for his role in the attack on the Indian Parliament in December 2001. The arrest, conviction and sudden, secret execution of Afzal Guru, performed without his family's knowledge, were subjects of intense debate and Afzal became a symbol of the military oppression of the Kashmir population. The anti-national slogans – some extolling the glory of Pakistan, other calling for the destruction of India – that he was said to have pronounced outside the commemoration led Kanhaiya Kumar to be accused of sedition. The main charge was historically significant, since it had been introduced to the penal code during the colonial era in order to suppress those taking part in the struggle for independence. Following the large scale mobilisation of JNU students and professors, as well as numerous demonstrations, the Delhi High Court of Justice released Kanhaiya on bail along with the other two students arrested with him.

As we can see, attempts to curtail freedom of expression in order to silence critics have sparked resistance. Associations representing minorities and large numbers of intellectuals have mobilised against the government and the implementation of the Sangh Parivar agenda. In October 2015, 40 writers returned the awards they had received from the prestigious Sahitya Akademi, the national academy of literature, in protest against the climate of intolerance faced by artists.

However, in India today public resistance is risky as experienced notably by the writer Arundathi Roy and the editor Krishna Prasad. The former was accused of contempt of court for publishing an article in May 2015 condemning the imprisonment of a severely disabled English teacher from the University of Delhi who allegedly engaged in anti-national activities. The latter – which also suggested an attempt to control the media – was suddenly and without explanation dismissed of his editorial position at the weekly magazine *Outlook*. His sacking followed the publication in *Outlook* of a report documenting the disappearance of 31 young girls who were abducted from their families in Assam and sent to Sangh Parivar institutions in Punjab and Gujarat¹¹. The report showed how political patronage was covering up a number of illegal activities being carried out by the Sangh Parivar organisations.

In its drive to dominate the public sphere and silence its critics, the Sangh Parivar utilises state powers, yet its resources run much deeper. It receives support from institutions and individuals working in business, education and the media, who act as sentinels launching attacks

¹¹ Neha Dixit, “Operation #BetiUthao”, *Outlook*, 8 August 2016.

on behalf of the ruling party. All of these social, political and cultural networks – from newspaper editors to aggressive online “trolls” – act systematically to sway public opinion.

What has changed

After 10 years of government under the Congress party from 2004 to 2014, the election of Narendra Modi reflects the popular will for change, but also the desire for a strong government, even if it favours efficiency at the expense of democracy. In 2014, many voters were willing to run the risk of opening the government up to the militant wing of Hindu nationalism, electing Modi the “modernizer”.

As we have seen, in order to understand what has changed in India after the BJP’s first two years in power, it is crucial to consider not only the government’s activities but also those of Sangh Parivar as a whole, as well as the part that Hindu nationalist ideology plays in Indian society in general. This ideology has undoubtedly gained legitimacy since the BJP came to power, but we should not underestimate its prevalence in Indian society since independence.

Over the past two years, the BJP has advanced the Hindu nationalist agenda through specific public policies. The party’s large majority has allowed it to ignore its coalition partners. However, in addition to what the government has done since coming to power, it has also given the Parivar a free rein, resulting in increased activity. The arrival in power of the BJP, far from affecting public policy alone, has thus caused a shift in the political climate, rhetoric and the spectrum of what is politically acceptable and publicly utterable and audible. This has paved the way for the banalisation and therefore legitimisation of the radical and violent expression of Hindu nationalism. This trivialization of ultra-nationalism in India has thus added a new layer to the contemporary panorama of the rise of far-right parties.

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