

Narendra Modi's Seven Years in Power, and What It Means for India and the Rest of the World

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This month marks seven years of Modi in power.

Narendra Modi first got elected as Prime Minister of India in May 2014. His right wing Hindu nationalist BJP has turned what has otherwise been known as the “world’s largest democracy” into an intolerant Hindu theocracy. Attacks on religious minorities, particularly Muslims and political dissidents, have grown under him since then.

Let’s first examine, why is this happening? And, what is so unique about this government?

We must keep in mind that India has seen emergency and press censorship in 1975 under a different regime. Likewise, India also witnessed the Sikh Genocide in 1984, under the Congress government. For the record, the Congress party, which is now in the opposition, claims to be a secular alternative to the BJP. Nevertheless, the Congress party had engaged itself in divisive and sectarian politics for short term gains by polarizing the Hindu majority. Yet, the difference between the two parties needs to be understood.

BJP is a political arm of the RSS – a Hindu supremacist group established in 1925 when India was under British occupation. Notably, the RSS never played an active role in the freedom movement. It mainly campaigned to establish a Hindu nation in which Muslims and Christians were to be treated as second-class citizens.

RSS has always considered Islam and Christianity as foreign religions, while domestic faith groups such as Buddhism and Sikhism are part of the Hindu fold. Their exclusionist and assimilationist agenda was no secret. They believed in violence and fascism. It is not surprising that they idolized Hitler and justified the Jewish holocaust, and even drew inspiration from Nazis.

RSS itself is like a semi-paramilitary force that routinely organizes camps across India. They mostly wear khaki shorts and sport black caps during their ceremonies. Modi is an RSS man. There is a famous quote from him saying that he owes to the Sangh (RSS).

It is important to mention here that the RSS was briefly banned following the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, the towering leader of the passive resistance movement against British rule.

Although a practicing Hindu himself, unlike the RSS founders, Gandhi believed in the coexistence of Hindus and Muslims. In spite of many of his own contradictions, Gandhi did not suit the RSS. One of their followers, Nathuram Godse, killed him in 1948.

While the BJP will never officially question Gandhi, who has been accepted as the father of the Indian nation, some of its MPs have been caught in controversies for glorifying his assassin. However, Modi reverrs V.D. Savarkar, another problematic figure and a Hindu bigot, who was involved in Gandhi's murder, although he was acquitted by the courts for lack of evidence.

Let's face it, Modi's ascendance to power is the culmination of both the consistent efforts of the RSS to transform the political environment through social engineering, and the pragmatic majoritarian politics of the previous Congress government. Right from Gandhi to the present, the Congress leadership has compromised to please the Hindu majority by soft-peddling religion-based politics.

For instance Gandhi believed in cow protection. The cow is considered a sacred animal by many devout Hindus. Today, the BJP has made many tough cow protection laws, while its supporters continue to hound Muslims suspected of carrying beef in their tiffin boxes.

In 1984, the Congress government ordered the military attack on the Golden Temple complex, the holiest shrine of the Sikhs in Amritsar, to deal with a handful of militants fighting an armed insurgency. As a result of this ill-conceived army operation, many innocent pilgrims died, and Sikhs were outraged all across the world. This was done to humiliate the Sikh minority to win an upcoming election.

On October 31, 1984, the then-Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was murdered by her Sikh bodyguards. The Congress then organized anti-Sikh massacres all over India. Several BJP/RSS men also participated in the violence. In the ensuing election, Indira's son got a huge majority in parliament, while BJP only had two MPs. In other words, the BJP-RSS vote had shifted to the Congress.

Modi used similar tactics in 2002 when he was the Chief Minister of Gujarat.

Following a fire on a train carrying Hindu pilgrims, anti-Muslim pogroms were organized all over Gujarat under Modi's watch, after he had blamed the incident on Muslims. While Modi was never charged, the survivors and the witnesses continue to allege his complicity. He was denied visa by the US and other western countries until he became the Prime Minister in 2014. In 2015, he visited Canada.

Let's fast forward to his re-election in 2019.

Shortly after his second term began, his government started pushing the core RSS agenda more aggressively.

As part of its long term commitment to the Hindu Right, his government scrapped the special status given to Kashmir, the only Muslim majority state in India. Thousands of Kashmiris fighting for self-determination were detained.

Then came the famous temple verdict. The Indian Supreme Court handed over the disputed site of Ayodhya to the Hindus. Ayodhya is the birthplace of Lord Ram – a prominent Hindu god.

The BJP has always claimed that the Muslim rulers had demolished the Ram temple that once stood there, to build a mosque. In 1992, the BJP goons had razed the mosque. Since then the BJP has been campaigning to rebuild a Hindu temple at the exact spot.

It is widely believed that the Supreme Court favoured the ruling BJP, and now Modi is determined to deliver on his promise to implement the RSS agenda of rebuilding the Ram temple.

The 2019 electoral win obviously emboldened Modi.

His government went ahead to pass another controversial law. The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) was a highly discriminatory legislation that welcomes only non-Muslim refugees coming to India from the three neighbouring Muslim-dominated countries, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan.

This law was heavily resisted.

If all this wasn't enough, the BJP government passed agriculture laws that the farming community believes will harm their livelihood. All these laws were implemented without much debate in parliament, merely because the BJP has an absolute majority in the house. Anyone resisting these policies can be potentially charged and detained under draconian laws or branded as "anti-national" by the lapdog media of Modi's government.

The situation continues to deteriorate. So much so, even those who raise questions over the government's mismanagement of the COVID 19 situation must face the music.

Despite tall claims of development and progress, India has failed under Modi. The shortage of oxygen and beds in the hospitals suggests the complete lack of preparedness. To question that makes you an "anti-national" or "unpatriotic". We can see clearly how the space for democracy and dialogue is rapidly shrinking under Modi. The previous regimes definitely played a role for the current state of affairs, by pandering to the Hindu majority and not doing enough to bring an even economic growth, but this government must take blame for outright failure, as they have a majority in the house. If this government can implement core programs of the RSS, why can't it deliver on issues that matter to everyone?

That the majority is with Modi is mainly because the RSS has been actively mobilizing people in the name of Hindu nationalism for all these years. Not only the previous regimes failed to stop the RSS from marching ahead, they have been pandering Hindu majority by playing destructive and competitive politics only to the benefit of Modi. Today, the RSS has deeply penetrated into the Indian institutions, the academic bodies, the administrative structure and even the police and the intelligence.

Let's examine what it means for Canada and the rest of the world?

Whatever is happening in India, will definitely have ripple effects here. We all are familiar with the 1985 Air India bombings; the worst terror incident in Canadian history. Never forget that it was the culmination of the ugly events of 1984. The Canada-based Sikh separatists are widely blamed for the incident that claimed 331 lives. Are we waiting for another

tragedy?

It is important to pay attention.

The way Modi is treating minorities might have an impact in the Indian Diaspora. His supporters are increasingly becoming vocal and aggressive in Canada, inciting his opponents here, while most Canadians still take India's secular democracy for granted.

From a Canadian perspective, Modi's policy of assimilating Sikhs should be recognized as a huge problem. Much as First Nations here are resisting assimilation, the Sikhs, who have a sizable population in Canada and have been defending their separate identity, are anxious about the continued growth of the RSS.

Notably, the RSS is repeating the history of Indian Residential Schools. They have been plucking young Indigenous or Adivasi girls from the north-eastern states, sending them to seminaries far away from their families to be indoctrinated into right wing Hindu nationalist ideology.

The CAA is also a repetition of the Continuous Journey Regulation (CJR), under which the Komagata Maru ship was forcibly returned from Vancouver in 1914. Whereas the CJR was aimed to keep Indian immigrants away, the CAA discriminates against Muslim refugees.

The RSS believes in the brutal caste system within Hindu society. Much like blacks, who suffer systemic racism here in North America, the Dalits or so-called untouchables face worst discrimination under that system.

For RSS the idea of racial superiority was never alien. Not only have they idolized Hitler, the BJP supporters openly admired Donald Trump. Modi campaigned shamelessly for his re-election. Let's keep in mind though, that Modi and RSS are far more dangerous than Trump.

As we see anti-Asian racism growing here in North America due to COVID 19, in other parts of India people from north eastern states with oriental facial features are also facing discrimination under Modi's watch. Due to his anti-China rhetoric, this hate has grown even more. It is time for Canada to pay attention and take this challenge seriously.

Where has Canada failed?

Canada, which is also enamoured by Sikh politics, failed to see the gradual growth of RSS in this country. What is the reason that Canada has failed to ban any Hindu extremist group? It is well known how the Hindu Right mobilized people in Canada in support of the Ram temple movement. Some temples even here in BC supported the idea of rebuilding the Ram temple in Ayodhya. Those associated with the movement and were responsible for the demolition of the Ayodhya mosque in 1992 were invited here and allowed to address the temple congregations.

Some of these temples have been holding RSS drills, and some RSS men held positions of power in local temples, and yet the Canadian authorities looked away.

India and Canada have had a number of strategies to deal with the Sikh separatists, but there is a complete silence about growing Hindu extremism.

Only recently, when Prime Minister Justin Trudeau raised his concern over the mistreatment of agitating farmers, there was a fierce backlash from India. Shortly after that, Trudeau

asked for COVID 19 vaccines from Modi, which further emboldened RSS sympathizers in Canada and encouraged them to hold demonstrations to irritate Modi critics here.

While Canada had opened its doors for Hindus and Sikhs facing religious persecution in Afghanistan, and for a Christian woman who faced death in Pakistan, there has been a deafening silence over what is happening with minorities in India.

Canada recently recognized genocide of Uyghur Muslims in China, but failed to recognize genocides of Sikhs and Muslims in India, which only reflects its selectivity.

Even though the Sikh separatist movement has lost its charm, Canada is still keeping an eye on Sikh activists, although it should be keeping a watch on Hindu groups.

What needs to be done?

There is a need to keep a check on the RSS and its folks in Canada, besides banning their activities. This should be followed by a freeze on their assets to stop hate funding. Equally important is to identify the organizations that have sympathy for RSS and Modi, but operate under the disguise of pro-India lobby groups.

There is also a need to keep a watch on Indian agents all across Canada, who have been trying to influence our politicians and the ethnic media to create a favourable image of Modi and the RSS. Elected officials who openly sympathize with Modi and RSS and continue to overlook their crimes against humanity must be made accountable.

If Canada really is a human rights leader in the world, it needs to stand up for the human rights of minorities in India under Modi.

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(With little amendments from my presentation to Squamish Rotary Club on May 13, 2021)

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