

Modi's Failure

Why India is losing faith in its strongman leader

By Robert F. Worth

On a winter afternoon in January 2024, Prime Minister Narendra Modi stood before a podium, gazing out at a handpicked audience of the Indian elite: billionaires, Bollywood actors, cricket stars, nationalist politicians.

Modi had come to the north-central city of Ayodhya, in the state of Uttar Pradesh, to consecrate the still-unfinished temple behind him, with its seven shrines, 160-foot-high dome, and baby-faced statue of the Hindu god Ram, carved in black stone and covered in jewels. He did not mention the fact that the temple was being built on a contested site where Hindu radicals had torn down a 16th-century mosque three decades earlier, setting off years of protests and legal struggle.



Instead, Modi described the temple as an emblem of India's present and future greatness—its rising economic might, its growing navy, its moon missions, and, most of all, its immense human energy and potential. The temple signified India's historic triumph over the “mentality of slavery,” he said. This nation of nearly 1.5 billion was shedding its old secular creed and, despite the fact that 200 million of its citizens are Muslim, being reborn as a land of Hindu-nationalist ideals. “The generations after a thousand years will remember our nation-building efforts today,” he told the crowd.

Among the tens of millions of Indians who watched that speech on TV was 42-year-old Luv Shukla, who lives on the edge of a small town about a three-hour drive from Ayodhya. I met him on a hot day in June, and we chatted while sitting in plastic chairs outside the tiny electronics shop he has run since he was 16.

Shukla has supported Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party since it rose to power in 2014. He was drawn to Modi's confidence and his talk of making India an explicitly Hindu country. But in 2024, for the first time in his life, he voted for the opposition, helping deliver an electoral setback late last spring that changed the narrative of Indian politics. Instead of the sweeping victory Modi had predicted, his party lost its majority in the lower house of India's Parliament—just a few months after that triumphant speech at the new Ayodhya temple. Modi had done everything he could to bend the system in his favor, and that made the reversal all the more surprising. His government had frozen bank accounts of the main opposition party—a tax-return issue, it was alleged—and launched prosecutions of many opposition candidates, turning India's justice system into a political tool.

Modi would remain prime minister, but with only 240 of the 543 seats in Parliament, he would be dependent on coalition partners. An especially shocking loss for the BJP was Uttar Pradesh, the country's most populous state, long considered a bulwark for Modi and his party.

I asked Shukla why he had lost faith in Modi. One reason, he said, was “animals.” When I looked confused, he pointed helpfully to the street, where a huge cow was meandering down the middle of the road. “Look, here's an animal coming now.” It took me a moment to realize what he was talking about. The BJP's preoccupation with protecting cows—for Hindus, a symbol of divine beneficence—was driving people crazy. No one was allowed to touch them anymore, Shukla said. They wandered at will, eating crops and fodder. Cows had even become a source of corruption, he claimed; funds have been set up to protect cows, Shukla said, but “the money disappears.” This is what Modi's rhetoric about building a Hindu nation often amounts to at the local level, especially in villages that have no Muslims to blame.

Shukla moved on from cows to the government's more basic failures. Small-business owners like him were most affected by the Modi government's mistakes, such as the surprise decision in 2016 to cancel large-currency banknotes, a misguided effort to curtail money laundering that left ordinary people desperate for cash. The mishandling of the coronavirus pandemic caused staggering losses of life and income. Many small firms folded, and others had to let go of workers. At the same time, Modi's grand promises about being India's “Development Man” remained unfulfilled. The schools were a mess. The local hospital was a joke.

Shukla was getting angrier. He stood up, saying he had something to show me. We walked across the street, past a brightly painted Hindu temple—by far the best-maintained building in the village—and approached an abandoned house with a rusted bed frame beside it. Nearby was a ruined ambulance, its tires rotting into the dust. The building was supposed to be a maternity hospital, Shukla said, but the government had never followed through. He kicked the building's broken door. “Useless,” he said.

India has been living on hype. Its leaders manufacture bigger promises every year: India as an economic titan, a spiritual leader, a world power capable of standing alongside China, Russia, Europe, and America. Modi's enablers describe him as a “civilizational figure”—someone who stands above politics, who will use his country's demographic weight to rewrite the rules of the global economy. This kind of chest-thumping is often picked up on in the West, where leaders such as President Joe Biden and France's Emmanuel Macron have expressed a desire for a reliable and prosperous Indian ally. Even Modi's abundant critics have focused mostly on his Muslim-baiting and his democratic backsliding, as if prepared to concede what they see as his managerial skill.

But the election results and their aftermath hint at a crack in Modi's populist facade and a spreading discontent with his economic and political record. India's growth has been heavily weighted toward the wealthy, who have become exponentially richer on Modi's watch. Those who have benefited most are a small cadre of billionaire friends to whom Modi has granted special access for years. That practice was cast in a new light in November, when American prosecutors indicted the industrialist Gautam

Adani—India’s second-richest man and a close Modi ally—for his role in a multibillion-dollar bribery-and-fraud scheme. (His company has denied the charges, calling them baseless.) The accusation revived fears about opacity and cronyism—the specter of “India Inc.”—that Modi had promised to address a decade ago.

At the same time, eight in 10 Indians live in poverty. Extraordinary numbers are out of work; one estimate puts unemployment among those ages 15 to 24 at more than 45 percent (though other estimates run lower). Instead of moving from farms to seek employment in cities, as people in other developing countries have done, many Indians—unable to find factory or service jobs—are making the trek in reverse, even as farm income stagnates and drought turns fields into deserts. Modi often says he wants India to be a developed country by 2047, a century after it gained its independence from Britain. But by several key social measures, it is falling behind neighbors such as Bangladesh and Nepal.

Saadat Hasan Manto, one of the Indian subcontinent’s great literary figures in the first half of the 20th century, once wrote that India has “too few leaders and too many stuntmen.” Many Indians appear to be tiring of Modi’s showmanship and growing frustrated with his failures. They may be proud of India’s fabled economic growth, but it hasn’t reached them. During the weeks I spent traveling in India last year, I detected levels of frustration and anger that were noticeably different from what I’d heard on earlier visits—about lost jobs, failed schools, poisoned air and water.

India is—among many other things—an experiment, the largest such experiment in the world, and one with urgent relevance for many other countries. The Modi years have made India into a testing ground for the following question: What, in the long run,

The Modi years have made India into a testing ground for the following question: What, in the long run, exerts greater sway on the electorate—the lure of demagoguery, or the reality of deteriorating living conditions?

exerts greater sway on the electorate—the lure of demagoguery, or the reality of deteriorating living conditions?

MAHENDRA TRIPATHI REMEMBERS the first time he saw Narendra Modi. It was January 14, 1992, and the future prime minister was in Ayodhya with a group of young Hindu nationalists standing outside the mosque known as Babri Masjid. A movement had been gathering for years to remove the mosque, which was widely said to have been built on the site of an older Hindu temple. Energy was in the air, often charged with violence, and Tripathi—then a young news photographer—wanted to capture it.

Something about Modi attracted Tripathi’s notice, even though “he was nobody at that time,” he told me. Perhaps it was his dress or the way he carried himself. Modi has always been intensely conscious of the impression he makes. Even at the age of 6 or 7, he was deliberate about what he wore and “spent a lot of time in grooming,” his uncle told a biographer. His ego and charisma were evident early on; he liked acting in school plays but insisted on having the lead role.

Tripathi remembers taking Modi’s picture and asking him when he would come back to Ayodhya. Modi replied that he would come back when the temple was built. “He kept his promise,” Tripathi told me.

Back in 1992, Modi was a party worker in the RSS, India’s first and most influential Hindu-nationalist group (the acronym stands for Hindi words meaning “national volunteer association”). The RSS was founded in 1925 in an effort to overcome the Hindu weakness and disunity that had, its founders felt, allowed India to be colonized by the British and other invaders over the centuries. The RSS aimed to impose discipline and military rigor on a growing army of Hindu recruits, along with a uniform: black forage cap, white shirt, khaki shorts. It later gave birth to an array of linked groups—including the BJP—with the shared goal of spreading *Hindutva*, or Hinduness, as the glue of a new nation. A central part of that nationalist ideal was the exclusion of Muslims, who were tacitly cast as latecomers to and usurpers of a Hindu realm.

Less than a year after Modi’s first visit to Ayodhya, Tripathi was standing in the same spot when a crowd led by Hindu zealots climbed the dome of Babri Masjid and destroyed it with sledgehammers and axes. Tripathi sympathized, but the mob was seething with rage and thousands strong, and he was lucky to get out alive. His photography studio, not far away, was demolished. “Everything was being broken down,” he told me.

Modi wasn’t there on the big day, and he is said to have resented missing the Ayodhya moment. But he got his own moment 10 years later, on a day that would prove just as important to the transformation of Indian politics.

On February 27, 2002, a train carrying Hindu pilgrims home from Ayodhya caught fire in the western state of Gujarat. Fifty-nine pilgrims were killed, and rumors quickly spread that Muslims had caused the fire. In the pogroms that followed, more than 1,000 people were butchered, most of them Muslim. Modi had just become the chief minister, meaning governor, of Gujarat, and he was accused of telling the police to stand back and let



Top: Sacred cows block traffic in the holy city of Varanasi, on the Ganges, in Uttar Pradesh.

Bottom: Narendra Modi in Ahmadabad in 2007, after reelection as chief minister of Gujarat.



the rioters teach the Muslims a lesson. Although he denied the allegations—and was ultimately cleared of wrongdoing after a decade of legal inquiries—he never expressed regret for what happened. His defiance in the face of pressure for his removal by opposition politicians made him a hero among many Hindus and gave him a national political profile.

Modi's timing was impeccable: India's old order had been crumbling for years. Its founding ideology had been defined in the 1940s by Jawaharlal Nehru, India's brilliant first prime minister, who famously called his country an "ancient palimpsest" of its many cultures and traditions. Nehru wanted an alternative to the tribal mindset that had led to the partition of the country along religious lines in 1947, when about 1 million people—estimates vary widely—were killed in sectarian violence as they fled across the new borders between India and Pakistan. Separating the two nations by religion served as a way out for the exhausted British. To Nehru, it was a betrayal of India's greatest gift. His India

would define itself through diversity; through a grand, maternal embrace of all its discordant parts. Even today, the Indian rupee note declares its value in 17 different languages. Nehru's patriotism was the high-minded vision of a Cambridge graduate who hoped to set India on a unique path—benignly secular and socialist, proudly nonaligned in the binary world of the Cold War.

By the turn of the 21st century, this ideal was a relic. India's leaders had already begun appealing to either Hindu or Muslim communal feelings as a way to get votes. A new capitalist ethic was rising, a consequence of the 1991 decision to embrace the free market and abolish the "license Raj"—heavy-handed economic management by government bureaucrats that had stifled Indian business for decades. The elite had become richer and more isolated from the rest of the country, putting added strain on the old Gandhian ideals of austerity and simplicity.

"The truth is we were an effete, hopeless bunch," wrote Tavleen Singh, a columnist and an avowed member of what she herself

called “the old, colonised ruling class,” in a harsh self-assessment published in April. “We spoke no Indian language well, but this did not matter to us. We were proud of speaking English well. In our drawing rooms we sneered at those who dared enter without speaking good English. And at those whose table manners were not embellished with western refinement.”

Modi was one of those unrefined outsiders. He had grown up poor, the son of a tea seller from one of the lower tiers of the country’s hierarchical caste system, which still weighs heavily on the life chances of most Indians. That background gave him an unusual street credibility within the BJP, whose original support base lay with upper-caste Hindus. He presented himself as an ascetic figure who rose before dawn and worked until late at night, a man with no wife or children whose only loyalty was to India. (Modi does in fact have a wife—he was married as a teenager in a family-arranged ceremony—but he left her almost immediately afterward and has always described himself as single.)

It was a winning formula: Millions of poor and middle-class Indians greeted him like an avenging hero, and not just because of his lowly origins or his gifts as a speaker. The old BJP rallying cry—that Hindus were under attack—had a strong ring of truth in the 2000s, when Islamist terrorists carried out deadly bombings across India. Modi’s immense and sustained popularity is partly about his ability to project a kind of Churchillian defiance in the face of these threats.

Modi became prime minister in 2014 amid a popular movement against corruption, saying he would clean house and fulfill India’s great economic promise. Many liberals were receptive, despite their unease with his triumphalist Hindu rhetoric. There was no denying that the Indian National Congress—the party of Nehru and his daughter, Indira Gandhi, which had dominated Indian politics since independence—was corrupt. And Modi had gained a reputation for managerial competence in Gujarat, where he’d been governor for more than 10 years. He had streamlined regulations and worked to lure big-business owners with what he and his proxies advertised as the “Gujarat model.” He promised to do the same for the entire country.

MODI HAS SOME real achievements to his credit. His government’s road-building blitz has transformed the landscape over the past decade, adding thousands of miles of highway every year; the figure for smaller roads is many times greater. I can remember the days when driving across India was a bit like heading out to sea: You’d stock the car with gas and provisions—uncertain when you’d find a gas station or a place to eat—and set off with a vague sense that you were taking your life into your hands. Nowadays, an Indian road trip is remarkable for its ordinariness.

The BJP has also taken steps to democratize information technology. In a small village in northern India, I saw people paying for produce by holding up their smartphone to a QR code stuck on a vendor’s wooden wagon. The payment system involves minimal merchant fees and has removed the middlemen who used to take a cut. Every Indian with a phone now has access to a virtual “DigiLocker” where their identity and tax documents can be stored, a useful innovation.

Some of Modi’s defenders argue that he has renewed the country’s politics. Swapan Dasgupta, a conservative journalist and former BJP lawmaker, told me that Modi had made use of *Hindutva* not just to demonize his enemies but to mobilize Indians politically and to deepen the country’s democracy. “The gap between rulers and ruled has narrowed,” he said. “There is now a vernacular elite.”

Modi often gets credit for raising his country’s profile and being an effective ambassador for what he and his allies call Brand India. There may be some truth in this, though it’s hard to know what the term means. There was much talk of India as a leader of the global South when it hosted the G20 summit in 2023, a frenzy of publicity and Davos-style schmoozing with a reported budget of \$100 million. Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar has taken brand-building to a new level, having published two books full of vaporous cant about “civilizational resurgence” and “the message of the Indo-Pacific.” He and others talk up India’s role as a partner to the United States in its competition with China—though they never make clear what India can do to help. India is a nuclear power, but its weak military has been humiliated by Chinese troops on the two countries’ shared Himalayan border.

Modi’s determination to cut a bigger global figure has its ugly and violent side. In 2023, Indian-government officials allegedly organized the assassination of a Sikh-independence activist in Canada and plotted to kill a Sikh leader in the United States, according to U.S. and Canadian officials. The boldness of the plot was a dark reflection of India’s rising economic weight in the West, despite the farcical denouement: An American informant had unwittingly been hired as a hit man. In mid-October of last year, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau expelled top Indian diplomats, including the ambassador, saying that the Indian government had orchestrated a campaign of violence inside his country. (India’s government, which regards the two Sikhs as terrorists, has denied the accusations; Canada has also said it has no evidence that Modi was involved in or aware of any plot.)

Three years ago, India became the world’s fifth-largest economy, surpassing its former colonial master, the United Kingdom. Yet by early 2024, even as Modi was declaring the dawn of a glorious new era, unsettling rumbles could be heard. Foreign direct investment in India had dropped by an astonishing 43 percent in the preceding year, partly thanks to high borrowing costs and unease about the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East. Out-of-work men could be seen trekking along the brand-new highways, part of the movement from cities to farms that began during the pandemic. The magnitude of the unemployment problem could not be hidden.

Much of this story arc would have been familiar to anyone who had taken a close look at the “Gujarat model.” Although the state’s GDP rose during Modi’s decade-long tenure, the number of people without jobs held steady. Modi focused on big companies, but small and medium-size enterprises, which make up the backbone of India’s economy, did not fare as well. The obsession with growth appears to have masked a neglect of health, literacy, and the environment. In his book *Price of the Modi Years*, the journalist Aakar Patel notes that Gujarat’s rate of child malnutrition was one of the highest in India. While Modi was governor,

the Central Pollution Control Board declared Gujarat to be the country's most polluted state. A study of 18 Indian states and territories placed the rate of school attendance for students in rural areas of Gujarat at the very bottom. The "Gujarat model" has indeed been applied to the entire country.

THE SCHOOL PRINCIPAL agreed to meet me at her home, in a small town in Uttar Pradesh. She was middle-aged, with an aura of faded glamour; she had been a model in her youth, and photographs of her as a young woman hung on the wall. She had spent her life in this same town, never marrying, devoting herself to teaching and to the care of her dead brother's children.

She had insisted that I not disclose her name, and I soon understood why. Her school district, she said, has nearly 700 teaching positions allocated to it by the government. But not even 200 are filled. Her own school, she said, has six teachers for 700 students. Many subjects do not get taught at all, and the school's internet doesn't work. Students, she said, lack phones or computers and must go to internet cafés to do their homework. She, too, is forced to go to internet cafés to handle the government's burdensome reporting requirements, which must be done online. "All this rests on my shoulders," she said. Little of this dysfunction is visible from the outside, because the school allows students to graduate despite the enormous gaps in their education.

The endemic corruption of the school system is another obstacle. If a child makes a small mistake on an online form, "to get it fixed, you have to pay a bribe."

According to India's Annual Status of Education Report, an independent analysis, most 14-to-18-year-olds in rural regions were still struggling with basic division in 2023, and about a quarter of them with basic reading. Some 30 percent of all students appear to drop out of high school.

"It's a moral failure of the political leadership," says Ashoka Mody, who spent decades with the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank and who published a polemic about India's developmental gaps last year titled *India Is Broken*. The book is densely documented and shot through with anger. One of its recurrent themes is the disparity between India and East Asian societies, which have seen mass primary education as a precondition to industrial growth and large-scale employment.

Narendra Modi has been in power for a decade, with his BJP allies running many of India's state governments. The schools have only gotten worse. Modi's educational priorities appear to be mostly ideological. History textbooks have been rewritten to include more Hindu-nationalist figures, praise Modi's own initiatives, and minimize contributions by Indian Muslims. In 2023, India cut a number of science topics from tenth-grade textbooks. You won't find Darwin's theory of evolution, the periodic table of elements, or the Pythagorean theorem.

Even when Indian students attend a decent school, the system often fails them. In a tiny rural village called Bhushari, in Uttar Pradesh, I met a 19-year-old man who said he was spending two to three years studying full-time for civil-service exams. "I'm trying to get a government job," he said, as we sat sipping cool drinks on the earthen floor of his family's reception room. "The youth of



A rice paddy in the state of Haryana. Lack of work has driven many Indians from cities to farms, even as farm income stagnates and drought turns fields into deserts.

India—we all want a government job. Families prefer their kids to get a government job; they think this is more reliable, because you cannot get fired.” You are also more likely to be able to get married if you have a government job.

For those who pass the exam, the relative dearth of government jobs can make new-hiring calls look like a crumb thrown into a lake full of starving fish. As *Foreign Affairs* has reported, in early 2023, the state government in Madhya Pradesh posted 6,000 low-level government jobs and quickly received more than 1.2 million applications. The volume hinted at the inflation of academic pedigree in India: There were 1,000 people with Ph.D.s, 85,000 graduates of college engineering programs, 100,000 people with business degrees, and about 180,000 people with other graduate degrees. The civil-service bottleneck puts enormous pressure on exams, and it’s hardly surprising that cheating has become an issue. Last June, the government canceled the results of an exam that had been taken by 900,000 aspiring academics in more than 300 cities, citing suspicions that the answers had been leaked onto the dark web.

Those who fail the test or don’t get the job have few options, and many end up in what economists call “the informal sector”—as vendors, day laborers, *tuk-tuk* drivers, and an endless array of other ill-paid roles. There aren’t many manufacturing jobs, because China drained them away decades ago.

The young man I met in Bhushari had been, in one sense, lucky. His father is the village *sarpanch*, or headman, and the family owns valuable farmland. If not for that, he would not have had the freedom to study for so long. He had spent his entire life in a village of some 2,900 people. He didn’t want to be a farmer in a place where drought is a constant threat, and where temperatures get hotter every year.

AS MY CAR thumped out of Bhushari on a pitted road, I saw cracked brown fields spreading to the horizon in all directions. People talked about the year’s record-breaking heat wave everywhere I went. Farmers told me the local wells and aquifers were drying up. The annual monsoons have become more erratic. Temperatures reached 121 degrees Fahrenheit when I was in Delhi, and there were frequent news reports about water shortages and people dying of heat exposure. Sometimes it was hard to tell which was worse, the heat or the smog. Of the world’s 100 most polluted cities, 83 are in India, according to 2023 data from the environmental group IQAir.

India’s environmental problems are among the most serious on the planet, but they have not been high priorities during Modi’s decade in power. He has shown occasional interest in the condition of the Ganges, India’s most famous river, which is sacred to Hindus. It is also one of the most polluted rivers on Earth, with stretches that are ecological dead zones. Modi’s electoral district includes Varanasi, a riverside city and an ancient pilgrimage site. Last spring, the BJP mounted elaborate campaign spectacles over the river, with 1,000 drones performing a light show to spell out, in Hindi, the slogan “Modi Government, Once Again.” During a trip to Varanasi in late May, Modi made a surprise visit to an electronics engineer named Vishwambhar

Nath Mishra, who has led efforts for decades to clean up the Ganges. The visit did not go well.

Mishra told me about the encounter when I went to see him, about a week later. It was night when I arrived in Varanasi, and I walked a mile along the darkened Ganges, past burning funeral pyres, Hindu priests performing rituals, and scattered children and dogs. Mishra’s air-conditioned office was a relief. He runs an environmental NGO founded by his father and is also the *mahant*, or head priest, of one of Varanasi’s best-known Hindu temples, a title that has been passed down from father to eldest son in an unbroken line stretching back 400 years. This blend of sacred and secular authority is unusual, and earns him wide respect.

Last June, the government
canceled the results of an exam
that had been taken by 900,000
aspiring academics in more
than 300 cities, citing suspicions
that the answers had been
leaked onto the dark web.

On the day of Modi’s visit, Mishra complained to him about the government’s failure to prevent cities and towns from dumping raw sewage into the Ganges. The river absorbs close to 100 million gallons of it a day. Its waters are a greenish toxic brew. Mishra reminded Modi that he’d given him the same lecture in 2013, shortly before Modi first took office as prime minister, and that nothing had been done. Modi does not like to be chastised. He told Mishra he would come back after the election, and then went on his way.

Mishra, meanwhile, continues to monitor the river like a doctor with a dying patient. He told me that around the time of Modi’s visit, samples from one spot contained 88 million fecal coliform bacteria per 100 milliliters of water—176,000 times the maximum amount that India allows for a Class B river, which is considered safe for bathing.

But as many as 50,000 people bathe daily in the river, Mishra told me. I myself saw hundreds of people swimming in it. Many Indians drink from the Ganges, including Mishra himself: It is one of his duties as a priest.

THE CITY OF Ayodhya—where Modi inaugurated the new Hindu temple—is a near-perfect emblem of Modi’s rule: It has

been reshaped into an advertisement at the expense of its residents. The government wants to make Ayodhya into a tourism and pilgrimage site for Hindus worldwide and has thrown enormous sums of money at the project, building wide roads, an airport, a train station. But in the city's old neighborhoods, nothing seems to have changed apart from new street signs that have been posted incongruously on decaying buildings and market stalls. Tens of thousands of locals have seen their homes and workplaces demolished. Many are furious at the Modi government. One of them is Mahendra Tripathi, the man who photographed Modi in Ayodhya back in 1992. He is now jobless at the age of 65, having lost his office to the urban renovations last year.

"My livelihood was destroyed twice," he told me, first by the rioters who destroyed Babri Masjid, in 1992, and a second time by the government that replaced it with the temple. "Now I'm old and don't have the energy to start again."

On a boulevard that leads to the city's Lucknow gate, I met a middle-aged man selling snacks in front of a one-room shop. He told me the shop was all that was left of his family's four-story house, which had included a much larger grocery store and upstairs rooms for his children and their families. The road needed to be widened, government officials had told him. The demolition had left him and his family with nowhere to live and no livelihood until they'd managed to reopen a shrunken version of their shop. "Not a single BJP worker came to check on us since the demolition," he said. His wife stood alongside him, misery stamped on her face.

A few doors down, a man was sitting on the floor of a tiny apartment. He was cutting and folding newspapers, to be sold to vendors as food wrappers. At his feet was a little bowl of homemade glue that he used to dab each folded paper before pressing its side together. He told me he had been making his living this way for 25 years. He was 60 years old, he said. Before the demolition, he'd had enough space to live with his family; now there was barely enough room for him to sit down. It was about 110 degrees outside, and the apartment's metal door was half open. "My house used to go all the way to that white strip," he said, pointing to the middle of the road. "Now this is all I have."

Later that day, I drove past another side effect of Modi's big temple: a vast, improvised landfill, built to accommodate the construction and demolition debris. Clouds of dust and pale smoke hung in the air above its lumpy surface. As we drove toward the landfill, the dust enveloped us, seeming almost to create its own weather system. In the dim landscape, I saw shacks where families were living, and a mill where people were grinding wheat. During monsoon season, the whole area becomes a flood zone. It seemed to go on for miles.

MODI'S REPUTATION is built partly on stage presence. His rallies have drawn as many as 800,000 people. On giant screens, his magnified image towers over the crowd. People who have been in a room with him sometime speak of an overpowering aura, as if he were a rock star or the pope.

Almost as impressive is Modi's ability to deploy—or inspire—an entire industry of social-media fans and public-relations



professionals who get the message out on a daily basis, telling Indians how Modi has made them respected in the world and defended their Hindu faith from attack by Muslims, "sickularists," and "anti-nationals." Some of these people are television personalities, such as Arnab Goswami, a kind of Indian Tucker Carlson. Others are anonymous warriors in a campaign to label the Muslim film stars of Bollywood as terrorists. Many of them work as trolls on social media, where the BJP has aggressively promoted its message even as it censors its critics. (India's significant market share—it has more Facebook and YouTube users than any other country—has allowed the Modi government to bully tech companies into removing oppositional content.) Others make movies or sing songs.

Kavi Singh is a star of the genre known as *Hindustva* pop, a mixture of jingoism and danceable beats. Her signature style is



A flooded street in Vijayawada, in southern India, in 2024. Annual monsoons have become more erratic, and India's environmental problems are among the most serious on the planet.

unusually androgynous for India: a man's Nehru-style jacket and tunic, with a multicolored turban wrapped around her head. Her long hair flows over her shoulders.

Singh made her debut during a moment of national crisis. In early 2019, a suicide bomber in a car rammed a convoy of Indian paramilitary police in the northern district of Pulwama, killing more than 40 people. An Islamist terrorist group based in Pakistan claimed responsibility. The attack—followed by accusations of intelligence failures—was a humiliation for Modi, who had cast himself as a more aggressive protector of India than his predecessors. The next day, while the country was still overcome by grief and anger, a song appeared on Indian WhatsApp groups, sung by a strident female voice. The lyrics put the blame not on Pakistani terrorists but on India's own Muslims:

The enemies are among us but we blame the neighbor
The one who is secretly carrying a knife; finish off that traitor
If our own hadn't helped carry this attack
Pulwama wouldn't have seen the blood of our bravehearts
spilled

The song went viral, and was followed by a video version in which Singh performs at a studio microphone, her singing interspersed with footage of gun-toting Indian soldiers and grieving families. She began churning out new songs with impressive regularity.

I met Singh at a guesthouse in the state of Haryana, about two hours north of Delhi. She wore her trademark outfit in shades of saffron, the color worn by Hindu saints and ascetics. Singh said she believes that the Hindu god Ram gives her signs.

She seemed to claim credit for one of Modi's most controversial acts—the 2019 decision to revoke Kashmir's semiautonomous status and lay claim to the Muslim-majority province, an old source of conflict between India and Pakistan. “Everybody listens to me,” she said. “I know that Prime Minister Modi listens to my songs.”

It was hard to tell whether Singh was naive about the ways her music has been used, or just preferred to shrug it off. After the Pulwama suicide bombing, Kashmiri Muslims were attacked all over the country.

When I met Singh, she was making final preparations for a long journey on foot—known as a *yatra*—to help unify Hindus in the aftermath of Modi's election setback. Her plan was to start in the northern pilgrimage town of Haridwar and walk southward for six months or a year with her entourage, blasting her music from loudspeakers every step of the way. Did she expect her *yatra* to meet with protests and critics? “Absolutely” there would be protests, she said. “They will try to assault us as well.” The way she said it made me wonder if that was exactly the point.

MODI'S DEFENDERS SOMETIMES note that large-scale communal violence has declined since the 2002 Gujarat riots. But one type of violence that has not declined is the lynching of ordinary Muslims.

One morning, after driving from the smog of Delhi into the great belt of farmland to the east, I met a man who narrowly survived a lynch mob in 2018. He is a Muslim farmer named Samayadeen who has spent his entire life—nearly 70 years, he reckons—in the same settlement, a tiny cluster of mud-and-brick houses surrounded by green fields of mustard, wheat, and sugarcane. After we shook hands, he led the way, limping visibly, into the open-air courtyard of his house, where he lay down on a string bed and apologized for his slowness. A buffalo dozed comfortably in the mud on the far side of the little enclosure.

Six years ago, Samayadeen was gathering fodder with another man on his farm when they heard noises in the distance. A lone figure was running toward them, chased by a crowd of about two dozen men. As Samayadeen watched, the mob caught up to its prey and started beating him mercilessly with sticks.

Samayadeen's companion ran off in terror. But Samayadeen recognized the victim, a fellow Muslim named Qasim. He hurried over and tried to stop the attackers. They turned on Samayadeen as well, accusing both men of killing cows.

Eventually, the attackers dragged the men to their own village, where other men arrived to continue the beating in front of a Hindu temple. Samayadeen recognized some of them. When the police finally showed up, they had to fight off the mob before they could drive the injured men to a hospital. It was too late for Qasim, who died soon afterward of his injuries.

What is most striking about the lynchings of the past decade is not so much their scale—several dozen people—as the government's attitude. Modi and many of his BJP allies have spent years demonizing cow-killers while at the same time downplaying lynching reports. In some cases, local officials have treated suspected murderers as heroes.

What is most striking about the lynchings of Muslims in the past decade is not so much the scale as the government's attitude. In some cases, local officials have treated suspected murderers as heroes.

Samayadeen's case might have gone nowhere, even with a good lawyer on his side, if not for the help of a journalist who went undercover to record video footage of a man who admitted that he'd incited the mob to kill Muslims. After that tape was admitted as evidence, a number of the attackers were indicted and ultimately convicted.

As he told me this story, Samayadeen emphasized repeatedly that all the people who had made his case a success—the man who'd helped him bring it, the lawyer who'd represented him, the judge who'd handed down the decision—were Hindus. “What I'm trying to say is that all the Hindu mentality is not like that,” he said, referring to the mob that tried to kill him.

SAMAYADEEN'S COMMENT about varieties of the Hindu mentality came to mind as I flew to Tamil Nadu, at the bottom of the subcontinent, 1,000 miles south of Delhi. Tamil Nadu's leaders have long been openly contemptuous of Hindu nationalism, and their governing philosophy represents a powerful alternative to Modi's worldview. They have put much greater emphasis on mass education and health care, and the south is today the most prosperous part of India. Bangalore and Hyderabad—two of its largest cities—host the country's IT hubs.

Modi has been trying for years to make political inroads in the south. In May, as the election campaign came to an end, Indian news channels began broadcasting a striking image over a chyron that read **BREAKING NEWS**. It was Modi, eyes closed, sitting on a stone floor with his legs crossed and his palms pressed together. He had traveled to a seaside sanctuary on the southern tip of Tamil Nadu to spend 45 hours in *ekantvas*, or solitary retreat. The images showed him in saffron robes, subsisting (as the news channels reported) only on coconut water. But Modi's meditation wasn't actually solitary; he was being filmed from multiple angles.

This stunt was the culmination of a campaign during which Modi hinted more than once that he had attained divine status. “When my mother was alive, I used to think I was born biologically,” he told a TV news interviewer in May. “After her demise, when I look at my experiences, I am convinced that I

was sent by God.” Later that month, he said that he received commands from God, though he admitted that “I cannot dial him directly to ask what’s next.”

But the south has not been receptive terrain for Brand Modi. In Chennai, the city once called Madras, I met with one of Modi’s most eloquent adversaries—Palanivel Thiaga Rajan, known to everyone as PTR. Now 58, he holds a degree from MIT and worked as a banker in New York and Singapore before returning to his native Tamil Nadu. He made his name running the state’s finance ministry, and now leads the state’s IT efforts. PTR met me at his office, in a gated compound that possessed an air of faded colonial grandeur. His family has been prominent in Tamil Nadu for hundreds of years.

The south’s priorities are the inverse of Modi’s, PTR told me. They are rooted in decisions made a century ago, when southern leaders—even before India’s independence—began passing progressive reforms including compulsory education for both sexes, women’s right to vote and hold office, and affirmative action for members of historically disadvantaged castes. The motives for those reforms may have been political, but the effect was to create a springboard for greater prosperity, as in Singapore and other East Asian countries. While northern India has pursued a zero-sum model of growth, the southern states have tried to ensure that “the pie grows because everybody is vested in the system,” PTR said. “Everybody’s got access to the basic things,” such as jobs, decent schools, and health care.

When I asked about Modi’s economic stewardship, PTR was withering. He walked me through all the mistakes Modi has made, starting with his much-lamented decision in 2016 to “demonetize” the country’s highest-currency banknotes. PTR’s eyes rolled as he considered the effects of this blunder, calling it “one of the staggering catastrophes of economic policy in the history of the world.”

PTR also deplored the way Modi has personalized his office and concentrated power in Delhi at the expense of the states. India was already more centralized than other large democracies such as the United States, thanks to the authors of its 1949 constitution. Modi’s brand of nationalism is rooted in the idea that India’s size and diversity call for an even stronger hand and a more unifying creed, but in practical terms that has made the task of government much harder: The average member in India’s 543-seat Parliament now has about 2.6 million constituents. It would make more sense, PTR said, to acknowledge regional differences and delegate more authority to the states.

Listening to PTR, one can easily get the sense of a road not taken—a way to steer all of India on a less divisive course. Unfortunately, the south is less an alternative than a rival. Its economic philosophy goes alongside a distinctly southern religious and cultural identity that is almost as aggressive as Modi’s. The two visions are so divergent that it is easy to see why there were calls for a separate southern nation called Dravidistan when India became independent.

This cultural rift became apparent when I asked PTR about Modi’s promotion of *Hinduva*. The subject makes him visibly angry. “I believe that Tamil Nadu is the most Hindu-practicing

state in the country,” he said, noting that the state government alone manages some 35,000 temples. All told, he went on, “there are probably 600,000 temples of noticeable size and maybe a million temples of all sizes.” PTR gestured at the red *pottu* on his forehead, a symbol of Hindu devotion. But the south’s version of Hinduism, he said, is “antithetical to the notion of a muscular *Hinduva*.” The southern tradition is rooted partly in a century-old revolt against the privileges granted to Brahmans, the priestly caste that sits at the top of Hinduism’s ancient social hierarchy.

Modi’s challenges in winning over the south are not just about Hinduism. The people of Tamil Nadu are mostly ethnic Tamils, and many see themselves as the original inhabitants of a region that has faced discrimination from the north. The BJP did not win a single parliamentary seat in Tamil Nadu last year, despite Modi’s efforts.

WHEN I ARRIVED in India, the election was still under way. The BJP platform was ostensibly that of a political party with hundreds of parliamentary candidates, but its title was “Modi’s Guarantee.” From the moment I arrived in India, at the Delhi airport, I couldn’t avoid Modi’s image—in life-size cardboard cutouts, in huge murals on city walls, in stickers on doors and windows, on roadside billboards. BJP supporters walked around with paper Modi masks wrapped over their face, giving the eerie impression of an army of clones.

Even when you looked at your phone you’d see him, asking for your vote in Hindi, in Urdu, in half a dozen other languages he doesn’t even speak; his voice had been copied and transfigured by AI programming. The opposition talked constantly about him too, adding to the widespread sense that the entire election was a referendum on the 10-year reign of Narendra Modi.

The election took place over six weeks, like a slow-moving tsunami, and the results started coming in on the morning of June 4. Modi was already doing far worse than he and his party had expected. Projections were giving the BJP fewer than 200 seats, a steep drop from its previous total of 303, and a result that would spell the end of its parliamentary majority. Modi’s continued rule would depend on the cooperation of coalition allies.

At about noon, I sat in on an editorial meeting in Delhi of *The Hindu*, one of India’s few remaining independent newspapers. The mood was buoyant. There had been a betting pool on the election, and as one editor read out the names of the winners, there was laughter and cheering. I heard a flurry of hot takes: “It’s about hubris; he’ll have to tone it down.” “It’s a huge sigh of relief for India’s Muslims.” “Coalition politics is back.” The political editor said she wanted a story on what the BJP got wrong, and someone joked that it would be too long to fit in the paper.

A little later, I made my way over to the headquarters of the Congress Party, on Akbar Road. A raucous outdoor party was under way, with a thick crowd of members and guests milling around in a state of bliss. The Congress Party and its opposition allies had lost, but were behaving as if they’d won a historic victory. Partly, this was because Modi and his party had done everything they could to tilt the election in their favor, and everyone knew it. Opposition politicians had faced a wildly disproportionate

number of investigations. In some cases, political figures who switched to the BJP saw their charges abruptly dropped.

To some extent, Modi had himself to blame for the way the election results were interpreted. He had said early on that he expected to win 400 seats, a supermajority that could grant him the power to change the constitution. Had this happened, *Hindutva* might well have been enshrined as the country's new ruling ideology.

Modi's narrow victory felt like a rebuke. But opinion varied on what it meant. Caste seems to have played a role, especially in northern India. Modi's party has always been vulnerable to defections by low-caste Hindus, who feel the party is still wedded to upper-caste privilege, and many Dalits, once more commonly known as untouchables, appear to have shifted their votes to the opposition.

Another prevalent view was that Modi had taken his divisive, anti-Muslim religious rhetoric too far. He may also have overplayed the god-man role. During the initiation of the Ayodhya temple last January, he'd violated protocol by performing religious rites himself.

In the days and weeks after the election, many Indians were too overwhelmed by happiness and relief to worry about the details. Modi was no longer invulnerable. He would have to compromise, people said, if he wanted to keep his job.

But Modi is not used to compromise. He is very good at dividing Indians to suit his political needs, and he is probably too old to change. In some ways, he is a more authentic product of India's democracy than any of his Congress Party predecessors, with their

patrician pedigrees. His departure—he will be 78 during the next general election, and is not expected to run again—will not change the country's structural vulnerability to populist strongmen. India may be more susceptible to the politics of identity and division than other countries precisely because, as PTR told me, it is so immense and so diverse. It is more a continent than a country, as the British liked to say—a self-serving point, but one that has grown even more apt since their departure.

Modi's legacy may be decided by those who no longer chant his name. Indian democracy will face its most important test in the small towns and villages where the bulk of the population still lives. One of the people I met in Uttar Pradesh, a 51-year-old farmer, told me that he'd voted for Modi, but a decade of BJP rule had soured him on politics. The party had “played the drums of zero tolerance for corruption,” he said, but had not paid attention to the people's needs, and corruption had only grown worse.

“*Hindutva*,” he said, “stands for a religion with the most humbleness, the most virtues, the best upbringing, the good culture we have that doesn't exist anywhere else.” He paused a moment. “There is no party that really stands for that,” he said, “and there won't be one.” *A*

Robert F. Worth is a contributing writer at The Atlantic. A former bureau chief for The New York Times, he has spent more than two decades writing about the Middle East, Europe, and Asia.



Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, where Modi last year consecrated a Hindu temple on the site of a mosque destroyed in 1992