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"Sickular" and "Povertarian": Politics and Economics of Hindu Supremacy, 1992–2022

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Abstract

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Starting with the Ayodhya incident in 1992, Hindu Supremacy (Hindutva) discourse has transformed from Hindu victimization to Hindu majoritarianism, leveraging its assumption of power in the 2014 parliamentary elections and pushing forward its agenda of Hinduization across the ideology, society, and state.

Hindu Supremacy in power puts the "authority" of Prime Minister Modi as its greatest (or essential) political asset. Often referred to as a rishi (Hindu sage), his spiritual "authority" is based on the supremacy of the nation (Hindu rashtra) as an organic sovereign entity that transcends individual rights and constitutional principles. This essentialist understanding of "nation" lies at the heart of the fundamental tenets of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangha (RSS). Modi's ideological umbilical cord with the RSS is too manifest to miss.

His doctrine, which extolls communal duties over individual rights, is also in congruence with his economic governance. While neoliberal competition and self-responsibility are emphasized, his welfarist policies, including poverty alleviation, instead of ensuring fundamental rights, reflect strongly authoritarian and patriarchal characteristics in which patronage from above and a sense of benevolence are evoked.

Keywords: Hindu supremacy, *Hindutva*, authoritarianism, politics of rights, competition state, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Modi government

* Independent Scholar. This version (dated June 12, 2023) corrects several minor errors in the previous version.

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Introduction: Three decades after the economic liberalization and the Babri Masjid demolition

More than three decades have passed since the curtain opened on what is now known as the "post-Cold War" world. However, with the fierce competition and confrontation between the US and China, and Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, we are entering a new era of tensions that cannot be captured by the passive stipulation of "post-X." India's democracy and economic growth will have to find its way in this new environment. In this essay, we will try to capture what lies ahead for India's political economy.

After the span of three decades, since the inception of the political and economic upheavals in India, triggered in the early 1990s by the economic liberalization policy and the Babri Masjid demolition in Ayodhya, our special attention is attracted by the emergence of the Modi government in 2014 and the subsequent Hindu Supremacist and authoritarian transformation. Following discussion endeavors to unravel the interconnection of the three dimensions of Hindu Supremacy (*Hindutva*), the authoritarianism and economic liberalization under the Modi regime. To achieve this purpose, we will structure our discussion in four sections.

I.   The Babri Masjid demolition as a starting point (1992)

II.   Hindu Supremacy (*Hindutva*) in power

III.   Dissecting Modi's political authority

IV.   The "politics of rights" versus the competition state

To be sure, none of these three themes—Hindu Supremacy, authoritarianism, and economic liberalization—can be discussed summarily. We will try, albeit in a somewhat hazardous way, to explore the inner logic on which these three themes are interlinked under the Modi regime. In this pursuit, our style of discussion will be more interpretative and narrative rather than theoretical or deductive.

The first two sections set the trajectory of three decades of Hindu Supremacy, starting with the Babri Masjid demolition in 1992, ending with the overall Hinduization, engulfing the three facets of ideology, society, and state. The term "Hindu Supremacy" in this paper

refers to *Hindutva* in Hindi (meaning "Hindu-ness"), which has conventionally been translated as "Hindu nationalism" which, we surmise, sounds rather equivocal and somewhat detached. In this paper, we adopt the term "Hindu Supremacy" or "Hindu Supremacist" to emphasize *Hindutva*'s aggressive and exclusivist nature as a politico-ideological project.

Section III focuses exclusively on political "authority" in Modi's authoritarianism rather than on institutional aspects of the authoritarian political system. That his "authority" is based on the basic tenets of his parent body, i.e., the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangha (RSS), is made clear based on the lectures delivered by the RSS ideologue, Deendayal Upadhyaya (1916–1968). It then points out that the prime minister's various statements are aimed at indoctrinating and mobilizing public consciousness, which consistently prioritizes duty over rights, even to the extent of thoroughly denouncing the rights discourse (rights-phobia).

Modi's antipathy to the rights discourse leads to the final topic of inquiry on his government's economic policy. Section IV defines the Indian state under the Modi-led government as a "competition state" founded on competition and self-responsibility principles, and we will argue that even the social welfare policies, including poverty alleviation measures, strongly reflect a patriarchal patronage from above and a sense of reverence or piety toward the political authority. Any public benefit is supposed to be provided by a benevolent government, rather than through an entitlement to the right to human life.

In sum, the purpose of our discussion will be served if it can be shown that the three themes of Hindu Supremacy, authoritarianism and the competition state are internally linked with three basic motifs of "power," "authority," and "rights-phobia."

I.   The Babri Masjid demolition as a starting point (1992)

The first two sections trace the trajectory of Hindu Supremacy over the last three decades. The starting point is the demolition of the so-called "Babri Masjid" on December 6, 1992. Legal disputes on the masjid (another word for "mosque") can be traced much earlier to the mid-nineteenth century and had been carried into the immediate post-

independence period when a statue of Lord Rama was surreptitiously placed inside the Masjid, but there is no great mistake in taking the 1992 Masjid demolition as the starting point of the situation today.[1]

India's transformation into a Hindu state (*Hindu Rashtra*), starting with this incident, completes a cycle with the inauguration of the Rama temple in Ayodhya, scheduled for January 2024 (just before the next Union parliamentary elections). Yet even then, Hindu Supremacists are not satisfied. As the slogan "*Kashi Mathura baki hai*" suggests, they claim not only Ayodhya, but also the Gyanvapi mosque in Kashi (Varanasi), which is said to have been built on the site of Lord Shiva's temple, and the Idgah (Muslim Eid prayer site) mosque in Mathura.

In the meantime, the Supreme Court judgment of November 9, 2019, settled the case by handing over the Masjid site to the Hindus with a separate masjid site to the Muslims to be offered by the Uttar Pradesh state government (we will rejoin this judgment later)[2]. Furthermore, on September 30, 2020, the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) court acquitted L. K. Advani and others involved in the demolition of the Masjid, thereby removing one obstacle after another to facilitate the Rama temple project. Despite its avowed principle, the secular state has continued to give the *de facto* go-ahead to the Hindu Supremacist project.

Leaving the discussion of what "secularism" is for the time being, this section first looks at the changes in the strategic position of Hindu Supremacists toward "secularism" in the three decades since the Ayodhya incident. This, together with the next section, will clarify the reach of Hindu Supremacy today.

1. *"Majority as victims" turns to "majority as perpetrators"*

Hindu Supremacists used the "victimhood" of the Hindus as leverage to spread their message. The aim was to instill into the Hindus a feeling of being neglected, ignored, or denied. Its central slogan was an appeal to "restore pride" as Hindus: "*Garva se kaho hum*

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[1] See Noorani (2003) for further reference.
[2] Judgement was delivered by the bench of five judges including the Chief Justice of India who suggested that the opinion of the court should be unanimous as well as anonymous (*per curiam*) (Gogoi 2021: 191).

hindu hain!" ("Speak with pride, we are Hindus!"). Criticisms of "pseudo-secularism" which had already been raised in the 1980s, claimed that the Congress party had locked up the Muslims as its vote-bank and appealed to a policy of appeasement (*khushmatgiri*) toward the Muslim community. On the other side, it was also argued that the BJP was the bearer of "true secularism." The *Ayodhya White Paper*, compiled by the BJP immediately after the demolition incident, also rationalized the "popular passion" that, they claimed, had led to the destruction of the Masjid.

> The double standards which came more and more to mar public discourse in India to the point that the word "Hindu" became something to be ashamed about, to the point that nationalism became a dirty word—these ignited a great revulsion among the people. As all this was being done in the name of "Secularism," it led people to feel that what was being practiced was not Secularism but perversion.[3]

Thus, the backlash, resentment, and hatred of those who were supposed to have been reduced to the status of "victims" is intensified. This is in line with anti-minority sentiments prevalent in other parts of the world—anti-"self-flagellation" in Japan, anti-minority ("people of color" or immigrants) in Europe and the US. Their victimization is heightened by the obsession that the majority will soon be reduced to a minority (as in the Hindu Supremacists' "Muslim demography," or French xenophobes' "*le Grand Remplacement*"). It must not be forgotten, however, that "majority resentment" can easily turn into "tyranny and oppression by the majority." Indeed, the subsequent Hindu Supremacist movement amply proved this transformaton.

Hindu Supremacy manifested its brutality through the Gujarat riots from February 2002 onward. The new century saw a series of alleged Islamist attacks in Indian cities (with Mumbai in 2008), which created fear among the people. Subsequent large-scale riots in Muzaffarnagar (UP) in 2013 and Northeast Delhi in 2020, with Muslims as major victims, have occurred for almost a decade.

In addition, with the development of information technology during this period, vulgar slang such as "sickular," which makes fun of secularism itself, has spread through

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[3] Advani (1993: 1–2).

social networking services (SNS). The rhetoric of "pseudo-secularism" versus "true secularism" disappeared and "secularism itself" was undermined, ushering in a society where the majoritarian aggression has been let loose to marginalize the minority.

2. What three decades after the demolition has vindicated

Let us look a little more closely at the implications of the shift from "majority as victim" to "majority as perpetrator." This understanding is based on the collective (communal) positioning of majority versus minority.

Against the perspective of political transformation in the last 30 years, there may have been a problem with an understanding that draws the 1992 incident solely on communal positions. Above all, it was not only the Masjid and secularism but the wider law and justice that were destroyed. Yet if you go back and read the critiques written immediately after the incident, a very few accurately pointed out the logic of the destruction of the masjid leading to a crisis of law and justice.[4]

Indeed, the subsequent development of the situation vindicated the profoundly serious implications of the Masjid demolition. After the incident, the ownership of the Masjid site was challenged in court, and in November 2019, the Supreme Court, the "guardian of the law," in its judgment, condemned the destruction of the masjid by "means that should not be used in a secular state committed to the rule of law." The following is the relevant part of the judgment:

> In respect of the possessory claim of the Hindus to the composite whole of the disputed property stands on a better footing than the evidence adduced by the Muslims. The Muslims were dispossessed upon the desecration of the mosque on 22/23 December 1949 which was ultimately destroyed on 6 December 1992.
>
> There was no abandonment of the mosque by the Muslims. This Court in the exercise of its powers under Article 142 of the Constitution must ensure that *a wrong committed must be remedied. Justice would not prevail if the Court were to overlook*

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[4] Particular attention should be paid to Ahmad (1993). For more recent observation, see also Chishti (2022a). It reveals a mystery of the rubble of the masjid missing.

the entitlement of the Muslims who have been deprived of the structure of the mosque through means which should not have been employed in a secular nation committed to the rule of law" [emphasis added].[5]

In other words, the destruction of the masjid was a clear violation of the "rule of law" itself. However, as noted above, the Supreme Court did not reflect these clear-cut judgments in its key conclusions on the right to the site. In effect, it condoned unlawful vandalism. Furthermore, in the subsequent trial of L. K. Advani and others involved in the demolition for criminal liability, this argument made by the Supreme Court was completely ignored. The special Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) court acquitted Advani and 32 others in September 2020 on the ground that there was no prior conspiracy or planning. Despite this clearly contradicting judgement of the Supreme Court as cited, the CBI (i.e., the Modi government), did not appeal to the Supreme Court. The demolition case is a story of how nonchalantly the verdict of the highest court of the land is flouted and the law and justice are systematically compromised.

In this sense, it is not sufficient to understand *Hindutva* as mere majoritarianism. The communal or ethnicity issue is one of the multiple aspects of *Hindutva*. It is more than a majoritarianism. Human rights activist Aakal Patel has characterized the three generations of *Hindutva* thought—V. D. Savarkar, Golwalkar and Upadhyay—as follows. He writes,

> What Savarkar had defined, what Golwalkar had operationalized in society, Upadhyaya would attempt to politicize and introduce into government.[6]

As the Hindu Supremacy (*Hindutva*) is not mere majoritarianism, the political implications of Hindu Supremacy cannot be fully grasped if it is understood only in a Savarkarian perspective, i.e., "Who are the Hindus?" This is because Hindu Supremacy today is above all a question of dominance and political power.

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[5] M. Siddiq vs Mahant Suresh Das & others, Civil Appeal Nos. 10866-10867 of 20210 (9 November 2019), Para 800.
[6] Patel (2020: 103).

II.   **Hindu Supremacy (*Hindutva*) in power**

Against the backdrop of the BJP's victory in the 2014 parliamentary elections, viewing Hindu Supremacy from the perspective of political power is too obvious to overlook. We will now ask for what purpose and how do they exercise their political power.

Let us start with the following remarks by A. Ahmad, already cited as a clue. He says:

> The true object of its [RSS's] desire is not mere Muslim submission but state power and the re-making of India as a whole—politically, ideologically, historically; and, true to form, this project of re-making India in its own image involves a great deal of un-making, both through selective appropriations as well as outright rejection of very large parts of India as a of un-making, both through selective appropriations as well as outright rejection of very large parts of our past and present histories.[7]

This passage is so relevant today that it is hard to believe that his remark was made nearly 30 years ago. In a nutshell, their project is to "remake India" in line with Hindu Supremacist ideas ("remaking India in its own image").

The project can be further summarized as "three agenda and two modes of operation (*Modi operandi*)" if we look at its agenda (issues) and its way of action.

1. *The Hinduization agenda*

Looking at their agenda, they can be broadly structured as Hinduization agenda in three areas: ideology, society, and the state (as illustrated in Figure 1). To paraphrase, their agenda is to "control the mind, divide the society, and reshape the nation."
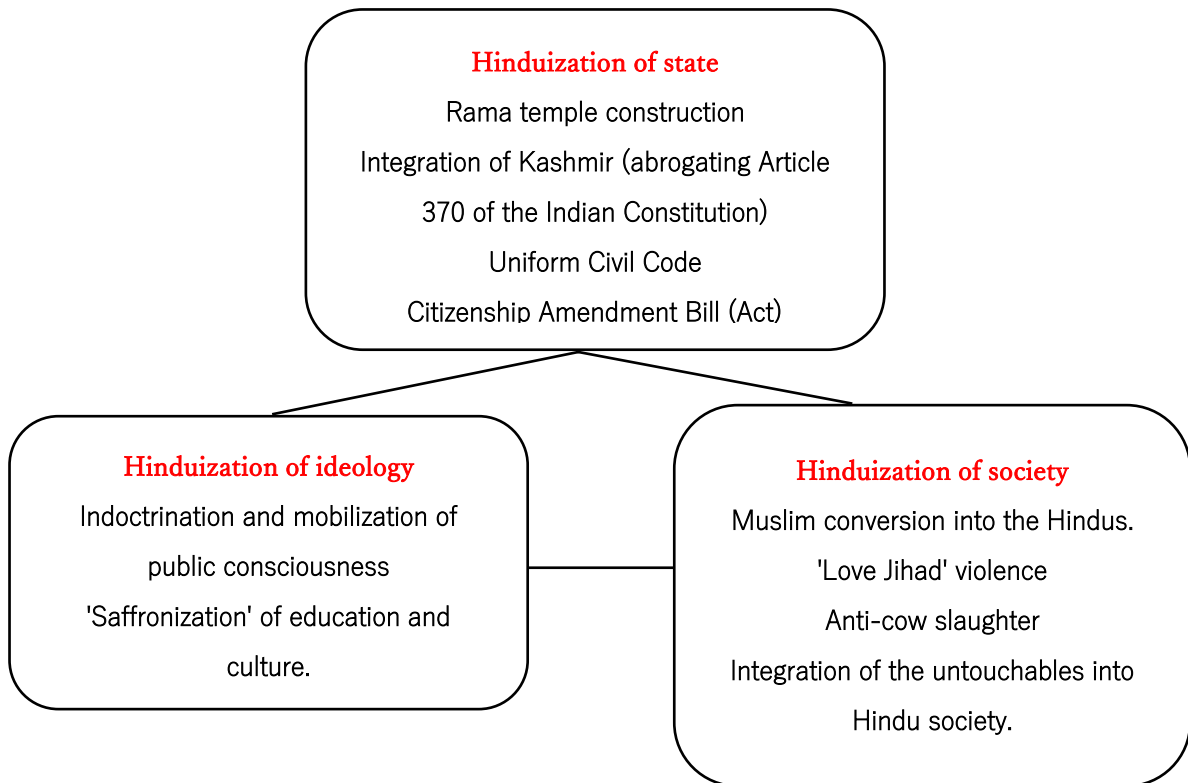
We do not claim that this illustration is flawless, as the three areas are never independent from each other. For an example, the religious conversion and exclusion of interfaith marriage, which are part of the Hinduization agenda of "society," are also

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[7] Ahmad (1993) in Sahmat (2009: 133).

closely related to the "state" when it involves legislative action to ban conversion and interfaith marriage. However, we find some explanatory advantage in this illustration.

First, by structuring them as ideological, social, and national (statal), we can capture multiplicity of the *Hindutva* agenda. The RSS has several umbrella organizations that share these agenda items individually or comprehensively. The BJP, for example, has the state agenda as its political platform as well as being comprehensively involved in all three agenda. Their student body (Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, ABVP) is primarily responsible for the "saffronizing" ideology and education, and acts as the BJP's field militia. Another umbrella organization, the World Hindu Association (Vishwa Hindu Parishad, VHP), sent a contingent to the destruction of Babri Majid in Ayodhya, and is a key player in the social agenda, including Muslim re-conversion, and ban on interfaith marriage and cow slaughter. In addition to them, the RSS has several sub-organizations that take part in individual agenda.[8]

Figure 1: Three Hindutva agenda

Hinduization of state
Rama temple construction
Integration of Kashmir (abrogating Article 370 of the Indian Constitution)
Uniform Civil Code
Citizenship Amendment Bill (Act)

Hinduization of ideology
Indoctrination and mobilization of public consciousness
'Saffronization' of education and culture.

Hinduization of society
Muslim conversion into the Hindus.
'Love Jihad' violence
Anti-cow slaughter
Integration of the untouchables into Hindu society.

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[8] As is well known, these organizations are collectively named RSS *Parivar* (family). Andersen and Damle (2018: 258-9) lists 36 main organizations and their fields of activity.

Secondly, the structuring of the agenda makes it clear that there are different means of achieving each goal. In other words, the Hinduization agenda of society is realized through direct action by the VHP and its affiliated organizations, while the Hinduization agenda of state requires a parliamentary majority for legislation and the judicial sanction. The former are so-called vigilantism groups that never hesitate to use forces including physical violence, intimidation and even murder, to implement their agenda. However, the Hinduization agenda of state cannot be brought about by itself, but requires the political majority through elections and other means. However, vigilantism is guaranteed a space to operate through the tacit approval or condoning of violence by the police and the government agencies (see below for more on vigilantism).

As a whole, the structuring of their agenda into three areas draws out a multilayered strategy of *Hindutva* which aims to achieve the *Hindu Rashtra* by combining multiple goals and *modi openrandi*.

Third, the differences in the means of achieving the goals are also related to the differences in the sequences by which the agenda is taken up under the Modi government since 2014. We shall look at the course of events after 2014. As if Modi's coronation was a signal gun, organizations under the RSS umbrella jumped upon Muslim and Christian minorities in line with the Hinduization agenda of the society. The Hinduization agenda of ideology was also taken care of immediately after the inauguration of the government, including the appointment of RSS cadres in the government-controlled education, culture, and intelligence agencies. Then the Hinduization agenda of the state heeled, and began to be tackled in earnest after 2016, when the BJP's victories in state assembly elections since 2014 began to be reflected in larger share of Rajya Sabha seats, especially after its victory in the 2017 UP assembly elections. This trend was accelerated by the re-election of the Modi government in the 2019 parliamentary elections, which promoted the state's Hinduization agenda at one fell swoop, including the scrapping of Article 370 of the

Constitution, amending the Citizenship Act[9] and setting to the construction of the Rama temple in Ayodhya.

These is no doubt about the great steps taken to achieve *Hindu Rashtra*. But despite (or due to) their apparent success, it seems as if the situation after 2019 has entered a qualitatively different phase, endangering the very existence of minorities.

This is because, first and foremost, the Hindu Supremacist does not consider these gains sufficient enough. Apart from Varanasi and Mathura, "seizure" or "destruction" of historical monuments such as the Taj Mahal, Qutub Minar, etc., is endlessly decried by RSS-affiliated organizations and other Hindu Supremacists in various parts of the country by challenging the historical basis of these monuments in district-level courts.[10]

Secondly, Hindu Supremacists violently react against Muslim resistance and opposition to the division of society and the 'second-class" citizenship status. Delhi and other cities witnessed large scale popular resistances when the Citizenship Act was amended in 2019. In response to their protests, a BJP member of parliament even incited the people by screaming "*Desh ke gaddaron ko / Goli maro salaon ko*" ("Traitors to the country / Shoot them rascals") whose rank was later from minister of State to full minister, rather than being censured or demoted.[11] The *Dharm Samsad*, an association of Hindu monastic leaders organized with close involvement of the VHP, has called for killing Muslims at its convention in Haridwar in December 2021.[12] Discrimination and segregation of Muslims across all spheres of life, including indiscriminate hate speech, the banning of hijabs (scarfs) in schools, obstruction of outdoor prayers, demolition with bulldozers of Muslim houses (on the pretext of illegal construction), boycotts of Muslim merchants and tenants, etc., has become increasingly intense.

Pratap Bhanu Mehta, a renowned educationist-cum-commentator expressed sense of grave concern by saying that a large-scale Muslim genocide (pogrom) is at no longer "if"

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[9] This amendment in 2019 grants the citizenship to the Hindu and other refugees, *excluding mainly Muslims*, who seek asylum in India due to religious persecution in the neighboring states, including Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan, all Muslim majority nations.

[10] See Apoorvananda (2022) for more information.

[11] Sharma (2022). The Delhi Police failed to prepare an FIR against the agitation and the Delhi High Court did not censure it.

[12] https://thewire.in/law/direct-attempt-to-lower-sc-authority-ag-nod-for-contempt-proceedings-against-narsinghanand (accessed 21 Jan. 2022).

but a "when" phase.[13] To date we witness no indication from the side of Modi-led government that it is willing to actively co-exist with Muslim minorities.

2. Two modes of operation—vigilantism and authoritarianism

The structuring of the Hindu Supremacist agenda into three areas also reflects the different modes of action or operation to achieve each end. Following C. Jaffrelot (2021), the two different modes are discerned: "vigilantism," which we mentioned earlier and "authoritarianism," which we will discuss further in the next section. These two modes supplement each other in promoting overall Hinduization projects.

Vigilantism

Vigilantism is a concept put forward by two French researchers (Jaffrelot 2021: 211).[14] The concept is aptly summarized in the following quote.

> The concept of "vigilantism" finds its origins in the forms of rough justice that developed in the United States during the nineteenth century. In the South and later in the West, self-styled punishers organised under the banner of "Vigilance Committees," while the Spanish term for watchman, *vigilante*, started being used to refer to those fighting against horse thieves and other outlaws, in the face of a formal justice system deemed either absent or ineffective. Later, the term *vigilantism* came to designate a social phenomenon with a more global outreach. *It now encompasses initiatives by ordinary citizens determined to deliver their own brand of justice, in the name of a community of reference, who is also to be their witness. Claiming to be invested by a popular mandate, these vigilantes do not hesitate to break the law to defend legal and moral norms.* The term "*vigilantisme*" is a recent addition in French but we are not the first scholars to use it: our colleague at CERI, Laurent Fourchard, has helped to popularize it through his research on South Africa and Nigeria [emphasis added].

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[13] (Mehta, Pratap Bhanu 2022).
[14] Sciences Po Centre for International Studies (2021).

Applied to the situation in India today, vigilantism is a mode of operation that promotes the Hinduization agenda, especially the social agenda, through the collusion of RSS-affiliated organizations, the police, and the subordinary (district) courts. The cow protection movement, the campaign to convert minorities to Hinduism, and the activities to prevent intermarriage between Muslim boys and Hindu girls. depend on unreasoned hatred, violence, and looting by RSS-affiliated vigilante organizations.

As the above quote points out, putting the law of the state under its own value *("these vigilantes do not hesitate to break the law to defend legal and moral norms")* is another key feature of vigilantism. Moreover, as we have repeatedly stressed, vigilantism is based on the active support or passive acquiescence of the state, so it is not only incorrect but dishonest to portray vigilante groups as "fringe elements" that deviate from the mainstream forces.

The form of "law and order" common to vigilantism, which places the laws of the state under its own value, can be named "prompt justice". It is administered not only by private violence (supported or tacitly condoned by public authorities), but by the "bulldozer justice"[15] or so-called "encounter killings" by police forces in different parts of the country. It is quite evident that this kind of the "prompt justice" or the vigilantism by the state is an important pathway for the nurturing and growth of authoritarianism.

Authoritarianism

Shortly after coming to power, Prime Minister Modi, while setting his first step in the parliament, rubbed his forehead against the entrance floor to show respect for his avowed "Temple of democracy." However, it needed little time before for his government to reveal its authoritarian nature: it was the first government with a single majority since the 1984 parliamentary elections and, boosted by the "Messiah-like" aspirations of the frantic supporters who welcomed a "strong leader," it was no surprise that Prime Minister Modi secured an absolute position within the government and his party.

This first manifested itself as a concentration of power in the prime minister's Office (PMO) within the administration. In the PMO, pivotal posts are staffed with the Indian

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[15] In BJP ruled states, Uttar Pradesh in particular, alleged criminals or protestors/dissenters against the state are indiscriminately identified with faint evidences and their properties are promptly destroyed with swiftly dispatched bulldozers. See Mittal (2023).

Administrative Service (IAS) officials whom Modi heavily relied on since his time as Gujarat chief minister. PMO has exercised broad guidance, supervision, and monitoring powers over the federal administration as if it formed a "miniature federal government."[16]

Furthermore, as the administration came into full swing, there was an erosion in the independence of the legislature, the judiciary, and various media outlets.

In the parliament, there was a clear tendency to take advantage of the overwhelming majority to evade open deliberation, with frequent presidential ordinances, avoidance of prior scrutiny of bills by the Standing Committees, and dispensing with the Rajya Sabha debate by designating even bills unrelated to fiscal spending as money bills. In relation to the judiciary, with the failure of legislative attempt to involve the government in the appointment of judges in the High Courts and Supreme Court, the government went slow with the appointment of judges, leaving a chronic shortage of vacancies in the judicial branch. However, by late 2022, the composition of the Supreme Court judges had been replaced by those who had all been appointed after the formation of the Modi government. Meanwhile, some of the Supreme Court chief justices were found clearly compromising and pandering to the government.

But what prompted Modi government's authoritarian orientation was the connivance and indulgence to the vigilante violence.[17] By late 2015, criticism of intolerance including murder of intellectuals and a spate of lynching targeting Muslims under the Hinduization agenda became so intense especially among students and intellectuals. Many literati returned the national awards as a protest against intolerance. However instead of the Modi government becoming submissive or remorseful, it rolled back protest or criticism by mobilizing VHP and RSS's student front (Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad), hurling the "anti-national" label at critical media, vocal civil society and student movements. In addition, rising tensions with Pakistan due to militants strikes in Jammu and Kashmir state offered an opportunity to boost the government's nationalist agenda.[18]

By the turn of the Modi's first term, the authoritarian streak of the government became unmistakably visible. We would like to emphasize that the uncompromising

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[16] On the organization and functions of the PMO in the Modi government, see Sato (2021).

[17] Jaffrelot (2021: 253).

[18] In Uri in September 2016 and later in Pulwama in February 2019, Kashmir militants attacked Indian forces, which triggered offensive strikes by Indian forces across the Line of Control.

counterattack to government's critics and opponents no doubt catalyzed and exacerbated authoritarian tendency of the Modi regime.

The theory of "authoritarianism" in political science is characterized by the view that it is a type of coercive but not necessarily a violent regime that differs from one-party dictatorships and totalitarianism.[19] Under authoritarianism, power is concentrated, the mechanism of restraint and balance in the state apparatus is destroyed, and the suppression of human rights becomes rampant.[20] The fact that governance in the Modi regime belongs to authoritarianism in this sense needs to be discussed in more detail,[21] and institutional perspective is no doubt crucial in understanding authoritarianism. Yet in the rest of our discussion on Modi politics, we would like to approach authoritarianism from a different angle.

The focus of our attention is rather on the ideological propensity observed in the exercise of Modi's "authority." In relation to our framework in Figure 1, the issue of "authority" lies at the core of the "Hinduization of ideology" to indoctrinate and mobilize the people by the Hindu Supremacists. We particularly underline the congruence of Modi's "authority" with what Max Weber called feelings of *Pietät* (piety or reverence) expressed by the subjects (the governed).[22]

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[19] There is a long series of literature on authoritarianism but here we refer to the two path-breaking works, Levitsky and Way (2010) and Guriev and Treisman (2022). These two studies focus on democratic transition from totalitarianism to authoritarianism, leaving aside another path to authoritarianism from liberal democracy. This may be the reason India (the Modi rule) has no place in their analysis. Also see the next footnote.

[20] Müller propounded in his penetrating essay that populism has three distinct techniques; colonization of the state, discriminatory legalism and mass clientelism (Müller: 2017: 44-49), the last one to be subsequently discussed in our Section IV. We note the *populism* literature is more concerned with *de-democratizing* transition from democracy to authoritarianism/totalitarianism. See the explanatory chart on Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017: 87).

[21] See Sato (2021), which analyzes the structures and functions of the prime minister's office (PMO) in the Modi government and determines the structure of the concentration of power, as part of a discussion on the destruction of the check-and-balance of power and the suppression of human rights. Jaffrelot (2021) provides a broad analysis of the institutional sphere of Modi's rule as authoritarianism. Khosla and Vaishnav (2021) describe the current Indian state as a triarchy of ethnic, absolute, and opaque states.

[22] Weber (1960: 143-8). Along with Karl Marx, Max Weber has been one of the most influential theorists in modern Japanese intellectual tradition.

III.   Dissecting Modi's political authority

1. Theories on political authority

Weberian theories that problematize "authority" include "charisma theory" (revolutionary and extraordinary rule)[23] or patriarchal dominance. The French political researcher C. Jaffrelot has also analyzed the characteristics of Modi's political leadership, relying on the concept of the sultanate as the most concentrated form of patriarchal authority, which has its origins in Weber and was developed by J. Linz in his theory of authoritarian regime.[24] The issue of authority has also occupied a major place in recent theories about populism.[25]

The "saintly politics" thesis by Morris-Jones also come to mind in this context, yet this concept is not so much an attribute of the leader (Mahatma Gandhi or Vinoba Bhave) as one of three political "idioms" that coexist in post-independent India: modern, traditional, and saintly. It is otherwise useful but does not offer immediate reference for our subject.[26]

If we are to follow Weber, we need a "typology of dominance" for India, one that is grounded in Indian history and politics. RSS ideologues have long focused on the "saints" or *rishi*s (in Indian language) as a type of ruler rooted in the Indian political tradition.

2. Modi and the RSS ideology of political authority

Apart from theoretical interest, Modi's personal authority attracts our attention from the point of his relations with the RSS. Modi has often been assumed to have kept a distance from the RSS (especially during his term as Gujarat chief minister), and his personal adulation has been said to be alien to the RSS organizational culture.

However, as will be presently seen in detail, the RSS is not immune to the cult of the individual worship, and there is an unquestionable trend in RSS political philosophy toward a kind of sage statecraft (*Rajrishi*) based on personal qualities of its leaders. We

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[23] Weber (1962: 411-417).
[24] Weber (1960: 41, 45) and Jaffrelot (2021: 459).
[25] Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017: 62-78). Among the literature on authoritarianism, see also Frantz (2018: 44-63).
[26] Morris-Jones (1963).

will make it clear through RSS literature on the subject that Modi politics is unquestionably in this vein.

"Rishi tradition"

Duttpant Bapurao Thengadi (1920–2004) was a RSS theorist and organizer who made perhaps the greatest contribution to the organization and expansion of the RSS *Parivar,* including the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (Indian Workers Association). He noted that in ancient Hindu society, the rule by a *Rishi* who transcended self-interest was an ideal one, and that this "*rishi* tradition" has continued to the present day. Thengadi contends that this idea was conveyed to him by the RSS's second supreme leader (*Sarsanghachalak*) Golwalkar (*Guruj*i) and that Deendayal Upadhyay, the former president of Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS) was a leader in line with this tradition. Thengadi states that:

> The vital force of the affluence and immortality of our ancient nation has been *a continuous train of persons who have always remained above the temptation of wealth and power, who had spiritual greatness, who were ever alert and who had the capacity to correct any injustice done by either of these powers. This Rishi-tradition has continued unbroken in Bharat. Pandit Deendayalji belonged to this category....* [emphasis added].[27]

This brief description says little about the place "*Rishi* tradition" occupies in the political philosophy of the RSS. It is Deendayal Upadhyay, who extensively theorized the RSS political doctrines. Upadhyay was a key figure among a group of party cadres deputed by the RSS to lay foundation of the BJS in 1951; if Vajpayee was the public face of the BJS as its builder, Upadhyay, who was much less visible in the public eye, was a more important "mastermind" figure. He became party president in December 1967, after the BJS's breakthrough in the 1967 general elections, and died a puzzling death shortly after in February of the following year in an accident during a train journey. Integral Humanism (*Ekatma Manavta Darshan*), which he championed, has been carried forward

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[27] Thengadi (1991: 120-1).

even after the BJP was formed as the party's basic philosophy in Article 3 of its constitution.

He played a leading part for preparing the BJS's basic policy document in 1965 and lectured on the political philosophy behind the document. In these lectures compiled in a booklet as *Integral Humanism,*[28] Thengadi's "*Rishi* tradition" was developed in more detail as part of the political philosophy of the RSS. To approach his theory of "*Rish*i," we have to take a slight detour and start from his (or RSS's) theory of the nation, which underlies it. The following two passages from *Integral Humanism* are most relevant in this respect.

A nation and its soul

> *When a group of persons lives with a goal, an ideal, a mission and look upon a particular piece of land as motherland, this group constitutes a nation.* If either of the two, an ideal and a motherland is not there, then there is no nation. (p. 36) [Italics in the original text]

> Similarly there is this Idea, Ideal, or fundamental principle, of a nation, its soul (Chiti, p. 36).[29] Similarly, every society has an innate nature, which is inborn, and which is not the result of historical circumstances.[30] (p. 37).

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[28] Upadhyay (c. 1965).

[29] *Chiti* is derived from *Chit* (consciousness). This word was absent in Bharatiya Jana Sangh (1965), a document three months preceding Upadhyaya's lecture in April 1965. Later in one of the commentaries of the Upadhyaya's thought, "chiti" is inserted in the document as a synonym of "genius" (Deodhar 1991: 70) . Bhishikar (1991: 90) explains "chiti" as a "national spirit or national character of the nation."

[30] Upadhyaya (c.1965: 34) quotes RSS second *Sarsanghachalak* Golwalkar in the context of the claim of collective nature: "Both Hindus and Muslims are good and bad as individuals. Good and bad are not the exclusive property of any particular group. But a Hindu can do good when any miscreant gathers together. But a Muslim, in a group, can devise and do what he would not have thought of as an individual." The text of *Integral Humanism*, currently available in PDF format on the Deendayal Research Institute's website (http://www.chitrakoot.org/download/IntegralHumanism.pdf), has this para removed (Patel 2020: 114). However, as Patel further points out, the para still stays on the website of the BJP state office in Gujarat (https://bjpgujarat.org/philosophy/) (confirmed on June 22, 2022).

Chiti and Dharma

> The state is brought into existence to protect the nation; produce and maintain conditions in which the ideal of the nation can be translated into reality. *The laws that help manifest and maintain the Chiti of a nation are termed the Dharma of that nation.* Dharma is repository of the nation's soul. *Anyone who abandons Dharma betrays the nation* (p. 46).

> That constitution which sustains the nation is in tune with Dharma. Dharma sustains the nation. Hence we have always given primary importance to Dharma, which is considered sovereign. All other entities, institutions or authorities derive their power from Dharma and are subordinate to it. (p. 50) [emphasis added]

According to Upadhyay, the nation, not the state, is supreme. Dharma, although left equivocal and undefined all through his lectures, is linked not to the existing state, but to the nation as an organic sovereign body. Rebellion against the nation therefore is the most seditious crime.

The essentialist understanding of the nation as a sovereign and organic body lies at the heart of the fundamental tenet of the RSS.[31] BJP's slogans for the 2014 parliamentary elections, "*Ek Bharat Shrestha Bharat*" (One India, Unparalleled India) and "*Sab se Pahale Bharat*" (India First) all proclaim the supremacy of Bharat as a sovereign entity, which has been repeatedly presented in the more recent statements by Modi.

The first is the concluding remarks of the motion of thanks to the president's speech in the parliament on February 7, 2022. He boastfully declared, "Nation (*Rashtra*) is neither a governing institution (*satta*) nor a political system (*sarkar vyavastha*). Nation (*Rashtra*) is a living soul (*jivit atma*)."[32]

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[31] While discussing on the populist regime of Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Paris put forth two basic concepts of the "organic and extra-legal sovereignty" as ruling codes of his regime (Paris 2022: 534-545). His formulation of organic and extra-legal sovereignty serves well in our argument on the RSS's idea of the nation.

[32] PM's reply to the Motion of Thanks on president's address in Lok Sabha (With Subtitles) - YouTube (accessed 25 April 2022). This YouTube image shows how PM Modi emphasizes the importance of this part of his remarks by raising his index finger as if he is going to reveal an esoteric doctrine.

The second was made on April 26, 2022, at an event in honor of Narayana Guru (1856–1928), a social reformer from *Ezhava*, an oppressed caste in Kerala. Drawing on Narayana Guru's well-known "One caste, One religion, One God" philosophy, the prime minister claimed, "We have one caste (*ek jati*), [that is] India (*Bharatiyata*), one religion (*ek dharma*), [that is] the law of service (*seva dharma*), and one god (*ek ishvar*), [that is] *Bharat Mata* with over 1.3 billion children."[33] The nation is embodied as one deity, *Bharata Mata*, under one norm (*dharma*). While Narayana Guru's "One" was a message of criticism and rebellion, rejecting caste and other discriminations among the members of society, Modi calls for a nationalism that enswathes the people into the framework of "Oneness."

In the RSS, from Upadhyay to Modi, the nation takes the equivocal Dharma as its inner codes and materializes itself as a deity (*Bharat Mata*), superimposed on the real world. After ascertaining the supremacy of the nation in the RSS ideology, we can now bring back our discussion to the role of *Rishi* in administration and politics.

3. Modi's political dualism—the Rishi/Raja structure

Dharma and Rishi/Raja structure

The following passages from Upadhyay's *Integral Humanism* capture the very essence of the relationship between the *dharma*, *rishi*s, and *raja*s (kings, political rulers).

> It is true that the ruler wielded a great deal of influence and that he was the protector of Dharma in society, but the ruler could not decide what constitutes Dharma. He only saw to it that people led their lives according to Dharma. *In a way he was equivalent to the present day executive.* (p. 61)

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[33] *The Hindu*, 26 April 2022. and also the image from https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/news_updates/pm-participates-in-inaugural-ceremony-of-year-long-joint-celebrations-of-90th-anniversary-of-sivagiri-pilgrimage-and-golden-jubilee-of-brahma-vidhyalaya/?comment=disable (accessed on May 1, 2022).

> *When the supremacy of Dharma is accepted as a principle, then, through the authority of Dharma, the Rishis derive a right to remove a ruler who defaults in its duty.* (p. 61) [Italics added]

If the sovereignty of dharma is accepted, the *rishi*s who incarnate the dharma have the right to exterminate kings who fail in their duty. He claims that the dharma reigns over kingship, and the ruler is merely a counterpart of today's executive.

We would also argue that it is the *rishi*s, not the people, who depose the ruler, and the people's right to resistance against a ruler is totally overlooked. In the first place, Upadhyay's theory of the state has no room for the people in governance. In his lectures, although Upadhyay mentions a relationship similar to the "social contract" between the ruler and his subjects, his theory is nothing more than an "exchange of duties," i.e., the ruler's obligation to protect his subjects and the subjects' obligation to pay taxes, as described in the Indian classics.[34] Upadhyay's theory of the state envisages a Brahmin-Kshatriya system, the very much "orthodox" theory of kingship where Dharma (Brahmin) stands above the ruler (Kshatriya).[35]

Thus, we have a formulation wherein the Dharma, the core of nation, is relegated to the *Rishi* who reigns over the ruler or the executive power.

We call this formulation as the *Rishi*/*Raja* structure, which, when transposed to the contemporary politics, manifests itself as a split structure in executive power represented by the concentration of power to the prime minister and his office (PMO) on one hand and the rest of the subordinate government ministers/departments on the other.[36]

It should be noted that while Modi is often referred to as the *Rishi* of the nation (*Rashtra rishi, Rajrishi*), the great *Rishi* (*Maharishi*), or Teacher (*Guru*, *Acharya*) etc., there are few occasions when he is simply praised as *Raja* or *Maharaja*. This is because his "authority" is attributed to some kind of transcendental power, rather than to worldly power as a "ruler" suggests.

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[34] Upadhyaya (c.1965: 41). Ghoshal refers to the "contract theory" between ruler and people in the Indian classics as "quasi-contract" and discusses the difference from the social contract theory of J. J. Rousseau (Ghoshal 1959: 536-9). Volume 3, section 16, of Rousseau's *Du Contrat Social*, "That the institution of the government is never a contract" discusses this very issue (Rousseau 1954: 137-8).

[35] For the overview of the theory of kingship in ancient India, see Yamazaki (1994: 27–39, 76).

[36] Sato (2021: 145–6).

The fact that *Rishi* Modi is not a Brahmin is of little relevance in this context. He has the qualities of a pseudo-Brahmin; in fact, he frequently quotes Sanskrit scriptures and leads the ceremonies involved in the construction of the Rama temple at Ayodhya. This Brahministic behavior is not only a reflection of his self-identification as a *rishi*, but also of his desire to match the former Prime Minister Vajpayee (a Brahmin), who often skillfully quoted Sanskrit phrases in public forums.

4. Rishi and stage-managed divinity

You cannot deny it just as a cynic's sarcastic view to sniff out a staged element in the ruling "authority." A well-known Indian classic, *Arthashastra,* asserted long ago that the spies released by a ruler, as means of intrigue, had staged and propagated the divinity of the ruler with an aim to deceive the "credulous" subjects and soldiers.[37] Stage-managing of holiness or divinity has obviously a long history in India.

The production of holiness or divinity as *Rishi* is aimed at two effects. The first is the production of infallibility, and the second is to impress seemingly contradictory attributes of transcendence and intimacy.

Infallibility does not simply mean "not to err," but "unable to err." Erring is in any way leads to damage the sanctity of the *rishi*s. But what happens when infallibility is introduced into realpolitik?

In realpolitik, it is impossible for any leader not to make mistakes. Therefore, the emphasis on infallibility creates, first of all, a structure of evading responsibility, whereby achievements are attributed to the ruler and mistakes and failures to the hangers-on. With this logic, the prime minister always remains unblamed. The infallibility of the *rishi*s is thus maintained.

Secondly to maintain infallibility, monitoring mechanisms (such as the legislature, the judiciary, the media and non-governmental organizations) over the prime minister and his executive branches are to be inactivated, as the monitoring mechanisms are detrimental to the maintenance of the prime minister's infallibility by bringing his

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[37] Yamazaki (1994: 109).

"mistakes" to light. Intimidation and obstruction of opposition politicians and activists are resorted to for the same purpose.

Third is the distortion or concealment of accurate information (especially statistics on economic performance) necessary for policy verification. This is another essential task in maintaining the infallibility of the *Rishi*. Statistics by international organizations are also challenged for their publication if they appear to be unfavorable, as in the case of the massive death in India in the second wave of the COVID-19.[38]

Fourth, any act that expresses even the slightest doubt about the authority of the *rishi*s or ridicules their authority is dealt with high-handedness, even through the use of police forces. In other words, "the fact that the people have feelings of independent dignity—that they do not conform to Pietät ideological indoctrination—makes them the object of authority's suspicion as an indication of their possible rebellion,"[39] Transcendental power is always haunted by the subjects' disobedience.

And finally, the holiness of a *Rishi* requires a personal element in addition to infallibility. The *Rishis* must stand on a transcendental ground different from that of ordinary people, but at the same time they must have a personality that is extremely close to that of ordinary people. Thus, intimacy as well as transcendence is an attribute closely associated with the patriarchal character. For the *Rishi*'s followers, he is none other than God. In the case of Modi, too, there are enthusiastic followers who go so far as to setting up a "god image" of him. In public media, Modi's images are often presented with a view to create the atmosphere of a sacred icon.

But transcendence is supplemented by performed intimacy with the people. Modi emphasizes his "humble" origins, which are not elitist, either professionally (son of a tea shop owner, *chaewala*) or caste-wise (so-called "other backward classes"), to create an intimate image with the general public. Alternatively, he tries to position himself below the people by referring to himself as a *pradhan sevak* (prime servant) or *chowkidar* (gatekeeper). Arguments comparing rulers to servants are said to be found in Indian

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[38]WHO estimated the "excess death toll" between January 1, 2020, and December 31, 2021, to be 14.9 million worldwide and 4.7 million in India. Publication of the WHO estimate is said to have been delayed considerably due to opposition from the Indian government, which has put the published death toll at around 500,000 (" India's real Covid toll may never be known," *https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-60981318*, 5 May 2022).

[39] Ishio et al. (1979: 100). Pietät (piety) will be taken up later again from social policy perspective.

classical literature,[40] yet closer to home, Friedrich II of Prussia in the 18th century called himself the "first servant of the people," which means that Modi was a latter-day avatar of an enlightenment despot.

It will not be off the point if we say that combination of transcendence and intimacy serves as a useful framework to understand Modi's political performance.[41]

5. Control over the mind

Thus, the regime with the *Rishi* at its head further deepens its inclination toward "authoritarianism." Rebecca Solnit, an American social critic and writer, says, "Authoritarians (with former President Trump in mind) don't just want to control the government, the economy and the military. They want to control the truth."[42]

The most effective way to "control the truth" is to "control the mind." The ultimate aim of staged divinity is to indoctrinate and mobilize the people toward the goals set by the Hindu Supremacy. All of the prime minister Modi's messages to the people are addressed to these objectives. Indoctrination and mobilization of the population by the "modern *Rishi*" has three facets.

The first is the imposition of self-sacrifice (*yajña*) and penance (*tapasya*) on the population. This rhetoric was used on the occasion of the demonetization of high-value banknotes in November 2016, and the COVID-19 lockdown in early 2020. People are told that the suffering is "sacrifice and penance" to make them believe that the hardship they face is nothing but an ordeal to achieve some sublime goal.

Second, on both these occasions, people were scarcely given time to prepare and ponder on the fallout of the policies. It was rather a "shock and awe" operation by the government on its own people. There were only a few hours between the prime minister's announcement and the implementation of the measures. The public is thus caught in a web of "passive" political participation or psychological mobilization of self-sacrifice and penance, without being given time to rethink, still less to resist.

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[40] Ghoshal (1959: 536-7).
[41] See also Vittorini (2022).
[42] Solnit (2022).

The third is social harmony and concord, with particular emphasis on individual duty and obligation. As detailed in Upadhyay's *Integral Humanism,* in RSS's political pathology, contradictions and conflicts are signs of diseases originating from the individualism which prioritizes individual rights over duties and obligations.[43] Duty is a much-favored theory by Prime Minister Modi. His "personal devotion to duty discourse" can be read in a way in which he proudly demonstrates the superiority of duty at the meeting of the National *Human Rights* Commission (NHRC), a public human rights body. He declared:

> As the Shastras say, do not do to others what harms you. In other words, human rights are not only rights, but also duties, which are inseparable. We must consider not only our own rights but also the rights of others, and make the rights of others our duties. If such *sahajata* (innate nature) is achieved, human rights will become a value in our social life. Rights and duties are the trajectory on which the development and dignity of humankind will move forward. Duties are as essential as rights, and the two should be considered as one, not as separate. It is our view that the greater the emphasis on duties, the more rights will be established.[44]

Claiming that one's right inevitably clashes with the claims by others is an argument denying universal nature of human rights. Even recently, before Republic Day 2022, Modi said, "In India, since independence, only rights have been asserted. That was the reason for the slow development of the country. The next 25 years [i.e., toward 2047] will see the penance (*tapasya*) of the fulfilment of duties."[45]

Thus, the "modern *Rishi*" preaches self-sacrifice and penance to the people and emphasizes duty over rights.[46] In short, the goal is collective rather than individual,

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[43] According to them, both Western individualism and communism share this pathology (Upadhyaya c.1965: 11–2).

[44] Modi speech at the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), 28th anniversary program, 11 October 2021 (PM Speech on NHRC Foundation Day 2021.pdf)

[45] *The Hindu*, 21 Jan. 2022; *Indian Express [IE]*, 21 Jan. 2022. On September 8, 2022, against the backdrop of developing new layout of the capital, *Rajpat*h was renamed *Kartavy Path* (Duty Avenue). On Modi's duty discourse, also see Chishti (2022b).

[46] No wonder, here is also found an undercurrent of duty discourse shared with the BJP's predecessor Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS). The BJS document in 1965 said, "according to our concept, a right is an instrument which enable the individual to carry out duties and experience a

suppressing individuality thereby creating reverent, sacrificial, and less demanding subjects.[47]

Harmony and organic growth, not conflicts or contradiction, is another core political philosophy of the RSS. The mutual organic sustenance embodied in bodily functions and familial relations is highly valued. In conformity with the philosophy of harmony and mutual sustenance, Modi has frequently espoused collectivity by invoking "everyone (*sab*)" since his manifesto for the 2014 parliamentary elections.[48] The constant evocation of "everyone" on the part of the Hindu Supremacy appears very much incongruous as they see a deep rift and hatred between "us" (Hindus) and "them" (Muslims).

Needless to say, harmony is always broken by conflicts and contradictions in the real world. Facing the difficulty, Hindu Supremacy must rely on double standards, i.e., different standards for us (insiders) and others (outsiders). Harmony does not apply to others (typically for minorities such as Muslims) who are the deemed disrupters. It is also tolerant of its own grievances and resentments yet intolerant of others' discontents. Hindu Supremacy harbors deep-seated grievances and resentments against the vilified "Establishment" whose representatives may be the "leftists," "liberals," or "sickular" intellectuals.[49] And the expression of grudges against them does not preclude even the physical violence.

We now ask if these characteristics of Hindu Supremacy, which celebrates harmony and strongly detests rights, are not also imprinted on economic policy of the Modi

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sense of being and belonging. Duty and right are thus two sides of a triangle which has *Dharma* as its base. It is the right of a soldier to be equipped with arms, for without arms he cannot fulfill his duty of defending the people. But how these arms are to be provided, and used, is a matter governed entirely by *Dharma*" (Bharatiya Jana Sangh 1965: 6-7).

[47] Textbook revision under way at the state and federal levels also need to be monitored in this connection. The Gujarat government's recent announcement to include the *Bhagavad Gita* as a subject for grades 6 to 12 (*IE,* 18 March 2022) seems to be aimed, not at providing profound knowledge on classic philosophy, but at creating the duty-bound citizenry. This move is shared by other BJP-governed states (https://thewire.in/education/now-uttarakhand-to-introduce-bhagvad-gita-other-hindu-scriptures-in-school- SYLLABUS, accessed May 2, 2022).

[48] The slogan *"Sab ka Sath, Sab ka Vikas"* (with everyone, growth for everyone) in the 2014 parliamentary elections was supplemented by *Sab ka Vishwas* (trust by everyone) after the 2019 parliamentary elections, again followed afterwards by *Sab ka Prayas* (effort by everyone).

[49] In political slang, these are the people known as Lutyens Delhi, Khan Market Gangs, Urban Naxals, or *Vilayeti* (foreign) liberals, etc.

government. Using the concept of rights as a clue, we would explore the linkages between politics and economics under this government.

IV.   The "politics of rights" versus the competition state

1. *Economic liberalization and the "politics of rights"*

Since economic liberalization in 1991, apart from the short-lived United Front (UF) coalition government, the central government has successively been headed by Narasimha Rao, A.B. Vajpayee, Manmohan Singh, and Narendra Modi. Throughout this period, the basic momentum of economic liberalization policy has been maintained.

However, despite a common set of policy orientation for deregulation, public sector privatization, or social security cuts and fiscal conservatism, economic liberalization policies do not run on a uniform predetermined track. If policy priorities and their methods are examined in detail, a certain degree of fluctuation and amplitude can be observed, including modification, adjustment, or slowdown of preceding policies. As David Harvey points out, neoliberalism has progressed with inflections, reflecting different historical and political conditions in different countries.[50]

In the case of India, the most "left" swing in this amplitude was seen during the first period of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance's (UPA-I) government (2004-09). This government passed a series of rights legislations (some in UPA-II; see Table 1 below) under the leadership of the National Advisory Council (NAC), a policy advisory cell presided over by the Congress president Sonia Gandhi, with extra-cabinet support by left parties basing upon the Common Minimum Program (CMP).[51]

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[50] Harvey (2007: 70-72). For a concise but suggestive introduction of neoliberalism, see Brown (2019: 17-21).
[51] Harriss (2011: 138-141) attributes this ambivalence in policy shift to (middle-class-based) nongovernmental organization pressure.

Table 1: List of rights legislation during the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) regime

- The Right to Information Act 2005.
- Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005.
- The Forest Rights Act 2006.
- The Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act 2008.
- The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009
- The Right of Citizens for Time-bound Delivery of Goods and Services and Redressal of their Grievances Bill 2011 (repealed by dissolution of the House of Commons in 2014).
- The National Food Security Act 2013.
- The Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act 2013.
- Lokpal and Lokayukta Act 2013.

A common feature of these "rights legislations" is that they legally guarantee people's right to life, and at the same time incorporate mechanisms for monitoring and regulating executive actions. In particular, the Right to Information Act and the Lokpal and Lokayukta Act were ground-breaking attempts to strengthen the administrative oversight function.

Furthermore, in parallel with the legislative and executive thrust, the judiciary also demonstrated its proactiveness in extending horizon of the Article 21 (Right to Life) of the Indian Constitution, thereby reinforced the "politics of rights" from the judicial angle.

Harvey's argument on the relationship between the "politics of rights" and neoliberalism in general would be instructive here. He states that there is a certain "available contradiction" within neoliberalism over "liberal rights" between the liberal current and the more conservative current (neoconservatism).[52] The "politics of rights"

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[52] Harvey (2007: 175–182, 203–4). According to Harvey, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India is also a neoconservative party. In his text, the BJP is described as the "Hindu Nationalist Party" (Harvey 2007: 85).

of the Congress party and the BJP's passivity toward it is a manifestation of this contradiction within the Indian neoliberalism.

2. Bringing back the competition state

During the second phase of the United Progressive Alliance's government (UPA-II), especially in the latter half period (2012–2014), assault and torturous murder of a girl student in Delhi and the anti-corruption campaign led by Anna Hazare and others aroused urban residents' discontent with the regime, while big business turned dissatisfied with stern policy regulations on land acquisition and environmental protection. Furthermore, alleged unsustainability of fiscal expenditure through entitlement legislation was overemphasized. As the headwind against the government intensified, UPA-II itself began to take a backward step in its flagship programs, such as cutting budget in rural employment guarantee projects and narrowing the scope of information disclosure.

Thus, amid a deepening sense of deadlock in the UPA government, the BJP, led by Modi, fought the 2014 parliamentary elections with the image of a viable government under the main slogan "*Vikas* [Growth (or Development)]" and won a single majority in the parliament for the first time in 30 years since the 1984 elections.

We presume that the core economic implication of the Modi government's "*Sab ka Vikas* (growth for all)" was a counterblow to the "politics of rights" under the UPA-I. The "rights legislations" listed in Table 1 have been revised or sabotaged across the board by the new government. The Central Information Commission (CIC), the watchdog of the Right to Information Act (RTI) has been left understaffed, budgetary allocation for Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, along with other welfare expenditure was curtailed. Environmental scrutiny against the state land acquisition was sought to be relaxed (though in vain, due to farmers' opposition). The central ombudsman (Lokpal) was only formally appointed at the dead end of Modi's first term, and remained inactive thereafter[53]. These are a few examples of Modi government's aversion to oversight and regulations on the executive power.

Just as the BJP's victory in 2014 brought Hindu Supremacy back to life in Indian politics, so did the line of economic liberalization in Indian economy, so far relegated to

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[53] After May 2022, when the first Lokpal retired, no regular Lokpal has been appointed.

the backstage in the face of the "politics of rights." What Joachim Hirsch calls the neoliberal state—the "competition state"[54]—has been back on the stage. It is no secret that Modi's victory was underpinned by massive funding by the Indian business community, frustrated by the "politics of rights" under the UPA. Their funding was subsequently made legitimate under the Modi government in the form of the electoral bonds.[55]

3. The competition state in full play

Competition states take the form of affirming and encouraging the principle of competition not only in economy but also in society at large. The main features of the competition state in India under the Modi-led government are, in our view, summarized under three heads. The first is the reinforcement of competition in every dimension, be it global, domestic (intra-statal), or societal. The second is the excessive encouragement of self-help, to the extent of the government giving less attention to welfare provisions. And finally, it brings forth the declining compassion for the economically under-privileged and vulnerable.

Compete to make doing business easier

Under the global movement of capital, every state competes to provide favorable investment and locational conditions for enterprises in the field of permits, labor laws, and so on. Competition states strive to provide and develop such conditions to make "Doing Business Easier" (DBE).

A set of policy measures to promote DBE is now internationally standardized by the World Bank. Indian government since the earlier UPA government has deeply interested in the World Bank's annual *Doing Business Report [DBR]*as a policy guide and

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[54] Hirsch (1998).

[55] Electoral bonds are bearer bonds with State Bank of India as the issuing agency and come in four denominations of Rs 1,000, 10,000, 1 million and 10 million, but the latter two dominate in terms of number of issues and their amount. Political parties that receive these donations encash them for election and other expenses. Estimated 65% of the issued bonds by 2020/2021 fiscal year are donations to the BJP(https://factly.in/data-bjp-is-the-beneficiary-of-65-of-all-the-electoral-bonds-redeemed-by-end-of-2020-21/ accessed on 12 June 2022).

evaluation. UPA tried to balance its economic policy with the politics of rights on the left hand and the competition state on the right.

The DBR sets out 11 indicators for business activity, and ranks more than 100 countries around the world based on the most "favorable" regulatory environment for each indicator. According to the *DBR 2019*, these 11 indicators are: creation of enterprises, labor legislation, building permits, electricity access, asset registration, financial access, protection of minority investors, tax delivery, international trade, contract enforcement, and debt insolvency measures. However, as labor legislation is not indexed, there are 10 indicators. Each indicator is an aggregation of about two to four sub-indicators.

India was ranked 120th in *DB 2008* and its rank continued to fall under the UPA government thereafter, reached its nadir at 142nd in *DBR 2015*. After Modi took office, it rose to 130th and 100th, went up to 77th in *DBR 2019*. Even during this period, the Modi-led government was full of complaints when its rank dropped, and greatly rejoiced once it reached 77th position.

However, it has become clear that the ranking of DBR contains several problems that cannot be dismissed out of hand. Above all, the World Bank itself has attached some reservations to the treatment of the doing business indicators. Above all, the rankings do not cover all factors of importance to business activities: even in *DBR 2015*, such factors as security, corruption, market size, macroeconomic stability, state of the financial system, training and skills of the workforce, security of electricity supply, access to credit, taxation and subsidies for trade which have a significant impact on the environment and competitiveness are not included.[56]. The World Bank itself ceased producing the report after 2021, acknowledging the lack of objectivity in evaluation, yet the Indian government continues to use the same ranking methodology as a means of promoting inter-state and inter-ministerial competition.

Excessive exhortation for self-help

The principle of competition and self-help are two sides of a coin. The emphasis on self-help is extremely pronounced in the field of jobs and employment.

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[56] *DBR 2015*, pp. 16–18; the 2019 edition also adds a reservation that the regulation of business activities is only one of the factors of "political stability, natural resource endowment, cultural characteristics, environmental risks and others" (*DBR 2019*, p. 14).

Job creation is the Achilles' heel in the Modi-led government's economic performance. In fact, *Vikas* promises in the 2014 elections were nothing but the promises to create jobs,[57] yet the performance has been disappointing. Government sector jobs, which could have been increased by the administration's decisions, have continued to be cut both in central and state sectors. In this context, the Ministry of Railways' recruitment drive has often made the news headlines as a symbol of the massive unemployment among the youth, due to its sheer size and the ensuing confusion it has caused.[58]

In the face of poor performance in job creation, the Modi government encourages self-employment and entrepreneurship rather than jobs in factories or offices, and has been sharing its success stories of self-help and entrepreneurship in PM's radio lectures and in other media. The administration's job creation project has effectively become a policy to encourage start-up entrepreneurship.[59]

In the age of digitalization, boosting this type of entrepreneurship is a global trend and certainly one of the leading areas for job creation. However, the jobs created by this type of support are unstable and this cannot mask the failure of job creation. Amit Shah, the Home Minister in the second Modi-led government, emphasized the "employment effect" of self-employment so much that he declared that "selling *samosas* on the streets is also employment," which was rebuffed by young people asking if begging was also employment. He continued to emphasize the achievements of IT-related entrepreneurship as a successful job creation, saying that jobs in government offices are not the only kind of employment opportunity (*IE*, March 1, 2022). The Minister of Education has also called on the youth to create their own jobs and to be job-creators rather than job-seekers.

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[57] Gurucharan Das, an entrepreneur and economic commentator, says that "Vikas is a code name for employment" (interview in *IE*, 2 Sept 2018).

[58] Even as recently as January 2022, more than 12.5 million people applied for the recruitment examinations held in January 2022 for 35,000 positions, and a large number of job seekers took to the streets in Bihar to demonstrate their dissatisfaction with the selection process (*IE*, 26 Jan. 2022).

[59] A flagship project is the prime minister's Employment Generation Program, which began during the UPA era [2008–09] and is estimated to have provided subsidies to 741,000 micro-entrepreneurs and created 6.06 million jobs by January 27, 2022 (How has Prime Minister's Employment Generation Programme fared so far? (factly.in), accessed February 28, 2022). On the other hand, mass layoffs to the scale of ten to twenty thousand people in start-ups establishments are often reported *(*e.g., *IE*, July 6, 2022).

The youth, "the global citizens of the future," were to be job creators, he pleaded (*IE*, April 7, 2022).[60]

Under a competition state, the principle of competition and the self-help discourse pervade the society at large. Examination in education field is a straightforward expression of social competition. In his radio lectures and rallies of students and examinees, Prime Minister Modi has glorified young people undertaking exams as "exam warriors" and called on them to win the "war" with the help of their parents and other family members. Instead of easing the hardship in exam competition,[61] the prime minister himself, who is heading the administration, in effect glorifies competition—as if he were Krishna preaching to the modern-day Arjunas.

Declining compassion for the underprivileged

Third, inextricably linked to the competition state is the declining compassion for the economically underprivileged.

The Modi government's 2014 parliamentary election slogan, *"Sab ka Vikas"* (growth for all), is often understood to be an equivalent to "inclusive growth." However, while "inclusion" is primarily oriented toward inclusion of the poor and other economically and politically vulnerable groups, the Modi government's *Sab* is more concerned with appeal to lower but more aspiring strata of the society, like the lower middle class and above, rather than just the poor.[62] Modi government's supporters are those who are dissatisfied with the UPA government's "politics of rights," which targets the poor and vulnerable. This observation can be corroborated by the following assertion by Rajiv Kumar, former

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[60] Nevertheless, in June 2022, the Modi government also announced the *Agnipath* program, a soldiers recruitment program for four-year term and the hiring of one million federal civil servants in the next 18 months (*IE,* June 15–16, 2022). This is an abrupt announcement, as usual, but clearly a move keeping the next parliamentary elections in early 2024 in mind. It may also have been influenced by the fact that the Aam Admi Party (AAP) government, which won the March 2022 Punjab Assembly elections with a single majority, announced the recruit for 25,000 civil servants immediately after its inauguration (*IE*, March 20, 2022). Punjab is one of the major supplying states of Indian army soldiers.

[61] Although exam stress is not the only major cause, the National Crimes Research Bureau's report shows the students suicides increased from 8,934 (4,697 for male and 4,247 for female) in 2015 to 12,526 (6,967 for male and 5,559 for female) in 2020, 40 per cent rise within five years. (https://ncrb.gov.in/sites/default/files/adsi_reports_previous_year/table-2.6.pdf).

[62] This situation does not seem to differ much from the relationship in which "*All* Lives Matter" is put forward to neutralize "Black Lives Matter."

vice chair of NITI Aayog (2017-2022), which certainly echoes the voice of the prime minister.

> Economic aspirations of India's youth will not be met by focusing only on poverty reduction....The neo-middle class that Modi identifies as his key support base, aspires for India to be a prosperous economy in their lifetime. It will motivate 65 per cent of India's population that is at present below 35 years of age, if they believed that India could be one of the three largest economies in the world before their retirement. That would be 30 years from now in 2046, which also happens to be the centenary of our independence....Modi's task is to convince the youth that such economic vision is feasible and attainable.[63]

As Rajiv Kumar points out, poverty reduction cannot be the main concern of the social strata that the regime focuses on. On the contrary, the "retrogressive" politics of making poverty reduction the main agenda of the administration must itself be rejected. It is based on these sentiments that the UPA government has been lambasted as "povertarian," a neologism for the "poverty supremacist." Importantly, "povertarian" is net slang contemptuous of the poor and weak, a rejection of the "politics of rights." "Sickular" and "povertarian" make a pair of invective slangs against the secular and welfarist politics and provided a socio-ideological basis for the backlash of the "new middle class" against the "politics of rights," the very backlash which gave boost to the Modi "wave" in 2014.

Povertarian ridicule includes criticism of the "political appropriation of poverty," whereby pre-2014 politics is alleged to have not only failed to solve the problem of poverty, but have also drawn political benefit from the persistence of poverty. The same kind of composition as the "sickular" critique of the political use of minorities as a vote bank is at play here. Such criticism leads to a highly convenient logic of indemnity, which holds that the responsibility for poverty lies not with "us" (BJP) but with pre-2014 politics, largely the Congress politics since Independence. In placing the blame for persistent

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[63] Kumar (2016: 189).

poverty solely on pre-2014 politics, this is in fact nothing less than "reverse povertarianism."

The Modi-led government has created a system of discharging governing responsibility by extending the logic of this kind of self-indemnity not only to poverty issues but also to all basic welfare backwardness, including education, health, and sanitation. The fact that the Congress party has been deprived of power at the federal and many of the states' level since 2014, yet the BJP keeps crying out for "Congress-mukta" (free from the Congress) rule is because the phrase is politically convenient for them.

However, this rather complacent argument may not stand forever. Even after two or three terms in power, will it still be able to hold other parties responsible for poverty and the unsatisfactory state of welfare? Also, while the BJP can fight with an advantage while dealing with the established forces like the Congress party, advantage will rather shift to the other party when it comes up against an emerging force like the Aam Admi Party (AAP). In this light, the policy competition between the BJP and the AAP will have to be carefully watched.[64]

4. *How the competition state provides welfare measures*

Thus, *Sab ka Vikas* can be said to be a slogan invented to water down and relativize pro-poor measures. However, the story is a bit more complicated, as *Sab* discourse has its inner dilemma. Despite the emphasis on self-help and dilution of pro-poor measures, Indian competition state cannot totally disengage itself from welfarist measures, as "*sab*" cannot preclude the poor and vulnerable. "*Sab*" must face this inner dilemma. There are several ways to do so.

Baggage from the Past

One way out is to stick to the "baggage from the past" argument that the poverty problem is historical baggage left unresolved by previous governments, and that there is no choice but to take it over. Modi made this argument when he took over the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) project during the first budget session after he came to power.

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[64] Amit Shah is reported to have told the Gujarat BJP leaders that AAP was the only Opposition party gaining momentum all over the country as it has no baggage from the past to answer for (*IE*, Oct. 23, 2022).

A point was made that government has or is likely to discontinue MNREGA [sic] program. The leaders of opposition parties may have some doubts about my capabilities but they would agree that I have robust political sense. My political understanding says that MNREGA should never be discontinued because this very program MNREGA is the live example of your utter failures. After 60 years of country's independence, the people have been put on work for digging only. My party will launch a huge campaign to tell the people and the world that this program is the direct result of your failures and misgovernance.[65]

However, the "baggage from the past" argument is never a positive policy principle. We cannot assume that all social policies including a wide variety of anti-poverty measures are remedies against the "baggage from the past." Positive policy implications are needed. This raises the question of how to integrate the competition state with pro-poor measures in a consistent manner. Our preliminary diagnosis is that the Modi government may be trying to overcome this challenge in three directions.

The first is to incorporate social policy within the self-help-oriented framework already mentioned. The second is a shift in discourse from entitlements to delivery. The emphasis is now on fostering the delivery process of existing programs, making extensive use of digitalization in public administration. The third is a shift in focus of social policy from poverty to vulnerability and correspondingly from social assistance to insurance guarantee as a policy instrument.

Self-help, empowerment and "dignity"

Generally speaking, the welfarist state is a mechanism to realize social assistance through fiscal redistribution, whereas market-friendly "workfare" is claimed as a mechanism to support self-help rather than redistribution. Public assistance in this sense, if any, is positioned solely as a call to help oneself, rather than as a right to be guaranteed.

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[65] "Motion of thanks on the presidential Address," Lok Sabha, Synopsis of Debates, Friday, February 27, 2015 (164.100.47.132/synop/16/IV/sup+synopsis-27-02-2015.pdf., accessed June 22, 2015).

It is implemented at the discretion of the government, simply because where there is no right, there is no obligation on the part of the government.

That the Modi government's basic position on social policy is also of this kind is amply illustrated by the messages that have emanated from within the government.

For example, there are claims by Rajiv Kumar, to whom we have already referred. According to him, the goal of Modi's economic policy is not "*Ma-baap Sarkar*" but a genuine "developmental state" on the model of East Asia.[66] "*Ma-baap Sarkar*," or "government of the parents," means a welfare state with emphasis on fiscal benefits. Ever since the introduction of the liberalization policy in 1991, in addition to the "*Ma-baap Sarkar*," the state has often been caricatured as a "*Langarkhana*" (free-feeding station) or a "*Dharmashala*" (free accommodation).[67] These arguments are presumed as if the state's welfare function has been well (or even over) exercised. The arguments in fact ignore the endemically low level of public health and education provisions in India.

Also very recently, Amit Shah (Home Minister) made the following statement:

> There is a difference in the way we work: we have given gas connections, power connections and it's up to them to pay their bills. toilets for them but they have to maintain them. When you take populist measures, you promise to pay electricity bills, free gas, etc. What we did was to provide help to upgrade. This triggers aspirations too.[68]

In contrast to Kumar's argument, Shah's appears to acknowledge the importance of welfare policy to a certain extent by introducing the term "empowerment." However, even in his case, the aim of social policy is to motivate people to maintain and improve their lives by their own means. Here, self-help and empowerment at the *individual* level are key to improving livelihoods.

Empowerment also advocates improving the market responsiveness of individuals, so the expansion of public infrastructure such as education and healthcare is given low priority. One commentator has pointed out that the BJP tends to provide a wide range of

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[66] Kumar (2016: 33).
[67] *Langarkhna* and *Dharmashala* both have religious charity backgrounds.
[68] *IE*, March 1, 2022.

simple (individual) benefits, but tends to leave behind more complex and intricate policies such as education, healthcare and employment.[69]

Finally, let us take Prime Minister Modi's own remarks, which underlines the empowerment argument in a unique context.

> The poor who had to go outdoors for latrines get not only latrines but also their Dignity. The poor who could not even dare to go inside the bank will get their Dignity increased by opening a Jan Dhan Account; the poor who never thought of a Debit Card will get a Rupay Card and their Dignity will be increased. Dignity of the poor, who had to rely on brokerage for gas connections, is enhanced when the Ujjawala Connection [a project to provide domestic gas cylinder] is achieved without any effort. Their Dignity will be enhanced if women who had no ownership rights get a house in their name through the government's Awas Yojna [housing supply project].[70]

The word "dignity" is used extensively here to describe the utility of various social projects. It can be the acquisition of social recognition or some kind of status symbol,[71] psychological empowerment rather than real empowerment (not that it is meaningless). It may even be an illusion of upliftment.[72] It is difficult to say what Modi means by "dignity," which allows for such a multifaceted interpretation, yet it is possible to say *what "dignity" does not mean*. Modi, who dislikes rights discourse, cannot possibly mean

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[69] Pugalia (2022). For a similar comment, see Aiyar (2019: 84) and Aiyar and Sircar (2020: 218). In contrast, according to Pugalia, Delhi's Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) government touts the improvement of public education and the success of community healthcare (Mohalla Clinic).

[70] Original text is in Hindi. Dignity is written in English. Other English words are in Devanagari script. Source: the Modi speech at the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) 28th anniversary program (October 11, 2021, PM Speech on NHRC Foundation Day 2021.pdf).

[71] At a time when banking transactions were restricted to the upper strata and a small section of the salaried population, carrying a bank cash card was also proof of a certain socioeconomic status with prestige. It can be recalled that an audacious politician once tried to use debit cards as voter identification card at the polling station.

[72] The following statement in Modi's radio address is also in the same vein: "When there is cash in the hand, or in the pocket or at home, one is tempted to indulge in wasteful expenditure. There is now an air of prudence. The money can be used productively in the days to come. Not just this, when a poor person sees a RuPay Card, in his pocket, he finds himself to be equal to the privileged - that if they have a credit card in their pockets, he feels a sense of dignity." In Prime Minister's Radio Address, Mann ki Baat, August 27, 2017 (https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/mann-ki-baat/).

"an autonomous sense of entitlement." In short, it does not mean people's consciousness for right.[73] So long as the provision of benefit is not the rights-based action on the part of the government, it is left to its discretion and the administration is relieved from the regular and mandatory scrutiny which only right entails.

Such acts of "benefit-giving" from above, without the rights of the people and the accountability of the administration, are founded on the patriarchal relationship of "patronage and reverence." It is precisely this relationship that Max Weber refers to as the Pietät (= filial piety) of the subjects toward the ruler in patriarchal dominance.[74]

This situation is aptly described by Yamini Aiyar, a leading Indian social policy analyst. She writes;

> It positions welfare as empowerment, but strips it from the language of rights, and enforces it through centralized delivery mechanisms. In this formulation, the citizen is cast as a recipient, *a beneficiary of welfare beholden to the benevolence of a charitable state rather than a citizen actively claiming rights from the state.*[75] (emphasis added)

Modi's preference for "dignity" is a paraphrase of this sentiment of benevolence (*beholden*) to the charitable State. We have already mentioned that the Modi government has added "*Sab ka Vishwas*" (Everyone's Trust) to his "*Sab ka*" slogans since the 2019 parliamentary elections. The patriarchal dominance of patronage and reverence is here rephrased by the word "trust."[76] It also reminds us of Müller's "mass clientelism" as one of the three techniques of the populist rule in much the same context.[77]

There is another reason Modi likes "dignity." The RSS-sympathetic scholar Badri Narayan has described the RSS's inclusion of the Dalits, Backward Classes (OBCs) as

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[73] The Aadhaar was once advertised as "Aadhaar is your right (Adhikaar)," but the website of the Unique Identity Authority of India (UIDAI), the agency in charge of the Aadhaar, does not have such a phrase as of May 31, 2022. On Aadhaar see note 76 below.

[74] See, e.g., Weber's Pietät mentioned in note 20 (Weber 1960: 143-8).

[75] Aiyar (2022).

[76] Narayan (2022). "Winning elections because there is trust" is nothing but tautology. Sircar (2020) depicts voters' personal support to Modi as "the politics of *vishwas*" as contrasted to "the politics of *vikas*" which counts upon performance and accountability. Sircar closes his article with an unanswered question what the politics of *vishwas* means for the state of Indian politics and Indian democracy (op. cit.: 191), but it seems the answer is quite obvious.

[77] Müller (2017: 44-49). Three techniques he formulated are state colonization, mass clientelism and discriminatory legalism.

"providing dignity in the Hindutva framework."[78] Narayan's argument well captures social aspect of "dignity" in Modi's welfarist politics.

To conclude, Modi's "dignity" does not refer to an independent sense of rights, but to a sense of reverence from below for patronage and recognition from above. Benevolence makes every benefit as if a gift by the prime minister Modi.[79] At the same time, the word "dignity" suggests a policy outreach to the lower-caste people. Furthermore, the cultivation of a sense of reverence through social policy is undoubtedly inextricably linked to the indoctrination and mobilization paradigm as discussed in the earlier sections. To quote Yamini Aiyar again, "Welfare programs—strategically deployed—are important instruments through which Modi has secured moral legitimacy and voter trust. In this sense, Modi's welfare politics is linked to the BJP's Hindu-nationalist (or Hindutva) hegemonic project."[80]

One may object that "prying" into dignity, as attempted here, does not in any way negate the significance or effectiveness of the welfarist policies of the Modi government. However, the significance and effectiveness of a policy can only be proven through fundamental scrutiny of the administration and verification of the policy based on facts. Unfortunately, under the Modi-led government, the BJP's electoral victories in a series of parliamentary and state assembly elections, rather than such verification, have continued to get stamped with the seal of "VERIFIED."

Digitalization and its "utility"

The second feature of the Modi government's social policy, including pro-poor policy, is the shift in emphasis from "rights to delivery." The importance of delivery in the implementation of social policy was clearly recognized from the UPA-II period, when the personal identification number (UID) system, the so-called Aadhaar (basis) number system, was introduced.[81] The digitalization of public administration and the introduction

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[78] Narayan (2022).

[79] Aiyar (2019), Deshpande, Tillin and Kailash (2019) and Aiyar and Sircar (2020) emphasize this factor to discuss on the exclusive patronage by Modi, and the decline of regional parties .

[80] Aiyar (2019: 79).

[81] Aadhaar is a 12-digit personal identification number for all residents of India, issued by the Unique Identity Agency of India (UIDAI). In addition to name, age, and other personal details, ten fingerprints, irises of both eyes and a photograph are required. It does not necessarily prove citizenship (see What is Aadhaar - Unique Identification Authority of India | government of India

of Aadhaar as its core element was seen as a panacea for the identification of beneficiaries and targeted as well as efficient execution of social policy.

The BJP, which did not appear to be very proactive when it was in opposition, was rather more enthusiastic in promoting Aadhaar once it came to power. Perhaps the Modi-led government, in promoting the digitalization of administration, realized the benefit of the system in implementing fiscal and monetary policy and its political efficacy in strengthening the powers of the central government.

Since its introduction by UPA-II, the Aadhaar system has been implemented without any legal basis. In the early days of its introduction, the negative aspects of this type of personal authentication system, including data leakage and breach of privacy, were not considered at all. However, due to the rapid digitalization of throughout the world, especially in China, concern with the "surveillance society" associated with digitalization has now become a matter of common concern in standard research literature.[82] Aadhaar has also gone beyond its original welfarist objectives and is now being used not only for a wide range of economic activities such as taxation and business transactions, but also for identification of voters (although linking Aadhaar with voters list is at planning stage).

Here we would like to draw attention to a unique context where the utility of digitalization is discussed in India. It is related to the decentralized nature of the Indian economy with the prevalence of so-called "unorganized sector."

The Unorganised Workers Social Security Act 2008 defines "unorganised sector" as an enterprise owned by an individual or self-employed worker that employs 10 or fewer workers and sells goods or provides services (Section 2 (l) of the Act). In a broader sense, the "unorganised sector" also includes the self-employed economy both in the agricultural and non-agricultural sectors.

Some argue that digitalization converts this vast swath of the labor force in the unorganized sector into the organized sector. In a radio address a month after the announcement of the demonetization, Modi encouraged the introduction of cashless payment, saying,

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(uidai.gov.in) for more information).

[82] For digital surveillance, see Mehra (2020) and Ito (2020). Ito is a specialist on Chinese economy. As regards Aadhaar system, see Khera (2019), especially chapters by R. Khera (pp. 72–85) and M. S. Sriram (pp. 187–202).

These people in the unorganized sector are paid only Rs 80 on a wage of Rs 100 because their wages are paid in cash. They also don't get insurance or proper facilities in the health sector. Cashless payments have now been introduced and wages are transferred directly to the bank. In a way, the unorganised sector is being converted into the organised sector and exploitation (*shoshan*) is coming to an end.[83]

Here Modi finds the utility of digitalization in two ways. The first utility is, as noted above, that the promotion of digital payments automatically transforms employment relations from the decentralized and unorganized state into the integrated and organized one. This is a defective argument because the unorganized sector is characterized not only by the small scale and decentralized nature of employment, but also by the lack of social security (as Modi himself contends). In so far as the digitalization per se does not bring about social security, it never automatically converts the unorganized sector into the organized sector.[84]

The second aspect mentioned by Modi is the elimination of "exploitation" through digitalization. According to Modi's statement above, two factors seem to be involved in the "exploitation." One is cash payments, and another is the existence of intermediaries. His argument runs in such a way that the payment of wages, for example, into bank accounts eliminates cash payments and intermediaries, so that exploitation itself ends.

However, apart from the fact that the original aim of the November 2016 demonetization was not to digitalize payments but to eradicate black money, alleged "exploitation" is nothing more than "cheating," and it would be tantamount to saying that exploitation would disappear if wages were paid as contracted. And again, if exploitation is born from the cash payment for wages, countries such as China, with its advanced cashless payment system, would be an ideal socialist country with no exploitation.

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[83] Statement by Prime Minister Modi in his radio lecture Mann ki Baat (December 25, 2016, https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/mann-ki-baat/).

[84] In the most recent case, against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, registering projects for workers in the unorganized sector, especially migrant workers (E-Shram), which started at the end of 2021 under the Ministry of Labour and Employment, is a good touchstone for this issue. Approximately 280 million workers ave been registered as of June 2022. But there is so far no prospect of any linkage with the social security system (*IE*, June 3, 2022).

This rhetoric is premised on the second factor, that is the existence of intermediaries (either individuals or groups) between the beneficiaries of public services and the government. Digitalization is said to have the effect of eliminating intermediaries who defraud and misappropriate the public funds. Intermediaries are also managers of voting bank politics at the grassroots. Digitalization is supposed to have the effect of eliminating the politics of intermediaries.[85]

The BJP talks as if "vote-bank politics" is the exclusive domain of the opposition parties, yet the BJP itself is not immune to vote-bank politics. In reality, the BJP's vote-collecting machinery set up at each polling station is deeply involved in the delivery of public services as political intermediary.[86] In collecting votes, the BJP places maximum emphasis on the presence of Prime Minister Modi as a source of patronage. This makes local intermediaries invisible, and creates rather a fictious structure in which the prime minister maintains direct connection with the beneficiaries.[87]

In this respect, we must underline the fact that digitalization leads to centralization of public service delivery.[88] As Aiyar and Sircar observe, digitalization technology itself enables centralization of governance. "Not only did technology allow the national government to cut through layers of state governments and forge a direct connect with citizens, it also allowed the national government to directly monitor implementation on the ground with no intervention from the states.[89]"

The digitalization of public services in this way plays an important part in fostering the centralization of public service provision and promote the "mass clientelism" by Modi.

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[85] Pugalia (2022).

[86] Narayan (2022). The most influential intermediaries are none other than the RSS and its affiliated organizations themselves. BJP's grass-root campaigning during 2019 national elections is minutely studied in Jaffrelot and Verniers (2020: 161-4).

[87] See Sircar (2021). Recently, "*labharthi*," which means "one who wishes to benefit," has been coined as a new political jargon that expresses Modi's (mainly rural) constituency (Mehta, Nalin 2022: 62-80).

[88] Aiyar (2019: 84-6).

[89] Aiyar and Sircar (2020: 218).

From poverty to vulnerability—a shifting emphasis

The third feature of the Modi government's social policy is the shift in emphasis from poverty to vulnerability. This shift from poverty to vulnerability has broader implication. It is also a shift in emphasis from direct monetary assistance to the insurance system. And again, this shift envisions a greater role for private sector participation and collaboration in the field of social welfare.

The World Bank researchers have defined the "vulnerable" population as the group between the "poverty line" defined by national governments and a level twice the poverty line, as distinguished from the "poor" population.[90] There is a broad layer of people who may not be in absolute poverty, yet whose livelihoods are as vulnerable due to low income, insecure employment, and poor health and diseases.

The attention to "vulnerable groups" in social policy has been earlier paid by the UPA government. The Nachiket Mor Commission Report on deepening financial inclusion, appointed by the RBI governor, also identified the expansion of insurance programs for vulnerable groups as one of its policy objectives, and addressed various risks such as commodity price fluctuations, human factors such as aging, disability and death, livestock mortality, rainfall fluctuations, and property damage.[91]

Insurance and pension system mediated by financial activities has been poorly organized, compared to direct social (monetary) assistance supported by public finance, and has been limited to a small section of the organized sector. The unorganized sector, which constitutes more than 90% of the vulnerable population, has been left out of its scope. The legal mandate of social security for unorganized sector workers under the "politics of rights" of the UPA (I) government was welcome in this regard (e.g., Unorganized Workers Social Security Act 2008).

Under the Modi government, although social assistance benefit has been conservatively maintained,[92] many of the new social policy projects introduced for the unorganized sector took the form of insurance programs.

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[90] Bhattacharya (2019).

[91] Reserve Bank of India (2014).

[92] We offer a few examples of social assistance program which has received poor financial support by the Modi government: MGNREGA wages, wages of care workers (mostly women) such as Anganwadi (Integrated Child Development Service) and ASHA (National Rural Health Mission),

The newly introduced or remodeled major insurance programs include four life and accident insurance programs under the Financial Services Department of the Ministry of Finance,[93] crop insurance (PMFBY) under the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare, and PMJAY (Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojna), medical insurance under the National Health Authority (NHA), which subsidizes hospitalization and treatment.

Of these, the insurance projects under the Financial Services Department of the Ministry of Finance can be seen as a means of "financial inclusion, targeting not only the population below the poverty line, but also the wide swath of the lower-class population. The Ministry of Finance has positioned these insurance projects as "from Jan Dhan (people's wealth) to Jan Suraksha (people's security).

The Modi-led government offers a diverse mix of these new and old insurance products through the state sector and private insurance institutions.[94] Unlike public supported financial (monetary) assistance, public insurance programs operate in the form of a public–private partnership (PPP) involving banking and insurance sectors. The shift in emphasis from public assistance to insurance is expected to stimulate financial market.

While the emphasis on insurance programs is a new aspect of social policy, covering a broad swath of the lower strata of society, including the poor, it also brings with it several weaknesses as a social policy. Let us briefly discuss the case of PMJAY.

According to an interview with the CEO of the National Health Agency (NHA), which has jurisdiction over PMJAY, as of early April 2019, all 1.8 million hospitalization cases covered by the program in the past six months were in private hospitals.[95] The

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who are responsible for feeding, nutritional guidance, and health and hygiene in local communities. Old age pensions are included in this category. It may also have something to do with the fact that these projects were all initiated before 2014. The complicated issue of union-state financial relations is involved, which we do not discuss on here.

[93] For a brief profile of these programs see the website of the Department of Financial Services, Ministry of Finance (https://financialservices.gov.in/). For an overall picture of the government insurance business, see Insurance Regulation and Development Authority of India (IRDAI) (2021: 66–7).

[94] Insurance Regulation and Development Authority of India (2021: 8, 17), the market share of state-owned insurance companies is 64.14% for life insurance (Life Insurance Corporation is the sole public enterprise in this field) and 36.15% for general and medical insurance (four public companies in these fields).

[95] https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/markets/expert-view/ayushman-bharat-50-of-empanelled-hospitals-are-from-private-sector-says-ceo/printarticle/68703794.cms (Accessed June 25, 2019).

program was launched in September 2018, which means that most of the hospitalization cases at this point were in private healthcare facilities.

In addition, the answer of the Minister of State for Health and Family Welfare to a question in the parliament indicates that the top five hospital admissions cases are dominated, in descending order, by cardiac catheterization, renal dialysis, caesarean section, cataract surgery and coronary artery bypass surgery, although their share in the total cases is not given.[96] The Minister of State further pointed out that the poor and economically vulnerable groups were visiting private healthcare facilities at their own expense, even for inpatient treatment that is available at public healthcare facilities, and PMJAY will be a factor in fostering the privatization of healthcare. Given the existence of health service disparities (urban/rural, sex, and class), privatization in medical service could lead to further disparities.

Benefit of the shift in welfarist policy we have observed must be closely examined if it has effectively reduced persistent disparity in health and education services across the region, in both sex and class. Need for public scrutiny of welfarist policy has become all the more urgent in view of the widespread disaster brought about by the COVID-19 crisis during 2020–21.

5. *The COVID-19 crisis—problems of poverty and accountability*

While it is true that the proportion of the population below the poverty line decreased during the UPA government under high economic growth, the actual poverty situation under the subsequent Modi government cannot be determined definitively, as statistical continuity was lost after the National Sample Survey in 2011–12. Based on data from the 2015 National Family Health Survey, NITI Aayog's "composite poverty" indicator comprising health, nutrition, education, and living standards estimated the poor population at 25%, but there is no continuity between this figure and previous estimates based on consumption expenditure. The NSS survey for the year 2017–18 has been withheld by the government. It is speculated that the survey results are not encouraging

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[96] Lok Sabha Unstarred Question No. 5633 on July 26, 2019 (retrieved from the Lok Sabha website). Question was asked by Mala Roy, All India Trinamul Congress MP from West Bengal.

for the government.[97] Given factors such as the demonetization, introduction of the GST and the subsequent COVID-19 pandemic and apparent slowdown in growth, the poverty situation is unlikely to improve, even if it did not worsen.

Since then, several estimates of poverty have been published by domestic and foreign research institutions, yet there are significant discrepancies among them: just as we found in the case of COVID death numbers, there is a need to conduct reliable and comparable research once again. For example, estimates by the Adam Premji University research institute published in May 2021 showed that the COVID-19 disaster had reduced 230 million people to a standard of living below the poverty line.[98] Estimates by Oxfam published the following year, in early 2022, estimated that a minimum of 46 million people and up to 150–60 million people fell below the poverty line during the epidemic.[99] On the other hand, estimates by World Bank and IMF officials published in April 2022 highlight a marked decline in poverty ratios. The former estimate maintains a diminishing trend, with the proportion of "extreme poor" with PPP per capita incomes below \$1.90 falling to 10.2% in 2019, down from 12.3% in 2011.[100] This estimate does not reflect the impact of the pandemic, but according to the latter estimate, taking into account the benefits of household subsidies such as free food aid (named PM's Welfare Scheme for the Poor, PMGKY) implemented under the epidemics, the proportion of "extremely poor" will be only 0.86% in 2020, meaning that the poverty problem has almost been eliminated.[101]

As these contradicting arguments show, the lack of reliable official statistics on the poverty situation is a major obstacle to understanding the real situation[102]. Modi

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[97] *Business Standard*, November 15, 16, and 18, 2019. See also Himanshu (2022).

[98] Center for Sustainable Employment, Adam Premji University (2021: 112-6, SWI2021_August_WEB.pdf (azimpremjiuniversity.edu.in)) accessed on Feb. 12, 2022). This report is likely to produce a higher "number of the poor" than other reports as the minimum wage for central government civil servants is referred to as the "poverty line."

[99] Abhirr (2022).

[100] https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/37273, accessed April 24, 2022.

[101] Pandemic, Poverty, and Inequality: Evidence from India (imf.org), accessed on April 24, 2022. Somewhat ironically, one of the authors of this report was a harsh critic of free food assistance and rural employment guarantee programs during the UPA coalition (https://www.downtoearth.org.in/blog/governance/india-s-poverty-there-is-no-end-to-surjit-bhalla-s-imagination-82268).

[102] Kumar et al. (2022) states that a continuous and comprehensive survey on the actual state of poverty will have to wait for the next survey by the NSO from July 2022 to June 2023 All three

government, as already noted, absolves itself of responsibility for poverty, would have neither the reason nor the need to devote its energies to measuring depth of poverty. The absence of reliable official statistics also absolves the government of accountability, which is the distinctive feature of the authoritarian system.[103] It is no exaggeration to say that trust (*Vishwas*) in the Modi government is underpinned by the lack of reliable information.

Conclusion

We shall now summarize the core of our discussion. What emerges from our argument is a picture of the Modi-led government as a "*Trimurti*" with three faces: "Hindu Supremacy," "authoritarianism," and a "competition state."

Starting with the Ayodhya incident in 1992, the Hindu Supremacy discourse has transformed from Hindu victimization to Hindu majoritarianism, leveraging its assumption of power in the 2014 parliamentary elections and pushing forward its agenda of Hinduization across the ideology, society, and state.

Hindu Supremacy in power puts the "authority" of Prime Minister Modi at the apex of governance as its greatest (or essential) political asset. Often referred to as a *Rishi* (Hindu sage), his spiritual "authority," while based seemingly on legitimacy through democratic processes, is in reality based on the supremacy of the nation (*Hindu Rashtra*) as an organic entity that transcends the individual rights and constitutional principles. The essentialist understanding of the nation as a sovereign and organic body lies at the heart of the fundamental tenets of the RSS as we decoded the texts in Upadhyaya's *Integral Humanism*. Modi's ideological umbilical cord with the RSS is too manifest to miss.

Modi has also made his "authority" a source of nurturing sense of self-sacrifice and penance among the people, and has focused on indoctrinating and mobilizing public consciousness by extolling duty over rights.

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authors are active officials in the NITI Aayog and government statistical departments.
[103] Although blame is not necessarily on the administration alone, the fact that the national census itself, the most fundamental statistics, could not be conducted in 2021 due to the COVID-19 and opposition to the Citizenship Law Amendment Act, and is shifted to 2023 or further beyond, is a serious impediment to policy formulation and verification (Paliath 2022; *IE*, June 15, 2022).

Commending duties over rights, his doctrine is also in congruence with his economic governance. While neoliberal competition and self-responsibility are emphasized, his welfarist policies, including poverty alleviation, reflect strongly authoritarian and patriarchal characteristics, in which patronage from above and a sense of benevolence are evoked rather than ensuring the fundamental rights.

Thus, in the womb (*garbha*) of the "*Trimurti*" of the Modi regime, enthroned is the trinity of "power, authority, and rights-phobia." Self-responsibility, self-help, and rights-phobia are the hallmarks of neoliberalism in today's world. In India under Modi, however, the modern ideology of neoliberalism has emerged under the garb of conservative thought in the form of classical dharma theory. We find here a sacred collusion between Indian conservative thought and neoliberalism.

At the beginning of this paper, we highlighted the importance of looking for a foothold on which to consider the future of democracy and economic growth in India. We would like to conclude by raising a few questions on how the discussion so far can be linked to India's prospects.

The first point we would like to underscore is the direction in which young people's social consciousness is heading. In the last three decades, the noteworthy progress of information technology has led to vocal public opinion mediated through net-slang in social networking spaces. In India, most typical slang terms that have emerged from this soil are "sickular," which demeans secularism, and "povertarian," which ridicules pro-poor policies as a bar to liberal economic progress and free competition. The public opinion among the youth reflected in these slangs served as groundwork for Modi's meteoric rise, which ultimately led to the majoritarian politics, and the politics of the privileged.

We do not intend to say that "politics for the weak" has ever been practiced in India to the letter and spirit. Rather, its failure has nourished a counter-rhetoric, such as "sickular" and "povertarian," that pokes fun at the "politics for the weak" as a mere political gimmick.

In the age of social networking, there grows a generation for which hate speech is a normal part of life, and some youth with mischief and antipathy toward minorities are sending out hate messages. The Modi government's rule for the past eight years has

incubated such group of youth in their late teens and twenties.[104] We must watch to see which direction the prolonging Modi rule will take the social consciousness of the youth, who are at the mercy of competition for jobs and education[105].

Our second point is the issue of authoritarianism. As we have emphasized, authoritarianism is the governance without public scrutiny. The power of the judicial branch, mass media, and other forces that act as a check on the executive power are systematically compromised. Election victories replace policy scrutiny. The supreme objective the governance is to keep winning elections to prove the prime minister's infallibility. As means to this end, social policies are politically harnessed to perpetuate the relationship of what Müller called "mass clientelism." Modi's popularity will not decline as long as he is able to make the electorate convince that not only poverty, but also all the fundamental flaws in the economy, are the "legacy" from earlier regimes and that he has nothing to blame for them. Yet such unexamined governance can never be sound in the long run. Although India's democratic institutions have changed dramatically during the last eight years, means to test government accountability have not entirely been lost. Protecting and strengthening them will, we hope, lead to resuscitating democratic governance.

However, we cannot mistake this hope for plaudits of the Indian democracy as it is practiced today. Rather an optimist assertion of the present state of the democracy in India is found in the following passage which is part of the opening address by US President Biden at the QUAD summit in Tokyo on May 23, 2022:

> Prime Minister Modi, it's wonderful to see you again in person. And I thank you for your continuing commitment to making sure democracies deliver, because that's what this is about: democracies versus autocracies. And we have to make sure we deliver.[106]

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[104] Young generations including students and college graduates are the active consumers as well producers of "the far-right YouTubers ecosystem" (Madhav and Jafri 2022).

[105] The pessimist view of India's youth may be countered by a recent successful concert of Urdu poetry under the auspice of *Jashn-e-Rekhtar*. The *New York Times* gave a detailed report on the event (Dec. 20, 2022, International edition). It was succeeded by enthusiastic reception of Shah Rukh Khan's film *Pathaan* and by clandestinely viewed BBC' documentary on Narendra Modi in early 2023 (Jain 2023).

[106] Remarks by President Biden, Prime Minister Kishida Fumio of Japan, Prime Minister

The war in Ukraine is regarded by the United States and the West (including Japan) as a part of the great power competition of "democracy versus autocracy" that engulfs the Indo-Pacific region. Basing upon this approach, Biden's eulogy totally ignores the reality of authoritarian rule in India. It invited dissenting and warning notes even from within the United States.[107] Future of democracy in contemporary world hinges not only on the domestic but also the international environment. Who is to say that India, guarded from the vigilant international eyes by the "democracy versus autocracy" dualism, will not use its quasi-big power status as a shield to foster authoritarian (autocratic) inclination at home? In that case, the QUAD framework that accepts India as a member of "democracy" will eventually become the bush warbler's nest for a cuckoo (autocracy) to lay eggs in. Eight years of Modi rule has given ample testimonies for such a dim view of the Indian democracy.

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[107] The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) **pointed out that the US** State Department had turned a blind eye by not including India in the list of "countries of particular concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act (https://thewire.in/rights/religious-freedom-uscirf-slams-omission-of-india-in-us-state-depts-particular-concern-list). The US-based Early Warning Project (EWP) identified India as a country with high risk of mass violence (https://thewire.in/rights/india-mass-killing-genocide-report). Both articles were accessed on December 5, 2022. The Editorial Board of the *New York Times* made a comment on the press freedom in India ("India's proud tradition of a free press is at risk," February 14, 2023, International edition). Also for a critical view on the official commitment to the Indian democracy among the US and the Western nations, see Sushant Singh (2023).

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