LIVING DANGEROUSLY

The heartland heralds the new communal-authoritarian model of Indian democracy

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Indian democracy and its institutional structures face an unprecedented challenge. Elections in India are no doubt marked by high levels of political participation, political activity and voter turnout. But there's more to democracy than the holding of elections at regular intervals. The greatest contemporary challenge to India's democracy comes from majoritarian nationalism that seeks to reconfigure the Indian nation as one that belongs exclusively to the Hindu majority defined by a demographic trait. The landslide victory of the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2019 reinforced the majoritarian trajectory India has embarked upon since the 2014 election. The conflation between nationalism and majoritarianism is the foundation of the new political dominance reflected in the increasing mainstreaming of Hindu nationalism in the public arena.

This project has worked through two processes – consolidation of Hindu dominance through authoritarian means and constant fear and objectifying of the other, defined in terms of religion, thus reminding people of a threat from an enemy within. This is the trope driving authoritarianism in Indian politics. More substantively, there is an attempt to redefine citizenship on the basis of religion, not civic equality that respects diversity and pluralism, and in the process transform the very meaning of democracy based on equal rights. Furthermore, the space for public deliberation and dissent has been narrowed. Politically, the suppression and criminalization of dissent, curbs on opposition, and crushing of protests pose a grave threat to democracy. This has contributed to democratic backsliding in India, noted by several international assessments, most notably, the V-Dem Institute's assessment which termed India an "electoral autocracy" (Lührmann et al. 2020). The political ecosystem has been vitiated by an erosion of public institutions which are meant to serve as checks and balances on the exercise of executive power. Although institutions have always had to negotiate with political rulers, and there have been periods in India's past when things came to a flash point, Emergency (1975–77) is an obvious example, never before have constitutional institutions had to function for political ends to this extent when there's no formal declaration of Emergency.

The two principal elements of this tectonic shift are embodied in the acceleration of authoritarian control and stepping up of communalism since the BJP came to power at the Centre in 2014. The coming together of both these elements has paved the way for the institution of a new right-wing authoritarian-communal regime. This regime has taken shape most strikingly in

states such as Uttar Pradesh – India’s weightiest state and a political springboard for the national stage. Nine of the country’s 14 prime ministers have been elected from constituencies in Uttar Pradesh. Narendra Modi, the current prime minister, is from Gujarat but chose to contest his first Lok Sabha election from the Varanasi constituency in Uttar Pradesh to underline the significance of the state and the eagerness of both the BJP and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) to signal its centrality to their strategy of establishing the dominance of Hindu nationalism. The BJP won a quarter of its 282 seats in 2014 from this state, helping it to an absolute majority in the Lok Sabha, and thus underlining the significance of the state in Indian politics.

Political developments in Uttar Pradesh fit into a more pronounced pattern of communal-authoritarian politics since the BJP was re-elected with a bigger majority in the 2019 general elections. Political shifts in this state are especially significant for what Pratap Bhanu Mehta describes as the wider process of creating “an irrevocably majoritarian state in all dimensions” (Mehta 2021). An examination of the working of the Uttar Pradesh regime and its politics would help to understand recent events that pose a challenge to Indian democracy and why it has increasingly become a host to aggressive communalism gradually morphing into an authoritarian order.

This chapter looks at the structural aspects of this project signified in the systematic attacks on dissent and the ways in which the checks and balances laid out in the Constitution for safeguarding fundamental rights have been compromised. This is attempted by looking at the state response to protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). The government response encapsulates the problems of the communal-authoritarian model in a key state of the Union, where it has both a massive majority in the assembly and a chief minister who has demonstrated a penchant for extremism and vigilantism. By winning around 40 per cent of the popular vote in the assembly elections in 2017, the BJP mustered a huge legislative majority to go ahead with its political agenda virtually unopposed. In the rush to strengthen majoritarian consolidation, an authoritarian model of governing gained currency marked by erosion in civil and political rights and a wave of intolerance against dissenters and minorities.

Communal-authoritarian regime

The communal-authoritarian regime exercises power through majoritarian assertion, centralized control, curtailment of opposition, and suppression of individual freedom. The origins of this regime can be traced to the BJP’s decisive victory in the assembly elections in 2017 in a campaign which openly pitted Hindus against Muslims with its top leaders insinuating that the majority community had not received a fair deal under previous governments. The appointment of Ajay Mohan Bisht, generally known as Yogi Adityanath, head of the Gorakhpur temple, as chief minister was a defining moment in this process. His entire politics revolved around a militant brand of Hindutva, an ideology of Hindu supremacy and fuelling antagonism against Muslims as public enemies.

From his first days in office, the BJP interpreted its landslide victory as a popular mandate for its project to construct a Hindu state. Yogi Adityanath used the instruments of governance to prioritize Hindu interests and used the police to target minorities (Verma and Mander 2020). The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which offers pathways of citizenship to refugees aligned to religion (not limited to Uttar Pradesh), new laws regulating conversion as a way of deterring interfaith marriage, laws of cow protection, and also laws to empower vigilantes to take action on behalf of these laws are top priorities of the regime to reinforce Hindu supremacy. These are the various ways in which Hindu nationalism is inscribed in law. But not just laws. Hindu nationalism is the dominant tendency in politics and civil society in this state.

This shift is based on two long-term projects: the first cultural and the second political. This joint project set the stage for the dramatic expansion of the Hindu right. The origins of the cultural project can be traced to the promotion of Hindi which played a key role in producing a Hindi-Hindu socio-cultural construct in the politics of north India, and in particular the cultural development of Uttar Pradesh society. At the cultural level, the primacy given to Hindu identity is visible in the BJP-RSS's efforts to play up Hindu fairs, festivals, and icons, and turning these into opportunities for political mobilization. The political project was embodied in the campaign for a Ram Mandir in Ayodhya which kick-started the rise of the current identity politics around religion. The construction of a Ram temple at Ayodhya has redrawn the basic contours of state politics in favour of the BJP. Importantly, this movement laid the groundwork for a communal majority in Uttar Pradesh which, given its huge size, helps the Hindu right to establish a strong base to offset its weakness elsewhere in India. The mass support garnered by this movement entrenched Hindu nationalism in the heartland.

The ideology of Hindu nationalism has succeeded in popularizing the idea that it is the nation, as defined by Hindu identities, that matters and no other identities such as caste. The nation is defined by Hindus, mobilized around their religious identity (and frequently a common language), which leaves little room for other identities. The BJP has used this broad-based identity to co-opt backward castes and Dalits who have been keen to align themselves to the cultural world of Hindi-Hindu nationalism. The consolidation of this identity has gone beyond caste, but this consolidation relies heavily on the exclusion of Muslims to neutralize caste.

Communal politics combined with longstanding problems of bias in the criminal justice system have created a pervasive climate of impunity, where minority communities feel insecure, with no recourse when such crimes occurred. These fears have been compounded by targeted violence that takes a variety of forms, the most common being mass violence and mob lynchings. Several Muslims were lynched on allegations of eating beef or even just transporting cattle for slaughter. Most of those incidents were perpetrated by vigilante militias and were the direct result of the communal atmosphere that the Hindu right created with little scope for punishment of those who committed the crimes (Seema Chishti 2017).

Muslims in Uttar Pradesh have been marginalized and pushed out of the public sphere and from political institutions. The 2006 Sachar Committee Report had brought public attention to the backward socio-economic status of Indian Muslims, suggesting that in terms of such parameters as employment, education, and literacy, they were badly off, if not worse off, than the historically oppressed Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Most available official data and research suggests that there has been no substantive improvement in the condition of the Muslim poor (every third Muslim is multi-dimensionally poor, according to a 2018 UNDP report) and nowhere is this truer than in Uttar Pradesh (Friese 2018).

The politics of polarization has reduced Muslim electoral representation to an extremely low level in the state assembly. Christophe Jaffrelot points out, "in general, when the BJP conquers a new state that was ruled by a regional party, the number of Muslim MLAs drops" (Jaffrelot 2019). This was dramatically demonstrated when the proportion of Muslim MLAs in Uttar Pradesh dropped from 17 per cent to 6 per cent in the 2017 assembly elections. The BJP didn't field a single Muslim candidate in Uttar Pradesh even though Muslims constitute one-fifth of the population of the state. The basic idea is to push them out of the system, first by rendering them irrelevant electorally, and then marginalizing them in the public sphere through their electoral inconsequentiality. As a result, the BJP says it has ended the veto that Muslims had over a number of issues in Indian politics. This resonated with the Hindu base of the party which believed that Congress pandered to minority communities for electoral gains and that BJP was rectifying this overkill (Daniyal 2017).

But the Uttar Pradesh regime is not only communal; it is also authoritarian in its attempts to exercise pervasive control. This regime brooks no dissent or protest. It targets anyone and everyone who dares to question the government, and this is not restricted to political Opposition alone. Public protests have been regularly stifled and a protest provides grounds for arrest and locking up protesters. The police can be sent anywhere to serve notice on citizens to stop them from participating in protests and journalists to stop them from covering them. More importantly, police have been given a free hand to detain and arrest people on any issue. On the whole, the politics of the BJP is both authoritarian and communal which tends to divide society by unleashing passions that relegate minorities to second class status. Communalism and authoritarianism are two sides of the same coin – the government was fomenting both processes (Mehta 2019). For this it creates the quintessential other, which communal politics continually needs to stoke hate and fear. Its aim is to corner minority groups by a constant focus on issues such as cow-protection, interfaith marriage, religious conversion, reconversion, and, most importantly, the CAA.

Citizenship Amendment Act

This brings us to the CAA and the public protests against it, the focal point of this chapter. In December 2019, Parliament adopted the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which grants special access to Indian citizenship to non-Muslim immigrants and refugees from three neighbouring countries, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh, on grounds of religious persecution in these countries. The CAA seeks to fast track citizenship to non-Muslim minorities on grounds of religious persecution. It offers quick protection and citizenship by creating an exemption from the “illegal migrants” category for Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, and Christians from these three countries, but discriminates against refugees and immigrants who happen to be Muslim. The government claims that the legislation applies to those who were “forced or compelled to seek shelter in India due to persecution on the ground of religion”. The CAA is not, however, a stand-alone law. It is paired with a proposed National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the National Population Register (NPR). Many observers believe the national register’s purpose is to disenfranchise Muslim voters by effectively classifying them as illegal immigrants. These suspicions gained ground as BJP leaders publicly used the CAA to assure Hindus in other parts of India that they would be protected in the citizenship verification process and conspicuously omitting Muslims from the list of protected religions.

The CAA is illogical as it singles out one particular religion for exclusionary treatment. The assumption that Muslims cannot be persecuted in Muslim-majority countries and where the state religion is Islam is unconvincing. This assumption is belied by the ill-treatment of Hazaras Shias in Afghanistan and Ahmadiyas in Pakistan. This narrative would be diluted if it is shown that Muslims also face persecution in Muslim majority countries. There can be only one reason why a government would exclude ‘persecuted Hindu’ such as the Tamils of Sri Lanka from the list. It is because their oppressors are not officially Muslim or official representatives of Islam. Clearly, the idea is not simply to help persecuted minorities, but to demonize and isolate one group. Their exclusion furthers a political narrative that suits the right-wing ideology – that Muslims persecute non-Muslims. This narrative will be diluted if it were shown that Muslims also face persecution in Muslim-majority countries. This leaves no room for doubt that the CAA advances the government’s political agenda, which is to transform secular India into a majoritarian Hindu India. The CAA, in addition to making the naturalization of Muslim migrants from the neighbouring countries difficult, would, at an ideological level, establish the notion of India as a Hindu Homeland to which the BJP is doctrinally committed. The CAA

signalled a move towards the assertion of Hindu supremacy vis-à-vis people of other faiths, especially Muslims.

The attempt to create a stratified citizenship provoked a massive opposition, by far the biggest since Independence. It was the most sustained popular protest since the BJP came to power in May 2014. Since then, no action of the regime had provoked this scale of opposition. The ground of protest is clear: India cannot be a Republic founded on discrimination and a pervasive sense of fear. It cannot exclude or target anyone simply on the basis of their religious identity. Many people feared that the government could force citizenship reviews on all Indians and that Hindus without proper papers would be allowed to stay in India under the CAA while Muslims without proper papers would be asked to leave. Government denied this, affirming that they were merely seeking to address illegal migration and help persecuted minorities from neighbouring countries. Failing to convince many people, the government resorted to attempts to curb these demonstrations through widespread internet shutdowns, arbitrary arrests and bans on assemblies. In states like Uttar Pradesh the government responded with brute force.

Vilifying protests

The BJP government at the Centre launched a countrywide campaign to defend the CAA and to generate public support for it. The Uttar Pradesh government did nothing of the kind; it did not bother to explain the merits of the CAA and disabuse people of their apprehensions regarding its implications for them. Far from responding to legitimate concerns regarding the discriminatory aspects of the CAA, the state government went about vilifying and punishing those who criticized the new law. Several BJP leaders resorted to strange language to describe those who were protesting against the CAA. The deputy chief minister, Keshav Prasad Maurya, claimed that “Those who are opposing the Citizenship (Amendment) Act are mentally affected. Such people should get medical treatment” (The New Indian Express 2020). Another BJP leader, Raghuraj Singh, said that people raising slogans against Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Uttar Pradesh chief minister Yogi Adityanath “will be buried alive” (Outlook India 2020).

Citizenship protests and regime response

Major protests broke out in Uttar Pradesh. In fact this state was the epicentre of protests against the changes in the citizenship regime. Protests against the CAA were held at 102 places across the state on 19 December (The Hindu 2019). The biggest demonstrations took place on the day of the all-India strike on 19 December called by various political parties and social organizations in the country under the common banner titled Hum Bharat Ke Log (We the People of India): National Action Against Citizenship Amendment (Clarionindia.net 2019). Protests occurred in Firozabad, Bhadohi, Bahraich, Farrukhabad, Gorakhpur, Sambhal, Rampur, Moradabad, Meerut, Varanasi, Kanpur, Bijnor, Hathras, Saharanpur, Bulandshahr, Mahoba, Hamirpur, Lucknow, Allahabad, and Agra among others.

The protests were organized by a mix of civil society, local community and youth groups, and often just spontaneously to express opposition to the CAA. Many protest marches planned merely to hand over a memorandum to the local authorities but even this was frowned upon as the government was averse to any opposition to the CAA. It refused to allow any opportunity for people to express their disagreement with the Act. This was confirmed by a fact-finding report, which observed that “The police systematically attempted to prevent protests, then, when protests went ahead anyway, they used disproportionate and violent means to subdue protesting citizens, including the suspension of emergency medical and legal services. In order

to perpetuate the atmosphere of fear, with a longer view of breaking the economic spine of the Muslim community, the police destroyed and looted private residences” (Karwan-e-Mohabbat 2020a).

From the beginning the government adopted a confrontational approach using strong arm tactics to curb and restrict protest. Public protests were harshly dealt with by selectively using the law-enforcement machinery to prevent people from protesting (Citizens Against Hate 2020), including the massive deployment of police, internet blackouts, and the imposition of curfews. Around 3,305 persons were detained by the police (Citizens Against Hate 2020). Even when there was no formal protest call, police forces were positioned in Muslim neighbourhoods to prevent people from gathering in groups making it effectively impossible for them to protest. Section 144 was enforced all over the state ahead of protests on 19 December (Citizens Against Hate 2020). Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC) of 1973 authorizes the District Magistrate to issue an order to prohibit the assembly of four or more people in an area. Section 144 is a serious restriction on the fundamental rights to expression, assembly and association and is expected to be invoked only in circumstances where concrete evidence is available of threats to public order (Yamunan 2019). It was later imposed in specific parts of cities, towns, and districts to prohibit people from gathering, especially in the western and central districts of the state which have a high concentration of Muslim population, and in the capital city of Lucknow, which also has a large population of Muslims.

The use of formidable new technologies for surveillance and control aided this process. These range from jamming the internet and cutting off mobile phone coverage, to using drones to closely monitor movement of people. Internet services were suspended in about a dozen districts. Public warnings, house arrests, and preventive detentions were then carried out against persons whom the authorities accused of coordinating protests, most often civil society notables and human rights defenders. Notices were issued to more than 3,000 people cautioning them not to participate or motivate others to participate in the protests (The Wire 2019).

Clamping down on dissent was manifest from the way the police were allowed to storm Aligarh Muslim University (AMU), a central, publicly funded university with a large number of Muslim students. State-wide restrictions against CAA protests had followed the initial protest moves by AMU students. Protest marches, sit-ins, and debates on the university grounds had regularly taken place in AMU (Khan 2020). Both students and teachers led protest marches with memoranda to authorities to withdraw the CAA (The Indian Express 2019a). There were reports of harsh police action inside the campus, including in hostels; at least six students were hospitalized with grievous injuries (Karwan-e-Mohabbat 2020b). The police reportedly used stun grenades and fired tear gas canisters into student hostels.

Police crackdown to shut down protests had the opposite effect. People, horrified and angry at the violence, poured into the streets as never before. Overall, the state witnessed the harshest crackdown, making it something akin to a ‘war-zone’. Muslims were the main victims of state brutality and maximum casualties in the protests occurred in UP (Johari and Subramanian 2019). At least 23 people were killed. Most of the dead were Muslim daily wage earners. Most of the deaths were caused by police bullets (Citizens Against Hate 2020). The police registered a total of 498 cases, took 5,558 people into custody, and arrested 1,246 people in this regard (DNA India 2019). The state government blamed the protesters for the violence while reports and videos indicate that the police attacked peaceful crowds with lathis, tear-gas, and bullets (Karwan-e-Mohabbat 2020a). These denials did not tally with accounts of local residents recorded in the various reports (Ahmad 2019). In some cases, police officers were captured on video breaking into people’s homes, roughing up the occupants, vandalizing private property, destroying private cars, two-wheelers, shops, and business establishments (Ahmad 2019).

No other state went this far in using punitive methods and encouragement of mobs to target legitimate protesters resulting in a widespread suppression of fundamental rights in the state during the anti-CAA protests (The Wire 2019). *The Indian Express* captured the adversarial character of the Uttar Pradesh regime in its editorial:

The right to assemble and protest peacefully is guaranteed by India's Constitution. That thousands of people, particularly young people, belonging to diverse faiths, regions, ethnicity and language, have chosen to contest the CAA despite the tame response from political parties is a sign of the argumentativeness of Indian democracy. However, the state government was unmindful of democratic niceties. Its tone has been confrontational; it has refused to allow any outlet for people to express their disagreement with the controversial Act.

(The Indian Express 2019b)

The excessive use of force was encouraged by the chief minister who issued threats of exacting "revenge" against protesters (Sharma 2019). Police action came after the chief minister declared his plan to take revenge himself at a public rally (The Indian Express 2019c). As police violence in Uttar Pradesh made global headlines, his office posted a series of congratulatory tweets: "Every violent protestor will cry now because there is a Yogi government in Uttar Pradesh." These tweets posted from the account of the chief minister said: "Every rioter is shocked. Every demonstrator is stunned. Everyone has been silenced after seeing Yogi Adityanath government's strict actions. Do whatever now, compensation will be taken from anyone who damages public property. Every violent protester will cry now because there is a Yogi government in Uttar Pradesh" (Deccan Chronicle 2019). Under his watch, the Uttar Pradesh police have acted as a "uniformed vigilante force" which has fired upon demonstrators with impunity, and especially during the CAA protests "behaved as if it were wearing khaki half-pants instead of uniform trousers" (Kesavan 2019).

Two days later, the chief minister said that "the cost of damage to property during the citizenship protests would be avenged" with fines collected from those responsible. People across the state were served notices demanding monetary damages for alleged acts of vandalism of public property by arbitrarily confiscating people's properties. Banners were put up at busy intersections in Lucknow displaying photographs and addresses of people who had been served recovery notices. The administration began proceedings by identifying and sealing properties of the accused (India News 2019). The action was part of the state-wide campaign to punish those allegedly responsible for violence (Hindustan Times 2020). The move to confiscate property was illegal because it is not supported by any law and results in pre-judging people without a fair trial (Bhatnagar 2019). Confiscation of property normally occurs after a criminal trial. On 9 March, the Allahabad High Court ordered the Uttar Pradesh government to remove the posters and declared the action as "without having the authority of law". The apex Court held that there was no law to support the actions of the state government. Rather than obeying the order, the government challenged it in the Supreme Court.

Many of those arrested were not even allowed legal help. Some advocates who reached out to victims were also arrested. The police excesses were a form of overreach that can only be characterized as repression (Citizens Against Hate 2020). The *kambalchor* (blanket theft) incident (18 January 2020) exemplifies this approach. Several women were protesting around Ghanta Ghar in Lucknow on a winter night in December (Business-standard.com 2020). Video footage shows the police turned up and snatched blankets and food leaving the protesters crying "police chorhai" (police is a thief). Later the police put out a tweet claiming that this *kambalchori*

was done “in a legal way” and after following “due process”(Mathur 2020). There is no “law” that permits blankets to be stolen by the police from peaceful assemblies but the police brazenly claimed due process and even reprimanded people for spreading misinformation. This incident raises serious questions regarding the conduct of the police and state administration, and the degree to which their actions contributed to the escalation in violence (India Today 2019). It also raises questions about the use of law for unlawful actions. Furthermore, it indicates the institutionalization of discrimination within the state apparatus itself (Mathur 2020). This has resulted in police colluding with and outsourcing law enforcement to vigilante groups which has serious implications for the life and security of citizens. The government response to the CAA protests is indicative of how the BJP in Uttar Pradesh has institutionalized political repression.

Apart from some rulings by the Allahabad High Court, none of the public institutions have been effective in checking the excesses of the Uttar Pradesh police and administration. Indeed, powerful sections of society ranging from legal professionals and the media to bureaucracy and state law enforcement agencies have been only too happy to agree with the government in seeing every act of democratic dissent as an anti-national conspiracy to undermine the government.

The BJP government in Uttar Pradesh was elected with a huge majority and could have dealt with the citizenship protests more humanely but it didn't because it lacks the democratic mindset to do so. The state government's response was harsh, focused on isolating and punishing protesters (Ahuja and Singh 2020). The government refused to recognize the legitimacy of the protests, leave alone talking to or assuaging the misgivings of the protesters. This state stands out because its agencies were active perpetrators of violence. No other state has used the state apparatus and state violence to such degree to serve an ideological purpose.

The ideological signal it wanted to send out to the public was clear: the state and the nation belong to the majority (Bhushan 2019). India is a Hindu country and Hindus must have supremacy over its polity and society. Muslims have been given too much power by the Constitution and by political parties, especially the Congress, which ruled India for most of the years since Independence. The CAA is an attempt to change this. It is a political project that seeks to redefine citizenship in such a way, albeit legally, that Muslims become second class citizens. The project's objective is the eventual disenfranchisement of Muslims, and the CAA and the state government's response to the citizenship protests is the clearest signal of this agenda. That this has found acceptance is an indication of the normalization of communalism at an ideological level and in political practice.

Divisive calculations and democratic backsliding

The authoritarian regime and its intolerance for dissent especially public protests have brought India's democratic standing into question. The V-Dem Institute in its 2020–21 report has faulted the performance of the Modi government on democracy and has said that India is no longer an “electoral democracy”, classifying the country as an “electoral autocracy” (Lührmann et al. 2020). Much of the decline which occurred after the BJP's victory in 2014 was due to the restrictions on civil society and free speech and the crackdown against citizenship protests and government's intimidation of critics. Many institutions that are meant to uphold the rights of citizens and society at large have been co-opted or subverted. Modern democracies rely on institutions to remain democracies. Institutions of democracy have proven to be weak. While every previous government is guilty of similar abuses, it seems that the nature and scale of recent events are qualitatively different, as evidenced by India's plummeting performance on

various democratic indices over the last few years noted above. The checks and balances of constitutional government have been weakened as the autonomy of major institutions has been seriously undermined. Institutions, which should be impartial, have been used in the service of the ruling party to stifle opposition.

Uttar Pradesh is the bastion of serious communal-authoritarian consolidation and penetration of civil and political society by the RSS which has changed the texture of civil society in that state. In consequence, Uttar Pradesh is well on its way to becoming a Hindu state. The regime's political calculations have focused on maximizing power and outweigh any consideration of how institutions should function in a democratic setup. An elected government is effective because of the moral authority it commands and the manner in which the government exercises power. Institutions provide a framework of rights and wrongs, and governments function by persuading voters that they are doing the right thing. But in Uttar Pradesh, the moral authority to do so has been eroded by leaders who continue to steamroll norms associated with democratic freedoms and political decency. The courts and most of the media that usually provide checks and balances in a democratic system have been restrained.

The full force and brutality of the authoritarian state was demonstrated in the government response to the anti-CAA protests. The official response to the citizenship protests indicates that this regime is simply incapable of tolerating any criticism or dissent. The attempts to change the storyline into one of "violent, anti-national, separatist movement" are an indication of the disregard of the democratic rights of people and follow a certain pattern of criminalizing protests. The communal axis has been used to divide society so that people cannot unite against the authoritarian state. To some extent the BJP has succeeded in consolidating a Hindu majority vote bank by co-opting lower castes into the saffron fold, based not on mobilization against the dominant castes but on the active subordination and subalternization of another population group; however, this cannot neutralize wider material and political discontents for too long. It is hard to imagine that there won't be opposition against the way this regime has functioned to consolidate Hindu power.

There cannot be a democracy without debate and dissent, and where minorities do not have equal citizenship. In India the rights and freedoms relating to the voice of dissent are currently under threat whereas the voice which is consistent with the prevailing viewpoint enjoys the protection of the state and the majority. This has serious consequences for democracy. But this can change as there's a growing reaction against authoritarian tendencies of the government and its policies and politics. The sizeable pushback from various groups and the numerous protests we have witnessed in the last few years indicate the limits of majority rule and the public resistance to redefining our democracy to make it majoritarian. Even if protests and dissent don't have an immediate electoral impact, they do open the door for a more gradual erosion of the authoritarian regime.

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