

India: The Broken Compact: Modi's India Replaces Constitutional Values With Those Of The RSS

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This is an edited excerpt from a keynote address delivered at Stanford University, on 10 October, while accepting the 2023 Shorenstein Journalism Award on behalf of The Caravan.

I know that I speak against the backdrop of the horrors unfolding in Israel and Gaza. At such a time, there is little reason to stress the importance of journalism. Our views, our knowledge, our opinions, even our sense of what is happening there, are being shaped by journalism. At times of crisis, journalism becomes a fundamental tool for understanding the world, so much so that we forget that there are other aspects to journalism as well. I think that one of the chief tasks of journalism is to warn us of the perils that lie ahead, of the tragedies that await us. And I want to invoke this task of journalism to talk about perils that have already unfolded in India but are not completely realised outside the country.

I want to begin by thanking the Shorenstein Center for the award. The names that have preceded us give us a good sense of the honour that has been bestowed upon us. I deliberately use the term "us" because I stand here as representative of an institution, The Caravan. Journalism is often seen as the work of individuals, with reporters breaking stories and columnists writing opinions and anchors holding forth, but, in the end, it is an activity sustained by institutions that are committed to certain values. Without such institutions, journalism does not survive. The Caravan is one such institution. The values that we are committed to are rigour, veracity and a commitment to examine the exercise of power by whoever possesses it.

This should be something commonplace and taken for granted in any institution that claims to do journalism. But, in India today, this is no longer the case. The number of institutions that can be said to be doing journalism is but a handful, at a time when the Indian media is thriving as it has never before in terms of infrastructure, technology and the number of employees. Every evening, at primetime, or in the opinion pages of English and Hindi newspapers, we see a reflection of hate and bigotry aimed at anyone who scrutinises the exercise of power by the Narendra Modi government. I am not talking about the south of the country here, but these media outlets are the primary source of information for a billion Indians. They have no sense of rigour and no commitment to veracity, and they certainly stay far from questioning those in power. They only amplify the government's power.

This failure of the media did not begin when Modi came to power, in 2014, but this tendency has been exacerbated and magnified since. The Indian media is largely owned by conglomerates that have a number of other business interests. In our semi-liberalised economy, the losses that tend to accrue because of government displeasure ensure that these conglomerates fall in line with what the government requires. But that is not the full story. A large part of the media is owned by people from the Baniya mercantile caste. Most of these owners are committed to the ideological project of the current government.

What we have seen in the media, therefore, is a coming together of financial interests and ideological commitment. These organisations present a façade that lays claim to journalism but actually enshrines values that serve the government. They are propaganda outlets.

This is but a reflection of the state of the country. The façade of constitutional democracy is intact. All the institutions that are supposed to sustain it are still functioning, but the values they embody are not derived from the Constitution. The values that, at least as ideals, sustained the country in which Modi came to power are not the values that are driving the country today. Those values come from elsewhere and represent a change so significant that, I would quite categorically say, the country that was India in 2014 is not the same country that exists today.

To understand how we came to this point requires us to go back almost a hundred years, to 1925, when the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh was founded. Our prime minister began his career in public life when he joined the RSS at the age of twenty. He was with the organisation for the next fourteen years, until he was deputed to work with its political wing, the Bharatiya Janata Party. To understand the values that underlie Modi's worldview, and the values that the ruling party embodies, we need to understand the RSS.

The RSS was founded by five people, chief among whom was a former Congress politician called KB Hedgewar. He broke away from the Congress because he was upset with the trajectory the freedom struggle had taken under MK Gandhi, who had brought Hindus and Muslims together in the fight against colonial rule. For Hedgewar, Muslims were "Yavana snakes"—the Sanskrit term for Greeks was used to emphasise their foreignness. He felt the need to consolidate Hindu society against this threat, rather than against colonialism.

To define the term "Hindu," Hedgewar turned to the work of VD Savarkar, who is glorified in India today, so much so that his portrait hangs in the parliament building. Savarkar had battled against colonial rule at one point of time but turned after he was jailed, writing several mercy petitions that promised undying allegiance to the empire. After his release, he remained true to his word, never uttering a word against British rule for the rest of his life. He made two notable contributions in these years: writing a book on Hindutva and mentoring an RSS member named Nathuram Godse, who went on to assassinate Gandhi.

According to Savarkar, and I am simplifying this, a Hindu is someone who considers the geography of India both their motherland—Savarkar used the term "fatherland," but the RSS preferred "motherland"—and holy land. The latter criterion is meant to exclude Muslims and Christians; people who think of Mecca or Jerusalem as the Holy Land cannot belong to this idea of Hinduness. Savarkar, an atheist, framed his definition as the basis for a cultural categorisation that extended beyond religion. He saw the Hindus as descended from a single race. These ideas of race and fatherland should be a reminder of the times I am talking about. There is a clear echo in Savarkar of the fascism then on the rise in Italy. During the 1930s, the RSS sent a delegation of senior leaders, including one of its founders, to meet Benito Mussolini.

Around this time, a young man named MS Golwalkar was emerging in the RSS. He was to become its chief ideologue, heading the organisation for over thirty years. His importance can be gauged from the fact that in a 2007 book by Modi about the 16 people who had most influenced him, the longest chapter, by far, was about Golwalkar.

Golwalkar's ideas on what constituted a Hindu nation form the bedrock of RSS thought even today. I think it is best to hear his ideas in his own words to understand the values that underlie today's India. "To keep up the purity of the Race and its culture, Germany shocked the world by her purging the country of the Semitic Races—the Jews," he writes, in a passage about the Nazis. "Race pride at

its highest has been manifested here. Germany has also shown how well-nigh impossible it is for Races and cultures, having differences going to the root, to be assimilated into one united whole, a good lesson for us in Hindustan to learn and profit by.”

Having defined the threat from the minorities, Golwalkar goes on to list the conditions under which they could exist in a Hindu nation. These “foreign races,” he writes, “must either adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and hold in reverence Hindu religion, must entertain no ideas but those of the glorification of the Hindu race and culture, i.e., of the Hindu nation and must lose their separate existence to merge in the Hindu race, or may stay in the country, wholly subordinated to the Hindu Nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment—not even citizen’s rights.”

At the time Golwalkar formulated this, the RSS was marginal to Indian politics and at odds with the freedom struggle. When the Constitution was discussed and adopted, the RSS contributed nothing to the document. It was written by people like BR Ambedkar, one of India’s foremost political leaders. A Dalit, Ambedkar had educated himself to the point where he went to Columbia University for his PhD, under John Dewey. The imprint of US constitutionalism is directly present in the Indian Constitution.

The Constitution sees India as a compact among its citizens, who have agreed to come together and form a republic with shared values that include guaranteed rights, equal treatment of all citizens and special protections for linguistic, religious or cultural minorities. It also seeks affirmative action to undo the central injustice of Indian society: the caste system that has existed for at least fifteen hundred years. This was the vision that pervaded India—imperfectly, often espoused hypocritically, yet underlying its institutions. This was the Constitution under which Modi was elected, but what has happened since is illustrative of how it has been sidestepped, its spirit discarded.

Let me give you a few illustrations that explain this. The BJP is represented by over three hundred legislators in the 543-member Lok Sabha. Not one of them is Muslim. Indian Muslims make up nearly fifteen percent of the population—close to 200 million people, larger than the populations of most countries. They are without representation in the party that governs the country today, that decides on legislation that sets out its future. This lack of representation is deliberate. The BJP chooses not to nominate Muslim candidates. If it does, it does so in constituencies where it does not stand a chance.

Such marginalisation in a supposed representative democracy is reflected in the situation on the ground. It is increasingly difficult for Muslims to rent or buy property in Hindu-majority areas. This is partly by legislative design, through the enactment of new laws or the reinterpretation of existing ones, but it is also the result of a social consensus by the majority that backs the government. The impact is evident—the best schools are in these areas, as are the best hospitals and other services. It is leading to a ghettoisation of the Muslim minority.

Golwalkar’s promise of denying Muslims citizens’ rights is being lived out, from the legislature to the rhythms of our daily lives. This is accompanied by an increasing atmosphere of fear. There has always been Hindu-Muslim conflict in India, but communal violence used to be localised. Since 2014, we have seen a new trend: dozens of Muslims have been lynched. These lynchings seem to occur at random. They can occur on a train, on a highway or outside Muslim homes. As far as the average Muslim is concerned, they can be lynched on the streets for reasons that amount to no more than the supposed possession of cow flesh.

The people leading the lynch mobs are directly or ideologically affiliated to the RSS. They have recorded themselves carrying out the lynchings and posted the videos on social media. They have

gained in local prominence and have largely escaped any legal action. The police have chosen not to proceed with these cases because they understand what the denial of political power means. Muslims, as Golwalkar promised, are less than citizens for the law enforcement machinery. Justice is not available to them because the values that underlie policing in India are not constitutional values but the values set out by Golwalkar.

It is not just the police. Most institutions in the country are living out a vision that is not constitutional but that of the RSS. Our next general election is scheduled for next year, but even more important is the year that comes after, 2025. It marks a hundred years of the RSS, and it should not be too much of a surprise if we move to consecrate what is already true de facto: India as a Hindu nation in the image of the RSS.

The ideology driving the BJP also serves its political interests—directing hate towards a minority has served as the means of consolidating political power. The definition of Hinduism is increasingly being restricted to how the RSS defines it, and the hatred of Muslims covers the fractures and fissures within the community. However imperfectly realised, the constitutional project of undoing the injustice of the caste system achieved more for social equality in seventy-five years than had been possible in the preceding millennium. This project is now under threat because the consolidation through hating an external enemy is one way of keeping existing structures intact.

For the first time in a few decades, we are seeing an increase in the control of the upper castes over key posts in institutions of power. This upper-caste dominance must be weighed against their numerical strength. No census since 1931 has gathered caste data, but a recent survey in Bihar revealed that the upper castes are about fifteen percent of the population. This fifteen percent has disproportionate control over financial and intellectual resources. If you consider the Indians in Silicon Valley, perhaps ninety percent of them would belong to this same fifteen percent.

This degree of intellectual hegemony and control over financial resources by a minority was perhaps rivalled only in apartheid South Africa. Even there, at its height, white South Africans had a higher share of the population than the upper castes do in India. This upper-caste control is no longer being challenged in Modi's India. In fact, it is reconsolidating.

Given all this, one would assume the government to be fairly secure, but a party that survives and grows by constantly hyping an existential threat from some of its fellow citizens, and is worried about the possible dissipation of its Hindu consolidation, must use everything in the rulebook of autocracies to continuously consolidate its hold on power. In his book *Ill Winds*, Larry Diamond, who is part of the panel discussion to follow this talk, writes that creeping authoritarianism follows a "generic playbook," which he calls "the autocrats' twelve-step program." It is worth listing these steps and seeing how many apply to India.

1. Begin to demonize the opposition as illegitimate and unpatriotic

This is certainly true of India.

2. Undermine the independence of the courts

The law of contempt stops me from expressing my frank views on this subject, but the Modi government has certainly done all it can to achieve this end.

3. Attack the independence of the media, by denouncing them as partisan fabulists, mobilizing public fervor against them

True.

4. Gain control of any public broadcasting, politicize it, and make it an instrument of ruling party propaganda.

True.

5. Impose stricter control of the internet, in the name of morality, security, or counterterrorism

True.

6. Subdue other elements of civil society—civic associations, universities, and especially anticorruption and human rights groups—by painting them as part of the arrogant, effete, selfish elite that have betrayed the people and the country.

True.

7. Intimidate the business community

True.

8. Enrich a new class of crony capitalists by steering state contracts, credit flows, licenses, and other lucre to the family, friends, and allies of the ruler and his clique.

True.

9. Assert political control over the civil service and the security apparatus.

True.

10. Gerrymander districts and rig the electoral rules

Untrue.

11. Gain control over the body that runs the elections

True.

12. Repeat steps 1 to 11, ever more vigorously, deepening citizens' fear of opposing or criticizing the new political order and silencing all forms of resistance.

True.

For Modi to score 11 out of 12 is a good indicator of where India stands today. It is anything but a constitutional democracy, well on the road to an autocracy that serves the ideological ends of the RSS. This is not the India that Indians signed up for when they adopted the Constitution in 1950. The original compact that constitutes the Indian republic is being undone.

Hartosh Singh Bal is the executive editor at The Caravan.

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