

# India: Hindutva's Forward March - Hindu nationalists electoral dominance, influence, intimidation and violence

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**In India, Modi's Hindu nationalist BJP is consolidating its power through vigilante violence, censorship, and state repression.**

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This March, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won regional elections in four out of five states [\[1\]](#), including Uttar Pradesh (UP). This huge prize represents a qualitative advance for the party and the Hindu nationalist Sangh Parivar it represents, giving greater legitimacy to their long-term goal of establishing a Hindu state in all but name.

Less than six months later, on the evening of September 5, the Bangalore-based journalist and civil rights activist Gauri Lankesh was shot to death outside her home. She had been a fierce critic of Hindutva organizations and their leaders, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi. This deadly assault dramatizes India's dangerous trajectory.

This article will trace what has happened since March, measuring Hindutva's forward march. Though the forces have not advanced as fast or as far as the Sangh and BJP wished, their leaders should have more reason to feel satisfied with their progress. I'm basing this assessment on three parameters: developments on the electoral-political front since March, inroads in the "long march through the institutions," (where I look at the Election Commission of India, the Supreme Court, the public education sector) and Hindutva's hegemonizing thrust in civil society, which increasingly focuses on generating fear among dissenters.

## Electoral Dominance

The March elections represented an important victory for the BJP, and its prospects have only improved since then.

In July, it converted Nitish Kumar, the chief minister of Bihar. Though his party, the Janata Dal (United) (JD[U]) served as the junior partner in government with the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) after

the 2015 state assembly elections, Kumar was nevertheless retained as chief minister from the previous term of office. That coalition represented a serious blow to Modi, but, in July of this year, Kumar suddenly dropped the RJD to forge a new alliance with the BJP. He said he wanted to distance himself from the corruption charges against RJD deputy chief minister, Tejashwi Yadav, the son of the RJD leader, Lallu Yadav.

In reality, Kumar switched sides because he wants to be on the winning side of the 2019 general elections. He believes that the BJP and allies will triumph and that he and his party will therefore get a better deal in both Bihar and the capital. After all, the JD(U) had a seventeen-year alliance with the BJP that only ended in 2013. So much for Kumar's recent claims that the Sangh's anti-secular and communal character repulsed him.

As a result, the BJP now sits in government in Bihar, and the opposition parties' efforts to establish a Grand Alliance or *Mahagathbandhan* for the next general elections lies in tatters. They believed uniting regional parties in the key northern states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh would attract other non-BJP parties elsewhere and help prevent another BJP victory, but their opponent now controls both states.

In a sign of possible things to come, the BJP performed much better — though still well behind the Trinamul Congress (TMC) — in the West Bengal municipal elections. In the 2014 Lok Sabha race, both the BJP and the Left Front got two seats each, tallying 17 percent and 22 percent respectively. This year in these local elections, the BJP overcame the Left to finish second.

Also, Modi's party is close to bringing the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) that governs the state of Tamil Nadu, into its National Democratic Alliance (NDA), which formally rules at the center. Currently holding this back is a factional fight for leadership within the AIADMK. But even if this goes unresolved and the AIADMK splits, the larger group will join the NDA.

The BJP and NDA dominate the two houses of parliament, the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha, and control more than half of India's state governments. As a result, this summer, the Sangh relied on loyal MPs and Members of the Legislative Assemblies (MLAs) to elect the right president and vice president from among the competing candidates.

And, indeed, Ram Nath Kovind, a UP Dalit who once belonged to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a principal Sangh organization, became president. Venkaiah Naidu, another former RSS member, relinquished his cabinet post to become vice president. For the first time in the history of independent India, ex-RSS men and Hindutva devotees hold the top three constitutional posts.

The BJP believes Kovind's appointment will reinforce its Dalit base in UP, influence Dalit preferences elsewhere, and also help mitigate the negative press around upper-caste Hindus who assault Dalits involved in the cattle trade. The vice-presidential appointment it is hoped will win over southern voters.

In November and December, assembly elections will take place in Gujarat, where BJP already controls the government, and Congress-held Himachal Pradesh. BJP is expected to return in Gujarat and could well take Himachal Pradesh.

Polling surveys for the 2019 general elections already favor Modi's return. Indeed, the BJP expects to win well over three hundred seats on its own, and the NDA would then exceed its current count of 312. Of course, the Sangh hopes that the NDA will secure a two-thirds majority in both houses of parliament, allowing the next BJP-led government to make major constitutional amendments.

But the election is still a long way off, and, if the history of Indian politics has taught us anything, it's

that we must always make room for surprises.

## **Anticorruption Corruption**

Leading up to the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, the BJP had stockpiled the most donations of all parties. Corporate funding has become an indirect form of bribery that every party accepts, and transparency around who makes these large donations would be a small democratic advance — though public funding would be even better.

Corporate funding has become an indirect form of bribery that every party accepts. Modi projected himself as an anticorruption crusader, an appeal that cuts across caste and class lines. In Finance Minister Arun Jaitley's February 2017 budget speech, he announced that the maximum limit for political donations in cash would be reduced from twenty thousand rupees to two thousand. Individuals or groups wishing to give more would have to write a check or make a digital transfer, both of which would be bank monitored.

But here's the rub: the government is also planning on introducing electoral bonds, which donors can purchase from designated public-sector banks for the purpose of political funding. The bondholders will remain anonymous, and no one will know who has given how much to which party. The Electoral Commission of India (ECI) will have no names or addresses to put up on its website.

Former ECI Chief Commissioner Nasim Zaidi immediately criticized these bonds upon his retirement this July, pointing out that they represented an official sanction for the lack of transparency.

His successor for the ECI, handpicked from high levels of government, is the bureaucrat A. K. Jyoti, who served as chief secretary of Gujarat when Modi was that state's chief minister. Will anyone be surprised if the ECI acquiesces to this proposal?

## **An Occasionally Independent Court**

Over the last fifty years the Supreme Court (SC) has all too often suborned itself to government dictates and pressures. It reached its pinnacle of obedience during the 1975-77 emergency rule, then tried to recover its independent reputation in the 1980s. However, since the 1990s, it has regularly conformed to the perspectives of whatever regime happened to rule at the center. This is especially true in cases concerning communal crimes and corruption.

Official investigative agencies, like the state-level Criminal Investigation Departments (CIDs) as well as the federal Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) and the National Investigative Agency (NIA) set up specifically to deal with terror-related cases. These agencies, meant to help the Judiciary through their impartiality of functioning, have trodden the same conformist path, and the Modi government has pressured them to encourage this behavior.

In 2016, the NIA dropped terror-related charges against the Sangh's fiery female preacher Sadhvi Pragya Thakur. In 2006, she and a militant Hindu group conspired to set off a bomb in the Muslim-majority town of Malegaon, killing eight and injuring eighty. Thakur will still face the courts, but despite the evidence against her which had put her in jail for eight years, the Bombay High Court let her out on bail.

In August of this year, the Lieutenant Colonel Prasad Shrikant Purohit, a co-conspirator in the Malegaon case, was also given bail and let out after nine years in jail. His release came after the SC

overturned the Bombay High Court's earlier rejection of his bail plea.

Under the Modi regime, major figures accused in terror cases have had reprieves of one sort or another even as their cases have dragged on for years. This judicial behavior reminds us that "justice delayed is justice denied."

The Modi government does pursue corruption charges against leading politicians in the Congress, RJD, and West Bengal's TMC, but investigation into major cases involving BJP politicians lies dormant.

For example, the Vyapam scandal revealed that BJP politicians and bureaucrats in Madhya Pradesh took bribes and then manipulated the examination-based selection process for government jobs and educational institutes. The scam came to light in 2013, and, in July 2015, the SC transferred the investigation to the CBI. More than thirty people associated with the scam have died in suspicious circumstances, raising serious concerns about a government-led cover up. This June, a journalist investigating the scandal was found dead, again under mysterious circumstances.

Further, this January 2017, the SC dismissed the plea for an investigation into the Sahara-Birla case, despite documents indicating that the Sahara and Birla corporate groups paid off Modi while he was chief minister of Gujarat and other politicians.

Finally, in 2010, the Allahabad High Court gave a shameful majority decision by dividing the land once occupied by the Babri Masjid, or Mosque of Babur, into three parts. One-third goes to the rightful owners, the Sunni Central Wakf Board, and two-thirds to Hindu claimants.

The SC promised to fast track the hearing of this case, but in the meantime, the Shia Wakf Board has now filed its claim for the land (even though this was completely rejected long ago in 1946) and declared that a mosque can be rebuilt at a separate site, effectively becoming a Muslim puppet for the Sangh. If this was not bad enough, the new chief justice, Khehar Singh, who started in January and left in August, actually offered in April to mediate the dispute and help secure an amicable settlement.

Both the Allahabad ruling and this offer demonstrate the Sangh's growing power. Anything other than the severest punishment for those who violently destroyed the mosque and the full restoration of land to its original and rightful owners would make the Sunni Central Wakf Board a miscarriage of justice. But it is difficult in the current political climate to be optimistic about what the future legal outcome will be.

If we were unhappy about Khehar Singh's performance, the appointment of his replacement Dipak Mishra to a fourteen-month term offers little relief. On November 30, 2016, Mishra made it compulsory to stand while the national anthem plays in movie theaters, though he did subsequently exempt disabled people. Then, immediately after his appointment began, he and another judge overturned a Gujarat High Court ruling that called on the state government to fully compensate the owner-trustees of the mosques, dargahs, and other religious sites damaged during the 2002 pogrom. They claimed their decision was in keeping with maintaining the "secularity of the state."

All that said, two recent rulings have partially restored the SC's reputation as a relatively independent body. First, a five-judge bench by a majority outlawed instant triple talaq, a welcome decision in its own right that also sets an important precedent for intervening in the constitutionally protected sanctity of religious personal law.

The BJP and Hindutva supporters endorsed the ruling because it rejects what they consider "Muslim privilege," allowing Modi and his cabinet to dishonestly present themselves as champions for Muslim

women. But progressive feminist organizations, while welcoming the verdict, have correctly pointed out that the justices based their decision on the divorce procedure's arbitrariness, not on grounds of promoting gender justice.

The second ruling (a unanimous one by a nine-judge bench) declared privacy a fundamental right. This decision constitutes a serious blow to Modi's attempts to establish the strongest possible surveillance state.

Modi is trying to mandate the Unique Identity Card (UID), which would require every citizen to reveal personal details to the government. The prime minister has proposed linking this card to a host of welfare provisions and everyday services like having a mobile phone or opening a bank account. If passed, the UID scheme would create a massive database, making many citizens' personal data available to government misuse.

While arguing the case, the Modi government made three shocking arguments. It claimed that privacy cannot be a fundamental right because the constitution does not say it is, objected that "privacy" has no proper definition and is therefore too vague a legal standard, and, finally, argued that, in the Indian context, privacy represents an "elitist" notion.

The ruling did allow for restrictions on privacy in the name of "national security" and "public interest," allowing the government some leeway for pushing the UID project. Future cases will indicate how extensive and meaningful the right to privacy will remain, but this verdict opens the door for other democratic advances, including the decriminalization of private sexual behavior.

## **Public Education**

The Sangh has long worked to influence educational institutions and practices. Their strategy has two elements — hiring politically loyal personnel and enacting politically motivated curricular revisions — that have had varying levels of success.

Even at the tertiary level, public-sector teachers come from diverse political and social backgrounds. They have years of experience, are spread across the country, and enjoy permanent tenure. Trying to secure ideological loyalty among this disparate community is a challenging and long-term project, but imposing uniformity in what is taught is a much easier task. As a result, the Sangh has emphasized textbook revisions or changing syllabi at the higher levels.

Recently, the RSS affiliate the Shiksha Sanskriti Utthan Nyas (Education Culture Regeneration Trust, or SSUN) recommended to the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) a number of changes to the books public or private institutions use to prepare students for the secondary-level exam system certified by the Central Board of Secondary Education. There are other school boards but the CBSE is by far the most popular in the country.

During the second UPA government (2009–2014) SSUN pressured the weak Delhi University administration to remove Three Hundred Ramayanas from its undergraduate history syllabus. This scholarly work testified to the diversity of Indian religious thought. The SSUN has also recommended to the NCERT removing from existing texts the thought of Nobel Prize-recipient Rabindranath Tagore because he criticized nationalism in the name of a broader humanity, deleting former prime minister Manmohan Singh's apology to the Sikhs for the 1984 pogrom, scrubbing the curriculum of any mention of violence against minorities, and omitting a sentence that reads "nearly two thousand Muslims were killed in Gujarat in 2002."

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Another RSS affiliate, Shiksha Bachao Andolan Samiti (Save Education Campaign Committee) is run by a Modi favorite, Dinanath Batra, a retired schoolteacher and hardline Hindutva ideologue. The SBAS successfully pressured Penguin Publishers India to withdraw and pulp all the copies of Wendy Doniger’s book *The Hindus: An Alternative History*. Since 2014, a set of nine textbooks Batra himself wrote finally have been translated from Hindi into Gujarati and distributed to over forty thousand schools.

The University Grants Commission (UGC) determines and maintains the standards of teaching, research, and examination in universities. It is the only body that provides grants to higher educational institutions. This powerful body currently lacks a chairman, and H. R. Nagendra, Modi’s personal yoga instructor, is serving as head of the search committee that will make the final selection for this post. Can anyone doubt where the UGC is headed?

## **Cow Vigilantism**

Expanding hegemony is not just a matter of mobilizing consent for a group’s ideologically inspired beliefs, values, and practices. It also requires generating fear: what consequences will befall those who do not agree with — let alone oppose — Hindutva politics?

The Sangh’s militant gangs and violence-prone foot soldiers play a key role in this process. Cow vigilantism promotes fear among Muslims generally and more specifically among non-Muslims in the cattle trade. No law specifically deals with targeted communal lynchings, as compared to the more generalized and indiscriminate violence in communal riots and pogroms. Cow vigilantism represents a new form of hatred that — unlike riots — does not require longer-term preparation, or an inciting incident, or a certain number of participants.

These attacks mean the state does not have to resort to violence and can cover its tracks by denouncing those who take the law into their own hands. Of course, the perpetrators know that they will almost certainly escape punishment or, at worst, receive milder penalties, particularly in BJP-ruled states. Here, Uttar Pradesh is setting the gold standard.

The secular claims many liberals make about the character of the Indian polity and constitution received a major shock when, for the first time ever, an acting high priest of the centuries-old Gorakhpur Temple became Uttar Pradesh’s chief minister. Yogi Adityanath belongs to the Nath sect, which takes *gauseva* — cow service — as a religious duty.

Each state controls animal husbandry, and many allow some cattle slaughter. But, since the central government can legislate animal cruelty provisions, it used this excuse to greatly limit the cattle trade. On May 23, it issued a notification to the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Regulation of Livestock Markets) Act, which imposes a virtual ban on the sale of cattle for the purposes of slaughter, which is one of the important purposes for having such markets in the first place.

The SC has ordered a stay on this attempted violation of existing laws, and the government’s initiative seems unlikely to go through. In the meantime, however, Adityanath has ordered the closure of all illegal abattoirs as well as many legal ones, whose licenses are currently lapsed. The court will force him to allow renewal, but the point is that, at least in BJP-ruled states, the government is officially encouraging cow vigilantism.

In Maharashtra, the new post of “honorary animal welfare official” has been created, inviting applicants from cow protection militias and groups. Haryana already has some five thousand cow-protection activists.

On April 1, a fifty-five-year-old Muslim man, Pehlu Khan, was transporting cows to his dairy farm in Rajasthan when a mob mercilessly beat him. He succumbed to his wounds a couple of days later. The main accused in Khan’s dying statement have just been let off by the Rajasthan police.

On September 5, a rowdy group of train passengers taunted Junaid Khan, a sixteen-year-old Muslim boy, for being a “beef-eater” and “anti-national.” They then stabbed him to death and threw his body off the train.

According to IndiaSpend, sixty-three incidents of cow-linked violence occurred between 2010 and 2017, leading to twenty-eight deaths. The years 2014–17 account for 97 percent of these incidents, and 86 percent of those killed are Muslim.

## **Unfree India**

Of course, cow vigilantes aren’t the only ones participating in these targeted attacks. In 2005, the Congress-led government passed the Right to Information Act, which significantly enhanced public transparency. Individuals could request documents and information, and government affiliated bodies had to reply. In April of this year, the Modi government proposed an amendment to this act whereby an applicant’s death would automatically end his or her written request or query.

As it is, the government has yet to implement the 2011 Whistleblower’s Protection Act, and seventy Right to Information applicants have already been killed. These activists often serve as leaders of rural movements fighting to secure everyday needs for their communities. Altogether almost four hundred such activists have been murdered, assaulted, and harassed, but the police have jailed only six culprits. This amendment if passed by the Central Information Commission would only encourage life-threatening assaults on applicants.

More disturbing, however, are the links between four assassinations, including the recent assault on Gauri Lankesh. Her murder closely resembles attacks on leaders of the rationalist movement: against superstition and for promotion of a scientific temper. The victims include N. Dabholkar, who was killed in Maharashtra in 2013, G. Pansare, also in Maharashtra in 2015, and M.M. Kalburgi, in Karnataka in 2015. The bullets recovered from the Lankesh crime scene indicate that the pistol used had the same make as those that felled the other activists. In all four cases, the ambushes were carried out very professionally, suggesting hired mercenaries.

No one has been found guilty or punished for these murders, though the needle of suspicion points to a radical right-wing Hindu group, the Sanathan Sanstha, which is based in Maharashtra but also active in Goa, Karnataka, and the Hindi belt. People belonging to this organization have been arrested in relation to the murders and for unrelated bombings, but the BJP-ruled Maharashtra government and the central Ministry of Home Affairs have given them all a clean sheet.

From time to time journalists have been killed while on duty and this deserves the widest condemnation. Indeed, five died in 2016, and three in 2015.

What sets Lankesh’s murder apart from other cases is that most killings relate to the journalists’ investigations into specific instances of crime, corruption, political malfeasance by politicians, powerbrokers, or the misdeeds of religious figures and the inner workings of their cult



organizations. Certainly the paper she was editor of did carry out muckraking investigations but it was the general political orientation that was the problem. What connects Lankesh to Dabholkar, Pansare, and Kalburgi — none of whom were professional journalists — is that all categorically and continuously opposed Hindutva. They also wrote, spoke, and campaigned in their respective regional languages, which gave their views stronger influence among the very constituencies that the forces of Hindutva are trying to win over.

Further, those demanding justice on Lankesh's behalf have become targets of mass trolling. They routinely face accusations of being "Hindu-haters" or "anti-the new India." Trolls have welcomed these assassinations, calling them warnings to others who might want to avoid a similar fate. Unlike earlier online attacks, these seem to be pre-planned as the posts have the same basic content across Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms.

### **Not in My Name**

But there's good news, too. Precisely because of Lankesh's broader journalistic interests, her death sparked a strong outcry. Thousands of people in different states and cities have held peaceful protests demanding justice.

Gauri held strong, left-wing views and was even working to bring Naxalites back into the mainstream. But her political positions have not put off those who came out on the streets for her. They recognize that she died for the basic democratic right for each person to hold her own views and express them freely, no matter how unpleasant the BJP, the Sangh, or other Hindutva organizations may find them.

Humanists, liberals, and leftists of all sorts have come together to present a common front. This civic resistance has a stronger resonance because no opposition party organized it. Parties can — and should — join in, but they should continue to play a supporting role and not try to grab the political limelight.

A loose network of activists, taking the label "Not in My Name" to protest the atmosphere of intimidation and violence that has emerged, set the precedent for the pro-Lankesh mobilizations. As the choice of name suggests, the key organizers of this movement come from the Indian middle class, who recognized this slogan's use in the West. But this action has not been confined to that social layer.

The activists have used a more decentralized protest format, with smaller groups meeting in different neighborhoods in various cities and towns. By entering communities that have different class, caste, and religious composition, Not in My Name has successfully initiated local unities.

These simultaneous meetings take place on one day in various parts of the country but also focus on a week-long campaign in a particular city. Activists have also launched peace journeys, where a small group of people visit a location where incidents of violence have occurred, meet bereaved families, hold meetings, and gather more fellow travelers for trips to the next stop on their itinerary. Among many other positive outcomes, these journeys show the urban activists' solidarity with rural areas.

These forms of protest are sending a clear message: the people oppose the politics of hatred and violence; they defend democratic freedoms to hold and express divergent views; they celebrate India's ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity; and that many among the better-off will stand with the downtrodden.



Will this be enough to counter Hindutva's forward march? On its own, of course not. But we should still welcome it because, in an era of mass media and virtual communities, face-to-face discussion retains an importance we should not underestimate.

The Modi regime's greatest weakness comes from its economic failures. For example, the demonetization scheme represented a massive failure. Modi designed his program to attack the black economy's cash flow, but the most important component of the informal economy is the stock of wealth held in immovable assets or stashed abroad. The government promised that the program's success would make up for the short-term disruption to the most vulnerable people, but most of the old notes have returned to the formal banking sector. This means that the elites, who hoarded wads of cash, have converted their wealth into legitimate bank holdings that they can now earn interest on. The scheme's mismanagement has helped lower average growth rates over the last two years. Modi's promise of greater prosperity for the vast majority has not and will not be fulfilled.

His greatest failure, however, is a structural one, embedded in his economic policies of neoliberalism: neither he nor his government can ever provide enough good-paying jobs for the nation. The already poor and precarious will face increasing deprivation, and lower middle-class youth will watch their opportunities fade away.

How these economic frustrations will crystallize politically between now and the next general elections — and what forces will take advantage of them — remains the most important unknown.

**Achin Vanaik**

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\* Jacobin. 09.19.2017:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/09/india-modi-bjp-cow-vigilantism-judiciary-corruption>

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## Footnotes

[1] ESSF (article 40776), [India's New Consensus - The BJP has become the central point of political reference in the country](#).