

Interview

India, its domestic and geopolitical challenges - an overview

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India hosted the G20 summit on September 9 and 10, an event that dominated international headlines. General elections are due to be held next year. This is an opportunity to take a look at the domestic situation and Narendra Modi's policies in India, as well as the geopolitical and diplomatic situation.

Pierre Rousset: The invitation to the G20 summit was made, quite unusually, in the name of Bharat and not of India. Is Bharat simply a synonym for India? Can you start by explaining how it was previously used?

Sushovan Dhar : Let me start with a clarification: the invitations were sent out by Indian President Droupadi Murmu, who self-proclaimed "President of Bharat", for a dinner on the sidelines of the G20 summit. The issue is not unimportant. However, it has generated considerable controversy of late, and it's clear that the ruling BJP government is all too eager to exploit this issue (and the G20 summit) for electoral gain. In fact, the name has been used interchangeably, but the debate is not new. The Indian constitution states that "India, also known as Bharat, is a Union of States". What is new, in fact, is the attempt to use this to relentlessly employ hyper-nationalism. Of course, Bharat is the name of India in many Indian languages, including Hindi, but critics say its widespread use is the latest sign of a nationalist surge in the midst of a banner year for the country.

Recently, 28 political parties (mainly opposition parties) led by the Congress formed an alliance, the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA), so the emphasis on rebranding the name *Bharat* may also be partly motivated by this. The BJP wants to show that it is keen to stand up for *Bharat* (the common people) as opposed to India (the settlers and modern elites).

Finally, we can say that the Modi government wanted to use *Bharat* as an electoral gimmick in the first place. It started with slogans like "Make in India" and "India Shining" to impress the population. As a result, he would lose all the advantages that came with it. In addition, Pakistan had historical claims to the name India, and recently we heard that Pakistan might claim the name "India" if Modi's government officially derecognized it at the UN.

However, it is interesting to note that it is the first time that the opposition set the agenda to which the BJP had to react. It has been just the opposite since Modi came to power in 2014.

In the present context, Modi's exclusive use of the term Bharat is clearly part of his policy of Hindu hyper-nationalism, Hindutva. How can we describe this hyper-nationalism, and

which movements are part of Hindutva?

Hyper-nationalist narratives of India entered mainstream discourse in 2014, when Narendra Modi, leader of the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), became Prime Minister. In the years since Modi came to power, repression of free speech and dissent has intensified.

Any criticism of the government, the armed forces, or the Hindu religion and its socio-political project, known as *Hindutva* (literally “Hinduism”), is branded as “sedition” and equated with treason for undermining India’s sovereignty. The government has used the charge of sedition under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA), an archaic anti-terrorism law passed in 1967. The authorities claim that protest movements and dissent against government policies are manipulated by the opposition and financed by foreign entities seeking to divide the country.

Recently, police carried out early morning raids on the offices of a news portal (*Newsclick*) and the homes of nearly 50 journalists, activists, and comedians across India under anti-terrorism laws, reinforcing fears of a crackdown on freedom of expression in the country.

Hinduism is a modern political ideology that advocates Hindu supremacy and seeks to transform India, constitutionally a secular state, into an ethno-religious nation known as *Hindu Rashtra* (Hindu nation). Hindutva is the official programme of the BJP, a far-right political party in India. Part of the Indian diaspora, including in the USA, also supports Hinduism. The ideology of *hindutva* is promoted by a set of vigilante, political, and cultural groups collectively known as the Sangh Parivar. The RSS, a paramilitary organisation based in India, is at the centre of the Sangh and defines the priorities and tactics for promoting Hindutva ideology.

Do you use the adjective fascist to describe the RSS in particular? What is the relationship of dependence and autonomy between the RSS, the BJP and Modi? How would you describe the current Indian regime?

Yes, of course, the RSS is a fascist organisation, even if it might diverge from the classic models of Hitler and Mussolini.

The RSS, established almost 100 years ago, has profoundly shaped Indian society and politics, as well as Modi himself. As Modi completes his second term in office, the RSS’s influence is more evident than ever, alarming members of India’s religious minorities, the country’s left, and secularists, who accuse the RSS of chauvinism and encouraging intolerance and hatred. The organisation imposes its agenda, mainly through Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party. The Prime Minister, the President, and most of India’s cabinet are members of the RSS. The RSS helped shape Modi, who still consults it on policy issues.

The RSS graciously acknowledges that it was Modi’s charisma that brought the BJP back to power in New Delhi. Modi also understands that without the RSS apparatus, his charisma alone would not have achieved such an astonishing victory. For the RSS family of organisations, the 2014 victory was unique, quite different from past experiences in 1977 and 1998. However, in the early days of the Modi government, the RSS steered clear of day-to-day politics, preferring to be seen as a moral rather than a political force. Since then, it has increased its influence on the government and its policies.

Today, the RSS’s influence is perceptible in national policies affecting everything from education to trade and food. It helps shape India’s public school curriculum, which in some BJP-ruled states teaches Hindu scriptures as historical facts. Through its affiliates, it has been able to defeat legislation he doesn’t like. It also pressures the Indian government to be more protectionist when it

comes to the entry of large multinational companies into the country.

The RSS no longer pretends to be “cultural”. Today, RSS bureaucrats run India from New Delhi through the organisation’s *pracharaks* (a full-time active missionary who disseminates RSS doctrine) and *swayamsevaks* (volunteers) and set the nation’s governance agenda. The BJP no longer claims to be “autonomous” from the RSS. Today, RSS leaders are party leaders and ministers. The RSS’s top hierarchy, its chief, the *Sarsanghchalak* (Mohan Madhukarrao Bhagwat), and his team, who claim to remain aloof from formal political power, exert enormous influence, not only moral but also political, on the Modi government. If Modi has charisma and leadership, Bhagwat has organisational know-how, movement, and authority. As both understand each other’s strengths and weaknesses, they are making the governance of India a joint enterprise by sharing power.

More cyclically, by blowing on the members of Hindutva, Modi has his sights set on next year’s parliamentary elections. The BJP’s electoral hegemony seems to have been challenged in recent polls, and the oppositions are looking to form a united front in an alliance that could take the name I.N.D.I.A... A poll set against a backdrop of communal and chauvinist mobilization would be more favorable to the BJP than if socio-economic issues were to take center stage...

In fact, it can be surely said that every time there has been an election on (deflected) class issues, the BJP has lost, whereas elections centred on communal connotations and chauvinism have favoured its return to power. If we look at provincial elections, which are no less important, we get a better picture. The BJP’s recent defeats in Karnataka and, before that, in Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Rajasthan, etc., are examples where the party was driven from power because it failed to polarise public opinion on issues of communalism and chauvinism. In Uttar Pradesh, however, it has continued to do so, and, as a result, this state is today the BJP’s strongest bastion in the country.

Don’t forget that the BJP won the 2019 parliamentary elections in the wake of the Pulwama incident, where a “terrorist attack” led to the deaths of 40 paramilitary forces. I don’t want to sound like a conspiracy theorist, but this issue remains an enigma for me. Satya Pal Malik, the former governor of Jammu and Kashmir, revealed that the Pulwama terrorist attack was the result of a systemic failure involving glaring security and intelligence gaps. He asserted that the tragedy had been exploited for political ends.

The BJP occupies the moral high ground, advocating good governance and development, while Sangh’s affiliates, the VHP and the Bajrang Dal, are free to propagate religious polarization. The party claims that there are no communal riots when it is in power, but communal riots in Manipur and Haryana, both ruled by the BJP, expose the vacuity of this claim.

Haryana’s parliamentary elections are scheduled for October 2024. The state elects 10 MPs to the Lok Sabha. The BJP won all 10 seats in the 2019 general elections. The same results in the next general elections might not be repeated without the consolidation of Hindu votes. To achieve this, it will need to mobilise hostile Jat farmers through their Hindu identity rather than caste and economic status. Communal polarisation will help. The states where elections are held are the most threatened by communal polarization. The BJP won 24 of the 25 Lok Sabha seats in Rajasthan, 28 of the 29 seats in Madhya Pradesh, and nine of the 11 seats in Chhattisgarh. These states will hold general elections in December. The BJP would like to create momentum for the 2024 general elections by winning them all. This will require more than just good governance rhetoric. These states could also see the VHP and the Bajrang Dal [[Bajrang Dal, part of the RSS-led Sangh Parivar. This is the youth wing of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), formed during the Ram temple movement, and represents the muscle behind the aggressive Hindutva agenda, which includes issues such as cow protection, anti-conversion activities, and mobilising support against “Love Jihad”.

It's the equivalent of Hitler's stormtroopers, better known as the brown shirts, coming to life again

Can you explain India's electoral system between the federal and state levels?

The Union Parliament consists of the President, the Lok Sabha (House of the People), and the Rajya Sabha (Council of States). The President is the Head of State and appoints the Prime Minister, who heads the government, according to the political composition of the Lok Sabha. Despite having a prime minister as its leader, the cabinet serves as the government's main decision-making body. A government can be made up of members from several parties, and even if the ruling parties are in the minority in the Lok Sabha, they can only govern if they have the confidence of the majority of Lok Sabha members. As well as being the body that determines the composition of the government, the Lok Sabha is the main legislative body, along with the Rajya Sabha. According to the Indian Constitution, the total number of elected members of the House of the People must not exceed 550. Currently, the House consists of 543 elected members, who are chosen directly from single-member territorial parliamentary constituencies, i.e., each constituency chooses one representative for the House. Thus, the whole country is divided into 543 territorial parliamentary constituencies.

The Constitution also provides for the appointment, by the President, of two members from the Anglo-Indian community if the latter is not adequately represented in the House of the People. Elections to the Lok Sabha are based on a first-past-the-post system. The country is divided into distinct geographical areas, called constituencies, and voters can each cast their vote for one candidate, with the winner being the one who obtains the highest number of votes. Members of the Rajya Sabha are elected indirectly, rather than by the citizenry at large, by the Vidhan Sabha of each state under the single transferrable vote system. Unlike most federal systems, the number of members elected by each state is roughly proportional to its population. At present, the Rajya Sabha has 233 members elected by the Vidhan Sabhas (provincial legislatures), plus twelve members appointed by the President as representatives of the humanities, sciences, arts, and social services. Members of the Rajya Sabha serve a six-year term, and elections are staggered, with one-third of the assembly elected every two years.

At the provincial level, the Vidhan Sabhas (legislative assemblies) are directly elected bodies responsible for the administration of government in India's 25 states. In five states, there is a bicameral organisation of legislative assemblies, with an upper and a lower house: Vidhan Parishad (Legislative Council) and Vidhan Sabha (Legislative Assembly). Elections to the Vidhan Sabha are held in the same way as elections to the Lok Sabha, with the States and Union Territories divided into single-member constituencies.

States and Union Territories are divided into single-member constituencies, and the first-past-the-post electoral system is used.

The first citizen of India and the leader of the Indian state is the president. Article 52 of the Indian Constitution stipulates that there shall be a President of India. The President of India is elected indirectly by a single transfer system. The President is elected by an electoral college made up of elected representatives of the government, who form the government after being elected to the state assembly and in national elections. Appointed members of both houses and state legislatures are not eligible to vote in the presidential election. Consequently, the electoral college for the presidential election is made up of (a) the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha and (b) the state legislative assemblies.

The size of the assemblies varies according to the population. The largest Vidhan Sabha is that of Uttar Pradesh, with 425 members; the smallest is that of Pondicherry, with 30 members.

The Vidhan Parishads are made up of representatives chosen by members of the Vidhan Sabhas and

local authorities, as well as by graduates and teachers from the state where the Parishads are located. The state governor also appoints certain members to represent the arts, sciences, literature, social services, and cooperative movements. Elections to these Parishads are held under the proportional representation system by means of a single transferrable vote.

Based on the principle of universal adult suffrage, any citizen over the age of 18 may vote in Lok Sabha or Vidhan Sabha elections (prior to 1989, the age limit was 21). The right to vote is independent of caste, creed, religion, or gender. People considered insane and those convicted of certain criminal offences are not allowed to vote.

Are there any past, present or future constitutional issues in what is still often referred to (incorrectly) as the world's largest democracy?

The Indian Constitution has had several shortcomings since its inception. The winner-take-all electoral system established by the Indian Constitution on the Westminster model has been one of the electoral system's biggest shortcomings. Previously, it had continued to give the Congress huge parliamentary majorities even as its share of the popular vote began to dwindle. The BJP took advantage of this, and since 2014, Modi and his entourage have had a disproportionate presence in Parliament in relation to their share of the electoral vote.

The BJP wants to empty the Indian Constitution of the minimal progressive values it contains. It has succeeded in overturning the federal architecture envisaged by the Constitution. It has done this by imposing a universal GST (General Sales Tax) across the country, leaving the states without the power to decide which tax rates to impose on which products (with the exception of alcohol and petroleum products), a right conferred on them by the Indian Constitution.

Secondly, the Modi-led central government has repeatedly encroached on the rights of states, as enshrined in the Constitution. The most blatant examples are our labour codes and the three agriculture laws passed by Parliament, although the farm laws were later repealed under popular pressure. The labour codes encompass 29 existing labour laws. Labour is on the "concurrent" list, meaning that it can be legislated both by the Centre and by the States. But the Modi government adopted the codes because it was in a hurry to please the corporate sector by introducing hiring and firing policies, fixed-term employment, an increase in working hours, and a reduction in minimum wage norms. It then pressured state governments to develop rules under these codes so that they could be implemented. The agricultural laws also dealt with farming, which falls under the state list. They were repealed earlier this year under immense pressure from the farmers' movement.

Freezing or reducing welfare funds: Time and again during Modi's reign, state governments have had to beg and demand the release of central funds for this or that program. The most blatant example is the Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), for which central funds are still insufficient, with states accumulating huge debts. The Modi government has also cut funds for a number of central programmes, including education, SC and ST scholarships, child and maternal nutrition, minority development programmes, and others. This not only jeopardised welfare programmes and deprived citizens of much-needed benefits but also put a strain on state governments as they had to continue spending from their depleted resources. The policy of cutting social funds—an integral part of the neoliberal dogma to which Modi and the BJP subscribe—has worsened the fiscal position of the states and made them weaker and more dependent on the central government.

Repeal Article 370: This is the greatest betrayal of the Constitution and the greatest sign of the Modi government's subservience to the RSS. In a legal sleight of hand, the government has repealed Article 370 of the Constitution, thus ending the special status granted to Jammu and Kashmir (J&K),

the Indian-administered region of Kashmir, when it joined India after independence. The Modi government has also divided the state into two Union Territories, headed by the Centre. It is now trying to fix Assembly seats through delimitation to secure the prospects of its own victory in the impending elections. The Kashmir Valley, meanwhile, has been turned into a military camp; the Internet has been cut off for over a year and a half, and thousands of people have been imprisoned. The ludicrous claim that this movement was “integrating J&K with India” has proved hollow, as the killings continue and the religious divide continues to be stoked.

Moreover, during the state of emergency, Indira Gandhi’s government, through the 42nd Constitutional Amendment, inserted the words “socialist” and “secular” in the preamble to make India a “sovereign secular socialist democratic republic”. Although there have already been several attacks on the country’s secular ethos, the Modi government now intends to eradicate all references to the notions of secularism and “socialism”.

There are many other examples of flagrant violations of the Constitution and democratic values in the country. The systematic attack on and weakening of educational and other institutions, the attempt to rewrite history, etc., are just a few examples. Official announcements have been peppered with proclamations that education must be rooted in “culture” and “traditions”, and that India was a “knowledge superpower” in the past, before Muslim invasions and British colonialism.

India was proud of its sacred constitutional precepts. All the more so as other countries in the region have undergone a precipitous shift to prioritise ethnicity or religion and define belonging and nationhood in the narrowest possible sense: Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, and Myanmar. But the differences between these countries and India are now fading fast, and not just because of hotheads or crowds taking to the streets. The official establishment, with its silence, declarations, and formalisation of new laws and norms, is indistinguishable from the sentiments that guide the crowds. The actions of the rioters, as well as those of the Union and state governments, mark a clear retreat from the democracy that India claims for itself.

China was absent from the G20. Why do you think that is? Border conflicts and the new maps of disputed border zones published in Beijing? Economic competition between the two powers?

When the world’s most powerful leaders gathered in New Delhi last month, it was strange to see that China’s Xi Jinping wasn’t among them, having never missed a G20 summit since coming to power in 2012. As is often the case with Beijing’s opaque decision-making, no explanation was given for Xi Jinping’s apparent decision not to attend a major global gathering to which China has given high priority in the past.

However, in the context of the rivalry between China and the USA, analysts believe that Mr. Xi’s absence from the G20 could also be a sign of his disillusionment with the global governance system and existing structures, which he sees as too dominated by American influence.

There’s an element of deliberate snub to India here, but it could also be a statement that Xi Jinping believes there are different important governance structures and that the G20 may not be one of them. Beijing has bristled at New Delhi’s growing ties with Washington, particularly its involvement in the Quadrilateral (Quad), a US-led collective security group decried by Beijing as an “Indo-Pacific NATO”. China sees India in the anti-Chinese camp and therefore has no wish to add value to a major international summit organised by India.

To what extent can India offer an alternative for capital wanting to reduce its dependence on China? In comparison with other countries, such as Vietnam? We’re talking about

economic ecosystems that have consolidated China's drawing power, and which are not easy to replicate...

A recent report by the Rhodium Group, a neoliberal research group, points out that American and European companies are shifting their investments from China to other developing markets, with Mexico, Vietnam, Malaysia, Mexico, and India receiving the great majority of this redirected foreign investment. These companies are turning their backs on the world's second-largest economy, even as its share of global growth continues to rise. The value of announced US and European investment in India has soared by some \$65 billion, or 400%, between 2021 and 2022, according to Wednesday's report, while investment in China fell to less than \$20 billion last year after peaking at \$120 billion in 2018.

Official Indian circles and the media have been euphoric about these recent developments. At a time when the Indian economy is beset by many uncertainties, not least the growing crisis in job creation, news of a transfer of investment from China to India will be a boost for the Modi government. Economists, analysts, and pundits believe that more and more jobseekers, especially young people, are looking for low-paying casual jobs or falling back on unreliable self-employment, even though the Indian economy as a whole is expected to grow by 6.5% in the fiscal year ending March 2024, which is a world record.

Urban unemployment in India soared during the COVID-19 pandemic, peaking at 20.9% in the April-June 2020 quarter as wages plummeted. Although the unemployment rate has fallen since then, there are fewer full-time jobs available. It's worth noting that in 2022/23, the Indian economy grew by a stronger-than-expected 7.2%, boosted by government capital investment. But private consumption, which accounts for 60% of Indian GDP, grew by only 2-3% in the second half of the year as pent-up spending and base effects faded.

Despite a large and steadily growing market, an abundant supply of cheap labour, and decent economic growth, India is struggling to attract enough foreign capital to raise overall investment and growth rates and take advantage of the current favourable geopolitical situation.

Inward foreign direct investment (FDI), including reinvested earnings and share purchases, fell by 16.3% to \$71 billion in the fiscal year to March 31. FDI *nett* fell even more sharply, dropping 27% to \$28 billion, against a backdrop of increased profit repatriation.

Surprisingly, this comes at a time when countries and companies are keen to reduce their exposure to China and seem to view India favourably for its potential to become the world's next factory.

Supporters of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government claim that the current decline is a temporary phenomenon and that the situation should soon improve. However, it's no secret that Vietnam has so far been a far greater beneficiary of investment from companies moving towards a "China plus one" supply chain.

Behind the key figures, we can see that FDI into India from Asian countries such as Singapore, Japan, and the United Arab Emirates actually increased substantially last year. It is flows from more traditional FDI sources, such as the USA, Mauritius, the Netherlands, the Cayman Islands, and Germany, that have declined.

Reports also indicate that Chinese factories are moving, but not to India or Mexico. Companies looking for alternatives to China are discovering that the country's vast interior still offers great advantages.

In the absence of Moscow and Beijing, Modi has done well to present himself as the spokesman for the South, or the non-aligned as some call it, a formula with progressive historical connotations. But the global context and political regimes have changed a lot since the 50s and 60s. What do you think?

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi claims that his country is “becoming the voice of the South”. In times of polarisation, rising India has acted aggressively to defend developing countries, seeking compromise and vowing to make their voices heard in America.

The Modi government claims that, with the help of other developing nations, India persuaded the US and Europe to soften a statement on the Russian invasion of Ukraine so that the forum could focus on the concerns of the poorest countries, including global debt and climate finance. India also presided over the admission of the African Union to the G20, putting it on an equal footing with the European Union.

There’s no denying that, at a time when a kind of new Cold War between the USA and China seems to be framing all global discussions, India’s discourse has a certain appeal. Neither the United States nor China are particularly popular with developing countries. The United States is criticised for focusing more on military power than on economic assistance. China’s centrepiece—its infrastructure initiative, “Belt and Road”—has provoked negative reactions, as Beijing has opposed the renegotiation of a crushing debt that has left many countries facing the risk of default.

The term “non-aligned” is increasingly used to describe this new trend in international politics. The Non-Aligned Conference in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, in 1961 is where the word first emerged, which built on the foundations laid at the Asia-Africa Conference held in Bandung, Indonesia, in 1955. At the time, non-alignment concerned countries led by movements rooted in the profoundly anti-colonial project of the Third World, seeking to establish the sovereignty of new states and the dignity of their peoples. This moment of non-alignment was killed off by the debt crisis of the 1980s, which began with Mexico’s default in 1982. What we have today is not a return to the old non-alignment, but the emergence of a new political atmosphere and a new political constellation that is precisely seeking its place in the imperialist ladder.

Solidarity with peoples must not be identified with alignment with states... It’s worth remembering this at a time when the BRICS are expanding.

As we know, “BRICS anti-imperialism” is not necessarily anti-capitalism. In other words, Putin, Modi, Ramaphosa, Xi Jinping, and others may say certain things against the US, but that doesn’t mean their domestic policies favour the poor or the working class. Unfortunately, many progressives are caught up in the anti-American rhetoric of the BRICS, and they see a strong virtue in the Sino-Russian bulwark against the world’s greatest imperialist hegemon, the United States. I think they are misled by the apparent radical anti-imperialist rhetoric designed to conceal a deep conservatism and attacks on their own working-class constituents.

It is in this context that we must insist on the solidarity of peoples, or what in the good old days was called proletarian internationalism. The unity of peoples the world over takes into account the social nature of states and, as such, runs counter to the interests of states that seek to perpetuate the capitalist order.

India is part of variable-geometry alliances, like the Quad... Joe Biden seems to have realized the futility of hoping to win New Delhi over to an exclusive alliance. Yet he is well aware of the extent to which this country contributes to bolstering Russia’s oil revenues, which are vital to support its war effort in Ukraine. Long gone are the days when Modi was

persona non grata in the United States after the massacre of Muslims in Gujarat!

Modi has gone from being *persona non grata*, unwelcome on American soil, to a celebrity guest at the White House summit. For almost ten years, the United States refused to issue a visa to Modi, who was accused of taking part in the religious riots that killed most of the Muslims in the Indian state of Gujarat in 2002. Against this backdrop, Modi's arrival in New York after becoming India's Prime Minister had the air of a victory lap.

Modi's celebration in Washington can be seen as the culmination of the growing closeness between India and the United States, which began after the end of the Cold War. Today, India is increasingly perceived in the West as a counterweight to China's power ambitions, which has made the country more attractive to its European and American partners. India is also one of the few countries to navigate between China and Russia, on the one hand, and the West and its allies, on the other. It is a member of the China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the BRICS group of emerging countries, as well as being part of the Quadrilateral, the informal anti-China alliance led by the USA.

India has established itself as a major interlocutor with the world's major powers. However, New Delhi's rise to power has more to do with recent geopolitical developments than with the Indian government's diplomatic dexterity. As it happens, Narendra Modi's rise to power in India coincided with major geopolitical changes in the world, which is now deeply polarized. The seeds of these divisions had already been sown with the war in Crimea, but they have been exacerbated in recent months, particularly since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The years marked by COVID-19, by worsening the humanitarian and economic situation, deepened the divisions, which exploded in the post-COVID period with the outbreak of war in Ukraine.

To conclude, where does the political and social left stand in India? How are its various components trying to cope with a very difficult situation, when national security laws allow repression to strike indiscriminately?

Unfortunately, the Left in India is at its nadir. I'm talking about the political and social left. India's once-mighty left-wing movements are facing the greatest challenge in their history as Narendra Modi's ultranationalist party consolidates its grip on power. This moment of crisis calls for Indian socialists to completely rethink their theory and strategy.

The Indian Left is at its lowest ebb, probably at the worst moment in its history. The mainstream of the parliamentary left, represented by the Communist Party of India and the Communist Party of India (Marxist), has no vision of anti-capitalist struggle and is losing its electoral base. Long reduced to an electoral force with a dwindling cadre base that clings to old Stalinist truths when they think of Marxism, their cadres, with a few exceptions in a few places, have lost the capacity and interest to pursue the politics of popular mobilisation around genuine and justified grievances. The crisis facing these parties is far worse than that facing Congress. In the 2019 assembly elections, these two parties collectively won just one seat in the other supposedly leftist bastion, Kerala, and four seats in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, thanks solely to their pre-poll alliance with the far-left Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), or Dravidian Progressive Conference.

The Maoist organisations are largely confined to the forests of central India, isolated by their political sectarianism. Among the various Maoist groups that have evolved towards parliamentary politics, the CPIML (Liberation) is the most important force, present throughout the country. Unfortunately, the radicalism of the organisation, which had been a point of attraction in the early 1990s, is limited to university campuses such as Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi. The party's general orientation, while clinging to a certain variant of Stalinism, is geared towards parliamentarianism.

It is seeking to fill the vacuum created by the withdrawal of the main communist parties through the electoral process. It is currently desperate to integrate itself into the anti-BJP electoral alliance in India and possibly win a few seats.

The Left must provide a counternarrative to the two major nationalist narratives, that of the Congress and that of the BJP, in an era of duelling hyper-nationalism.

This alternative must be secular and democratic. Democratic in the sense that the people must have a choice as to whether or not to embrace the nation.

The fight against Hindu hegemony cannot be separated from the counter-transformative project of building democratic socialism, either.
