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HINDUTVA

SPREADING HATE

A FILM BY HUGO VAN OFFEL

PRODUCED BY
BABEL DOC & ARTE FRANCE

HISTORY EXPERT
CHRISTOPHE JAFFRELOT

52'

SUMMARY

Ever since the Hindu nationalists came to power, India has been moving away from democracy and into a new type of regime where ethnicity prevails over everything else. This supremacist ideology is embodied by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who came to power in 2014. Hindutva, as it is called, targets all minorities – Dalits, Christians and, above all, Muslims. Its supporters call for an India populated solely by Hindus.

Hindutva is not just an ideology, it's also a formidable soft power tool that serves Narendra Modi's foreign policy interests. The Prime Minister's calculation, once in office, is simple: Hindu nationalism will echo other nationalisms and liberal policies, such as those of Abe's Japan, Putin's Russia or Xi's China.

Hindutva and its precepts would offer him the perfect position in a world marked by the rise of "strong men", supporters of the "my country first" approach (Putin, Xi, Trump, Erdogan, Abe and Modi himself). In an interview he gave during the 2014 elections, Narendra Modi said: "My Hindutva face will be an asset in foreign affairs."

Four months after coming to power, the Modi administration's first major economic decision was to launch the *Make in India* campaign, a message that the Prime Minister used on his many trips around the world to attract foreign investment, whose inflow was facilitated by a number of reforms. The campaign was a success, with foreign direct investment rising from \$74 billion to \$102 billion a year, and the Indian economy becoming one of the fastest-growing in the world, ahead of China.

India is in the midst of its quest for economic, military and space power. In the global balance of power, it now stands at the crossroads of the United States and China, and this puts it in a particularly powerful position. Modi takes great care in strengthening ties between his government and Washington, while at the same time maintaining ties with Beijing. Today, India has the capacity to tip the balance.

Armed with this strategic position, Modi takes advantage of the opportunity to spread his ideology, promoting, for instance, Hindu hegemony in the guise of cultural traditions. In 2015, the United Nations General Assembly's unanimous acceptance of June 21 as World Yoga Day was a diplomatic success for Narendra Modi, completed the following year by the display on the entire façade of the United Nations headquarters of Happy Diwali – the Hindu festival of lights that marks Rama's victorious return to Ayodhya...

Thanks to powerful underground networks, this ideology of hatred has infused all strata of Indian society and extended its sphere of influence as far as the United States and Europe, giving rise to violent intercommunity brawls in the streets of Leicester and New Jersey.



CONTEXT

"I have paid the price for speaking the truth.", said Rahul Gandhi, the main opposition leader in India. On April 22, 2023, in front of the journalists, he was forced to vacate the government allotted bungalow he had been living in for almost 20 years, as a Wayanad MP. This member of the Indian National Congress, a legendary party that was founded in 1885 and of which he was president, lost his seat in Parliament (where he worked as a lawmaker), after he was sentenced to two years imprisonment for defamation back in March 2023.

His crime? He made a comment on Modi's surname.

Another target is the media. In mid-February, the authorities raided the BBC offices in Mumbai and New Delhi. The tax officials' raid came a few weeks after the broadcast in the UK of a documentary accusing Modi of having allowed anti-Muslim pogroms to take place in Gujarat in 2002, when he ruled this western state. Some 2,000 people perished in the massacres.

"Prior to this, several independent Indian news outlets and newspapers had been subjected to such raids", says Kunal Majumder, the India Representative of the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). What they have in common is that they both have been critical of Modi's government. As of May 1, 2023, six Indian journalists were rotting in jail, most of them under a draconian terrorism law that makes it virtually impossible to get out on bail before a trial.

These arbitrary arrests are the result of a paradigm shift happening in India.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi is a fervent advocate of Hindutva ideology and loyal to its parent organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Born in the 1920s, this movement, inspired by the Hitler Youth, promotes a Hindu India in which minorities, especially Muslims, are enemies of the nation.

In various states of the Indian Union, the authorities have undertaken to change the names of towns, streets and railway stations in order to enhance the country's historical and linguistic heritage. In many cases, these states are ruled by the Hindu nationalists of the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party). The name change is intended to rehabilitate the Hindu version of places that have taken on an Islamic sound throughout the seven to eight centuries of Muslim presence in the country.

These measures are just one aspect of a much broader trend, which has been in motion since the BJP returned to power in 2014.

Hindutva today – more than an ideology – is a "deep state", with its offshoots, its electoral wing, its national federations of students, women and trade unions, its "storm troopers" of volunteers and its cultural and religious wing, the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP).

Prime Minister Narendra Modi embodies the complexity of modern India, which combines its position as the world's third-largest economy with its radical Hindutva ideology.

In 1947, however, the founding fathers of an independent India favored an open understanding of nationhood, which they felt was the only way to embrace the immense diversity that in practice characterized the population of the new state.

In the wake of the 1947 Partition of India, which had brought interfaith violence to a head, this open-mindedness made it possible to welcome into the Indian nation the many Muslims who had not migrated to neighboring Pakistan. As a result, independent India adopted secularism, a variant of secularism that places all religions on an equal footing in relation to the state, with no preferential treatment for the majority Hindu faith.

Today, India has a much more restrictive conception of nationhood, based on the ideology of Hindutva (Hinduism). For the proponents of this ideology, Hindu culture alone defines the Indian nation and its identity.

Such a vision puts Christian and Muslim Indians on the spot. Hindutva proponents tend to see them as deviant Hindus, and expect them to assimilate to Hindu culture and revere the great symbols of Hinduism.

Unlike the founding fathers, who recognized India's plurality and adapted the idea of the nation and its institutions accordingly, Hindutva advocates are obsessed with unity and homogeneity.

They see the diversity and fragmentation of the Hindu religion as a serious weakness, which explains the recurrent and traumatic historical episodes of invasion and subjugation of the subcontinent by foreign forces, especially Muslim and British.

Finally, because they want to unify Hindus, Hindutva advocates point out scapegoats, portraying them as irreducibly threatening. In doing so, they demonize minorities whose faith is deemed "non-Indian" because they were born outside the subcontinent. Christianity and Islam are therefore stigmatized.

Hindutva proponents hold Muslims responsible for every ill that has ever befallen Hindus. They believe, for instance, that it was the Muslim conquests of the 13th century that put an end to the golden age of Hindu civilization. They accuse Indian Muslims of being pro-Pakistani, and rail against the favoritism they are said to have enjoyed during decades of Congressional rule.

To grasp the scale of the transformation that is taking place in India, we need to remember that this country is characterized by exceptional religious pluralism, whose survival seems to be under threat. While Hinduism accounts for 80% of the total population, Islam is a major religion in India. With 170 million believers, it makes this country the largest Muslim community in the world, behind Indonesia.

The rise of Hindu nationalism has resulted in a rejection of the religious diversity that the country has long prided itself on.

In the 1990s, the rise in power of the lower castes, and in particular their demand for an extension of "affirmative action" policies, led the Hindutva advocates to take the political field more seriously. The BJP, the political wing of this movement, won local victories, always in coalition with other parties, and its rise to prominence constituted an "Indian-style conservative revolution", a true "revenge of the elites".

The party's subsequent rise to central power is due to two interrelated factors: Narendra Modi's personality and his strategic choice to add a strong element of "national-populism" to the ethno-religious nationalism of Hindutva. As head of the state of Gujarat for thirteen years (2001-2014), Modi made it the laboratory for this national-populism as well as his personal "launching pad".

Not without some reservations coming from within his own party, due to his responsibility (at least by abstention) for the pogrom which, in February 2002, claimed the lives of 2,000 Muslims in his state and caused 125,000 of them to flee. The perpetrators of these massacres have never been prosecuted, and Modi has expressed neither remorse nor has he apologized, instead he has earned the title of "Emperor of Hindu Hearts".

Endowed with an oversized ego and a great friend of Donald Trump, he has developed a true cult of personality, quite contrary to traditional Hindutva culture. Like all populists, he presents himself as a man of the "people" (in fact, he comes from a modest family), a victim of the political, media and academic establishment.

Cultivating the amalgam between Islamism and Islam, he claims that Islamist terrorists are targeting him personally, if need be through staged attacks perpetrated by the police themselves. An American communications company was commissioned to promote his image (social media, holograms...). This would not have been enough to bring him to power in Delhi had he not tried and succeeded in a risky gamble: using ethno-religious polarization to minimize the social polarization that kept the poor out of the BJP vote. By diluting caste identities (which usually structure electoral choices), this ethno-religious polarization (all Hindus, regardless of caste, must unite against non-Hindus) enabled him to broaden his electorate downwards: middle-class voters were joined by those from the poor "neo-middle class" of new urbanites. Indeed, many poor people can identify with Hindu nationalism if they are pushed into fearing the other, and if this fear is transformed into anger, even hatred. He succeeded in imposing this strategy of radicalization on the party's old-timers, who thought that electoral victory required refocusing and alliances.

Since 2014, India has become an "ethnic democracy". This concept, coined by political scientists analyzing the Israeli regime, refers to a regime that remains democratic, but where citizens of the majority ethnic group have more rights than others.

While the 1950 Constitution gives all religions equal rights in the public sphere, official statements now refer to India as a "Hindu nation".



L'INDE DE MODI

NATIONAL-POPULISME ET DÉMOCRATIE ETHNIQUE

THE SPEAKERS



Rana Ayyub

She has been persecuted by Hindu groups for exposing Modi's involvement in the 2002 anti-Muslim attacks.



Christophe Jaffrelot

As a political scientist specializing in South Asia, India and Pakistan, he is the author of several books about India including *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy*.



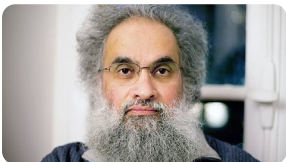
Raqib Hameed Naik

As a Kashmiri journalist who relocated to the United States, he is the founder of Hindutva Watch, a website that documents hate crimes and speeches against religious minorities in India.



Audrey Truschke

As a historian specializing in South Asia and an associate professor at Rutgers University, she is one of the world's leading experts on Indian history, particularly Hindu-Muslim relations.



Sanjay Subrahmanyam,

Historian and professor at the University of California, pioneer of world history, he was born in New-Dehli and specializes in South India.



Arundhati Roy

As the author of *The God of Small Things*, she is a political activist and is very critical of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi whom she accuses of stirring up hatred among communities.



Ashoka Mody

As an economist, visiting professor and lecturer at the Princeton University, he is the author of *India Is Broken A People Betrayed, Independence to Today*. He is extremely critical of all the economic policies that have been carried out in India since Independence, from Nehru to Modi.



Ramachandra Guha

Historian, author of the bestseller *India After Gandhi* - he lives in Bangalore. He is one of the leading experts on contemporary India. He himself has been arrested several times during anti-government protests.

THE DIRECTOR

Hugo Van Offel is a documentary director. He started out at CAPA TV, the French press agency and production company where he spent 7 years. He then became an independent filmmaker.

He has made films for France5, Arte, Al Jazeera, RTBF, Canal+ and Netflix.

He recently wrapped up a 4x52mn documentary series on Interpol's hunt for major environmental criminals ("**Planet Killers**") and a documentary for Le Monde en Face ("**Ukraine: le cout de la guerre**" (in French)) which focuses on the issue of armaments in the Ukrainian conflict. He has worked many times in India.



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