

**Book review: Christophe Jaffrelot: Modi's India
- Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic
Democracy; Princeton: Princeton University Press
2021. ISBN 978-0-6912-2309-4**

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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Rezension / review

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Nandan, A. (2022). Book review: Christophe Jaffrelot: Modi's India - Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy; Princeton: Princeton University Press 2021. ISBN 978-0-6912-2309-4. *International Quarterly for Asian Studies (IQAS)*, 53(2), 313-315. <https://doi.org/10.11588/iqas.2022.2.19769>

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science audience – rather than a legal audience – this book achieves an admirable feat. It engages with a broad range of important and emerging policy issues that lie at the crossroads of the BRI and the law of the sea and serves as one of the few publications to address this research area, which will continue to grow in significance.

Tom Narins

CHRISTOPHE JAFFRELOT, *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy*. Translated by Cynthia Schoch. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021. 656 pages, \$35.00. ISBN 978-0-6912-2309-4 (eBook)

Christophe Jaffrelot is among those scholars who have acutely analysed, and been critical of, the changes in the realm of politics and society in India over the last three decades. His book *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy* is an extensive reflection on the historical curve and rise of Hindu nationalism, as one of the longest sustained campaigns in Indian democracy, culminating in the triumph of Hindutva, the saffronisation of institutions as well as the state apparatus, and the making of a populist and divisive politician in Narendra Modi, the current Prime Minister of India. Therefore, any assessment by Jaffrelot of Hindu nationalism and the rise of Modi must be located in a much broader space; political, social or cultural spaces alone will not help us to understand the expanse, ideology and the actual working of the Hindutva ideology that remains key to Modi's success.

Modi's India is equally useful in tracing Jaffrelot's articulation of "the rise of ethnic democracy", which is not only a consequence of deficiencies in the acceptance of democratic frameworks, but is also the product of a series of intensely fought elections, fierce battles over sites, rituals and spaces, and a polarising debate over the meaning of secularism and democracy. The book details that in India the decay of inclusive democracy and rise of ethnic democracy is not just a feature of the past few years or even decades but is the result of a long drawn-out campaign and the socio-political assertion of Hindu majoritarian notions supported by fundamentalists as well as self-proclaimed non-partisan Hindus.

The book is divided into three parts and eleven chapters. The first part of the book begins by giving a brief account of shifts in democratic politics and further outlines almost every major political issue linked with the Hindu nationalist movement from the 1990s onwards and the rise of Narendra Modi as a populist leader from the early 2000s. Jaffrelot emphasises that the intertwining

of Hindutva with populism has become more evident since Narendra Modi was projected as the prime face of the BJP in electoral politics.

Part two of the book, focusing on the alchemy of Hindutva and populism, meticulously details the creation of an ethnic democracy on the premise of the homogenisation project in the nation-state. This form of homogenisation has been assertively dividing Indian society into “pure people (nationalist)” and “corrupt citizens (anti-nationalist)”, furthering the discourse of “Us vs Them”. In the post-2014 era, after the election of Narendra Modi to the office of prime minister, democratic principles have been washed away with the establishment an ethnicisation model in which a majority enjoys more rights than the minorities, both *de facto* and *de jure*.

The central argument of the third part of the book focuses on a form of authoritarianism, founded on the principles of majoritarian nationalism, that has communally polarised Indian society by manipulating independent institutions, using media for political propaganda and unleashing campaigns for the further marginalisation and terrorisation of Muslims, in particular, and any other group or individual that contests the authoritarians of the Hindu *rastra* (nation).

The strength of the book lies in Jaffrelot’s impressive scholarship, distinctive documentation and rich observation of changes that have taken place in the social, political, cultural and economic realm. The book is not a mere description of events or even an analysis of democracy in decline but an extremely poignant take on the deterioration of social morality, institutional values and republican principles. However, while the author expounds in detail on the centralisation of power and the attacks on the proponents of secularism, free speech, social justice and liberal values in universities, the book does not adequately cover the forms and extent of resistance against the neutralisation of the opposition, a neutralisation that is carried out in the name of promoting Hindu nationalism.

PM Modi’s policies have been challenged and torn apart by several academics and free thinkers in India, and their efforts to oppose a malicious and increasingly authoritarian regime deserve elaboration. At the same time, students at many universities in India have been combating the onslaught of an institutionalised Hindutva. Protests against Modi’s most ambitious project, the Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019, in combination with the proposed all-India National Register of Citizens, have been not just political and intellectual opposition but also a form of defiance of an unconstitutional law by the commoners, spearheaded by women and students.¹

It is in this sense that the book is a one-sided (yet extremely meticulous and extensively researched) narration by the author, who portrays the very harsh reality of present-day India and a decidedly worrisome future. Undeniably Jaffrelot is correct in pointing out that in the Indian version of ethnic democracy the state promotes a majoritarian version of history, identity construction and legal

interpretation – even as non-state actors, such as vigilante groups from the Hindu majority, have become coercive agents of cultural policing, trolling and religious fundamentalism in both physical and virtual spaces.

He also notes that the longer the Modi regime remains in power, the higher the chances that the separation between the actions of the majoritarian state and of non-state actors will further diminish. Thus, the book stimulates questions that need to be addressed by those Indian citizens who believe in the foundations of a righteous republic: Can there be a concrete opposition to this form of authoritarianism? What forms of socio-political alliances are required to stall the ethnicisation of democracy? And how do we contribute to a compassionate humanitarian society?

Aniket Nandan

1 The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) of 2019 provides citizenship to religious minorities from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan, but it excludes Muslims from these countries. The Act also defines illegal immigrants as foreigners without valid documents and subject to punitive action. Opponents of the bill view it as exclusionary and a violation of the secular principles enshrined in the constitution. According to them religious faith cannot be made a condition of citizenship or its refusal. The CAA is also linked to the National Register of Citizens (NRC) which is a list of people who can prove citizenship of India. A large section of scholars of Indian politics have viewed that the implementation of the nationwide NRC will divide the immigrant population into two categories: (predominantly) Muslims, who will be deemed illegal migrants, and all others, who would have been deemed illegal migrants, but are now immunised by the Citizenship Amendment Bill if they can prove that their country of origin is Afghanistan, Bangladesh or Pakistan. For more information on these acts, please see: <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-citizenship-amendment-act-nrc-cao-means-6180033> (accessed 15 July 2022).

JYOTI GULATI BALACHANDRAN, *Narrative Pasts: The Making of a Muslim Community in Gujarat, c. 1400–1650*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2020. 248 pages, £45.00. ISBN 978-0-1901-2399-4

Narrative Pasts studies the different ways in which Muslim communities of medieval Gujarat imagined their history through commemorative texts, spiritual networks and architectural monuments. The book moves beyond the Delhi-centric historiography and the state-focused narratives of the Muslim past. Jyoti Balachandran fully acknowledges the importance of the formation of the Gujarat Sultanate as central to the functioning of the Muslim community in the region, but she rightly adds that there were multiple historical processes – Sufi textual production, organisation of Sufi orders, construction of shrine complexes – that impacted each other and are therefore equally significant for understanding the history and experiences of Muslims in medieval Gujarat.

The book provides a social history of the region, a history in which centre stage is taken not by those in political power, but by the Sufis, their disciples and