

COMPARATIVE POLITICS

India before Modi: How the BJP Came to Power. By Vinay Sitapati. London: Hurst & Company, 2021. 400p. \$25.00 paper.

Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy. By Christophe Jaffrelot. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021. 656p. \$35.00 cloth.
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India, the world's largest and, until now, the most unlikely democracy, has witnessed tectonic political changes in the last 10 years: the country has replaced its historically secular nationalism with religious nationalism and its vigorous democracy with competitive authoritarianism. Christophe Jaffrelot's *Modi's India* and Vinay Sitapati's *India before Modi* are the most sophisticated, comprehensive chronicles to date of these contemporary changes.

To genuinely understand the ascendance of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the national political party that mainstreamed Hindu nationalism in India, one must first understand the country's social cleavages and the history of its political system. Both Jaffrelot's and Sitapati's introductory chapters nicely summarize India's political evolution from independence until the national ascendance of Narendra Modi in 2014. From the 1950s to 1970s, India's nascent democracy continued to function through a dominant Congress Party led by urban, upper-caste elites in the central government and rural, upper-caste elites in villages. During this time, rural elites frustrated the socialist imperatives of the Nehruvian Congress.

Both books emphasize that a new phase of Indian politics emerged in the 1980s, when middle castes (referred to by their constitutional moniker "Other Backward Classes," or OBCs) mobilized to gain political power. Jaffrelot describes middle-caste defection from Congress's system of control as India's "silent revolution." The middle castes' bid to gain control of the Indian state spurred on a counterrevolutionary reaction by upper-caste elites that heralded the rise of the BJP as a national political force. After Indira Gandhi's Emergency of 1975–77, the Mandal Commission recommended the expansion of "positive discrimination" by making government civil service jobs available to OBCs; it recommended that the proportion of prestigious civil service jobs allocated to groups other than upper castes increase from 22% to 49%. The 1990 implementation of this recommendation was followed by an upper-caste revolt: "While middle castes supported the decision, upper castes were noisily against it. A government job was one of the few paths to social mobility. And faced with reduced avenues upper-caste students, many

from poorer backgrounds, brought cities to a standstill" (Sitapati, p. 157). At the same time, the middle castes defected from the Congress Party's system of political control: "Many OBCs stopped voting for upper-caste notables and instead sent representatives from their own social milieu to parliament. Thus, long kept on the margins of power, the uneducated usually rural masses became a force to be reckoned with in the political arena" (Jaffrelot, p. 4).

India before Modi and *Modi's India* investigate two distinct time periods of the BJP's ascendance. Vinay Sitapati's impressively readable monograph chronicles the rise of a more moderate BJP before Narendra Modi won Gujarat's reelection in 2004, whereas Jaffrelot's detailed tome discusses the rise of what almost all scholars agree is a fundamentally new period in Indian political history under the leadership of Narendra Modi: first an "ethnic democracy" and, in more recent years, a competitive authoritarian system.

Sitapati tells the story of India before Modi through the prism of the friendship between Atal Vajpayee and Lal Krishna Advani, arguing that they together led the BJP to national power by playing the liberal good cop (Vajpayee) and the Hindutva bad cop (Advani) to assuage both moderate voters and Hindu nationalists. They forged a 1971 pact that emphasized the social movement Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's (RSS) radicalism for its movement's base and BJP moderation for the more moderate public. Sitapati (p. 73) states, "It is hard to overestimate the impact of this 'deal.' For the next three decades, political Hinduism would run its politics based on this presumption: that while Hindutva would energize the cadre, the party needed to dilute its ideology to appeal to moderate Hindus and win power."

India before Modi argues that the friendship between Vajpayee and Advani—particularly its ability to navigate both the structural tensions of appealing to RSS cadres and mainstream voters and several reversals of fortune between Advani and Vajpayee—is crucial to understanding the BJP's political fortunes before 2004. Part I details the early careers of these leaders and the evolution of the organizations they participated in, whereas part II describes the dance of moderation between Vajpayee and Advani in the corridors of national power. When the BJP first gained national power in 1998, it was on the back of economic distress and demographic anxieties among Hindus about the higher birth rates of Muslims. A collection of Hindu organizations known as the Sangh Parivar channeled this anxiety and economic dislocation into anti-Muslim sentiment, with attendant violence steadily paralleling its organizational growth.

The final part of *India before Modi* shows how the Advani–Vajpayee friendship succeeded in bringing the

BJP to power in 1998 by projecting a moderate Hindutva ideology. At this same time, however, another pair of younger leaders, Narendra Modi and Amit Shah, were experimenting with “jointly seeking to convert Hindu anxiety into votes by preaching caste equality along a united front against Muslims” (Sitapati, p. 125). When India’s most serious episode of violence since independence broke out in Gujarat, the Hindu hardliner Advani defended Modi while Vajpayee rejected Modi’s approach. It is striking that when Prime Minister Vajpayee summoned Modi to Delhi, Modi “came armed not with contrition, but with an opinion poll predicting that if elections were conducted in Gujarat immediately (rather than a year later, when they were scheduled), the BJP would win two-thirds of the assembly seats” (Sitapati, p. 269). When these Machiavellian methods of political polarization succeeded in both energizing the base and appealing to moderate voters, the RSS pushed to promote Modi to a leadership position in the BJP. The Vajpayee–Advani leadership of the BJP was thus ultimately eclipsed entirely by the rise of Modi.

India before Modi is a riveting and compelling read. Its core scholarly arguments emphasize the role of democracy in strengthening Hindu nationalism and how (ideological and organizational) unity was the most crucial element to the BJP’s early political success. The book also contributes greatly to our understanding of how the social movement RSS was a key driver of the BJP’s early political fortunes. Both Advani and Vajpayee came to the BJP from the RSS, as did many of the BJP top brass. Both leaders were immersed in the RSS’s reading of history, its consequent strong focus on ideological unity, and its organizational prowess. The RSS was founded by individuals who identified the lack of unity between Hindu castes as the primary impediment to national greatness. Its organizational aims were thus the mainstreaming of Hinduism in the Indian national imagination by creating intercaste unity and by targeting Muslims. To that end, RSS set up a national political party, first the Jana Sangh, and, in 1980, the BJP.

Sitapati could have done more to signal his argument that what makes the BJP–RSS such a powerful combination in contemporary Indian politics is their shared reading of national history. It is only on the very last page of the book, in a separate section titled “Why Does the BJP Win?” that Sitapati (p. 309) concludes, “The secret sauce of the BJP, as well as the RSS, was their unbending focus on unity.” Even for the nonscholarly reader, starting the book with this narrative would have been helpful.

A more consistent conceptual argument would have also benefited Jaffrelot’s meticulously detailed *Modi’s India*, a book that picks up just where *India before Modi* ends. Jaffrelot’s core argument is that Modi has been able to resolve the core tension that Vajpayee and Advani juggled; namely, how to simultaneously appeal to the

Hindutva-oriented base *and* the moderate Indian voter and transform India into an “ethnic democracy” after 2014 and into a competitive authoritarian regime in 2019.

Jaffrelot argues that Modi effectively appeals to both the Hindutva base and moderate voter because of Modi’s demographic and individual characteristics, innovative strategies, and organizational prowess. Modi’s characteristics include his OBC caste status, which positioned him “as an outsider and a clean man rooted in the Indian soil” (Jaffrelot, p. 151); his oratorical charisma; and his willingness to politically advance the agenda of the upper castes who “wanted to continue their climb up the social ladder by moving from reservations in the public sector to private enterprise, as they believed Modi had done in Gujarat” (Jaffrelot, p. 154). Modi’s innovative tactics included combining personalist populism with Hindu nationalism and his savvy use of holograms and videoconferencing that allowed him to reach unprecedented numbers, in one case more than seven million people in 12 days (Jaffrelot, p. 96). He had organizational command of “vote mobilizers,” a network of individuals personally devoted to Modi that he built with the help of an organizational called Citizens for Accountable Governance: “The Sangh Parivar was not the forefront; Modi’s team of professional campaigners and individual supporters was” (Jaffrelot, p. 97). The RSS did back Modi, but Jaffrelot argues that the Bajrang Dal, a 1980s youth movement deputized by Modi’s support network, was the most important grassroots movement powering Modi’s rise.

Although this analysis is very detailed, it is not always clear which factors were the most significant in propelling Modi’s ascent. It would have been especially helpful to present which factors were particularly important in Modi’s rise, especially when many leaders around the world have similarly combined majoritarian nationalism with populism. And given Sitapati’s work that highlights the key organizational role of RSS–BJP unity, how enduring will the influence of the Bajrang Dal be compared to the pivotal role of the RSS?

In the later sections of the book, Jaffrelot describes how India became a “de facto ethnic democracy” after 2014, in which ethnic Hindus have come to define the national identity and non-Hindus are definitionally second-class citizens. Although the state mainstreams Hindu national symbols and practices, a range of vigilante groups are deputized to demonize not just minority Christians and Muslims but also any opposition. As in Sitapati’s work, Jaffrelot singles out educational institutes and the content they produce to legitimize Modi’s Hindu nationalism: “Before 2019, the key players [in the move to authoritarianism] were Hindu nationalist vigilante groups... [who] were thus the main actors of anti-Muslim violence” (Jaffrelot, p. 404).

Modi’s second national electoral victory in 2019 ushered in a new era of competitive authoritarianism in

which the state itself has adopted an anti-Muslim agenda, implemented through new acts of parliament such as the Citizenship Amendment Act (directly targeting Muslim migrants) and the abrogation of Article 370—which subjects primarily Muslim citizens in Kashmir to a complete assault on their civil liberties, press freedoms, and even torture. Elections are now performative in India because the very rights that make such elections meaningful—the voicing of dissent and the organization of meaningful opposition—are severely curtailed through the weakening of democratic institutions ranging from the Right to Information processes, the Election Commission, the parliament, and the Supreme Court. Combined with the severe weakening of the free press through intimidation and fear, India is today a competitive authoritarian regime.

Jaffrelot's detailed account of Modi's rise will no doubt be the go-to scholarly resource for understanding contemporary India's political transformations. At nearly 500 pages with more than 100 pages of notes, this meticulous accounting of Modi's rise provides a sobering account of India's democratic future. Follow-up research should engage the question of what has made Modi a particularly successful nationalist populist, one whose popularity shows little sign of electoral decline. Another unresolved question, given the highly personalized appeal of Modi, is whether voter loyalty to him can be transferred to another BJP leader. If Modi disappeared tomorrow, could Amit Shah take his place, just as Advani was able to supplant Vajpayee? This is likely a question for the distant future because Narendra Modi is firmly entrenched as the leader of the world's second-largest competitive authoritarian country.

Rioting for Representation: Local Ethnic Mobilization in Democratizing Countries. By Risa J. Toha. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 355p. \$120.00 cloth.
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Like many new democracies in postcolonial countries, Indonesia's transition at the end of the last century witnessed episodes of interethnic violence. That violence was not evenly distributed throughout Indonesia, however: important variation existed across both time and space. The uneven explosion of ethnic riots during Indonesia's early democratic years is the focus of Risa Toha's new book, *Rioting for Representation*.

The systematic study of ethnic riots had its first regional center of gravity with work on India by Paul Brass, Ashutosh Varshney, and Steven Wilkinson. This work was implicitly scope-condition-limited by the established democratic institutions of India's postindependence history, albeit ones inhabited by local elites willing to employ

violence for political gain. By contrast, more recent work on Indonesia has had to focus on constantly evolving institutional dynamics, from late autocracy to new democracy. It is on this latter period in Indonesia that Toha's analysis focuses attention.

In initial multiparty elections—especially in multiethnic regions in which a former autocratic ruling party was long dominant—local ethnic elites look to electoral results as signals of how inclusive institutions are likely to be to minority interests. Here, *Rioting for Representation* presents two important and broad contributions to the study of ethnic politics. First, Toha is insistent that the origins of riots are to be found at the local level—dynamics of incumbent and excluded ethnic elites, capacity for mobilization, and whether local institutions accommodate demands by the excluded are absolutely central. Second, she makes use of a common but understudied form of inclusion: the creation and proliferation of new local administrative units. In the same way that American congressional districts may take a form intended to enhance representation for minorities, Toha argues that the same is true in the spatial administrative makeup of new democracies. The difference in the Indonesian context is that these units were often created to serve as a vehicle of inclusion for communal minorities, replacing quotas or ethnic party representation in local legislatures.

Building on Albert Hirschman's iconic Exit, Voice, and Loyalty model (1970), Toha suggests that local electoral competitiveness, and the capacity for ethnic groups to mobilize, shape the decisions elites make about whether to employ violence as a postelection signal demanding group representation. In short, she argues that they do so only when (1) they perceive regular, if new, political channels to be ineffective and (2) their mobilizing resources are sufficient for the task of organizing violence. "Loyalty," in this framework, is passivity in the face of electoral loss or exclusion. "Voice" may take the form of violence if not rewarded in elections. "Exit," finally, is available to the extent that local actors can seek (and obtain) new administrative units or better representation in other existing ones. In Toha's words, "violence can be expected during a political transition when formal political channels fail to usher in the accommodation desired by excluded local actors and when local networks can be readily mobilized to unleash violence" (p. 33). This elegant proposition is broken down into eleven testable implications, which form the basis for the empirical layout of the book.

That empirical design begins with chapter 5, after two chapters that develop the historical dynamics of regime, institutional change, and ethnic politics up to the collapse of the New Order in 1998. Chapters 3 and 4 lay out how ethnicity came to matter in Indonesian regions, how the New Order regime used local ethnic elites to help to augment its rule, and how that varied according to the level of diversity within districts. In short, the Golkar