

India Turns an Electoral Autocracy

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ABSTRACT

This article is a critical appraisal to the findings of Sweden based Institute V-Dem¹, the Democracy Report 2021 “Autocratization Turns Viral”. This report elucidates that India is no more among the list of democratic countries, terming India as an “Electoral Autocracy”. This statistically quantified analysis puts a big question mark on the face of Indian democracy where human rights are no more respected. The Indian democratic backsliding has largely occurred due to Modi’s promotion of Hindu-nationalist agenda that has hollowed Indian democracy leading country to a polarized and intolerant society. Personality cults have historically been the hallmarks of totalitarian regimes. The cult of Modi has been complemented by a deepening majoritarianism, as the ruling party assaults and threatens religious minorities in its effort to build a theocratic Hindu state. Empirically the study focuses on critical analysis of this report while discussing Hindutva Ideology and Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). The present research tries to answer the question how current situation of democratic backsliding will impact Indian politics. The paper will argue the impact it has vis-a-viz regional and global peace.

Keywords: V-Dem Report, Autocratization, Democratic Backsliding, Electoral Autocracy, Hindutva, Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA)

Introduction

In the modern history, the world’s so called largest democracy with 1.4 billion people has lost the freedom of expression and has fallen down from democracy to electoral autocracy- reveals the V-Dem Report 2021. It finds out how human right abuses and atrocities have become a common practice largely followed the typical array for countries in the “Third Wave of Autocratization” over the past ten years: a steady corrosion where freedom of the media², academia, and civil society were

¹ Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute is an Independent organization working at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. It produces largest dataset on democracy (based on local knowledge yet meets global standards) with almost 30 million data points for 202 countries from 1789 till date. can be reached at <https://www.v-dem.net/>

² India remains one of the most dangerous countries in the world for the journalists. It ranks at 142 according to World Press Freedom Index

abridged first and to the greatest extent. The Hindutva centered BJP's policy, in conjunction with the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) from 1967, conceived about 50 years ago and modified in August 2019 and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) has generated a toxic tree. This situation is even more disturbing in unprecedented times of pandemic.

The V-Dem Report finds out that India has slipped from top 50% of the 180 countries to the bottom 50%. The autocratic regime types dominate 68% of the world population. After this report, Indian claim to establish its soft image across the globe on the basis of the largest democracy in the world is utterly tarnished.

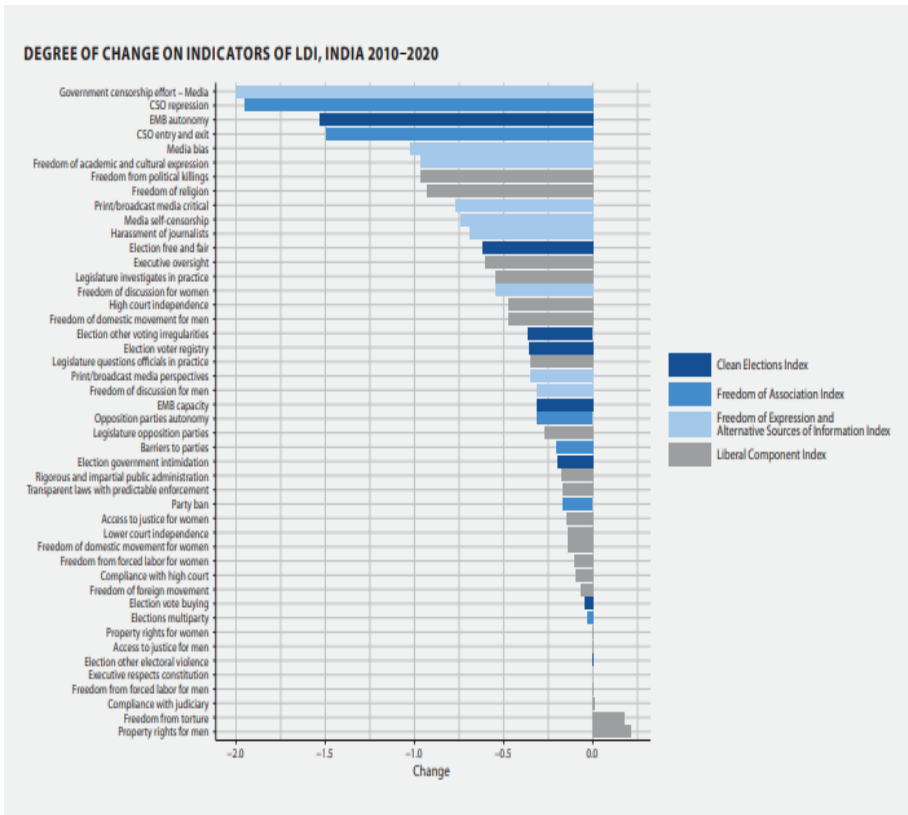
Table: Top 10 Autocratizing Countries, 2010-2020

	CHANGE	LDI 2010	LDI 2020	REGIME TYPE 2010	REGIME TYPE 2020
1 Poland	-0.34	0.83	0.49	Liberal Democracy	Electoral Democracy
2 Hungary	-0.32	0.68	0.37	Electoral Democracy	Electoral Autocracy
3 Turkey	-0.29	0.40	0.11	Electoral Democracy	Electoral Autocracy
4 Brazil	-0.28	0.79	0.51	Electoral Democracy	Electoral Democracy
5 Serbia	-0.27	0.51	0.24	Electoral Democracy	Electoral Autocracy
6 Benin	-0.26	0.55	0.29	Electoral Democracy	Electoral Autocracy
7 India	-0.23	0.57	0.34	Electoral Democracy	Electoral Autocracy
8 Mauritius	-0.23	0.73	0.50	Liberal Democracy	Electoral Democracy
9 Bolivia	-0.18	0.41	0.231	Electoral Democracy	Electoral Autocracy
10 Thailand	-0.17	0.34	0.17	Electoral Autocracy	Closed Autocracy

Source: Democracy Broken Down: India. In Autocratization Turns Viral. Democracy Report 2021. P. 23. Retrieved from https://www.v-dem.net/static/website/files/dr/dr_2021.pdf

The study by Pillai & Lindberg, (2021: 20) show “India’s level of liberal democracy is registered at 0.34 by the end of 2020 after a steep decline since its high at 0.57 in 2013. It represents a 23% point drop on the 0 to 1 LDI scale, making it one of the most dramatic shifts among all countries in the world over the past 10 years, alongside autocratizing countries like Brazil, Hungary, and Turkey. The latter two became (electoral) autocracies in 2018 and 2014 respectively, and India now joins their ranks”.

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Source: Democracy Broken Down: India. In Autocratization Turns Viral. Democracy Report 2021. P. 23. Retrieved from https://www.v-dem.net/static/website/files/dr/dr_2021.pdf

What is an Electoral Autocracy?

In the modern times, it is pretty hard to classify political regimes. *De-Jure* multi-party elections with universal suffrage are commonly observed in most of the regimes. There are certainly the countries where elections certify that political rulers remain accountable to electorate. However in others, they are mere windows dressing exercise for authoritarian politics. Therefore, it requires to base regime classification on the de-facto implementation of democratic institutions and processes. This is how discrepancy can be found between the electoral democracies and electoral autocracies. It is a system of governance in which people have this impression that they are at the helm of affairs.

V-Dem data helps to categorize regime types/ classification.

Closed Autocracy	Electoral Autocracy	Electoral Democracy	Liberal Democracy
No <i>de-facto</i> multiparty, or free and fair elections, or Dahl's institutional prerequisites not minimally fulfilled		<i>De-facto</i> multiparty, free and fair elections, and Dahl's institutional prerequisites minimally fulfilled	
No multiparty elections for the chief executive or the legislature	<i>De-jure</i> multiparty elections for the chief executive and the legislature	The rule of law, or liberal principles not satisfied	The rule of law, and liberal principles satisfied

Source: Lührmann, Anna, Tannenber, Marcus & Lindberg, Staffan I. (2018). Regimes of the World (RoW): Opening New Avenues for the Comparative Study of Political Regimes. Vol. 6 (1). Politics and Governnace. Pp. 60-70

Electoral autocracies hold *de-facto* multiparty elections for the chief executive; however they fail to meet democratic standards having substantial irregularities, restrictions on party competition or other violations of Dahl's institutional provisions for democracies. To be reckoned as electoral democracies, countries not only have to hold *de-facto* free and fair and multiparty elections, but also— based on Robert Dahl's famous articulation of "Polyarchy" as electoral democracy (Coppedge, Lindberg, Skaaning, & Teorell, 2016: 580-593; Dahl, 1971, 1998)—accomplish a satisfactory level of institutional guarantees of democracy such as freedom of association, suffrage, clean elections, an elected executive, and freedom of expression (Lührmann, Tannenber & Lindberg, 2018: 61) .

The democracies regression has come across new ways of backsliding. The 20th century witnesses this regression to authoritarian mainly through the military coups, e.g; Thailand and Mayanmnar (more recently). The Madisonian traditions show that democratically elected governments are checked by a number of ways that is a conception of liberal democracies. However the conception of democracy is entirely different things and that is most likely a Majoritarian tradition. The main idea lies behind this conception is that the majority should not be checked by the deep states. The contemporary history witnesses backsliding through a different increased notion of democracy in which the majority should more or less be utterly abandoned.

Democratic Backsliding in India

The democratic regimes have been under threat since 1992 whereas autocratization is in move even before that. This issue has been well explained by Tomini (2021: 1191-1201) in her article titled, "Don't think of a wave!" (DTW). There was a similar piece published by Skaaning (2020: 1533-1542) titled "Waves of autocratization and democratization" (WAD). These pieces of research widely help establishing the opinion how the waves of autocratization can be defined and measured when democracy faces backsliding. B. R. Ambedkar (1891-1956), in a speech in November 1949, he observed that "in politics, Bhakti or hero-worship is a guaranteed highway to dilapidation and to subsequent autocracy and authoritarianism." Invoking John Stuart Mill, Ambedkar warned his compatriots

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not to “lay their liberties at the feet of even a great man, or to trust him with powers which enable him to subvert their institutions”. The greatest enigma regarding Indian democracy is that Indian liberal democracy remains under threat and eventually we find V-Dem 2021 report where India has been listed in the countries with electoral Autocracy. The main factor being the harsh policies adopted by BJP for the minorities and specifically for Muslims through discriminatory restrictions aggravated with Covid-19 restrictions.

In contemporary times, it is not a demographic fact that a majority of Indians are Hindu rather a governing premise. It is a country where journalists are put behind the bars if they oppose the government’s stance. The country has emerged as a divided society, where Muslims remain an unwelcomed faction of the society and where the farmers are beaten for defending their rights. The current state of democratic backsliding in India owes to human rights denial, which is the fundamental democratic principle that talks about equality of all.

Hindutva Ideology

Hindutva ideology gains traction under BJP, triggering the violent animosity between Hindus and Muslims of India. Vinayak Damodar Savarkar coined the term “Hindutva”, in 1923, which means “Hinduness”. Today it has emerged as a cultural representation of India as a Hindu nation, used widely by Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) Ideologues. Since coming to power in 2014, Modi has transformed India into a majoritarian Hindu-state.—one that demonizes its minority groups, emasculates civil liberties, and crushes dissent (Serhan, 2021). The surge of Hindu nationalism has been influenced by the ideology of Hindutva, in the so-called secular Indian polity.

Hindutva is the political manifestation of Hindu religion which has been exploited by few Hindu radicals for their political motives. But such behaviors do not fit in the modern democracies. Lyla, (2020) writes that the history narrates; this is how the democracies are sabotaged from within, through populist but authoritative figures. There is more freedom of speech for Hindutva-led parties whether they are civil society organizations or political. The freedom of speech for any other alternative has been curbed under current BJP government. Under the charge of defamation, about 7000 prisoners are in jail. There is no space for the people having secular ideas. This state of affairs has shut down the political spaces for the politicians who are critical to BJP regime.

We would quote a book here of Amartya Sen ‘A Quantum Leap in the Wrong Direction’? which evaluates the assurances and strategies of the current BJP-led government. The social inequality is inbred in Hindutva that would eventually transform into an economic inequality. Also he says that there is a close liaison between the Hindutva and the notion that the numbers do not matter. The deplorable thing is that even in Hindutva philosophy; even some people do not matter as well (*The Hindu*, 2019, February 27). Modi does not have the “breadth of vision” about a multi-religious and multiethnic India. Modi came to power by

defeating a dynastic founding party and after 65 years, a new blood was seen in the country's politics but the time proved that the new leadership style itself is not less than a threat to world's largest democracy. However with the passage of time, he strengthened his pro-Hindutva stance and apex was seen in 2019 elections. He inhibited large number of eligible voters (2016 State elections), from the electoral roll unless they provide documentation of their residency (That could generate a new influx of immigrants). The underline motive was to wipe out the non-Indians. The BJP, eventually, started putting bar on Muslim immigrants (coming from Bangladesh between 1951 and 1971). After his victory in 2019 elections, BJP continued to expel the so called "Illegal Infiltrators". It is astounding that most immigrants can attain the citizenship and legal status but not Muslims.

However, democracy in theory is different than democracy in practice. In Modi's India, the government has weaponized the country's police and courts in a bid to silence its critics. Serhan (2021) in her article writes about "Gujarat Files: Anatomy of a cover up", published by Rana Ayub. This book became one of the best sellers and currently it is being adapted in to documentary feature, to be released in year 2022. The book talks about the hushed face of the state, how the country is under a state of emergency.

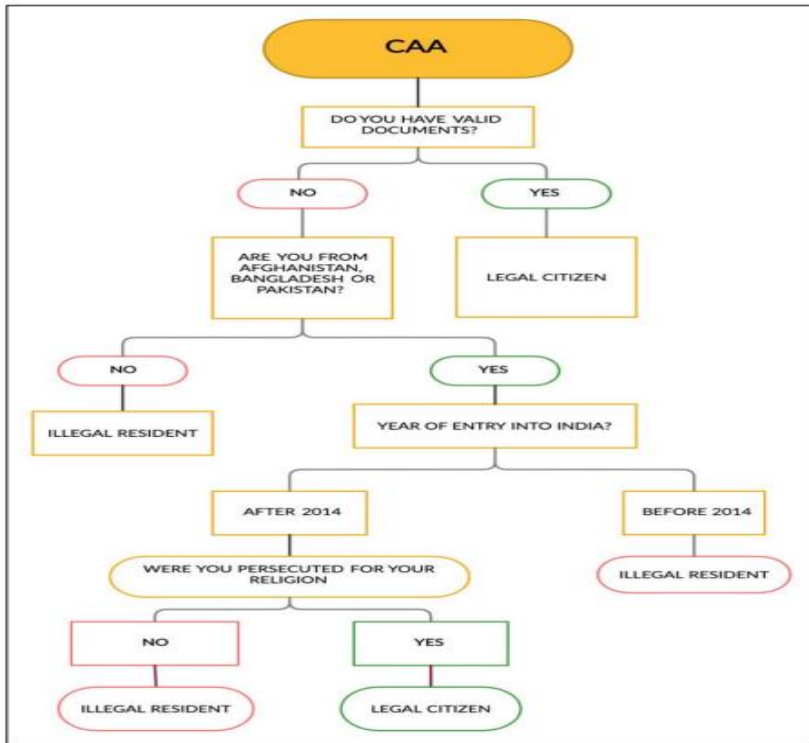
The BJP has worked through a nationalist agenda, based on the staunch principle of Hindutva. Its ideology is based on the philosophy that India should be a Hindu state, based on Hinduism and Hindu values. The ideology of Hindutva has been inculcated in the school curriculum. This policy is a question mark on Indian claims of secularism, promotes an orthodox medieval mindset and serves to intensify the religious nationalism leading to socio-political polarization. This philosophy, combined with a popular electorate slogan and the rise to power of Hindu right including BJP as its political agenda is one of the greatest threats to regional peace.

Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA)

Since re-elections in 2019, the BJP has approved and implemented several discriminatory acts and policies to stimulate its political identity as pro-Hindu and anti-Muslim/minority political party.

- 1) Revocation of Article 370- On August 5, 2019
- 2) Implementation of CAA- On December 11, 2019

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Source: Binder, Natalie Elizabeth. (2020). Hindu nationalism fueling strife: How India's Citizenship Amendment Act Impacts the Indo-Pakistani Kashmir Conflict. M.A Thesis. Iowa State University Ames, Iowa

In August 2019, the Indian government revoked the Article 370 (that dates back to 1947) which provided special status to the state of Jammu and Kashmir. This law, putting bans on non-permanent residents applies to the refugees from six religious communities³. It has revealed a new face of Indian authoritarianism. The country has witnessed large scale protest at every level and it has been widely criticized due to its discriminatory nature as it excludes the Muslim minority sects. This mechanism is considered as an assault on the sectarian fabric of the so called secular state of India.

The CAA has its roots embedded within Indian politics. It recapitulates the BJP's deliberations, which is symbolized as a majoritarian, xenophobic, anti-minority philosophy of Hindu supremacism. Though the CAA will have domestic implications yet the million dollar question is what repercussions South Asia and India's extended neighborhood may face in the coming days. The BJP government under Modi might have thought that trade and people-to-people contact would help pacify the situation. However there is many a slip between cup and the lips. It is no

³ Hindu, Christian, Sikh, Jain, Zoroastrian, and Buddhist, For details see, Shreya Upadhyay. (2020, January 31). Regional Fallout of India's Citizenship Amendment Act. Retrieved from <https://southasianvoices.org/regional-fallout-of-indias-citizenship-amendment-act/>

denying fact that the CAA has stimulated a hornet's nest. A clear deep split within India and global community has emerged as the country faced nationwide protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act 2019 (CAA). The international media has been criticizing how CAA has damaged Indian foreign policy and global position eventually.

India does not enjoy good relations with its neighbors. The aggressor attitude of Indian relations with all its neighbors has exposed it as an aggressor state, eventually emanating threat for the security, peace and stability of South Asian region (Ali, 2020). The historic rivalry with its neighbors will not only generate challenges for Indian diplomacy in the region, rather it would have adversarial consequences for the Indian diaspora in the future. The most immediate repercussion could be the effect on Bangladesh relations with India. The country needs to grasp its Act East and "Neighborhood First" policies, because it is crucial for peace and stability in its northeastern region that borders Bangladesh. Delhi-Dhaka tensions over the CAA could have at least some negative economic impact for India.

The CAA has been strongly opposed by Pakistan whereas the National Assembly of the Country passed the resolution to revoke the discriminatory clauses of the Act. Speaking at the Global Forum on Refugees in Geneva, Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan **cautioned** if the situation prevails, a "refugee crisis" in the Sub-Continent cannot be averted. Subsequently OIC has not been that vocal as compared to small Muslim nations like Malaysia, Turkey, Iran, Qatar, and Indonesia. Undoubtedly, India has extended its diplomatic relations with Middle East and Gulf but now its policies would certainly hamper its interests both at regional and global level.

The functioning of democratic institutions has been undermined by Modi as he has brutally used the tools of state power. The media has been under his control. He has tamed the media, set the tax authorities on his political opponents and jailed dozens of human-rights activists. He has also sought, with some success, to bring under his control previously independent institutions such as the army, the central bank, the election commission and the higher judiciary (Guha, 2021). Hindutva is a political Hinduism whereas Hinduism is a different religion. Therefore building Modi's politics around this very notion is inflating nationalism and self-pride in India, which is hyper-nationalism. There is no country in the world that has progressed on the basis of hyper-nationalism. It was the hyper-nationalism that led the world towards 1st and 2nd World Wars and all other wars.

Contemporary India is not without economic challenges. This new policy of Hindu majoritarianism and its harsh reaction will fade India's so-called image of soft power together with its reputation as a diverse and democratic society. It cannot be ruled out that India misjudged the response for the abrogation of article 370. The abrogation appeared at a time when Pakistan's foreign policy was to a greater extent efficacious in internationalizing the Kashmir dispute. Though India had swayed the international community on the plea that cross-border terrorism

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was the main factor behind that fact that Kashmir issue remains unresolved, yet the abrogation of article 370 radically transformed this international insight. Even after more than three years, the situation is worse with utter human rights violation in Kashmir.

Critique

The principles of self-determination and state sovereignty are absolutely negated by Human Rights violations. A state that intrudes upon Human Rights forfeits its power to co-opt Human Rights issues (Shale & Schnabel, 2004: 141, 154). Chatterji & Jaffrelot (2019) discuss in their book how the surge of Hindu Nationalism (i-e; Hindutva) rather than Indian nationalism emerged over the last century. The book is a message and threatening caution for the global community together with Indian minorities and South Asia neighbors of India which eventually will transform as a threat to global peace. Modi intends to create a Hindu nation where only Hindus may live and this has been cautioned by Dr. Swain in an interview from Sweden, where he is based.

Absolutely the world faces Ethnic and religious violence in different parts. Yet, the current Indian stance on human rights violation through different acts carries much potential security implications and ramifications beyond domestic politics. And the two major nuclear powers of South Asia may face another wave of tense relations in the future with the main focus on Kashmir issue. The dynamics of International relations are already on shift due to the rise of Hindu nationalism. Modi during his first tenure (2014-19) helped exposing aggressive nationalism and tried to inculcate national patriotism by making national security a key focus. Though on one hand, his tensions with Pakistan, China, Bangladesh and Nepal were intensified; on the other hand, he invested heavily on the media to make it pro-government. However, appallingly, his second tenure has permanently divided the Indian society rather than merely polarizing it. This phase can rightly be called as “Hard Hindutva” in the Indian polity. Modi is not only intended to alter the domestic landscape of Indian society but is aimed at creating an impact across the borders of India in South Asia (Ahmed, 2020).

The process of autocratization develops gradually over the years. It is astounding to think that the democratic norms are being derailed by the elected leaders. However Indian government’ blatant subjugation has raised question in the minds of its allies as well and Biden has shown his reservations how to get along with India as a reliable partner in future (Balakumar, 2021). The Indian democratic decline causes threat to the its foreign policy corridors as well, keeping in view its much-anticipated permanent seat in UN Security Council together with strategic and commercial interest with the US. Indian democratic status is in bit and pieces. Being an authoritarian regime, it faces rising criticism abroad.

The Indian American diaspora groups have been calling on Congress to take notice of how India is declining in terms of democratic norms. Though India considers itself an inclusive democracy yet in the words of the economist Amartya

Sen, “democracy empowers public debate and it is not merely about having victory in elections is about enabling public discussion. This, indeed, is what makes a democracy — not simply winning elections. We need to cultivate the culture where we respect the difference of opinion as well”. The Indian government should revisit its authoritarian approach and listen to its citizens, rather than hushing them.

An important question rises why Indian society is leading to bedrock? The answer is the ‘appetite for politics’ through the tools of religion and ultra-nationalism leaving minorities emotionally drained and fearful. It has pushed India towards democratic backsliding and losing the democratic steam. Former UN Deputy Secretary-General Jan Eliasson stated: “There can be no peace without development, no development without peace, and no lasting peace or sustainable development without respect for human rights and the rule of law” (Mastoi, 2020).

Conclusion

The V-Dem Report has very clearly established how India has lost its democratic status under Modi’s harsh policies which shrunk the spaces for media and civil society. Started in 2014, V-Dem has a unique approach to measure and conceptualize democracy. This report has gained traction worldwide and has been widely discussed in print media, broadcasting media and social networks. It has called Indian democracy into question. This report has confirmed its suspicion where India was considered on the verge of losing democracy in the year 2020’s report. The Indian transformation from a secular democracy into a Hindu majoritarian polity is evident. The creation of otherness of Muslim minority is the identity politics of Modi government. The ideal of liberal and secular democracy has been tarnished in India under BJP’s rule. A new wave of nationalist populist regimes is in offing, if the democracy keeps hindered at the same pace. Though Modi has been popular in India but it must be kept in mind that a new young voter’s pool is emerging in India with highest level of dissatisfaction. Today Indian economic record is so fragile together with mismanaged COVID-19 situation. Even before the pandemic, growth rates had started to drop. Poverty and inequality have both increased alarmingly, with India ranking 101st out of 107 countries in the annual Global Hunger Index, and 140th out of 156 in terms of the gender gap. It has become an environmental basket case, ranking 120th out of 122 countries on water quality, and 177th out of 180 for overall environmental performance. It is too early to say where this will go, but anticipations are often worse than reality and the future democracy of the country seems at stake.

Hindutva-driven Modi’s policies have excluded the space for minorities and this is why it is no longer a pluralistic and democratic state. On one hand, India is drifting towards global isolation while on the other hand; there is a question mark on Indian constitutional commitment towards minorities’ rights and matter of great concern for many of its trusted allies. Many states have countries have

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unequivocally showed their reservations over such developments in India recently and suspected whether the country would be able to uphold its secular and heterogeneous character or stay inflexible about connecting itself with some tarnished "Majoritarian States" of the planet.

The regional and global peace is at stake unless India stops human rights violations otherwise, it will have to pay a heavy price. How current situation will impact Indian politics, depends on Modi where he wants to take India? If he wants to make India an Authoritarian regime, then his current policies and actions are serving his interest.

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