

:[Christopher Jaffrelot](#), a Senior Research Fellow at Science Po CERI and an Indologist specializing in South Asia, was invited to speak on [Modi's India; The Rise of Hindu Nationalism and Ethnic Democracy](#) on October 17, 2022.



Jaffrelot initiated his discussion by highlighting that India is presently witnessing the emergence of a distinctive form of national populism, characterized by elements of ethnic democracy or ethnic autocracy manifesting through electoral authoritarianism. The term national populism is a political term that combines both the elements of nationalism and populism emphasizing a nation's cultural, ethnic or religious identity as the bedrock of its political life. In India's context, this base is linked to the ethnicity of the majoritarian population, leading the country to shift from conservative democracy towards an ethnic democracy or even an ethnic autocracy. The majority community has become the nation itself while delegating a subordinate or second-class status to other minority communities. Modi's India, epitomizes ethno-religious nationalism, he said.

This brand of ethno-nationalism is not new. It was codified 100 years ago by V. D. Savarkar in his book, *Hindutva*. The essence of this ideology lies in the assertion that India primarily belongs to the Hindus, portraying them as the rightful inheritors of the land. In Savarkar's words, India is a country of Hindus as Hindus are the sons of the soil. They are a race, people descending from the Vedic fathers. In their veins, runs the blood of their fathers. They inhabit a sacred land. For him, this ethnic nationalism is

territorial given that Vedic India is connected to the sacred land where the holy rivers flow. Central to this narrative, Savarkar believes in the preservation of Sanskrit, a common language, a linguistic bedrock from which Hindi, and subsequently, the idea of a Hindu and Hindustan, emanates.

Jaffrelot further highlighted that this thinking is in alignment with the Zionist school of thought as it emphasizes the exclusivity and cultural superiority of the Hindu community like the 'chosen people.' Like Zionists are interested in the sacredness of the Jewish race and their 'Promised land', Hindu nationalists also signify ethnic, historical, and cultural traits of Hinduism rather than the spiritual element of religion. Quoting Savarkar, he shared that he himself has made this comparison stating that "No people in the world can justly claim to be recognized as a racial unit than the Hindus and perhaps the Jews." By endorsing Hindu nationalism, taking Hindus as a people and not as a community of believers, this ideology accepts Muslims as part of the nation only if they see India as a sacred land, marry Hindus and have children with them. Like Zionism, one cannot convert to Hinduism as it is a closed system that does not make conversion accessible and acceptable.

Jaffrelot argued that this ideology is depicted in Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)'s framework as RSS is deeply rooted in the ideology of Savarkar. It serves as the operational arm for propagating these beliefs. Through discipline and indoctrination, the RSS cultivates a sense of unity and physical robustness among its members, particularly focusing on the youth. It inculcates a sense of commitment and motivation in Hindus to resist Muslims, who were perceived as a threat by Savarkar.

Prime Minister Modi is a product of this ideology, organization, and his trajectory within this framework is notable. He has been associated with the RSS since he was seven years of age, was initiated into its rigorous organizational structure, later transitioning to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in his youthful years. This underscores his alignment with RSS's ideological underpinnings. Before Modi's ascendancy within the BJP, the party did not enjoy a popular position as it was considered an elitist party unpopular with the masses. However, Modi's asso-

ciation with the BJP heralded a populist shift, transforming it from a Brahmin-dominated entity into a mass-based political force. Hailing from Ganchi, a peripheral part of India, Modi was taken as somebody who came from the masses, which served a pivotal role in him gaining popularity amongst the masses. Further, Hindu nationalism, and his populist style, tone, and direct engagement with the masses, facilitated by social media and innovative communication strategies, amplified his appeal and persona.

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However, Jaffrelot remarked that this populist surge has been accompanied by regressive tendencies. It is exemplified by vigilante groups raising anti-“love jihad” campaigns, land restrictions and inspecting trucks for cows on highways. A Muslim in India cannot buy land in a Hindu area forcing them to opt for ghettos. Driven by a sense of cultural insecurity, these actions perpetuate the marginalization of minority communities, leading to de facto segregation and instances of forced conversion. Muslims in particular, are feeling the brunt of this discrimination as they are living in fear, compelled to change their names and alter their appearances to avoid persecution, which ghettoizes them. These actions paint a picture of an “ethnic democracy”, in which the largest minority group bears the brunt of marginalization. Discriminatory laws and practices further exacerbate the situation as religious identity has become a criterion for Indian citizenship. Inter-religious marriages are not allowed. Selling property in Gujarat to someone outside your community is practically impossible. Cow slaughter is equally challenging, with severe penalties in place, such as imprisonment for those found guilty. In Maharashtra, there is a paradox whereby consuming beef from outside the state is permissible, yet slaughtering a cow within provincial borders is prohibited.

Discussing India’s democratic shift towards electoral authoritarianism, Jaffrelot argued that the Indian system

incorporates traditional democratic aspects in the form of elections, through which populists acquire legitimacy by gaining a popular mandate. However, where elections should ideally serve as a forum for genuine debate and equitable participation, populists utilize excessive media coverage and financial influence from capitalists to increase their chances for favorable electoral outcomes. These disparities do not represent the essence of a true democratic system.

Concluding his talk, Jaffrelot stated that even institutions like the election commission and the judiciary also face erosion alongside the electoral process. The judiciary’s reputation in India has declined over the past five years for several reasons. Firstly, there’s an increasing ease in filing complaints against judges which undermines judiciary’s independence and integrity. Secondly, a growing influence of Hindutva ideology in the judiciary compromises the legal system’s secular principles. Thirdly, the practice of judges affiliating with political parties after retirement raises questions about their impartiality.

In response to a query regarding the distinction between authoritarianism and democracy, particularly in the context of ethnic democracy versus ethnic hegemony in India, Jaffrelot stated that India could be termed an ethnocracy, similar to Israel. However, India has moved beyond authoritarian rule by a single leader like Modi. Interestingly, “the new India” encompasses a broader societal transformation signifying an evolution in political ideologies and policies, shaped by the BJP.

Addressing the stance of major Indian political parties amidst these changes, Jaffrelot shared that the Indian National Congress was reverting back to its roots of a social movement-oriented organization in response to evolving political dynamics. It is trying to advocate for leftist policies and maintaining its ideological stance amidst the shifting political landscape. Regarding electoral strategies and perceptions of India’s Muslim population, Jaffrelot said that approximately six percent of the Muslim population supports the BJP owing to their lack of alignment with Islam, and economic factors that shape electoral dynamics.