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Article

# Religious Populism and the Future of Indian Democracy

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A special issue of *Studies in Indian Politics* investigates the contemporary struggle to maintain democracy in the country.

Democracy is a fragile construct. Nowhere is that clearer than in societies where pluralism and populism occupy the same geopolitical space.

The Republic of India is one of the world's largest nations by landmass. As a polity, it is one of the most ethnically, culturally, and religiously diverse. And, just recently, it overtook the People's Republic of China as the most populous nation on the planet. In many ways, India is the poster child of the promise and painstaking struggle of holding together a democratic society.

***Ever since its birth as an independent nation-state, and from much before it, the question of religion has been crucial in India's public debates about its own existence and identity. This question has variously panned out over***

***the past seven decades and also touched upon questions of legal citizenship and citizenship in the sense of membership of the polity.***

**—Suhas Palshikar, [Editorial Note](#)**

Understanding the innovations and challenges of democracy in India was the purpose of a special 2022 edition of the journal *Studies of Indian Politics* (SIP) that celebrated the 75th anniversary of the country's independence from British rule. With the help of experts assembled by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, this commemorative edition of *SIP* asked critical questions such as: To whom does India belong? Is the balance of power irreversibly tipped in favor of one group over all the others? How has colonialism shaped the current use and/or abuse of religion in Indian politics? What is the future of minority groups in India?

[Read the special section of SIP](#)

## “Who Is Indian?”

“Who is Indian?” is the throughline of the entire special issue *Studies in Indian Politics*, evoking the even larger debate that every nation that aspires to true democratic governance wrestles with. Can democracy truly exist in a diverse society?

Officially, the Indian Constitution established the new country as a secular nation, designed to protect the interests of all its various peoples. And yet this aspiration runs contrary to political actors who believe that India ought to be governed for and by representatives of its

Hindu population. If the latter idea comes to fruition, in whole or in part, where does that leave the rest of the people?



Source: Frank Hollerman via Unsplash.

***Hindu nationalists believe that India is fundamentally a Hindu rashtra (nation) and that the adoption of secularism, as articulated by the Constitution, was a betrayal of the majority's wishes. In recent years, the tension between the secular post-colonial conception of India and the Hindu nationalist alternative has come into***

## ***open conflict.***

**—Madhav Khosla and Milan Vaishnav, “*India @75: Religion and Citizenship in India.*”**

This special issue of *Studies in Indian Politics* is composed of an introduction and five essays. In “[Reinventing the Republic: Faith and Citizenship in India](#),” Niraja Gopal Jayal analyzes the implications of the 2019 Citizenship Amendment Act and its exclusion of Muslim people from newly defined pathways to naturalization. She warns, “As the CAA selectively legalizes illegal migrants; and as minorities are rendered second-class citizens by the insidious use of the law, India stands on the edge of a dangerous precipice where not just its constitutional values but also its moral compass is at grave risk.”

Pratap Bhanu Mehta’s contribution looks at the development of Hindu nationalism and the different possible visions of governance that elide majority-versus-minority political antagonism. “[Hindu Nationalism: From Ethnic Identity to Authoritarian Repression](#),” seeks to understand the pre-independence political landscape and investigates why “every strand of politics that tried to think outside of the majority/minority framework was relegated to the margins.”

Raeesa Vakil examines the erosion of the Indian Supreme Court’s ability to protect the interests of all of India’s people. In “[Representation and Legitimacy in the Supreme Court](#),” she focuses on the debates around *locus standi* (the idea that the court must determine a litigant is sufficiently connected to the legal issue they are raising in court). Recent judicial trends have advocated a stringent interpretation of legal standing—so stringent, Vakil argues, that it endangers the rights of minority groups. In her words, “The result has been

an absence of a principled, coherent understanding of the question of standing in religious matters, and one that specifically results in more concessions to majoritarian claims over minority rights.”

In “[New India, Hindutva Constitutionalism, and Muslim Political Attitudes](#),” Hilal Ahmed charts Muslim political movements during the current era of Bharatiya Janata Party dominance. He writes, “The political engagements of Muslims in contemporary India, I argue, could be seen as an ever-evolving discourse, which certainly responds to the Hindutva hegemony; yet it is not *always* governed by it.”

In “[Religion-as-Ethnicity and the Emerging Hindu Vote in India](#),” Neelanjan Sircar argues, “A key project of Hindu nationalism is to electorally construct a version of Hinduism that behaves as an ethnic group for whom finer distinctions of caste and language are less salient to identity. This is what I call ‘religion-as-ethnicity’ voting.”

According to the collection’s introduction, these essays seek to “analyze and contextualize recent shifts in the conception of citizenship and belonging in India, especially the ways in which citizenship is increasingly defined in religious terms.”

*Note: In 2019, the South Asia Program of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace assembled the experts who produced this “India@75 ” collection.*