Trajectories of Change in the World's Largest Democracy:

From Inclusive Neoliberalism to Authoritarian Populism[1]

(India, 2004-2019)

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As the title suggests, my central concern in this lecture is to propose a conjunctural analysis of key trajectories of change in India – the world's largest democracy – over the past one and a half decade. More specifically, I will argue that the shift from the decade-long rule of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) (2004-2014) to the current National Democratic Alliance government, led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), substitutes a hegemonic project that was centred on inclusive neoliberalism for one that pivots on authoritarian populism.

Since the BJP, with Narendra Modi at its helm, won an absolute majority in the general elections in April 2014, the party has effectively secured control over most of the north Indian Hindi heartland. The BJP has come to power in important western states such as Maharashtra and Gujarat, as well as in smaller states like Jharkhand, Goa, and Uttarakhand, and it also controls much of the northeastern region of the country. Indeed, despite its recent electoral setback in the southern state of Karnataka, the BJP's dominance in electoral politics currently extends from the national level in Delhi to 20 of India's 29 states. This transition has significant implications for subaltern groups and progressive political forces in the country, as well as for the future of India's democracy. It is therefore also vital that we train our lenses on its character and its workings – not just for the purposes of academic analysis, but also to advance informed strategic debate about what it might entail to forge progressive oppositional projects in the current conjuncture in India.

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[1] This lecture is based on a book chapter entitled "From Inclusive Neoliberalism to Authoritarian Populism: Trajectories of Change in the World's Largest Democracy" (forthcoming in 2019). A draft version of this chapter containing full

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In what follows, I will first of all propose that the UPA regime is best understood as a hegemonic project centred on what might be called inclusive neoliberalism – that is, a hegemonic project that sought to couple market-oriented accumulation strategies with limited social policy interventions in order to ward off anti-systemic resistance from below. The Indian National Congress adopted this strategy in the early 2000s in an attempt to stem the long-term erosion of its hegemony in electoral politics, and especially to halt its loss of support among India's subaltern groups. By combining economic policies that advanced and consolidated the market logic with rights-based legislation that enshrined new civil liberties and socio-economic entitlements, the party in effect sought to rebuild its image as a champion of the poor.

On the economic front, the Modi regime has mostly followed in the footsteps of Congress by prioritizing the continuing pursuit and consolidation of neoliberalism. However, I will argue that, in place of the rights-based policy interventions of the UPA regime, the BJP has promoted a majoritarian agenda that lends itself well to analysis within Stuart Hall's rubric of authoritarian populism. Authoritarian populism under Modi is constructed, first of all, around a trope of development that seeks to address frustrated subaltern aspirations in the context of jobless growth while opposing dynastic elitism and promulgating individual entrepreneurialism. This common sense is in turn coupled with a rhetoric of Hindu nationalism, forms of communal violence, and a policing of dissent that clearly push the Indian polity and the country's public sphere in a majoritarian and authoritarian direction.

The Modi regime, however, is not necessarily the juggernaut it is often made out to be by media pundits. There are cracks and fissures in its hegemonic project, and I will conclude this lecture by delineating some of the corrosive processes that render Modi's re-election in 2019 less likely than what it is common to assume. More specifically, I shall argue that the central challenge for progressive forces in the Indian republic today lies in building a new popular radicalism that fuses multiple social forces around a counterhegemonic project to defend and deepen democracy.

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The end of the 1990s witnessed the installation of the first BJP-led coalition government at the national level. In many ways, this event represented the culmination of the long erosion of the hegemony of Congress in Indian politics. This process arguably stretches back to the late 1960s, and was animated by the departure of lower caste groups and Dalits from its ranks of supporters, as well by the eruption of new social movements that challenged the legitimacy of its postcolonial nation-building project. The party met with several serious electoral setbacks in the late 1980s, and during the 1990s it positioned itself at the helm of a process of neoliberal restructuring that further alienated much of its popular support base – especially in rural India.

There is no doubt that senior Congress leaders were keenly aware of the predicament that the party was faced with in this respect. For example, in the run-up to the 2004 elections, which resulted in a surprising win for the Congress and its coalition partners in the UPA, one prominent Congress politician argued that it was imperative for the party to present an agenda that emphasized spending on programmes of immediate relevance to the poor. The political resurgence of Congress, in other words, was perceived by its High Command to hinge in large part on the party's ability to rearticulate neoliberal accumulation strategies with new forms of legitimation, in a bid to win the votes of those vast subaltern groups who languished in what has rightly been referred to as the underbelly of the Indian boom.

Under the UPA regime, which encompassed regional parties, parties representing lower caste groups and Dalits, and which enjoyed external support from the parliamentary left, this strategy was pursued through what political scientist Sanjay Ruparelia refers to as India's new rights agenda. This agenda established civil liberties and socioeconomic entitlements as legally enforceable rights. The new rights-based legislation includes the Right to Information (RTI) Act of 2005, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) and the Forest Rights Act of 2006, the Right to Education Act of 2009, and, most recently, the Right to Food Act of 2013 and the Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement (LARR) Act of 2013 – the latter of which I shall discuss in more detail shortly.

The laws that have been put in place emerged from the Common Minimum Programme that the UPA centred its election campaign on, and which emphasized the need to achieve growth with a human face. Significantly, each of these laws responded – to greater or lesser extents – to social movement projects that had crystallized in India during the 1990s. The processes of

policy-making that yielded these laws incorporated social movement activists and civil society actors in crucial ways. The establishment of the National Advisory Council (NAC) by the UPA government facilitated this incorporation. Chaired by Congress president Sonia Gandhi, the NAC included prominent activists among its members and was intended, as a senior Congress leader put it, to be the interface of the UPA government with civil society. Moreover, the drafting of several key laws was propelled by the direct involvement of key movement activists and shaped in significant ways by extra-parliamentary mobilizations and campaigns.

Commentators have argued that laws such as the NREGA and the RTI Act have the potential to establish new standards for social citizenship in India. According to Sanjay Ruparelia, for example, this new welfare paradigm is distinctive because it provides poorer citizens with an opportunity to challenge the practices of corruption and patronage that have enabled benefits to be targeted towards or captured by particular social groups in the past. Ruparelia is right, of course, to note the potential significance of rights-based legislation for subaltern claimsmaking – indeed, I shall have more to say about this in my concluding remarks. However, there is a dimension that is arguably missing in his analysis, pertaining to the role that rights-based legislation played in enabling the Congress to construct a new hegemonic project that remained quintessentially neoliberal. Firstly, in terms of economic policy, the UPA did not break in any significant way with the process of neoliberalization that Manmohan Singh had initially set in train during his tenure as Finance Minister in the early 1990s – on the contrary; it sought in many ways to add impetus to the globalization of the Indian economy. Moreover, although activists were significantly involved in shaping policy-making, it should also be kept in mind that the law gained salience as a terrain of mobilization in a conjuncture when many of the social movements that emerged in India in the 1970s and 1980s had entered into phases of decline or professionalization.

Consequently, rights-based legislation is most adequately conceptualized neither as an unequivocal expression of democratic accountability on the part of the Indian state during the UPA regime, nor simply as a stratagem of co-optation. Rather, inclusive neoliberalism as it was practiced in the UPA decade sought to enmesh markets in institutionalized regulations that mitigate the detrimental consequences of commodification and dispossession in order to curtail oppositional collective action. The objective of pursuing such a strategy, in turn, was to facilitate

the long-term advance of neoliberalization in a global context where India was rapidly emerging as a serious contender for the status of the world's fastest growing economy.

In the case of the LARR Act of 2013, for example, this was done by putting in place a new legal framework that sought to contain opposition and construct the basis for subaltern consent to what was in fact a neoliberal regime of dispossession, while at the same time deepening and widening the scope of that regime. To bring about such a resolution, the LARR Act was made to hinge on a two-pronged move: on the one hand, it introduced seemingly generous provisions for resettlement and rehabilitation; on the other hand, it widened the definition of the public purpose for which the state can acquire land, and introduced a number of exceptions from the new provisions for resettlement and rehabilitation. The first part of this move is a clear concession to the long-standing demands of social movements that have challenged dispossession. However, the fact that public purpose has been defined in such wide terms obviously constrains the political space in which social movements can challenge the form and direction of development in contemporary India. Moreover, the fact that the new bill looks set to apply only to a fraction of land acquisitions actually occurring in India makes it possible for the Indian state to consolidate the restructuring of India's political economy in a direction that creates spaces of accumulation for global capital.

In addition to the fact that the overall logic of the laws that were introduced was intended to curtail subaltern resistance, scholars like Aradhana Sharma have shown that the laws themselves also often channel oppositional collective action towards bureaucratized activism and procedural citizenship. Furthermore, as Priya Chacko has recently argued, it should be borne in mind that in its second term, the relationship between the UPA regime and Indian activists cooled down quite considerably – a development that was manifest, for example, in a crackdown on several movements and NGOs that were perceived to be critical of the developmental agenda of the UPA. Hence, whereas the introduction of rights-based legislation was and still is far from inconsequential from the point of view of progressive social movements, for the Congress elite, its purpose was clearly to serve as a vehicle that would enable the party to win popular support for a hegemonic project that ultimately attempted to deepen the neoliberalization of the Indian economy. This strategy, however, ultimately failed as public opinion shifted massively in favour of Modi's fusion of market liberalism and Hindu nationalism.

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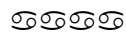
The 2014 elections were nothing short of a landslide, which, as Achin Vanaik has put it, signified for the first time ever the replacement of the Indian National Congress by the Hindutva-motivated Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as the central point of reference of the Indian polity. How can we explain this scenario? The first thing to note is of course that the standard right-wing argument that the UPA regime failed to bring about growth is demonstrably false. Growth stood at an average of 8 per cent in the first UPA period (2004-2009) and 7 per cent in the second period (2009-2014). This is the fastest growth rate the country has seen since neoliberal restructuring was implemented in the early 1990s, and also exceeds the BJP benchmark that was set during Atal Behari Vajpayee's tenure as Prime Minister from 1998 to 2004.

If not failure to generate economic growth, then what explains the UPA defeat? A partial answer to this question can be found in the fact that the last three years of the UPA regime witnessed a fateful fusion of slowdown in growth rates, food price inflation, and major corruption scandals. Moreover, and more significantly, high rates of growth were not translated into job opportunities – indeed, unemployment continued to rise in a national context where the working-age population is increasing rapidly. This made it possible for the BJP to expand its sway further downward in the Indian socioeconomic pyramid. At the same time, Indian capital came to side decisively with Modi, a move that was in no small measure an expression of discontent with the UPA's introduction of rights-based legislation. In other words, the elections of 2014 took place in the context of a conjuncture that also enabled the BJP to extend and consolidate its reach upwards in the Indian socioeconomic pyramid.

I want to focus here on the downward extension and consolidation of electoral support for the BJP. This achievement has to be understood in terms of the trajectory of the party from the 1980s to the present. Hindutva, of course, is first and foremost a political project to transform Indian public culture into a sovereign national culture rooted in what is claimed to be a superior ancient Hindu past. In the realm of party politics, the BJP has been the driving force of this project since the early 1980s, and the party's trajectory must be viewed in relation to changes in wider structures of power and authority in the Indian state and society. As Thomas Blom Hansen has

pointed out, contemporary Hindu nationalism took root among middle classes who sought to ward off the challenge represented by the rise to political power, during the 1970s and 1980s, of lower caste groups and Dalits in what has been referred to as India's silent revolution. The making of what Ornit Shani calls ethnoHinduism – a unitary Hindu identity – was driven by the tension that this democratic revolution generated internally among Hindus, and was intended to transform contradictions between classes and castes into contradictions between religious communities.

Upper caste support for the BJP was certainly important, but it was also not adequate to propel the BJP to power, as these groups are simply not large enough to be a decisive force in an electoral democracy. This limitation was addressed during the 1990s, as the BJP expanded its social base among younger and politically aspirational segments of India's Other Backward Classes (OBCs). During this decade, the BJP brought OBCs into the party fold in one of two ways: either by directly absorbing these groups into the party, as in the case of Gujarat, or by establishing political coalitions, which is what the party did elsewhere in northern India. In this way, the party effectively built a coalition of the propertied sections of the upper castes and the middle castes. The significance of this coalition was evident enough in the results of the 2014 election: In addition to securing 56 per cent of the upper caste vote, the BJP also secured 34 per cent of the OBC vote. However, in addition to this, the party's victory was also underpinned by a further widening of its social base, as it won 24 per cent of the Dalit or Scheduled Caste vote and 38 per cent of the Adivasi or Scheduled Tribe vote. In other words, the BJP had succeeded in winning over important segments of the subaltern groups that Congress had sought to appeal to through its strategy of inclusive neoliberalism.

It is in the modalities that enabled this downward extension of electoral support that we can begin to discern the contours of the authoritarian populism that is at the heart of Modi's regime. As Stuart Hall pointed out, authoritarian populism operates on genuine contradictions and it has a rational and material core. However, as a hegemonic project, it pivots on constructing popular consent to an essentially authoritarian regime. So just how did the BJP under Modi work to forge a populist common sense? A key strategy was to foster a narrative and an image of Modi as *vikas purush* – that is, as a man of development. Modi was posited as someone who would be capable of bringing economic growth through good governance. In doing so, this narrative

proposed, Modi would be scaling up the alleged developmental miracle that he had been the architect of during his tenure as Chief Minister of Gujarat from 2001 to 2014. This developmental narrative was also emptied of class content. Modi's message has been adamant and unequivocal: '*Sabka Sath; Sabka Vikas*' (Everyone Together, Development for Everyone). There can be little doubt that this idiom was effective in terms of constructing a national consensus around the imperative of giving power to a "strongman saviour" who would then resolve all basic ills.

Authoritarian populism also relies on reworking and neutralizing the people/power bloc contradiction. As Hall pointed out, it is necessary to cut off populist sentiment at just the right moment in order to avoid the development of a genuinely popular campaign. In Modi's India, and in the campaign that led up to his electoral triumph, this has been achieved through the articulation of a putative anti-elitism that pivots on opposition to the dynastic politics of the Congress party. Modi's objective of achieving a '*Congress-mukt Bharat*' (Congress-free India) was portrayed as a quest to rid India of a privileged elite that was out of touch with the ground realities of the country's common people. Anti-elitism was closely conjoined with anti-corruption: Modi, the campaign narrative went, was not only not tainted by corruption, but also not afraid to act decisively against it. Crucially, this was a message that resonated with wide segments of the Indian public in the wake of the anti-corruption protests of 2011 and in the context of Congress being implicated in major corruption scandals.

Anti-elitism is in turn linked to a distinct form of anti-collectivism, which draws much of its sustenance from Modi's branding of himself as someone who rose from the lowly status of a '*chai-wallah*' (tea vendor) to become the architect of developmental success in Gujarat, and ultimately to the very summit of political power in the Indian nation. Speaking from the Red Fort in Delhi on Independence Day in 2016, Modi declared: "The government is focusing on empowerment, not entitlement." This statement was expressive of how the Modi regime attempts to distance itself from the rights-based welfare approach that was integral to the UPA's hegemonic project of inclusive neoliberalism. The rhetorical distancing from UPA welfare schemes is further linked to an attempt to celebrate and promote entrepreneurial individualism. Facilitating self-employment – for example through the MUDRA Yojana, which provides access to institutional finance to small businesses – has become a mantra in this regard. "If someone opens a *pakoda* shop in front of your office," Modi infamously stated in an interview earlier this year,

"does that not count as employment?"

To some commentators, the focus on growth, good governance, and development has amounted to a move away from the Hindu communalism that had been so central to the BJP's expansion from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, and which culminated in the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992. However, to conclude on this basis that Modi and the BJP have abandoned Hindutva would be erroneous, for, as Nitasha Kaul has argued, "Hindutva" and "Development" are in fact the key components of a dramatic narrative of power that combines nationalism and neoliberalism. First of all, Hindutva was in no way entirely absent from the BJP campaign trail in 2013 and 2014: BJP politicians communicated majoritarian and communal messages both directly and indirectly during the party's campaign. After the elections, this rhetoric has arguably become more explicit and more central to the agenda of the new NDA regime. A majoritarian cultural politics has crystallized around issues such as cow protection, the communal policing of inter-religious love and of women's sexuality, the rewriting of school textbooks to bring them in line with Hindutva historiography, and the promotion of religious reconversion among Muslims and Christians. Hate speech has proliferated, and a number of public campaigns have come to contain thinly veiled majoritarian messages and symbols, which resonate with the popular Hinduism that has experienced a resurgence in recent years – especially among the urban, educated middle classes.

Moreover, the majoritarian rhetoric is clearly linked to communal violence. Since Modi took charge in Delhi in 2014, violence against Muslims and other marginal groups has proliferated. This violence takes the shape of spontaneous lynchings, where vigilante groups attack individuals – most often Muslims or Dalits. Those who are attacked are often accused of storing, eating, or trading in cow meat, and the gangs who carry out the attacks claim to be '*gau rakshas*' – protectors of the sacred cow. Over the last eight years, India has witnessed 63 such attacks, which often end in murder. More than 96 per cent of the attacks have taken place under the current Modi regime and Muslims constitute more than 50 per cent of those who have been attacked and 86 per cent of those who have been killed.

In this way, through rhetoric and through violence, the Modi regime constructs the ominous Other that authoritarian populism depends on in order to frame a unitary conception of the nation and national culture. These majoritarian constructions of the Other have been joined

at the hip with systematic attacks on political dissenters – activists, public intellectuals, students, and journalists, for example – who are accused of being "anti-national" and subjected to harassment and silencing. In fact, the targeting of dissenters goes beyond harassment to encompass murderous violence, as evidenced most recently in the killing of the progressive journalist Gauri Lankesh outside her home in Bangalore, and before that in the murders of M. M. Kalburgi, Govind Pansare, and Narendra Dabholkar – all activists and scholars who paid with their lives for challenging Hindutva dogma. It is at this point, of course, that the authoritarian character of Modi's regime becomes particularly and explicitly evident, but this dynamic also works in more subtle and insidious ways – for example, through the appointment of BJP supporters and known Hindu nationalists to key positions in national institutions. Should the elections in 2019 yield an even larger majority for the BJP than what it currently has, and if the party comes to control both the upper and lower houses of parliament, the formal political power of Hindutva could easily converge with this institutional entrenchment of its presence in civil society and the ongoing saffronization of the public sphere and everyday life, in ways that bode ill for the future of India's democracy.

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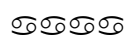
I refuse, however, to end this intervention on such a pessimistic note. And I have good reasons for refusing to do so. Less than a week ago, the BJP suffered a setback in the state elections in Karnataka in southern India. Despite its best efforts – efforts that consisted largely of attempted bribery and threats – the party failed to garner the support that was necessary in order to form a government. Earlier this year, the BJP suffered defeats in parliamentary by-elections in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar – both of which are Hindi heartland states in which the party currently holds power – and we know that this is part of a wider trend. Now, it is of course true that the BJP increased its vote share in Karnataka and that by-election results do not necessarily hold much predictive value in terms of national politics. However, there is still good reason to assume that these defeats signal that the BJP may not have an easy win ahead in 2019 and that the party has lost some of the support it had built up among Dalits and other subaltern groups.

Indeed, there are numerous indications that such a process might be underway. Just a

few days before the by-elections in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, some 35,000 farmers entered Mumbai after having completed a 180-kilometer long march to put forward their demands for a loan waiver and higher support prices to the BJP-led government of Maharashtra. The crisis in the Indian countryside has only deepened under Modi's reign, and rural India has become somewhat of a flashpoint for oppositional collective action over the past year. Dalit radicalism has also re-emerged as a political force, including in the state of Gujarat – the very heartland of Hindutva. Here, the leader of the Dalit movement, the young lawyer Jignesh Mevani, was elected to the state's Legislative Assembly in the elections that took place in late 2017. More recently, the national protests against the attempt to dilute the Scheduled Castes/Schedules Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act can be read as an indication that the BJP is losing support among Dalits in the Hindi heartland.

If authoritarian populism as a hegemonic project has its fragilities, the immediate question is how to consolidate scattered forms of resistance in a counterhegemonic project. As Achin Vanaik has pointed out, India's liberal democracy may be weak and brutalized but it is nevertheless meaningful and real. Its defence must therefore also be one of the cornerstones of any collective oppositional project in the current conjuncture. Yet, at the same time, such a project should not limit itself only to a defensive rallying around formal democracy. On the contrary, progressive forces must aspire to couple a defence of democracy with deliberate efforts to deepen it. And a starting point for a counterhegemonic struggle for democratic deepening in India today might be precisely the rights agenda that was introduced by the UPA, and which has come under attack from the Modi regime. As much as rights-based legislation was put in place to enable the UPA to engineer a compromise equilibrium between subaltern and dominant groups in order to stabilize the long-term advance of neoliberalization, this does not constitute an inherent limit to the oppositional potential of rights-based legislation. Laws are fundamentally indeterminate and can be given radical new meanings through counterhegemonic mobilization from below.

If such a counterhegemonic project is to advance, it will be necessary to bring together multiple social forces across a complex political landscape. It is hard to imagine that this can happen without some kind of revival of a third front in electoral politics that is able to genuinely fuse demands for redistribution and recognition in a meaningful way – but to bring about such a

fusion will be a challenging task. The track record of India's silent revolution clearly shows that the transformative potential of a politics based exclusively on caste comes up against the constraint of basic class antagonisms. However, at the same time, left forces will have to reckon – and reckon very seriously – with the fact that that caste-based discrimination and political underrepresentation constitute distinct manifestations of social injustice. The most promising route towards such a politics arguably runs through and beyond the all-too entrenched barriers between political parties and social movements that have tended to seriously hamper the development of oppositional collective action from below. Indeed, the current articulation of progressive opposition to Modi's authoritarian populism already defies such ossified demarcations – with the emergence of a new Dalit-Bahujan oriented left-wing politics in Gujarat being a case in point.

Ultimately, such a politics should not just set itself the goal of enabling subaltern groups to participate in the implementation of policy. Rather, it should build their capacity to challenge the very premises on which policy is made. This is what André Gorz once referred to as a strategy of non-reformist reform – an oppositional strategy that aims to augment autonomous power from below in order to achieve fundamental political and economic changes. It is such a project that can possibly turn the tide, not just on authoritarian populism, but on the wider trajectories of change that deny justice and fullness of life to far too many of the citizens of the world's largest democracy.