

TOP TEN THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT INDIA IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

By Arvind Sharma

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Indian Border Security Force (BSF) personnel keeping vigil at a checkpoint along a highway leading to Ladakh, at Gagangeer area of Ganderbal district on June 18, 2020. Source: © Shutterstock. Photo by Sajadhameed.

1. Sino-Indian Relations

The first thing to know about India in the twenty-first century relates to the future of Sino-Indian relations. The relationship between India and China has undergone three main phases since the middle of the twenty-first century. The first phase may be described in hindsight as a romantic phase. The vision of this relationship was that India and China, the two longest-surviving cultures in the world, were great civilizations that were laid low by the West in the age of imperialism and were now to take their proper place in the comity of nations. These two civilizations had enjoyed peaceful relations for thousands of years, and the two emerging giants were expected to provide an example of harmonious coexistence to the world, somewhat like the way America and Canada exist as neighboring countries. This vision received a rude shock after the Chinese occupation of Tibet, which brought the whole issue of the border between India and China into the limelight, an issue that remains unresolved to this day. The occupation of Tibet by China, although acquiesced to so far by India, led to the flight of the Dalai Lama to India. This did not go down well in the long run with India because the guarantees of autonomy that the Chinese had offered as a quid pro quo of the acceptance of its suzerainty over Tibet were not honored. The defeat of Indian forces by the Chinese in 1962 ushered in a phase after which India tended to be cowed by the growing economic and political might of China. Now, we stand at the threshold of a third stage in which India has shown a new spirit in dealing with Chinese provocations, as exemplified by Doklam (a plateau claimed by both China and Bhutan) and Ladakh. The evolving nature of this relationship is difficult to define because it is at the moment in its incipient stage, but it is something to watch as it unfolds. It reminds one of the struggle for supremacy between the United Kingdom and France in Europe in the early nineteenth century, which has sometimes been compared by historians to a contest between a whale and an elephant.

2. Indian Secularism on Trial

The second thing to know about India in the twenty-first century is that secularism is on trial in India. The term “secular” was made part of the preamble of the Indian Constitution by Mrs. Indira Gandhi in 1976 and

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has been upheld by the Supreme Court of India as one of the fundamental features of the Indian Constitution, which cannot be amended. However, secularism is coming under pressure in India both on account of its inner contradictions and certain historical developments. Although the government in India claims to be secular in nature, it is also a fact that many state governments in India administer Hindu temples. For instance, the five southern states of India—Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana—administer more than 90,000 temples, and their funds are syphoned off into the state treasury. This apparent anomaly of a secular state administering Hindu temples has surprisingly been overlooked for a long time. It has been explained away by making a distinction between religious and secular activity of a temple, where the government is supposed to be constitutionally capable of taking over the secular functions of these temples. This arrangement is unique to India and has become the cause of considerable heartache within the Hindu community,

Summary of the Discrimination Faced by Hindu Places of Worship

Statement	Hindu	Muslim	Christian
Places of worship are under state control	Yes	No	No
Government administers finances	Yes	No	No
Government can control takeover and dispose temple assets	Yes	No	No
Government can divert funds for other purposes	Yes	No	No
Priests, devotees, practitioners have a say in temple management	No	Yes	Yes
Educational institutions run by place of worship are autonomous	No	Yes	Yes
Educational institution can decide and discriminate in hiring of staff and student admissions	No	Yes	Yes

Source: Based on a chart in the article *Part 1: The Way Hindu Temples were Systematically Looted by Congress Governments Is Reprehensible* on the TFIPOST website at <https://tinyurl.com/yxx33lhb>.

The Hindu community retains a memory of perceived Muslim oppression during the period of Muslim rule over India and of perceived Christian oppression at the hands of the European powers.



A 1970 postage stamp portrait of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, formulator of the Hindutva philosophy. Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/yxmpwkky>.

especially because the government has not shown the same enthusiasm in taking over mosques and churches. The Muslims and Christians enjoy the protection of minority rights, which is deemed to come in the way of the acquisition of their assets. What is surprising is that even those states that are run by the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party), such as Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Karnataka, also have shown little interest in changing this state of affairs, presumably because they benefit financially from such an arrangement, although the BJP garners votes in the election by projecting itself as the guardian of Hindu rights. This feature of the Indian Constitution was probably introduced to prevent the temples from indulging in discrimination against the former untouchables and other corrupt practices, and so was well-intentioned, but was identified as early as 1963 by Donald Eugene Smith in his well-known work *India as a Secular State* as a potential threat to Indian secularism. This issue has now become relevant because several moves are afoot within the Hindu community to legally challenge this arrangement. The existing arrangement has created the impression that a secular looting of the Hindu temples is going on unchecked, and more than one party has claimed that if any government is going to do this, then it should proclaim India as a Hindu state!

The Hindu community retains a memory of perceived Muslim oppression during the period of Muslim rule over India and of perceived Christian oppression at the hands of the European powers. It had hoped that, after Independence, it would be free from such oppression, but unfortunately such governmental control over Hindu temples, some of which generate annual revenue in US millions of dollars, is now being increasingly perceived as secular oppression of the Hindus in line with earlier oppressions associated with Muslim and Christian rule.

This perception is aggravated by the fact that the minorities in India, such as the Muslims and the Christians, have a privileged position compared to the Hindus, who constitute the majority, although majorities and minorities were never defined as such in the Constitution. This too may have been well-intentioned, under the influence of the noble idea that the minority may be granted more rights than the majority in order to make it feel secure. But this has had the unfortunate consequence that some groups within the Hindu community have begun to claim they are not Hindus, but followers of a “minority” religion in order to avail of such privileges

or to protect themselves from governmental interference. This happened in the case of the Ramakrishna Mission in Bengal, where the Communist government there made it so difficult for the mission to function that it was driven to claim in 1980 that it is a minority religion, although it is a quintessentially modern Hindu organization.

The point, then, is that these forms of asymmetrical secularism are generating responses that might pose a serious threat to Indian secularism in the twenty-first century.

3. The Transformation of Hinduism

The third thing to know about India in the twenty-first century is that Hinduism has been undergoing a transformation over the past few decades, whose consequences will have possible ramifications throughout the twenty-first century. These changes are partly the result of the perception of “secular” oppression and partly the result of changes within Hinduism that have led to the rise of political Hinduism, otherwise also described as Hindu nationalism, whose main ideologue was V. D. Savarkar (1883–1966), identified with the concept of Hindutva or militant Hinduism. The most provocative version of his message finds expression in the slogan “Hinduise politics and militarise Hinduism.” The first half of the slogan has proved more effective than the second, and the electoral ascendancy of the BJP on the Indian political scene reflects this. Apart from perceptions of secular oppression, two other factors have put increasing pressure on Hinduism to move away from its traditionally apolitical nature: experiences of Jehadi terror and Christian proselytization.

4. The Changing Concept of Indian Nationhood

The fourth thing to know about India is that the traditional concept of Indian nationhood is under challenge as a result of the developments just described. It seems obvious that a concept of a Hindu nation, as espoused by the Hindu Right, is at odds with the concept of a secular India (although some Hindu thinkers have argued that Hindu pluralism may serve as a possible substitute for secularism). Thus, one needs to watch the interplay of the concepts of Indian secularism and Hindu nationalism for the rest of the century. At stake is the very understanding of Indian nationhood. When India became independent and was partitioned in 1947, it faced a fundamental choice: will its polity *also* be based on the religion of the majority, as in Pakistan, or will it be nonsectarian in nature? The leaders at the helm at the time in India resisted the temptation of the former option and chose to found Indian polity on the basis of territorial nationalism rather than on the basis of ideological or religious nationalism. The concept of a Hindu nation is central to Hindu nationalism, or Hindutva, and therefore poses a challenge, if not a threat, to secular nationalism. The rise of the Hindutva movement within India is therefore something to watch for in view of the implications it has in this respect, as already noted in my spring 2020 (volume 25, number 1) *EAA* article, “On the Difference Between Hinduism and Hindutva.”

5. Ethical Issues

The fifth thing to know about India in the twenty-first century has to do with the ethical implications of what we have been discussing so far. All the points discussed have to do with the exercise of power—China, secularism, Hindutva, and the concept of Indian nationhood. A major ethical issue India will be facing in the twenty-first century has to do with the way that it negotiates the tension between piety and power. The importance of this distinction should be clear from the fact that orthodoxy is a reaction of a religious tradition to the perceived loss of piety in the public square, while fundamentalism is its reaction to the loss of power in the public square.

Religious life in India within Hinduism has largely been an exercise in piety rather than power. Islam and to a lesser extent Christianity are more politically determined religions compared to Hinduism. If the trends identified in the previous points hold, and India as a nation and Hinduism as a religion become more interested in seeking power rather than piety, then the entire religious landscape in India will tend to become more power-oriented than piety-oriented. This is again something to watch.

Another ethical issue to watch has to do with the righting of historical wrongs. Modern discourse has studiously avoided including the righting of historical wrongs as part of human rights discourse. Modern human rights discourse knows only biography, not history, but the previously colonized parts of the world are only now fully awakening to the extent of the deprivations and depredations suffered under foreign rule over these countries, and the demand for reparations are now being raised, though often only in muted tones, in parts of the Third World. This issue is gaining some visibility in India. An economist, Utsa Patnaik, has calculated that the amount of wealth removed from India under British rule perhaps exceeds US \$45 trillion dollars, which is several times the current GDP of Britain. Similarly, demands for restoration of temples destroyed during Muslim rule over India resulted in the demolition of the Babri Masjid (mosque) in 1992. That mosque in Ayodhya was supposed to have been built on the site of the birth of Ram, a Hindu divinity. The issue of building a temple again at the site of the mosque went to the Supreme Court, which basically upheld the right of the Hindus to do so, and the foundation stone for the new temple was laid earlier in the year by the Prime Minister of India himself.

Curiously, India's affirmative action program for the former untouchables and lower castes is perhaps the most comprehensive affirmative action program in the world. These measures were obviously instituted to right historical wrongs which the members of these castes were subjected, but somehow the concept of historical justice has not been associated with them in Indian intellectual discourse. These measures are viewed as constituting social or economic justice. The preamble to the Indian Constitution also refers to justice of various kinds, such as economic and social, but does not use the word "historical" in this context. It could be argued historical justice in practice if not in theory is already a constitutional value, and in this respect praxis may be said to be ahead of theory. The very concept of justice could well take a historical turn in the twenty-first century in India.

6. Indology

The next thing to look for are new developments in academia, especially in what is now called Indology. The academic study of Indian history and culture has, over the past 300 years, been largely a Western enterprise. Even the chronology of ancient India as it currently stands was reconstructed by Western scholars. In this sense, a self-understanding by the modern Indian of his or her own history and culture has been uniquely mediated by the scholarship rooted in another, namely Western, culture, especially as Indian scholarship has basically accepted the lead provided by Western scholarship in these matters. The impression has been gaining ground among Indians for the past few decades that this could well have resulted in distortions, sometimes very serious, and that the time has now come to rectify them. To provide an example, most Western writings describe the conical object associated with the worship of Shiva, referred to in India as the Shiva Linga, as a phallic representation, and yet hardly any worshipper of Shiva considers it as such. For Shiva worshippers, it may have many meanings, as symbols often do, but in his mind it is hardly ever associated with a fertility cult. It is as if an Indian were to see the Christian Eucharist as a form of cannibalism.

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Currently, some foundational assumptions of Western Indology are under serious contestation in India. Two examples must suffice. Western reconstruction of Indian history is based on the assumption that a people who called themselves Aryans either invaded or migrated into India in the middle of the second millennium BCE, but this assumption is fast losing credibility among large sections of Indians. The further assumption—that the Aryans belong to a different race that entered India from the outside, resulting in a racial conflict between them and the indigenous people, and that the caste system arose as a result of this conflict, somewhat like



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The BJP was accused of being an upper-caste organization, but today, it is being led by Shri Narendra Modi, who hails from a caste just above the former untouchables in the traditional caste hierarchy.



June 16, 2020: Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi discussing the COVID-19 pandemic with Chief Ministers via video conferencing.
Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/y4w7ceqg>.

apartheid in South Africa—has also become increasingly difficult to sustain for many Indians. Whether Western Indology is able to weather these challenges remains to be seen, but there can be little doubt that Indology stands on the threshold of a major change. What form it will take remains unclear at the moment, but one can safely predict that major changes are likely to occur.

7. Education

Now we come to the seventh point, which also has to do with education but in a broader context. Ever since the beginning of the nineteenth century, a dilemma has stared Indians in the face, which has rarely been articulated in the following manner: how is the obvious superiority of Western culture, especially in the form of science and technology, to be accessed linguistically by India? Should Indians learn a European language like English to gain access to it, or should it be made accessible to Indians through India's own numerous languages such as Bengali, Tamil, and many others, sometimes referred to as regional languages? So far, the first approach has been the dominant one, but it is an approach obviously at odds with Indian nationalism. The tension between the two is reflected in India in the distinct approaches adopted toward primary education and higher education. Primary education in India is largely carried out in the twenty-two regional languages identified in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, which lists the various languages of India. Higher education, however, has been largely carried out in English, although in some parts of India the regional languages are also being used for higher studies in the social sciences but rarely in the hard sciences. This, in effect, means a two-tier system in education and explains why English-speaking Indians dominate national life. This arrangement, however, may not reflect a stable equilibrium, especially in a democracy, as more and more Indians become educated in the regional languages and yet find themselves excluded from the higher echelons of power, except perhaps in politics. But this can be a very important exception in a democracy, because governments will be under pressure from the educated elites in the various regional languages to accommodate literates in the regional languages who will be voting them to power. The turmoil associated with the extension of reservations in education and administration to the lower castes in the 1990s is perhaps to be accounted for in these terms. In what form this issue will play out is, again, unpredictable. But that the tensions associated with this issue will have to be faced may be

safely predicted. Some students at the Indian Institutes of Technology have committed suicide because of these tensions.

8. Caste Revolution

The eighth point to know is that Indian society in general and Hindu society in particular have been undergoing a quiet revolution with the empowerment of the lower castes and women ever since India achieved Independence. The BJP was accused of being an upper-caste organization, but today, it is being led by Shri Narendra Modi, who hails from a caste just above the former untouchables in the traditional caste hierarchy. Similarly, Brahmins are traditionally supposed to provide religious leadership in Hinduism, but one of the most popular Hindu leaders of today, Ramdev by name, does not come from this class. It is he who has popularized yoga in modern India more than anyone else, except perhaps India's present Prime Minister himself. Hindu women have recently won the right to their proper share of ancestral property, and Muslim women are no longer subject to Triple Talaq: a provision in Islamic Law that empowered the husband to divorce his wife by merely saying, "I divorce you, I divorce you, I divorce you." These developments are the result of cumulative changes over several decades. As already mentioned, India has had for several years now an affirmative action program that covers almost half the population. This process is likely to continue.

9. Economic Policy

The ninth thing to know about India is the gradual shift underway in terms of economic policy. For several decades, Indian economic policy tended to be socialist. The government was more concerned with ensuring the just distribution of wealth as distinguished from its creation. Although these policies did not ignore the production aspect, they were ideologically more oriented toward fair distribution of what was produced. Over the past few decades, government policymakers have begun to pay more attention to the enlargement of the pie than to its division. This economic "liberalization" trend is likely to continue, perhaps even at the cost of increasing inequality, although the government is not entirely ignoring the distribution aspect. Some economists have openly admitted that this phase of increasing inequality is a necessary one and that the issue of fair distribution can be addressed once the production level has risen. This perspective was previously unheard of. The model here is economic development under capitalism in the West, where increasing inequality was later followed by gradual reduction of this inequality. There are, however, signs of growing inequality in the West now that globalization has accelerated. The French economist Thomas Piketty has argued that the more egalitarian transformation of the economies in the West after the largely capitalist phase may not be inevitable and that deliberate government policies had an important role in bringing about this transformation. The thing to watch is whether the Indian government takes the possible implications of this finding seriously.

10. India's Space Program

The tenth thing to know about India is that it has an active space program that has not been as high-profile as those of the USA, Russia, and China, but surprised the world in 2013–2014 by getting a spacecraft to orbit Mars in its very first attempt. It was called *Mangalyaan*, which was part of the Mars Orbiter Mission (MOM). The organization behind it is called Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO), located in Bengaluru, as Bangalore is now called. It has placed more than 100 satellites in space for various countries. Moreover, India hopes to join the USA, Russia, and China in putting a person in space in 2022. ■