

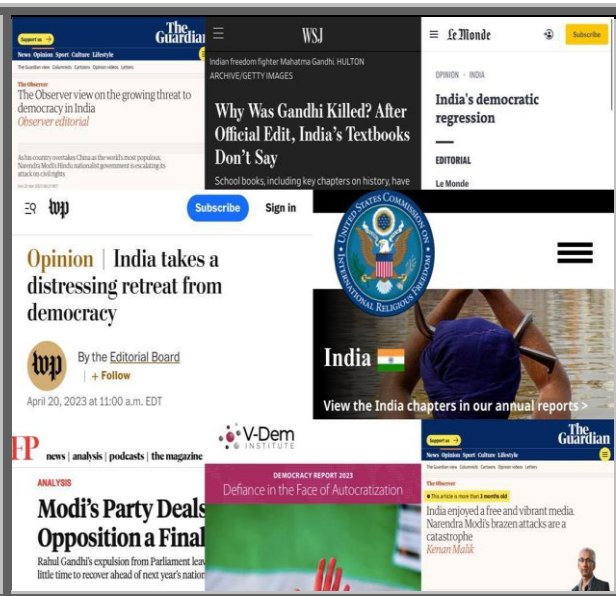
DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDE IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



Over the past many decades, India has projected itself as the world’s ‘largest democracy’ with a ‘secular’ outlook. India’s post-independence political sphere was based on Nehruvian political ideology that endorsed secularism as a strength of the Indian nation.¹ However, today’s India has gone far off-track from what were commonly described as the ‘founding principles.’ Instead, the current ruling RSS-BJP dispensation has embraced a ‘Hindutva-led’ exclusionist ideology. In recent months, prominent Western media outlets have commented on this shift and the implications of a continuous democratic ‘backslide’ in India. Their analyses and assessments map the nose-dive of freedom in India.

An analytical piece in the *Foreign Affairs* in April 2023 briefed about the stifling of democracy in India. The author noted that opposition was a hallmark of parliamentary democracy; however, the expulsion of one of India’s most prominent opposition leader Rahul Gandhi from parliament by the BJP undermined the important symbol of democracy in India.² The *Guardian* carried an editorial titled ‘*The Observer view on the growing threat to democracy in India.*’³ It highlighted as to how the

1 Mohammad Ghose, “Nehru and Secularism,” *Journal of the Indian Law Institute* 20, no. 1 (1978): 103–16. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43927437>.
 2 Sumit Ganguly, “Modi’s Party Deals Its Main Opposition a Final Blow,” *Foreign Affairs*, 7 April 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/04/07/india-rahul-gandhi-conviction-congress-opposition-modi-bjp/>
 3 “The Observer view on the growing threat to democracy in India,” *The Guardian*, 23 April 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/apr/23/the-observer-view-on-narendra-modi-growing-threat-to-democracy>

BJP government had taken measures to reduce the influence of the opposition and dismissed the playing-level field for democratic forces. The editorial mentioned the defamation case against Rahul Gandhi and stressed the biased role of courts in Gujarat in sentencing him, where the current Indian prime minister served as a chief minister from 2001-2014.⁴ The editorial concluded by stressing that it was difficult not to view the court's verdict as 'politically motivated.'

The highlight of Mr. Modi's time in Gujarat was the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom. Another *Guardian* opinion piece, '*Narendra Modi's brazen attacks are a catastrophe*,' underscored the BBC documentary that investigated then chief minister Modi's link to the anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat and how the BJP government dismissed the BBC documentary as rather a 'propaganda and anti-India garbage' and accused the BBC of 'harbouring colonial mindset.'⁵ The article mentioned that the BJP government invoked emergency laws to ban the documentary and any online links to it in India. Furthermore, it harassed BBC and had its Mumbai and New Delhi offices raided by the Indian tax department.⁶ Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) students tried to screen the documentary; however, the University authorities off-cut the electricity to the whole campus.⁷ These measures uncovered the desperate attempts by the BJP government to suppress the truth and clamp down on an independent international media outlet for exposing the factual position through investigative journalism.

The BJP government's attempts to curtail media freedom have elicited wider international attention. The Reporters Without Borders's World Press Freedom Index 2023, published on 3 May 2023, focused on these issues in India. World Press Freedom Index reported that press freedom in the world's so-called largest democracy was in a 'crisis.' The report especially highlighted that the state of the media had been such since 2014 when Mr. Modi's BJP government came into power with embodied 'Hindu nationalist right.'⁸

Another recent article published by the *Financial Times* discussed the Freedom Index in light of the common fear of speaking against Mr. Modi in public life.⁹ The journalists deemed critical of the BJP

⁴ "List of Chief Ministers Of Gujarat & Their Tenure Periods," *One India*, 2023
<https://www.oneindia.com/list-of-chief-ministers-of-gujarat/>

⁵ Kenan Malik, "India enjoyed a free and vibrant media: Narendra Modi's brazen attacks are a catastrophe," *The Guardian*, 19 February 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/feb/19/india-enjoyed-a-free-and-vibrant-media-narendra-modis-brazen-attacks-are-a-catastrophe>.

⁶ "BBC offices raided in India in latest Modi assault on press freedom," *Reporters Without Borders*, 2023
<https://rsf.org/en/bbc-offices-raided-india-latest-modi-assault-press-freedom>

⁷ "BBC offices raided in India in latest Modi assault on press freedom," *Reporters Without Borders*.

⁸ *World Press Freedom Index 2023*, report (Paris: Reporters Without Borders, 2023),
<https://rsf.org/en/index>

⁹ "India's democratic backsliding," *Financial Times*, April 20, 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/6c98e1aa-85da-4738-b889-fc4d76d1d0bc>.

government had frequently faced online harassment and, at times, legal repercussions. The article highlighted how this undermined the freedom of speech in the so-called democratic state.

An opinion article in the *Washington Post* titled ‘*India takes a distressing retreat from Democracy*’ examined the BJP government’s major overhauling of school textbooks to scrap chapters that did not sit well with its agenda, such as on ‘democracy’ and ‘secular’ history of India.¹⁰ The article mentioned a sixth-grade chapter on ‘key elements of a democratic government’ that was scrapped from a political science book. The students in India are taught about democracy in sixth grade; however, this change would now deprive the children of knowledge on the subject. Additionally, the chapters in the twelfth-grade political science textbook that taught the students about the 2002 Gujarat pogroms were removed.

The French newspaper *Le Monde* published an editorial that discussed how the authoritarian drift by BJP is redefining India as a purely Hindu Nation.¹¹ It stated the deletion of textbook chapters on India’s long history of Muslim Mughal emperors, who ruled the subcontinent between the 16th and 19th centuries. The future generations will also remain oblivious to the essence of the secular legacy of the country after official edits of why Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated, mentioned an article in *the Wall Street Journal* published on May 22, 2023.¹²

Another article in the *Financial Times* discussed India as an ‘electoral autocracy.’¹³ The article highlighted that India neither preferred democracy within its country nor in any other. It instead underscored that India’s political landscape was dominated by Hindu majoritarianism and weakened secularism. The article warned the West not to misread India’s character as democratic only because it was seen as a democracy.

Yet another article recently in the *Washington Post* echoed a similar message. It mentioned a Swedish Institute’s Democracy Index 2023 that named India as one of the worst ‘autocratizers’ in last 10 years.¹⁴ It cited the heightened political polarisation and how democracy had broken down in

¹⁰ “India takes a distressing retreat from democracy,” *The Washington Post*, 20 April 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/04/20/india-backsliding-democracy-modi-school-textbooks/>.

¹¹ “India’s democratic regression,” *Le Monde*, April 24, 2023, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/opinion/article/2023/04/24/india-s-democratic-regression_6024042_23.html

¹² Krishna Pokharel, “Why Was Gandhi Killed? After Official Edit, India’s Textbooks Don’t Say,” *The Wall Street Journal*, May 22, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/why-was-gandhi-killed-after-official-edit-indias-textbooks-dont-say-d5b86e77>.

¹³ Edward Luce, “India will never be America’s ally,” *Financial Times*, May 5, 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/d842b152-86d4-4dde-ad14-17bfb2993859>

¹⁴ Evie Papada, Fabio Angiolillo, Lisa Gastaldi, Tamara Köhler, Martin Lundstedt, Natalia Natsika, Marina Nord, Yuko Sato, Felix Wiebrecht, and Staffan I. Lindberg, *Democracy Report 2023: Defiance in the Face of*

India over the last ten years. The report stated that the right-wing, Hindu-nationalist BJP government at the helm continued to suppress religious freedom in the country. The article also pointed out that India's powerful ruling party did not have a single Muslim representative in parliament.

On 1 May 2023, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) released the 2023 Annual Report that highlighted worsening religious freedom in India and tagged it as a 'country of particular concern.'¹⁵ The report investigated India as promoting and enforcing religiously discriminating policies and laws, such as the Citizenship Amendment Act and policies against wearing hijabs and slaughtering cows. The report concluded that such acts have negatively impacted minorities, including Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Adivasis and Dalits, among others. Furthermore, the recent tensions in Manipur have flared, where about 25 Churches were burnt down, mosque Imam was beaten up, and his beard was cut off on refusal to chant *Jai Shri Ram* (a Hindu religious slogan).¹⁶ The locals blamed the BJP government for creating fissures among the native communities. These events have created socio-religious agony in India.

Conclusion:

These recent articles, reports, editorials and analyses present a sketch of contemporary India as emerging in sections of the Western media and put a spotlight on the country's drift away from the vision of its founding fathers. They highlight how the 'Hindutva' project of the BJP government had shifted from the policy of inclusion to exclusion and how this was degrading peace in India and fragmenting its social and religious equations. The BJP continues to appeal to the basic instincts of the majority of the electorate, i.e. Hindus, and directs the resultant disaffection towards the minorities to mobilise electoral support for itself. As a consequence, the minorities' political, social, economic and legal space continues to shrink in India. The BJP is seeking to erase the account of Indian Muslims from history, stoking religious extremism, and resorting to methods that continue to undermine both the spirit and substance of democratic principles. These recent Western reports and commentaries are not without consequences. They represent a belated (albeit very limited) awakening to the dangerous transformation underway in India and serve as a notable blow to India's international image. It is hoped that these assessments will not prove to be abortive in the wake of

Autocratization, report (Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute at the University of Gothenburg, 2023) https://www.v-dem.net/documents/29/V-dem_democracyreport2023_lowres.pdf

¹⁵ *Annual Report 2023*, report (Washington, D.C.: United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 1 May 2023), <https://www.uscirf.gov/countries/india>

¹⁶ "Maharashtra: Mosque Imam beaten, beard cut off for refusing to chant Jai Shri Ram," *Maktoob*, May 2023, <https://maktoobmedia.com/india/maharashtra-mosque-imam-beaten-beard-cut-off-for-refusing-to-chant-jai-shri-ram/>

New Delhi's strong pushback and that they will play some role in halting and possibly reversing the negative trends underway in India.