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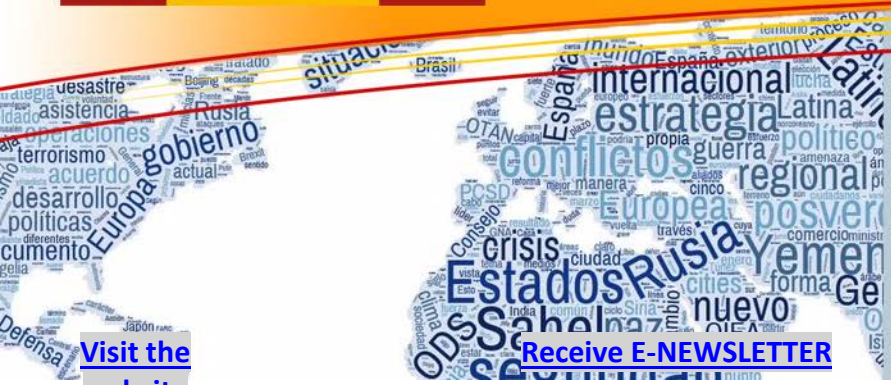
Internal challenges



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Abstract:

This chapter will focus on providing a structural overview of India's internal challenges in cementing its role as an increasingly relevant international player on the global stage. To this end, its demographic and economic situation will be presented, with its challenges and opportunities, major advances, and also its ambiguities. In this regard, the country's social situation will be analysed, highlighting, alongside the progress achieved in recent decades, the still significant inequalities, including those viewed through the lens of women's rights and the caste society. Finally, it will explain how the world's largest democracy faces challenges such as polarisation, regional diversity, and coexistence among different identities.

Keywords:

India, Modi, BJP, Congress Party, Demography, Economy, Gender, Inequality, Caste system, Democracy, Polarisation, Diversity.

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Introduction

This chapter will focus on providing a structural overview of India's internal capacities and challenges in cementing its role as an increasingly relevant international player on the global stage. One of the books that has best defined this new role for India is *The New World Disorder and The Indian Imperative.* Its authors are Shashi Tharoor, politician and analyst, and Samir Saran, president of the Observer Research Foundation (ORF), the country's most influential *think tank* on international relations. In this work, two of India's most influential thinkers in the international arena join forces to share an Indian perspective on the crisis of the liberal international order that emerged after the Second World War, which they characterise as "the new world disorder" (Tharoor and Saran, 2020).

These two authors consider that India has a fundamental role to play due to its growing geopolitical influence, which could grant it a leading role in major global discussions on security, climate change and the governance of the new digital landscape. This revolves around the fundamental capacities and resources that India has built since its independence from the British Empire in the mid-20th century. Two key aspects of this new India are its sustained commitment to constitutional democracy and its identity as a non-hegemonic global power. The “Indian imperative” they discuss in their recent work is a vindication of this new Asian global player and its diplomacy, supported by its soft power. Tharoor and Saran highlight, however, the challenges India faces in achieving this status as a global power. These internal challenges will be the focus of this chapter.

India is undergoing a period of major transformations, and its leaders—not only political but also social, business, academic and intellectual figures such as Tharoor and Saran—are proposing their own scenarios for its role as an increasingly influential international actor, while simultaneously facing key internal challenges such as demographic evolution, inequality and democratic governance.

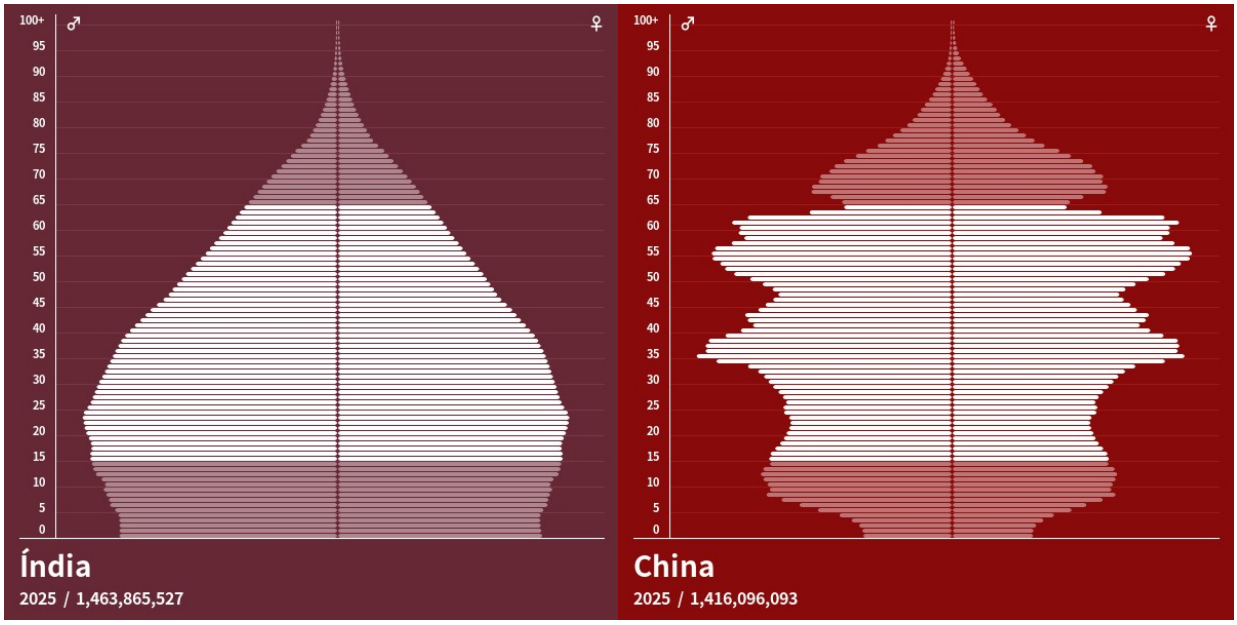
To better understand these dynamics, we will present India's demographic and economic situation and analyse its social implications—including the unequal situation of Indian women and the groups most disadvantaged by the social caste system—and it will be explained how the world’s largest democracy faces challenges such as polarisation, regional diversity and coexistence among different identities.

Demography

India's population has multiplied nearly fourfold since its birth as a modern state in 1947, making it a major demographic power. According to recent United Nations estimates, the South Asian country has surpassed China as the world's most populous, with over 1.4 billion inhabitants (UNDESA, 2022). This is a huge increase compared to the 361 million recorded in the 1951 national census.

Although this data has generated media interest and is often included in recent reports or analyses on the Asian country (El País, 2023), what is relevant is not necessarily the number of inhabitants but the model of its growth and the positive demographic dividend of its population pyramid, with a still predominantly young citizenry. This element is key to the short-term promise of continued economic growth, but it is not static. Key political actors in the country are concerned about its possible future evolution, as both the birth and death rates are declining (UNDESA, 2022), implying higher life expectancy and lower fertility rates and a possible change in this population pyramid in the coming decades.

If this trend continues in the future, India will have to face the challenge of an ageing population, as the percentage of people over the age of sixty will increase over the next twenty years. A population pyramid marked by a greater presence of retired people is a fundamental economic challenge that currently weighs on the growth expectations of its Chinese neighbour (Esteban, 2024). For all these reasons, according to the aforementioned Indian politician and analyst Shashi Tharoor, his country has "a narrow window of opportunity to take advantage of the growth of its productive workforce to boost economic development" (Tharoor, 2022).



When comparing India's population with that of China, it is important to note not only how their population pyramids differ but also that China has a territory of approximately 9.6 million square kilometres, while India has only a third of that area—3.3 million square kilometres. Therefore, India's population density is nearly three times higher than China's. With far less territory and resources, India must care for, educate, feed and provide employment to a comparable number of people.

India's demographic boom in the second half of the 20th century coincided with an economic transformation that brought significant improvements in life expectancy, development levels and food production. Population growth and how to provide educational and health resources, as well as employment, has been a concern for the authorities, as indicated by measures reflected in a study by the Pew Research Centre in the United States (2021): some states and territories discourage large families by imposing sanctions, such as prohibiting parents with more than two children from receiving social services or holding political office.

> "In 2017, India's Ministry of Health and Family Welfare launched a comprehensive family planning programme aimed at reducing fertility to replacement levels by 2025 by improving medical care and health facilities,

access to contraceptives, and reproductive health education, particularly in areas with relatively high fertility rates" (Pew Research Centre, 2021).

Another demographic challenge lies in patterns of regional inequality. Northem India states are still experiencing population growth, while in the south the increase in population has already stabilised. In some southern states, such as Kerala, the population is even declining. The northern states, which are poorer, less educated and largely speak Hindi, the national language of the Devanagari language family, account for a significant part of the increase, while the southern states, which have a different cultural identity, speaking, for example, Dravidian languages that are very different from those of their northern neighbours, have limited population expansion more effectively, due to better human development and better educational policies (Tharoor, 2022). In general, the southern states of India (such as Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Kerala, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh) not only have slower population growth, but are also more developed economically and in terms of social indicators than many northern states (such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh).

Another challenge related to demographics and regional diversity has to do with the democratic dimension. The greater demographic weight of the northern states described above should have given them greater parliamentary representation at the federal level in proportion to their number of citizens. However, concerned about regional imbalances, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi of the Indian National Congress promoted a legislative reform in 1976 to freeze the effects of the census on the distribution of seats. Twenty-five years later, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpajee of India's other major political party, the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), renewed this situation for another twenty-five years, so that the parliamentary distribution has continued to exclude the largest population increase in the northern states.

The current government of Narendra Modi, also of the BJP, will have to decide in 2026—half a century after Indira Gandhi’s reform—whether to continue this anomalous situation or restructure seat distribution according to the current population. A decision to redistribute seats based on today’s census would give greater power to the north relative to the south, a key issue in internal power balances. For Tharoor (2022), while this scenario would make "the Indian Parliament more representative," it would also give the

northern states a two-thirds majority in the *Lokh Sabha* (the lower house of Parliament), enabling those who command this majority to amend the constitution at will, without necessarily considering the wishes of representatives from the southern states.

Economy

Over the last decade under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's governments, India has experienced continued economic growth, in line with that enjoyed since the beginning of the 21st century, on which it has built its aspirations to become a global player, while also facing significant challenges.

The Bharatiya Janata Party government has implemented major economic reforms such as demonetisation in 2016, the Goods and Services Tax (GST) in 2017, and various initiatives focused on digitalisation and infrastructure strengthening, including access to electricity, drinking water and sanitation (Pérez López, 2020). The goal of Modi's economic policy has been to simplify the tax system, reduce corruption and increase economic formalisation, as well as improve the business environment. Initiatives such as *Make in India* and *Atmanirbhar Bharat* ("Produce in India" or "Self-reliant India", in English translation) have sought, with varying success, to strengthen self-sufficiency and domestic industry.

Significant progress has been made in recent years, reflected in India's improvement, for example, in the World Bank's *Ease of Doing Business* index, which measures the ability of states to promote and facilitate business activity in their territory (from 142nd to 63rd place in just five years), and in the attraction of foreign direct investment, which has been gradually increasing steadily since 2014 (Pérez López, 2020). A particularly relevant fact is that, during Narendra Modi's governments between 2014 and 2022, GDP *per capita* has increased from five thousand to seven thousand dollars, a 40% increase in just eight years. According to the International Monetary and Fund, India's economic performance in 2024 is expected to yield a growth rate of 6.5%. This is higher than China's projected growth of 4.6% and exceeds that of any other major economy in the world (Sen, 2024).

These excellent macroeconomic figures do not prevent the Indian economy from also facing difficulties in recent years. The COVID-19 pandemic had a devastating impact, with GDP falling by around 7.3% in 2020. The recovery has been rapid, with growth of

approximately 6.4% in 2023 and a projected 6.5% in 2024, but millions of informal workers were severely affected. In this regard, the Modi government's agricultural and labour reforms have been controversial and have sparked significant protests, particularly among farmers. These laws allowed farmers to sell their products outside government-regulated markets, facilitated direct agreements between producers and companies, and reduced the role of intermediaries. However, farmers, especially in the Punjab and Haryana regions, protested massively, claiming that the reforms would benefit large corporations and jeopardise the minimum purchase prices previously guaranteed by the government. After a year of protests and blockades in New Delhi, Modi announced in November 2021 that the laws would be repealed, marking one of his government's biggest concessions to popular pressure (Narula, 2022).

Although successive Modi governments have managed to expand India's economy, they have not achieved the same success in generating productive employment for the large number of unskilled workers. Approximately 40% of the workforce remains in agriculture, while only about 20% are employed in industry or business services such as the technology sector. Despite multiple initiatives to boost industrial jobs—such as the *Make in India* programme launched in 2014 and the recent 2023 production-linked incentive scheme—the industrial sector's share of the economy has not grown significantly (Sen, 2024).

For India to achieve labour-intensive industrialisation like China's, profound structural reforms are needed in the product, labour and credit markets. However, these changes are politically complex, as they involve confronting the interests of the country's powerful business conglomerates and trade unions. One of the greatest challenges facing Modi's government in its third consecutive term will be the creation of productive jobs outside the agricultural sector for an increasingly educated and ambitious youth.

Aware of the difficulties of providing quality employment to a large part of the population, the Modi government—especially in its second term—has implemented public policies aimed at providing economic and material resources to the less privileged population in a policy referred to by some experts as *new welfarism* (Anand *et al.*, 2020).

The new welfarism of Narendra Modi's government represents an approach contrary to that of its centre-left political alternative, the Congress Party, has developed over decades in terms of public policies of redistribution and inclusion. It does not prioritise the provision

of public goods such as basic health care or primary education or the strengthening of the public safety net that previous Indian Congress Party governments have promoted with mixed success. Its aim is to enable the government, with strong support from technological and digital tools, to directly deliver essential goods and services normally provided by the private sector, such as bank accounts, cooking gas, toilets and washbasins, electricity, housing and, more recently, water and cash, to the most disadvantaged groups (Anand *et al.,* 2020).

A paradigmatic example of this policy has been the implementation of the *Aadhaar* programme, launched in 2009 during the Congress Party government, prior to that of Narendra Modi. *Aadhaar* is a biometric identification system that assigns a unique 12-digit number to every resident in India, based on data such as fingerprints and iris scans. *Aadhaar* is a cornerstone of India's digital governance strategy, reflecting the Modi government's approach to a *new welfare state* that combines technology and social policies for inclusion and development.

Interestingly, the programme faced numerous criticisms in its early days, including from then-candidate Narendra Modi, who in 2014 called it a "political gimmick" (The Wire, 2024). Despite this, the Modi government adopted and significantly expanded the programme after winning the elections that same year and taking power. In 2016, the Modi administration enacted the Aadhaar Act, consolidating the use of the initiative in various government initiatives. Today, 99% of Indian adults are included in the programme (Sen, 2024).

Under Modi's leadership, *Aadhaar* has been integrated into multiple schemes to improve the efficiency of public redistribution policies and reduce fraud. For example, it has been used in the *Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana* campaign to facilitate financial inclusion, enabling millions of bank accounts to be opened for previously unbanked individuals. In 2024, 71.1% of Indians have an account with a financial institution, compared to 48.3% ten years earlier, when Modi began his first term (Sen, 2024).

The implementation of *Aadhaar*, with this vision of "new welfarism", has enabled the Indian federal government and the various states that comprise it to distribute benefits to the poorest sections of the population directly through their *Aadhaar*-linked bank accounts. It has also helped to curb the usual corruption of intermediaries in the delivery

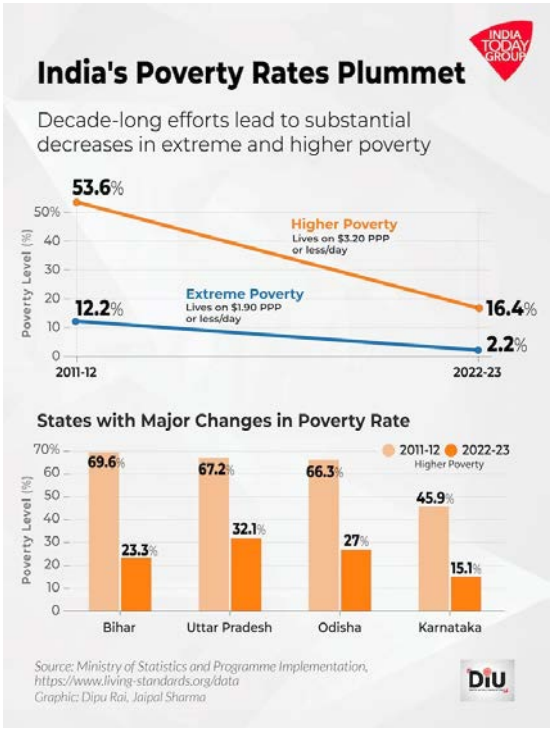
of subsidies to poor households, which has long been a serious problem in the provision of social assistance in India.

Through this framework, Modi's government in recent years has distributed large quantities of essential goods such as toilets and cooking utensils, which previously had to be acquired privately. According to Arvind Subramanian, former Chief Economic Adviser during Modi's first term, the logic of the new welfarism lies in the electoral opportunity of providing tangible goods and services—such as a toilet or a bank account—to the most disadvantaged classes. When the government promises cash transfers or toilets, everyone can monitor whether the money has reached new bank accounts or the toilets have been installed in low-income households (Anand et al., 2020).

Despite its benefits in terms of efficiency and savings, Aadhaar has also faced criticism over concerns related to privacy and data security. Some experts argue that the system could facilitate state surveillance and undermine democratic principles (Bhatia, 2021).

Social and gender inequalities

It is evident that the major challenge facing the Indian government and society as a whole lies in reconciling the rates of economic growth—outlined in the previous section—with the implementation of appropriate reforms to ensure that broader segments of the population can benefit from the country's increasing wealth and influence. In this respect, and during the last decade, India has achieved significant progress in reducing poverty, particularly in terms of multidimensional poverty, according to data provided by the United Nations Development Programme. Between 2015 and 2021, around 135 million people, especially in rural areas, emerged from multidimensional poverty, which reduced the poverty rate from 24.85% to 14.96%. Rural areas reduced poverty more rapidly, falling from 32.59% to 19.28%, while poverty in urban areas declined proportionally to a lesser extent, from 8.65% to 5.27% (NITI Aayog, 2023).



However, according to a recent report by the World Inequality Lab, economic inequality in India is still among the highest in the world, despite its recent economic growth. This report provides a detailed analysis of the distribution of wealth in India and highlights the growing economic disparities in the country. In terms of wealth, the richest 10% of the population owns 77% of the total national wealth, and the richest 1% controls 53%. In

contrast, the poorest half of the population has only 4.1% of the country's wealth (Bharti *et al.*, 2023).

A worrying aspect from the perspective of the Modi governments, as the report highlights, is that economic inequality declined from India's independence in 1947 until the early 1980s. During those decades, the current opposition Congress Party was the dominant political force. Since then, inequality has been on the rise, with exponential growth, especially between 2014 and 2023, when the concentration of wealth among the country's elite intensified, reaching historic highs (Bharti *et al.*, 2023). In terms of share of national income, India's economic elite surpasses even countries with high levels of inequality such as South Africa, Brazil and the United States.

The report also raises concerns about the regressive nature of India's tax system when analysed from the perspective of net wealth. Currently, the tax system fails to collect sufficient resources from the enormous fortunes accumulated by the elite, contributing to the persistence of inequality. The World Inequality Lab report proposes a restructuring of fiscal policy that takes into account both income and wealth, as well as greater public investment in key sectors such as health, education and nutrition, to ensure that the benefits of economic growth reach a larger part of the population and not just the elites. However, it notes that such measures have been rejected by both the Narendra Modi government and the most privileged economic sectors (Bharti *et al.,* 2023).

Another key aspect of the report, which points to a structural problem in India's ability to tackle the challenge of economic inequality and poverty, is the poor quality of economic data from the country's official sources, noting that the availability and accuracy of information has declined in recent years. As a result, current estimates of inequality are only tentative and do not fully reflect the economic reality of the country. Although this has historically been a problem in India, given the advances in digitalisation, economic progress, and modernisation in other areas of bureaucracy and public policy, the report also underscores the Modi government's responsibility to improve data collection and ensure greater transparency in official information so as to design more effective policies against inequality (Bharti et al., 2023).

Another aspect to consider in this context is gender inequality, as India, among other problems in this area, has an unbalanced sex ratio due to practices such as selective

abortion of female foetuses and a preference for male children in many rural and urban areas. Femicide includes cases of dowry-related murders, honour killings and prenatal femicides. This form of violence is rooted in the patriarchal structures of Indian society and is an extension of the gender inequalities that exist at the social, cultural, and economic levels (Mitra vom Berg, 2021).

The expert Nishi Mitra vom Berg, from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, in a 2021 chapter on this issue in the *Routledge Handbook of Femicide*, contextualises how the prevailing social system of castes, traditional gender norms, and practices of control over female autonomy contribute to maintaining in India one of the highest rates of femicide in the world (Mitra vom Berg, 2021). The culture of impunity and the lack of effective law enforcement also play a crucial role in perpetuating these crimes. The author argues that, despite progress in legislation—such as the 2005 Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act—the implementation of these public policies remains deficient in many parts of the country, particularly in rural areas.

These behavioural patterns analysed by Mitra vom Berg lead to India's position in the *Global Gender Gap Report 2024* of the World Economic Forum, ranking 129th out of the 146 countries assessed in terms of gender inequality. There remains a significant gap in women's economic participation and opportunities, access to education, and gender-based violence (Global Gender Gap Report, 2024).

Despite this inequality, some progress has been made in recent years. According to data from the Indian government's National Family Health Survey, which collects information from 2019 to 2021 (International Institute for Population Sciences, 2021), there has been an increase in the female literacy rate compared to previous reports. In the previous study from 2015-16, the female literacy rate was 70.3%, while in 2021 it reached 72.9%. This indicates a slight overall improvement in women's literacy in India, although it is still below the male literacy rate, which in the most recent study stands at 84.9% (International Institute for Population Sciences, 2021). In addition, significant disparities between genders and regions persist, especially in rural areas, where women still face significant social and cultural barriers to accessing education.

Regarding gender-based violence, the *National Family Health Survey* highlights that a significant proportion of women have experienced some form of domestic violence. Specifically, almost one in three women aged between 15 and 49 (31.1%) have suffered

some form of physical or sexual violence from their partner at some point in their lives. Of the women who reported experiencing violence from their partner, approximately 5.7% indicated that the violence occurred in the last twelve months. Although there has been a slight decrease in these cases compared to previous reports, the situation remains worrying, highlighting the need for more effective interventions. The institutional response and access to legal resources to counteract this situation remain insufficient for many women, especially in rural and disadvantaged areas (International Institute for Population Sciences, 2021).

Finally, in terms of gender inequality, despite recent economic growth, women's participation in the labour force has declined in recent years. Factors such as socio-cultural norms, domestic responsibilities and lack of economic opportunities contribute to this disparity. Most women work in the agricultural sector, but mechanisation and lack of incentives have reduced opportunities in this sector. At the same time, employment in industry and the service sector has grown insufficiently to absorb women seeking employment. In addition, domestic burdens and lack of support infrastructure, such as childcare facilities and adequate parental leave, hinder women's integration into the labour market. Specifically, the decline in women's participation in the labour force in India is most evident in rural areas, where the percentage of women employed fell from 54% in 1980 to 31% in 2017 (Mahajan, 2024).

This decline was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. During the July-September 2020 quarter, the female labour force participation rate fell to 16.1%, the lowest rate among the world's major economies. In times of crisis, Indian women were disproportionately affected, leading them to leave the labour force in large numbers due to increased domestic responsibilities, the closure of nurseries and schools, and a greater burden of caring for sick relatives (Yasir and Schmall, 2021).

To contextualise this worrying dynamic, which has continued even after the COVID-19 crisis has passed, expert Nikita Mahajan highlights the lack of opportunities in formal sectors and the predominance of informal work, where women face precarious conditions. Increased education for girls and women has not been enough to generate stable employment, as social norms continue to limit female participation in the labour market, especially after marriage. To reverse this trend, Mahajan proposes a series of measures such as public incentives for female hiring, improvements in childcare infrastructure, and

a boost to sectors that have traditionally employed women, such as manufacturing and commerce. The author emphasises the need for active public policies that facilitate the incorporation of women into the workforce and reduce the gender gap in the Indian economy (Mahajan, 2024).

The final factor of inequality to highlight in the current Indian context is the still fundamental influence of the caste system on society, which is the social norm that structures the vast majority of the Hindu population, around 85% of the citizenry. One of the major obstacles to fairer and more equitable development in India today is the rigid and hierarchical system of social organisation through castes, which was legally dismantled in the 1950 Constitution but still has a decisive influence, especially in rural areas.

The millennial legacy of the caste system, a hierarchical social structure justified on religious grounds linked to spiritual purity, still plays an essential role in the daily life of the population, especially in rural areas, and is one of the major problems of inequality in India, affecting above all its most disadvantaged social groups.

This division into closed groups called castes is the most characteristic element of the majority religion on the Indian subcontinent, Hinduism, whose roots date back to around 1500 BC with the cultures that developed along the Indus River in the north-west of the subcontinent. Hinduism hierarchically divides the members of its religion into castes or social groups by birth (Flood, 1998)[1] .

Caste, is inherited from parents and immutable throughout life, carries a religious connotation linked to the idea of reincarnation. According to Hindu belief, the purest souls are reincarnated into those born into higher castes, whereas impure souls—those that have lived outside the religious path, or *dharma*, in past lives—are reincarnated into the lowest castes.

Birth into a particular caste also has socio-economic implications, as each group is linked to a specific social function: the highest castes, such as the Brahmins, are traditionally engaged in the most privileged and valued tasks in society, such as politics, religion or

[1] A detailed explanation of the religious, cultural and socio-economic implications of the caste system is provided in the following work: Gavin Flood. *Hinduism.* Madrid, Cambridge University Press, 1st edition 1996, 1st edition in Spanish 1998, which forms the basis for the information presented in this section.

the military, while the lowest castes occupy less socially regarded roles, such as farmers, artisans or bricklayers, for example.

The very concept of caste, however, is somewhat misleading and fails to encompass the full complexity of this social system. The word derives from Portuguese (where *casta* means "type") and began to be used by representatives of this colonial power who arrived in India in the fifteenth century. They used it to describe how the social organisation of the inhabitants of these territories was divided into a series of closed groups or "types," arranged in a clear hierarchy.

Although from an external point of view the system seems unfair and dehumanising, for Hindus the caste system is a large family that protects and helps them in times of need, as there is solidarity among all its members, even if there are no direct family ties. The survival of the system is also based on the interrelationship between all the groups and their functions. Although social interaction may be non-existent from an economic and functional point of view, all castes fulfil an essential function and need each other to maintain cohesion and make society work.

However, the hereditary nature of the caste system, which perpetuates the structural injustice inherent in this form of social organisation, clashes with the democratic principles and respect for human rights of the new independent state of India. Although the 1950 Constitution, which crowned the transition from the authoritarian system of the British Empire to an independent and secular democracy led by an Indian government, categorically prohibits discrimination on the basis of caste, the millennial tradition of social organisation has adapted to the new circumstances and survived.

Two groups have suffered most directly from this hierarchical and unjust dimension of the system. The so-called outcast groups, also known pejoratively during the British rule as untouchables and as *Dalits* in their own denomination; and those belonging to the tribes, also known as *Adivasis,* which means ancient inhabitants, as they refer to the indigenous inhabitants of the subcontinent, who lived in the territory centuries before Hinduism even developed.

The *Adivasis* are a very heterogeneous group that includes a multitude of ethnic groups who, because they live in isolated areas such as forests or mountains, were not assimilated into the Hindu religious and cultural framework and are therefore outside the

caste system and considered and treated as inferior by Hindu orthodoxy. There are more than 600 *Adivasi* tribal groups officially recognised after independence and the advent of democracy. They are called "scheduled tribes (STs)" (Flood, 1998).

On the other hand, and according to the latest official Indian population census of 2011, around 16.6% of the population belongs to officially recognised marginalised castes (Scheduled Castes, SC), which include the *Dalits*. This represents approximately 200 million people at that time. The *Adivasi* population is estimated to be around 8.6% of the total population, which at the beginning of the 2010s would be equivalent to around 100 million people. (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, 2011). In both cases, this is a minority percentage of the population, but at the same time it represents tens of millions of people, more than two-thirds of the current inhabitants of the entire European Union, for example.

In the case of *Dalits*, according to the same 2011 census, the literacy rate is significantly lower than the national average of 66%, while the national average at that time was 74%. *Adivasis* are in an even more problematic situation, with a literacy rate of only 59%. *Dalit* and *Adivasi* women have an even lower literacy rate.

Dalits and *Adivasis* also represent a disproportionate percentage of the population living in poverty in India: approximately 40% of the *Dalit* population and 45% of *Adivasis* live below the poverty line, which is a clear indicator of their economic and social exclusion (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, 2011).

This is not only a socio-economic problem; violence against *Dalits* by other more privileged groups, for example, remains a serious issue. According to a report by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB, 2021), more than 50,000 cases of crimes against *Dalits* were recorded in 2020, including murders, physical assaults, rapes and harassment. In his 2019 book *Caste Matters, Dalit* academic Suraj Yengde argues that despite legal advances, caste continues to shape social, political, and economic life in modern India. Yengde uses examples from his own life experience as *a Dalit* and statistical data to describe the systemic discrimination suffered by the most disadvantaged castes and their efforts to organise, fight for their rights and seek justice.

Domestic politics and regional tensions

In this section of the chapter, we will analyse the performance of the world's largest democracy and the challenges of maintaining freedoms and rights for a population of more than 1.4 billion people with the enormous diversity and different identities already mentioned above.

Since its independence in 1947, India has maintained, despite countless difficulties, one of the most fruitful democratic experiences of all the states that emerged in the process of decolonisation. Like many other democracies today, it faces complex challenges such as the new digital environment with its opportunities to increase and streamline participation, but also with problems such as disinformation and increasing polarisation.

In the case of India, these issues will be analysed in the context of the trajectory of the governments of Narendra Modi, who came to power in 2014 with an exciting message for a majority of the electorate of political and economic regeneration and championing a Hindu vision of society in the face of a weakened opposition from the Congress Party and other forces that continue to support an identity built around the diversity of cultures and religions that amalgamate the Indian nation.

The consolidation of a democratic system in India has its roots in the influence that the British exerted on the subcontinent during their colonial rule. The leaders who launched the Indian nationalist movement at the end of the nineteenth century—such as B. K. Gokhale and Lokamanya Tilak—admired the British political system, and their main demand was that this same system be applied in Calcutta or Delhi with the same consistency as in London or Edinburgh. The next generation of nationalist leaders, led by Mohandas K. Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru—both educated in British universities—also identified strongly with democratic ideals, which they considered antithetical to the practices of the British Empire in India (Campos, 2003).

After independence in 1947, the values and principles of the Indian democratic system were formally enshrined in the 1950 Constitution. This enshrines the political and legal equality of all citizens regardless of race, religion, caste, or gender. In its Magna Carta, India is constituted as a federal republic with two large legislative chambers: *the Lokh Sabha* (People's Assembly) and *the Rajya Sabha* (Council of States). The representatives of the former are elected by universal suffrage and are responsible for

appointing the executive power. The *Rajya Sabha* is a body representing the states that make up the Indian union, and its representatives are elected by the respective parliaments of those states.

The first elections were held in 1952 and brought Jawaharlal Nehru's Congress Party to power. From that year until the present, federal and state elections have been held regularly, although confidence in the political class has weakened. The generation that took over after Nehru's death in 1964, symbolised by his daughter Indira Gandhi, changed the inclusive and open style of the Congress Party to a more top-down approach, where loyalty to the leader became the guiding principle of this political force. Power began to shift from party members throughout the country and their representatives in Parliament to a series of private advisers to the Prime Minister herself ( ), a practice that has not changed substantially under subsequent leaders of the party of another political persuasion.

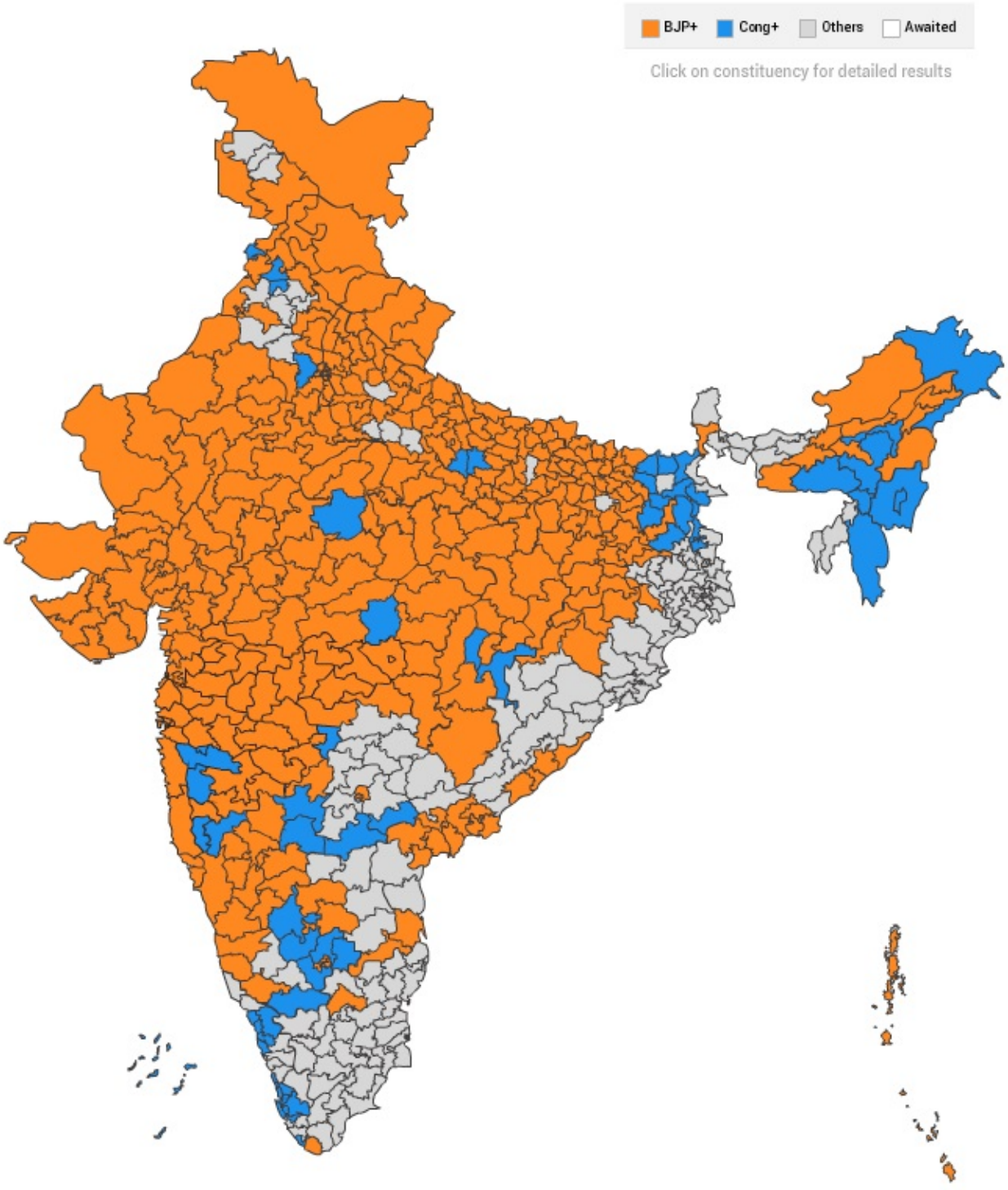
In 1977, cornered by various court rulings and growing political opposition, Indira Gandhi declared a state of emergency, which suspended constitutional rights for several months. But even this brief period of absence of democratic guarantees, with judges dismissed, opponents imprisoned and parliament closed, ended in a new call for elections, which Indira herself lost, giving power for the first time to a coalition of political forces that did not include the Congress Party (Campos, 2003).

The Congress Party's discredit has grown over the years, becoming an electoral machine at the service of the Nehru-Gandhi family. Following the assassinations of Indira (1984) and her son Rajiv (1991), the party is now led by Rajiv's son, Rahul Gandhi, who has lost the last three consecutive elections to Narendra Modi's BJP.

Modi is the first Indian head of government since Indira Gandhi in the early 1970s to win two successive terms with a clear parliamentary majority. In the 2024 elections, he ratified his power with a narrower victory, but one that has allowed him to continue governing in coalition with other allied political forces.

In the 2014 elections, Modi achieved a historic victory with a clear message about the importance of promoting economic reforms, fighting corruption in the Congress Party and creating jobs for India's young population (Campos, 2019). In comparison, his campaign to renew the support of the Indian electorate in 2019 and 2024 has focused on national

security and promoting his vision of *Hindutva,* or the Hindu way of life. A common factor in this electoral journey has also been his vision of India as a key player on the international stage that must regain the historical weight that Indian civilisation has had in the history of humanity, only overshadowed by the years of relative decline following the 19th-century industrial revolution led by Western countries.



The arrival of Modi and the BJP to power in 2014, in elections where, for the first time in decades, an absolute majority was achieved, is the focus of the journalist Prashant Jha's book *How the BJP Wins: Inside India's Greatest Election Machine*. In this work, Jha offers a detailed analysis of the strategies that have enabled the BJP to consolidate itself as a

dominant political force in India, not only at the federal level but also in many states. The BJP, under Modi's leadership, has consolidated its dominance in northern states such as Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Haryana, Rajasthan and Bihar, where it has achieved major electoral victories at both the state and national levels.

In his work, Jha not only takes into account the essential contribution of Modi's leadership to this achievement, but also that of other key BJP figures such as Amit Shah and innovative tools such as the use of digital technologies and local and regional support networks to create a successful electoral machine.

Jha's book provides an understanding of the transformation of the BJP's Hindu nationalism, which has gone from being a peripheral narrative in Indian society in the 1950s and 1960s to becoming the main ideological framework of a party that has achieved three consecutive electoral victories at the national level.

One of the keys to the BJP's success, according to Jha, is its ability to connect with diverse segments of Indian society. The party has been able to articulate a message that resonates with both economic development aspirations and nationalist and cultural sentiments. This duality has enabled it to attract voters from different castes, religions and regions, expanding its support base beyond its traditional strongholds. All of this is underpinned by a narrative of political change based on a liberal economic model and a new identity for India built around the majority religion of Hinduism (Jha, 2017).

In addition, the author analyses the BJP's strategic use of technology and social media. The party has been a pioneer in adopting digital platforms to spread its message, counter adverse narratives and mobilise its supporters. This innovation has given it a significant advantage in a country with a young and increasingly connected population. At the same time, it has generated strong dynamics of political polarisation, not only against supporters of the main opposition force, the Congress Party, but also between the *Hindutva* vision and that of India as a secular country, and the identities of other religious groups such as Muslims.

According to the 2011 Census of India, the Muslim population was approximately 172.2 million people, representing 14.2% of the total population at that time (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, 2011). Population growth over the last decade has increased the number of Indians who profess Islam to more than two hundred

million, making India the third country in the world with the largest Muslim population, only behind Indonesia and Pakistan. Although they remain a minority, Muslims are a fundamental part of the population, and the clash with Prime Minister Modi's *Hindutva* vision poses a significant risk of social confrontation.

Narendra Modi's government has implemented several recent policies that have generated controversy in relation to the Muslim minority. One of the most debated is the Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019, which grants Indian citizenship to refugees of religions that have their historical origins in the Indian subcontinent (Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, among others) from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan, but excludes Muslims. This has been seen by many critics as a discriminatory measure, especially since it does not provide a similar path for Muslims persecuted in those countries (Guha, 2020). In addition, policies related to the National Register of Citizens in the Assam region have raised concerns that they could be used to exclude many Muslims who are unable to provide the required documents, potentially leading to the loss of their citizenship and legal rights.

These policies have been linked to the BJP's stance on the Ram temple in Ayodhya, a deeply controversial issue in Indian politics. The BJP has advocated for the construction of a Hindu temple on the site of the former Babri Mosque, which was demolished by Hindu groups in 1992, an event that sparked violent religious riots. After years of legal disputes, the Indian Supreme Court ruled in 2019 that the site should be handed over for the construction of the temple, which was seen as a victory for Hindu nationalist sectors led by the BJP. This link between policies towards Muslims and the Ram temple has reinforced the perception that the Modi government favours Hindu interests, which has increased inter-religious tensions in the country and has been criticised by many human rights advocates as a setback for religious equality and social cohesion (Pande, 2019).

In this context, the internal political situation in the Kashmir region is particularly relevant, as it is the only region in India where the Muslim population is in the majority. This region, located in the north-west of the Indian subcontinent, has been the subject of territorial claims by India and Pakistan since the independence of both countries in 1947 and recently held its first elections following the central government's abolition of the region's semi-autonomous status in August 2019.

Following a confrontation between India and Pakistan at the end of the 1940s over control of this territory, it was divided into two distinct regions: in the east and south lies the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, with about two-thirds of the total territory. Its capital is Srinagar, and sixty per cent of its inhabitants are Muslim. To the north extends the mountainous region controlled by Pakistan, referred to by Pakistani leaders as Azad (Free) Kashmir, with its capital in Muzaffarabad.

The Indian government's promises at that time to hold a plebiscite, supported by the United Nations, to determine its future were never fulfilled. Pakistan refused to withdraw its army from the area under its control, and the Indian government used this decision as a basis for ruling out the option of a referendum. Since the 1950s, the security situation in this region has been a constant source of conflict between India and Pakistan, which have fought three wars caused directly or indirectly by control of the Kashmir territory (1948-49, 1965 and 1971). Since the 1980s, the clashes have continued, mainly between pro-Pakistani militias, identified as terrorist groups by the New Delhi government and the Indian army, leaving thousands dead in the following decades and an open wound that has yet to find a diplomatic solution despite attempts at reconciliation and dialogue at the beginning of the 21st century (Jacob, 2013).

The political autonomy of Jammu and Kashmir within the Indian state has also suffered many limitations over time. In 1953, the Kashmiri Prime Minister, Sheik Abdullah, was arrested on charges of promoting separatist tendencies. Elections in different decades marred by allegations of fraud, political repression with arrests of opposition leaders, and decisive influence at certain times from the federal government in New Delhi are other examples of restrictions on democracy in Kashmir.

Polarisation and tension in Kashmir have worsened under Narendra Modi's governments. David Devadas, a journalist and political analyst with extensive experience in Kashmir, explores this in his recent book *The Generation of Rage in Kashmir*. The reasons behind the growing anger and radicalisation among young Kashmiris, as the title of the book makes explicit, stem from a generation born after the insurgency peaked in the 1990s, which has grown up in an environment of violence, repression and lack of opportunities, leading to a sense of hopelessness and frustration. Devadas argues that the current generation is driven by a combination of historical grievances and state repression led by the central government, which has led to a continuous cycle of unrest and protests (Devadas, 2019).

The book examines the role of the Indian state in the Kashmir crisis, pointing out how government policies and the militarisation of the region have further fuelled resentment among young people. The repression of demonstrations, censorship and human rights violations have created an atmosphere of mistrust and hostility towards the central government, culminating in the revocation of Article 370 in 2019, which removed the

special status of Jammu and Kashmir, exacerbating tensions and deepening the sense of alienation among the local population.

A relevant aspect in this context was that the state of Jammu and Kashmir was reorganised, and the region of Ladakh was separated from it. The inhabitants of Ladakh, especially the majority Buddhist community in Leh, had long demanded an administration separate from Kashmir, which was granted in 2019 through Prime Minister Modi's initiative, although without its own legislative assembly and under direct control of the central government. In the rest of the state of Jammu and Kashmir, with a Muslim majority, this separation was met with protests and became another source of discord with the government.

Another fundamental element in the region, as Devadas also analyses in his book, is the role of social networks and technology in the radicalisation of part of the Kashmiri youth. With the growing availability of the internet, narratives about the Kashmiri struggle have been amplified, allowing young people to connect more quickly and effectively with discourses of resistance and militancy. Devadas points out that, unlike previous generations, who had moderate political leaders as references, the current generation has been influenced by extremist ideologies and has adopted a more militant approach to the struggle for self-determination. The author argues that unless the legitimate concerns of Kashmiris are addressed through dialogue and a more inclusive approach—instead of relying primarily on military force and state repression—the region could face an even greater escalation of conflict (Devadas, 2019).

In this regard, in the recent regional elections in Jammu and Kashmir, held in October 2024, the opposition alliance formed by the Congress Party and the National Conference (NC) won a significant majority, securing 48 seats, while Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party won 29 seats. These elections were the first in a decade in the region and the first since the central government revoked Jammu and Kashmir's special status in 2019. Voter turnout was remarkable, reaching 64%, indicating a significant commitment by the population to the democratic process.

The result has been interpreted as a rejection of the BJP's policies in the region, particularly the 2019 decision to revoke Kashmir's autonomy—a measure widely criticised and seen as an attack on Kashmiri identity. Omar Abdullah, leader of the National

Conference, has called for the restoration of the state's previous status for Jammu and Kashmir.

The situation in Kashmir is not the only source of regional tension. There are security problems with armed groups in many other regions. One of the most significant is the Naxalite or Maoist insurgency, which operates in the so-called *red belt* of central-eastern India, covering states such as Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha and Maharashtra. This movement, influenced by Maoist communist ideology, has waged an armed struggle against the state since the late 1960s, arguing that it defends the rights of peasants and indigenous tribes. Although the insurgency has declined in recent years due to military operations and development programmes, clashes with security forces still persist in various areas of these states.

Another focus of conflict lies in the northeast of India, where various separatist groups have sought autonomy or independence in states such as Assam, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram. In Assam, for example, the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) has carried out attacks against government and commercial targets since the 1970s. In Nagaland, demands for a "Greater Nagalim"—which would include territories of China, India and Myanmar—have led to decades of fighting between insurgents and the army. Although the government has signed peace agreements with some groups, the region remains volatile due to ethnic rivalries and the illegal arms trade.

Finally, it should be noted that there are tensions unrelated to armed groups, such as those related to language and regional identity policies. One example is the persistent opposition to the imposition of Hindi as the national language in southern India. In this region, the native languages are of Dravidian origin, from a different family than Hindi and other languages spoken in the north of the country, which are of Devanagari origin. In southern states such as Tamil Nadu, the central government's attempts to popularise Hindi as the official language since the 1960s have been met with a powerful political and social movement that has channelled the protests of millions of people over the years, defending the use of Tamil and other regional languages over Hindi. These tensions have led the federal government to promote policies of linguistic plurality in administration and education. However, even today there is friction in southern states such as Karnataka, where local nationalist groups continue to protest against the pre-eminence of Hindi, insisting on the promotion of the regional language, Kannada. These disputes reflect

India's linguistic diversity and the constant challenge of balancing regional identity with national unity.

Conclusions

Against this backdrop of challenges, Narendra Modi's BJP government achieved a bittersweet result in the recent 2024 national elections. The Hindu nationalist party lost the absolute majority it had held alone for the last ten years, quite clearly in 2014 (303 MPs) and very broadly in 2019 (353 MPs), falling far short of the 272 required for this majority. Only with its partners in the *National Democratic Alliance* coalition has it been able to muster enough votes for a third term.

The new legislature should take Narendra Modi's BJP government through to 2029, if it is able to complete its current term. The great question hanging over its future performance is whether the Prime Minister will be capable of reversing this erosion of popular support and finding more effective solutions to the demographic, economic, social inequality and political problems analysed in this chapter, in order to lead India to the privileged position in the international context that his government has consistently argued the country deserves to achieve.

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