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Saffron Politics and Autocratization in India.

Setting the Context

The creeping deterioration of democracies globally has been increasingly visible in the contemporary world. There is now growing consensus of a global trend of democratic decline (Croissant and Diamond 2020). A defining characteristic of global *autocratization* has been a prevalence of more subtle, gradual methods such as opposition harassment and a suppression of government accountability over more traditional and blatant forms like military coups and election-day vote frauds (Bermeo, 2016; Svobik, 2014).

Research Relevance

The annual V-Dem report (2018, 2019) devotes an entire section towards highlighting the politics of exclusion of vulnerable and minority groups as a precursor for violent conflict. It further contends that there is an urgent need for further research into how autocratization intertwines with the politics of exclusion and minority conflict.

However, the politics of exclusion of vulnerable minority groups, while in line with the more clandestine methods employed by would-be autocrats, has proven to be far less noticeable at the national level, and therefore much harder to measure. There is thus a critical need for scholarship that studies autocratization on a smaller scale, at subnational levels.

My research seeks to address the current gaps in the literature by examining autocratization at the subnational level. It also proposes to focus on the role of social exclusion and violence against minority groups as a key, but thus far under-researched indicator of autocratization. As a case study, I propose an in-depth analysis of subnational autocratization in India.

Why India?

The V-Dem report (2019) highlights the spread of disinformation, the rise of toxic polarisation and government attacks on the media, civil society, freedom of expression and association as the biggest challenges facing global democracy. In recent years, Indian democracy has been host to most, if not all these challenges in recent years (Ganguly, 2019). Concurrently, there has also been an increased incidence of mob violence and public lynchings against minority groups, in the name of protecting the pride and position of Hinduism and Hindus in India.

As the largest democracy in the world, and for many decades the torchbearer for liberal post-colonial states, the fate of Indian democracy will shape democratic trends both regionally and globally in the 21st

century. India also manifests as a critical case study when we consider the most potent variants of democratic backsliding observed by scholars in recent years.

There has been a serious paucity of work situating recent trends in India within the conceptual framework of autocratization. Furthermore, there has been a lack of research focused on understanding how the majoritarian, autocratic impulses of the BJP government functions at the subnational level. My research proposes to take a significant step towards plugging that gap by studying how the autocratizing impulses of the BJP government manifests at the subnational level and attempting to shed greater light on the diffusion of autocratization between the national and subnational levels in India.

Research Questions

- How does autocratization manifest at the subnational level in India?
- How can we best understand the diffusion of autocratization between the national and subnational level in India?

Interdisciplinary aspects of research

From a methodological perspective, I plan to employ mixed methods, marrying qualitative and quantitative methods. This will include ethnographical analysis that borrows from anthropological and sociological traditions.

My research will also be of relevance to area studies experts, particularly South Asian studies as well as Indologists, constitutional law researchers and students of public policy. I believe it will also be of interest to students of religion, particularly with regards to its presence in the public sphere and its political manifestations.

I also hope that my research, given its multi-disciplinary interests, will benefit from a constant interaction with peers from different disciplines, allowing for far more robust research outcomes.