

Understanding India?

By Erik Solheim

Should King Harald give the Grand Cross of St Olav to India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi? Is it right for me to highlight Modi as the most popular politician in the world, loved by the vast majority of Indians, at a time when few other politicians are popular at home?

Johannes Morken thinks not and raises relevant objections related to human rights and especially the position of religious minorities in India.

Central to the debate is Modi and his party BJP - the Indian People's Party. The BJP is today the world's strongest political party with more than a hundred million members. It has won almost every election in northern and central India in recent years. Two weeks ago, the BJP won for the first time in West Bengal, a state with 106 million inhabitants. The voter turnout was 93%. In Norway, 62% voted in the last local elections. Many European countries are below 50%.

BJP's ideology is Hindu nationalism, the idea that India's modernity must be rooted in India's history and tradition - in Hindu dharma. India's temples are seething with life, 24 hours a day, all year round. We Christians cannot imagine such involvement even in our wildest dreams. Hindu nationalism is not without its problems, but it is strange that we are not more curious. Perhaps Verdinytt can pick up the gauntlet? Perhaps there might even be something to learn?

The West has a three-hundred-year history of arrogance towards India. Winston Churchill said that "I hate Indians. They are a beastly people, with a beastly religion. Karl Marx believed that India had no history other than as a recipient of foreign invasions. "Hindu Gods are absolute monsters of lust, injustice, evil and cruelty," said the impressive, radical Christian opponent of slavery, William Wilberforce. Baden Powell, the founder of the Boy Scout movement, characterized Indian boys as "totally without character by nature."

We may not be as arrogant anymore in the West, but we still lack genuine curiosity about India. Those who are not curious do not learn either. Today, there is no Norwegian media that follows India - almost 20% of humanity. Norwegian media showed little curiosity during Prime Minister Modi's visit to Norway - the first by an Indian top leader in 43 years.

How are we to understand Hindu nationalism?

When India's struggle against the British colonial rule began a hundred years ago, there were two major camps. The Congress Party led by Gandhi and India's later Prime Minister Nehru, fought for a secular India, even though Gandhi dressed like a Hindu

guru, ate vegetarian food and talked about Ram Raya, the ideal rule of the God Ram on earth.

Against them and together with them in the fight against the British stood the RSS - the Federation of Volunteers for the Nation. RSS is the BJP's parent organization. Modi spent twenty years of his life in RSS - traveled around India and knows India from the bottom like a Norwegian missionary preacher knows the west coast of Norway. RSS emphasized that India not only had to become independent, but also strong, cultivating its roots in Hindu tradition and religion. This program stood against the Congress Party's insistence on Hindu-Muslim unity against the British.

For many decades, the secular Congress Party dominated. Hindu nationalism was important, but in a minority. Now the Hindu nationalists have won the ideological battle in India. Even if the Congress Party was to win the next election, it can never get the Hindu nationalist genie back in the bottle. The debate is over, won by Modi and the BJP. We in the West would be wise to deal with that.

In Modi's story, India has been subjected to two major attacks.

Turkic Muslim tribes, often from Afghanistan or Central Asia, attacked India in the years from 1000 onwards. They burned and destroyed Hindu temples - the remains of Hindu gods became building material for mosques. Hindus were converted to Islam.

Probably the most important political movement in India in recent decades would rectify this. Hindu activists claimed, with good evidence, that Muslim emperors of the 16th century had demolished a temple at the birthplace of the god Ram in the city of Ayodha. They demanded the removal of the mosque and the construction of a new temple. This movement mobilized millions of people across India and was the beginning of the BJP's rise to political dominance. Hindu activists eventually demolished the mosque with violence and without permission, but the Supreme Court of India later accepted the argument for a Hindu temple in Ram's honor and asked that a new mosque be built elsewhere. I was present at the inauguration of the new Ram temple in Ayodha in 2024. It is one of the world's most beautiful religious buildings.

When the British attacked India in the 18th century, India accounted for 25% of the world economy; when the country became independent in 1949, India was down to 2%. To justify their plunder of Indian resources, the British had to find an ideological superstructure. They branded Indian traditions and Indian religion as backward, as superstitious, as unscientific and inferior. If the British had admitted that India had been totally superior to the British Isles for almost all of world history, it would have been difficult to justify the British "civilizing" mission in India.

India was attacked with swords and with superior money bags. Hindus were threatened with weapons to change their faith. It was also often economically profitable to convert. And converting could solve Indian problems such as caste oppression. But unlike almost all original cultures in Africa, Latin America and Southeast Asia, Hinduism resisted the foreign attacks. Hindu dharma had sufficient inner strength and ability to renew itself. It is this strength that Modi will build on.

Perhaps the greatest “achievement” of the British was to colonize Indian hearts and minds. Independent India after 1949 was led by an elite that had studied in Britain, knew Shakespeare better than Indian literature, knew more about Greek than Indian thinkers, spoke English better than Indian languages and preferred afternoon tea to Indian food. This Indian elite despised ancient India and saw it as an obstacle to modernity, industry and progress. It was a question of breaking with meaningless rituals, old superstitions, irrational speculation and antiquarian gods - everything that stood in the way of making India as modern as Britain or the Soviet Union. I don't think India's impressive first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru ever visited a temple. He was a socialist and an agnostic, worshipped power plants and big industries and not Shiva or Ram, had an English noble mistress and adopted European modernity, but often with superficial roots in the real India.

Nehru did not want to dwell on ancient India because it hindered his goal of a modern, European-inspired, secular country. Indian traditions were a distraction, not a strength. "India must break with the past and not allow the past to dominate the present", he wrote. He feared an Indian Pakistan, rooted in one religion alone.

Britain's last viceroy of India, the radical Lord Mountbatten, later wrote that the Indian elite were “more British than the British”.

I just spoke to some Indian art students who told me that their studies began with Plato and Aristotle. Really? Why? In India? No Greek philosopher has ever played any role in the Indian thought process.

Modi's new India is a reaction to this. India's future must be rooted in India's history. Since the industrial revolution, all countries outside the West have faced the same challenge: How to modernize, but not become like the West. Everyone wants airplanes and artificial intelligence, modern cancer treatment and good schools. That doesn't mean that the Global South wants to become a copy of the United States. The first country to cut this knot was Japan during the Meiji Restoration in the 1870s. Japan is one of the world's most modern countries, but deeply Japanese. Korea is now even richer than Japan and a major exporter of Korean culture – my wife watches K-drama and my daughter admires Korean BTS, the world's most successful band who is singing in Korean. In China, President Xi Jinping is creating the world's most high-tech country, not communist, but rooted in the combination of the three great schools of thought in China's history - Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism.

Why are western opinion makers scared when Modi does exactly the same in India?

Of course, Hindu nationalism is not unproblematic. Muslims and Christians may feel fear when the BJP emphasizes that these are foreign religions in contrast to the Indian religions - Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Jainism and more.

It is important to stand up for the fundamental rights of minorities. And fortunately, there is room for a little optimism.

Millions of Muslims vote with their feet. They go from neighboring countries to India, almost no one goes the other way. Could that mean they feel safe in India?

Hinduism is the world's most tolerant religion. There are no dogmas, no creed, no church, no hierarchies, you choose which gods you want to worship. You can believe in one god or in thousands of gods. You can be a Hindu and an atheist at the same time. Hinduism is more the collective wisdom of the Indian people than a fixed doctrine.

No Hindu has ever burned books or executed heretics. Since it is allowed to worship Shiva, Vishnu, Ram, Krishna, or their wives, or not to believe in any of them but still be a Hindu, there have never been religious wars. Killing each other for marginally different views on the true nature of Jesus Christ as we Christians have done for a couple of thousand years is completely incomprehensible in a Hindu mindset.

Hinduism is a unique religion that emphasizes knowledge and cultivates doubt and counterarguments. "How did the world come into being? Maybe it created itself - or maybe it didn't. Only the highest God knows - or maybe he doesn't know" says an old text. The contrast to the blind certainty we often find in the Abrahamic religions is great.

Morken is concerned about the minorities in India. It is commendable to improve their situation. But the minorities must accept that they live in a Hindu-dominated country where Hindu nationalism will be the main ideology. It is no different than that minorities in Christian Europe or the Muslim Middle East must also accept that they are minorities.

The time for missionary work is over. Since Hindu dharma is a non-missionary religion, there is a strong reaction against all attempts to convert people to Islam or Christianity. No one can expect that foreign missionary work will have good conditions in the future India.

The BJP has a Hindu national program for culture and thought, but a secular program for the state. Modi acts at times as both the country's prime minister and as the foremost Hindu guru. But laws and state decisions remain secular.

There are several controversial topics. One of the strangest from Norwegian eyes is Modi's plan for a common Indian marriage law. This is a matter of course in Europe, but absurdly enough, this has so far been prevented by conservative Muslims in alliance

with secular activists who defend “Muslim rights”. In this case, it is the right of Muslim men to divorce more easily than Hindus or Christians can do. As long as India continues with its own Muslim civil code, Muslim men can only say three times that they want to divorce. They do not have to go through procedures or show tentative respect for their spouse.

Another controversial issue has been the rules for refugees coming to India. Modi has made this easier for other groups than for Muslims. This has provoked strong reactions. But it is not very different from Norwegian policy where we receive Ukrainian refugees with open arms, but are not as warm-hearted to people from Syria or Sudan.

Conflicts around cow slaughter are another sensitive area. Hindu dharma has a much more ecological and respectful view of animals than is common in Western thinking. The cow is central as a god. Militant Hindu activists attack Muslims in particular who are accused of slaughtering cows. In India, this is a more explosive issue than burning crosses or the Koran or disrespecting the Western Wall in Jerusalem. Few dispute that Christians and Muslims in India have the right to eat beef, but it may be wise to find pragmatic solutions based on local conditions.

India is a huge country. Close to 1.5 billion people. Almost a fifth of humanity. There are as many people living in India as in Europe, North and South America combined. The strange thing is not that there are episodes, sad events or things that we think we should criticize. The strange thing is how peaceful India has been since independence - there has been much more violence in almost every other corner of the world.

India is not a perfect democracy, far from it. But India is more of a democratic miracle than a democratic problem. The BJP dominates the state and has many advantages, but voter turnout is high and the losers accept being voted out. If you choose to look for faults in Indian democracy, rather than see it as an inspiring example for the world, democracy is doomed. Then we declare that democracy is a form of government that is suitable for small, extremely rich, ethnically and religiously homogeneous countries in Western Europe. Then we say that democracy is suitable for 5% of humanity.