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Siddhartha Deb, *Twilight Prisoners: The Rise of the Hindu Right and the Fall of India,* Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2024, 232 pp. ISBN: 979-8-8889-0088-8, $21.95 (pbk)

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Siddhartha Deb is primarily a novelist, but his journalistic work has appeared in such major publications as *Harper's*, *The Baffler*, and *Tablet*. *Twilight Prisoners* collects many previously published non-fiction works into a critique with a single focus—Mahendra Modi's India. Deb is not bashful about criticizing Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Despite this animus, the first two pieces provide a useful rundown of the rise of Modi, Hindu nationalism, and sectarian violence since 2014. Deb roundly criticizes the current government and the elite in general for their efforts to make India a capitalist paradise. He does not try to unpack this new ideology, however, focusing instead on its authoritarian tendencies, as well as increasing dangers to minority groups.

India's Northeast

The partisan flavor is tempered in many of the articles that deal with specific sites and events. Deb gives readers a clear description of the Bhopal disaster, for instance, a relevant reminder that corporations need to be held accountable for gross negligence and nonexistent governance. The article on the isolated province of Manipur, "Nowhere Land," is an exceptional description of the ethnic and economic tensions that keep this overlooked corner of the world turbulent. The piece takes an unexpected turn by uncovering the plight of Myanmar dissidents who have been leading a marginal existence there for nearly 40 years.

India has famously given shelter to democratic activists and refugees, most prominently the Tibetan communities who left Tibet beginning in 1959. But the current government takes a different view of refugees, especially those from Bangladesh and Myanmar who come for economic reasons. The far right has promoted a theory that immigrants from Bangladesh are going to dilute the Hindu population in such regions as Assam, where around two million Bengali-speaking migrants (called *ghuspetiyas,* "infiltrators") from Bangladesh live, including both Hindus as well as Muslims. The Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019 allowed migrants from neighboring countries to apply for citizenship—unless they are Muslim.

Ayodhya: The Ram Temple

Deb's animus toward Modi and the BJP is an annoying presence in his otherwise fine description of his visit to the new temple dedicated to the god Ram in Ayodhya. The temple's site is said to be the birthplace of the god. It is also the former site of a mosque, Babri Masjid. The temple became prominent in 1984 when the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP, World Hindu Council), a BJP-affiliate, called for the mosque to be destroyed and a new temple built. A funding campaign ensued, with donations flowing in from both India and the overseas diaspora. Babri Masjid was finally torn down by a crowd of Hindu "volunteers," called *kar sevaks,* in 1992. Deb points out that the Ram temple issue served as a useful symbol and rallying point for the BJP, which later led a coalition that won the 1998 national elections. However, the temple project has been plagued with problems. Construction did not begin until 2020. It was finally completed in 2025 and is now one of India's main pilgrimage sites.

Deb notes (118-9) that the ruins unearthed under the site were probably not from an original Hindu temple, but from a Buddhist or Islamic one. The area had indeed been a center of Buddhism, called Saket, in the sixth century BCE, the era of Buddhism's founding. The city was mentioned as a Buddhist center by the visiting Chinese monks Fa Xian and Xuan Zang, in the fourth and seventh centuries, respectively.[1] Nevertheless, the Ram Mandir complex, as it's now called, played a significant role in the BJP's rise and dominance. The chant sung during the old temple's demolition, "Jai Shri Ram!" (Long Live Lord Ram!), has now become closely associated with the Hindu right.[2]

The BJP and its allies, the mass movement Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS, "national volunteer corps") and the VHP, have created a discourse of India as a uniquely Hindu culture under threat from outside ideologies. A major element of "Hindutva" is hypermasculinity. Purushottam Ram is the version of Lord Ram as the ideal man. In his age, it is taught, there were no outside disruptive forces, and no crime. In BJP ideology the Ram Mandir will be a manifestation of this ideal state from prehistory.

But the Lord Ram revealed in the Ramayana is not the ideal man. Although an avatar of Vishnu, Ram is not aware of his divinity and is subject to very human fears. Pressured by people who doubt his wife Sita's fidelity, he expels her to the forest. In some versions of the story, at the end of his rule of Ayodhya he drowns himself.

In addition to the ideal version of Ram, the Hindu right and the BJP have also appropriated the popular god Hanuman, whose image can be seen throughout India in a new version, "angry Hanuman."

Hindutva and Politics

Deb is not only critical of the BJP and Modi. His primary focus is "Hindutva," the movement to make "Hinduness" the nation's dominant ideology. This framing of issues puts minority groups, minority religions, journalists, and anyone promoting progressive causes on a collision course with right-wing organizations like the RSS.

Dhirendra Jha, in *Shadow Armies: Fringe Organizations and Foot Solders of Hindutva,* describes several of these thirty-odd groups loosed associated with Hinduvta. One particular group is the Santan Sanstha (SS, "the Path for Spiritual Progress") a charitable foundation founded in Goa in 1999. SS has been linked to bombings and prominent assassinations of journalists, although charges have never been upheld in court.

One of the assassinations was of Gauri Lankesh, left-wing editor of the *Gauri Lankesh Patrike*, who was gunned down in 2014. She had been reporting on one particular sensitive topic—the possibility that Lingayat Hindus in the state of Karnataka were asking to be granted status as a separate minority religion. The Veerashaivas, conservative Lingayats, see themselves as fully Hindu. And in political terms the defection of this powerful body from Hinduism would take away the BJP's most important group in Karnataka. Lankesh was a critic of the BJP on other issues, but this political one was so sensitive it led to her assassination. India continues to be a place of danger for journalists, ranking 151 out of 180 countries in 2025, lower than Hong Kong and Rwanda.[3]

In support of Hindutva the BJP government has established what amounts to a surveillance state. The National Investigation Agency (NIA), tasked with anti-terrorism, uses the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) of 1967 to arrest and hold civil-rights activists and government critics without trial for years. And recently, according to Deb, they have used powerful spyware applications, such as Pegasus, to plant documents on the computers of activists (181).

The influence of Hindu nationalism is only gradually coming to light through brave writers and journalists. Deb profiles Arundhati Roy, author of the novel *The God of Small Things*, who has devoted most of her prose writing to political issues. Deb's work is also in this vein and deserves to be applauded. At the same time, he spares little attention to exploring the BJP's core developmental agenda. His primary argument appears to be that millions remain mired in poverty while the new elites, industrialists, internet entrepreneurs, and their political allies, are rewarded with riches. This is hardly a full critique. His writing would benefit from tackling the validity of specific elements in government plans. He does a fine job of unpacking the fallout from such plans. But I find myself wanting to know more about what India's leaders will do to solve the intractable issues of livelihood and justice profiled here.

Notes

[1] Nishad Wankhade, "The Buddhist Claim on Ayodhya," *Round Table India* website, 25 May 2020, https://www.roundtableindia.co.in/the-buddhist-claim-on-ayodhya/.

[2] Mir Afzal, "Jai Shri Ram: Exploring the Significance and Cultural Context of a Sacred Chant, on *Smart English Notes* website, 22 Jan 2024, https://smartenglishnotes.com/2024/01/22/jai-shri-ram-exploring-the-significance-and-cultural-context-of-a-sacred-chant/#google_vignette.3

[3] "RSF World Press Freedom Index 2025: Economic Fragility a Leading Threat to Press Freedom," rsf.org. May 2025.