India’s national elections in the spring of 2019 were historic by any measure. A record 67% of India’s 900 million registered voters cast their ballots in about a million polling stations managed by 10 million election officials. In the contest for 542 available seats in the 545-member lower house of the Indian Parliament, the Lok Sabha, more than 30 political parties secured places, according to results from the Election Commission of India. Beyond the metrics and logistics, however, one other number has become troubling for many Indians: 303. When the final results were tallied, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party, the BJP, had swept the boards with a huge majority of 303 seats—augmented to 353 by including its allied, mostly regional, partners in a coalition called the National Democratic Alliance.

For the BJP, a hardline, right wing political organization promoting Hindu nationalism while proposing vast welfare programs that have strong populist appeal, it was a near total sweep of political power. Analysts have since been measuring the profound depths to which India’s secular

BARBARA CROSETTE is a former New York Times bureau chief in Southeast Asia and South Asia and a Fulbright Fellow in India. She won the 1991 George Polk Award for coverage of the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, a 2008 Fulbright Award for International Understanding and the 2010 Shorenstein Prize for writing on Asia. She is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, and the Foreign Policy Association Editorial Advisory Committee, and a co-founder of PassBlue.com, an online news site focused on the United Nations.
democratic traditions and global reputation as the world's most populous democracy may have been shaken. Will India become, in essence, a one-party state, guided by the concept of Hindutva, an all-embracing Hindu culture that marginalizes and endangers minorities? What will this mean to majority-Muslim Pakistan?

Little more than two months after that election victory, the BJP, enjoying its near absolute political power, played its ideological hand. In early August, in a stunning strike against Muslim-majority Kashmir, Modi and his team remade the map of northernmost India. Kashmiri Muslims were stripped of their limited political autonomy placed under military rule, confined to their homes with all communications to the outside world cut off for months. Pakistan’s prime minister, Imran Khan, who had been in office barely a year after a political upset, was enraged. Independent human rights experts reported to the United Nations that Kashmiris were suffering under collective punishment that they had done nothing to provoke.

For the South Asian region no political development on this sweeping scale and intensity had taken place for years if not decades, and violence by restive, angry Kashmiris was widely expected to follow if and when the clampdown is lifted.

Modi and the BJP: ‘all about himself’

Looking back to the 2019 Indian elections that enabled the BJP to carry out its strike on Kashmir, Indian analysts of most political persuasions seem to agree that the outcome of the voting was all about Narendra Modi. Polling during and after the election found that large numbers of people would not have chosen the BJP had he not been its leading candidate. Since Modi first became prime minister in 2014, there have been plenty of negative developments in India: high unemployment, a spate of farmer suicides and deadly assaults on Muslims and Dalits, the Hindu caste system’s most disadvantaged people, some killed in documented lynchings. There had been a bungled attack on Pakistan and a catastrophic currency decision to recall large banknotes in an effort to curb corruption in a cash society. All had been called out in the media, think tanks and secular civil society organizations. But those factors under Modi’s administration seem not to have given pause to his followers.

Souvik Biswas, the BBC’s trenchant, Delhi-based commentator on Indian politics and society, analyzed how Modi, 70, had consolidated his personal power to make the 2019 campaign “all about himself.” Five years ago, when Modi began his first term in office, Indian commentators wondered how the prime minister would balance his record as an economic modernizer while chief minister in Gujarat state with his long years of activity in the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the RSS, a disciplined paramilitary volunteer force of Hindu zealots some of whose founders were inspired by European fascism. In the cancellation of Muslim Kashmiri autonomy, they got their answer.

Voters in 2019 apparently accepted his two-track reputation: one part an uncompromising Hindu ascetic dressed in traditional Indian garb, who fasted during his first official visit to the United States in 2016 amid meetings with President Barack Obama, business leaders and technology titans. The other part is his skill as a brilliant political strategist adept at the use of both old-fashioned oratory and contemporary social media. He communicates not in press conferences but on Twitter. Often forgotten, or hidden, was his failure to prevent or stop a pogrom against Muslims in Gujarat in 2002, which left an estimated thousand people dead. The United States subsequently revoked his U.S. visa until he became prime minister in 2014, after which it was restored as a diplomatic courtesy.

The BJP and Modi could ignore the critics. “The more liberals agitated against Modi, the stronger it made him,” Barkha Dutt, an influential television journalist in New Delhi and author of This Unquiet Land: Stories from India’s Fault Lines, wrote as 2019 election results were being released. Her conclusion was shared by many across India: “Narendra Modi’s unprecedented victory in the 2019 elections is proof that India and her politics have been irrevocably altered,” she wrote. Amartya Sen, India’s Nobel prize-winning economist and philosopher at Harvard, remarked that like other uncompromising nationalists around the world, Modi has made political use of “hatred and loathing.”

The prime minister’s close aides have become ruthless enablers and enforcers, most notably 56-year-old Amit Shah, a former BJP party president, who was appointed minister of home affairs. His portfolio includes border controls, internal security and the activities of a central government police force, among other law-and-order responsibilities. He is tough on immigration, and has been quoted calling Muslim migrants from neighboring Bangladesh “termites.” More than a million ethnic Bengali Muslims, not all of them immigrants, are facing possible deportation from the Indian Northeast.

Devesh Kapur is director of Asia programs and Starr Foundation Professor of South Asian studies at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies in Washington. Writing in The Washington Post, he stepped back to explain the
deep social forces in India behind the Modi phenomenon.

“The fact that India’s weak economy, rising joblessness and pervasive agrarian crisis did not dampen support for the BJP says something about Modi’s high leadership quotient and the fecklessness of the opposition,” Kapur wrote. “But it also reveals something about how Indian society has changed—in ways that have perhaps been misrepresented by the English-speaking interlocutors who interpret India for the West,” he argued.

“The reality is that Indian society has become more aspirational, more assertive and less deferential, with more pathways to social mobility than ever before,” Kapur said in his essay. “Rising social groups are resentful of the social and cultural capital that privileges the elite and are increasingly willing to express this resentment electorally,” he wrote.

Those in that elite, in Indian terms, are English-speaking, well educated, more cosmopolitan and secular in outlook. Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first prime minister after independence, symbolized these traits. “Now, that old Nehruvian India is giving way and is being replaced by Modi’s India, one that is less embarrassed by its limited English and heavy accents,” Kapur added. “Its nationalism is unapologetic about India’s Hindu roots, and it is prepared to be more assertive in defense of what it regards as its national interests—even if it means redefining the idea of the ‘nation’.”

Can India’s Congress Party Recover?

Long before the voting began in India in 2019, many experienced political analysts were predicting a dismal showing for the Indian National Congress, the party that under Nehru, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi—the Mahatma—and other luminaries had led the long, nonviolent campaign against British colonialism, and then dominated Indian politics, for better or worse, in the decades that followed. By 2014, plagued by increasingly weak leadership, however, Congress won only 44 seats in the lower house of Parliament. Adding the 16 seats captured by its coalition allies in the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance, brought the total to 60, compared with the BJP and its allies at 336.

In 2019, Congress did only slightly better in the general election, winning 52 seats, which rose to 92 counting partners in the center-left United Progressive Alliance. (The upper house of parliament, the Rajya Sabha, is composed of 233 members elected by states according to population, with 12 additional members nominated by the president of India; it does not figure in the selection of a prime minister.)

Rahul Gandhi, the son, grandson and great-grandson of Indian prime ministers, led the Congress party into its 2014 and 2019 debacles. He appeared to many voters as a half-hearted candidate, who in the end had lost even his safe Congress seat in Amethi in northern India, which his family had held for decades. He did win in another constituency, in Kerala, as allowed in Indian electoral law, and will still be a member of Parliament. Gandhi, 49, did not seek or savor a life in politics, nor did his father, Rajiv. Both bore the heavy baggage of dynastic duty and a sense of entitlement—high caste Brahmins, the elite of elites, in a rapidly evolving society.

Eager strivers for recognition and opportunities for advancement are emerging from the 200 million Dalits of India, formerly known as “untouchables,” who have suffered and still feel crippling social discrimination as the formal Hindu caste system’s literal “outcasts.” The Congress Party once could count on Dalit “vote banks” to support it candidates in return for handouts and promises. Now young Dalits whose families were once consigned to a scavenger life, are acquiring university educations, technology training and professional careers. A growing number are also creating a new Dalit literature, both in India and in the global Indian diaspora. The increasing numbers of Dalit immigrants in the United States and their continuing social disadvantages have been the subject of groundbreaking articles by reporters for the American newspaper India Abroad.

Dalits are reviving interest in Bhim Rao Ambedkar, a greater hero to them than Mahatma Gandhi. Dalit-born,
The Enduring Tragedy of Kashmir

When Prime Minister Narendra Modi acted on Hindu nationalist demands that Muslims be stripped of their political autonomy and other protections in Kashmir, he defied the Constitution that had established independent India's democracy. The sudden siege on the night of August 4–5 was quickly approved by the BJP-dominated Parliament. The state of Jammu and Kashmir—which the United Nations and many countries around the world still recognize as territory in dispute with Pakistan and not legally Indian—was reconfigured as a "union territory" controlled by the central government in Delhi. Part of the region was also carved out as a separate territory for Ladakh and its dominant Buddhist population.

All communications were cut to the Kashmir Valley, the heart of Muslim Kashmiris' unique culture, and hundreds of local politicians, journalists, business people and any others perceived to be critics were arrested. Dozens disappeared. Independent human rights monitors reporting to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights called this "collective punishment...without even a pretext of a precipitating offense." The effects of the remaking of Jammu and Kashmir and the loss of Kashmiris' constitutional rights—Article 370 on political autonomy and Article 35A on citizenship and property rights—are likely to be felt in the region for years.

Pamela Philipose, a senior fellow with the Indian Council
of Social Science Research, is a distinguished journalist and author with experience at The Times of India and The Indian Express, who later directed the Women’s Feature Service in Delhi. She recently turned her attention to Kashmir in an essay on her fear of a nexus of two critical factors developing under the Modi regime: media controls and militarization.

Analyzing how the Hindu nationalist BJP strategized to end the safeguards for Muslim Kashmiris in Article 370, she wrote of the takeover: “Its lynchpin was the combination of military force and media manipulation, both conducted on an unprecedented scale. The muzzled media and the unmuzzled gun have always coexisted in the dystopic landscape of Kashmir. On 5 August, however, there was a media gag so impenetrable, so sudden, so cynical, so ruthless, that an entire population was blindsided… The impact of this climate of fear and mass muting on ordinary lives can well be imagined.”

In the days that followed the re-making of Jammu and Kashmir, two of India’s neighbors, Pakistan and China, succeeded in bringing the fate of the Kashmiris to the United Nations Security Council for the first time in more than half a century. They argued that the Modi government was in violation of UN resolutions dating back to 1948, a year after British colonial India gained independence. One of the resolutions, number 38, barred India and Pakistan from altering status or borders without consulting residents or involving the Security Council. India has refused to abide by those demands. China’s situation was not covered by Resolution 38, but China has an interest in this dispute. It claims and occupies an area in the eastern edge of Jammu and Kashmir.

All three countries, China, India and Pakistan, are nuclear armed, but of the three only China has signed and/or ratified international treaties banning the proliferation and testing of nuclear weapons. India tested its nuclear arsenal in 1974 and again in 1998. That second event prodded Pakistan to test a nuclear device for the first time, elevating an already tense situation in the region and stoking fears of an accidental war. Kashmir has long been considered a potential flashpoint.

India asserts that since Indian and Pakistani leaders agreed in a 1972 accord that they would settle the dispute together and that the UN has no further role to play. However, on August 8, 2019, Secretary-General António Guterres, expressed his concern at developments and noted that UN policy on the region is governed by the organization’s charter and extant Security Council resolutions.

Since 1949 the UN has deployed a small international monitoring mission along the “line of control” that has served as a de facto border for more than 70 years. The future of the mission, the United Nations Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan, known by its acronym UNMOGIP, may now be uncertain. A Security Council military staff delegation was refused permission by India to visit the Indian-controlled side and report on the group’s activities in 2018, though the fact-finding group was welcomed in Pakistan.

Indian paramilitary forces stand in Srinagar, Kashmir on May 25, 2019. Anti India clashes erupted in many areas of Srinagar soon after Indian forces left curfew-hit areas. Police used tear gas canisters to disperse the angry protesters. (FAIRAL KHAN/REUTERS/GETTY IMAGES)
Ambedkar, with a Columbia University graduate degree in economics and legal training at Grays Inn in London, led the commission that wrote independent India’s constitution. His hopes for a more equitable society based on the constitution were denied, however, by persistent caste opposition. In October 1956, not long before his death, he converted from Hinduism to Buddhism with more than 300,000 of his supporters. Many other Dalits became Christians.

In a recent book, *Emergency Chronicles: Indira Gandhi and Democracy’s Turning Point*, Gyan Prakash, a historian of modern India and the Dayton-Stockton Professor of History at Princeton University, raises questions about whether democracy in India was ever fully and broadly formed as Ambedkar and other writers of the constitution intended. “Indian politics showed scant concern for turning democracy into a philosophy of achieving social equality,” Prakash wrote. “Instead it diminished the meaning of democracy into a competition between political parties and interests for state power. To be sure, adult franchise brought the backward castes out of the shadows of India’s hierarchical society and placed them on the avenue to state power. But this was not the sum total of what Ambedkar had meant when he implored Indians to develop political democracy into social democracy.... he wanted social equality to become inseparable from political freedom.”

Marshall Bouton, president emeritus of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, among numerous other institutional positions, is a scholar and writer on India who has served as director of policy analysis for the Near East, Africa and South Asia in the U.S. Defense Department and as an assistant to the American ambassador in India. Over years of work on India, beginning with analyzing and writing on agricultural development, he has maintained close ties to numerous officials and influential people in Congress party circles. In a conversation at the Center for the Advanced Study of India at the University of Pennsylvania after the 2019 election results were published, he spoke of many Indians concerned about the direction in which the BJP is taking India, and how Congress party leadership essentially allowed this to happen.

On his frequent recent visits to India, he said, he has heard comments about a stagnant Congress party “devoid of elders” or the kind of effective strategists who would not have missed the current profound changes in Indian society that Narendra Modi saw and tapped into. Moreover, there is a sense, Bouton said, that “dynasticism is going to be the death of the Congress party.”

With Rahul Gandhi lacking in charisma at this critical time for the party, Congress seems to show that it has lost its political capital, Bouton said. Urban India is teeming with young people from rural areas aspiring to join the middle class, he noted. The Congress party did not seem to grasp how Modi’s message was attracting young Indians, including the poor. “They didn’t want a handout, they wanted a hand up,” Bouton said.

Bouton said that India’s political viability as a democracy requires a balance of power among party policies and ideas, and the task of Congress at this point is to establish a strong left-of-center approach and alternative to the BJP. “There has to be competition,” Bouton said. Instead, critics have seen some Congress politicians tailor their message to the Hindu right. The Congress party manifesto for the 2019 election was stripped of the word “secular” for the first time. Leading candidates, including Rahul Gandhi and his sister, Priyanka Vadra (who also lost a parliamentary seat in 2019), made outdoor publicized visits to Hindu temples while campaigning.

Shashi Tharoor, a Congress party member of Parliament from Kerala, was outraged. In *The Week*, an Indian newsmagazine, Tharoor, a former under-secretary-general for communications at the United Nations, wrote:

“Those who are suggesting that the answer to the party’s woes in the Hindu heartland is to become more like the BJP in ‘majority appeasement’ are making a cardinal error. If the voter is presented with a choice between an original article and a pale imitation, he will choose the original every time. Rather than allowing ourselves to be intimidated by the BJP’s success, it is far better for U.S. to stand up for what we have always believed in and urge the country to follow our principles,” he wrote. “The loyalist will respect a party that demonstrates the courage of our convictions rather than offering some sort of ‘Hindutva Lite,’ like Coke Lite and Pepsi Zero, ‘Hindutva Lite’ will end up with ‘Congress Zero.’”

---

**In Pakistan, a new political party takes charge**

In 2018, traditional politics and politicians in Pakistan were challenged by an upstart party with a youthful following, culminating in the first election victory of now-Prime Minister Imran Khan’s Movement for Justice (Tehreek-e-Insaf). Prime Minister Khan, who was best known as an international celebrity cricket star before building a political career, spoke at a meeting at the United States Institute of Peace in Washington on July 23, 2019 about his plans.

He told his audience that he had inherited a bankrupt and politically corrupt country with the largest financial deficits in its history. He blamed what he described as a collective “mafia” of traditional politicians that included the feudal, landed Pakistan Peoples Party of the Bhutto family in Sind Province and the Pakistan Muslim League faction under the Sharif clan of Punjabi industrialists.

“What happens,” Khan said, “is the ruling elites, when they make money out of corruption, they have to take it out of the country because otherwise people ask questions — where did the money come from?” So, you suffer in two ways. Money which should go to human development ends up going into people’s pockets. But the other aspect of corruption is that in order for the
ruling elites to take money out, they have to destroy the state institutions. Because if the institutions are strong — for instance, if your anti-corruption body is strong, if your justice system is working, your taxation department — you cannot take money out. That’s the biggest damage these corrupt, ruling elites do to the developing world.”

Pakistan, created on the military western frontier of British India, was once a region where Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims had lived in relative harmony. When Britain’s Indian empire was collapsing in 1947 and was divided into two nations, Pakistan was established as a country primarily for Muslims. Horrific, colliding stampedes ensued, leaving between a million to 2 million people dead – no one will ever really know exactly many – as Hindus fled to Hindu-majority India and Muslims raced toward their new country. Ever since, the days of carnage are known simply as Partition. It has been estimated that tens of thousands of women were raped as families on both sides were torn apart in the lethal mayhem.

Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the leader of the Muslim League, founded in 1906 to give Muslim’s a political voice and later to campaign for an independent Muslim nation in South Asia, became Governor-General of Pakistan and its first national leader, in 1947. He was considered by many to be a “secular” Muslim, born into a politically active family in Karachi, Pakistan’s largest city. Jinnah, who had studied law in England, was in this early 70s and in failing health. He died the following year, and is remembered as Quaid-i-Azami, “Father of the Nation.”

Pakistan has been politically unstable more or less ever since his death, with long periods of military rule several wars with India and the loss of part of its territory to what became Bangladesh in 1971 with assistance from the Indian army. Post-Jinnah history began with the assassination of his successor, Liaquat Ali Khan in 1951. Pakistan was officially declared an Islamic state. In 1973, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, a political populist, became prime minister and was later arrested, tried in a controver-

sial case and executed by the military in 1979. His daughter, Benazir Bhutto, a former prime minister twice deposed by the army, was killed nearly four decades later while campaigning to return to power in 2017. Her son, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, is now leader of her Pakistan Peoples Party.

Imran Khan, born in Lahore to a rich ethnic Pashtun family, is an Oxford University graduate with a degree in politics, philosophy and economics, known as the PPE, a popular course of studies for or those students planning to enter public service and the media. His cricket career followed, during which he led Pakistan to its first cricket World Cup title by defeating England in 1992. In South Asia some say that as a cricketer, he is as popular in India as he is in Pakistan – at least until he became the face of the Pakistani government. After retiring from his sports career that year, he turned to philanthropy, building the first specialized cancer hospital in Pakistan in honor of his mother, who had died of the disease. He also became politically active, was elected a member of the Pakistan Parliament and became an outspoken critic of Pervez Musharraf, a four-star army general who was president from 2001 until 2008.

By 2013, Khan was garnering a strong showing for his party, the Pakistan Movement for Justice, buoyed by young people. The BBC, while covering the 2018 election, noted that “his campaign against corruption and dynastic politics in Pakistan, and a promise to raise a whole new class of ‘clean’ politicians – that seems to have chime with his supporters.” Khan, “has sought to ride a wave of disillusionment at Pakistan’s old political order, particularly among the urban middle class and young voters, who are tired of living in a country with an economy and currency on the slide, and water and power supplies in constant crisis,” the BBC said.

When the Panama Papers emerged in 2015 from investigative reporters working in numerous countries tracking allegations of politicians’ links to offshore companies used to channel funds to assets abroad, one of Khan’s primary political targets toppled. Among those named in reports was Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif of the Pakistan Muslim League, whose family was implicated in the acquisition of foreign properties. Sharif was forced to resign in 2017. He was sentenced to 10 years in prison by an anti-corruption court. Another former prime minister and close Sharif associate, Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, was also arrested in July 2019 on corruption
challenges. Supporters of the Nawaz faction of the League say these are part of a political vendetta.

Khan, who met with President Trump in July 2019 the day before his U.S. Institute of Peace session, told his audience there that he had a package of development plans for Pakistan, including in agriculture, export industries and education. He spoke of various overtures he had made to India but received no response. In February 2019, India sent fighter planes over Pakistan to destroy a militant camp linked to a reported ISIS-backed suicide bombing in Kashmir earlier in the month that killed 40 Indian paramilitary troops. No serious damage was apparently done on the ground, but during the aerial attacks, Pakistan shot down an Indian plane, rescued the pilot and returned him to India. In July, Pakistan finally arrested the founder of a militant group blamed for terror attacks in Mumbai, India in 2008 that killed more than 160 people, including six Americans. In the same month, Khan’s administration reopened a thousand-year old Hindu temple in Sialkot that had been closed for 72 years, with plans to turn it over to a Hindu organization.

Then came August 5 and the Indian seizure and political conversion of Muslim Kashmir into a territory to be administered from New Delhi by a Hindu nationalist government. Khan will now face the huge challenge of keeping Pakistani hotheads and the military under control, no matter what India may do to provoke them in Kashmir. Domestic programs may suffer. The leadership of Pakistan will be severely tested.

On September 27, in his address to the 74th United Nations General Assembly opening session, Prime Minister Khan spoke in blunt terms about what he saw as the potential dangers ahead in Kashmir. He said that the clampdown on the region, a tactic warped by “an ideology of hate,” will lead eventually to widespread protests among the more than four million Muslims in the territory, and that will in turn prompt more repressive use of force by the Modi government. “There will be bloodshed,” he said.

As economies grow, or slow, so do aspirations

As 2019 was drawing to a close, India and numerous other countries were becoming jittery about the global economy. Trade and tariff disputes, sanctions regimes, predictions of recessions ahead and concerns about mounting effects of climate change and its threat to agriculture and other economic sectors, were being analyzed almost daily. India, already stressed, is on the verge of becoming the world’s most populous nation — if it hasn’t already crossed that line; the next decennial national census takes place in 2021. This adds strain to already overburdened and often underperforming social service.

The Indian population at the end of 2019 was reliably estimated to be 1.36 billion and growing, with China steady or shrinking at 1.41 billion. Two leading United Nations demographers formerly from the organization’s Population Division, Joseph Chamie and Barry Mirkin, have concluded that India will double China’s growth rate and remain in first place for the rest of this century, possibly with a population of 1.9 billion by 2100.

For India, there are other important numbers. The median age of population is 27 (for China it is 38) and more than a quarter of Indians in the age range at which they will be looking for higher education, technology training — and jobs. (And wives, if the widening gap between female and male births continues because of sex-selective abortions.) In Pakistan, according to the UN Development Program, 64% of the nation of about 218 million people is younger than 30 and 29% are between 15 and 29. This growth among the young is forecast to continue to increase until at least 2050. On both sides of a tense border divide, there will be ample recruits for both protest movements and the military.

In July, Prime Minister Imran Khan told an audience in Washington that this makes education reform in Pakistan imperative, given that school enrollments expose social and ideological gaps. He said that students attending elite schools where teaching is in English number about 800,000, while 32 million children study in local languages in government schools and 2.5 million are in madrasas.

India had some disappointing economic news in 2019. From July 2016 to July 29, 2019 growth of India’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which measures the value of most economic activity within a country, shrank from 8.7% to 5%, according to Trading Economics.com, a New York-based tracker for 196 countries using more than 300,000 economic indicators, including exchange rates, stock market indexes, government bond yields and commodity prices. In August 2019, a report from the World Bank showed that India had dropped two notches to Number 7 on global GDP rankings year-on-year between 2017 and 2018, behind, the U.S., China, Japan, Germany, Britain and France. It was the weakest showing since the first quarter of 2013, the World Bank said. India’s all-time high GDP growth was 11.4% in the first quarter of 2010. Slowdowns in construction and manufacturing were singled out as problems. The crisis in Kashmir could cost significant losses in tourism nationally as well as in the popular Kashmir Valley.

In May 2019, after the recent Indian election, President Trump ended India’s preferential tariff status given to developing countries, making India imports more expensive in the U.S., as the administration accused India of failing to provide “equitable and reasonable access” to its markets for American goods and services. On August 23, Moody’s Investors Services cut its estimate of Indian GDP growth for 2019 to 6.2% from 6.8% and for 2020 to 6.7%. The Reserve Bank of India, the country’s central bank had earlier lowered its growth estimate from 7% to 6.9%. Moody’s noted weak hiring and “financial distress among rural households.”
In July 2019, in a report refining his earlier estimates, a former Indian government chief financial adviser, Arvind Subramanian, now at Harvard University and the Peterson Institute for International Economics, questioned the veracity of official government GDP figures. Subramanian and his team, working on a detailed, mathematical economic profile of Indian growth going back to the last years of a Congress party-led government, suggested that “Measurement changes likely caused India’s GDP to be overestimated in the post-2011 period. Moreover, while it is not possible to say precisely what India’s GDP would have been absent the measurement changes, the evidence suggests that the discrepancy in measured GDP growth post-2011 is likely to be significant.” The debate continues.

Domestically, Narendra Modi has taken justifiable pride in his projects to improve living standards and reduce financial strains on rural households in his first term from 2014 to 2019. Now, however, prominent Indian commentators on economic and social issues are doubting reported results. Amartya Sen, who won the 1998 Nobel Prize in Economics for his work on poverty and famine, along with Mahbub ul Haq, a development economist from Pakistan, had led in the creation in 1990 of the United Nations Human Development Reports and the accompanying Human Development Index to measure the reality of peoples’ lives in human terms.

In February 2019, speaking in Shantiniketan, where another Indian Nobelist, Rabindranath Tagore, established a haven for scholarship and the arts in 1901, Sen said that India could learn from China, where good basic education and primary health care have spurred the economy. India has one of the lowest government expenditures on healthcare in the world at about one percent of GDP.

A critical factor in improving the health of the poor and the conditions in which they live, especially in rural areas, is ending hunger and malnutrition. In June 2019, Marshall Bouton, the American expert on Indian agriculture quoted earlier in this chapter, wrote an illustrative paper for the India in Transition series of the Center for the Advanced Study of India at the University of Pennsylvania. Titled “The Paradox of India’s Green Revolution,” the study said that the story is complex, involving outdated government welfare policies, problems in the food distribution system, changes in diet and a failure to reform tax policies that ask too much of the agricultural sector, among other factors. “Today, agricultural households account for 50% of extreme poverty in India,” Bouton wrote.

Paradoxically, India is self-reliant in the production of food grains. It is the world’s second-largest producer of both wheat and rice and the largest exporter of rice, Bouton writes, but adds that “per capita availability of all food grains has increased only modestly as the population has more than tripled since the mid-1960s.”

The International Food Policy Research Institute’s 2018 Global Food Policy Report projects that 93 million Indians will be at risk of hunger by 2030. “India ranks 103rd out of 119 countries on the institute’s Global Hunger Index and is home to the largest number of malnourished people in the world—about one quarter of the global total.”

Pakistan’s economy is very much smaller and less diverse than India’s, and its starting point for future development is dire, as Prime Minister Khan has acknowledged. The Asian Development Bank, of which Pakistan was a founding member in 1966, is working with the Pakistanis on a 2019-2021 to expand the government’s income through a combination of project loans from the bank to support reforms, and mobilizing financing for public-private partnerships. Urban development, water resources, energy and transportation rank high on the economists’ list. Such plans, however, assume peace between India and Pakistan.

Pakistan’s economic growth rate was a relatively healthy 5.5% to 5.8% in 2018 figures vary—but is forecast to drop to 3.3% for 2019 and 2.8% in 2020. By social measures, Pakistan is more or less on a par with India: The percentage of people living below the national poverty line is 21.9 in India and 24.3 in Pakistan; Maternal mortality (deaths per 100,000 live births) is 174 in India, 178 in Pakistan. Where Pakistan falls well behind India, however, is in deaths of children under 5 years of age and incidence of undernourishment, among other measures.

The World Bank had some good news for the Khan government, which pledged to bring back money stashed overseas and increase tax collection within the country. “Financial flows had a boost in FY19 due to a significant increase in central bank deposits and bilateral inflows from China, UAE and Saudi Arabia,” the report said. In July, the International Monetary Fund extended a three-year, $6 billion loan package according to the Reuters news agency, but asked that the Khan government, which had initially wanted to avoid foreign borrowing, to agree to “tough conditions.”

The U.S., Modi’s India and Pakistan: works in progress

Despite the awkward image of Trump and Modi strolling into a political rally in Houston on September 22 holding hands, the administration’s interests in South Asia have been at best episodic. The president’s 2019 actions against India on trade and related economic issues have apparently unsettled some Indians focused on the country’s strategic partnership with the United States and on an Indian Ocean-Pacific regional security project created in response to Chinese expansion. That had seemed to be the top American priority—not a trade war.

One of China’s biggest projects in the region is the rebuilding and upgrading of the deep water port at Gwadar, on Pakistan’s west coast. Yet Prime Minister Imran Khan claimed in Washington in July 2019, that relations between his country and the U.S. are now very
good. “So, why do I think that we will now have the very best of relationship with the U.S.?“ he asked rhetorically in remarks at the United States Institute of Peace. “Because we’re all on the same page.” No mention of China.

“The period from 2003 or 2004 to 2015 was the worst in the relationship between Pakistan and the U.S. Pakistanis felt that they were fighting the U.S. war. No Pakistani was involved in 9/11,” he said. “Taliban were in Afghanistan, Al Qaeda was in Afghanistan, but Pakistan ended up involved in that war. We lost 70,000 people. We lost over 100 billion dollars to the economy. And yet, there was mistrust.” Khan was in the political opposition during the bad years and critical of Pakistan’s role. Now, he said, American officials finally understand that there can be no military solution in Afghanistan and Pakistan needs to turn inward to national development.

The Trump effect on American diplomacy is felt widely in Asia. “President Trump’s belligerent nationalism and his use of trade as a political weapon are being emulated by key American allies, compounding the damage to U.S. strategic interests,” a Washington Post editorial on September 6, 2019, said, pointing to heated disagreements between Japan and South Korea, “which have become caught up in an escalating feud about 20th-century grievances that animate nationalists in both countries.”

Americans have not been very knowledgeable about South Asia, including India, the dominant regional power. Unlike the British, French or Portuguese with their long colonial histories in India, Americans do not have the same lingering political, economic, familial and even literary links to the Subcontinent. In the United States there were only moments of interaction with South Asians until they began to immigrate in larger numbers in the mid-20th century. Yet the first Sikhs who came to the U.S. from India in the late 19th century with their agricultural expertise soon emerged as the most successful farmers in California. In 1893, Swami Vivekananda, the best known Hindu religious leader and yoga master of his era to visit America, spoke at the first meeting of the Parliament of the World’s Religions in Chicago, bringing messages of universal brotherhood and dedication of service to the poor. His erudite speeches captured the attention of American intellectuals — there are now numerous Vedanta centers following his philosophy in the U.S.

The recognition of Indian-Americans and their contributions to society, the media and politics has been magnified many times over since those early days. By the turn of the 21st century, exuberant accounts were appearing such as books such as Mira Kamdar’s Planet India: How the Fastest Growing Democracy Is Transforming America and the World (2007) and Indian readers were also drawn to books built on Western experiences of more somber life in contemporary India. Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity, by Katherine Boo (2014) is one example.

The most scholarly, comprehensive study of Indian migration, the background to understanding the growing political influence of Indian-Americans is the book The Other One Percent, by Sanjoy Chakravorty, Devesh Kapur and Nirvikar Singh, published in 2016. Pratap Bhanu Mehta, who until July 2019 was president of the Center for Policy Research in New Delhi and also taught at Harvard and New York University School of Law, called it a “riveting and textured portrait of the Indian diaspora, its formation, its political preferences, its social and economic base.” Calling attention to its usefulness for policymakers, who are interacting frequently with Indian-American political activists, Mehta added “The book will unsettle many entrenched assumptions and open up a large research agenda.”

From Indian independence in 1947 to the rise of radical Hindu nationalism under Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the BJP, the U.S.-India relationship has not always been smooth. Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first prime minister after independence, was closer to the “civilized” British than to the more rough-cut Americans, his sister, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, told me in an interview a year before her death in 1990. She was India’s ambassador to the United States from 1949 to 1951 and later the first female president of the United Nations General Assembly.

Nehru’s daughter, Indira Gandhi, was close to the Soviet Union, with which she had concluded a Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation. She was perceived by influential Americans as hostile to the U.S. and too pro-Moscow during the Cold War. India-U.S. relations improved somewhat under her successors, her son Rajiv and later Manmohan Singh, an economist and economic reformer who was prime minister from 2004 to 2014, during the administrations of Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama.

India-U.S. relations during those years is the subject of an article by Robert D. Blackwill and Ashley J. Tellis in the September-October 2019 issue of Foreign Affairs, the journal of the Council on Foreign Relations. Both authors are strong defenders and promoters of India. Blackwill is the Henry A. Kissinger senior fellow for U.S. foreign policy at the Council on Foreign Relations, and Tellis holds the Tata Chair for Strategic Affairs at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington. The title of their article acknowledges their point of view: “The India Dividend,” subtitled “New Delhi Remains Washington’s Best Hope in Asia.” Not all policymakers would agree with that assertion, but Blackwill and Tellis were insiders during the years when American policy shifted significantly from treating India as a distant friend to a “strategic partner,” and their account establishes the background to the current state of relations. Blackwill was the U.S. ambassador in India in 2003-04 and later deputy national security adviser to President Bush, and Tellis was senior adviser to the U.S. embassy in New Delhi from 2001 to 2003.

The authors argue that the idea among some Americans that “sooner or later, the two countries would become allies in all but name" is a misunderstanding. “If the United States’ aim is to turn India into a close ally, formal or otherwise, it will come to grief,” they write. “Instead
Washington and New Delhi should strive to forge a partnership oriented toward furthering common interests without expecting an alliance of any kind." Now under Trump, when the most pressing common interest is the expansion of Chinese influence, India's rogue nuclear weapons are ignored, though the country refuses to sign global nonproliferation or testing agreements. The U.S. has moved to support for civilian programs in India, such as nuclear safety, technology and missile defense.

The foundation of this U.S. policy is a 2005 agreement between President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh that would allow American companies to build or invest in India's civilian nuclear power systems. Some U.S. companies were eager to seize the opportunity. But the plan did not turn out well because in 2010 the Indian Parliament passed a liability law that would make nuclear suppliers solely responsible in case of an accident, which stalled implementation of the deal as interested partners backed off.

On the nuclear weapons in South Asia, the fact remains that as long as India has them, Pakistan will keep or even enhance its arsenal. If Prime Minister Khan would even consider unilateral denuclearization it could invite military intervention and jeopardize his political career. Furthermore, all Asians see North Korea becoming an unofficial but increasingly openly recognized nuclear state, as the Trump administration has been stymied repeatedly by Kim Jong Un on demands for denuclearization.

What has fallen off the White House's ever-changing list of priorities appears to be India's worsening human rights record under the BJP. State Department experts, however, continue to catalogue Indian abuses and shortcomings in annual reports on human rights and religious tolerance. The department's 2019 report of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom concluded that "In 2018 religious freedom conditions in India continued on a downward trend."

Members of the Commission, which was created by an act of Congress, are barred from visiting India. Their latest report was harsh, saying that violence against Muslims and other minorities, much of it perpetrated by Hindu extremists, was going unpunished. The Commission consequently placed India on its list of countries of "particular concern." Indian actions in Kashmir, a Muslim majority area where a stranglehold on communications has been imposed by the Modi government have been accompanied raids on homes and offices of civil rights lawyers and human rights advocates across India.

Some members of the U.S. Congress are beginning to protest, including Senator Bernie Sanders (D-VT), who joined a loosely organized movement called Stand with Kashmir. A Congressional Research Service report that was circulating on Capitol Hill in mid-August after Modi had stripped Kashmiris of their political rights, pointed to the dearth of expertise on foreign affairs under Trump and Pompeo, and its effects on policymaking. It said: "At present, the United States has no Assistant Secretary of State leading the Bureau of South and Central Asia, an Acting Ambassador to the United Nations, and no Ambassador in Pakistan, leading some experts to worry that the Trump Administration's preparedness for India-Pakistan crises remains thin. Developments in August 2019 also have renewed concerns among analysts that the Trump Administration's "hands-off" posture toward this and other international crises erodes American power and increases the risk of regional turbulence."

The UN position has since been filled. The new ambassador, Kelly Knight Craft, has no South Asian experience or other international policy expertise. Her first and only diplomatic job was as U.S. ambassador to Canada, a political appointment. Her husband, Joseph Craft, is a wealthy coal mining executive from Kentucky, Senator Mitch McConnell's home state. The Crafts were generous donors to Trump's political campaigns. As ambassador in Ottawa for 22 months, Knight Craft spent a third of her time out of Canada. The UN post is, or should be, a full time appointment. Every major global crisis sooner or later turns up there, as Kashmir did in August 2019 in the Security Council for the first time in half a century. Downgrading the American presence at the UN at this point is hard to explain.
discussion questions

1. Considering that each of these nations possess nuclear weapons, a miscalculation could lead to a major disaster. Despite previous failed efforts by other nations and the United Nations to attempt to reach a resolution with these two sovereign nations, why has this not been deemed a crisis priority by the world community that must be addressed now? If you were a mediating party to such a negotiation, what proposals would you consider placing on the agenda as a potential solution to this issue?

2. What should India do to meet the rising tide of population growth and demands by an increasing number of young aspirants for a "better life"?

3. What problems confront the United States in its relationship with Pakistan? What solutions might be proposed to bridge the gap between the two nations?

4. Can the United Nations play a more constructive role in bringing feuding parties to the negotiating table than it has in the past? What suggestions might you propose?

5. Is it in the best interest of the United States to keep strong relations with President Modi, despite the controversy surrounding his administrations recent actions? Should the U.S. take into special consideration the opinions of Indian-Americans?

6. Do you agree that some blame must be laid at the feet of the Trump administration for not having ambassadors for either India or Pakistan? How can the U.S. restore trust and a good working relationship with both nations?

suggested readings

Prakash, Gyan. Emergency Chronicles: Indira Gandhi and Democracy's Turning Point. 456 pp. Princeton, NJ:Princeton University Press, 2019. Emergency Chronicles provides the first comprehensive account of this understudied episode in India's modern history. Gyan Prakash strips away the comfortable myth that the Emergency was an isolated event brought on solely by Gandhi's desire to cling to power, arguing that it was as much the product of Indian democracy's troubled relationship with popular politics.

Crabtree, James. The Billionaire Raj: A Journey Through India's New Gilded Age. 386 pp. Danvers, MA: Tim Duggan Books, 2018. India is the world's largest democracy, with more than one billion people and an economy expanding faster than China's. James Crabtree's The Billionaire Raj takes readers on a personal journey to meet these elusive billionaires, fugitive tycoons, and shadowy political power brokers.

Guha, Ramachandra. India After Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy. 944 pp. New York, NY: Ecco Press, 2008. Taking full advantage of the dramatic details of the protests and conflicts that helped shape the nation, politically, socially, and economically, Guha writes of the factors and processes that have kept the country together, and kept it democratic, defying the numerous prophets of doom.


Don't forget: Ballots start on page 98!!!!

To access web links to these readings, as well as links to additional, shorter readings and suggested web sites, GO TO www.fpa.org/great_decisions and click on the topic under Resources, on the right-hand side of the page.