Democracy, Dissent, and Dialogue in Contemporary India

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Abstract: The complexity and commonality of today's local and global challenges, such as achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, deepening democratic governance, preventing violent conflict, or tackling terrorism, is a poignant reminder of our increasing interdependence and the distant future of equity. Much like other nations, India is experiencing and resisting each of these. Since 2014, when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power, the contours of these experiences and resistances are marked by somewhat centralised and authoritarian stakes imbued in an 'emotional force'. The emotional force is rooted in values of Hindutva[2] which has a precise type of ideological construction of how India, its people, and the Indian democracy should be. There is a conspicuous dualism and chauvinism in the imagined democracy. This imagination derives and delivers the 'new democracy' which is inextricably grounded in the majoritarian-populist politics. Bearing this in mind, this paper aims to unpack and understand the way democracy and dialogue, or the lack of it, shapes the everyday experience, while using some pertinent examples to typify the discourse. We find that democracy is challenged, but questioning its meaning is wrought with grim complexity and tensions. The author takes stock of an ongoing event to demonstrate that democracy and dialogue are becoming provisional and desultory tools in the larger scheme of things in India.

Keywords: Democracy, BBC Documentary, Dialogue, BJP, India

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2 The term Hindutva as a political ideology was coined by Chandranath Basu in the 19th century; however, the term is most popularly associated with V. D. Savarkar to manifest a part of the Hindu identity and nationalism that later became the framework for the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the BJP.

'Modi's years in power have been ones of disappointment for believers, vindication for the sceptics, and frustration for all who want India to thrive.'

Shashi Tharoor in Modi Man of Destiny (2020)

Contextualising India's (Emotional) Democracy

In 2009, the Booker Prize Winner and global justice activist Arundhati Roy, published an essay titled, '*What have we done to Democracy?' (*Roy 2009*)* In her writings, she explored how people constituting the democracy contribute towards the making and un-making of democracy, how institutional monopoly underwrites democracy, and finally, what happens when democracy becomes devoid of meaning in the context of India. In 2022, she concluded that 'the damage to Indian democracy is not reversible' (CNN, 22 June 2022). Her prime line of argument is founded in the complex majority-minority politics that is manifested by the government where 'engineering hatred of a common enemy' is conspicuously propagated and justified. Democracy and democratic backsliding in India can be evidenced with several global indices that have established that the government has failed to sustain fair and just democratic participations and outcomes. Furthermore, the government has weakened the quality of freedom associated with Human Rights and the Press, key indicators of democracy. A stark example that substantiates the above statement is the 2023 BBC's documentary *India: The Modi Question*, which has received ecumenical attention for being banned in India. The two-episode series tracks the rise of Prime Minister Narendra Modi since the 2002 Gujarat riots, when he was the Chief Minister of the state. The BJP rationalised the ban by citing that it is 'a propaganda piece designed to push a particular discredited narrative' (quoted from the statement on Twitter by Arindam Bagchi, Official Spokesperson of Ministry of External Affairs). The ban was followed by Income Tax investigations at the BBC offices in New Delhi and Mumbai citing non-compliance with the *Transfer Pricing Rules* resulting in vast diversion of profits; however, many deduce it was a petty retaliation and further suppression of press freedom. While this case is quite recent, it is safe to argue that since 2014, the BJP and Modi have courted serious concerns and controversies on matters closely intertwined with democracy, and in this paper, I take stock of this case to unpack and understand the role of impositions that infringe on the scope for dissent and dialogue in democratic processes especially when it pertains to the vulnerable minorities – the Muslim communities in particular.

The Hindu majority and the Muslim minority are a part of the modern Indian cultural fabric and identity. The partition of the subcontinent was based on this idea and independent India, was touted as the safe home for Hindus, even though declared secular. The independent India was never imagined to be a Hindu state.

Drawing on the secular fabric, of the three people who were chosen to deliver a speech addressing the free nation alongside Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was Chaudhry Khaliquzzaman. The thought behind this was to assure the Muslims who remained in India were equal citizens and that their fundamental rights would be protected. Khaliquzzaman is a debateable figure and I mention his name here not to decorate him as a contributing political leader but to emphasise that the religious majority-minority dynamics and representation of 'the other' was reflected in the very first political speech addressed to independent India. Ontologically, the likes of Emmanuel Levinas have written that the 'the other' are a discourse in their own right and that negotiated social identities are complete only in relation to 'the other'. In pre-2014 India, 'the Muslim other' existed and the Indian National Congress (INC) played its part in clouding the secular democracy with ballot politics. As noted by Gould (2004), the INC has used aspects of Hindu nationalism and communalism since the late colonial times, and it continues to exhibit shades of 'soft Hindutva' (Anderson & Longkumer 2018). After the Narendra Modi-led and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh-backed BJP came to power, the Hindutva identity has been made necessary to being an Indian. Macro-narratives across India have shown that the BJP are openly hostile to the secular framework and several BJP-led states, and the national government have directly or symbolically fanned Hindutva sentiments at the cost of the security of the Muslim minorities. At micro-levels, the perception of 'the other' varies greatly depending on the context. But reports on discriminatory impositions by law-making and governing institutions at local and national levels have raised serious concerns about democracy and are sadly not rare today.

At its simplest, democracy is a system of governance where people choose their leaders through free and fair electoral operations at unambiguous periodic intervals, and the system in turn fortifies policies and regulations that sustain democratic goodwill. The democracy in India is channelled through what Richards (2013) has called 'emotional governance', where the national identity programme is rooted in emotions. The aspirations which compose the identity programme reflect much on the tendencies of the democracy that significantly tap into the emotions and enthusiasm of the masses. However, the challenge is to restrict the liberties of the already strong and the polemics and the already strong emotions around it. These emotions can be a result of orchestration, synchronisation, or both. Of these, an emotion that is often implied is that the majority community own the nation and are the carriers of rights, while all others are dependents and supplicants (Kinnvall 2006). There is little doubt that this emotion is at the heart of the desired Indian identity and that democracy in India is tending towards deference in recent times as it manifests sentiment-driven majoritarianism.

This article contends that there are two particular – neither mutually inclusive nor exclusive – paths that democracy in India is essentially trotting on, both of which are emotion-driven. The first is what Guillermo O'Donnell refers to as 'delegative', in contrast to representational democracy (O'Donnell 1997), and the second is what Sammy Smooha calls 'ethnic democracy' (Smooha 2002). Delegative democracy is premised on the notion that the elections are an emotional affair, and the elected leaders embody sentiments and are seen as protectors of the country and the people. The leader and their party symbolise diversity and exhibit the power to subvert legislatures, courts, and the press. The country enjoys liberties more than that of an authoritarian state, but, inherently, the government is *not* unconditionally dedicated to the fundamental needs and the rights of the people. Most of all, O'Connell reasons that a leader in a delegative democratic country uses the rhetoric of majoritarianism in a frequent pattern and promotes the narrative that the majority groups have suffered due to historical and political injustices that they aim to remedy, thus, intensifying the in-group and out-group divide. The ethnic democracy is not completely a detour from the delegative democracy. The majoritarian discourse is common where the dominant nationalist discourse recognises an ethnic group as forming the core nation in the state (Jaffrelot 2017, 59). Jaffrelot clarifies that the ethnic democracy in India does not exactly fit in the definitions of Smooha's observation of Israel; mostly because in India, constitutionally and legally, the disparities between the majority and minority have still not been consolidated.

India is a highly diverse and unequal country where implementing democracy is as daunting as it is imperative. In times of global competitiveness and surveillance, the task of securing political and social democracy is supressed with a degree of coercion or is influenced unfavourably by political precincts. Eisenstadt (2003) argued that there are only two countries outside the Western Hemisphere that have sustained democracy despite critical and continual challenges. He referred to India and Israel. However, both these countries in current times are undergoing an extensive phase of ethnic nationalism. While constitutionally, India remains secular and mandates the right to freely to profess, practise, and propagate religion (Article 25) and that all communities have the right to manage their own affairs in matters of religion (Article 26), the last three decades have seen the erosion of secularism (Jaffrelot 2017). Having acutely assessed the Indian socio-political affairs for decades, Jaffrelot (2017 and 2021) argues that India has been propelled greatly towards ethnic nationalism with authoritarian populism at its characteristic core. Populism can be a radical democratic programme (Laclau 2005) or can be inclined towards divisive politics (Rydgren 2012); however, the challenge is to insulate government policies from engineering antagonistic camps. In India, nationalism has stemmed from mobilising feelings and people as if they inherently have superior ethnic, national or religious essence (Chatterjee 2019) and recognises that there are people who are at the core of

the nation and others who form the non-core (Smooha 2002; Jaffrelot 2017). The peril is that even the state perceives the non-core groups as less worthy or even a threat, gradually justifying the imposition of control over them, thus impeding the democratic mechanisms. The shrinking space for dissent and dialogue in India exemplifies this dynamic where the state and law-enforcing institutions play a role in consolidating the peripheries between the core and non-core groups.

Democracy in India is commonly referred to as the largest in the world and the people are, as Ramachandra Guha (2017) puts it, 'so many and so various that the people of India continue to be divided'. The world's most successful democracies are comparatively much smaller, wealthier and are fairly homogenous – countries such as Denmark, the Netherlands and Norway exemplify this narrative. These countries should not be compared to India, where a single state like Uttar Pradesh has such a dense population that had it been a nation, it would be the fifth largest in the world! Of the world's most populous countries, only the United States of America and India have long-standing democracies. Countries like China and Russia may ideologically claim to be democratic states but have established forms of autocracies. Other countries like Indonesia, Pakistan, Nigeria, Brazil, Bangladesh, and Mexico can be modestly described as works in progress. To obtain a rounded understanding of democracy, a country like India can offer abundant and diverse insights into the functionality of democracy – the path towards civil liberties for *all*. Understandably, the concept and lived realities around democracy can be quite distinct in a society that is really divided. However, what does it imply when the state and its institutions offer support in premeditated discrimination and violence? Or collude with agents that thwart the process of delivering law and justice? One of the greatest blots in Indian democracy continues to be the 2002 Gujarat riots. Although the then Chief Minister Narendra Modi was cleared of all charges by the Supreme Court of India[3], it lingers on the radar of global political controversies. Independent organisations like Amnesty International, media representatives from outside India, and resolute diplomats have reported on the tacit support of the Modi government for the Hindu majority and the complicit role of the police during the riots. It has been two decades since the pogrom and the delay of dialogue in the process continues to shadow India's democracy.

3 In 2008, during the Congress rule, a Special Investigation Trail (SIT) was commissioned by the Supreme Court of India (SCI) to analyse the 2002 Gujarat riot case and determine the existence of a larger conspiracy and the complicity of Modi. In 2012 the case was closed with the SIT and SCI finding 'no prosecutable evidence' against them. In 2018 the verdict was challenged, and after several hearings, in 2022 the SCI upheld the SIT's findings.

Democracy, Dissent and Dialogue: The BBC Documentary

India: The Modi Question is a two-part documentary that attempts to explore Prime Minster Modi's relationship with the country's largest minority group – the Muslims, using long-term investigative journalism. The case studies used are not only historically momentous but speak to the many ways the majority-minority interface has been shaped in contemporary India. The first episode opens with a British Muslim man narrating his experience of the riots when he visited his ancestral family in Gujarat in 2002. The organised violence against the Muslims had led to the loss of his uncle and friend who were accompanying him on the visit. He shares his struggle of trying to seek safety during the rampage and justice since the incident and repeatedly failing at both. As the episode progresses, it paints the background to the riot by showing the actual footage of the events and the viewers' attention is drawn towards the role of authority in the pogrom. A senior BBC reporter who had extensively covered the news in 2002 and was in the field at that time shares her suspicions of the law-enforcing institutions like the police's indifference and negligence. She is convinced that the 72-hour-long mob-violence could have been significantly reduced had the police been accountable and sincere. This observation is documented and backed by scholars like Engineer (2002), Lobo (2002), Jaffrelot (2003 & 2017) among others. The police operated on the axis of the state and politics, compromising much on their civil duties which leads to greater exposure of the implicit relationship of the police forces and the government (Human Rights Watch, 24 April 2004). There are distinguished diplomats, human rights lawyers, and independent organisations who corroborate this reading of the situation and express in varied ways that Mr Modi was largely responsible for a climate of impunity during the 2002 Gujarat pogrom and that there was a systematic campaign of violence against the Muslim minorities.

The second instalment of the series focuses on Narendra Modi's term of office following his re-election in 2019 and the subsequent years, which continue to be marked by religious restiveness. The reason for his electoral victory ranged from welfare plans (such as providing toilets, bank accounts, inexpensive loans, electricity, and cooking-gas cylinders) to unending advertisements and lavish donations (Mishra 2019). Part two of the series delves into the reactions to some policies and decisions of the government in Modi's second term that point at direct calls to make India a Hindu nation, even if it means using violence against the Muslim minorities. As the opposition leader Shashi Tharoor noted, 'India's identity must be purely Hindu. Mr. Modi cannot be oblivious to this fundamental contradiction, but he can only resolve it by jettisoning the very forces that have helped ensure his electoral victory' (Tharoor 2020, 235). A series of controversial policies – the banning of beef

trade and consumption, the removal of Kashmir's special status guaranteed under Article 370 of the Indian constitution, and the implementation of the Citizenship Amendment Act – and their role in inciting structural violence and treating the Muslims unfairly are cited. In Lacanian terms of 'the imaginary', the Modi government perceptibly aims to offer a *space* to the majority Hindu and the *lack of it* to the minority Muslims in the ontological paradigm of policies. These imagined spaces are instrumentalised through policies and occupy pivotal roles in national and religious identities (Kinnvall 2006). The documentary brings to light the experiences of people who are directly affected by these policies and also those who have expressed dissent on these issues. Modi and his government reject the indictment that their policies reflect any prejudice towards Muslims, but these have been repeatedly criticised by human rights organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. The Chair of Amnesty India articulated his apprehensions in the course of their work in the Modi regime and how they have had to close their offices in Delhi following the freezing of bank accounts in connection with an investigation into financial irregularities; the verdict is yet to be heard. The documentary ends by conceding that the perception that Modi is anti-Muslim is widespread and it continues to have an impact on the quality of India's intended democracy.

The documentary offers a space to give voice to victims who are either unheard, harmed, or silenced; has spokespersons who counter, explain, and represent the BJP and its associates; and also hosts activists, journalists, and academics who have thoroughly researched the matter. A key value in the series is access to the first-hand accounts of people encountering forms of violence but their stories have been undermined. The minority discourse is of high importance in this documentary. It unveils how those who are framed as a 'threat' to the social and national security are *being* threatened in their everydayness. The makers redeem authenticity by not only adding human faces to the unwinding narratives, but also relating it to real-time life-events of the people. A significant part of the series is seemingly about a community's (inferior) position and the often-damaged, tampered, and tragic stories that are tied to it; suppressing Muslim voices is a part of the process (Bhattacharya 2022). In a climate where the political representations of the Muslim minority are impeded (Farooqui 2020), the chances of these accounts being uncovered and addressed are meagre. The inferior position comes with inherent attributes that affect the power dynamics and determine whether a dialogical relationship is possible. In this case, even the word 'dialogue' is subject to privilege and only a few have the choice to engage with it. The most affected persons in the documentary are presumably far away from any privilege, and, for many, this documentary records the grief that the people have normalised. Common in the world of such victims are the memories and stories of those they lost, and in some ways, the series helps them with a space to share what they are going through. The ban on this does not come as a shock to many because

the culture of imposition and infringement on freedom of choice is ongoing with the Modi government in power (Mishra 2019). While the Indian government continues to frame the series as a propaganda tool, the makers from the BBC have contended that 'the highest editorial standards' were employed in the production. Several student bodies and activists have tried to screen the documentary in their institutions and that has been met with disciplinary actions including arrests (BBC, 25 January 2023).

While the content of the documentary itself is complex, its reception by the BJP is politically emboldened and is in line with the feared rise of demagogues. Instead of creating opportunities for the public to understand and discern, the banning of the series across India is in itself a populist trademark. The construction of an ecosystem where fears are ontologically justified and the need to suppress those occurs routinely highlights the diminution of safe space to express and dialogue. As Sahoo (2020) argues, even though interfaith dialogue can counter the polarising of Indian society, the environment in the present time is toxic and this shows no signs of abating. The nuanced interpretation of the public's reaction is deemed unimportant when compared to the exercise of raw political power; hence, doors leading to meaningful dialogue are discouraged. Dialogue with 'the other' in the democratic discourse of India has not been absent; however, it is safe to argue that it has been much too little, conditional, and, to a great extent, superficial. The banning order by a government is often soaked in reasons but when a two-hour documentary is banned, one can deduce that it is rather a frantic effort to approximate the objective of public control, and it has received unflattering responses globally. The enforcement of the ban has occurred through state and extra-state entities, and it reinforces the rhetoric of how the government panoptically continues to control their citizens while normalising this in the name of asserting the country's post-colonial identity. The political dispensation under the Modi government transpires as a populist democracy where power and polarisation are moralised, and exclusionary practices are pursued to mobilise emotions and electoral turnouts. The populist democracy in India has highlighted that differences cannot be reconciled (Gudavarthy 2021), and the self-imagined reality is about an uneven and unmediated victory of majoritarianism.

This paper does not wish to make any single-axis claim about democracy in contemporary India nor about the terms 'victim', 'Muslim' or 'minority' being homogenous in nature; on the contrary, the idea is to construct the complexity of the shared communal realities of the Muslim minorities at the intersection of majoritarian politics and social insecurities. The example of the banning of *India: The Modi Question* doubtless deconstructs the political intentions in disguise that from a bird's eye view attests to protecting the nation's image but, when empirically assessed, it unpacks layers that warrant social control. This action by the BJP was an act of self-con-

stitution, and the strategies that might precede it symbolise a sense of political clout. Even if the pressure is realised from the political hold on this subject, the knowable socio-cultural will have contingencies on the praxis of the majority-minority complex. The ban will only further invoke paranoia about domination and invite vociferous campaigns against the sitting government. Given that violence has started to erupt on the fringes, one cannot refute the idea that, even though banned, the documentary will continue to stir the pot. It is in the news that students in institutions like Jawaharlal Nehru University and Jamia Millia Islamia University are organising screenings of the documentary, and this is being met with 'accidental power cuts' across the campus or detention of the students involved. If not handled sensitively, this may incite communal tensions; and to restate, the minority Muslims will be vulnerable, for they can be unequally treated by the law enforcement units. As Jaffrelot (2017) has argued, democracy may be often embraced in a way that favours the majority, but it becomes liberal only when it insists that the minority rights and individual rights are safeguarded.

Democracy, Dissent and Dialogue: The Digital Space

The digital space today is not just a substrate to communicate. In fact, it is a highly effective means for reflecting upon what it is to be a human (Horst and Miller 2020). The digital world enables the re-imposition of normativity while radically reinforcing certain ways of thinking (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017). There is no reservation in stating that the nature and impact of government extend to this sphere where social conscience is strengthened and mobilised. The notion that the electronic medium relays of our reality have wedged democracy in a mediatised world is well established. We read the same posts at the same time on the screens that have become a pervasive horizon which compels us to feel some emotions – instantly, and with pride, passion, or panic alike. The digital media and Indian democracy have an intimate relationship, particularly since the 2014 general election. Scholars argue that since then the electronic space has been cleverly used (and integrated) as a form of public relations (Chibber & Ostermann 2014; Jaffrelot 2017; and Rao 2018). Additionally, the promise of radical innovation and participation of the masses in creating unmediated and personal relations is assured (Chakravartty & Roy 2015). Despite Modi not having any press conferences and interviews with the traditional media, he is touted as one of the most interactive politicians globally! This is achieved through the tactical use of social media. Since Modi's time in office, social media has converted democratic principles in the country where governance is vastly affected by direct forms of communication (Sinha 2017) into a rhetoric that is soaked in slogans, business, and a Hindu identity (Rao 2018). As a spin-off, the Modi government is able to propagate profound mistrust in conventional media, while the global watchdogs on press freedom rank India after 135 countries.

Since the introduction of the *Reliance Jio* network in 2016, the number of internet users in India has increased dramatically and so has the average internet speed.[4] In India, 97% of internet users access it through mobile devices (Mankekar 2020) and the use of online demonstrations to incite offline violence is no news (Udupa 2018). Unprecedented online presence and influence of political leaders and their ability to articulate grandly the economic and military prowess of their country has been a game changer. Populist leaders and their parties use these platforms by means of trolls, hackers, and bots, to communicate directly with their electorate on open platforms such as Twitter and YouTube, the majority of which are one-way channels and not two-way exchanges, thus defying the 'participatory culture' which it aims to be. With time, popularity transforms into legitimacy. In an article published by *Fortune*, Mark Zuckerberg admits to Facebook being a media company and not just a social platform that connects people as it is projected to be (*Fortune*, 23 December 2016). Studies have shown the direct impact of Facebook on the spread of ethnic conflicts and violent nationalism in India, where democracy is undermined as political processes gain hegemony over public discourses (Vaidhyanathan 2018). In India, 438 riots over religious identity were recorded in 2019. In 2020, that number doubled to 857 and Facebook had an evident role in inciting communal distrust and hatred (Reuters, 1 February 2022). Furthermore, in 2020, several hate-promoting accounts on Facebook were deleted by Facebook's oversight board; however, when it was uncovered that some accounts were handled by a Member of Parliament from the BJP government, Facebook refused to take action (The Wall Street Journal, 14 August 2020). India continues to be Facebook's largest market with more than 340 million active users.

In the contemporary discourse of democracy in India, social media has become a handy tool to demonise opponents and bully minority groups and that predictably fuels intolerance and violence. In the past decade, vigilante groups and majoritarian mobs have increasingly attacked minorities, activists, and human rights defenders, often with impunity (Sahoo 2020, 16). Hate crimes against the Muslim people range from attacks for the offence of cow-slaughter to accusations of 'love-jihad'. These well-known examples and the subsequent crackdown on Muslim men shed light on the emotional delegative democracy that India is moving towards. Since the release of *India: The Modi Question* and its ban, people have taken to social media to express their views on the matter. The BJP, their associates, and several communication channels have incited hostility not only along political lines, but also religious. Many

4 In the last six years, the number of broadband subscribers has increased from 19.23 million (Sept 2016) to nearly 800 million (June 2022), but the average internet speed also increased from 5.6 Mbps (March 2016) to 23.16 Mbps (April 2022). https://www.bizzbuzz.news/markets/6-years-of-jio-data-consumption-increased-by-100x-in-india-1165190

have accused the producers of this series of a colonial outlook that reflects on their motivation for this project. A quick search on Twitter with '#BBCdocumentary' and '#BBCraid' presents several narratives and counter-narratives from lay people and experts alike. Several 'blue-tick' people or organisations have liberally supported or challenged the conception, content, and characterisation of the documentary or its ban. Similarly, on Facebook, people have used similar hashtags to mobilise their part of the narrative and organise protests either for or against the ban. The Indian diaspora in London organised a protest outside the BBC headquarters using social media platforms to gain traction and spread the word. Lastly, fake news and hate speech was rampantly shared through several channels (particularly WhatsApp) in India and abroad. Speaking to a student of the Jamia Millia Ismailia University in Delhi, I learnt that there were police stationed outside their campus and, while on her way to attend regular class, she got into a conversation with a cab driver. The driver shared his unfiltered views on the matter where he said he would urge the Delhi police to be permanently stationed outside this rebel university which produces traitors to the country. On being asked if he is referring to the screening of the documentary, he said he read it on WhatsApp that the documentary is doctored and has been produced to defame Modi before the 2024 general elections. Several posts on the social media have blatantly and repeatedly referred to Hindu-Muslim identities, which underlines how the political is saturated in the religious in the new India.

Conclusions

Thomas Hansen coined the term 'saffron wave' in understanding Hindu nationalism in the twentieth century and argued that *imagining* and *organising* a Hindu nation are two distinct discourses with some common principles binding them. Today's India is probably best sited between these two discourses. In his research on democratic India, he acknowledged that the non-western post-colonial democracy pervades a multitude of social identities and practices, and that democracy is not merely a form of governance, but rather, is a principle that can transform a society's imagination of itself (Hansen 1998, 09). The projects of 'democracy' and 'dialogue' in India in their distinct existences or in relational terms may sometimes come across as a paradox. The premise of the paradox is partly based on the idea that these discourses need installing while also needing the very democracy and dialogue as pre-requisites during the installation. Acknowledging the paradox may lead to socio-political frameworks that enable assessments of the varied expressions of democracy and dialogue that are earnest representation of *the ordinary* but are of paramount value. Often, encountering the local ordinary experiences of exchange between a Hindu and a Muslim in this climate of tension may fulfil the civilisational meaning of democracy and dialogue. This paper does not intend to convey that the democracy in India today should replay what it was decades ago or emulate a model from elsewhere, be-

cause democracy is in effect a product of the society with dynamic attributes. Much like our society, our meaning of democracy too is irresolute. However, what this paper aims to show is the rising subversion of human rights and the lack of certitude in the government and the law-enforcement bodies that has led to severe insecurity and intolerance – more so, when the insecurity and intolerance seem to be directed towards or experienced by a particular group of people and stretched to an extreme extent where these emotions are validated and normalised. What is most worrying is the decline of questioning of the system and the space for dissent.

The good news is that, despite all these challenges, democracy is being reinvented at the margins and it is gradually being sculpted through tools of dialogue. Since 2015, academics, activists, and authors have organised public forums to voice their concerns on the freedom of expression, stood in solidarity with the victims of hate and violence, held candlelight vigils, and surrendered government honours and awards to express their growing dissent. More centrally, efforts are being made to challenge the divisive politics and polarisation through educative discourses and dialogue via formal channels. Interfaith dialogue and conversations have proven useful in checking communal riots in several Indian cities, and much of their success is credited to drawing on local religious narratives of coexistence and communal goodwill. The syncretic nature of supporting dialogue is intricately woven in Hindu scriptures and religion, which is used to encourage dialogical exchanges (Gottschalk 2005 and Sahoo 2020). Interfaith engagements in India are not a modern merchandise of neoliberal efforts at cultural integration or reconciliation. Muslims and Hindus have been in dialogue since the arrival of Muslim traders in the early centuries, and since then the Hindus and Muslims have been a part of the same community through marriages, business, and other forms of interfaces (Hassan 1992 and Bigelow 2013). Hassan emphasises the possibility of Hindu-Muslim dialogue that exists (or ought to exist) in the Indian subcontinent because for millennia these groups have managed to live together, with each age bringing its own peril and disease. She argues that pluralism in India is innate, and just as no good thing comes free, pluralism too comes with a price. There are people and organisations who pledge their life towards communal trust and co-operation, and it is in their efforts that extremism and unprovoked dominations are being contested. 'Dialogue for life' between the Hindu and the Muslim people has emerged and will continue to emerge from the processes of life itself, and it will safeguard the essence of democracy. Meanwhile, studies will question, revise, and document the ever-changing meanings of democracy, dissent, and dialogue in India and beyond.

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