

# Election Season in Varanasi

The battle over the heart of India's Hindu  
center

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Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi (C) celebrates his reelection. New Delhi, India. May 23, 2019.  
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Like most Hindus who've been living in Varanasi their entire lives, fifty-three-year-old professor Vishwambhar Nath Mishra takes a dip, every day, in the holy

Ganges River. At sunrise, he wakes up, wraps a simple white Indian *gamcha* around his waist, and wades slowly into the river, dribbling the water over his arms and forehead. Doing his best not to think about the river's increasing toxicity, he brings the water to his lips. This bathing ritual is one his family has practiced for thirteen generations, performed by pious Hindus in Varanasi since the sixth century BCE. To dip into the Ganges is to be purified of all sins.

One morning late last April, just as Mishra was stepping into the Ganges in the airless 110-degree heat, a blazing neon sign with orange block letters appeared downstream, containing the slogan for Prime Minister Narendra Modi's reelection campaign: MAIN BHI CHOWKIDAR ("I, TOO, AM THE GUARDIAN"). Next to the sign bobbed a pair of neon-orange lotuses, the ancient Hindu symbol for divine beauty and purity. More recently, it has been used as the symbol for Modi's right-wing Hindu nationalist party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Later that day, Modi himself would show up in Varanasi—called there, he claimed, by the Mother Ganges herself—in order to file his nomination papers for the following month's general elections, the results of which, in a country of more than 1.3 billion people, would require over a month to tally.

That Modi had chosen Varanasi, India's epicenter of Hindu temples and gods, was a strategic move for bolstering his image as a pious "guardian" of India. He arrived in the city in a storm of symbolism, wearing saffron garments—a move that commentators from India Today, a prominent English-language magazine and news channel, noted on a live webcast with play-by-play enthusiasm: "The prime minister, as always, sitting and—he's just come out of his vehicle, in saffron! Notice the color! Notice the *color*! He is wearing a saffron kurta!" Tens of thousands of people, waving bright saffron and green BJP flags, pushed forward to get a closer look as Modi's motorcade crawled through the garlanded, narrow streets like a baby sea turtle swimming against the tide, and chanted, "*Jai Hind!*" ("Victory to India!") as he waved back in slow motion. By the evening, Indian media were reporting that Varanasi had been hit by a "Sea of Saffron"—a strongly symbolic color in Hinduism which, under Modi, has become increasingly political in a city that has come to represent the ongoing transformation of the country's national identity.

Professor Mishra, the scion of one of Varanasi's most well respected families, was not thrilled to see Modi in town. After Modi was elected prime minister in 2014, one of his most ambitious promises was the *Namami Gange*, or "Obeisance to the Ganges," initiative: a \$3-billion-dollar national movement to clean up the Ganges River. According to Mishra, who is both the head priest and scientist at the Sankat Mochan Foundation, a research center devoted to studying fluctuating pollution levels in the Ganges, Modi's promise has been nothing more than a "cosmetic setup."

I'd arrived in Varanasi the day after Modi's visit, the city still swooning in a BJP glow. Young men were posing in front of ten-foot-tall cardboard cutouts of Modi;

torn BJP posters flapped in the wind; Modi's face was plastered on the back of nearly every other rickshaw. Just a month later, Modi would go on to win a sweeping electoral victory across the country, and, in Varanasi, there was little doubt that Modi would win his home constituency there nor that he would be reelected as prime minister. "Everyone loves Modi," my taxi driver said blankly, without offering his/her own opinion. "They are saying: 'NaMo again.'"

But not everyone I spoke with shared that sentiment. To someone like Mishra, Modi's presence was proof of what had become a nationwide trend: a move to rebrand India's pious but apolitical Hindu center as one of *Hindutva*, the Hindu nationalist ideology that emphasizes the religious component of India's national political identity, at the expense of the country's 172 million Muslims and other religious minorities. The movement, which Mishra referred to as "radical Hinduism," has stoked India's lethal and divisive history since partition in 1947, when Colonial British India was divided into present-day India and Pakistan.

"As my father used to say: There are radical Hindus and there are practicing Hindus," Mishra told me when I met him at his house in late April. "We are from a family of practicing Hindus. The BJP are radical Hindus. And they are trying to change the DNA of Benares."

If the Ganges River is a 1,500-mile-long artery winding through Hindu India, then Varanasi is its beating heart. Located five hundred miles southeast of New Delhi, Varanasi, also called Benares, is the spiritual capital of India. Not unlike Muslims visiting Mecca or Jains visiting Shatrunjaya, Varanasi receives more than a million Hindu pilgrims a year: To bathe in the Ganges is to be purified of all sins; to die in Varanasi is to reach moksha, the transcendent state of salvation, and a release from the cycles of rebirth. Along the riverbank, amid the thousands of men cleansing their bodies and spirits, the dead are lined up in bundled sacks ready to be burned, one after another, at all hours of the day, while ashes and decayed bones are released into the river.

The Ganges River is dangerously polluted—an issue Modi made the centerpiece of his last Varanasi campaign, five years ago, when he promised to clean up the river by 2019. "It's my destiny to serve Mother Ganga," he said in a speech after claiming victory in 2014. "Mother Ganga needs someone to take her out of this dirt, and she's chosen me to do the work." It was a bold promise: Past administrations have been trying to clean the Ganges River—which absorbs over a billion gallons of waste every day in the form of raw sewage and industrial debris—since 1985, shortly after Professor Mishra's father, Veer Bhadra Mishra, started the Sankat Mochan Foundation. Over the decades since, little has come of the government's commitments, and the Ganges remains one of the most polluted rivers in the world.

Modi, so far, has not acknowledged his failure to clean up the Ganges River. Instead, during his April campaign visit to Varanasi, he shifted from focusing on the Ganges to a broader, if still familiar, agenda—an ambitious renovation of Varanasi itself, in accordance with the dictates of his polarizing Hindu nationalism. “Just like the great men of Varanasi,” Modi said, in Hindi, “I also stay focused on one aim only, and that is being concerned with India’s goodwill. I just follow one mantra: India First.” As the crowd erupted with applause, Modi went on to cite a number of Hindu temples that had been attacked by Muslim terrorists from Pakistan, implying few degrees of separation from India’s own Muslims. “Former governments did nothing but have a dialogue. Varanasi has blessed me with the strength to give a befitting reply to terrorists. We told them that the new India won’t budge!”

Modi’s renovation of holy Varanasi has most visibly taken shape through the clearing out of twelve acres of land surrounding the Shri Kashi Vishwanath Temple, an important Hindu site dedicated to Lord Shiva. What Modi failed to mention in his renovation plans is that the temple shares a wall with the Gyanvapi Mosque, built during the Mogul Empire and a crucial node of worship for Varanasi’s 350,000-plus Muslims, who have lived in the city for over five hundred years.

The coexistence of an Islamic mosque and a Hindu temple in one of the holiest cities in India has usually been taken as a sign of the potential for religious tolerance. But rather than encourage this pluralism, Modi’s message about the renovation during his campaign concentrated exclusively on the rejuvenation of the city’s important Hindu sites: the Vishwanath Temple and the creation of the Temple’s corridor. Since early 2018, Modi’s government has cleared 45,000 square feet of land surrounding the temple to make space for it to “breathe.” A few months before I’d arrived in Varanasi, two yellow bulldozers were parked in the heart of the city, remnants of the preceding year’s demolition that razed just shy of three hundred buildings and forcibly relocated six hundred families. Walking through the neighborhood on a late evening, it felt as if the future of Varanasi’s textured historical legacy lay in mounds of dirt ten feet high, ready either to construct a new history or to sow the seeds for the next crisis. At the end of the corridor, protected by thirty-foot-tall solid steel pillars and a bunker of police toting AK-47s, was the Gyanvapi Mosque.

Temples and mosques occupy a particularly fraught space in India’s public discourse. One of the most controversial flare-ups in modern Indian history centers on the destruction of the Babri Masjid, a mosque in the northern city of Ayodhya; In 1992, Hindu nationalist mobs destroyed the mosque using pickaxes and stones, believing the mosque to have been built on the birthplace of the Hindu deity Rama. The incident prompted violent riots between Hindus and Muslims across the country that resulted in more than two thousand deaths. That same year, a group called the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, a militant nationalist right-wing Hindu group that more recently has widely supported Modi, appeared in Varanasi to rally the people to “liberate” the city’s Hindu temples. Their main target was the demolition

of the Gyanvapi Mosque, which they claimed is situated on top of the remains of the original Kashi Vishwanath Temple. Fearing a repeat of the Babri Masjid incident and its aftermath, the central government deployed a thousand policemen to guard the mosque.

While a number of people I spoke with—both around the Vishwanath Corridor and in Varanasi—insisted that there was no tension between the city’s Muslim and Hindu populations, many Muslims I met expressed growing apprehension. “If you say anything against the BJP, you get attacked,” Hasan Maqbool, the master weaver of a garment shop, told me when I met him at his office in a Muslim neighborhood across town from the Ganges River. “But the BJP wants only Hindu development. Right now, Varanasi is under pressure from the BJP. They want to make Varanasi a holy city for Hindus only.” He was worried about Modi’s changes to the Vishwanath Corridor, and cited the Babri Masjid incident as an example. “Muslims fear it will be a repeat of Ayodhya; they are making so much space for the temple, but if we protect the mosque, they will take action.”

Varanasi has long been a microcosm of India, where 1.2 million Hindus, Muslims, Jains, Buddhists, Christians, and Sikhs live out all of India’s contradictions in a state of osmotic peace. “This city has always been pluralistic,” Amitabh Bhattacharya, a seventy-year-old journalist who has covered the city his entire career for one of India’s oldest newspapers, *Northern India Patrika*, said when we spoke at his office. “We have three sects of Islam, two major sects of Christianity, three sects of Buddhism, two sects of Jainism. It was an ideal place to see the peaceful coexistence of different religions and culture.” Bhattacharya slowly tore off pieces of a dry paratha packed in a tin can as he spoke, choosing words carefully between bites. “But today a new threat has emerged: neo-Hinduism. And it is against the basic essence of this city.” The greater threat, he clarified, was not Modi himself, but what lay behind him: “Intolerance.”

The BJP’s Hindu nationalist political ideology began to gain traction starting in 1989, largely as a pushback against India’s Westernized elites whose vision for India was of a religiously inclusive and cosmopolitan country. It wasn’t until the May 2014 general election, however, that the BJP’s organizing worked on a massive scale: it won a landslide victory nationwide, easily surpassing the 272 seats required for a majority in India’s lower house of parliament and effectively relegating the more pluralistic Indian National Congress Party—first led after partition by the Cambridge-educated Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru—to minority status. As prime minister, Modi initially trumpeted a series of ambitious, modern economic goals: creating a nation of bullet trains, “smart cities,” and, most prominently, the *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan*, or “Clean India Mission,” which aimed, among other things, to end open defecation in the streets by supplying eighty million toilets to households throughout the country. But while most of those promises withered, with the exception of the toilets, Modi has made good on the other promise of his campaign: to pursue an ambitious and unapologetic Hindu

agenda. Since first assuming office, Modi has renamed ancient cities having Islamic names using Hindu ones; BJP state legislatures, meanwhile, have been rewriting history books for Indian public schools—redacting sections on Muslim rulers and introducing ones on Hindu gods. By far the most dangerous product of this *Hindutva* rhetoric has been the rise of vigilante mobs that patrol rural areas and murder anyone thought to be mistreating cows, viewed by Hindus as sacred. Since 2012, at least forty-five people have been murdered in the name of this form of Hindu purity, most of them Muslims, with videos of their deaths posted on YouTube.

Much of the BJP's *Hindutva* discourse comes neither from Modi nor the BJP itself, but rather from its affiliate organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), founded in 1925 by K. B. Hedgewar, a doctor from Nagpur who was profoundly influenced by the culture of fascism that was predominant in his time, especially its ideas of racial purity. Since its inception, the RSS has established training camps all over the country for the purpose of reinvigorating a militant nationalism based exclusively on India's Hindu roots. In 2017, Modi appointed Yogi Adityanath, once a local leader of an RSS chapter who currently leads a group charged with terrorism against Muslims, as the chief minister of the State of Uttar Pradesh, where Varanasi is located. As one of his first moves in office, Adityanath banned all beef consumption in the state and shut down every major Muslim-operated buffalo slaughterhouse in Varanasi, putting over thirty thousand Muslims out of work. When Muslims from Uttar Pradesh were murdered by vigilante mobs who'd been infuriated by the mistreatment of cows, Adityanath defended their actions, and went so far as to call for trials against the victims' surviving family members. Earlier this year, while campaigning for Modi, Adityanath warned voters of the "green virus": Muslim voters who were infiltrating India's polls. (In response, the election commission imposed a three-day ban on his campaign activities.)

One day in Varanasi, I went to meet with a local RSS leader named Gaurav Garg at his apartment near Benares Hindu University (BHU), where he works. Garg had originally joined the RSS when he was studying at BHU in 2006, motivated by a sense that India was growing too Westernized and a desire to reconnect with his Hindu roots. After graduating, he moved abroad to Dubai for a high-paying job in the technology sector. When Modi was elected in 2014, Garg took a significant pay cut in order to move back to Varanasi, where he could, as he put it, "work for the motherland."

"What RSS teaches you is that you have to sacrifice everything for your country," he explained over tea and orange soda. The walls surrounding us were stark—bearing no photos of his family; only a framed photo of Hedgewar, and a large wooden stick from one of his training sessions near the door to keep away "the goons," Garg said. He felt that India's sense of pride, in both itself and in Hinduism, had been lost under what he called "Nehru's pseudosecular agenda." As the country's spiritual center, Varanasi, in his opinion, was essential to restoring that pride. "What Modi has done, he made every Varanasi localite a part of his movement. Varanasi was never part of the focus of previous governments. Because

they wanted to kind of...” He trailed off. “I’m very direct in saying, what these Muslim invaders did, they want to put Islam on the top, they kind of crushed all these Indian historical pious centers related to this Hindu religion.”

Later, Garg led me through a dingy shopping mall and across a deserted open courtyard to a faded yellow building with a sign on the door that read CENTRAL OFFICE. This was one of the three local RSS headquarters in Varanasi. Inside the building was a small library full of awards and flyers for upcoming training programs—including one called “Consciousness Flow,” featuring a photo of men combat-kicking into the air.

A group of men were there, out of the heat, lying lethargically on the floor of an austere, shared bedroom, staring at their smartphones. “You see,” Garg gestured, “We live a very simple life.” He explained that their days followed a strict schedule of yoga, meditation, prayers, recitations, and classes—except when Modi called into action a new plan. “Then RSS workers will go out and do that thing,” he said proudly. When Modi called for the Ganges River to be cleaned up, he explained, RSS workers showed up with brooms to sweep the ghats.

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That Modi was reelected this past May wasn’t surprising—his opponent, Rahul Gandhi, of the dynastic Indian National Congress party, was unpopular and largely considered inexperienced. But the margin by which Modi won was stunning: the BJP won 303 seats in the 545-seat lower house of parliament, removing any chance for effective opposition to Modi and the BJP. (The former ruling party, and Modi’s main rival, the Indian National Congress Party, captured a mere fifty-two seats.) In few places was Modi’s victory more pronounced than in Varanasi, which he carried with 63 percent of the vote.

Modi’s renewed mandate came despite the fact that none of Modi’s promises for Varanasi has materialized. His plans to renovate the Vishwanath Corridor lie stalled in a crater-like demolition pile of rocks and sand in the center of the city. In the meantime, the BJP had again targeted a city in Uttar Pradesh, called Kanpur, where toxic dyes used in Muslim-owned tanneries were leaking into the Ganges River. In 2015, the BJP government shut down two hundred twenty-five of the city’s two hundred fifty-one tanneries, putting thousands of Muslims out of jobs. Most importantly for a number of residents in Varanasi, one promise has not been forgotten: Five years after he made his original pledge, Modi has still not cleaned up the Ganges.

“The Ganges is deteriorating day by day,” Mishra said to me. We were in his sitting room—a large room with white cloth draped over every couch and chair, the panoramic view of the Ganges shuttered to keep out the heat. He went on to explain that the pollution levels in the river have increased by more than threefold since 1986.

Over the past five years, Mishra has written the Modi administration seven letters, with detailed reports of the astonishing amounts of raw sewage and industrial waste that pollute the river. Each letter has been met with silence. Just before the election, the *Times of India*, one of India's largest newspapers, published an article citing Mishra's study as evidence that the water quality in the Ganges had worsened in the last three years. Soon after, Mishra was visited by a BJP leader who was not happy with the *Times of India* report.

When Mishra invited him inside and offered him tea, the BJP leader immediately began talking: "Mohanji, all the time you criticize our government, saying the Ganges is not clean. At least you can say the Ganges is somewhat clean now?" Mishra politely declined, explaining, from memory, a slew of statistics he'd meticulously collected from his labs, including the latest fecal coliform bacteria count and biochemical oxygen demand. Shortly after, the BJP quietly pushed back the deadline for the Ganges River cleanup to 2020.

Yet few seemed to notice the change. When Modi returned to Varanasi, a few days following his victory in May, a massive crowd showed up to greet him. Garlands of saffron balloons were strung between street lamps, blocking out the sky, while Modi appeared like a mirage, performing the same ritual he had in 2014, and again right before this year's election; the same that he would likely continue to repeat: a motorcade through the streets, a kneeled blessing before the Vishwanath Temple, and a speech, in which he would thank the Hindu gods for calling him to Varanasi. "The nation may have elected me for prime minister," Modi said, addressing his Hindu base there, "But for you, I am a worker. For me, your orders were the priority."