



## FOREIGN AFFAIRS

# Why Modi Can't Make India a Great Power

## Government-Backed Intolerance Is Tearing the Country Apart

**BY SUSHANT SINGH**

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Starting September 9, New Delhi is scheduled to host the G-20's 18th annual summit. The event, in the eyes of the Indian government, will mark the country's growing international importance. "During our G-20 presidency, we shall present India's experiences, learnings, and models as possible templates for others," Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared last year, when his country assumed the organization's leadership. This August, he asserted that India's presidency would help make the world into "one family" through "historic efforts aimed at inclusive and holistic growth." The government's message was clear: India is becoming a great power under Modi and will usher in an era of global peace and prosperity.

But 1,000 miles away from New Delhi, in the northeastern state of Manipur, India is caught in a conflict that suggests it is in no position to serve as an international leader. Over the last four months, ethnic violence

between Manipur's largest community, the Meiteis, and its largest minority, the Kukis, has killed hundreds of people and rendered 60,000 people homeless. Mobs have set fire to over 350 churches and vandalized over a dozen temples. They have burned more than 200 villages.

At first glance, it may seem like the violence in Manipur will not hinder Modi's foreign policy ambitions. After all, the prime minister has traveled the world over the last four months without having to talk about the conflict. It did not come up (at least publicly) in June, when U.S. President Joe Biden rolled out the red carpet for Modi in Washington, D.C. It was not mentioned when Modi landed in Paris three weeks later and met French President Emmanuel Macron. And the issue has not arisen during his visits this year to Australia, Egypt, Greece, Japan, Papua New Guinea, South Africa, and the United Arab Emirates.

But make no mistake: the events in Manipur threaten Modi's goal and vision of a great India. The state's violence has forced the Indian government to deploy thousands of troops inside Manipur, reducing the country's capacity to protect its borders from an increasingly aggressive China. The conflict has also hampered India's efforts to be an influential player in Southeast Asia by making it hard for the country to carry out regional infrastructure projects and by saddling neighboring states with refugees. And the ongoing violence could give other Indian separatist and ethnic partisan groups an opening to challenge New Delhi's primacy. If these organizations do begin to rebel, as some of them have in the past, the consequences would be disastrous. India is one of the most diverse countries in the world, home to people from thousands of different cultures and communities. It cannot function if these populations are in intensive conflict.

There is little reason to think that tensions will ease under Modi, and plenty of reason to think they will get worse. The prime minister's central

ideological project is the creation of a Hindu nationalist country where non-Hindu people are, at best, second-class citizens. It is an exclusionary agenda that alienates the hundreds of millions of Indians who do not belong to the country's Hindu majority. It is also one with a track record of prompting violence and unrest—including, now, in Manipur.

Modi's allies and supporters like to argue that the prime minister is personally transforming India into a new superpower. Modi's deputies, for example, suggest that the prime minister has earned respect unmatched by any previous Indian leader. Modi "exudes India in many ways, and I think that has had a big impact as well on the international community," Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, India's foreign minister, remarked in June. The country's pliant media have declared that Modi is *vishwaguru*: the world's teacher and guide. But Manipur shows that India stands little chance of becoming a global leader so long as Modi is at the helm. Great powers need to be stable, and the ruling party's exclusionary policies will open the country's various fault lines, creating chasms that lead to violence and drain the state's capacity. Manipur has sent Modi a warning. He is ignoring it at India's peril.

## **SONS OF THE SOIL**

Modi is not the first Indian politician to promote Hindu nationalism and majoritarianism. The prime minister's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its parent organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), have spent decades trying to turn India into a Hindu *Rashtra*, or a nation exclusively of Hindus. Along the way, the groups have routinely provoked bloodshed. The groups, for example, inspired the man who assassinated Mahatma Gandhi in 1948. The RSS helped destroy a historic mosque in 1992, which set off widespread riots.

But although Hindu nationalism has been around for decades, the movement has amassed more power than it ever has before. Manipur

provides an insight into how. In theory, the state should be unfavorable terrain for Hindu supremacists. Its Meitei majority does not traditionally identify as being Hindu; they have instead followed an animistic faith, one with its own beliefs and traditions. The community's language is not Hindi, nor is it one of Hindi's cousins. In fact, until the late 1990s, the Meitei nationalist movement sought independence from India. Meitei organizations should, if anything, oppose Hindu nationalists ruling the country.

But the BJP and the RSS have worked to get ethnic groups that form the majority in their own states to join their cause (except when they are Muslims), arguing that these groups deserve to dominate their regions—just as Hindus should dominate India overall. Sometimes, the BJP and RSS even try to amalgamate smaller communities of animistic faiths into the Hindu tradition. Their message does not always land, but in Manipur, it appears to have done so. Many Meiteis now say they are Hindus, and the community's nationalists identify as part of the BJP's program. They believe that they are the original inhabitants of the Manipur—the sons of the soil—and that Kukis are illegal immigrants from Myanmar. Their argument mirrors the one made everywhere by the RSS, which claims that Hindus are the original inhabitants of India whereas Muslims and Christians are outsiders.

The state's chief minister, Nongthombam Biren Singh, has fashioned himself accordingly. Once a pluralist politician from the Indian National Congress—the main opposition party—Singh joined the BJP in 2017 and has positioned himself as a Meitei partisan since 2022. He won Manipur's state elections again for the BJP, and he has been leading the charge against the Kukis. In the months before the conflict began, he adopted a policy of arbitrarily evicting Kuki villages under the pretense of protecting forests. Beginning in February, his government began checking the biometric details of people living in Kuki-dominated hill districts in order

to identify “illegal immigrants.” In March, he blamed “illegal immigrants from Myanmar” engaged in the “drug business” for protests against the state’s efforts to evict Kukis from their villages. And in April, he told an RSS-controlled newspaper that “foreigner Kuki immigrants have taken control of the social, political, and economic affairs of the native tribal people of the state.”

Singh’s policies and rhetoric are squarely at odds with the Indian constitution, which was designed to safeguard marginalized groups. The document affords all of the country’s indigenous minorities—including the Kukis—special protections to secure their land, language, and culture. But under Modi, those protections are falling apart. After winning reelection in 2019, Modi’s government quickly stripped Jammu and Kashmir, India’s only Muslim-majority state, of its constitutionally enshrined protections. He then split the state in two and downgraded the resulting components from states into federally controlled territories. Anticipating widespread unrest, Modi deployed vast numbers of troops into what was already a militarized region and shut off the area’s internet. It was a brutal response, and one that sent a message to other protected groups.

That included the Kukis, who are now at risk of losing their own protections. In April 2023, the state’s high court ruled that the state government must recommend whether Meiteis should be given access to the same set of privileges granted to the Kukis, including reserved jobs, reserved university seats, and the ability to buy land in Manipur’s hill regions. (In the context of Indian politics, this effectively meant telling the state it had to give Meiteis access to these privileges.) The decision, immediately condemned by Manipur’s Kuki and other tribal communities, kicked off the recent unrest. As tribal groups marched to protest the order, they began fighting against Meiteis who supported it. Soon, the clashes escalated into organized bloodshed. Meitei-majority areas in the

Manipur's Imphal valley were cleansed of all ethnic Kukis. In response, Kukis targeted Meitei households in their midst.

But even though both sides have resorted to violence, it is clear that tribes have borne the brunt of the carnage. Kuki women have been raped and subject to other forms sexual violence. Indian soldiers have done little to arrest armed Meitei men. Manipur's police have done almost nothing while Meitei groups ransacked their armories. Since the conflict started, mobs have taken more than 4,900 weapons and 600,000 rounds of ammunition—including mortars, machine guns, and AK-47s—from Manipur's stockpiles. Almost 90 percent of these weapons have been taken by Meitei militias.

### **WEAK LINKS**

The Kukis are not an isolated ethnic group. Instead, they belong to a broad network of tribes that live in Manipur, Manipur's neighboring states, and two of India's neighboring countries: Bangladesh and Myanmar. As a result, tens of thousands of Kuki families have fled into these jurisdictions, turning Manipur's conflict into a regional issue.

The exodus and violence have undermined Modi's grand strategy. Under Modi's "Act East" policy, for example, India is trying to build infrastructure connecting its remote northeastern states with Southeast Asian countries. But the instability has delayed these ambitious projects. The government, for instance, cannot begin a planned highway linking India to Myanmar and Thailand until there is peace in Manipur. It also cannot start a project that would improve the Indian northeast's coastal access by building a road to the Burmese river town of Paletwa. (Civil conflict in Myanmar is holding up these endeavors as well.) India's bid for greater influence in Southeast Asia therefore remains stalled, even as China continues its heavy regional spending under the Belt and Road initiative.

The spillover is not the only way that Manipur's violence has made it harder for New Delhi to compete with Beijing. Over the last 40 months, the Chinese and Indian militaries have been locked in a series of heated—and sometimes lethal—border standoffs, as China works to grab Himalayan territory from India. As a result, protecting India's borders has become one of the country's main foreign policy objectives. But to send troops to Manipur, the federal government had to pull a whole mountain division of roughly 15,000 soldiers away from the Chinese-Indian border, weakening India's defensive posture.

China, of course, may not capitalize on India's border weakness; Beijing has its own security priorities and issues. But even if the conflict in Manipur does not end up directly helping China, the violence will still degrade India's international position. Since its independence from British colonial rule in 1947, India has been bedeviled by many separatist insurgencies. Sikh separatists, for example, waged a bloody, failed campaign for independence in the northern state of Punjab during the 1980s and 1990s. Maoist insurgents fought against India in parts of the country's east and center. Some of these groups still exist, and they occasionally remind Indians of their presence by carrying out spectacular acts of violence. The central government's complete collapse in Manipur could embolden all of them to challenge New Delhi, putting India's security establishment under increased pressure and diverting its energy and resources away from major external threats.

And yet despite these risks, Modi has been remarkably blasé about the conflict. He has not visited Manipur, and he has refused to meet with elected representatives from the state. He has not chaired a meeting about the violence, nor has he issued major statements condemning the deaths or suffering of Manipur's people. He did not react even when the house of his junior foreign minister was burned by a large, angry mob in the state's capital. His silence was broken only after 78 days, when he spent all of 36

seconds criticizing the violence after a video of two naked Kuki women being harassed and paraded went viral. Modi talked about the fighting again a few weeks later, but only when opposition parties tabled a no-confidence vote in parliament in order to force him to speak about the issue. Even then, Modi raised the subject about 90 minutes into his remarks, after all the opposition lawmakers staged a walkout in frustration.

### **KING OF THE ASHES**

There are several explanations for Modi's silence. One is Manipur's location. The state, tucked into India's northeast corner, is seen as a distant land—barely connected to the country psychologically, physically, and now digitally. (The government has largely shut down Manipur's internet in response to the unrest.) Another is that Manipur is home to just three million people, a tiny fraction of India's 1.4 billion residents, and so the country's BJP-friendly media can easily ignore its politics. A third is that Modi may believe he can fix the conflict without saying anything, simply by throwing more troops and police at it.

But the final explanation for Modi's silence is more chilling: the prime minister cannot condemn what is happening because it would expose the debilitating contradiction between his ideological project and his vision for a strong India. The BJP's goal is to create an India where Hindus, as the party defines them, control everything. It is encapsulated in the BJP's old unitary slogan—"Hindi, Hindu, Hindusthan"—and is evidenced in its virulently anti-Muslim election campaigns. (During the 2019 national elections, Amit Shah, now India's home minister and Modi's second-in-command, called Muslim immigrants from Bangladesh "termites.") Letting the Meiteis dominate the Kukis is perfectly in keeping with this majoritarian vision. It may, in other words, be the natural outcome of Modi's politics.

Modi has certainly behaved as if he does not mind Meitei dominance. The prime minister could fire Singh, or he could use his considerable weight to make the country's armed forces actually check Meitei violence. But he has not. Instead, Modi has placed his political interests ahead of the requirements of India's constitution. He has decided that, although the BJP's behavior in Manipur may alienate some voters, it is more likely to help by rallying Meiteis to the party's side. Corraling the country's Hindu majority through exclusionary rhetoric and actions has, after all, helped Modi win commanding national elections.

But in the long run, Modi's project will take a toll on the authority and credibility of the Indian state. It will open up fault lines between and among India's many communities—divides that will widen and cement into permanent gulfs. The country could eventually confront what the British Trinidadian writer V. S. Naipaul called “a million mutinies,” threatening India's own being. The northeast's various other ethnic groups might begin fighting with each other. India's southern states, which have their own distinct languages and identities, could demand more freedoms from New Delhi. Kashmir and Punjab—which do not have Hindu majorities—could experience renewed sectarian violence and insurgencies. Both places are on India's volatile border, and so conflict in either would bode poorly for New Delhi's international dreams.

Even if Hindu supremacy does not result in widespread civil strife, the Indian government's nationalist program could still undermine its bid for global leadership. New Delhi likes to argue that its aspirations are peaceful, but the RSS has long spoken of trying to establish *Akhand Bharat*: a fantastical, greater India in which New Delhi would govern over all or part of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Tibet. When the Modi government unveiled a new parliament building in May, it even featured a mural of the entity. Multiple countries lodged formal complaints in response.

None of those countries, of course, are part of the West, which has nothing to directly fear from India's regional goals. Indeed, Western governments seem to believe they will gain. The United States and Europe both openly hope that as India grows more powerful, it can serve as a strong check on China. As a result, they have gone out of their way to avoid criticizing New Delhi, irrespective of its bad behavior.

But the violence in Manipur clearly shows the limits of the India's potential under Modi. The country will not be able to effectively defend its borders if it has to divert military force to suppress internal unrest. It cannot serve as a counterweight to China if it is burdening other parts of Asia with domestic conflicts. In fact, India will struggle to be effective anywhere in the world if its government remains largely preoccupied with domestic strife.

For New Delhi's Western partners, an India that cannot look outward will certainly prove disappointing. But it will be more disappointing for Indians themselves. Theirs is the largest country in the world; it should, by rights, be a global leader. Yet to be stable enough to project substantial authority, India needs to keep peace and harmony among its diverse population—something it can accomplish only by becoming an inclusive, plural, secular, and liberal democracy. Otherwise, it risks turning into a Hindu version of South Asia's other countries, such as Myanmar and Pakistan, where ethnic dominance has resulted in tumult, violence, and deprivation. Everyone who wants India to succeed should therefore hope that New Delhi can see the problem with its vision—and change course before it is too late.

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