

A New India, A New China? The Politics of Narendra Modi and Xi Jinping |Text Transcript |CIRCLE

This is a text transcript for the recorded webinar “A new India, a new China? The politics of Narendra Modi and Xi Jinping” presented by the Canada India Research Centre for Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at the University of Guelph. This webinar was recorded on October 28, 2020 and was moderated by Prof. Sharada Srinivasan, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Guelph. The guest speaker was Dr. Sanjay Ruparelia, Jarislowsky Democracy Chair, Ryerson University.

Transcript:

Sharada Srinivasan:

I think we should get started now. Hello and welcome everyone for another exciting webinar from the Canada India Research Center for Learning and Engagement. I am Sharada Srinivasan, I am in the department of sociology and anthropology at the University of Guelph and I am the director of CIRCLE.

CIRCLE for those of you who are joining us for the first time, is a center that's been recently launched at the University of Guelph, it was launched in February 2020 this year. The intention is to be an interdisciplinary nucleus for cutting-edge research related to India and the diaspora here in Canada. So, this is our ninth webinar, so we did a couple of these over summer and this is the third webinar for the fall term another exciting webinar obviously.

We have a very exciting theme, so the speaker Dr. Sanjay Ruparelia is associate professor of politics and the Jarislowsky Democracy Chair at Ryerson University. He's done extensive research on India and China, but has also compared the two leaders, the current leaders of the two countries, and that is going to be the focus of his talk. Before I hand over to Sanjay, I just wanted to give a, you know, sort of a brief introduction, a seriously brief introduction to Sanjay's work.

Sanjay's research addresses the politics of democracy, equality and development broadly in the post-colonial world, but specifically also in India, South Asia and China, and he's also interested in looking at the role of parties movements and institutions in politics. Some of his collected works include *Divided We Govern: Coalition Politics in Modern India*, and he is the editor of *The Indian Ideology: Three Responses to Perry Anderson*, and he's one of the co-editors of *Understanding India's New Political Economy: A great transformation? with a question mark*, the other editors are Sanjay Reddy, John Harriss and Stuart Corbridge.

I think, Sanjay I think John Harriss is in the audience, in the virtual audience somewhere. So, prior to joining Ryerson, Sanjay was associate professor of politics at the New School for Social

Research and he was also the assistant director of the South Asia Institute at Columbia University.

So welcome, Sanjay. Before I hand over to Sanjay just a few etiquette information, please turn off your videos and audio, so please mute yourself and during question time you could either put your questions down in the chat, or you could actually talk, you could indicate in the chat that you would like to actually ask the question orally, in which case I would invite you to unmute yourself and pose your question to Sanjay. So, with that I hand over to you Sanjay.

Sanjay Ruparelia:

Thank you so much Sharada and thanks to everyone joining this morning, I'm very much looking forward to our discussion. Let me see if I can start this PowerPoint, so I'll be making a PowerPoint presentation hopefully that's clear to everyone. So, the title of this talk 'A New India, A New China? The Politics of Narendra Modi and Xi Jinping', is taken very much from these two leaders' own pronouncements on what they see themselves as doing since taking the helm as Asia's two giants.

And just to set the frame of the comparison, I think that this may help to explain the purpose of this presentation, is to look at these remarkable similarities in the way in which these two leaders have restructured and exercised power since they've taken office. And I think the best way or at least perhaps a common way of thinking about this, is to think that India and China have, since independence and since the revolution, represented two models of political modernity in Asia and in the Global South more generally.

India of course as we know is a modern constitutional democracy with the federal parliamentary system of government based on universal adult suffrage, that was its revolution in 1947, has held 17 general elections and dozens of state elections since then and has seen rising political intellectual participation over time, particularly among subaltern classes, women, and other historically marginalized groups. The constitution of India also as you know, famously separates powers and has many checks and balances within the regime, and its supreme court is often described as the most powerful court in the world in terms of its jurisdiction, it's remit.

So, that's sort of the most unusual, unlikely democracy in the modern world many would say. The People's Republic of China in contrast as we know, is a communist party state in which a hegemonic party monopolizes all formal power based on the principle of democratic centralism. The Chinese regime has a constitution, has had several, the most recent was a 1982 constitution, and although formally the national people's congress has power to review, interpret, and revise that constitution it never has.

In addition, the constitution has no independent mechanism for reviewing violations of rights that it enumerates, and there's no process for reviewing lower court documents. The supreme court of China itself has historically never even exercised its powers to do so. So this is a very different regime as we know and those two images, I could have mentioned, the first one of

voters queueing for an election, a very emblematic one of an Indian election, and here as the last regime we saw of Hu Jin Tao and Wen Jiabao, of the men in the Standing Committee of the Politburo, who really run China.

So that's the context you're trying to look at this particular set of leaders Narendra Modi, Xi Jinping. The context in which they came to power is quite striking, both took the helm between 2012 and 2014, following decades of rapid economic growth which led to rising social inequalities and expansion of new welfare schemes. Both of them came to power when there was systematic political corruption that had become embedded in the political system, environmental degradation, and economic slowdown. Their biographies in some ways couldn't be more different.

Narendra Modi was, in his own description, a chaiwala from a plebeian backward caste, who rose through power in the RSS and the BJP and really wrested control of the party between 2012 and 2014. Xi Jinping in contrast, was literally a princeling. The son of a very famous revolutionary leader who fought alongside Mao, had been rehabilitated by Deng Xiaoping after the cultural revolution and in fact, was one of the architects of what happened in the Pearl River Delta and Shenzhen in the massive economic miracle that we've seen in China, in terms of its manufacturing powerhouse that's been developed.

So, these biographies are very different as I've just mentioned, but what's very striking at least from what I've studied is the remarkable convergence in their aims, in their strategies of power, and how they sought to exercise and practice it, and that's going to be the focus of what I'll be saying now over the next 20 minutes. So things began, you might say, normally in China.

Xi Jinping was anointed the president, the premier was Li Keqiang and in 2012 on the 30th anniversary of the 1982 constitution, Xi Jinping and the politburo generally made a declaration that the party, and I'll be reading here, "must firmly establish throughout society the authority, the constitution, and the laws". The third plenum in 2013 further stated that they were going to "build a rule of law country and safeguard the authority of the constitution and the laws".

So, it began on a note where many liberals believe that this would be a moment for the constitutionalism to strengthen in China after regression had happened under Hu Jintao's regime. Xi Jinping also indicated or sent signals early on that the market should play a decisive role. He himself had earned his spur in two provinces, in Fujian and Zhejiang, which was very famous bastions of private enterprise in China's capitalist, state capitalist juggernaut, and as I mentioned his father himself played a key role in the agricultural reforms that happened in the early 1980s under Deng Xiaoping.

The third pledge was this famous one to catch tigers as well as flies, and this was really a crackdown, a massive systemic crackdown on corruption in China. So, what happened? Well, although Xi Jinping in the politburo when he was anointed talked about the rule of law and constitutionalism, it was also the case as it's often been in China, that the other side was also

stated. Namely in 2014 in a communique of the plenum that the rule of law and party leadership are identical, and inseparable.

Calls for greater constitutionalism by prominent legal scholars and liberal rights activists were suppressed and censored in that period, and then most famously, or not most famously, but famously for many of us particularly university professors, was the so-called seven don't mentions. This was a directive the central committee which prohibited professors from discussing and I quote, "universal values, freedom of the press, civil society, civic rights, historical mistakes committed by the communist party, elite cronyism and an independent judiciary".

Just in passing, this is when I began to study these things, so it was not a particularly opportune moment to be studying them. So, what we began to see very quickly with Xi Jinping was as I've described it, rule of law or rule by law as many observers of China discuss it - describe it, without constitutionalism, or at least the fact that Chinese constitutionalism is a double-edged sword, and she quickly consolidated power.

The 19th Party Congress introduced a new Politburo Standing Committee which had many of his loyalists, there was a new party edict and the party edict was very important: that the government, the military, society, and the schools, north, south, east, and west, the party leads them all. And therefore, we saw a reintroduction of party cells and many private enterprises and government ministries or at least a more visible explicit role.

Xi himself was designated the core leader and the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, a title not used since 1954, and this image on the on the right of the screen which you may be puzzled by, is someone's attempt to describe what was called 'Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era'. It was enshrined in the party charter, ideologically equal to Mao Zedong thought and Deng Xiaoping theory.

So, this tells you how important Xi was in the party, he was suddenly alongside Deng and Mao, and this was at the start of his rule. And very quickly observers, commentators, scholars of China began to discuss the fact that, are we seeing a new Mao in China? Many of the normal conventions were broken, the convention that presidents of China should only serve for 10 years was annulled by a constitutional amendment in 2018.

Lee Keqiang, who was the premier, was very quickly sidelined by Xi Jinping by the establishment of what are called party leading groups, particularly on the economy, premiers historically in post-Deng China, were responsible for the economy. And the attack on corruption in China was largely done, of course, without judicial oversight of any kind through something called the discipline inspection commission, which was also run by a very close confidante of Xi Jinping, Wang Qishan, who very quickly expanded the series of investigations to ensnare over 2.5 million officials. 1.5 million of them were punished in some way in the party including very high-ranking former members of the politburo, over two dozen high-ranking generals, and including some figures that were seen as the sort of anointed successors to Xi Jinping.

What was very striking is that nobody was anointed as successor to Xi Jinping, it's the first time that this has happened since Deng Xiaoping ruled the party from behind so to speak, in the early 1980s. And so, what we see here is a massive expansion of Xi Jinping's power and a concentration and a personalization of that authority in his own person. The rise of Modi in contrast, at the start, you might say couldn't have been more different as I've already explained through their biographies.

Modi stormed to power in the BJP by wresting authorities, sidelining ruthlessly many rivals and party elders in the campaign for the 2014 election. He, as many scholars and observers of India know and many of us would know here, very famously in that campaign championed his strength, and trumpeted his 56-inch chest, said that he would battle cross-border Pakistani aggression, and declared himself 'vikas purush,' the development man from Gujarat, who would bring industrialization and millions of good jobs as India modernized its economy.

The 2014 election set some historic precedence, the BJP became the first party since its own, it became the first party since - the only party besides the Congress to win a majority on its own, since the Janata Party in 1977 at the end of the day was an agglomeration of various other parties. And when Modi first came to power, he very much sort of championed this sort of new nationalism combined with a sort of agenda for modernization, and this is just a depiction from one of his rallies.

But, we also in India quickly saw what we have been seeing in China, a concentration and personalization of power, in the prime minister's office and in the figure of Modi himself, the most presidential prime minister India has seen since Indira Gandhi, in some ways you might say more. Cabinet has become a rubber stamp institution under Narendra Modi and even more so since he was re-elected in 2019, he rarely submits to questioning in parliament, and despite the fact that India has constitutionally a separation of powers and many checks and balances we've seen a weakening of them dramatically over the last six years.

The institution that most people focused on of course, was the supreme court, the major counter majoritarian institution in India, and early on it rebuffed attempts by the government, the executive, to interfere in its workings in terms obviously of overlooking and enforcing the rule of law. The national judicial appointments commission was struck down as unconstitutional in 2015, and there have been some important landmark judgments by the supreme court, for instance the famous privacy judgment that privacy was a fundamental right in 2017, but the larger picture that we have seen is of a court very quickly losing its power and its authority, not least because of some of its own actions.

There have been behind-the-scenes interference in the appointment of in the, let me rephrase that - there's been some behind-the-scenes interference in the scuttling of judicial nominees who are seen to be opposed to the BJP by the executive, others have been shifted from different benches in the high courts. Most famously or infamously there were allegations that the executive was interfering in how the benches were being constituted and therefore the

outcomes of controversial cases, when the chief justice was Chief Justice Mishra, in this remarkable, public denunciation that took place just a couple of years ago.

And more generally the court has been seen to abdicate many of its responsibilities. Very important controversial legislation is refused to judge whether it's the Aadhaar bills, what has been happening in Kashmir with detention, violation of habeas corpus and so on, and so what we've really seen is a concentration of executive power at the expense of the legislature and the judiciary. And this has taken place because of a new party movement structure in India, the BJP has expanded rapidly, in terms of the size of the party.

Take this of course with a grain of salt, but reports of 100 million members of the party under the leadership of Ahmed Shah that's the figure on the left - on the right of Modi, the left of our screen, who was his confidant and partner in Gujarat, and this party has, like many governments in India, tried to compromise the autonomy of institutions whether they're universities, research institutes, cultural centers, but I think many would agree in a much more vociferous, explicit manner to try to politicize and undermine the autonomy of many independent public institutions.

Many of the institutions rules and bodies that were there to increase transparency in India have also been quickly undermined from the Right to Information, to the Whistleblowers Act which was never properly implemented, to the Lokpal which barely met. And this of course is ironic you might say, when Narendra Modi himself rode a wave of anti-corruption protest following the India Against Corruption movement of Anna Hazare in 2012. The most distinctive feature about this new BJP I think you could say, is its desire to colonize and occupy all political space, all institutional space in India.

It's even declared that it's campaign, and it's in a permanent electoral mode since they've come to power in 2014, is to remove opposition from India, Vipaksh-mukt India. So, these are the sort of general tendencies we've seen, the concentration of power in the executive, and the expansion of the party within the state. What have been the results? In India and China we've seen the targeting of civil society, in China in 2013 there was a new ordinance which allowed community organizations to register themselves independently, but internal documents from the party had already declared that civil society may be a threat to the power of the party and its authority.

In 2016, a new law on non-governmental organizations prohibited religious groups, required all projects receiving foreign support to be registered, and enabled certain associations to be deemed unwelcome including the Ford Foundation and the Asia Society and what we've seen is a particularly harsh crackdown on the rights lawyers, the Weiquan movement, in China since Xi Jinping came to power. Of course, this preceded his ascent to the office of the presidency, it began under Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao, but it's really deepened and accelerated.

So, lawyers and activists have been charged, detained, disappeared for picking quarrels and provoking troubles, disturbing social order on the grounds that they were inciting subversion of

state power. We've seen very similar developments in India, the implementation of the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act in 2010, more vociferously by the BJP than it happened under the congress like the UPA, targeting NGOs and activists who were deemed to be anti-development and therefore anti-national in their views.

Since 2014 more stringent application and revision to the FCRA has led to the suspension or revocation of licenses of approximately 10,000 NGOs receiving funds from abroad, approximately one quarter of the total in India. And the irony and contradictions of this are quite astounding, because this law was enforced more vociferously in the name of transparency and accountability, but the reason for decertification and the criteria for regaining it have never been made transparent themselves.

Furthermore, parties have been exempt from the very same law, so parties have been receiving foreign funding whereas NGOs have not, and finally the Make in India campaign as I'll mention in a moment, explicitly courts foreign capital. So, clearly the foreign hand so to speak is seen as dangerous for some groups but not for others. The wider attack on civil society in both countries has also led to further constraining of media autonomy.

In China of course as we know, there is very limited press freedom, but it has actually grown worse under Xi Jinping, journalists suspected again of these charges of picking quarrels and provoking troubles online could lose their press cards after 2016 and face criminal indictment. "The media", in 2016 the party said, "must speak for the party's will and project the party's authority", an older regulation that made it illegal to hire reporters or publish content from anonymous sources, which is what outlets such as Tencent, Sina and Caijing had done, were muzzled increasingly, so what we've seen is as a clampdown even further on the media in China.

In India the media has also been under assault and of course, in some cases has also abdicated its own duties. The Modi government has disparaged the media often as news traders, or even worse as prostitutes so to speak. There have been many behind the scenes interventions in removing editors and censoring certain lines and of reporting and investigation, and this is particularly the case in the television media, which has really, I would say, degraded in many ways in India over these years.

And what we've seen is a culture of intimidation and fear, a fear of reprisal and growing self-censorship in many parts of the media, as some very courageous journalists have pointed out. So, notwithstanding very important outlets such as The Wire and Scroll, and of course some of the leading newspapers which continue to investigate and criticize the government, generally we've seen a real deterioration in press freedom in India.

Another area where you see a commonality - and most of what I'll be talking about now as you can see in this presentation, are commonalities between the two countries and we can focus on differences in our discussion I hope - is the expansion of the state. Both these leaders came to

power, and observers and supporters of them said that they would champion liberal reforms, they would liberalize the economy, but in fact what we've seen is quite the opposite.

In China, Xi Jinping came to power in supporting the line that markets would play a decisive role, and one of the great ambitions of China was a so-called made in China campaign, to make China a global leader in 10 advanced industries in the 21st century, from robotics, to artificial intelligence, to pharmaceuticals, and so on. But what we've seen under Xi Jinping, you might say this was predictable given the campaign, was that the state has actually advanced at the expense of the private sector.

State-owned enterprises have consolidated their power through preferential access to capital markets and to bank credit. Even though the private sector employs the vast majority of workers in China, we've seen a decline in productivity in China, credit fuel growth continues to expand and leading to greater indebtedness of households and companies in the Chinese economy, and this was before COVID-19 so we can talk about what happened afterwards, but what we've really seen is expansion of the state over the market, and society.

In India, Narendra Modi came to power championing this phrase: minimum government, maximum governance, "government has no business in business" he said. And like in China some important campaigns were unveiled early on, the Make in India campaign, Smart Cities Digital India. You might call these all modernization campaigns to leapfrog India's current state into a more advanced industrialized future, but what we've seen of course since Narendra Modi's come to power are shocks, and distress, and a decline in growth.

The most important shock of course was demonetization, which has by and large, by almost every measure, been a grand failure in any of its stated aims but has inflicted great pain on the economy and particularly those who are most insecure within it. We've seen growing agrarian distress, the much wanted production of many millions of jobs for youth entering the economy has not taken place, and growth has actually continued to decline in India particularly in the last two years, across sectors, and the public sector has actually become more important in propping up whatever growth there is.

Public spending has expanded at the expense of a private investment and we've seen a lowering of consumption indices in a manner that we've not seen since the 1970s, and this increased expansion of the state has led to an expansion of what Foucault and others would have called governmentality, in everyday social life. This is particularly in the area of social welfare in India and China.

In China, we've seen the expansion of the social credit system, the basis of which is a mobile payments revolution, mobile payments now in China are greater than many countries combined in terms of the level and volume of transactions that take place on a daily basis. It's very much allowed to happen, or not allowed to happen, it's very much promoted and encouraged and supported by what are called killer apps, these sort of integrated apps that allow you to do everything from your phone.

The image on the top sort of shows this incredible infrastructure which connects individuals and enterprises across society and China, but what's very striking about the social credit system of course, is that it is also aligned with mechanisms of surveillance. Voice, facial, and gait recognition, which allow the government and companies to blacklist certain individuals if they are deemed to be not good citizens so to speak, and generally what we've seen is a massive expansion of surveillance in China; CCTV cameras, smartphone apps, security officers, and also human informants.

India has also seen an expansion of a similar type of, you call the social welfare architecture under the Modi government, the expansion of direct cash transfers and new insurance schemes at the expense of rights-based entitlements in India which had been introduced by the UPA government in 2004. These two are linked to bank accounts and mobile payments through Aadhaar, the biometric ID system in India which is expanded under the Modi government despite serious concerns about privacy, data security, and serial misidentification, simply the reliability of the technology.

And we've seen this expansion of surveillance in India as well, not to quite the same extent as in China, but that's not for a lack of trying but more a question of state capacity. And these images capture what is taking place. The phrase I've used here: "seeing like a state", a 21st century state, for some of you who may know, this famous book by, Seeing Like a State, I'm sorry I'm suddenly forgetting the famous anthropologist's name... James Scott, which talked about how states desire legibility and simplification of their societies in order to control them.

So, what we see in China and India today is you would call a turbocharged, more muscular version of this high modernist ideology with an expansion of state capacity in a way that that no 19th century statesman could have possibly imagined, and so these images from China and one on India sort of capture what's happening with this expansion of the state, this expansion of surveillance throughout society. So, let me end by saying, one final feature which really does bind these two leaders in ways that of course that have troubled many of us, and that is in the face of nationalism or on the foundation of nationalism.

What kind of nationalist vision do they project? Xi Jinping when he came to power talked about a new China, based on a Chinese dream, and this is a quote from him: "That we must make persistent efforts, press ahead with indomitable will, continue to push forward the great cause of socialism with Chinese characteristics, and strive to achieve the Chinese dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation". On the face of it, nothing wrong given the inequalities and asymmetries in the international order which has been dominated by the West for two centuries.

And key to this Chinese dream, of course, were two one-hundreds so to speak, the goal that China would become a moderately well-off society by 2020, that's this year which was pushed off course by the coronavirus, and the goal of modernization that China would be a fully

developed nation by 2049, because although China is by different measures the first or second largest economy in the world it's still a middle-income country.

But what has been the nature of this Chinese dream for those who are not part of the majority? Well, we've seen the imposition of national unity and political sovereignty at home and abroad in China. Of course it's happened in Tibet, Xinjiang and Taiwan, or claims on Taiwan today, in Xinjiang most disturbingly the expansion of massive detention camps. The cultural and political oppression of the Uyghur population on grounds that they are a threat to the stability and security of China, and a massive expansion of the surveillance apparatus, and a massive indoctrination campaign is one of the great human rights violations and taking place in the world today.

And we've seen it of course in Hong Kong, a clampdown on this vibrant, remarkable, democracy movement, or rights movement in Hong Kong to the imposition of national security law which has extraterritorial reach. So, we've seen in China, this is the headlines of the news every day, an increasing desire to impose its will, to expand its claim of sovereignty at home and abroad, in the South China Seas and of course even beyond. Even criticism of China in countries abroad is seen as being an attack on their sovereignty.

India has seen it's in its own way a similar, majoritarian, nationalist vision. The Modi government when it came to power has many different slogans, one that was repeated often was "Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas", together all will develop with everyone's trust sort of very loosely translated. But what have we seen since 2014? We've seen a clear project of defining citizenship in the nation as Hindu in India under a BJP government. This has taken place in numerous ways but the main point I would probably want to stress as many others have is that citizenship increasingly in India has been defined by religion, and is something to be proved, and therefore criticism of the BJP or any of its measures is seen and equated as treasonous.

We've seen social campaigns such as ghar wapsi, 'love jihad', gau raksha, in which many acts of intimidation, harassment, and violence have taken place by Hindu nationalist vigilantes. This has happened before the Modi government have come to power of course, but now many would agree that it's far worse because of impunity from above and what seems to be growing criminalization of sentiment in society, most viciously seen in lynchings that have taken place since 2014 in which the police often simply are bystanders, or even abet the violence that is taking place in many states of India.

We've seen legislative changes from the anti-cow slaughter legislation in many states, to the annulment of article 370 in Kashmir which removed its special rights under the constitution and led to a curfew and an imposition of the army since August of 2019. And most recently in the Citizenship Amendment Act which granted the right to citizenship or path to citizenship for illegal immigrants, illegal migrants from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan as long as they were not Muslim, and in doing so violated the constitution, the preamble article 14, the basic

structure which always separated citizenship from any religious identification or loyalty or belief in India and that's a second measure, second plank platform where you might see some of these changes, and the third has been actually in judicial rulings.

As I've already mentioned earlier on many had hoped that the judiciary might be a counter-majoritarian check on the executive, and the judiciary has for the most part despite some early rulings, an important one on triple talaq early on, has really abdicated its responsibility. We see this in Kashmir where it's refused to take up cases on whether detentions were violating fundamental rights or habeas corpus.

We've seen it in its judgments in Ayodhya most famously, which granted the right to build a temple on the site of the razed Babri Masjid despite the fact that the court called the destruction of the Babri Masjid, the mosque itself, an egregious violation of the rule of law, and this on the grounds that Hindus as opposed Muslims could establish uninterrupted possession of the property itself, putting a burden of proof on Muslims yet again to claim, to show that they were proper citizens of India.

So, let me conclude then by saying sort of three broad features that I think really strikingly show convergence in the way in which power has been restructured and exercised in India since Modi and Xi Jinping have come to power. One is the personalization of power itself, it's not simply the concentration of power in the executive but it's personalization in these two individuals. The second is a remarkable expansion of the state apparatus over the private sector, over civil society, and of the party within it.

Of course you would expect this in China because it is a communist party state, but what's very striking in India is how the BJP itself has increasingly colonized many spaces and we can talk about why it's unable to do that of course because there are many opposition parties, many elections that still take place to see why it is that they've been thus far relatively ineffective in combating this.

And the third is what I've sort of ended with here, what we might describe as an exclusionary majoritarian nationalism which really has been at the expense of minority rights and the rule of law, in which both leaders have really tried to reshape the attitudes and boundaries of the nation. So, let me just end there, I'm probably taking a little bit longer than I had hoped, but I really look forward to criticisms, comments and questions that that you may have.

Sharada Srinivasan:

Thank you Sanjay, I don't know if you notice there are actually questions popping up in the chat already, so I'm going to just, kind of, post some of them to you. So, one of the first questions is from Clara Joseph, I mean asking you specifically to talk more broadly about structural and ideological issues as they pertain to democracy and modernity, but many of them might apply to the West as well right?

So, for example, the Indigenous community in Canada might think that you're actually comparing Canada and the US, you know? I mean, so a lot of this could be used to compare you know, issues around democracy and modernity for other nation states as well. So, do you want to respond to that and then I can share the next questions?

Sanjay Ruparelia:

Sure, so yes, thank you for that question. I think many political scientists have been using this phrase or this concept of democratic backsliding, that we've seen a deterioration in the norms, institutions, and procedures of democracy around the world, whether that's in established democracies, newer democracies, or authoritarian regimes which may have had certain practices we would associate with democratic governance.

So, I think that's a broad trend and the question's absolutely right that this is not unique to India and China, so that would be sort of the first response. The second would be, so then why focus on India and China apart from simply my interest in it or maybe the interests of others? And here I think what I would say, certainly about India, is that the decline in India I think has been quite striking.

If you look at lots of measures of the state and quality of democracy in the world, take those with a pinch of salt, but these are sort of indices like Freedom House, the Varieties of Democracy, the V-Dem index out of Sweden, the Polity IV score of the World Bank for instance, and if you look at a lot of comparative scholars of democracy, in 2014 they said you know, despite this erosion that we see in many parts of the world India seems to be holding up quite well, and what is so striking is that since all of these indices show a dramatic decline in India compared to other countries, you know.

So, the United States of course is one that that worries so many of us six days from the election now, its decline has been dramatic, but I would say what's happening in India in many ways has been worse. There's still been a lot of opposition in the United States, its institutions, the autonomy of its institutions, the criticism, or the freedom of its press in a way which I just don't think we see in India today. So, I think we do need to think about these comparisons and not to make invidious comparisons about you know, who is better and who's worse.

But simply to say where have things progressed to progress, and at what rate, and why? And I think there, what's happened in India, the decline has been quite striking in a way which only reminds people of the and contrasts to the 1970s. And in China I think, what can you say about China? I think if you're concerned about democracy in the world and obviously you have to be concerned about China simply because it's the second most powerful country in the world, and with the United States it will define the 21st century.

So, what's happening within China, and how China is acting abroad, and how we interpret that. There's a real debate on how people see that, it's a really important debate and discussion to have. On the one hand there seems to be, there's a resurrection of sort of a cold, warrior

mentality in the West, which I don't think is very helpful, or constructive, or even accurate about what's happening in China to some extent, but on the other hand you know there are really very disturbing developments that have happened in China, mostly, most prominently in Xinjiang, Tibet is an old issue, it's increasing assertion of power or claims on Taiwan and Hong Kong.

So, it's obviously a front line of any sort of struggle for democracy in the world, and I think - so it was in that sense that I think we should really be paying attention to these two countries because for better or worse, simply by their weight and their importance, and the importance of the Asia Pacific or Indo-Pacific region in the 21st century, we need to pay particular attention to what's happening there.

I'm not sure that's a good answer to the question, but I very much agree with the general spirit that what we're seeing is an erosion on many fronts, in many democracies. And particularly I would say in the West, which has collapsed that old distinguished - old distinction between the old established, consolidated democracies of the West would seem to be immune from so many of these problems, so to speak, of populism, and sort of neo-fascist tendencies and so on from what was happening in the South, so it's very much a global phenomenon.

Sharada Srinivasan:

Okay thank you Sanjay, so here's a question related to Tibet. So, I think there are two parts to the question, first is what happens to Tibet after the Dalai Lama's time is up and how do you see that playing into Indo-Sino relations?

Sanjay Ruparelia:

So, thanks Andy for the question. Yes, so I don't know what to say to the first question because I don't have the information or expertise to consider what happens. I think many, simply as a general observer, I think what happens after the Lama is no longer here with us on the scene is an open question. I imagine there may be some in our audience who may be more informed than I to sort of feel that question, on the question - sorry can you say the second part of the question? Which is what impact it has on Indo-Sino relations?

Sharada Srinivasan:

Yeah, exactly.

Sanjay Ruparelia:

Well I think it's... I mean the question of Tibet seems to be one issue amongst many others that have seen the right growing tensions between India and China over the last five-six years. I mean of course, at the moment what everyone is focused on is what's happened in Ladakh which is you know a very serious escalation of tension and conflict on the border, and I think that took many people by surprise, and we can talk about why that actually took place.

One of the issues I think it's worth discussing certainly with the - we know amongst ourselves is, to what extent - what was driving Chinese the Chinese to assert themselves you know across the line of actual control, from what we've been reading in different reports? On the one hand I think it was quite surprising given that China was increasingly in confrontation with many states on many issues, from the South and East China Seas, the trade disputes and larger geopolitical disputes with the United States, growing tensions with the European Union, and so on, growing criticism of the Belt and Road Initiative in Southeast Asia and parts of parts of Africa, Central Asia less so.

So, the timing of it was quite striking that, here was China sort of increasingly battling many critics and potentially adversaries on multiple fronts. But one of the things that I don't know how to think about clearly enough is to what extent the decision to annul article 370 in Kashmir by the Modi government precipitated China's actions to assert its sovereignty or its claim to sovereignty along the line of actual control, which of course as we know is still, has been disputed for a long time and it's not been clearly demarcated.

And so I think Tibet is simply one of these issues that has led to growing tension between India and China, I don't know whether - it doesn't seem at the moment that that is the issue that's going to lead to the danger of an actual outbreak of a military conflict, but there are others would be much better informed than I would on this issue, I haven't studied this carefully myself.

Sharada Srinivasan:

Okay, two questions related to foreign policy, Gopika Solanki poses a question of the impact of their respective foreign policies especially on Asia, so that's the first question. The second question is from Steffi Hamann, the broader perspective of perception is of China as a threat, so when you look at the Belt and Road Initiative and so on and so forth on the world stage, China is seen as a threat. What is the general perception within India of China? Are people seeing this as a threat, or is the public seeing it as something good? So, your thoughts on these two questions.

Sanjay Ruparelia:

These are all very big, tough questions. Foreign policy on India for how, the view... Let me rephrase the first one, how of India and Chinese for - how is Indian-Chinese foreign policy changed, if it's changed at all with respect to Asia? Well I think there are a couple of things that seem to be quite important.

On the one hand, of course I think the clear story of China since Xi Jinping took power, and that there's a debate amongst China scholars on whether it has to do with his personality, his politics, his ideology in particular, or whether it's simply a structural feature of Chinese foreign policy that was bound to express itself, is simply the fact that China of course sees it as its right to become the dominant power in the Asia Pacific.

Hence its clashes with the United States and in its clashes with many countries over disputed sort of territories within the South and East China Sea, it doesn't see why the United States should be the dominant power in Asia Pacific. And therefore, also its assertions, this long-standing claims on Taiwan as being a renegade province that it wants to reintegrate. I think the more open and fascinating question is what will India do?

We know that historically, and even since the US-India civil nuclear court, that on the one hand India has grown over the last two and a half decades closer to the United States in terms of its military and strategic partnerships, and alliance, and defense, but it's never to date wanted to be an actual junior partner in the way in which Japan or South Korea have aligned with the United States in some kind of defense pact.

And I think that's why the confrontation in Ladakh recently has generated so much scrutiny, and debate, and attention, because I think many scholars are asking many commentators, is this a tipping point where India historically has tried to maintain its strategic autonomy vis-a-vis all other great powers? So, it wants to maintain relations with Iran in order to import gas despite the US saying it shouldn't, at the beginning of the term of Narendra Modi and Xi Jinping, Modi was very openly courting Chinese investment in infrastructure in India and of course also Japanese investment, and so this general position of enhancing a strategic autonomy I think has been a long-standing feature of Indian foreign policy.

And the question I think we all have to think through is - and watch, is the recent escalation of tension between India and China so great that it actually pushes India towards a more formal pact? Or further down the road where it's not trying to balance its relations with the United States and Russia, of course India remains very dependent on Russian military hardware and its importation of those types of goods.

And so this sort of balancing act that India has assiduously played for a very long time you know, is that going to become imbalanced and tilted more towards the United States, towards the so-called quad with Japan, South Korea and Australia vis-a-vis China? I think that's a big open question. But what we do see is a shift I think certainly in the tenor and the rhetoric coming out of New Delhi, and I think the question about perceptions of China and India.

India of course right from the beginning was very skeptical and critical of Belt and Road, it saw Belt and Road as a way of encircling India, and Chinese assertion in the Indian Ocean, of course we know about in Pakistan and Sri Lanka with the ports and the economic corridor, India was very critical from the beginning on those measures. I think what I've seen again is just surveys that have been reported and published in India that like in many countries, like in Canada there's been a very marked deterioration in perceptions of China and we see that in the EU, we see that in the United States, we see that in Canada, and we see it in India as well.

So, I think for China, and for the for the rulers in Beijing, that's a real problem isn't it? Because I think China and India, Brazil you know, the so-called basic countries and others you know, there were very legitimate criticisms of the so-called rules-based international order post-2000, about

the dominance of the West, about the asymmetries of power in terms of who ran the World Bank, and the IMF, and the UN, and so on, but China's actions in recent years are actually obscuring some of these deeper structural inequalities.

And so, in that sense you know, it seems to be an act of self-harm the way the Chinese are acting, and I think China scholars themselves are continuing to debate about what's causing this. Is it something that was bound to happen? As Deng Xiaoping said you know, China should bide its time until it's powerful enough to assert itself. So it was bound to happen and China now is so powerful, and the United States is in a crisis of its, often of its own making, whether it was the war in Iraq and afterwards and then of course the election of Trump and what has happened.

Or is it the case that Xi Jinping himself, that this particular leader, in his ideology and the outlook of those who support him in the politburo and the party more widely, is what's the cause of China's actions? And that these actions are actually going to harm its potential to find allies and supporters going forward, you know.

Sharada Srinivasan:

Okay so, from foreign policy we move to the economic realm. A question from Ramachandra Guha, Xi's personalization and centralization have not impeded economic growth but Modi's has, why is this so? And the second, okay maybe I'll just wait for you to respond to this and then give you the second question.

Sanjay Ruparelia:

So, the question is, if I understood correctly, that's - yeah, centralization and personalization power itself is not in itself a hindrance to economic growth, but why hasn't it happened under Modi yes?

Ramachandra Guha:

Yeah.

Sharada Srinivasan:

I would think so.

Ramachandra Guha:

There has been a precipitous decline in the Indian economy since Modi came.

Sanjay Ruparelia:

Yes, yes, thank you Ram. I imagine you know, there are two parts to an answer. One is that, I'm not defending the government, but you know there is something to be said for well, they inherited certain problems. Certainly we know for instance the you know bad loans in the banking system which had not been cleared up by the UPA, the UPA had increased investment

in and social infrastructure in very important ways but there was still a lot of work to be done and so on.

So, these are just some of the measures, so they inherited something and that's what the government's defense would be. But of course, I think that what's so striking about the Modi government, you know 2014 and since, is that it just doesn't really have a, it doesn't have a prospectus to really address the problems of the Indian economy.

It's so striking that you know, its signature moves, when we talk about its first term we talk about demonetization which was you know a fiasco on almost every level, the goods and services tax which the UPA tried to introduce and implement the Modi government finally pushed through, but they bungled its implementation.

And I think in some ways you know some of the earliest critics and skeptics of the Modi government as being a panacea for India's structural economic problems, great debates on what those are, I think of the work of Pranab Bardhan for instance, you know 2012/13/14, and others who had studied Gujarat and said you know, the so-called wanted Gujarat model is not a model for India.

First of all, it you know it wasn't generating all these jobs that had to be created in India, it wasn't. It was very much defined by heavy industry and petrochemicals and so on, and its social development indicators are always middling. John Drèze's work showed that you know, almost on every measure it was a middling performer and compared to other states of equal wealth such as Tamil Nadu and even others, it was actually quite a lackluster performer.

And so, I think of course, because I suppose I would maybe put it this way, that centralization of power is not an obstacle to rapid economic growth. If you think of the developmental states in East Asia of course as we know, one of the dividing features was this concentration of power and linkages between the executive, the bureaucracy, and business groups, but that required you know a certain strategic vision, and a plan, and a certain discipline to sort of implement, and I think you just don't see with this government you know, you don't see a consistent, coherent plan.

And I think that the concentration of power in the prime minister's office and the silencing of criticism or dissent itself means that many half-baked ideas, or just bad initiatives you know, are allowed to happen. I mean demonetization is one we keep returning to, it's not the cause of all of the problems we see, but the fact that it even took place unknown to some of the key you know ministers in the government, or advisors to do with economic affairs itself is very striking. So I don't know that's a satisfactory answer to Ram's question but I think there's just a lack of understanding of what's necessary to address the various challenges that the Indian economy faces, in this particular government, in this particular prime minister's office.

Sharada Srinivasan:

Okay, I'm now going to invite Leonard Buckles to pose a question and that's again related to the economics.

Leonard Buckles:

Yeah, I had recently took part in a webinar from the London School of Economics where Dr. Jayati Ghosh had done a presentation on the pandemic in India and the Modi response to the pandemic, and from my understanding of her lecture it seemed that the government was not performing very well in terms of providing a social safety net to the Indian population.

And she had mentioned about the prime minister's special fund, the JDY fund, and she had mentioned that there might even be less than 10 percent of the population that could even benefit from that, and you did mention that in your presentation. So, I just want to get your understanding in terms of what you see potentially as the Modi government's broader sort of populist approach to governance, and really how broad is that reach?

Sanjay Ruparelia:

Thank you for that question, that's a complicated question. I think when you think of the Modi government's sort of social welfare initiatives post striking features. One is an emphasis as I mentioned on cash transfers, market-oriented instruments, new insurance schemes, to provide social protection to India's population at the expense of rights-based entitlements that the UPA introduced.

So you know, there's been a very concerted considered assault on the right to information, disparagement of NREGA which they had to rehabilitate around 2018 because of the agrarian crisis that are taking place on declining investment in the rural sector, and all kinds of other problems that that causes deepening of agrarian distress that many have studied, including John Harriss who's with us today and others.

So, the one hand is a sort of very market-oriented approach to social protection, and you see it actually in the health sector most vividly you know, the expansion of health insurance. Well, I'm not sure what Professor Ghosh has said but I'm knowing her work, I imagine what she must have emphasized and what others have emphasized is that you know, what we see in India, India has one of the most privatized health care systems in the world, out of pocket expenses are over 70%, it's like the United States or worse actually.

And under the UPA there was a concerted attempt to start to build that critical public health infrastructure particularly in rural India, the National Rural Health Mission, and they made some important strides, with of course lots of setbacks along the way, but after the Modi government came in it just doubled down on this sort of more insurance based approach, and that approach means that you're not building up the public health sector's capacity. Nurses, doctors, the primary health center level, the community health clinics and so on.

A figure that I remember from about two or three years ago is something like only 20 percent of public health centers, that's the main point of contact for most Indian citizens particularly in rural India, met Indian public health standards you know in terms of having running water, electricity, a nurse on staff, vaccination kits and so on.

And so, there's a real crisis in the Indian public health sector, one I don't think, certainly I think people who study public health in that field have studied it for a long time, but political scientists and sociologists have actually neglected it, and if there's one area of state capacity which is really shockingly poor in India, it's actually the health sector, I think we've done more studies of education than health. And of course, in a pandemic as you've said, it's brutally exposed.

So this sort of more market-oriented approach to social protection is not a panacea of any type, India underspends in public investment you know as a percentage of GDP far below even its comparators in other developed, in other parts of the South and the post-colonial world. On the other hand, what was very striking in the run-up to the 2019 election is, as growth was faltering so poorly that you know, the jobs reports from the labor ministry were no longer issued because it showed that unemployment and underemployment was rising in India under the Modi government.

We've seen all kinds of disputes and about the methodology of how you measure growth in India, the revision of growth of the rural figures themselves. What was very striking in that run-up is that this populism was of a type that the Modi government themselves decried in 2014 as "sops" right? That weren't going to - that were entitlements as opposed to measures of empowerment as one of the economic advisors to the Modi government early on Arvind Panagariya had described.

And what we saw in 2019 was this government doing exactly what it had criticized previous governments for doing, you know farm loan waivers, reservations for upper caste groups because there were no jobs being created in the private sector as they've been promised, and so on. And those popular schemes were very important, many electoral analysts said, in helping the Modi government get re-elected in 2019.

You know, gas, cooking oil and cylinders that were directed to poorer households, the building of toilets and a lot of rural India under the Swachh Bharat campaign, and all targeted and identified as being the sort of the gift of the prime minister and the party himself. So I think what we see under this government is sort of these two faces, you know, one's a sort of, very, neoliberal market-oriented approach to social protection, which has made many matters worse because what we do need is a greater public investment, we need stronger public institutions and stronger public infrastructure in health, education, in other areas and then on the other hand the sort of more... sort of what the economists, when they use the language of populism what they mean is sort of populist gambits, and they've been important.

I don't wanna diminish them or belittle them, I mean these are important goods, but what we... I suppose I've been trying to find a way to answer your question well. I think this way maybe I would summarize it, what we see in the Modi government I think generally speaking, is the sort of private supply of public goods, and we see this public supply of private goods, others have used this formulation as well, and what many development economists, right, students of development might actually argue for is a sort of reversal.

That these classic public goods of health and education and so on should be ones where the public sector leads and the provision of these other goods which are sort of household, private entitlements might be ones which you would hope the public sector may not actually have to take the lead on, because people actually have good jobs and incomes are rising and they're able to meet those needs themselves.

Sharada Srinivasan:

Thank you, so that leaves us above with about two minutes and we haven't still talked about the opposition at all, and you know, so as a chair I'm going to pose a question to you. So, in the Chinese context the structure doesn't allow for the opposition and people like Amartya Sen have talked about the importance of the opposition in the democratic setup, right? Now in India one might say, and this is where I would like to hear your thoughts, I mean to what extent has Modi's rights been facilitated by the lack of a credible opposition, very quickly?

Sanjay Ruparelia:

Yeah well, that is the question, where is the opposition? And I think it has obviously been severely demoralized by these incredible victories of the Modi government and I think, you know, it's been a lack of leadership by many parts. I mean there have been so many problems that this government has either failed to confront or has actually created.

There's been pockets of resistance all across the country, but what you need is in these movements of citizens of, whether it's the farmers movement of Western India, you know, students uprising, where are the parties able to mobilize, and consolidate, and harness this energy and this opposition? Whether it's the congress party the old Janata Parivar which of course was splintered, and we're seeing it in Bihar now, see what happens in this election.

I think what lessons the oppositions need to think about is what the BJP has done. I think it's on sort of two levels, one is actually creating parties as organizations. The BJP has always, like historically the left had done, had a cadre-based party. The left of course has been in terminal decline for a long time, and when I said the left, I meant the communist left. So really investing in parties as organizations that mobilize, you know, members, supporters, the electorate, and then I think to think about, the other battle where they've really failed is on is the ideological one, which is to - I think it's a dilemma for them and this probably requires another whole seminar.

Which is you know, it's much like in the United States as well with the Democratic Party, we can think of other places. When you face a party which is championing a very aggressive majoritarian nationalism, do you confront it head-on? Which is what you think you should do to protect minority rights and democratic principles. Or do you try to defeat it where it's weak? So, in other words on the economy, its handling the economy, its questions of governance and so on.

And I think the opposition has more or less shied away, when it has won at the state level it's done so mostly on the economic record of the government, so those are important victories to dislodge the BJP from power but it leaves unchecked this ideological agenda. So much so that as figures like Suhas Palshikar and others have argued, I think quite persuasively, what the BJP has very successfully done and very disturbing for the future and the present of democracy in India, is that it has come to equate nationalism with Hindutva without ever mentioning Hindutva.

So many of the tropes, and symbols, and claims that it's putting forward of what makes India a strong nation or what it would mean to be patriotic about India, are actually Hindu nationalist claims, but it no longer talks about Hindutva as much as it used to if you compare it during the reign of Vajpayee for instance.

It now simply talks about nationalism, but it's a nationalism that's imbued with Hindu nationalist ideology and subsumes it, and I think that's what has been so difficult for the opposition at the ideological level is to understand, how do you counter that? You know, is the politics of secularism using that term adequate or necessary? Is the politics of federalism championing a sort of a sub-national imaginary of the nation? What do you need to do that could check and confront this this aggressive Hindu nationalism?

So, I think it's these all political challenges of creating parties that have linkages to vibrant movements that can mobilize, you know, a counter politics, and it's been quite shocking to see how the opposition has failed to do this despite what I think most - I mean I'm as you can see I'm a critic of this government, but I think even a neutral analyst would say that, you know, given the fanfare that accompanied the government when it came to power, if you were a supporter or mutual observer in you know, its record on the economy has been really mediocre and not to mention of course simply the division and polarization and violence that has increased in Indian society.

So, there's so many points, there's so many issues in which the opposition should be able to mobilize something, and it's been unable to, and maybe the final point to say is something I don't think we've studied enough. I know that CSDS surveys have been doing some of this by looking at to what extent have we have we seen an accumulization of belief in Indian society? Some of the surveys that we've seen by Lokniti at the Azim Premji University that have been carrying out state of the nation surveys over the last three-four years, do show a very worrying disturbing trend to greater support for autocratic behavior, to consolidation of power by the

executive, and greater criticism or even opposition to minorities, particularly Muslims of course, but minorities in India in general, so we may be seeing a change in that.

I think what the Modi government has been very successful in doing is redefining the attitudes and boundaries of the “deimos” of the nation and that's the most worrying thing. Like in, you could say, in the United States, although I think in the US to a lesser degree, to think back to that very first question, that we're seeing a broader development of these trends in many parts of the world.

Sharada Srinivasan:

Thank you Sanjay, on that note we will conclude this webinar. Thank you for a stimulating talk and I think we need to get you back here to talk a little bit more about some of the issues that we didn't touch upon. I would also like to thank Shirley and Heather for providing fantastic support for a smooth conduct of this session.

As a final point I want to draw your attention to our next webinar which will be on Thursday the 12th November at 11 a.m.: Scarcity, Abundance and Human Dimensions: Analyzing Urban/Rural Water Conflict in India. This webinar will be by Dr. Bharat Punjabi. You can register for this webinar soon after this webinar and thank you once again to everybody for joining this session. Thank you.

Sanjay Ruparelia:

Yes, thanks for everyone especially for your questions and thank you, Sharada.