



# ASIA MAIOR

Vol. XXXIII / 2022

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## **Asia in 2022: The impact of the Russia-Ukraine war on local crises**

**Edited by**  
**Michelguglielmo Torri**  
**Filippo Boni**  
**Diego Maiorano**

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**viella**

A large, intricate, light-colored mandala pattern is positioned in the bottom right corner of the cover. It features complex, repeating geometric and floral motifs, typical of traditional Indian or Middle Eastern art.

CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

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The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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## CONTENTS

IX	MICHELGUGLIELMO TORRI, <i>Foreword. Asia in 2022: The consequences of the war in Ukraine, US-China rivalry, democratic decline and popular protests</i>
1	SILVIA MENEGAZZI, <i>China 2022: The 20<sup>th</sup> party congress and popular discontent in Xi Jinping's China</i>
23	GIULIA SCIORATI, <i>China 2021-2022: A foreign policy of «re-branding»</i>
43	MARCO MILANI & ANTONIO FIORI, <i>Korean peninsula 2022: Stuck between new leadership and old practices</i>
79	COREY WALLACE & GIULIO PUGLIESE, <i>Japan 2022: Putin and Abe Shocks thwart Kishida's enjoyment of three golden years despite major defence overhaul</i>
131	AURELIO INSISA, <i>Taiwan 2022: Cross-Strait security spirals further down</i>
157	CLAUDIA ASTARITA, <i>Hong Kong 2021-2022: A new life in the shadow of China</i>
177	RIWANTO TIRTOSUDARMO & PETER B.R. CAREY, <i>Indonesia 2019-2022: The authoritarian turn as leitmotif of president Jokowi's second term</i>
215	GEOFFREY C. GUNN, <i>Timor-Leste 2021-2022: Electoral change and economic reset</i>
233	SALEENA SALEEM, <i>Malaysia 2022: 15<sup>th</sup> general elections and deepening political polarisation</i>
249	EDOARDO SIANI, <i>Thailand 2022: The «post-pandemic» era</i>
261	MATTEO FUMAGALLI, <i>Myanmar 2022: Fragmented sovereignties and the escalation of violence in multiple warscapes</i>
281	SILVIA TIERI, <i>Bangladesh 2022: Challenging post-pandemic times</i>
299	DIEGO MAIORANO, <i>India 2022: Political realignments in a BJP-dominated system</i>
327	MICHELGUGLIELMO TORRI, <i>India 2021-2022: Playing against China on different chessboards</i>
371	DIEGO ABENANTE, <i>Sri Lanka 2022: The aragalaya protest movement and the Rajapaksas' fall from power</i>
387	MARCO CORSI, <i>Pakistan 2022: The geopolitics of Imran Khan's fall and the fledgling government of Shehbaz Sharif</i>
411	FILIPPO BONI, <i>Afghanistan 2022: Life under the Taliban</i>
425	GIORGIA PERLETTA, <i>Iran 2022: Domestic challenges to state legitimacy and isolation in the global arena</i>
447	CARLO FRAPPI, <i>Armenia 2022: Looking for a way out of the Nagorno-Karabakh impasse</i>
479	<i>Review article</i>
505	<i>Reviews</i>
573	<i>Appendix</i>

HOW THE BJP WINS: IT DID NOT WIN AND THEN IT DID

*RFI Smith*

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Vinay Sitapati, *India Before Modi: How the BJP Came to Power*, London: Hurst and Company, 2021, xiv+409 pages (ISBN: 9781787385375).

Nalin Mehta, *The New BJP: Modi and the Making of the World's Largest Political Party*, Chennai: Westland Non-Fiction, 2022, xxxvi+809 pages (ISBN: 9789391234003).

### 1. *Introduction*

These books offer timely and complementary insights into the rise and rise of the electoral phenomenon that is the contemporary BJP. Vinay Sitapati uses existing literature complemented by interviews, archives, and memoirs to explore how Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Lal K. Advani and many others, built from the disparate components of post-independence Hindu nationalism, a competitive political party. He foreshadows the evolution of Narendra Modi from organiser and caste analyst to preeminent leader of a very different BJP. Nalin Mehta combines digital analysis of who is in the party, and what its publicly accessible communications say, with case studies of how in government at the centre the party extends its electoral appeal. His accounts of the links between beneficiaries of welfare schemes and the party and government are revealing. They help show how, under Prime Minister Modi, the party extends its reach and the Prime Minister himself engenders a sense of personal connection.

Both authors, whether synthesising existing knowledge or breaking new ground, emphasise the importance to the party of organisation and unity. In politics and in government its approach can be summarised as: «organisation, organisation, organisation». However, its strategies have not stood still. In the books, four transitions in the party's organisation and development stand out:

- From early years of diluting ideology to win elections to explicit appeals to ideology and to win elections handsomely
- From competing within a post-independence consensus led by Congress to replacing it with assertive Hindu nationalism
- From high caste, top-down leadership, caught out by bottom up demands, to top down leadership embracing claims and support from below to extend its constituency; and
- From a compelling ethos of organisational collegiality in a disciplined,

cadre-based party to a dominant leader with a large, still disciplined organisation, a powerful personal appeal to voters and a compelling voice in decisions.

- Two continuing questions about key ideas and the party's organisation also stand out:
- How does the Hindutva promoted by the party relate to Hinduism?
- How does the party, whether in opposition or in government, relate to party institutions and related organisations, especially the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS).

The books suggest, through several examples, that on the continuing questions ambiguity coexists uneasily with firmness. Sitapati notes that Dr SP Mookerjee, founder of the precursor to the BJP, the Jana Sangh, resigned from the Hindu Mahasabha because it would not admit non-Hindus. Also, Atal Bihari Vajpayee appeared more liberal than he may have been and Lal Krishna Advani acted more bigoted than he was. In religion, neither was particularly observant. Mehta's examples, perhaps significantly related at the front of the book, come from family experience. When his grandfather placed a Ram sticker on a motor scooter in the family home his military father promptly took it off. Mehta's father-in-law, descendant of a land-owning Hindu family, with a history of supporting mosques, retired after puja to a closed room to read the Quran. Neither author uses these stories to editorialise. But they do prompt readers to do some thinking.

## 2. *India Before Modi: How the BJP Came to Power*

Sitapati begins by setting out the drivers that led to the foundation of the Jana Sangh. Discussion of the process of party building follows, including brief assessments of the style of the main leaders at each stage, electoral successes and failures, brief experience in government as part of the Janata Party and later for a full term as the BJP. This includes a running account of the relationship between Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Lal Krishna Advani around which the book is organised. The book then discusses the conflicts, stand offs and switchbacks that resulted in the Janata Party's foundation and collapse, the formation of the BJP in 1980 and the alternation in leadership between Vajpayee and Advani.

The book notes the influence of growing radicalism among Hindus, which it says Vajpayee missed. It then examines the BJP's record in government in 1998-2004, including the tensions between Vajpayee and Advani. As Prime Minister, Vajpayee ignored his long-standing partner who he only belatedly made Deputy Prime Minister. It concludes with the rise of Modi, reflections on the nature and significance of the partnership between Vajpayee and Advani, and comparisons with the relationship between Modi and Amit Shah.

Sitapati argues that the main driver for political action was elections. Electoral democracy crystallised divisions between Hindus and Muslims. Turning a Hindu majority population into a Hindu led government through elections was a compelling idea. However, electoral democracy also crystallised divisions between Hindus themselves. The process of party building was not quick. Differing approaches to Hindu nationalism had to be accommodated. A pre-existing Hindu nationalist organisation, the Hindu Mahasabha had had limited electoral appeal. The RSS did not contest elections and initially resisted the formation of the Jana Sangh. Further, the Congress Party contained many Hindu nationalists and intermittently appealed specifically to Hindu nationalist voters.

In the turbulence of partition and independence Congress swept post-independence elections. In the lead up to the elections, Dr SP Mookerjee, who had resigned from the Nehru government on the issue of protecting Hindus in Pakistan, proposed a new party. The Jana Sangh was founded in 1951 after the RSS eventually agreed to cooperate (it provided people but remained organisationally distinct). However, the post-partition context, including assassination of Mahatma Gandhi by a Hindu nationalist, imposed constraints. These had a long run influence on how the party pitched its appeal and fared in elections.

The transition away from diluting ideology towards a more assertive stance was also not quick. In retrospect, a set of facilitating factors had to come together. Sitapati argues that while the ground began to shift under the Jana Sangh as the «Congress System» unwound, the emergence of Narendra Modi and proclamation of a New India had to wait another forty years. Initially the party had to establish itself on the ground and in parliament. With skilled organisers, including Advani, it did so in the community. Industrialists opposed to Indira Gandhi's nationalisations (including Jinnah's grandson, Nusli Wadia) helped with funding. But in parliament it was in a minority.

Vajpayee, on the death of SP Mookerjee, became the party's leader in parliament. Having originally come to notice as Mookerjee's eloquent Hindi speaking interpreter he was already a noted parliamentary orator. Yet to have influence the party, with limited numbers, needed to cooperate with other parties, inside parliament and out.

As Sitapati points out, in this process the RSS was both a help and a hindrance. Able and disciplined leaders, deputed from the RSS, helped build the party organisation. But vocal Hindu nationalist claims from the RSS and the party organisation hindered cooperation with other parties. The Janata Party, into which the Jana Sangh merged to fight the 1977 election, collapsed after a conflict-ridden period in government. One among many points of conflict was the role of the RSS.

Other points of tension included how an upper caste leadership could win lower caste support, what to do about the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya, how

to respond to the liberalisation of some restrictions on economic activity by the Congress government of Narasimha Rao and how to relate to the party and the RSS when in government.

A turning point on extending voter support was Advani's ability to keep the peace within the party when the government increased civil service reservations for Other Backward Castes (OBCs). As one of the party's principal organisers, Advani had learnt from contact with the socialist leader, Dr Ram Manohar Lohia, the demographic power of OBCs was worth fighting for. However, the party's handling of demands for replacement of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya with a Ram temple exposed the party's internal differences. Advani's *yatra* in support of a new temple, with Narendra Modi a key organiser, gathered support which led ultimately to the mosque's destruction. But it led also to political disruption. P.V. Narasimha Rao as Prime Minister thought Advani, as party leader at the time, had misled him. Vajpayee, who Rao would have preferred to deal with, remained silent. Among the most vocal supporters of destruction were Hindu *Sadhhus* who had acted independently of any organisation. Sitapati notes that the RSS was glad the mosque was down but cross about the loss of control.

Like the Jana Sangh, the BJP did not object to much of Congress's post-independence economic policies. Indeed, Sitapati notes that Vajpayee reportedly said that voters liked socialism. When the Rao government, changed directions the BJP sat on the fence. However, in government Vajpayee found that Rao had changed the economy. Here, without consulting Advani, he continued in Rao's direction. This included several steps towards privatisation of government businesses.

In government with no single coalition partner able to threaten his majority, Vajpayee nevertheless faced continuing discontent within the *Sangh Parivar*. He was happy to use the resources of government, including his personally selected head of the Prime Minister's Office, a former foreign services officer. He did not pay particular attention to views in the party or the RSS. Sitapati argues that he found out the hard way that he could not side-line both Advani, his long-standing link to the party, and the RSS. He found out too, even with Advani's help, that because of intractable conflicts over Kashmir, attempts to conciliate with Pakistan were bound to fail. Grand gestures got nowhere. In the end, Sitapati argues that, on economic and foreign policy, Vajpayee led the government to «swim in the mainstream». In response people in the RSS and the *Sangh Parivar* asked: «What's the point?»

Following the defeat of the Vajpayee government in 2004, a Congress led coalition held office for two terms. In the BJP, opposition to the Vajpayee/Advani partnership by the partnership of Modi/Shah, evident since the 1980s, grew. After riots and killings of Muslims in Gujarat in 2002, following murders of Hindus returning from Ayodhya, Vajpayee had wished to sack Modi as Chief Minister. But Modi survived and won a subsequent election handsomely. Support from backward castes and in the areas of most

violence were notable. When he sought to contest the 2014 national election as the party's candidate for Prime Minister it was said he would be stopped. But his controversial record proved to matter little. He bypassed with ease his former patron, Advani. With a program of pan Hindu solidarity, downplaying of caste, undiluted ideology, promises of good governance, prospects of development, and eloquent personal leadership he took the BJP in a new direction.

Sitapati concludes first with reflections on the partnership between Vajpayee and Advani. On the partnership he is blunt: in the family like culture of the RSS Vajpayee and Advani learnt the value of unity; their achievements came when they worked as one, matched oratory with organisation. This is followed by reflections on how his account relates to other analyses of Hindu nationalism. On this he is blunt on one thing: he asserts that because of the electoral promise of a Hindu majority the roots of the BJP are not anti-democratic; like the Jana Sangh the party under Vajpayee/Advani worked with electoral democracy. He is more tentative on the nature of Hindu nationalism. In his view it is based less on religion than on ethnic identity. Hindutva is adaptive to local culture. He notes further that the view of Hindus as victims is associated with «'defensive violence': the need to stand up for Hindus in every battle». He suggests, however, that such association is less clear in the institutions of Hindu nationalism than in ideology. The substance of the book follows his first reflections.

However, his reflections on Hindu nationalism and the significance of BJP participation in electoral democracy, are less well supported. The ambiguities he notes in relations between Hinduism and Hindutva invite much further consideration. So do assumptions that electoral democracy alone is an effective mark of democracy. Along with participation in elections other critical factors would demand consideration, including the nature of the electoral system, processes of participation and political debate, and the effectiveness of how citizens can interact with governments between elections.

### *3. The New BJP: Modi and the making of the world's largest political party*

Mehta sets out how the BJP under Modi transformed itself. It made a deep change in drive, organisation, and electoral results. As he puts it, it did not win. And then it did. In a significant contribution, he sets out how he thinks it did it.

He argues that its tools of growth included differentiated material and ideological incentives combined with sophisticated digital applications and communication strategies. Like Sitapati's account, the book outlines the party's ideology, approaches to governance, economic thinking, and relationship with the RSS. In these, the party continues a thread from SP Mookerjee and the Jana Sangh to the present. He too notes that ambiguities as well as continuities remain. In an important section the book explores

the party's expansion beyond its original base. The effectiveness of its appeals to women is especially remarked. In conclusion the book examines the party's aspirations as the 'Party of Ram'. This is counterpointed with a brief discussion of difficult issues yet to be effectively addressed. It is a light reminder of tough matters of public policy and management of up to now little public political resonance. While the contributions of party and *Sangh Parivar* organisational capabilities are notable throughout, the leading role is seen to stay with Narendra Modi.

Mehta's account of transformation begins with the party in Uttar Pradesh. There, leading up to the 2014 national elections, it made three big changes. It became the most socially representative party; built up local level organisational efforts around voting booths; and refocused on unapologetic Hindutva. Following election at the centre, it added the politics of welfare and caste representation. In Modi's BJP, as reflected in the administration of Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, Hindutva, hard nationalism, development, efficient welfare, and outreach to lower castes combined in targeted mixes. Organisation geared to promoting these themes, brought members and voters into the party. It also sought to keep them in.

Mehta provides extensive examples of how in the north the party extended its social reach. Examples are backed by a Social Index Project from the results of which Mehta argues that 'the idea of BJP being an upper-caste dominated party can no longer be supported'. While there has been argument about his numbers, his account of how the party approached election preparation and campaigning supports his contention.

Under Modi it promoted an inclusive Hindutva welcoming to those at the lowest levels in and beyond the caste pyramid. In doing so it leached into the support bases of parties which had risen on the mobilisation of lower castes. Further, the party made membership and prospects of appointment to a position in the party structure easy. It was enough to make a 'missed call' to a dedicated number to be enrolled as a member through an automated process.<sup>1</sup> Members, from any background, who were demonstrably active could vote in intraparty elections and hold office.

Members of formerly excluded castes could chair booth committees and be recognised by a place on the platform at higher level meetings. Higher officials checked to make sure that local operations were effective. They demanded follow up of voters by local officials. Elected members who lacked impact in their electorates lost their tickets. Personal tactical touches were encouraged. Leaders should include overnight stays in areas of focus. Higher caste office holders were enjoined to take tea with Dalits.

But in a conspicuous exception, the party did not seek Muslims. In areas with strong Muslim populations, it did not endorse Muslim candi-

1. The dedicated number disconnected automatically; a membership form was sent to the author of the phone call by SMS; following return of a completed form a membership number was issued.

dates. On the contrary, it mobilised Hindu votes by first promoting Hindu candidates and then mounting campaigns against Muslims.

Nevertheless, in government the party did not rely exclusively on Hindutva. It mixed it differentially with other strategies. In a phrase Mehta heard from party workers, welfare benefits were the ‘wheel» and Hindutva the ‘speed». Benefits provided by government included access to facilities to make life more bearable for lower castes and other low income groups. They notably included benefits directed to women. These included Direct Benefit Transfers (DBT) adapted and extended from the previous government. They included also signature schemes, including building of household toilets and provision of water supply. In this way the party recognised the special significance of toilets and water for women.

Establishing eligibility with officialdom could still be difficult. But once application was made and eligibility determined, benefits were said to flow. Digital delivery, where applicable, cut leaching by intermediaries. Here Muslims too could apply for and receive benefits. Eligibility was said not to depend on religion. Mehta reported that, in a phrase that demands further exploration, while Muslim support was not thought necessary for elections, it was needed for «governance».

However, electoral considerations were far from absent. Beneficiaries became a new political category – in Hindi, *labarthees* (लाभार्थी – whose votes were actively sought. One means was through beneficiary get togethers – in Hindi, *sammelans* (सम्मेलन). Such get togethers, arranged with access to lists of beneficiaries, aimed to get the «quiet people» to «stand up». Different get togethers were organised for different benefits, for example one for gas bottles and a separate one for toilets. The party and government departments worked together. Lists of beneficiaries were exchanged. Further, the Prime Minister held focused meetings with selected groups. These included women, forest dwellers, Adivasi groups and seafarers. Those who did not immediately receive benefits received encouragement to nourish hope. Delivery and follow up emphasised throughout a direct link between benefits and the Prime Minister.

Mehta’s account of transformation continues with the party’s drive to extend beyond its northern and western geographical and linguistic base. Wins under Modi have come mainly from twelve states (ten Hindi speaking). Field experience and interviews give life to Mehta’s account. It is a story of resourcefulness and targeting. It is also one of frustration. Where its strategies have worked (Karnataka and the Northeast) it has gained entry through selected sensitive issues. It has then found local leaders, provided online resources, and grown from there. Aspiring leaders who could not find berths in existing parties could get a crack at influence in the BJP. As Mehta puts it «mergers and acquisitions» provided a means of growing quickly. Such growth is reinforced for BJP governments, formed in this way, by the prospect of support for local projects from the national government.

However, barriers of regional culture and language are strong. As Mehta says, even experienced organisers from the party and the RSS found them difficult. In parts of the Northeast, he notes the effectiveness of appeals to long running ties with Hindu culture and organisers who have learned local languages. But as he notes also, people who come in for power can forge their own agendas. In the Northeast Mehta reports churning and the possibility of rapid shifts. A recurrent theme is that extending support beyond the north and west demands experienced organisers who speak local languages and have grown up in local cultures. Mehta reports that BJP supporters in Tamil Nadu lament the lack of an «Amit Shah who speaks Tamil».

Where transformation is very clear too is in organisational infrastructure. The party has restructured internal organisation; built modern offices; set up training centres; organised voluminous archives; and developed multi-layered digital communications strategies. Mehta's argument is that in this transformation digital capability is intrinsic. By 2019, with half of voters on social media and two thirds on digital payment systems, digital outreach could be combined with a personal touch. Digital training of cadres spread capability. Speed of digital reacting kept messaging current. It used different messages for the public and the party. It spoke in multiple voices, including through the RSS. Further, it was fluent in social media. Its troll armies and WhatsApp infiltration became notorious. From a digitised index of communications Mehta tracked trends in messaging. He notices an important shift. By 2017 the BJP was talking more about Modi than about itself. It was also talking more about development than about temples.

However, in policy directions claims of transformation tended to take form in adaptations and increments. In ideology, approaches to governance, economic thinking, and relationship with the RSS the party continued trends outlined by Sitapati. Culture and nationalism remain pervasive. For the RSS, culture, now as then, leads. In a phrase that highlights a continuing ambiguity Mehta describes its relationship with the BJP as independent but «integrated». In education, its influence and that of the *Sangh Parivar* are strong. In other fields, the most prominent new directions took place in a widening range of digital applications. As Mehta recognised both started under the previous government. But as he shows repackaging and expansion have been dramatic.

In economic thinking, Modi has, if anything, backtracked from Vajpayee. Vajpayee liked to stay in the centre. But he also talked about disinvestment. More so than Modi, Mehta suggests. Indeed, he cheekily begins a chapter on the BJP's economics with the heading «When Right is Left». Like Shekhar Gupta [2021], Mehta argues that under Modi the BJP is not, on economics, a right-wing party. It has focused on keeping inflation down and on social welfare, social projects, and infrastructure. On disinvestment, expected to take place more than it has, Modi's approach has been incremental. In economic management, growth is encouraged. But

bold options have not been accepted. Economic directions have seen few big policy shifts.

Mehta's combination of a journalist's eye and a researcher's industry provides detailed insights into how the party operates. In his account the party has, in conjunction with the RSS and the *Sangh Parivar*, combined, in an adaptive way, themes from Hindu nationalism and sophisticated organisational methods and digital technology to extend the party's electoral reach. His data sets provide much material for others to explore. Similarly, his case studies, although illustrative rather than comprehensive, provide rich leads for others to follow. Throughout his stance is that of an empathetic observer and narrator. Endorsement or critique is not his business.

However, in conclusion Mehta canvasses not only the party's wider ambitions but also a selection of significant challenges. It has global ambitions. It wishes to extend Hindu cultural power beyond India. It wishes to build on and extend ancient traditions. The Ram temple at Ayodhya is envisaged as a vehicle for taking new messages to the world. In Prime Minister Modi's terms this includes a reframing in which «Ram Rajya» is focused on the marginal and the poor.

However, Modi and the party have also to deal with problems at home and abroad, including fall-out from the Coronavirus pandemic, an economy that fluctuates and does not provide steady growth in employment, and the stand-off on the China border. Internally, the party must handle new coalitions in its support base, tensions of expansion, and succession planning. It needs also to manage the fault line between Hindus and Muslims. Campaigning against Muslims has helped it aggregate Hindu votes. But in government it has recognised that it cannot ignore Muslim communities. Mehta's discussion here is brief. But it may prompt readers to ponder the significant implications.

#### 4. *Conclusion*

Both books focus on political mobilisation. However, in examining the political strategies of the BJP they make also a substantial contribution to understanding the context in which governing takes place. They have the merit of suggesting more questions than they set out to answer.

In the BJP's unitary and election focused model, issues of public policy and management have less priority than themes of politics and cultural ascendancy. Questions arise about the Modi government's centralised and personal model and how far its capabilities extend. Hindutva, welfare benefits, and digital applications have helped mobilise voters. The RSS and the *Sangh Parivar* have been force-multipliers. But both books end with cautions about future ambitions: Mehta with questions about how the BJP will meet selected challenges and Sitapati with an observation: «all flowers will wither

someday, must wither someday». These prompt two thoughts: what will the new communities mobilised by Modi's BJP want to do within the party and with their lives; and what will the government be able to do to provide an enabling environment?

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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