

Under Modi, The Northeast Is More United With India, But More Divided Within



*Makepeace Sithou -
Photo: LinkedIn*

04-30-2024 ~ India's ruling BJP claims to have overcome the "tyranny of distance" that has plagued Northeast India, but its politics have created greater division, as the Manipur crisis shows.

In March, India's prime minister, Narendra Modi, said at an election rally in Arunachal Pradesh that previous governments had not cared for states that sent only two representatives to the country's Parliament, as Arunachal and several others in the Indian Northeast do. Modi failed to see the irony of his claim given that he has not visited Manipur, which has only two representatives in parliament, since the outbreak of an armed ethnic conflict that has raged on for nearly a year. The toll from the violence stands at more than 200 lives lost, and many thousands displaced.

In India's 2024 national election, widely seen as being decisive for the country's democracy, the eight states in the Northeast—Assam, Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Meghalaya—will decide whether they want to be part of "*Modi ka parivar*," or Modi's "family"—a phrase that Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has rolled out on social media as an election gambit. The BJP-led central government in Delhi has repeatedly claimed to have bridged the "tyranny of distance" between the Northeast and the rest of India, something

that the region has undoubtedly long suffered from. Unfortunately, the Modi government's handling of the Manipur crisis shows otherwise—and none of the BJP's numerous political partners in the Northeast region, who often profess themselves to be “sons of the soil,” have challenged the government's claim.

The Northeastern states combined send only 25 representatives to the Lok Sabha, the 543-seat lower house of the Indian parliament. Assam, the most populous of the states, accounts for 14 of these alone. The perceived remoteness of these states, connected to the rest of India by only a narrow “chicken's neck” of a corridor in West Bengal, is another factor that has kept the region on the fringes of national politics. What's more, the Northeastern states are among the country's poorest—with the exception of Sikkim, which has the highest per-capita net domestic product of any Indian state—and among those most heavily dependent on central funds. In fact, the central government has a ministry dedicated to the development of the Northeast, going by the acronym DoNER, which channels 10 percent of the annual budgets of all 52 central ministries to infrastructure projects in the region. Regional experts often remark that the Northeast is compelled to follow Delhi's lead because of this historical dependence on the center.

The BJP secured its first electoral victory in the Northeast when it won an assembly election in Assam in 2016. Since then, it has gained a hold over much of the region and worked to better integrate it with the rest of India. But the specifics of that integration follow a very particular vision: for the BJP, the Northeast is not beyond the purview of its longed-for Hindu Rashtra, or Hindu nation. In a region long perceived to be dominated by Christian groups, the party has played on the sentiments of the Northeast's Hindus, who constitute a 53-percent majority in the region cutting across multiple divisions of language, ethnicity, and caste. With this approach, the last decade of BJP politics in the Northeast has exacerbated internal divisions in a region that was already struggling with bloody schisms to begin with. The Manipur conflict is one symptom of this.

In the early 2000s, even while Atal Behari Vajpayee headed a BJP-led government at the center, the opposition Indian National Congress was in power in four of the Northeastern states, and in ruling coalitions with regional parties in two others. Once the Congress returned to national power, the grand old party's presence and power in the Northeast remained more or less a constant. That was until

2014, and Modi's ascent to prime minister. Like almost everywhere else, the BJP has used money and power to completely change this electoral picture in the Northeast, throwing large sums into campaigning in this region where many voters openly accept [bribes](#). The party also played *mitra*, or ally, to various regional parties, and partnered with them in numerous state governments.

Unlike the Congress, which typically chose to take on electoral contests in the Northeast alone, the BJP entered the region relatively quietly through alliances with the National People's Party in Meghalaya, the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) in Assam, the National Democratic People's Party in Nagaland and the Indigenous People's Front of Tripura. In a region with a dizzying mix of ethnicities and cultures, not only did this help deflect attention from the BJP's general reputation of being anti-minority, or being against anyone who was non-Hindi or not caste Hindu, but it also enabled the party to poach certain regional leaders. For example, Sarbananda Sonowal, the former chief minister of Assam and leader of the AGP, joined the BJP in 2011. The AGP eventually declined and is now reduced to being a token partner in Assam's BJP-led five-party coalition government. Such poaching by the BJP effectively ended the political runs of several regional parties. Helped by this, since 2014 the BJP has gone from a bit player to a dominant force in the politics of the Northeast, forming state governments in Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, and Tripura.

Moreover, the BJP has been able to exploit historical resentment against the Congress, which presided over the many brutalities of the peak years of insurgency in the Northeast, in the 1980s and 1990s. After a dark phase of counterterrorist operations and extrajudicial killings that lasted into the early 2000s, Assam saw relative peace under a Congress government at the center from 2004 onwards. Yet the BJP has successfully blamed the Congress for allegedly encouraging illegal immigration into the Northeast, primarily from neighboring Bangladesh, by "appeasing Muslims." The BJP has even interpreted a [radio speech](#) by the Congress icon and former prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru as reflecting the rival party's indifference to the Northeast. Speaking in 1962, when China invaded India, Nehru used the phrase, "My heart goes out to the people of Assam at this hour." His political opponents have long claimed that this was a signal that Nehru had abandoned Assam to its fate—an accusation that the BJP has continued to drum up in its 2024 electoral campaign.

The BJP has temporarily neutralized civil society groups and armed groups in the

region that would, in earlier times, have likely stood in opposition to the central government. The home minister, Amit Shah, boasted during the election campaign that the Modi government has signed nine peace accords in the Northeast in the last 10 years. Given that the Northeast has long had the greatest concentration of secessionist groups and movements anywhere in India, the first order of business for any government looking to impose itself on the region is to establish peace, preferably through political settlement. However, the Modi government's peace agreements look better on paper than on the ground.

For example, the government's first major move in the Northeast after coming to power in 2014 was to sign a framework agreement for a Naga peace accord with the Isak Muivah faction of the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagalim (NSCN-IM). Given the Nagas' history of demanding self-determination and standing against union with the rest of India, a firm agreement with the Naga leadership for a settlement within the Indian republic would have been a landmark achievement.

However, the framework agreement was ambiguous in ways that eventually left the Nagas feeling let down. Naga negotiators had agreed to share sovereignty with India while retaining Naga's unique identity, as well as a separate flag and constitution. However, after the Modi government unilaterally abrogated Article 370 of the Constitution of India, which allowed for special constitutional status and autonomy for the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir, it became [clear](#) that the BJP government was pursuing a policy of "One nation, one constitution." The Nagas were blindsided and talks went into a stalemate.

Then there is the example of the Bodos. The Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution offers special privileges regarding land and resources to groups recognized as Scheduled Tribes (a government-recognized disadvantaged socio-economic group in India.) After a bloody struggle, the Bodoland Territorial Council emerged in 2003 out of a settlement between the Bodoland Liberation Tiger Force and the governments of India and Assam. Such territorial councils, under the provisions of the Sixth Schedule, empower a designated tribal community in a designated region to self-govern within constitutional limits, with earmarked funds from the central government. Despite claims that the BJP has fulfilled promises of the accord such as providing [direct funding](#) to the Bodo Territorial Council, the Indian government has categorically said that it [has not](#). Meanwhile, even as Bodos have continued to engage with the government, their

claims and ambitions have been pushed back. Under an agreement signed with the Modi government, the Bodo leadership's purview extends only over a "region," and not over a full-fledged state as the Bodos once hoped for.

More recently, the government has signed agreements with factions of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and the United National Liberation Front (UNLF) of Manipur—two insurgent groups known to be among the least amenable to negotiations. ULFA was founded in 1979 with the professed aim of liberating Assam from exploitation by India. The UNLF, established in 1964, has been advocating for Manipur's secession on the basis that its former ruler should never have agreed to merge with India in 1949.

The Modi government brandishes its agreements with these two old and formidable militant groups as impressive achievements, but they were, in fact, low-hanging fruit. Support for ULFA in Assam has decreased considerably in the last decade, with a steady fall in recruitment, partly due to fatigue with the group's Ahom revivalist mission and partly due to backlash after a series of blasts linked to it that killed civilians. The government signed an agreement with a pro-talks faction of ULFA in 2023, while an anti-talks faction refused to abandon the armed movement unless the government was willing to discuss sovereignty for Assam. The fact that the agreement led to the disbanding of the pro-talks faction while the more militant anti-talks faction continues to survive has left a major, and potentially dangerous, loose end.

In Manipur, the government was all set to sign an accord with the Kukis in May 2023—much to the displeasure of Biren Singh, the BJP leader and chief minister of Manipur, according to a report in [the Wire](#). Singh belongs to the Meitei community concentrated in the Imphal Valley, which has long been at odds with the Kuki Zo tribes of the surrounding hill districts of Manipur. Kuki Zo communities, who complain of disadvantage and discrimination under the Meiteis' established dominance of Manipur politics, have been asking for separate statehood since the 1980s. The accord would allegedly have granted them autonomy under a territorial council. However, the violence in Manipur broke out the very month the accord was to be signed, pitting the Kuki Zo tribes against the Meiteis, and there has been no movement on it ever since.

Instead, there is increasing doubt that the ceasefire agreement between Kuki insurgent groups and the central and state governments, first signed in 2008, will

be extended. Far from bringing real peace to the hills or the Imphal Valley in Manipur—the Modi administration has faced widespread criticism for not stemming the violence—the central government has signed a cosmetic peace agreement with the pro-talks Pambei faction of the UNLF, even though it has refused to [surrender](#) its arms. Instead, members of this armed group have openly carried AK-47, M-16, and INSAS rifles, which are among the more than 5,000 weapons stolen from government armories, and are carrying out military-style operations aided by drone surveillance to attack Kuki villages in the hills. The armed faction has often fought along with Manipur police commandos, with the central security forces functioning as nothing more than mute spectators.

The extortion of civilians by armed groups, something commonplace in earlier years, saw a brief lull in the initial years of BJP rule. Now, with armed groups resurgent across Manipur amid the conflict, the phenomenon has returned to both the hills and the valley. And the tensions in Manipur have naturally overflowed into neighboring states. The NSCN-IM has already warned the government against settling the Pambei faction in the Naga hills. As the Kuki Zo tribes and Meiteis fought each other in Manipur, many Meiteis in Mizoram were forced to leave the state after open threats against them by a local Mizo group.

Even the tripartite agreement signed in February between the Modi government, the Tripura state government, and the recently formed Tipra Motha party appears to cede political advantage only to the BJP. The Tipra Motha has seemingly compromised on its demand for a separate state for the indigenous Tiprasa people in exchange for a territorial council with more seats. Tripura's chief minister, Manik Saha, who is from the BJP, has said that only Modi can ensure the development of the state's tribal communities.

This has become a widely held belief among tribal communities across the Northeast. This explains why, in Manipur, Kuki Zo MLAs from the BJP and the Kuki People's Alliance, one of the national party's local partners, continue to be faithful to Modi's party even after being driven out of the valley and shut out from assembly proceedings.

Much of the mainstream media across India has failed to look at the fine print of the peace agreements. Instead, it has followed the official line of hailing them as victories for the ruling government, alongside touting statistics like an [86-percent reduction](#) in civilian deaths across the Northeast since Modi's arrival in power.

What such coverage has ignored is the wider atmosphere of conflict and heightened insecurities within the region, and the distrust that the one-sided “peace agreements” have engendered in the people of the Northeast, who have seen their long-standing demands being traded away cheaply.

The BJP model of governance to pacify tribal minorities caters to a political status quo that favors ethnic majorities in specific regions, and this has further cemented feelings of “us versus them” between ethnic communities. The government has exploited fault lines of identity politics in the Northeast as a ploy to distract from important issues that adversely affect all of the Northeast, like the amendments to the [Forest \(Conservation\) Amendment Act](#). There have been eruptions of violence along ethnic lines not only in Manipur but also along the disputed border between Assam and Meghalaya, and between Assam and Mizoram, where sub-regional identities have been pitted against each other. The atmosphere has never been as polarized as it is now.

This ethnic polarization in the Northeast is something the BJP does not know how to deal with, and that can get in the way of its own Hindu nationalist agenda. The party would rather curb the growth of Christian missionary movements in the region, which continue to make deep inroads, and project Muslims as a common adversary of the people like it has to its advantage across much of India. Still, to expand its reach in Christian-dominated states like Mizoram and Nagaland, the BJP has used the ploy of an ostensible Hindu-Christian solidarity that it has resorted to in Kerala. A BJP leader and former legislator of the Mizo National Front warned against Bangladeshi Muslims in Mizoram, [claiming](#) that “only Hindus would come to the aid of Christians.” In Nagaland, similar sentiments led to a Muslim man being lynched to death in a town square in March 2015 after he was accused of raping a minor. Local Hindutva groups are already acting as vigilantes against “love jihad,” a supposed conspiracy by Muslim men to seduce, marry, and convert Hindu women for their own demographic gains. It is very likely that a big-budget propaganda film with an anti-Muslim narrative set in the Northeast—doing here what the inflammatory movie *The Kerala Story* did in the context of South India—will soon be made.

In Assam, where anti-outsider sentiment has built up since the 1960s largely along linguistic lines, the BJP has placated majoritarian anxieties by further bullying the local Muslim minority. In the last five years, Muslims have been evicted from their homes on flimsy excuses, an act allowing the voluntary

registration of Muslim marriages has been repealed, and the government has passed a law retroactively criminalizing child marriage and consigning offenders to new detention centers meant for “illegal” foreigners—measures understood to target the Muslim community.

But such targeting of Muslims brings its own complications. Through the winter of 2019 and 2020, India was swept by protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), passed by the Modi government, which allowed granting Indian citizenship to only non-Muslim immigrants from the Muslim-majority countries of Bangladesh, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. In the rest of India, the protestors took issue with the non-secular nature of the law, setting a precedent for possible future disenfranchisement of Muslim citizens on the basis of their religion. Assam saw massive protests against the BJP government too, only here they were based on fears that the law would allow an influx of Bangladeshi immigrants and so threaten the identity and existing demographics of the state.

Bengali Hindus in Assam, many of whom came to India from Bangladesh, have already been declared non-citizens by foreigners’ tribunals, kangaroo courts set up by the Assam government, or marked “doubtful” voters by the Election Commission of India. Despite their being an important vote bank for the BJP, many Bengali Hindus have been excluded from the National Register of Citizens (NRC), another BJP-led effort originally intended to target and disenfranchise the Muslim population, and have been detained or stripped of access to government welfare as a result. On this, too, the BJP government faced significant pushback.

Yet, despite the unintended consequences and backlash from the CAA and NRC, the BJP won the 2021 Assam elections with greater numbers than before. When the Modi government released framework rules for the CAA in March this year, taking the next step in implementing the controversial law, protests in Assam were far more subdued than the earlier ones.

Elsewhere in the region, where the CAA aroused similar anxieties over a possible influx of outsiders, the BJP managed to douse the fires by exempting from the purview of the law tribal areas with special protections under the Sixth Schedule, as well as areas under the inner-line permit system that regulates the entry of outsiders. Another potential flashpoint could be the Uniform Civil Code (UCC), which the BJP apparently intends to impose across all of India. The UCC, again intended primarily to target Muslims, would bring all Indian citizens under

uniform personal laws regardless of their religion—yet it is also deeply divisive and complicated in the Northeast, where myriad communities hold dear to the traditional customs they are currently able to follow, and the customary laws and religious practices of Hindu, Christian, and indigenous communities overlap significantly. Assam’s chief minister, Himanta Biswa Sarma has said that his state government will exempt tribals from following such a code, but the inflammatory potential of the UCC remains. The Modi government’s abrogation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir has led to fears of similar action in the Northeast, which is allowed several accommodations under Article 371 that recognize various tribal and customary laws.

In Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, and Tripura, there has been growing support within tribal communities for stripping those among them who have converted to Christianity from Scheduled Tribe status, which comes with special protections and reservations. Hindu tribal groups and ones following various indigenous faiths have been radicalized by BJP’s ideological parent, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), to act against Christian proselytization. This effort is primarily run through educational institutions, including the RSS-run [Ekal Vidyalayas](#), which impart Hindu nationalist philosophy to tribal children and train them to counter Christian-run schools. In the early months of the Manipur conflict, extremist groups that patronize the indigenous Sanamahi faith, practiced by a section of the Meiteis, attacked members of tribal communities and destroyed a large number of churches—estimates vary between 150 and 300—including ones that served [Meitei Christians](#). They have also forced Meitei Christians to return to the Sanamahi faith by making them sign conversion affidavits and burning their bibles in what they described as acts of *ghar wapsi*, or homecoming—the preferred Hindu nationalist term for the reconversion to Hinduism of Indian Christians and Muslims.

The BJP’s majoritarian playbook, bolstered by its push for the region’s development, has proven largely successful in the Northeast. The BJP administrations in Delhi and the Northeastern states have invested heavily in promoting tourism and improving connectivity in the region, with long-term plans to make the region a trading thoroughfare connecting India to Southeast Asia. The BJP also has plans to promote mineral extraction, hydropower generation, and [palm oil plantations](#), which it touts as economic boons without heed of the ecological costs. Local communities have largely welcomed these announcements,

and regional parties have not been able to challenge the BJP even on their home turf—Mizoram being the only exception to this.

Yet the BJP has not fully understood the region's complex ethnic and linguistic dynamics, or the dangers of heedlessly manipulating them, as the conflict in Manipur has shown. For the people of the Northeast, many of its intellectuals would argue, this national election is just business as usual, with pockets being stuffed and potholed roads (temporarily) fixed. However, every act of majoritarianism in the region is slowly changing its people and politics. The Northeast might have finally got more roads and bridges, but they have come at the cost of our relations with each other. With election predictions pointing heavily to a return to national power for Modi and the BJP, the people of the Northeast might expect greater connectivity with the rest of India, but with certainly more disunity among themselves.

By Makepeace Sitlhou

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Source: Himal Southasian/Globetrotter

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India's Billionaire Wealth Is On Display As Nation Votes



Sonali Kolhatkar

04-28-2024 ~ *India's Ambani family has enjoyed flaunting its obscene wealth, a perfect reminder in the midst of an election, of the economic inequality afflicting voters.*

There are several exercises in extremes playing out in India right now. Nearly a billion people are voting in [elections](#) that will last into early June, braving [record-high temperatures](#) to cast ballots. Against this backdrop, Asia's richest man, [Mukesh Ambani](#), is throwing what will likely be the world's most expensive wedding for his youngest son.

Although they appear unrelated, these phenomena are intimately linked.

With 1.4 billion people, India now has the largest population of any nation in the world, [surpassing China in 2023](#). It is also the world's largest democracy, a title it has held since the end of British colonial rule in 1947. India's [secular democracy](#) has eroded, particularly since 2014 when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s leadership ushered in a dawn of Hindu supremacy in a nation that is home to many [different faiths](#).

Much like the [Christian right](#) in the United States blended religious fervor with capitalist fundamentalism, the BJP has cloaked its [pro-business](#) position in saffron robes. And, just as American billionaires [embrace](#) the white supremacist Donald Trump, India's wealthy seem unperturbed by incumbent Prime Minister Narendra Modi's [hate-filled speeches](#).

Indian corporate interests are counting on incumbent Modi winning another five years in office, “hoping for further easing of stifling investment restraints,” as per the [Financial Times](#). This dismantling of regulations, which began a few decades before the BJP gained power, ushered in an erosion of India’s socialist infrastructure. Economists Subhashree Banerjee and Yash Tayal explained in the [Deccan Herald](#), that India’s 1991 reforms ended up “liberalizing the Indian economy to an unprecedented extent. These reforms facilitated an environment for the wealthy to profit from the less-affluent without repercussions.”

The BJP accelerated this trend so that India, which housed [nine billionaires in 2000, was home to 101 by 2017](#). According to Oxfam, “The top 10 percent of the Indian population holds 77 percent of the total national wealth,” and “73 percent of the wealth generated in 2017 went to the richest 1 percent, while 670 million Indians who comprise the poorest half of the population saw only a 1 percent increase in their wealth.” It’s clear that deregulation helped catapult the rich into greater riches while keeping India’s poor relatively impoverished.

Sitting atop this inglorious dung heap of billionaires is [Mukesh Ambani](#), who is not only India’s richest man, but the wealthiest person in all of Asia—the world’s largest continent. He is also the world’s 11th richest man. And he appears to feel no shame in having spent [\\$152 million](#) for a three-day extravaganza in early March celebrating the coming nuptials of his youngest son.

Yes, that’s correct. Twenty-nine-year-old Anant Ambani’s “pre-wedding” festivities, which took place in Gujarat over three days (several months before the actual wedding), cost the equivalent of feeding nearly [50 million of India’s poorest citizens](#) for a day. The groom-to-be’s mother sported a [\\$60 million necklace](#) to the party, while American pop icon [Rihanna flew](#) in to perform for guests for one-tenth of the cost of the jewels.

This brazen display of excess is oddly refreshing. Unlike many American billionaires who prefer [hiding](#) the perverse extent of their wealth, the Ambanis are delightfully honest in flexing their economic power for the world to see. The pre-wedding has generated countless headlines in India and in the world for its mind boggling lavishness—[1,200 guests](#), including the world’s top CEOs and Bollywood’s most popular stars! More than [2,500 unique dishes](#) including 70 breakfast options and 85 varieties of midnight snacks! Bespoke [designer gowns](#) dripping with pearls!

Forget Britain's royal family, whose weddings appear humble in comparison—Harry and Meghan's wedding cost a [mere \\$43 million](#), cheaper than Mrs. Ambani's necklace—India's royalty is newly minted and unwilling to bow down at the altar of modesty.

The Ambanis' conspicuous consumption has also generated endless derision from ordinary Indians who are having a field day lambasting the family's apparent need for such profligacy on social media. One popular YouTube [channel](#) spent more than [13 minutes](#) gleefully delving into every over-the-top detail, ridiculing the ridiculous.

There seemed to be at least some semblance of an attempt by the wealthy family to thwart the inevitable public criticism. [Forbes](#) reported that the festivities were held against the backdrop of a wildlife sanctuary called [Vantara](#), which apparently is "the manifestation of Anant's vision for a brighter future for the animal kingdom, from spreading awareness on the mistreatment of animals to working to breed near-extinct species."

A friend of the happy couple told [Forbes](#) that, "The events brought incredible exposure and shone a spotlight on the good work that's been done, and also spread the message on the state of animals in the world and the challenges to overcome in improving their welfare."

Was it charity, shame, or public relations that prompted such a ludicrous juxtaposition as justification? We may never know.

Meanwhile, the defenders of corporate profiteering in India's business-friendly atmosphere have enjoyed a public relations coup with the release of a long-overdue [report](#) by the BJP government earlier this year claiming that poverty in India now afflicts only 5% of the population. The report spawned such wild conclusions by publications like the Brookings Institute as "[\[d\]ata now confirms that India has eliminated extreme poverty](#)," promoting the wild idea that predatory capitalism is good for Indian democracy.

But critics point out that the report's numbers have been massaged to align with the BJP's reelection efforts so as to paint the government as having achieved the near-impossible. According to Princeton economist [Ashoka Mody](#), "While the publication of India's first consumption figures in over a decade has generated much excitement, the official data appear to have been chosen to align with the

government's preferred narrative."

Mody eloquently surmised, "[W]hile such misuse of statistics will amplify the India hype in elite echo chambers, poverty remains deeply entrenched in India, and broader deprivation appears to have increased as inflation erodes incomes of the poor."

The "elite echo chambers" he references are very real. One Indian billionaire, [NR Narayana Murthy](#), argued for a 70-hour work week in India (even as Americans are now debating working for [less than half that time](#)). A tech mogul and co-founder of Infosys, Murthy happens to be the father-in-law of UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak. He complained on a podcast that "India's work productivity is one of the lowest in the world," and that the nation's youth ought to be saying, "This is my country. I'd like to work 70 hours a week."

India's political and financial elites are painting a gold-plated vision of a modern Gilded Age: Because billionaires are saving wildlife from extinction it's okay for them to obscenely flaunt their wealth, and meanwhile everyone's fortunes are rising through hard work!

But the strongest evidence that this vision is a lie is for Indians to see their own lives against the Ambanis'. Nearly a billion Indians will finish casting ballots about a month before their "royal family" jet sets off to London for the youngest heir's [actual nuptials](#), to be held at the exclusive Stoke Park estate. If there's anything voters can be grateful for, it is that their nation's wealthy elites are busy reminding them of how little they have in comparison and how morally bankrupt a system is that allows such inequality.

By Sonali Kolhatkar

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How Banks And Investors Are Fueling A Global Biodiversity Crisis



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04-28-2024 ~ Commercial financial flows to the forest-risk commodity sectors are driving the majority of tropical deforestation.

In a global context where tropical rainforests play a [critical role in biodiversity conservation](#) and climate regulation, these ecosystems are severely threatened by expanding agribusiness and logging activities. This poses significant risks to the environment, wildlife, and communities dependent on rainforests.

Against the backdrop of escalating [climate change impacts](#), urgent action is needed to prevent the collapse of these [vital ecosystems](#) and address the injustices faced by [Indigenous and local communities](#) and workers within the

agricultural sector.

The [ratification](#) of the UN Global Biodiversity Framework in December 2022 marked a pivotal moment, signaling a collective commitment by 196 countries to reverse the decline in global biodiversity. However, financial institutions have historically failed to address their role in exacerbating the biodiversity crisis.

A 2023 [report by Forests and Finance](#)—a coalition of campaign, grassroots and research organizations that [includes](#) TuK Indonesia, Profundo, Amazon Watch, Repórter Brasil, BankTrack, Sahabat Alam Malaysia, Friends of the Earth U.S., and my organization, Rainforest Action Network—sheds light on the extensive financial support provided to [sectors responsible](#) for tropical deforestation, including beef, palm oil, pulp and paper, rubber, soy, and timber. “From January 2016 to September 2023, banks provided at least \$307 billion in credit to these operations,” [states](#) the report, while institutional investors held approximately \$38 billion in related shares and bonds.

Despite fluctuations in financial flows, there has been no discernible downward trend in financing forest-risk commodity production. Alarmingly, the analysis of more than 100 financial institutions’ policies in 2023 revealed grossly inadequate safeguards against deforestation and its associated social and environmental impacts. The average policy score was just 17 percent, [according](#) to the report.

Entities like JBS, Cargill, Royal Golden Eagle, and Sinar Mas Group exemplify the egregious behaviors tolerated and enabled by banks and investors.

Demands to Correct a Systemic Issue

The report by [Forests and Finance](#) urged governments and financial institutions to adopt and enact five principles:

1. Halt and reverse biodiversity loss
2. Uphold and prioritize the rights of Indigenous peoples, women, and local communities
3. Facilitate a just transition
4. Safeguard ecosystem integrity
5. Harmonize institutional objectives across sectors, issues, and instruments

Immediate action is crucial to combat the climate and biodiversity crises. The report urges financial institutions to align their activities with sustainability goals, enact robust environmental and social policies, and ensure transparency and accountability. By holding the financial sector accountable for its role in enabling social and environmental harm, we can work toward preserving biodiversity and mitigating the impacts of climate change for current and future generations.

Notable Progress

The [Forests and Finance](#) report highlights the significant progress of tropical forest countries and key import and financial jurisdictions in promoting sustainable financial practices and combating deforestation. Brazil, Indonesia, Malaysia, the United States, and the European Union have all taken notable steps toward integrating environmental, social, and governance (ESG) considerations into their financial systems.

Brazil stands out for [excluding industrial livestock activities](#) from sustainable [sovereign bonds](#) and for being the first country to commit to integrating the International Sustainability Standards Board's [IFRS Sustainability Disclosure Standards](#) into its regulatory framework by 2026. Implementing these standards will help bolster Brazilian capital markets by amplifying transparency in sustainability-related risks and opportunities. This, in turn, will ensure that companies attract capital and foster global investments that are aligned to meeting the goals of nature protection and sustainable development.

Another initiative that supports sustainability is the implementation of green taxonomies. These taxonomies are meant to simplify guidelines regarding activities that support decarbonization objectives, including efforts to curtail deforestation and environmental degradation. This can bolster financiers' confidence in investing in projects that move the needle toward a low-carbon and climate-resilient economy.

Indonesia introduced its [Green Taxonomy](#) in January 2022 to expedite financing for sustainable sectors. "Indonesia's joint targets under the [Just Energy Transition Partnership](#) (JETP) include capping power sector emissions to 290 MT by 2030 and reaching net zero by 2050," [reported](#) Luthfyana Kartika Larasati and Tiza Mafira of the Climate Policy Initiative, an independent nonprofit research group based in San Francisco, in October 2023.

“To achieve these [targets], phasing out coal-fired power plants while accelerating the deployment of renewable energy sources is necessary. As financiers are now reluctant to finance coal, a transition taxonomy defines measurable parameters within which coal investment is allowed in order to facilitate early coal decommissioning,” [wrote](#) Larasati and Mafira.

Malaysia implemented the Value-based Intermediation Financing and Investment Impact Assessment Framework ([VBIAF](#)) in November 2019 and issued the Climate Change and [Principle-based Taxonomy](#) in 2021 to guide Islamic financial institutions.

Meanwhile, [a March 2024 Securities and Exchange Commission \(SEC\) climate disclosure ruling](#) seems to be a step in the right direction toward the U.S. managing its climate risk, even though the move remains inadequate to effectively protect the world’s forests. On the procurement side, the new [EU Deforestation Regulation](#), expected to take effect on December 30, 2024, provides a potentially powerful new tool for achieving supply chain traceability and transparency.

The European Union also approved new [EU Taxonomy criteria](#) in 2023 focusing on biodiversity protection and ecosystem restoration, despite criticism that it judged [harmful sectors](#) like forestry and bioenergy to be environmentally sustainable economic activities.

Forest-Risk Credit Trends

The [report](#) revealed that at least \$307 billion in credit had been directed to forest-risk sectors from 2016 to September 2023. The beef sector dominated South America, while palm oil led in Southeast Asia and rubber in Central and West Africa. Primary beneficiaries included agro-commodity traders and companies with significant environmental and social violations.

While progress has been made, heightened attention and enhanced due diligence procedures are needed to address associated ESG risks and promote sustainable financial practices to combat deforestation and environmental degradation.

Big corporations launched the [Taskforce for Nature-related Financial Disclosures](#) (TNFD) in June 2021 to guide businesses in reporting nature-related dependencies. However, civil society organizations have repeatedly raised [concerns](#) about the task force’s development, composition, approach, and

potential for [greenwashing](#).

Regional Analysis of Credit Flows

The [analysis](#) of regional credit flow and investment trends in forest-risk commodity sectors across South America, Southeast Asia, and Central and West Africa revealed significant financial flows and investments contributing to deforestation and environmental degradation.

In South America, the beef sector dominated forest-risk credit flows, followed by soy, and pulp and paper, with Banco do Brasil emerging as a significant creditor. Infamous beneficiaries included companies like [Suzano](#) and [Marfrig](#).

In Southeast Asia, palm oil was the dominant recipient of forest-risk credit, followed by pulp, paper, and rubber. Indonesian banks played a significant role as financiers, with recipients including [tycoon-owned conglomerates](#) Sinar Mas Group (SME) and [Royal Golden Eagle](#) (RGE). Concerns over governance risks and greenwashing practices persisted despite reductions in primary forest loss.

Central and West Africa saw the rubber sector attracting the majority of forest-risk credit, with Chinese companies emerging as primary financiers. The Chinese Sinochem Group was the largest recipient of the credit, followed by China Forestry Group and Wilmar.

Despite fluctuations in credit flows, challenges remain in corporate structures and accountability. For instance, companies like “SMG [and] RGE... have established complex corporate structures that mask ownership relations. This poses serious governance risks and facilitates leakage and greenwashing. They have all been linked to egregious social and environmental harms for decades,” [states](#) the report.

Forest-Risk Investments

Investments in activities likely to damage forests globally amounted to more than [\\$38 billion](#), with palm oil receiving the most significant share, followed by pulp and paper. Major institutional investors like BlackRock and Vanguard increased their stakes in forest-risk commodity companies, while others maintained or reduced their investments.

In South America, investments were predominantly allocated to the pulp and paper sector, with Suzano being the highest recipient. Southeast Asia saw the

most investment in palm oil companies, with Sime Darby Plantations and IOI Group among the leading recipients.

In Central and West Africa, palm oil companies also received the majority of investments, with Sumitomo Forestry and Itochu being prominent recipients.

Forest-Risk Policy Assessments

Forests and Finance's assessment methodology evaluated financial institutions' adherence to 38 criteria to avoid contributing to deforestation and associated ESG issues.

These criteria are categorized into environmental, social, and governance requirements, covering commitments to zero deforestation, respect for land rights, anti-corruption measures, and more.

Forest-risk policy assessments of more than 100 financial institutions revealed a lack of robust policies, with an average score of only 17 percent. Despite incremental improvements since 2016, vague language, unclear timeframes, and loopholes persisted, leading to continued facilitation of human rights violations and deforestation.

The analysis underscores the urgent need for heightened attention, enhanced due diligence, and more stringent policies to address associated environmental, social, and governance risks. It also highlights the need to promote sustainable financial practices in combating deforestation and ecological degradation in tropical forest regions.

Policies by Sector

Regarding sectoral policies, financial institutions [exhibit](#) the most robust policies for palm oil, followed closely by timber, and pulp and paper. However, the average scores for these sectors remain relatively low, indicating room for improvement despite sustained civil society campaigns and certification schemes' existence.

The assessment of forest-risk bank policies reveals that, on average, the largest 30 forest-risk banks have higher overall policy scores than the largest forest-risk investors. However, the scores across the board are still low, reflecting minimal policy coverage across ESG criteria.

While some banks like CIMB and BNP Paribas scored relatively higher, others like Banco do Brasil and ICBC had notably low scores, indicating inadequate policies to address harmful activities.

Four Corporations Leading Destruction

The [report](#) highlights four corporations—Cargill, JBS, Royal Golden Eagle, and Sinar Mas Group—that continue to receive significant credit and investment from financial institutions despite having egregious environmental and social track records. Cargill, in particular, has received substantial credit for its soy operations in tropical forest regions despite having a legacy of human rights abuses and environmental degradation.

Cargill

Cargill's expansion into the Brazilian Amazon and the Cerrado savanna has raised concerns due to decades of deforestation, violations of [Indigenous peoples' rights](#), and failures to meet deforestation commitments. Civil society campaigns, such as [Burning Legacy](#), have aimed to hold Cargill accountable for its practices, documenting evidence of human rights abuses and deforestation in its supply chain.

Despite making commitments to ensure zero [deforestation](#) by 2020, Cargill has failed to meet its goals and has faced allegations of land grabbing and violations of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) rights.

The [report](#) also discusses the implications of the financialization of land and the role of the financial sector in exacerbating soy-driven deforestation through [land speculation](#). It evaluates the policies of banks financing Cargill, revealing low scores and loopholes that weaken their effectiveness in preventing harm in forest-risk sectors.

JBS

The report delves into the multifaceted issues surrounding JBS, the Brazilian meat giant, and its impact on the [Amazon rainforest](#), [climate change](#), and local [communities](#). Financed by major banks from Brazil, the United States, Europe, and Japan, JBS has received substantial credit and investment despite its documented history of harmful business practices. Since 2019, banks have provided more than \$718 million in forest-risk beef credit to JBS, while investors

held \$667 million in bonds and shares as of September 2023.

JBS's operations in the Brazilian Amazon have devastating consequences for forests, biodiversity, and Indigenous and traditional communities. The company's practices include [bribery](#), corruption, [price fixing](#), forced labor and [labor abuses](#), forest destruction, land grabbing, and contribution to [climate change](#). Despite JBS's high-profile [pledge](#) to achieve net-zero emissions by 2040, independent research suggests that the company lacks a credible decarbonization plan, leading to allegations of [greenwashing](#).

The exploitation of people and forests in the Amazon is a systemic issue linked to JBS. Between 2008 and 2020, the company's involvement in deforestation extended to approximately [200,000 hectares](#) in its direct supply chain and 1.5 million hectares indirectly. Despite agreements to clean up its supply chain, JBS has failed to ensure its products are free from deforestation and forced labor, as evidenced by ongoing [violations](#).

The assessment of JBS policies reveals concerning scores, indicating inadequate measures to prevent environmental harm and protect human rights. While some banks like Barclays scored relatively higher, others like Bradesco and BTG Pactual had alarmingly low scores, raising questions about their commitment to addressing crucial issues like deforestation and climate change.

The communities affected by these actions are now holding financial institutions supporting companies like JBS [responsible](#) for the environmental damage. In April 2024, the Parakanã people met with the Brazilian Development Bank (BNDES) to ask for reparation for the devastation of their territory, including by JBS suppliers. The Brazilian bank holds 20 percent of the shares of JBS and is therefore considered co-responsible for the impacts.

Royal Golden Eagle Group

The report also reveals mounting evidence that the multibillion-dollar [Royal Golden Eagle Group](#) (RGE), which says on its website "manages a group of world-class companies specializing in resource-based manufacturing," operates numerous "shadow companies" and complex offshore ownership schemes to hide their destruction of forests across Indonesia. Banks have poured more than \$4.5 billion into forest-risk pulp and paper-attributable loans and underwriting services for RGE's operations between 2019 and 2023.

However, none of the financial institutions assessed have adequate policies to mitigate the negative impacts. Scores for RGE's top creditors range from 1 percent to 24 percent, indicating a lack of comprehensive policy coverage regarding forest-risk commodity sectors.

Sinar Mas Group

Sinar Mas Group (SMG), Indonesia's largest conglomerate, has attracted substantial financing, receiving more than \$20.3 billion in credit since 2019. Its palm oil division alone obtained \$3.7 billion, primarily from Indonesian and Malaysian banks, between 2019 and September 2023. Despite this financial backing, SMG faces accusations of human [rights abuses](#), massive greenhouse gas emissions, and large-scale [deforestation](#), mainly through its pulp and paper division, Asia Pulp and Paper ([APP](#)).

The destruction of the Rawa Singkil Wildlife Reserve by illegal palm oil plantations linked to SMG's [operations](#) poses a significant concern, threatening biodiversity and local communities' well-being within the [Leuser Ecosystem](#). Despite documented evidence, SMG and its subsidiaries have failed to address these issues adequately, raising questions about their commitment to sustainability.

The report evaluates the policies of banks and investors financing SMG, revealing a spectrum of approaches. Malaysian banks CIMB and Maybank and Dutch bank Rabobank exhibit more robust policies, scoring highest for the palm oil sector. However, Indonesian banks such as Bank Panin, BRI, and Japanese bank MUFG have notably weaker policies, indicating insufficient measures to address environmental and social risks.

What Governments and Financial Institutions Can Do

The report underscores the urgent need for financial institutions to adopt robust policies and due diligence measures to address environmental and social risks associated with companies like JBS and RGE. Failure to do so perpetuates ecological destruction and human rights abuses and exposes banks and investors to significant financial and reputational risks.

Critically, the report also advocates for governments to step in and mandate financial sector regulation necessary to safeguard society and the ecosystems we depend on, consistent with international public policy goals. This is a problem

that ultimately demands stronger, more systemic interventions. These could include, for example, prohibiting the allocation of capital to certain sectors or corporations driving ecosystem destruction and legislating for meaningful sanctions against financial institutions that fail to align their lending and investment accordingly.

By Laurel Sutherlin

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Source: Independent Media Institute

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What Does Play Tell Us About Human Evolution?



Brenna R. Hassett

04-26-2024 ~ Our species devotes a singular amount of time to an utterly unserious aspect of life: play. This begs the question: what is the adaptive value of horsing around? What possible evolutionary benefit could an activity that sees no specific return possibly have that we devote so much time to it?

Play holds a particularly special position in the study of both human and non-human behavior; it is accepted as a near-universal part of many animals' lives, but a definition for 'play' that covers species from birds to bats is elusive. What holds together the mock-fighting of puppies and the rhyming chants of our own children, however, is [a definition of play](#) that says it is not for any specific purpose; it's a set of actions that don't quite achieve anything that an animal repeats during certain phases of their life when they are relaxed and not under threat. Three separate types of play are usually distinguished: play with objects, with locomotor skills, and with friends. The critical thing that separates these types of activities from others, whether undertaken by a cow or a crow, is that they are *fun*.

It does not, in a strictly Darwinian sense, make any sense for animals to play unless play itself has some adaptive value. Time spent in play is not spent acquiring food or sleeping, for instance, and bouncing around unnecessarily in play burns calories that could be used for growth or survival. And yet, a [huge number of animal species](#) have been observed 'playing': monitor lizards like the giant Komodo dragon will chew and fetch objects like a dog, fish will chase balls, and [octopuses will explore Lego](#). Play is most at home, however, in mammals, and nowhere is it more obvious than in our own species.

There has been a great deal of argument in evolutionary biology and evolutionary psychology about what that adaptive value might be. Hypotheses include play in animals as physical training, allowing immature individuals to 'practice' pounces or perches that they will need as adults. The theory dating back to Victorian times that play is in fact [a serious business that serves to train adult minds](#) is still quite prominent, as can be seen by the vast array of 'educational' toys available. What these approaches have in common is that they see play as purposeful, as a kind of training mechanism. In this framing, juvenile play serves to make a fully competent adult, of whatever species.

It is clear that play does help train some animals to survive and thrive. A [study of bear cubs](#) found the cubs that played more had better survival rates; [cheetah cubs](#)

that spent more time pretending to stalk their family also did more stalking of prey. There is a vast body of research on the way that play prepares human children for their lives as adults, and in fact our species spends a proportionately longer amount of time on the most playful period of our lives, childhood, than any other. So, while we know that humans engage in locomotor, object, and social play, what we need to understand is *why* it is adaptive for our species to spend so much time doing it.

One of the ways to do this is to look at how play works in closely related animals. Play does not behave like some sort of directly inherited Mendelian trait; play is deployed very differently even among relatively closely related species. Compare two of the great apes that, to the untrained eye, seem very similar: [bonobos and chimpanzees](#). Both are great ape species of similar size and morphology, but they last shared an ancestor 1 to 2 million years ago and today are separated by the Congo River. Their social systems are very different, with male-dominated hierarchies in the chimpanzees and more fluid and female-led social groups in bonobos. They also occupy different environmental niches, with more reliance on seasonal fruit by bonobos and more access to year-round foods, including plants and insects, by chimpanzees. These may relate to differences in the skills they need to eat: chimpanzees make and use tools such as [termite 'fishing rods'](#) while bonobos have never been seen to do so.

One difference is in the amount and [time the species spend in play](#). Bonobos are inveterate players throughout their lifetimes, whereas chimpanzees tend to limit play to infancy and childhood. The type of play chimpanzees and bonobos enjoy is also different. Young chimpanzees, who will grow up to become tool users, [do more 'object' based play](#) than young bonobos. Young bonobos however, who rely more on cooperation to organize their adult societies, will spend more time in 'social' play. Play also results in different outcomes for the two species: juvenile chimp play fights often escalate into real fights, while this almost never happens in bonobos.

Perhaps one of the most critical differences in the way these two species play is that in bonobos, play carries on throughout the animals' lives. Chimpanzees, as they get older, have less and less tolerance for these kinds of interactions, while bonobos retain a kind of childlike tolerance for some kinds of play throughout their lives. That not all species give up on play as adults suggests that there is more to play than just training—adults, after all, are supposed to be fully trained.

This is something that we can recognize in our own species: human adults are also champions at playing; whether it is sports, video games, dramas, or any other sort of activity that meets the not-quite-functional-but-fun definition of play.

Adult play tends to be social and to happen in species where social relationships are complicated and require a lot of finesse to manage. Playful interactions, particularly play fighting, help less-dominant adults test the boundaries of their relationships with more dominant ones, reinforce social bonds, and generally maintain the social organization of the group. This kind of adult play encourages cooperation and tolerance, and [may even support collective decision-making](#).

We can look at the evolutionary commitment to play that our species has made in two parts, then. Our long childhoods give us a great deal of opportunity to ‘train’ through play—to gain competence in locomotor, object manipulation, and social skills. We are certainly not the only species to do this, nor are we very unique among our closest relatives: we like to play with tools, just like chimpanzees, because we are also a tool-using species, and we engage in all sorts of social play like bonobos. For us humans, our long childhoods give us a chance to play longer—but perhaps what most stands out is our ability to carry on this childlike willingness to take things a bit less seriously into adulthood. Our dedication to play throughout our lives, then, may be precisely the mechanism that allowed us to evolve to survive with less rigid social hierarchies and more cooperative social groups.

By Brenna R. Hassett

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Source: Human Bridges

Credit Line: This article was produced by [Human Bridges](#).

Modi Could Squander An Unprecedented Chance At Normalizing India-Pakistan Ties



Map: wikipedia.org

04-26-2024 ~ *Mired in economic and internal crises, Pakistan is primed for normalization and trade with India—but Narendra Modi’s Hindu nationalist government is failing to seize the chance.*

When Narendra Modi returned to power for a second term in India with a landslide victory in 2019, his government acted swiftly. Just months after the election, the Modi government [abrogated Article 370](#) of the Constitution of India. In doing so, it stripped the special constitutional status conferred on Jammu and Kashmir, India’s only Muslim-majority state, and downgraded its status from a state with its own elected assembly to a union territory administered by the central government in Delhi. The move disrupted the tremulous status quo that India and Pakistan had been holding on to in Kashmir for decades: India demanding that Pakistan withdraw from the north and west of Kashmir, which are under Pakistan’s administration, and Pakistan demanding a referendum to determine who administers the whole territory, with both parties holding steadfastly to the Line of Control. Angered by the Modi government’s move, Pakistan retaliated by suspending trade ties with India.

Until recently, Pakistan’s position vis-à-vis India emphasized a resolution to the

Kashmir issue as a prior step to movement on any other matters. Now, with Pakistan in a dire economic crisis, no prospects of a softened stance from India, and a possible third term as prime minister for Modi after India's looming general election, Pakistan might be forced to seek a resumption of trade ties while putting Kashmir on the backburner.

Ever since Modi became India's prime minister in 2014, there has always been anticipation in Pakistan—heightened during each Indian election season—that the Modi government will mobilize anti-Pakistan rhetoric to energize its base. In April 2019, at a campaign rally in Rajasthan before the last general election, Modi announced his readiness to use India's nuclear weapons against Pakistan. "Have we kept our nuclear bomb for Diwali?" he asked the crowd. Pakistan immediately denounced the remarks as "highly unfortunate and irresponsible" and a foreign office spokesperson called out Modi's use of such "rhetoric for short-term political and electoral gains, with complete disregard to its effects on strategic stability in South Asia," rightly deeming it "regrettable and against norms of responsible nuclear behavior."

Modi deployed similar hyperbole while talking about a cross-border commando operation in 2016 and an air raid on Pakistan's territory in early 2019 that New Delhi claimed to have conducted in retaliation for militant attacks on the Indian military in Jammu and Kashmir. The discussion around these operations, which Modi called "surgical strikes," had more political significance in India than actual military significance between India and Pakistan. By now they have even become the subjects of Bollywood movies, making them part of popular discourse in Modi's favor.

Just this month, the Guardian reported that intelligence officials from both countries had alleged that India had a policy of targeting terrorists on foreign soil, with 20 individuals killed in Pakistan since 2020. While India denied the report, its defense minister, Rajnath Singh, said that if "any terrorist will try to disturb India from Pakistan, we will give *muh tod jawaab*" ("a jaw-shattering answer"). He added, "If needed, Pakistan *mein ghus ke maareng*" ("If needed, we will infiltrate Pakistan and kill them"). Coming into another election season, Singh was repeating Modi's tough-on-terror rhetoric from the "surgical strikes" in 2019. In Pakistan, the report escalated fears over Indian conduct, further weakening the prospects of a normalization of ties between India and Pakistan—something that would entail a demilitarization around Kashmir, an end

to cross-border support for militancy by both countries and greater exchanges between Indians and Pakistanis via relaxed visa regimes as well as increased trade and cooperation.

The anti-Pakistan imperatives of Modi's regional policies, in Pakistan's view, are part of a broader anti-Muslim domestic politics that has defined the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) under Modi. Hindu nationalists have set Indian Muslims up as their hapless punching bags at home, and Pakistan, with its Muslim majority and acrimonious history with India, fills the same role on the regional stage. A recent [report](#) by India Hate Lab, a research group based in Washington, D.C., showed 668 recorded incidents of hate speech targeting Muslims in India in 2023. Of these events, 255 came in the first half of the year and 413 in the second half—marking a 62 percent increase in the build-up to the general election, with the majority of all these incidents taking place in Indian states with BJP governments in power. The dominant view in Pakistan is that this trend, and a corresponding inflammation of anti-Pakistan sentiment, will grow further as the Indian election gets underway in April and May, and also if—or if prevailing predictions are correct, when—Modi wins his third consecutive term.

With this anticipation, Pakistan's policymakers think that an India that continues under Modi will not be willing to engage with Pakistan vis-à-vis Kashmir, and will likely increase its support for militant groups operating against the Pakistan state, including the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan and Baloch separatist outfits. Almost five years after Article 370 was done away with, and with the Supreme Court of India since having dismissed all legal challenges to the validity of the action, the idea of Kashmir as a Delhi-administered region without its earlier special protections and limited autonomy has become deeply entrenched and institutionalized in India. Pakistan cannot realistically expect the Indian state to reverse this position. It will be extremely difficult, if not impossible, for even a non-BJP government to undo this change for fear of popular backlash, and also because of the court's judgment declaring that Kashmir has no internal sovereignty that sets it apart from other states and territories.

The Track II channel of diplomacy between India and Pakistan, which entails non-official meetings between retired officials and academics of the two countries, and in earlier decades was vaunted as a source of hope for peace, has also not been able to yield any meaningful results in the Modi years. Not only has it failed to move the needle on the issues of Kashmir and terrorism, but it has not even

done so on reopening official channels for dialogues and using diplomacy to resolve conflicts.

With the Indian state locked in on its stand on Kashmir, Pakistan is pushing for a new status quo mirroring the Sino-Indian model of bilateral ties. Broadly, this would mean opening up trade without necessarily pushing for a prior resolution of outstanding territorial disputes. For decades, and despite some clashes in mutually disputed zones in recent years, India and China have been able to steadily carry out and expand bilateral trade, whose present value stands at around \$136 billion per year. A 2018 World Bank estimate showed that India-Pakistan trade could grow to \$37 billion per year if the right conditions materialize. Pakistan, which has been on the verge of complete economic collapse for the last few years, cannot ignore the critical importance to its future of trade with India, and Islamabad has been trying to find a way to realize its promise.

When the pandemic hit, Pakistan resumed imports of pharmaceuticals from India, nine months after it suspended all trade with this neighbor. As its economic situation has deteriorated, it has lifted more restrictions to avail itself of cheap Indian goods. This March, Pakistan's foreign minister, Ishaq Dar, promised to "seriously look into matters of trade with India." It bears emphasizing that it is not just Pakistan that stands to gain: India could gain massive new markets in Pakistan, and resources to further fuel its growth. If anything, with its superior economy, India would secure the majority of the projected \$37 billion worth of bilateral trade—and all the political and diplomatic leverage that would also come with it.

Even for the Pakistani military, a minimal normalization of ties with India that can help change the country's economic situation, so long as it comes without an overt compromise on Kashmir, is not necessarily a tough bargain. Any subsequent boost to bilateral trade, which could involve the Pakistani military's approval and even participation through its [large business holdings](#), could help the military recover from [the recent domestic backlash](#) to its involvement in and manipulation of Pakistan's politics. In addition, if trade can reinforce peace on the border, this might allow the Pakistani military to focus more clearly on dealing with the resurgence of religious and nationalist militancy that has recently gripped parts of [Khyber Pakhtunkhwa](#) and [Balochistan](#) provinces.

For Pakistan, therefore, there are definite advantages to adopting the "Sino-

Indian” framework, but the key question is whether India, led by Modi and the BJP, will be willing to work with Pakistan to develop such a framework. As a corollary, Pakistan should also ask what it can do to convince India to pursue this model of bilateral relations.

The optimistic view is that there is already a base to work from. For more than three years, since February 2021, India and Pakistan have observed a [ceasefire along the Line of Control](#)—making this one of the longest-lasting ceasefires in the history of both countries and showing how negotiated settlements are possible not only to achieve but also to sustain. This ceasefire was instituted by the Modi government on India’s side, and there is reason to hope it will remain if a fresh Modi-led administration returns to power. In that eventuality, Pakistan can hope that a new Modi government can also be convinced to resume trade relations.

What Pakistan can do to maximize the probability of this is to eliminate any existing support for militant groups seeking the independence of Indian-administered Kashmir. For many years, New Delhi has consistently accused Pakistan of supporting terrorism, and the fact that many Pakistan-based militant groups seek Kashmir’s independence reinforces this claim. In 2022, Pakistan showed India it was serious about the issue when it sentenced Hafiz Saeed, the co-founder of the militant organization Lashkar-e-Taiba, to 31 years in prison on charges of financing terror. A larger and decisive break away from these groups might signal Pakistan’s readiness to positively engage with India.

Pakistan should also be watching how India has recently shifted its focus in regional relations away from the beleaguered South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and towards the newer Bay of Bengal Initiative of Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). BIMSTEC, headquartered in Dhaka, includes all the SAARC countries except Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the Maldives, and also includes Myanmar and Thailand. Leaving behind the western flank of the Subcontinent, and the India-Pakistan quarrels that have so often hobbled SAARC, BIMSTEC is being pitched as an alternative to SAARC and a mechanism to temper China’s influence over the region. BIMSTEC states supported Modi’s withdrawal from the SAARC summit scheduled for late 2016 in Islamabad, which India saw as a diplomatic victory over Pakistan.

BIMSTEC has its own limitations, but its development merits Pakistan’s attention, especially in what it says about the future of SAARC. For all its problems, SAARC

offers a potential space for Pakistan to engage with India in pursuit of normalization and trade. Pakistan's diplomats may do well to see how its fortunes could be revived.

Where things go next will only be clear after the Indian election. A strong BJP government might not feel the need to sit at a negotiating table with Pakistan, for reasons including its deeply entrenched anti-Pakistan and anti-Muslim politics—or, optimistically, a Modi completely assured of his domestic unassailability might feel he has the room to push for improved ties. There is no hiding, however, that this latter scenario is a remote possibility at best, as is the general possibility of a Sino-Indian-style relationship between India and Pakistan. There is a crucial difference between India's ties with Pakistan and its ties with China: India and China do not have a communal angle to their territorial conflict. Even if Pakistan wants to move away from its reliance on non-state actors in Kashmir to achieve meaningful improvement in the bilateral relationship, a Modi-led India, with its institutionally cultivated hate against Muslims and Pakistan, is unlikely to take any step that can undermine its political standing at home.

If Modi's India continues to relentlessly pursue its Hindu nationalist ideals, with an aggressive antipathy towards Muslims and a suppression of the fundamental rights of the Indian Muslim community, it will be equally politically difficult for Pakistan's government to seriously advocate for improved trade and relations, despite its economic desperation.

By Salman Rafi Sheikh

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Source: Himal Southasian/Globetrotter

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Raising Hairless Primates



04-24-2024 ~ I remember the first time I observed my daughter pointing. We were at a neighborhood playgroup, a daily gathering of toddlers and their parents, and 12-month-old Tessa pointed at a painting of a koala on the wall. I marveled at her, almost yipping with joy. In the days and weeks that followed she pointed with growing frequency at things that

interested her, and, more importantly, things she wanted to share with me. And every time she did this, I looked at her in astonishment. The other parents thought I was nuts.

Earlier in my life, I was a primatologist—I studied behavior and communication in capuchin monkeys, chimpanzees, and bonobos (the latter a relative of the chimpanzee, but a distinct species with very different behavioral characteristics). I eventually specialized in gestural and multimodal communication in great apes. Great apes have more cortical control over their hands than other primates, and they use their hands to gesture to one another. In addition to gestures, apes use facial expressions and vocalizations to communicate, and sometimes they use all three modalities simultaneously (as humans do)—hence the term “multimodal communication.”

One thing I always looked for while gathering my data was pointing; it was rare among the socially housed, outdoor-living chimps I studied, and the handful of times I observed it, it was a big deal. To be sure, chimps have other ways to signal to each other what they want, but pointing with their index fingers isn't usually one of them. When I saw this very common behavior develop in my own child, my appreciation deepened for just how complex (and social) human cognition is.

Primatologists study our closest living relatives for a variety of reasons—to intrinsically understand more about their lives (diet, habitat, mating patterns,

genetics), to understand how they interact with their environments, and to shed light on what our last common ancestor with the apes might have been like. One of the enduring mysteries of human evolution is how much of our behavior and cognition is uniquely human and how much can be found in living primate species. This was my research focus.

When I stared in amazement as my daughter pointed to the koala painting while looking at me, what the other parents didn't know was that I was marveling at how often human toddlers point, and referentially point, at that—meaning children point to share attention, not just to obtain things. The distinction is known as declarative vs. imperative pointing—"Hey Mom, look at that cool thing over there!" as opposed to "Give me that piece of candy on the shelf." Pointing is considered a hallmark of communication, language development, and joint attention (when one individual wants another to pay attention to the same thing she is looking at), and neurotypical toddlers do it all the time (the absence of pointing is a marker for autism).

In addition to my daughter Tessa, I have a son, Eli, who is two years younger than her. Like all siblings, they are obsessed with fairness (I don't believe any parent who says their kids aren't). If one kid gets a cookie that's even a millimeter bigger than the other's, all hell breaks loose. You can try all you want to justify to them why one cookie is bigger, but the kids aren't having it. We tend to think this focus on fairness is uniquely human, but my lab colleague Sarah Brosnan and our PhD advisor Frans de Waal corrected this notion 20 years ago in a landmark study aptly named "Capuchins Reject Unequal Pay." In this study, two brown capuchins (highly intelligent South American monkeys) worked side by side on a token exchange task. As a reward, each received a cucumber slice. When the monkeys received the same reward for the same work, all was peaceful. That peace was quickly disrupted when one received a grape (more desirable than the cucumber) and the other still got the cucumber. After being perfectly happy with a cucumber, once the monkey saw the other one's grape, he lost it; he literally threw it out of his enclosure with what I freely admit is an anthropomorphized sense of indignance. Capuchins reject unequal pay indeed.

When I see my children argue over the fact that one's backpack is taking up an inch more space on his side of the car than the other's, I try to remember that this is evolutionarily ancient behavior, one that ensures that cooperation is beneficial to our species. Why do we care if someone gets more than we do, all other things

being equal? In the long term, if we feel assured that everyone is putting in equal amounts of work for similar pay, we're more willing to cooperate. I tell this to my kids, but for some reason, they don't act like rational beings and bicker less. But when they figure out that cooperating nets them big payoffs (such as stepping on each other's shoulders to reach the candy I thought I'd so cleverly hidden), they're my shining examples of evolutionary continuity. I couldn't be more proud.

Viewing my children through primatological glasses provides me with an ongoing perspective on raising them. When they have tantrums, argue over the last slice of cake, or try to get my attention through gestures, those glasses enable me to take a step back and recognize a broader purpose (I hope!) of their behavior. And this perspective also helps me feel another layer of connection. Remembering that we're all one big primate family makes the wilds of human parenting a little more manageable—and fun.

By Amy Pollick

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