

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



*Laurel Sutherlin ~
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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. Alarming, 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

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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 maarenge*" ("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

Credit Line: This article is part of "[Modi's India from the Edges](#)," a special series by [Himal Southasian](#) presenting Southasian regional perspectives on Narendra Modi's decade in power and possible return as prime minister in the 2024 Indian election. The article is distributed in partnership with [Globetrotter](#).

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

Author Bio: Amy Pollick received her PhD in animal behavior from Emory University, working with Frans de Waal on gestural and multimodal communication in great apes. She is a former director of government relations for the Association for Psychological Science, and she has taught at Gallaudet University. She lives in Washington, D.C.

Source: Human Bridges

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Senator Cardin Must Help End The Blockade Of Cuba



04-22-2024 ~ Cuba is going hungry. The costs of food and other basic necessities are [skyrocketing](#). Rolling [blackouts](#) periodically plunge the island into darkness. Parents struggle to find [milk](#) for their children.

For the first time in history, the government has [asked](#) the UN for food aid.

The people of Cuba are facing their [worst humanitarian crisis](#) in decades. But Maryland Senator Ben Cardin has the power to help. We, as faith leaders concerned for our siblings in Cuba, urge him to act.

When President Obama took office, he recognized that U.S.-Cuba policy needed a change. For over half a century, the powerful United States has imposed a strict embargo (considered by many to be a [blockade](#)) on the small island nation. The main consequence of this policy has been the suffering of everyday Cubans. A [fettered economy](#), [deteriorating infrastructure](#), lack of access to [food](#) and [medicine](#)—the costs of the blockade are borne by the entire Cuban people.

President Obama began a process of easing these harsh restrictions and thawing relations between our two nations. The people of Cuba were [overjoyed](#); for once, their future looked bright.

Then came President Trump. In short order, Trump undid virtually all of the progress that Obama had made. In his last week in office, Trump even [added](#) Cuba to the State Sponsors of Terrorism list, a designation that top Democrat and Republican officials [have called](#) “bogus” and “a fiction,” and that effectively cuts investment-starved Cuba off from the international financial system.

When Biden became president, hopes of a return to the Obama approach were rekindled. After all, Biden had been Vice President at a time when easing restrictions yielded immediate benefits for Cuban civilians while [winning](#) the [support](#) of U.S. voters. But instead, Biden has kept almost all of the Trump policies in place, and the Cuban people are now paying the price.

The combination of the COVID-19 pandemic and Trump’s sanctions has ignited such a crisis that [over 4 percent](#) of the Cuban population has left the country in search of a better life in the United States in the past two years alone.

U.S.-Cuba policy is stuck in the Trump era. But as Senator Cardin prepares to retire, he has a chance to chart a new path.

Last year, Cardin assumed the powerful position of Chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, taking over from the hardline pro-blockade New Jersey Senator Bob Menendez, who had to [step down](#) after being indicted on bribery-related charges.

That's why we recently joined over thirty Maryland-based organizations, and dozens of community leaders, in sending a letter urging Senator Cardin to help end the blockade. As Senator Menendez used his position to block any measure of relief for the Cuban people, Senator Cardin can promote reform, supporting and advancing legislative efforts such as those that would repeal the [Torricelli](#) and [Helms-Burton](#) acts, and could wield his role to pressure Biden to take unilateral action, such as [removing](#) Cuba from the State Sponsors of Terrorism list.

Uniting churches, immigrant rights organizations, University of Maryland academics, Young Democrat clubs, and over a dozen ordained ministers and rabbis, we wrote: "As you are soon to depart from Congress, your actions in the coming year may define how you are remembered. It is our hope that your legacy will be as someone who is willing to transcend the inertia of the status quo and do what is right; for the people of Cuba, the United States, and the world."

This is not a fringe demand. As our letter notes, [poll](#) after [poll](#) after [poll](#) show that most Democrats and Republicans alike support an end to the blockade. That's to say nothing of the rest of the world; last year, the United Nations General Assembly [voted](#) to condemn the blockade by a vote 187 to 2. It was the 31st time the resolution has passed nearly unanimously.

Whatever we may make of the Cuban government, and whatever share of the responsibility it holds for the state of the Cuban economy, nothing justifies the United States intentionally starving the Cuban people. Our faiths demand that we stand up to such injustice, and build a world that respects the inherent dignity of all people.

Senator Cardin has a window of opportunity to help right a historic wrong, ease the suffering of millions, and define his legacy as a true forward-thinking leader. But that window is closing fast. It's time for him to act.

By Rev. Deborah McEachran and Rev. Dr. Eliezer Valentín-Castañón

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