



Japan and India: Looking Beyond the Economy

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Nakamizo Kazuya [\[Profile\]](#)

Narendra Modi has embarked on his second term as India's prime minister, following a convincing victory in May's elections. In this article, a leading specialist on South Asian affairs argues that Japan is wrong to focus exclusively on economic cooperation in its relations with India, and should no longer turn a blind eye to the dangerous side of Modi's Hindu supremacist project.

Against most expectations, Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party won a convincing victory in the general elections in India in May this year. The response from the Japanese government and business leaders has been overwhelmingly positive, and Prime Minister Abe Shinzō lost no time in sending his congratulations becoming the first foreign leader to do so. A report in the *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper on May 24 quoted a senior figure involved in Japan's foreign policy as saying that the next five years promised to be an ideal period for building a closer

relationship between Japan and India in fields such as national security and economic cooperation.

Personally, I predict that the BJP government is settling in for a long period (Nakamizo 2019). In this essay, both as a Japanese citizen and as a specialist in Indian studies, I want to consider the relations between the BJP government and Japan and to examine some of the questions affecting how Japan should position itself in relation to the BJP government.

Prime Ministers of India since 1980

1980-84	Indira Gandhi	Indian National Congress
1984-89	Rajiv Gandhi	Indian National Congress
1989-90	Vishwanath Pratap Singh	Janata Dal
1990-91	Chandra Shekhar	Samajwadi Janata Party
1991-96	P. V. Narasimha Rao	Indian National Congress
1996	Atal Bihari Vajpayee	BJP
1996-97	H. D. Deve Gowda	Janata Dal
1997-98	Inder Kumar Gujral	Janata Dal
1998-2004	Atal Bihari Vajpayee	BJP
2004-14	Manmohan Singh	Indian National Congress
2014-	Narendra Modi	BJP

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The Essence of the BJP

The first thing we need to do is to understand the essence of the BJP. It is a right-wing religious party whose aim is to make India into a “Hindu Rashtra” (nation). Its parent organization is the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, which can be loosely translated as “National Volunteer Organization”; the RSS, along with other, similar right-wing religious volunteer organizations, are collectively known as the Sangh Pariwar. Their philosophy is inspired by the idea of Hindutva, or “Hinduness,” as defined by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar in a book published in 1923. He describes Hindus as a people of a common nation (*rashtra*), common race (*jati*), and common culture (*sanskriti*) for whom India (*Sindhusthan*) is their fatherland (*pitribhu*) and holy land (*punyabhū*). For this reason, those who have converted to Islam or Christianity cannot be Hindus, even though they share the same fatherland and culture with the Hindus, because their holy land is outside of India.

India has been rocked by a succession of violent attacks on Muslims since Modi’s re-election. This violence is a manifestation in extreme forms of the party’s central claims that it will make India into a “Hindu Rashtra.”

Modi’s Politics: Economic Growth and Hindu Supremacism

Prime Minister Modi is a product of the RSS and a true believer in this supremacist creed. Realizing the “Hindu Rashtra” is a key part of his political faith. In Japan, there is a tendency to see him simply as a leader who has introduced a barrage of economic reforms, but to emphasize this side of him alone paints a distorted and misleading picture. Modi’s political engine is driven by the twin cogs of economic growth and Hindu supremacy; it cannot move forward on one of these alone. During the recent election campaign, he strongly attacked Pakistan for terrorist incidents, a move that actually was aimed at hiding his government’s own miserable failures in solving the unemployment problem. This approach of laying the blame on terrorism and Pakistan can be fairly described as emblematic of his approach to politics.

Modi first showed his political acumen in the context of communal violence and riots. After being all but wiped out in the 1984 elections for the lower house, the BJP successfully revived its fortunes and considerably increased its number of seats in the 1989 elections by using religious mobilization and related communal violence. Not long after this success, the BJP organized the Ayodhya mobilization (Rath Yatra) —marshalling right-wing religious forces to oppose the presence of a mosque on a site regarded as sacred by Hindus. This was in part carried out to counter the mobilization of backward castes through the 1990 declaration of the implementation of the Mandal Commission report, which sought to redress caste-based discrimination. More than 600 people were killed in the riots related to the Ayodhya mobilization in 1990, exacerbating tensions between the Hindu and Muslim communities (Nakamizo 2012: 249–257).

Communal violence reached a new nadir not long after Modi assumed office as chief minister of Gujarat state in 2001, with the Gujarat carnage of 2002 (Nakamizo 2015: 219–243). Government statistics say 1,180 people lost their lives in the violence. Modi was widely believed to have been complicit in the killings, and although he was later absolved of legal responsibility, he was roundly criticized by international society. Famously, he was barred for a time from entering the United States. Achin Vanaik, a former professor at the University of Delhi, has argued that Modi’s travels as prime minister—more than 60 visits to foreign countries in his first three years in office—“have had much more to do with Modi wanting to overcome his international ‘pariah’ status after the Gujarat pogrom (where, despite his command responsibility, he has gone unpunished) and to pose as a global statesman, than with having to make diplomatic deals at the very highest levels with all the countries visited” (Vanaik 2017: 369).

At the state assembly elections held in December 2002, nine months after the massacres, Modi won an overwhelming victory by fanning the flames of communal feelings. After securing his power base, he shifted his focus to economic development, eventually achieving economic growth above the Indian average and boasting of what he called the “Gujarat model.” Hopes for wider economic growth were the biggest factor behind his victory in the 2014 general election, and during the five years of his first term, he claimed to achieve average economic growth rates of 7% a year, although some doubts remain about the methodology used to measure this growth.

But his government was not all about the economy. He did not fail to put the Hindu supremacist project into practice as well, and his first term in office saw new strategies unleashed for oppressing Muslims and other religious minorities. One example is the rise of, and implicit encouragement for, vigilante groups of “cow protectors,” who have terrorized Muslims in many parts of the country. Although there have not yet been any major religious riots on the scale of those in Gujarat in

2002, vigilante violence has spread across the country and has become even more common since Modi was re-elected in May 2019.

The sudden announcement on August 5, 2019, that Jammu and Kashmir would be stripped of their special status and placed as union territories was another aspect of his Hindu supremacist policy. Now that it has achieved the first of the three main agendas of the BJP, by getting rid of Article 370 of the Constitution, the government is likely to push ahead with the remaining two, namely drawing up a uniform civil code (abolishing separate personal law for Muslims), and building the Ram temple at Ayodhya. I am of the strong conviction that the overt and direct repression of Muslims is likely to become more intense, and Indo-Pakistan relations are going to get worse.

Narendra and Shinzō: Birds of a Feather?

How should Japan deal with Modi's government, given these characteristics? As I said at the outset, the personal relationship between the two prime ministers seems to be extremely cordial. Modi chose Japan as the destination for his first overseas trip outside South Asia after becoming prime minister. The reason is not difficult to discern. In a context where the United States and other Western countries were continuing to ask awkward questions about his responsibility for the Gujarat carnage, Japan did not make it an issue at all. On the contrary, Japan continued to invest in Gujarat, and thus supported Modi's bid to become prime minister. It is only natural that he should have felt a debt of gratitude.



Abe Shinzō and Narendra Modi visit the Central Technical Center of Fanuc, a leader in the field of industrial robotics. Taken on October 28, 2018, in Oshino, Yamanashi Prefecture. (© Jiji)

Abe also feels a personal affection for India. The most important strategic reason for wanting a strong relationship with India is to help build a coalition capable of containing China. But in Abe's case, the significance of India goes beyond this. For him, India is a country that has shown its friendship and loyalty by supporting the "Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere" ideology he is fond of. In Abe's view, it was the Indians who above all else responded to the promises of Japanese propaganda to smash Western colonial rule in Asia during the "Greater East Asian

War". Indians helped form the Indian National Army and fought alongside the Japanese in the Imphal operations, and it was an Indian judge, Radhabinod Pal, who declared all the Class A war criminals not guilty at the Tokyo trials after the war.⁽¹⁾

In fact, Japan's war caused catastrophic suffering in India, albeit indirectly. Nevertheless, India renounced any claims against Japan, and Kishi Nobusuke, Abe's grandfather, later became the first Japanese prime minister to visit India (Horimoto 2017: 14–15). In light of this, it is not difficult to understand why Abe went out of his way during his first visit to India as prime minister in 2007 to visit Pal's eldest son despite an illness. In his speech to the Indian parliament, he said: "Justice Pal is highly respected even today by many Japanese for the noble spirit of courage he exhibited during the International Military Tribunal for the Far East."⁽²⁾

Two Japanese Myths About India

Is it really true that India supported the "Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere" ? In fact, leading figures including Gandhi and Nehru were strongly critical of Japanese imperialism and militarism (Takenaka 2017: 302), and the Indian National Congress took China's side throughout the Second Sino-Japanese War. It is true that some members of the independence movement supported Chandra Bose, who led the Indian National Army, but they were a minority far removed from the mainstream of the independence movement. The idea that India as a whole was sympathetic to the "Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere" is a nothing more than a myth.

Another myth holds that no historical problems exist between Japan and India relating to the Second World War—unlike those that continue to bedevil Japan's relations with China and Korea. In fact, Japan's war caused huge suffering to Indian society. The Battle of Imphal, in which Japan attempted to launch an invasion of British India, is well known in Japan, because many Japanese soldiers lost their lives there. Less widely remembered today is the fact that after the Japanese occupied British Burma in 1942, they carried out air raids and bombing attacks on major cities along the Bay of Bengal in India and Ceylon, including Calcutta.

When I visited Trincomalee in Sri Lanka, one of these sorties was still remembered by a signboard marking the site of a Japanese "suicide attack." But the most serious consequence of the war in India was the Bengal famine of 1942–43. In preparation for an expected Japanese invasion, the British colonial government imposed a series of "denial policies" designed to deprive invading forces of food and other useful materiel, including boats. The policy resulted in the seizure of many boats and ships crucial to commerce in the Bengal region, making transport of grain impossible. An estimated 3 million people died in the resulting famine.⁽³⁾



A signboard in Trincomalee, Sri Lanka, commemorates an attack by a Japanese fighter plane during World War II. (Photo by the author)

This figure, almost equal to the number of Japanese war dead, leaves no room for doubt that Japan's war caused catastrophic losses in Indian society, albeit indirectly. Similar "denial policies" were implemented in Orissa, where farmers apparently appealed to Gandhi's disciple Mirabehn, asking: "Do we all have to be killed before the Japanese invasion?" (Nagasaki 1989: 192)

If I ever mention this in my lectures, it is clear that almost none of the students have ever heard anything about it. My guess is that most Japanese people would be the same. When discussing our relations with India, people often refer back to the positive exchanges the country had with cultural figures like Swami Vivekananda and Rabindranath Tagore before the war. But if we are going to go back that far, I believe, it is important to be aware of the serious suffering that Japanese militarism brought to Indian society as well.

Dealing with India

In light of the points I have made so far, how should Japan deal with India as it exists today, dominated by a party driven by a Hindu supremacist philosophy? I would like to make two propositions.

The first is that the discourse of "shared values" that seems to receive obligatory lip service at summits and similar occasions should not be simply window-dressing. Presumably these "common values" are supposed to be things like liberty, democracy, and respect for human rights. It is hard to say that these values are being respected in India today, where Muslims and other religious minorities find themselves oppressed and persecuted. The violence perpetrated against Muslims by the cow protection vigilante groups is no secret: it is described in considerable detail not only in the Indian media but in the annual reports on religious freedom published by the US State Department, among other sources.⁽⁴⁾

In a high-flown speech during his first visit to India as prime minister, Abe made the following statement: "I would like to emphasize today to the people of India that the Japanese people stand ready to work together with the Indian people so that this spirit of tolerance becomes the leading principle of this century."⁽⁵⁾ I strongly urge Abe to carry out his word. In fact, the United States, Japan's most important alliance partner, not only expresses deep concern about the oppression

against religious minorities, but also maintains contact with the leaders of religious minorities and NGO activists. The Japanese government should convey serious concern about the violation of human rights in India and urge a stop to them at top-level meetings. Regarding the Indo-Pakistan relationship, the Japanese government should strongly urge self-restraint.

It remains difficult, however, to imagine that the Abe government will put any pressure to bear on Modi with regard to human rights. The key will be solidarity between the citizens of Japan and India. The Modi government has taken steps to cut off funding from overseas for NGOs working in India that have been critical of the government. A personal acquaintance of mine who operates an NGO in India has been forced to reduce the scale of the organization's activities for this reason.

In this situation, solidarity between citizens across national borders is not easy, but it is important and crucial to let people who are facing discrimination and human rights violations in India know that they are not alone. It is not always easy to obtain enough information about India in the Japanese media, but reports are gradually increasing. I hope the media will report more information about what is actually happening in India, and that readers in Japan will stop regarding themselves as mere bystanders and become more engaged in learning more about what is happening. These are important first steps toward resolving the current crisis facing democracy worldwide.

The second point I would make is that we should be cautious with regard to widening the frame of military cooperation. Military cooperation is currently expanding across a multilateral framework encompassing many countries, including India, in the name of securing sea lanes for oil, and ensuring free and open navigation across Indo-Pacific. The reality is that this is part of a strategy of military containment designed to fight back against China's apparent "string of pearls" strategy to develop a series of strategic military and commercial centers from the South China Sea to the Horn of Africa.

A major point of debate in Japan at the moment concerns the extent to which the Self-Defense Forces can be allowed to operate outside the parameters of homeland defense. The reality is that the definition of what is permissible is widening all the time. We have already reached a situation in which military cooperation is cited alongside the economy as a priority area for the Japan-India relationship. It is essential to be prudent in the years ahead and to make sure we discern carefully what the true objectives of both governments are.

Japan and India are two Asian countries that pride themselves on having followed a democratic system since the end of World War II. India now finds itself on the front lines of a widening global democratic crisis, and freedom of expression is under serious threat in Japan too. In this context, citizens can play a significant and important role. I hope the people of Japan and India will pool their collective wisdom and cooperate to build a better world together: This would be the best way to protect the democracy that both countries have valued more than anything else in the years since the war.

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(Originally published in Japanese. Banner photo: Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi arrives at Kansai International Airport on June 27, 2019, to attend the G20 Summit in Osaka. © Jiji.)

(*1) ^ See Nakazato (2011) for an excellent study that uses historical documentary evidence to show the fictitious way in which the Pal myth was created in Japan. Nakazato (2016) covers the subject in English.

(*2) ^ “Confluence of the Two Seas.” Speech by Abe Shinzō at the Parliament of the Republic of India, August 22, 2007. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html> accessed on August.2, 2019

(*3) ^ The number of victims is normally put at 3 million, but a government investigation team estimated the number as between 1 million and 3 million people. See Nakazato (2007: 190).

(*4) ^ US Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, India 2018 International Religious Freedom Report. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/india/> (accessed on August 2, 2019.)

(*5) ^ “Confluence of the Two Seas,” referred to in footnote 2.



Nakamizo Kazuya

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Professor at the University of Kyoto, where he specializes in South Asian studies and political science. One of the major publication is awards winning *Indo bōryoku to minshushugi: Ittō yūi shihai no hōkai to aidentiti no seiji*, (Violence and Democracy in India: The Collapse of Single-Party Rule and Identity Politics). University of Tokyo Press,2012, forthcoming in English by Kyoto University Press and Trans Pacific Press in 2020

