

## LIBERTY WATCH - INDIA

November 2019 began with much of northern India engulfed in toxic haze, gasping for breath. If international commentators are to be believed, similarly hazy are India's claims of being a pluralistic democracy. The Financial Times [noted](#) that India's march to illiberalism under Prime Minister Modi continues to proceed apace since his re-election, with alarming implications for the country's minorities. Another commentator in the same paper [lamented](#) the free pass that Modi has been given by the West for too long, remarking that he is a threat not just to India but to global efforts to fight authoritarianism. Other outlets revealed efforts by pro-Modi forces to [influence](#) foreign elections, and to [peddle](#) fake news and propaganda on a massive scale internationally.

As 1.9 million people raced to save themselves from statelessness in Assam, a man who described Bengali-speaking Muslims as "East Pakistanis" was [appointed](#) to oversee the rest of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) exercise. Home Minister Amit Shah reiterated, in Parliament this time, that the exercise would eventually be [extended](#) to the rest of the country. Efforts to complement the NRC with the blatantly Islamophobic Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB) before the end of the ongoing Parliamentary session are already [underway](#). Meanwhile, Shah's deputy, Nityanand Rai informed Parliament that 28 people have [died](#) in Assam's detention centres for "foreigners", and that 988 remain in custody. 90% of these deaths have [occurred](#) after the BJP assumed power in the state, according to Citizens for Justice & Peace (CJP).

In Kashmir, which according to Home Minister Shah is experiencing "[total normalcy](#)" after officially coming under the direct control of the central government, special forces from the Army, Navy and the Air Force were deployed [jointly](#), for the first time ever. The move was followed by reports of multiple [attacks](#) by alleged militants that left at least 4 people dead. Meanwhile, the protracted shutdown has caused economic losses of over a billion dollars, with Kashmir's main trade body announcing plans to sue the government for [damages](#). The government-enforced Internet gag - now approaching its 120th day - continues to cripple the economy, apart from choking journalism, communication and access to information for Kashmiris. Cable television operators in the region were [warned](#) by the central government to block content from Muslim nations. As another one of Shah's deputies [routed](#) 99.7% attendance in Kashmir's schools during ongoing examinations, media reports revealed that children continue to be routinely 'picked up' and [assaulted](#) by security forces, blatantly violating numerous international norms of juvenile justice. Their mothers have [revealed](#) horror stories of their attempts to navigate through India's labyrinthine legal system and secure the children's release. In Washington D.C., the second US Congressional [hearing](#) on Kashmir in a month, provided Kashmiris another rare chance to present their narrative to the world. In New York, India's consul general remarked that "Hindu culture" should be kept alive in Kashmir by [emulating](#) Israel's model of building illegal settlements in its occupied territories. In Alwar, Rajasthan, four Kashmiri Muslim students were declared "terrorists" and [beaten up](#) by a mob of 70 fellow students.

In Delhi, the Supreme Court gave filip to further degrading of India's secular credentials and the rule of law, [unanimously](#) awarding the site of the demolished Babri Masjid in Ayodhya to Hindus, even as it acknowledged the crime of the demolition committed in 1992. No one - including senior BJP leaders of the day and those from allied Hindu extremist groups charged of the crime - has been convicted to this [day](#). Modi [lauded](#) the judgement as a "new dawn" and an opportunity for Hindus and Muslims to put aside past misgivings, but his Hindutva stormtroopers revived their old [war cry](#): *Yeh to keval jhanki hai. Kashi, Mathura baaki hai.* ("This is just a preview, Kashi and Mathura are still left" - a reference to similarly [disputed](#) mosque sites elsewhere). In another development, the Delhi High Court began an attempt to [purge](#) Urdu, a language traditionally associated with India's Muslims, from official documents. In Rajasthan, nine Muslim policemen were ordered to [shave](#) their beards and look "unbiased." In Gujarat, the sale of a property to a Muslim was [halted](#) after vociferous protests by Hindu neighbours. At the Banaras Hindu University (BHU) in Varanasi - that PM Modi represents in Par-

liament - students [protested](#) against the appointment of a Muslim professor in the Sanskrit department. Finally, at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) in Chennai, 19-year-old Fathima Latheef [hung](#) herself to death after alleging repeated harassment by her professors.

In the face of a [failing](#) economy, targeted attacks against minorities have continued unabated. In Jharkhand, a Muslim man was [lynched](#) to death by an angry mob that accused him of being a thief. Cow-related lynchings were reported from Bihar's [Katihar](#) and West Bengal's [Coochbehar](#) districts too. And over 10,000 Adivasis, indigenous people, in Jharkhand have been charged with [sedition](#) since 2017 for invoking the Indian Constitution to demand their tribal rights.

As has the targeting of critics of the ruling regime. Aatish Taseer, a US-based columnist of Indian origin, who wrote a cover piece in Time Magazine decrying Modi's [divisive](#) tendencies, had his Overseas Citizen of India (OCI) status [revoked](#), effectively banning him from visiting India. Kannan Gopinathan, a former bureaucrat who had resigned over India's recent clampdown in Kashmir, was formally [chargesheeted](#). Amnesty International's offices in Delhi and Bangalore were [raided](#). And a massive, illegal state [surveillance](#) operation was unearthed, with WhatsApp [revealing](#) that Pegasus, a spyware developed by an Israeli firm that sells only to government bodies, was used to hack into the phones of at least 121 Indian journalists, lawyers and activists. Google's Threat Analysis Group (TAG) [revealed](#) that it too has warned up to 500 Indian users that they may have been the victims of similar snooping attempts by "government-backed actors".

State authorities have been quick to come down heavily on other dissenters too. At the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), a traditional liberal bastion, students protesting government's fee hike were brutally [thrashed](#) and detained by Police. And at Banaras Hindu University's Mirzapur campus, a senior university official was [booked](#) and forced to quit after he removed from university premises a flag belonging to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) – the Hindutva umbrella organisation, of which the ruling BJP is a part, and which has been banned twice since Independence, for its violent anti-national activities, including its role in the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi in 1948.

In Parliament recently, BJP MP and terror accused in the Malegaon blast [case](#), Pragya Singh Thakur [repeated](#) her assertion that Nathuram Godse, an RSS ally and Gandhi's assassin, was a *deshbhakt* (patriot). This attracted only a soft reprimand from her party. As Thakur's parent organisation, the RSS, goes about steadfastly realising its vision of India as a majoritarian and exclusivist Hindu nation, those who believed that India's true greatness lay in its traditions of pluralism and tolerance, find themselves increasingly sidelined.

**Citizens Against Hate**

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