**Transcript**

(Theme music in)

**Emmanuel Kattan, Host**: This is “Vis à Vis”, a new podcast series brought to you by the Alliance Program at Columbia University. "Vis a Vis" features conversations that challenge our understanding of key global, economic and social issues by casting them in a transatlantic perspective. I’m Emmanuel Kattan. I head the Alliance Program, a partnership between Columbia University and 3 French universities: Sciences Po, Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne and Ecole Polytechnique. Every episode, I sit down face to face – or as we say in French, “Vis a Vis” – with some of the most insightful thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic. I hope you enjoy our conversation.

(Theme music out)

**Kattan**: In today's episode, we’re asking the question: is India becoming an ethnic democracy? Since being elected prime minister in 2014, Narendra Modi and the BJP party he leads have implemented legislation and policies that call into question India's commitment to democracy. Today, legitimate dissent in India is compromised. The BJP has used the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act to designate individuals as terrorists without providing corroborating evidence, and provisions in the penal code have been invoked to silence journalists. Three years ago, the Indian Parliament passed a law providing a pathway to citizenship for persecuted minorities from neighboring countries, explicitly excluding individuals from Muslim faith. Is India's democracy in decline? Will the BJP’s majoritarian rule erode India's tradition of pluralism, secularism and religious tolerance? Do authoritarian features of the current government point towards India becoming an ethnic illiberal democracy?

To answer these questions, we brought together two experts on India, Christophe Jaffrelot and Manan Ahmed. Christophe Jaffrelot, you are a professor of South Asia's politics at Sciences Po and a professor of Indian politics at King's College London. You've written a great number of books and articles about India and Pakistan. Let me just mention the two most recent ones: *Majoritarian State: How Hindu Nationalism is Changing India*, and *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy*. Manan Ahmed, you are an associate professor of history at Columbia University. You're also the author of several publications on South Asia. In 2016, you published *A Book of Conquest: Chachnama and Muslim Origins in South Asia*. And in 2020, your book *The Loss of Hindustan: The Invention of India* was published by Harvard University Press.

Professor Jaffrelot, let me start with you. Your book *Modi's India* describes in great detail Narendra Modi's rise to power. He spent 13 years as Chief Minister of Gujarat before his election as prime minister of India in 2014. How did his term in Gujarat prefigure his leadership of India today? And are there policies, specific policies implemented in Gujarat that shaped his politics?

**Christohpe Jaffrelot, Guest**: Well, definitely, Narendra Modi learned how to be a politician in Gujarat. He was primarily a caterer in a very important organization, the RSS, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, that is, the matrix of the Indian nationalist movement since 1925. Very, very old organization. And after becoming Chief Minister of Gujarat in 2001, he became a politician and he had to, in fact, invent his own repertoire. Something he did very creatively, if you want to look at it positively, because he combined into nationalism, the RSS ideology, and populism. That is something you can see in, of course, a very dramatic matter in 2002, when the anti-Muslim pogrom that took place in Gujarat resulted in the death of something like two dozen Muslims. So, he was chief minister, and in a way presided over this program. That was the Hindu nationalist facet of his trajectory. Only a few months after he became chief minister, but he balanced that and he combined that with a new style, a style that you can call "populist," because he claimed that he was the people. That he represented the people. But broadly, because he was from the plebeians, he is someone from a low, with a low caste background. He was selling tea on the platform off the station of his little town. At least that's what the legend says. He could say, "I am the people and, and I'm going to fight for the people against elite people." That's something nobody had really tried before. But last and not least, he did it in a very sophisticated manner. He is very tech savvy. He was the first one to use social media. He was the first one to use holograms. He was the first one to use, also, TV channels dedicated to his campaigns in 2007, 2012.

**Kattan**: You mentioned the riots in Gujarat in 2002. Turning to you, Professor Ahmed, what was the background to this violence? What role did it play in the rise of Narendra Modi? How was he able to capitalize on these riots?

**Manan Ahmed, Guest**: So, you know, let me just begin by saying I think one of the things that Christohpe's book has given us — *Modi's*, *Modi's India* — is a template for how the last 20 years of Indian politics has shifted in a in a remarkable manner, such that the world of Vajpayee or Indira Gandhi almost seems kind of unimaginable anymore. And part of that is the question of violence. And part of that is the routinization of violence. And the use of violence as a, as a flashpoint, or as an exemplary case for the state to, to enact its, its will. Everything from where, in Gujarat under Amit Shah Modi, there are very routine types of violence, encounter killings, specific targeting of individuals were shot and killed, and then told to the press that these are Pakistani agents or terrorists, to spectacular violence, such as the 2002 pogroms against Muslims, that, you know, Modi became kind of internationally known for. But there's a connection between these very small encounter killings and these types of orchestrated, state police-involved programs, as one would one would call it. And that's the kind of question of violence that creates a set of what Christophe calls in his book, these, "the vigilante state," right, the state that in which, you know, a organization of young people like the Bajrang Dal is the kind of force that mobilizes at the very local level, at the level of the neighborhood or the bazaar.

And where, what happens in February 2002, as we know, is, is connected intimately to, to 9/11, to 2001, in terms of a global conversation against Muslims. But for India, it has its roots really with 1947, '48, when, when Jawaharlal Nehru's prime minister, who was the Prime Minister, his home minister, begins the campaign to rebuild the Somnath Temple. So, right from the very beginning '52, '51, there is a there is an idea in Gujarat precisely, and in other parts, which is that we need a return to a Hindu Golden Age after a dark period of Muslim rule, and then a liberal colonial phase. But also '90, '92, when a mosque, Babri Masjid, is demolished by *kar sevaks*, by apparatchiks of RSS, BJP, Bajrang Dal and others. And this demolition of a mosque is a type of, I think, radical act of mass politics. That really the person who has gotten ahold of it and us- and turned it into the authoritarian vigilante state is Narendra Modi.

**Kattan**: Anti-Muslim politics — as you show, Professor Ahmed — is a very important dimension of Modi's populism. Another appeal of his populism, it seems to me, is the fact that he has been able to position the BJP as a friend both of upper castes and of Dalits and so-called “lower castes.” How did his party achieve such a feat? And does that mean that different messages were being put to different groups of people, or that similar policies appealed to both the upper castes and the so-called “lower castes”? Professor Jaffrelot.

**Jaffrelot**: The poor, the low-caste people, can somewhat look at him as one of the representatives. As one of them. This is something that you is very well-documented in Pierre Ostiguy's analysis of populism. The populist is the leader who can be both like me, and a super, superhero in a way, a super-human. That's one. Another explanation is of course, when you highlight religion as the main identity, you can claim: "Forget about your class, forget about your caste, you are part of a majority, the group. You deserve to prevail. And the other is the Muslim, or the Christian." But there's a third explanation that is a more complicated one. And this is what I call the, the "products of reservations." You know, reservations in India is another word for positive discrimination. A maj- a major achievement of the Indian Republic, really, to have quotas for the untouchables, the lowest castes, which in that system, could get 15% of the seats in the universities, 15% of the seats in the bureaucracy, and 15% of the seats in the assemblies, in Parliament. Well, some of these groups of untouchables, ex-untouchables, we call them "Dalits." They call themselves Dalits.

Some of these subgroups within these Dalits could corner most of the reservations. And from one generation to the next one, from father to son, you have the same families, the same groups of families, the same subcastes, which monopolized reservations at the expense of other Dalits which could not get access to this. And therefore you have a division within the Dalits that BJP was very shrewd in exploiting. And they have nominated at the time of elections those who could not get access to reservations. Representatives of those who could not get access to quotas. And that resulted in massive support at the time of elections. And there is one last explanation: that is, what we call Sanskritization. Sanskritization is a word that has been introduced by the Indian anthropologist M. N. Srinivas to say, "Well, the low castes want to try to emulate the Brahmins, to be part of the same universe, the same world, and RSS has attracted low-caste children precisely by resorting to this device."

**Kattan**: Right. At the same time, Professor Ahmed, what are some of the concrete policies that have been implemented by the government in order to address the needs of the poorest in Indian society? What impact did these policies have, and how can you explain Modi’s continued appeal to the lower castes, despite the fact that their condition has seen little progress under Modi’s rule?

**Ahmed**: The policies themselves have continued to really, really hurt. India is now ranked lower in the poverty scale, the Indian rupee has fallen drastically. Modi's signature kind of policies like the demonetization really hurt the poor classes. I mean, that's actually a very similar scenario to, to United States under Trump and even continuing in the debate right now in the United States, where there is a sharp resistance against social welfare and Build Back Better programs that, that the Democrats are trying to do. This type of claim to a populism while a kind of crony capitalism class denationalizes or takes resources out. You know, under Modi's India, the number of billionaires, Indian billionaires have, have grown substantially. So I think what's important here is that this charismatic populism, or vigilante kind of authoritarianism, hinges on a claim towards poverty. But in the figures from that are, that are in Christophe's book, the BJP's kind of current political picture is even more upper caste and is even more kind of distant from, from the poor of the country, which are in dire straits. I mean, some of us, or maybe many of us remember, early in March 2020, when the pandemic hit and Delhi and UP were under lockdown, and the long walks where hundreds of thousands of migrant, you know, internally displaced workers were trying to walk their way to their homes. And there was these harrowing scenes that haven't been seen since the partition of destitute people flooding highways and byways in north India. And that really forces us to kind of understand this, this type of politics that isn't quite a politics of self-interest.

**Kattan**: Professor Jaffrelot, Professor Ahmed just mentioned the growth of billionaires in today's India. I was wondering how you see Modi's relationship with the Indian business community at large, and what kind of support the government has been able to muster from entrepreneurs and business people?

**Jaffrelot**: Well, the links are very deep with some of them. It's not as if all the businessmen are benefitting. Far from that. Many of them do, but within the winners, you have real friends of the regime. And that's a very specific characteristic of many other populist regimes. Well, there is, as early as 2014, a decision that is made that is pro-business: to abolish the wealth tax, to reduce the corporate tax, in fact, it has been lowered for existing companies from 30% to 22%. And interestingly for compensating this lack of fiscal resources, indirect taxes have increased a lot, and in particular, the taxes on petrol. That is such an important source of income. I mean, everybody needs some petrol for his scooter, for his three-wheeler and so on. There is a kind of pro-rich slash anti-poor taxation policy in the making. And you have crony capitalists, people who have really grown from scratch, somewhat, or sometimes, to do very affluent status. So you have a very important component of this authoritarian regime that is illiberal in economic terms, as well as political and cultural terms, and relies on a handful — handful — of cronies, coming mostly from the industry. You know, interestingly, the IT sector that used to be so influential during the previous dispensation, under the Manmohan Singh government, the big companies like Infosys, Wipro, they have lost out to these industrialists.

**Kattan**: You've highlighted the important role of the business community. It seems that there are other sectors of society that have also contributed to the support of the populism of the BJP. I'm wondering, Professor Ahmed, whether you could tell us a little bit about the role of the media, and particularly social media? How did the BJP manage to dominate the media space in recent elections, and particularly in 2019?

**Ahmed**: What happens is, is a confluence of two things. One, there is Modi's kind of insight, that the type of claim to leadership that Indira Gandhi and the Jawaharlal Nehru family represented, it can actually be taken away from them. As then you can actually claim a new type of dynastic self-making. And I think there, Modi's use of media becomes really important. As mentioned earlier, you know, usage of Twitter by Modi was very early and very influential in his, in his rise to significance. And then there is an approach to kind of social media which gets at the question that is, how places like Facebook make money, which is virality, right? So, it's, it's how can you create a controversy? How can you create something that is, that gets your attention? Attention span becomes important.

And I think here what we colloquially now call the "WhatsApp University" came into being. And this is the infrastructure through which, you know, spurious claims, facts, fake stories, hatred, demonization, can spread across networks. And those networks are primed to do that. They're, they're there in order to create the virality of the viral effect. And we cannot say that this is the story that would have been possible without Facebook, Twitter actively engaging in creating this infrastructure and understanding that what's happening is harmful for the societies, but good for their business. Facebook knows what's happened in, in India. And I think that reckoning has still to come. I think we, as a global community have still to figure out where and what level a redress needs to happen. Every day, we see lynching videos, we see videos of drastic violence. Every day, we say, "Well, should we be looking for the cause of this violence in a religious text? Or should we be looking for this cause of, of the violence in some other thing?" But — valid, but at the same moment, should we not ask that this viral video violence exists because of the need to create viral violence, if that makes sense. In other words, the violence is coming into being as a result of the capacity of it, it to be writ large on society's kind of collective consciousness.

**Kattan**: I’d like to give Professor Jaffrelot the last word. Could you give us some insights about what the future holds? Do you feel that there are potential pathways for a return to pluralist politics in India? What is the role of the opposition? Are there any incentives for the BJP to adopt policies that are more in line with the pluralistic tradition and the diverse makeup of Indian society?

**Jaffrelot**: There are certainly pathways for a return to some pluralist politics. One, the socioeconomic agenda may stage a comeback. You know, there is certainly a limit to identity politics. When it does not deliver, when it results in more poverty. That's one. Two, you have a resilient federalism still, in India. Of course, the north and the west are so populous that they tend to marginalize the east and the south. And BJP is strong in the north and the west. But still, BJP could not win West Bengal. Cannot make any inroad in Tamil Nadu and Kerala. And these are only the most obvious examples. And third, yes, there is an opposition. And there is an opposition that is certainly very strong in the states I've just mentioned, but that is not absent at all in the rest of the country. The big question in this regard is: Will the opposition leaders join hands? And if you look at other countries which have followed a similar trajectory, Hungary is a very similar example of, well, opponents finally realizing that when you have to confront a man playing on polarization, you'd better be united, because you will have always 50 plus 1 seats in parliament. So there's a third possibility of pluralism. But there is a big "if" behind: Will these leaders gather together? Rally around a leader? And then, of course, will that take the country back to what it was? What India was 15 years ago, before 1992 (as Manan said, a major turning point). That's a very remote prospect, but at least to, to stop the trend, the tendency towards ethnic democracy, that would already be an important landmark, if it could happen.

**Kattan**: Indeed, this would give us reasons to be moderately optimistic. I would like to thank both of you, Christophe Jaffrelot and Manan Ahmed, for all your insights and your clear-sighted understanding of the situation facing India today. May I remind our listeners that if you want to go deeper in your understanding of India’s history and current politics, Christophe Jaffrelot’s book, *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy*, is published by Princeton University Press, and Manan Ahmed’s book, *The Loss of Hindustan: The Invention of India*, is published by Harvard University Press. Thank you again.

(Theme music in)

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