That bedrock of feelings: Review of ‘Politics, Ethics and Emotions in New India’ by Ajay Gudavarthy

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi at an election rally in Churu, Rajasthan, on February 26, 2019., hours after reports came in of IAF fighter jets destroying terror camps across the border in Pakistan. The country, he said, was safe in his hands. | Photo Credit: PTI

New India, this book says, is a mixture of immiscible opposites achieved through an emotional churn.

India has in recent times turned the page at multiple times on past misfortunes to focus on the promise of the future. Results have been mixed, with most promises remaining unfulfilled. In perhaps another throw of the dice after a quarter century of coalition or minority governments, the country in 2014 invested its political capital in the slogan of “New India”, awarding a clear parliamentary majority to a party of the Right. The “New India” that seemed to fire the popular imagination then was a reversion to imagined glories of a theocratic past, under the ideological project of Hindutva——an irony that escaped some who eagerly signed up for it.

Politics, Ethics and Emotions in ‘New India’

By Ajay Gudavarthy

Routledge

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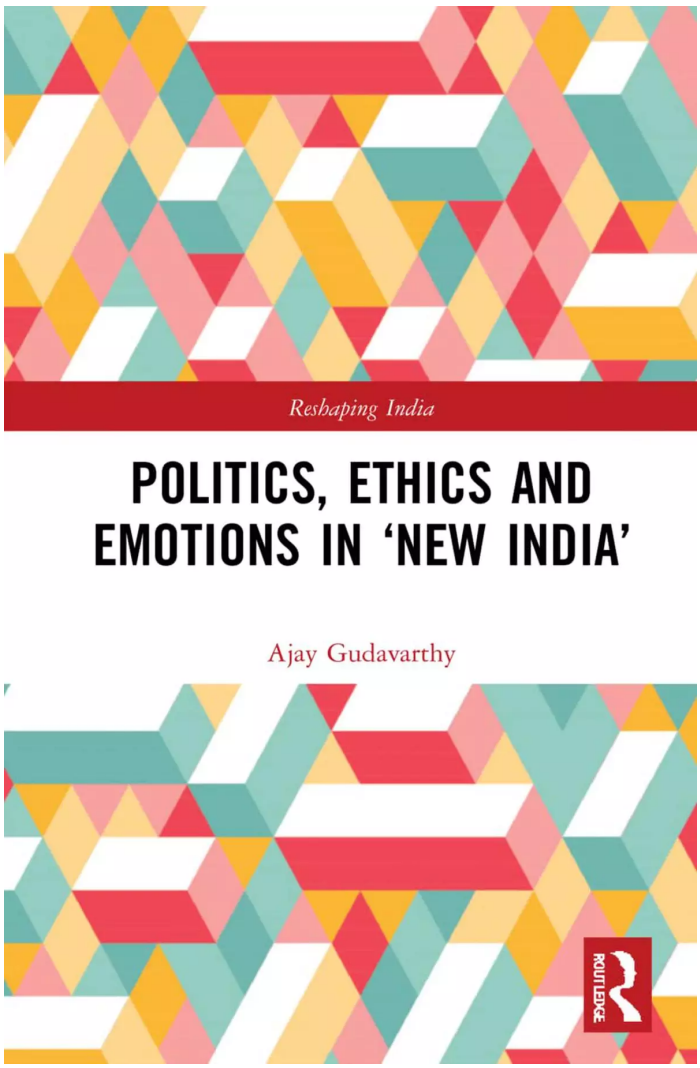
In power since 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi famously invoked the “New India” theme after Indian Air Force fighter jets carried out strikes deep inside Pakistan territory in February 2019. It was rightful retribution, seemingly, for a suicide bombing in the Kashmir valley that killed over 40 Indian service personnel. After a short and perfunctory briefing by officials from the IAF and the Ministry of External Affairs, Modi declared while campaigning in Rajasthan that “New India” would repay with interest every indignity inflicted on it.

A nationwide election was imminent and passions ran high. Scepticism occasioned by reported—and verified—military losses on either side was shouted down as the moral equivalent of giving comfort to the enemy. It was not what really happened that was germane, so much as how it made people feel.

In one of many vignettes scattered through this deeply engaging book, Ajay Gudavarthy quotes a small business owner who seemed unconcerned about factual details. It mattered little to him if the air strike had not taken place at all, since India had shown what it was capable of.



Cover of *POLITICS, ETHICS AND EMOTIONS IN 'NEW INDIA'* by Ajay Gudavarthy | Photo Credit: Special arrangement.

"New India", as Gudavarthy argues, was built on a blend of immiscible opposites. It was achieved through an emotional churn, which made it a potent weapon with the capacity to underwrite large electoral pluralities. It is an aspect of human conduct——the realm of affect and emotion——that the calculus of rationality which supposedly drives human action, has singularly failed to grapple with, leave alone understand.

Much of this book is spent in an examination of the shift in norms and the erosion of constitutional proprieties since Modi led the BJP to victory in the 2014 general election. Through his first term and the triumph of 2019, governance was cast in the idiom of a technology-driven campaign, against the background of the applause and adulation of a compliant media.

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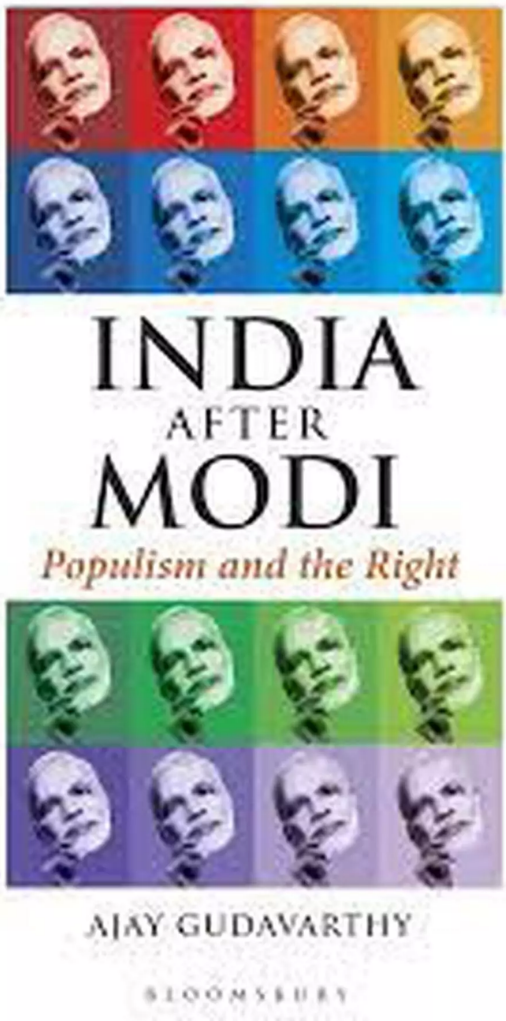
Gudavarthy examines events since the 2019 victory, some in microscopic detail, others in broad strokes. He is attentive to the minutiae of election dynamics across the country and also relies on a form of pop ethnography, drawing wide inferences from snatches of everyday conversation. He speaks of a conflict between “constitutional morality” and the “populist reality” that is tilting rapidly in favour of the latter, when institutions created through long years of political striving are usurped for patently illegitimate ends. Coexistence in a large and complex body politic required a commitment to these institutions, but India’s populist turn has subordinated civic loyalty to the urgency of expressing voices that claim to long have been suppressed.



In *India After Modi*, Ajay Gudavarthy examines how the right wing examines populist politics. | Photo Credit: Special arrangement.

Political assertion in “New India” goes along with the infliction of some misfortune on those seen to stand in the way. Gudavarthy devotes a chapter to Kashmir and its status before and after the abrogation of the special constitutional guarantees of autonomy it was granted when acceding to the Indian Union. Anger and hatred are closely related in the melange of emotions triggered by Kashmir, though with an important distinction. There is great anger in Kashmir at the litany of broken promises it has endured. Within India, the rage occasioned by a constant reminder of these broken promises spills over seamlessly into hatred.

As consequential as the impact on the people of Kashmir would be India's own effort to "negotiate the corollary dynamics" of the annulment of the State's constitutional status. Kashmir has been reclaimed as real estate that Indian interests can have untrammelled rights over, but this has implications for the autonomy granted to culturally distinct regions across India's complex geography. And there has been a moral impact from the spectacle, visible all over the world, of Kashmir being placed under a stifling curfew while it prepared for the Eid festival.

Could resistance emerge from some quarter to this negation of the values the Indian republic was built on? The less privileged within the mainstream——Dalits and Backward Classes——could pose an alternative, though Gudavarthy finds that both have turned quiescent, having taken the bait of the shallow politics of representation. Without unsettling the established systems of privilege, Dalits and Backward Classes have been granted an assured space within the Right, which has always been more adept at the politics "that demanded representation without an accompanying social and economic agenda".

A deserted street in Srinagar, which was under curfew on August 4 and 5, 2020, because protests were feared on the first anniversary of the removal of Jammu and Kashmir's special status. There is great anger in Kashmir over the broken promises it has endured. | Photo Credit: NISSAR AHMAD

The inegalitarian economic order the Modi government has instituted hinges on the "political psyche of majoritarianism", which "boosts people's self-image without allowing them to participate as fuller citizens". The irony here is that the "the majority becomes disempowered in the construction of majoritarianism".

Perhaps it is the very complexity of the country that made India such an easy pick for majoritarian morality. “India is open, dialogic, and liberal from a certain vantage point,” Gudavarthy writes, “and yet extremely uncivil, violent, and discriminatory from another.” Modi’s singular skill has been to tap the anxieties and insecurities rife among those living through a “transitory economy and a socially rigid society”. And the sustenance of the Modi story would require that people be denied an “expanding economy (with) transformative social relations”, since these would be inimical to a political agenda that flourishes by sustaining “vulnerability for India as a collective”. There is eloquent testimony to this aspect of the BJP’s politics in the regression of human development indicators across the terrains where it has flourished.

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What all this points to, in Gudavarthy’s terms, is the imperative of returning to questions of “the self, ethics, and emotions”. The European Enlightenment, as it is called, raised the human species to the status of master of its destiny. There was a significant rider: every individual though potentially invested with the gift of perfect rationality, had to seek his own traverse through life in the company of others in the human race. At that collective level where every person is seeking to both pursue an individual end and be part of the community, emotions could often sweep aside rationality.

Highlights

- The idea of “New India”, Ajay Gudavarthy argues in this book, is built on a blend of immiscible opposites, a mixture achieved through an emotional churn, which makes it a potent weapon with the capacity to underwrite large electoral pluralities.
- Gudavarthy examines events since the 2019 victory and is attentive to the minutiae of election dynamics across the country, relying also on a form of pop ethnography, drawing wide inferences from snatches of everyday conversation.
- Coexistence in a large and complex body politic required a commitment to these institutions, but India’s populist turn has subordinated civic loyalty to the urgency of expressing voices that claim to long have been suppressed.

Martha Nussbaum’s sprawling and eclectic work Political Emotion is a source Gudavarthy relies on. Nussbaum in turn relies on John Rawls, whose work on justice she accords the honour of being the greatest work of political philosophy of the 20th century. Rawls is known for his exposition of the difference principle, which posits the need for every person with privileges above the norm in a “well-ordered society” to justify that status by contributing to a greater social good. But he was also aware of the limited utility of measuring intangibles such as collective welfare and individual responsibility. Emotions mattered, and his prescription was that a “well-ordered society” should be attuned to collective goals and principles, not as “a useful modus vivendi”, but “an enthusiastic endorsement”.

Public ethics, as Gudavarthy reads it, can “move seamlessly between lofty idealism and rugged pragmatism”, and likewise between “compassion and consent to violence”. Emotion was the force that drove these wild fluctuations, seemingly incomprehensible to the faculty of reason.

How could an alternative political praxis achieve that connect with emotion? Gudavarthy proposes that progressive politics shed its excessive scruples about intervening in the realm of affect. The Right, he argues, “makes a clear distinction between the political and the social or cultural aspects of the human condition”. One is about power and conflict, while the other is about “collective living, communication, memory and belonging”. Left progressive thinking believes that there are “aspects of power internal to the latter” but does not quite get its mobilisation strategies in this realm right.

A public culture of politics needs emotional foundations. And this is where the matter slips into a zone of deep ambiguities. Reason, even in its most rigid formulations, can never be affect-free. Modern bourgeois civilisation is built on the precept of the self-seeking individual seeking to maximise his utility. But even its most zealous ideologues ——the overly racist Social Darwinists excepted——provide ample room for certain indefinable traits in human character that soften the potential for conflict.

Immanuel Kant, who formulated the values of the Enlightenment in his vast body of work, believed firmly in humanity’s ability to achieve that state where it would be able to live by the principles of “universal legislation”. And that system of law would not be coercive because it would be one that the human race gave itself. Autonomy of every individual was to be safeguarded in the Age of Enlightenment —— every person was to be an end rather than the means to another’s end.

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How is a political investment in the realm of affect that Gudavarthy proposes consistent with the imperative of safeguarding individual autonomy? John Rawls in his theory of justice proposed that emotions could also be appraised through the faculties of rational cognition. He later flagged this aspect as one requiring further work, opening up a terrain that Martha Nussbaum, for one, has explored.

The ethical dilemma is posed sharply in these works: when does the benign effort by state or society to channel emotive expressivity in ways that are supportive of larger values slip over the edge and become an intrusion into personal autonomy? Gudavarthy furthers the effort to promote a collective understanding of this question. But perhaps the central message of his work is that the quest for a resolution would most likely begin in the terrain of praxis, before the relevant doctrines are formulated.

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