What's wrong with Narendra Modi's outmoded idea of India

Three years after he was elected, Prime Minister Narendra Modi looms over India's political scene like no other leader in the country's recent history. And his critics must explain why his mass appeal seems unimpaired, despite his increasingly authoritarian ways and growing failures.

Modi is far from realizing his promises of economic and military security. Pakistan-backed militants continue to strike inside Indian territory. The anti-Indian insurgency in Kashmir has acquired a mass base; Maoist insurgents in central India attack security forces with impunity. Industrial growth, crucial to creating jobs for the nearly 13 million Indians entering the workforce each year, is down, at least partly due to Modi's policy of demonetisation.

That gambit was, as the economist Kaushik Basu writes, "a monetary policy blunder," which "achieved next to nothing, and inflicted a large cost on the poor and the informal sector." Yet Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) subsequently swept elections in Uttar Pradesh, India's politically most significant state. He looks almost certain to be reelected as prime minister in 2019.

Many commentators assumed that once in office, Modi would downplay his ideological commitment to remaking India into a Hindu nation for the sake of economic development. Today, Modi seems to mock such aspiring fellow-travellers, choosing a virulently anti-Muslim Hindu priest as Uttar Pradesh's chief minister and maintaining an eloquent silence as Hindu vigilantes, aiming to protect the sacred cow, lynch anyone suspected of selling or eating beef.

Ascendant in both new and old media, Twitter as well as radio, television, and the press, Modi is moving India away from debate, consensus-building and other democratic rituals. He is presiding over what Mukul Kesavan, a sharp observer of Indian politics and culture, calls an "infantilization of Indians." "Instead of being proud, equal, adult members of a republic," Kesavan writes, they "are reduced to being the wards of an all-seeing parent."

Certainly, Hindu chauvinists, intolerant of minorities and indeed anyone who can be identified as a "liberal," seem determined to replace the secular and democratic principles outlined by Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, with the creed of Hindu nationalism.

To such accusations, Modi might respond that the founding "idea of India" was always open to radical revision by the will of the people. France, where the

language of secular republicanism was invented, has experimented with several republics since its revolution in 1789 launched the earth-shaking experiment in democracy. Most of these were authoritarian in nature, hospitable to repressive leaders and acclaimed by citizens.

The French thinker Claude Lefort once described how "democracy inaugurates the experience of an ungraspable, uncontrollable society in which the people will be said to be sovereign, of course, but whose identity will constantly be open to question." Modi has understood this dynamic aspect of democracy better than those who cling to Nehru's idea of India.

There is also another way to interpret Modi's turn to popular authoritarianism—one that may bring us closer to his vision of transforming India into a major superpower.

Whether accumulating power and authority at the top, removing all obstacles to decision-making inherent in pluralist democracies or mobilizing Hindus around economic objectives, Modi is trying to construct the kind of "developmental state" seen in East Asia.

The American writer Chalmers Johnson used this term to define the style of governance pioneered by Japan during its quest for rapid economic development. Modi's own reverential references to the Japanese capacity for self-sacrifice in the cause of national power reveal that he aims for the "particular kind of legitimacy" that "comes from devotion to a widely believed-in revolutionary project."

And his critics—I include myself—must acknowledge that Modi has a successful history of East Asian authoritarianisms on his side as he spurns India's founding promise of creating proud, equal and adult citizens. Communal feeling and solidarity, and indeed the infantilization of citizens, were crucial to the economic rise of the Japanese and Koreans from near-destitution, Taiwan after the end of the devastating Chinese civil war, and Singapore after its expulsion from Malaysia.

The devastating flaw in Modi's project is this: He is trying to build a homogeneous national community in an irrevocably diverse country. It commits him and his party to demonizing, excluding and alienating too many members of the Indian population. Moreover, he has arrived too late in history, decades after Park Chung-hee, Chiang Kai-shek, and Lee Kuan Yew accomplished their tasks of national self-strengthening.

His borrowed projects—"Smart Cities," "Make in India"—reveal Modi's own idea of India to be outmoded and unviable. The jobs awaited by millions of Indians are unlikely to materialize, as manufacturing industries in India struggle with the radical changes wrought by automation. As their great leader fails, inevitably,

Modi's supporters are likely to intensify their hunt for scapegoats. The next few years, it is safe to say, will be the most treacherous yet for India.