

While We Watched

A FILM BY VINAY SHUKLA



POV

DISCUSSION GUIDE

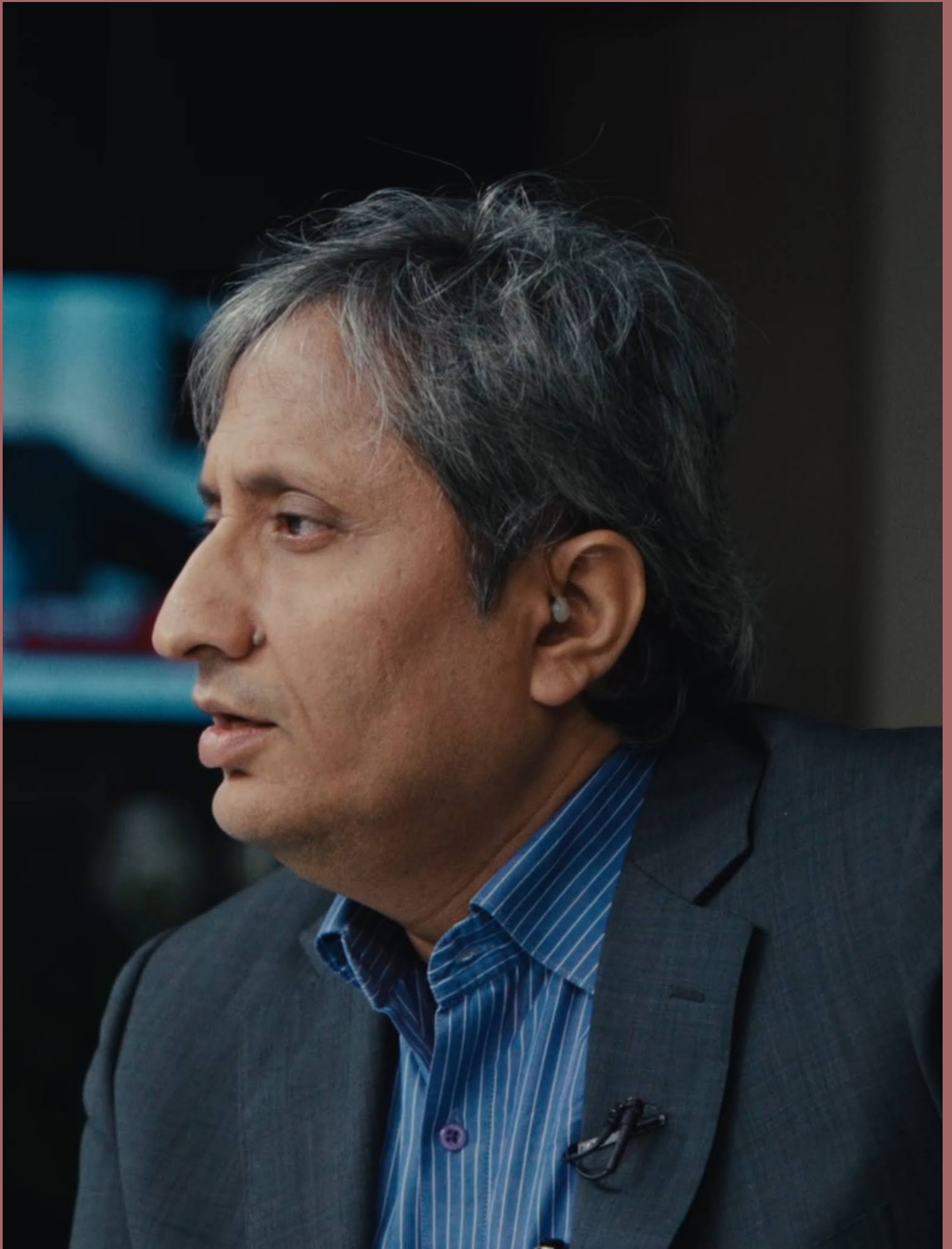




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Film Summary



A timely depiction of a newsroom in crisis, *While We Watched* follows Ravish Kumar for two years as he battles a barrage of fake news and falling ratings and the resulting cutbacks while struggling to maintain fact-based analysis. Will his show survive or become a swan song of reason—drowned out by sensationalism, misinformation, and ratings-driven editorial decisions?

Using This Guide

This guide is an invitation to dialogue. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection and is designed for people who want to use *While We Watched* to engage family, friends, classmates, colleagues, and communities. In contrast to initiatives that foster debates in which participants try to convince others that they are correct, this document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness in which people try to understand one another and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening actively.

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the issues in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. And be sure to leave time to consider taking action. Planning the following steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult.

For more detailed event planning and facilitation tips, visit <https://communitynetwork.amdoc.org/>.

Tips and Tools for Facilitators

Here are some supports to help you prepare for facilitating a conversation that inspires curiosity, connection, critical questions, recognition of difference, power, and possibility.

Share Community Agreements

Community Agreements: What Are They? Why Are They Useful?

Community agreements help provide a framework for engaging in dialogue that establishes a shared sense of intention ahead of participating in discussion. Community agreements can be co-constructed and created as an opening activity that your group completes collectively and collaboratively. [Here is a model](#) of community agreements you can review. As the facilitator, you can gauge how long your group should take to form these agreements or whether participants would be amenable to using pre-established community agreements.

Opening Activity (Optional): Establishing Community Agreements for Discussion

Whether you are a group of people coming together once for this screening and discussion or a group whose members know each other well, creating a set of community agreements helps foster clear discussion in a manner that draws in and respects all participants, especially when tackling intimate or complex conversations around identity. These steps will help provide guidelines for the process:

- **Pass around** sample community agreements and take time to read aloud as a group to make sure all participants can both hear and read the text.
- **Allow time** for clarifying questions, make sure all participants understand the necessity for the agreements, and allow time to make sure everyone understands the agreements themselves.
- **Go around in a circle** and have every participant name an agreement they would like to include. Chart this in front of the room where all can see.
- **Go around two to three times** to give participants multiple chances to contribute and also to give a conclusive end to the process.
- **Read the list aloud.**
- **Invite** questions or revisions.
- **Ask** if all are satisfied with the list.

COMMON CONCEPTS & LANGUAGE

Anti-racist

One who is supporting an antiracist policy through their continued actions and/or by expressing the idea that racial groups are equals and do not need developing. Anti-racism is a journey and not a destination—it is an orientation toward how we live our lives in pursuit of racial justice.

Classism

Differential treatment based on social class or perceived social class. Classism is the systematic oppression of subordinated class groups to advantage and strengthen the dominant class groups. It's the systematic assignment of characteristics of worth and ability based on social class. Policies and practices are set up to benefit more class-privileged people at the expense of less class-privileged people, resulting in drastic income and wealth inequality—and the culture that perpetuates these systems and this unequal valuing.

Discrimination

The unequal treatment of members of various groups based on race, gender, social class, sexual orientation, physical ability, religion, and other categories.

In the United States, the law makes it illegal to discriminate against someone on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, or sex. The law also makes it illegal to retaliate against a person because the person complained about discrimination, filed a charge of discrimination, or participated in an employment discrimination investigation or lawsuit. The law also requires that an employer reasonably accommodates applicants' and employees' sincerely held religious practices, unless doing so would impose an undue hardship on the operation of the employer's business.

Equity

In basic terms, to achieve equity is to treat everyone fairly. An equity emphasis seeks to render justice by deeply considering structural factors that benefit some social groups/communities and harm other social groups/communities. Sometimes for the purpose of equity, justice demands an unequal response.

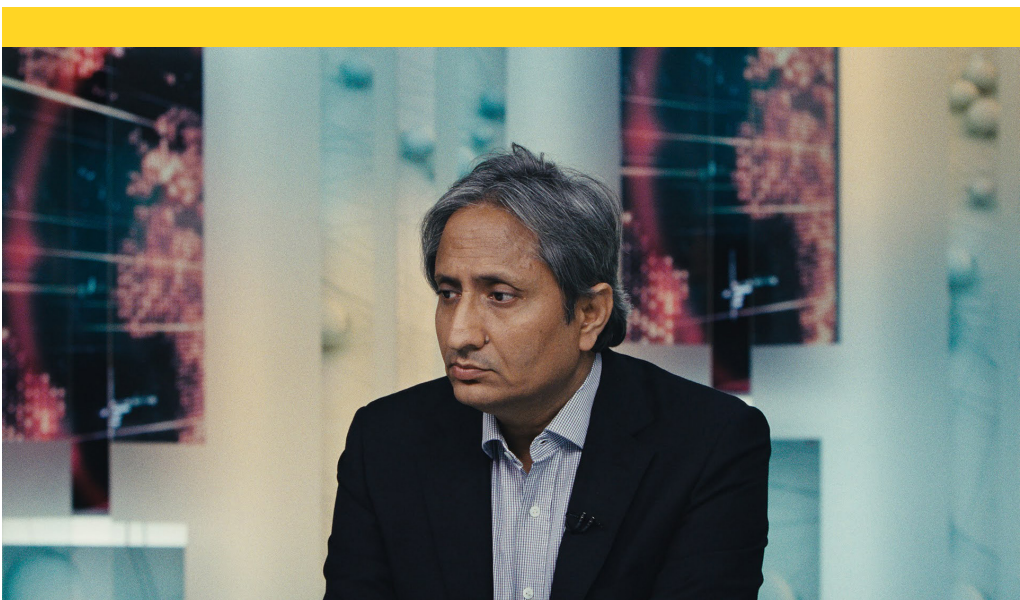
Institutional Racism

Institutional racism refers specifically to the ways in which institutional policies and practices create different outcomes for different racial groups. Institutional policies may never mention any specific racial group, but their effect is to create advantages for Whites and oppression and disadvantage for people from groups classified as people of color.

Participants

Ravish Kumar

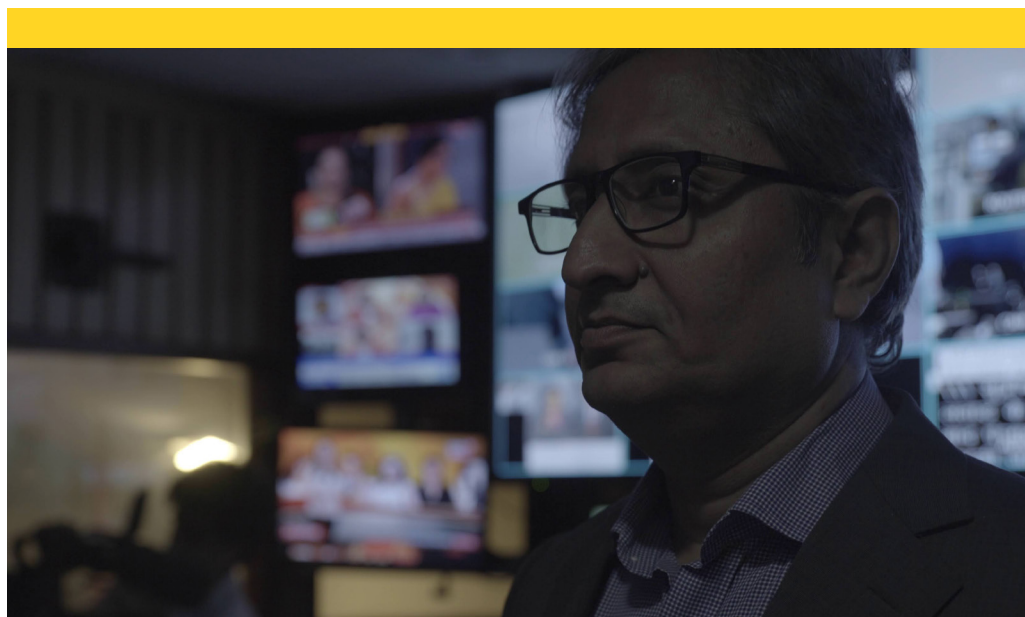
Journalist and NDTV news editor



Key Issues

While We Watched is an excellent tool for outreach and will be of particular interest to people who want to explore the following topics:

- Censorship and silencing
- Communal violence
- Democracy
- Media, misinformation, and propaganda
- Nationalism
- Public perception
- Religious fundamentalism
- Social hierarchies
- State corruption and violence



Timeline

(A Non-Exhaustive List of Notable Dates in India's Contemporary Political Landscape)

August 15, 1947: India becomes independent after 89 years as a British colony.

August 17, 1947: Days after independence, India is partitioned into India and Pakistan by the British, leading to the largest forced migration in human history. After Partition, Hindus and Sikhs migrate so they are within India's new borders, while Muslims migrate to Pakistan. During the months after Partition, as many as 15 million people are forced to leave their homes on short notice and as many as one million people die due to sectarian violence during fraught migration journeys.

January 30, 1948: Mohandas Gandhi is assassinated by Nathuram Godse, a Hindu nationalist who believes Gandhi to be too pro-Pakistan.

1951: The Bharatiya Jana Sangh Party is founded as the main political party affiliated with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a rightwing Hindu nationalist volunteer paramilitary organization.

April 6, 1980: The modern Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is founded after evolving from the Bharatiya Jana Sangh Party. The BJP is a Hindu nationalist party that promotes the belief that India should be a Hindu nation.

October 31, 1984: Prime Minister Indira Gandhi is assassinated by two of her Sikh bodyguards after executing a military plan that harms the holiest Sikh temple in India. This assassination begins a period of anti-Sikh riots/pogroms that will result in thousands of Sikhs being murdered, marking a period of significant harm toward a religious minority in India.

December 6, 1992: After a BJP rally turns violent, rally attendees demolish the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, leading to a period of anti-Muslim riots. This incident marks one of the first political occasions when BJP leaders openly encourage violence against Muslims.

1998–2004: The BJP rules India under Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, marking the first extended period of national rule by the BJP, after previous short-lived periods of BJP rule in India in the mid-1990s.

February–May 2002: Sixty Hindu pilgrims die during a religious pilgrimage in the state of Gujarat, where Narendra Modi is the chief minister. This incident leads to a period of riots when Muslims are openly targeted. Modi faces such severe accusations about his role in instigating the violence that in 2005 he will be banned from entering the United States.

2004: The BJP loses national elections and Manmohan Singh of the Indian National Congress party becomes prime minister and serves until 2014. While Congress maintains national power for 10 years, the party faces allegations of corruption, ineptitude, and numerous scandals, causing public opinion of the party to decline.

May 2014: The BJP gains victory in Lok Sabha (lower parliamentary house) elections and Narendra Modi is elected as India's prime minister.

September 5, 2017: A journalist, Gauri Lankesh, is murdered outside her home in the city of Bengaluru. Her murder is part of a landscape of increasing attacks on members of the press during Modi's time in office.

May 2019: The BJP wins by an even larger margin than in the 2014 elections and Modi is reelected as prime minister. These elections mark the first time a non-Congress party has won a majority for two consecutive terms.

December 2019: The Indian government passes the Citizenship Amendment Act, a law that expedites Indian citizenship for non-Muslim immigrants from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan. With concurrent plans for a national register of citizens in India, there is widespread fear that the law will be used as a basis for a religious citizenship test designed to persecute Muslims. After the act passes, large-scale protests in India break out, and the Indian government responds violently.

June 2021: Sher Khan, a cattle dealer in his fifties, is shot and killed by villagers in the state of Uttar Pradesh. Since Modi took national office in 2014, killings of cattle traders and buffalo meat sellers have become more common and perpetrators are rarely found or prosecuted.

November 2021: The World Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders ranks India 142 out of 180 countries in the world, indicating that India is an especially dangerous country for journalists.

July 2023: A Hindu mob sets fire to a mosque in Uttar Pradesh, killing a deputy imam inside, one of countless possible hate crimes. The Indian government tracks hate crimes but does not make the data publicly available, making it difficult to determine which mob attacks are considered hate crimes and how many occur in different states in India each year.

Background Information

Inter-Religious Community Violence in Post-Independence India

On August 15, 1947, India became independent after 89 years as a British colony, and over 200 years of British economic imperialism. Two days later, on August 17, 1947, the nation India was partitioned by the British into two countries: India and Pakistan. Cyril Radcliffe, a British lawyer who had never visited India, drew the borders. These arbitrary new borders split apart villages, communities, and families. In a climate of fear, uncertainty, and religious conflict, Sikhs and Hindus migrated to newly-redefined India, while Muslims migrated to Pakistan over the course of several months. Approximately 15 million people migrated and one million or more were killed in the rioting and sectarian violence that ensued.

The violence and fear around Partition contributed to contemporary conflicts between religious groups, as well as anti-Pakistan sentiment among segments of the Indian population. Immediately following independence and Partition, the Indian National Congress Party (or Congress), led by Mohandas Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, administered the country at the national level. In this mid-20th-century period, Congress positioned itself as a secular party that emphasized that the good of the Indian public and nation should take precedence over the individual interests of religion, caste, and community. While secularism remains a central tenet of Congress, conflict between religious communities has affected not only the Congress party, but India as a whole

In 1948, a member of a right-wing Hindu nationalist party shot and killed Gandhi, believing that Gandhi was too pro-Muslim and too pro-Pakistan. The assassin had previously belonged to Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a rightwing nationalist paramilitary organization that is active today and closely aligned with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the political party of current Prime Minister Narendra Modi. In 1948 and again in 1975, Congress supported a ban of the RSS, which angered many Hindu nationalists. In 1984, after Prime Minister Indira Gandhi ordered military actions that damaged the holiest Sikh temple in India, she was assassinated by two of her bodyguards, who were Sikh. The next day, anti-Sikh riots erupted throughout India, claiming the lives of at least 3,000 Sikhs. While these are the official state numbers, some sources suggest the actual numbers are significantly higher.

In 1992, the BJP hosted a rally of 150,000 at the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, in the state of Uttar Pradesh. Most of the rally attendees believed that the mosque was built over a Hindu holy site in the 17th century. Following the rally, attendees tore down the mosque, leading to a period of riots between Hindus and Muslims in which at least 2,000 people died. Police and political leaders were actively involved in these riots, marking a rise in official state involvement in riots targeting Muslims with violence. Similarly, in 2002, 60 Hindus died in the state of Gujarat during a train fire of still-disputed origin while returning from a religious pilgrimage. Anti-Muslim riots broke out throughout Gujarat, where Modi was then chief minister. At least 1,000 people died, and Modi has been accused of not only allowing the riots to happen, but actively encouraging violence. Since Modi was elected as prime minister in 2014, the number of physical attacks and riots targeting Muslims has increased dramatically.

Nationalism, the Rise of the BJP, and Modi's Dominance

While Congress was politically successful throughout the middle of the 20th century, the BJP began to gain momentum by the mid-1990s and became the politically dominant party in India a decade into the 21st century. The BJP was officially founded in 1980, but evolved from Bharatiya Jana Sangh, a party originally founded in 1951 that opposed the secular principles of Congress. The leaders of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh felt that Congress prioritized the needs of religious minorities above those of Hindus and aimed to secure a political future that would benefit Hindus in India. Today, the BJP states that it advocates for “Hindu nationalism, social conservatism, a free-market economy, and robust national defense.” Congress’s decline can be attributed to two main factors. First, Congress leaders faced public allegations of corruption and incompetence through the early years of the 21st century. In 2014, the party’s leader was Rahul Gandhi, the grandson of Indira Gandhi and son of Rajiv Gandhi. Voters who felt frustration with India’s top political dynasty and allegations of corruption became BJP supporters. Second, the BJP was able to mobilize many first-time voters, partially due to Modi’s aggressive campaign and rally schedule. The 2014 elections marked the highest voter turnout for elections for the Lok Sabha, the lower parliamentary house.

The BJP attributes its success to its focus on jobs and national security. In the leadup to the 2014 election, many supporters claimed that they were less interested in politics than the political change they believed Modi would deliver. The BJP has enjoyed national popularity under Modi, including sweeping victories in the 2019 elections. The party performed better in 2019 than it did in 2014, winning 303 seats in the Lok Sabha and securing another term as prime minister for Modi. While supporters often emphasize BJP’s focus on jobs, security, and India’s economy, religious minorities have faced deteriorating social, economic, and political

conditions and greater danger in Modi's India. Hindu nationalists tend to view Indian Muslims as disloyal to India or pro-Pakistan.

While conflict and riots targeting non-Hindu communities were a part of the political landscape of India prior to 2014, much of this violence has increased and become normalized in the years since Modi was first elected. BJP leaders have condoned, supported, and instigated violence, and vigilante mobs have led attacks against Muslims for perceived anti-India or anti-Hindu actions. In the decade since Modi rose to national political leadership, Muslim individuals have been subjected to hate crimes, beatings, and lynching at the hands of Hindu nationalists all over the country. BJP party leaders have used Hindu festivals and holy days as justification for physical attacks on Muslims and destruction of Muslim religious sites. Deadly sectarian violence has broken out in multiple states. In some cases, such as in the July 2023 killings of Muslim passengers onboard a train traveling to Mumbai, Maharashtra, Indian police have instigated violence.

The involvement of political party leaders and police indicate that sectarian violence and hate crimes are becoming an increasingly accepted and normalized part of India's political landscape for Hindu nationalists. In 2019, the government passed the Citizenship Amendment Act, which allows religion to be used as a basis for granting citizenship, a policy that could be interpreted as discriminatory against India's Muslim population. This redefinition of citizenship could yield disastrous consequences for religious minorities in India.

Contemporary Narratives, Media, and Censorship

Religious minorities have not been the only groups to be targeted in Modi's India. India's press freedom has experienced a dramatic decline since Modi was elected to national office in 2014. From 2014 to 2023, at least 20 journalists and media workers have been murdered in India. High-profile deaths of journalists have become increasingly common. In 2017, journalist Gauri Lankesh was murdered outside her home in Bengaluru, India. In 2023, Shashikant Warishe was killed after his coverage of a land dispute. In addition, arbitrary arrests have become a common way to target journalists, and in 2022 alone, seven journalists were imprisoned in India.

Threats to the press are not limited to attacks on journalists. Since Prime Minister Modi entered office, his allies have been participating in media takeovers. In 2022, an associate of his, Gautam Adani, announced he would acquire NDTV in a hostile takeover, ultimately leading to Ravish Kumar's resignation from NDTV. During the same time period, Indian authorities have been restricting freedom of expression and assembly, contributing to democratic decline. Allies of the BJP promote pro-BJP and pro-Modi messaging, furthering Hindu nationalist propaganda through media avenues that are the most widely accessible to India's population. Concurrently, press freedom is decreasing and news media that is widely available to the public is biased and inaccurate. With inaccurate media rooted in Hindu nationalism, public awareness and knowledge on issues such as religious and political persecution remains limited.

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DISCUSSION PROMPTS

Starting The Conversation

Immediately after the film ends, you might give participants a few moments to reflect to themselves about what they've watched, to write down key points, or to think about how they would respond to some of the issues and conflicts the film presented. Additionally, you could give viewers time to discuss thoughts with a partner or small group before beginning a larger group discussion.

- How did this film make you feel? Did the story feel familiar or strange to you? In what ways?
- Where do you get your news? What kind of conversations do you have with friends, family, and community members about the news media you consume? In what ways do those conversations feel different depending upon who you are engaging with?
- How can media impact personal relationships?
- The film demonstrated how much communication technology shapes the perceptions people have of politicians and public leaders. How do you think social media and messaging apps shape how people see political leaders where you live?
- Why do you think the story about media in this movie is important?
 - In what ways is it relevant to your life?
- In the film, Ravish Kumar continues with journalism even as he faces numerous challenges. What do you think motivates people to push forward during challenging times?

Nationalism and Democracy

- With a population of 1.4 billion people as of 2023, India is often referred to as the world's largest democracy. When you think of a democracy, what characteristics and values come to mind?
 - How does India's democracy fit into or contrast with these characteristics and values?
 - What about where you live?
- Where does a free and open press fit into democracy?
- In the leadup to the 2019 elections, Ravish Kumar visited people in rural communities who discussed how their needs, such as water access, were not being met. When you think of the country where you live, do you think there are people whose needs are not met by the government? How do these issues affect how people engage with politics and vote?
- This film suggests that nationalism is a cover for religious fundamentalism; how are the depictions of these issues similar to or different from your perceptions of religious fundamentalism or nationalism before watching the film?
 - If your thoughts on these issues changed, in what ways did those changes occur?
- What was it about the media claims that Prime Minister Modi was divisive that angered critics and media figures in the film?
 - What about this was interesting or surprising to you?

Media and Misinformation

- What are some ways that communication technology and social media play a part in the spread of misinformation in the film? How do you see this in your society?
- In the film, we see the censorship of NDTV through multiple avenues, from TV channels not airing news shows that are supposed to air on those channels to the NDTV director and his wife being charged with criminal conspiracy and corruption. What are the primary goals and outcomes of the types of censorship portrayed in the film? Why do you think these methods are or are not effective?
- On air, Ravish Kumar asks, “Is the news today representing you? Or just making you hate a few?” What are some possible social and political outcomes from news media sowing division between groups? What are some examples of this in your community, city, or nation?
- Based on how misinformation spreads through televised and social media, it is very plausible that a person might experience a family member or loved one believing and promoting misinformation. What is the personal or emotional toll of that experience?

Power, Truth, and Visibility

- Ravish Kumar says, “When we choose to remain silent, it costs us the truth.” Outside of news, where does truth come from? Who decides what is the truth? What is the difference between truth and opinion?
- Through the film, we observe how Kumar is accused of being anti-India by other media figures, private citizens, and political leaders. How might learning about these accusations shape how residents of India communicate or act upon their political beliefs? What is the effect of this on a society as a whole?
- At NDTV, we see multiple instances of the staff cutting cake to mark several colleagues’ departures. How do you think these departures affected those who remained at NDTV?
- The film covers the dominance of Hindutva (Hindu nationalism) in the politics of the BJP, the political party of Prime Minister Modi. As Hindutva has flourished, members of the dominant news media in India have tended either to ignore stories about Muslims in India or to speak about Muslims in a negative light.
 - How might this type of news coverage affect Muslims as a targeted population?
 - How might this type of coverage impact non-Muslim people and shape their perceptions?

Education, Knowledge, and Media Literacy

- When Ravish Kumar visits a university and discusses how education isn't accessible for everyone and how news channels do not provide accurate information, some of his audience seems receptive. What role do you think schools and higher education institutions play in combating flaws in news media? Where do people turn for political education if they are not able to attend school?
- The Indian diaspora is sizable, and messaging and social media apps spread political messages far beyond the geographical borders of India. How do you think the international spread of misinformation affects diaspora communities?

CLOSING QUESTIONS

OPTIONAL

At the end of your discussion, to help people synthesize what they've experienced and move the focus from dialogue to action steps, you may want to choose one of these questions

What did you learn from this film that you wish everyone knew? What would change if everyone knew it?

If you could require one person (or one group) to view this film, who would it be? What would you hope their main takeaway would be?

The story of these people presented in this film is important because _____.

Complete this sentence: I am inspired by this film (or discussion) to _____.

TAKING ACTION

Host a teach-in about media literacy and attacks on freedom of the press around the world.

Read independent journalism and watch media from Indian journalists who do not rely on propaganda for viewership.

Pick a country or region of the world whose leaders belong to the dominant religion. Research religious minorities in that region to understand how policies may target or otherwise affect these minorities.

Locate three examples of campaign media, such as ads, speeches, and rallies. As you observe them, make mental notes of claims that seem like propaganda. Discuss with your peers.

Resources

Reporters Without Borders

An international nonprofit organization that supports access to free and reliable information for all.

Committee to Protect Journalists

An independent, nonprofit organization founded by journalists that promotes press freedom worldwide and defends the right of journalists to report the news safely and without fear of reprisal.

Freedom House

An organization that defends human rights and promotes democratic change.

PEN America

An organization that promotes free expression and human rights through writing and literature.

International Federation of Journalists

The world's largest organization of journalists, focused on equality, freedom of expression, and fair labor conditions.

Access Now

An organization that promotes digital freedoms and access for vulnerable populations.

Credits & Acknowledgments



About the Author, Reiya Bhat

Reiya Bhat (she/her) is a PhD student in political science at the University of California, Irvine, where she specializes in comparative and American politics. She has conducted fieldwork in India, collecting the oral histories of women who lived through India's 1947 Partition. She is passionate about the role of oral histories and storytelling in affirming the autonomy of and sharing the lived experiences of marginalized communities. Currently, she is continuing to expand on oral history work to examine perceptions of belonging and political engagement within immigrant communities.

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