

**OPINION**

# Agreeing to disagree on Modi's India

As we celebrate our homeland, we Llers must confront our divergent views of it



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Indian Americans this month are celebrating their homeland's 76th year as a free, democratic nation. Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians from across Long Island will throng to "little Indias," including Hicksville, to stage or cheer parades and pageants, in a collective exhibition of pride and homesickness.

They relish their ties to India, a country of 1.4 billion — which this year outpaced China as the world's most populous nation and emerged as the fifth-largest economy — and cling to its movies, music and food.

But they're just as divided over India as Americans are over America.

Members of Long Island's Asian Indian community — which grew to 73,284 in 2021, from 56,174 just a decade before, a jump of 30%, according to census data — have widely

divergent views of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his right-wing Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party.

To Alex Esthappan, 64, of Elmont, and Asok Mukherjee, 80, of Yaphank, who immigrated to the U.S. decades ago, Modi is a hero of sorts. Esthappan praises Modi's push for privatization of entities like Air India and Mukherjee hails Modi for ramping up digital payments — you can buy almost anything on the streets with your phone — making a big dent in the parallel economy.

Others, like Habeeb Ahmad, 64, of Albertson, a Muslim, are not so enthusiastic. "The conditions in India are not very good for minorities," says Ahmad. "To be honest, since Mr. Modi came, it has been a different India."

Sonia Arora, 53, of Port Washington, a Sikh woman, and Neela Mukherjee Lockel, 47, a practicing Hindu and Asok Mukherjee's daughter, are worried about women's rights. Arora, who is also con-



Members of the Indian community march and ride floats along Hillside Avenue in Floral Park during an India Day parade Sunday.

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cerned about the muzzling of the press, would prefer a return to the secular ideals of the nation's founders.

Once refused a visa to visit the U.S. when he was chief minister of Gujarat state because of his notorious human rights record, Modi seemed to be vindicated when he addressed a joint session of Congress to a rousing ovation and walked away with billions of dollars in defense deals with the U.S., which now needs his support against Russia and China.

But Modi has a problem with criticism, and has no control over militant Hindu groups that are allied to the BJP and terrorize ordinary people. On a recent

visit to Moradabad, in northern India, I found Muslim restaurants closed because they were forbidden by local toughs to serve meat for 10 days during the ongoing Ramnavami Hindu festival, even though the eateries were legally allowed to operate.

A splintered opposition and the courts seem to be the only impediments to the BJP's straggling policies.

Recently, India's Supreme Court struck down the defamation conviction of opposition leader Rahul Gandhi, who was thrown out of Parliament and given a 2-year prison term for a remark he made ridiculing persons with the last name "Modi." He eventually regained

his parliamentary seat.

A court also questioned whether the Modi government has been indulging in ethnic cleansing by demolishing Muslim shanties in the northern state of Haryana.

Journalism has become a perilous enterprise. Modi has been using a 2021 law setting new internet rules to suppress the flow of bad news through social media channels wherever it erupts — as after the recent killing of three Muslims on a train near Mumbai, and the rape of two Christian women during sectarian violence in the BJP-ruled state of Manipur.

What the BJP doesn't get about democracy and good government is that they are synonymous with criticism and transparency, which can only help business.

India's beauty lies in its embrace of secularism, diversity, constitutional rights, and the rule of law.

What better occasion than India Day to hold our leaders to those values shared by our two democracies — the oldest and the largest.

■ **COLUMNIST NIRMAL MITRA'S** opinions are his own.