**June 6, 2024 / A win for democracy in India**

**[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]**

**[BILLBOARD]**

SCORING IN – (dorian) And The Moustache Was His Name

NOEL KING (host, *Today, Explained*): Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi was absolutely going to win a third term in this month’s election.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.npr.org/2024/05/06/1248045428/india-elections-narendra-modi-varanasi-ganges)*> SKY NEWS: “A star campaigner for his party, Modi leaves no stone unturned as he covers the length and breadth of this country.*

NOEL: Modi is an authoritarian Hindu nationalist and he’s VERY popular with millions of Indians.

NOEL: But the authoritarianism and the nationalism worry those who note that India’s a democracy and those are not super democratic values.

NOEL: Anyway. He was going to win and not only that his PARTY - the B-J-P - was going to take even more seats in Parliament, said the pundits and the analysts and seemingly everyone else except …

NOEL: well, the people.

NOEL: As votes rolled in and the bewildered pundits melted down on live TV

*<CLIP> India Today: “You win some and you lose some he still has a fabulous track record. Oh you made him. Oh God. In life you don’t get all right.*

NOEL: it became clear that Modi’s party had in fact LOST its majority in Parliament.

NOEL: Coming up on Today, Explained: India reminds the world what democracy looks like.

**[THEME]**

NOEL: It’s Today, Explained. I’m Noel King with Vox’s Zack Beauchamp, Senior Correspondent. Zack has a very cool beat: DEMOCRACY.

ZACK BEAUCHAMP (senior correspondent, Vox): and I got a book coming out on that topic.

NOEL KING: What's book going to be called?

ZACK BEAUCHAMP: It's called The Reactionary Spirit, and it covers, among other countries, India.

NOEL: All right. India just held an election. The votes have now been counted. It was a long process. It's a very, very big country. And the outcome is different than most people expected. What happened?

ZACK: The ruling party, the BJP, as it's called, led by very popular Prime Minister Narendra Modi, was expected to win in a landslide. They won. I want to be clear on the results. They won, but they won by a much smaller margin than they expected.

NOEL: Why did this happen?

ZACK: So that's the question everybody's asking. And honestly, we're all trying to figure it out. I'm reporting on this right now. I'm talking to experts. And a lot of the time when I speak to, you know, leading people in Indian politics, they're like, look, we don't know yet, right? It's it's shocking, but but I'll give you some of the leading theories.

SCORING IN –A Spiral Staircase (hip hop, beat, drums, forward momentum)-02

So the biggest one is the economy. Now, India's economy has been growing, at a pretty strong clip, I mean, one of the best in the world. The issue is that the benefits of that growth are unevenly distributed. There's still a lot of poverty and there's a lot of unemployment, especially among young people. So, the line that you're hearing is you can't hate Hindu nationalism. Modi campaigned primarily on an ideological platform, you know, saying this is a Hindu country. I'm the advocates for Hindus. That's all BJP ideology.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mcDxCEgrXew)*> CNA - MODI SPEECH: Hindi   
<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mcDxCEgrXew)*> CNA: Indian prime minister Narendra Modi has been accused of making islamophobic comments during an election rally. Triggering widespread anger from Muslims and members of the opposition.*

And it seems like the counter messaging, which, from, from the opposition parties was, well, okay, fine. But your young people are unemployed. There's not electricity that's reliable in a lot of different places. What are you going to do about that? If all you're doing is talking about how the Muslims are infiltrators? Right?

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EDBSkqRs7TU)*> CBC: \*HINDI\* The poor remain poor and the rich are getting richer said clothing retailer …*

And the real shock here has been the state of Uttar Pradesh, where most analysts are singling that out as the key reason why they underperformed expectations right – their underperformance in that state.

SCORING OUT

NOEL: Do we know who voted against him in Uttar Pradesh?

ZACK: We're still trying to sort that out. But a lot of it seems to be centered in the, Dalit or untouchable class, which is the lowest caste in the Hindu caste system. The caste politics were intertwined with the economic issues, right? Like caste is not in India a direct correlate with economic status. But if you're upper caste, you're more likely to be wealthy. If you're lower caste, you're more likely to be poor. And so it seems to be, at least in part, that the lower caste revolts against the BJP is bound up in in part in economic issues. One thing that's clear is that the cross-caste alliance the BJP had built is not as durable as many people had expected.

NOEL: Zach, I was reading this morning that Modi lost Ayodhya, which is the place that I was super interested in because we did an episode on how he built a temple there on the site of a disputed mosque,

and he did that as a way of speaking to his base, being like, I'm your guy.

<CLIP> OLD TEX CLIP:

*PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA NODI: Siyawar Ramachandra ki Jai! Siyawar Ramachandra ki Jai! <under>*

*SOUTIK: Mr. Modi said that he had a lump in his throat when he went inside the temple sanctum sanctorum, and he congratulated the country on this occasion. He actually said, uh, 22nd January is, I quote, “Not a date on a calendar, but the dawn of a new era.”*

NOEL: And the the assumption was, oh, he's definitely going to win here. What do you think it means? That places where he seemed like a gimme, he just didn't turn out to be a gimme. Is this backlash or do you think we were reading the tea leaves wrong?

ZACK: So, I mean, it's both, right?

SCORING IN – Subtle Edged Sword

ZACK: Like, there's this incredible video on Indian television of a pollster who got the results wrong. Right? Very wrong – predicted massive BJP victory – breaking down and crying on national television.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AAeuNbrAZ80)*> NDTV: “But he worked really hard four times. He went into the sport. So we thank you for your effort and you win some and you lose some. He still has a fabulous track record in terms of polling.*

*Now you’ve made him – Oh God.*

*No but the thing is …*

*\*CROSSTALK\**

*Here's the thing. In life you can’t get all right …*

ZACK: It was shocking, right? And the situation in Ayodhya was especially shocking.

*<CLIP> NDTV: According to some locals, the BJP lost because of anger and resentment among the rural populace in and around Ayodya.*

I think Ayodhya here is a mirror of what's happening nationally. People were concerned about the direction of the country under the BJP, and not just in an economic sense, but in a what is happening to India sense.

SCORING OUT

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kFzUczMHjuM)*> NDTV: Rahul Gandhi’s (?) 2.0 kicks off today starting from Manipur the yatra will cover 16 states in 67 days.*

ZACK: The the leader of the Congress party, Rahul Gandhi. He did this march – it's called a yatra – across parts of the country where he met with ordinary voters.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qdm_36DEcz0)*> FRANCE 24: He sports a distinctive beard and a white t shirt. SInce september he’s been walking across the country hoping to complete 3600 kilometers in just 5 months. Along with his supporters he sets off at 6am every day. Wherever he goes villagers line up just for a glimpse.*

ZACK: The message that he was trying to convey is that this was a unity march, right? It's that Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist politics was fracturing India and that the country needed to unite around its shared Indianness, not a shared Hindu-ness, and create a vision that's inclusive to all people. There's at least some reason to think that that message broke through. It does seem like there were people who were worried about what was happening to Indian democracy under Modi, and those voters turned out to vote against him.

NOEL: Now, Modi is going to be sharing power with two regional party leaders who are moderates. How do you think this is going to go? Will he share power?

ZACK: I mean, he has to, right? He does. He doesn't have a choice. Right. And they're going to make some demands. And they're not Hindu nationalist parties. A lot of the reason that Modi has been able to get away with democratic backsliding is that people have been afraid of him, of his personal popularity. There's a sense that he's invincible, as a as a political figure, that that is shattered. And so you have to wonder if some people who have been self-censoring or hiding from the fight, just because of concerns about what it would mean for them, are now going to be more willing to speak out.

NOEL: Perhaps what you're saying is to be a critic of Narendra Modi's just became a bit less dangerous. Now, you recently did an investigation for Vox into the ways that the Indian government under Modi was silencing its critics, including and this is really interesting, its critics here in the United States. What did you find as you were digging into Modi's influence on people who are American citizens and live here?

SCORING IN – SON\_SCDV\_1091\_00601\_Calculated\_Momentum\_A\_STEM\_(stem\_05\_synth)\_APM-05

ZACK: There was this invisible campaign, all sorts of different ways the Indian government was trying to to control and censor its critics here, and doing so effectively. We're talking social media mobs threatening them. We're talking the Indian government suspending their ability to visit. We're talking threats against their family living back in India, and we're talking even assassination plots against American citizens.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.npr.org/2023/11/30/1216005701/u-s-charges-indian-national-in-an-alleged-assassination-plot-of-a-sikh-separatis)*> NPR:*

*LEILA FADEL: The Justice Department announced charges against an Indian national for allegedly taking part in a murder-for-hire scheme on U.S. soil. The indictment alleges this was orchestrated by an Indian government employee.*

ZACK: There's no question to me that there is a systematic Indian government policy of reaching out across its border to silence critics. It's huge, and it's happening at scale inside the United States.

NOEL: One thing that's been very tough for the Biden administration and previous administrations is that the U.S., of course, does not appreciate democratic backsliding. You're saying this is happening at scale. You're saying it's happening in the United States. Does the Biden administration acknowledge this? Has it pushed back?

ZACK: Not publicly. They have criticized, the assassination plot, obviously,

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G2VZZRuXH8Y)*> GLOBAL NEWS:*

*BLINKEN: The government announced today that it was conducting an investigation and that's good and appropriate. And we look forward to seeing the results.*

ZACK: but in my reporting, it came up again and again that the Biden administration was basically letting India get off scot free on this one, that the the refrain from experts who work in this area was that the administration was prioritizing China over anything going on in India that they want Modi's cooperation when it comes to dealing with, rising China, and that they were willing to put human rights to the side, so long as that would guarantee India would take a more aggressive and confrontational anti-China stance.

SCORING OUT

NOEL: Let's go back to what we talked about at the beginning of this interview. You're writing a book about democracy, and India has been a specific area in the world of real concern. This time around, 640 million people voted. Nearly half of the voters were women, I read today. When you read those statistics, independent of the outcome, how does that make you feel?

ZACK: I mean, it's amazing – seeing all these people vote. And, you know, maybe they're not kicking Modi out of power, but they are sending an unmistakable message to the BJP that you can't do whatever you want.

SCORING IN – Neutral 01 Scanning the Horizon! NO DRONE

ZACK: I mean, India’s a democracy. It still is, despite all of the things that have been done under the past ten years of BJP rule, to try to weaken that democracy – it still is one. And that is just a remarkable, remarkable development, not just for India but for the world, right? India is a huge country. It's growing incredibly quickly, both in terms of population and in terms of the economy. And so it will likely be pivotal to determining the future of democracy on this planet. So for India to to show that its democracy has not been defeated, well, hey, I mean – if that doesn't make you optimistic, nothing will.

NOEL: Vox’s Zack Beauchamp– covers democracy, writing a whole book about it. You heard Zack that say we’re still waiting to figure out WHY Narenda Modi and the BJP did so much more poorly than expected, but one possibility is that his authoritarian tactics simply went too far. So far they came to the United States! Coming up: an American man runs afoul of the Indian government after a caught-on-tape moment with a politician goes viral.

**[BREAK]**

**[BUMPER]**

NOEL: In the summer of 2022, journalist Angad Singh took what should have been an easy trip.

SCORING IN – BM\_BMLP\_0103\_01401\_Running\_Tom\_

ANGAD SINGH (independent journalist): My family was visiting my grandparents in India. I wanted to join them.

NOEL: His gramma and grandpa’d just had a terrible bout of COVID —>

ANGAD: Barely survived. So I jumped on a plane to New Delhi from New York

*SFX PLANE SOUNDS:*

*SFX PLANE TAKING OFF*

ANGAD: Got to the airport …

SFX DELHI AIRPORT CROWDS MURMURING

ANGAD: and realized I wasn't going to be allowed in. I got to the customs agents and they took my passport. Looked to my left, looked to my right, and noticed people were getting in while I wasn't, so I was getting a little, a little nervous there.

NOEL: Nervous because this was supposed to be the easy part. Angad is American. But his family are Sikh and live in India. Now, India doesn’t allow dual citizenship but it DOES allow people of Indian origin to be “Overseas Citizens of India” - there’s even a little card that you carry. Angad had been using that card without problems for years and yet here he was … In India stuck at customs. And then. It got worse.

ANGAD: And then eventually they sort of escorted me to a deportation cell,

<SFX DELHI AIRPORT> OUT BY HERE

ANGAD: asked me some questions. They didn't really tell me what was going on, sat me on the same plane that I that I came on

*SFX DING*

*SFX PLANE TAKING OFF*

*SFX PLANE SOUNDS: to operate your seatbelt….*

*ANGAD:* and, upon landing in New York, I was given my passport back. And in order tofind out what was behind all this, I had to sue the Indian government to find out some answers.

SCORING OUT

NOEL: What did you hear and what did you expect to hear?

SCORING IN – 4 - i'm on your roof (STRINGS MOMENTUM)-02

ANGAD: What I heard from them, that I had been blacklisted for creating “anti-national propaganda” that “portrayed India's secular credentials in a negative light.” I don't know what I was expecting, to be honest. Because in my mind, I had always approached my storytelling about India from a place of deep, you know, appreciation for a culture that I felt I've always belonged to. So it was really devastating to be told thatthe Indian government sees me as this master propagandist who is trying to undermine the national sovereignty and integrity and security of the nation with the films that I make. At the same time, it was kind of flattering because I was like, wow, I guess my work has been impactful.

SCORING OUT

NOEL: This is a very specific charge that you “portrayed India's secular credentials in a negative light.” What do you think they were referring to? What was in these documentaries that you made?

ANGAD: I actually only went to India once in my life in the capacity as a journalist. I've been there many times from my childhood as just an individual going to see my family and my ancestral homeland. But in the documentary that I worked on while I was in India, it was about India's constitution. And we were talking about landmark bills that had been passed by the Indian government at that time.

SCORING IN – Bubbling Over - NO DRUMS (tension building, repetitive bass, strings, chimes, reverb, spooky)-02

ANGAD: Everyone was talking about this new law called the Citizenship Amendment Act that essentially, gave a pathway to citizenship to everybody besides Muslims in the country.

<[CLIP](https://archive.org/details/india-burning-vice-on-showtime)> VICE “INDIA BURNING”:

REPORTER: Several thousand people showed up today to make their voices heard about what they see as anti-Muslim, discriminatory moves by the ruling BJP government.

ANGAD: And so the film was essentially looking at is India, under the Narendra Modi's second administration, holding true to those secular values at the core of its constitution. And a lot of people were saying this citizenship law is clearly discriminatory against one group of people based on their religion.

SCORING TRANSITION

SCORING IN – New Tension 03 The Tunnels-03

ANGAD: So I was a uncredited production assistant on that film. So my role was quite minor in all of the editorial workings, but our team definitely landed a very strong interview with Subramanian Swamy, who was a leading figure in the BJP government.

**<CLIP> VICE “INDIA BURNING”:**

**SWAMY: If** Muslims become more than 30%, that country's in danger.

**VICE REPORTER:**That sounds like hatred. That sounds like the language of hatred towards...

**SWAMY:**Easy to say hatred. I'm being kind to them by not letting them come to India.

ANGAD: Mr. Swamy said it as many people in India see it. He said it very straight.

* **<CLIP> VICE “INDIA BURNING”:**
* **SWAMY:** All people are not equal.
* **VICE REPORTER:** Muslims do not deserve equal rights to apply for citizenship?
* **SWAMY:** There's no such thing as equal rights. They are not an equal category.

ANGAD: It was hugely controversial. The interview itself was quoted widely around the world. It was referenced in a letter by the UN Under-Secretary General for the Prevention of Genocide, and a letter about its concern about India's treatment of its minorities. Pakistan's Prime Minister at the time, Imran Khan, even retweeted that clip.

NOEL: Wow.

ANGAD: So it became this sort of international news item.

SCORING OUT

ANGAD: I think that was in part why our crew and me in particular were targeted so much. This is essentially the cost that India seeks to impose on its critics.

Whether you're an American who has Indian ties or not, if you go to India, if you are critical of the administration, you will not be allowed back in. And it's particularly devastating for us who are “Overseas Citizens” because we have the most nuanced understanding. And I think that's what India is most scared of, is its critics in the diaspora who are of Indian origin, who actually understand the country and have a lot to say about it. And that's why they impose such high costs for speaking up.

NOEL: Have you gone to the U.S. government and said, “hey, I'm an American citizen? I have family in India. They're blocking me.” Have you asked anyone for help?

ANGAD: It's India's sovereign right to decide who they let in and who they don't. And the United States, quite frankly, doesn't care. What the United States says is this is an alliance of democracies, and it will continue. But at the end of the day, I'm just one person, and I'm just here making my videos and being a part of the free press.

NOEL: What has all this meant for you? Like your personal life? I mean, this is your grandparents, this is your extended family. And from what I understand, you simply cannot see them.

SCORING IN – Bottom Drone Changes-02.A1

ANGAD: I grew up getting told to go back to my own country, that I was a terrorist, growing up in Georgia, the United States, where I was the only Sikh American in my community, the one of the few Indian Americans in my community. And I would go back to India regularly, and it was in India, visiting my grandparents, connecting with my ancestral homeland, that I learned to love the parts of me that America did not yet understand. Knowing that I'm no longer welcome there, knowing that when I went to India last time, they were the ones who told me, go back to your own country. And when I got back, I looked on Twitter and everyone was calling me a terrorist and I wasn't welcome here. It blew my mind because it was the same sort of nonsense that I faced growing up in southern America after 9/11. How has it impacted me? I worry that myself, my family, my future generations, we're not going to be allowed to go back to where we belong to. And that's a really, really tough thing to lose. I've had family members tell me you should do something else. You're a really smart guy, what has this gotten you? You think about that sometimes. But I don't really know any other way to navigate my life, so it is what it is.

SCORING OUT

NOEL: Were you watching as the results from the election came in?

ANGAD: Absolutely. It seems to be a bit of a shocker in that this idea that the Hindu nationalist being unified as one, which is something Modi loves to talk about, is, is not actually as popular as he and his party thought it would be.

NOEL: I wonder, though, what the outcome of that will be. Narendra Modi is an authoritarian, and one thing that we know about authoritarians, wherever they hail from, is they don't like being embarrassed. And the analysis I'm reading is this is deeply embarrassing for Narendra Modi. Do you think, at the end of the day, that this could make life more difficult for this man's critics, for people like you, for people like you, but who are living in India?

ANGAD: Most definitely. I mean, it's it's never been easy to be a critic of those who are in power.

NOEL: Yeah.

ANGAD: And history has shown that for generations. But I do believe that, there's certainly a chance that the conditions could get worse, that, you know, they might resort to more of this sort of communal politics, but I think people are also coming together and realizing that there's solidarity amongst the diversity that does exist within India.

SCORING IN – Lordy I Hope There Are Drums (neutral, pushing forward, concert percussion) 5/9-02

And there's something to be protected and cherished within that as well.

NOEL: That was journalist Angad Singh. This episode was produced by Peter Balonon-Rosen, edited by Miranda Kennedy, fact-checked by Laura Bullard, and engineered by Andrea Kristinsdottir and David Herman, whose last day with us / is today. I’m Noel King. It’s Today Explained.

**[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]**