ABOARD THE THIRUKKURAL EXPRESS, India — The 1,800-mile journey south from New Delhi to Kanyakumari is one of the longest train rides in India, passing through cities, villages, scrub forests and deep ravines.

The 22-car Thirukkural Express is a microcosm of India, carrying passengers from different castes and religions and with wide-ranging ambitions and grievances — from migrants crammed into sweltering no-frills cars to well-heeled families luxuriating in air-conditioned sleeper cabins, and everyone in between.

Passengers can also be divided by their ***politics***, a topic that is top of mind with a [*consequential election underway*](https://apnews.com/article/india-election-modi-bjp-democracy-8998fe6aba5fa26debc0f82c4e2ccf69). The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party is likely to win and reappoint [*Prime Minister Narendra Modi*](https://apnews.com/article/india-election-modi-muslims-congress-hate-speech-90f70cfae68d39ecc80a90acab6e3e00) — the leader for the past decade — for another five years.

India’s economy has grown rapidly under Modi, but the strong-arm tactics he has deployed to push his [*Hindu-nationalist agenda*](https://apnews.com/article/india-election-narendra-modi-hindu-nationalism-rss-79c30c8ae750a9c037d86b9e2c1b640c) has sharpened [*religious divisions*](https://apnews.com/article/india-population-ayodhya-religion-muslims-hindus-070ec1e8ec6fbd0ad2b54ab485ef9531) in the country of 1.4 billion people — roughly 200 million of whom are Muslim — and raised fears of a [*slide from secular democracy*](https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=india+democracy+apnews&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8) toward religious autocracy.

The Associated Press recently made the 48-hour train journey to interview Indian voters about the election, whose results will be announced on June 4. Below are some highlights:

**THE GENERAL CLASS**

Many passengers who bought the cheapest tickets available are domestic migrants. Sitting on steel benches, standing in doorways, or lying on the floor, they traveled between the thriving capital and villages in the countryside, or to other cities, in search of work.

Pardeep Kumar, a bespectacled man who runs a food stall in New Delhi, said the ruling Modi government isn’t doing enough for the poor.

Like millions of Indians scraping by in the informal economy, Kumar has felt the sting of rising food prices.

He appreciates the 5 kilograms (11 pounds) of free grains he receives every month from the government, part of a program to alleviate poverty and help large numbers of unemployed. But he would prefer the government focus more on improving education, and providing better health care.

“We don’t want free food,” said Kumar, who traveled with his family to their village in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh. With better education, he said, “we can then earn on our own and feed our families.”

Kumar is rooting for the opposition party, the Indian National Congress, which he knows faces an uphill battle against the ruling BJP.

“For ten years all (the BJP) did was talk about Hindus and Muslims, temples and mosques,” Kumar said. “And if you raise your voice against this, you’ll be arrested.”

A few berths down, Rishipal Chaudhary, wiry and goateed, disagreed.

Chaudhary, a locomotive driver traveling to the southern city of Madurai for work, believes Modi has improved the country. For example, he said, crime against women is down, and schools are being given better teachers and facilities, changes that have benefitted his daughter.

“I love him from the beginning,” Chaudhary said, an opinion shared by many passengers crowded around him.

**THE SLEEPER CLASS**

As the train cruised through the heartland of India, passing through Agra, a city famous for the 17th century Taj Mahal mausoleum, a man moved through the aisles, shouting: “Tea! Tea! Get your tea!”

A notch up from basic service, the more comfortable — and only slightly less affordable — sleeper cars were filled with passengers sitting in its lower berths. Some were perched on top of the foldable bunks. They discussed ***politics*** to pass the time.

“The times have changed. Ten, twenty years ago we were one, but now we have been divided,” Haji Abdul Subhan said, his flowing beard buried in the newspaper he was reading.

Subhan, a 74-year-old former railway employee who is Muslim, was traveling to the city of Bhopal.

Many Muslims have experienced discomfort since Modi took office, and Subhan enumerated some of the indignities carried out by the government: razing the homes and shops of Muslim activists as [*a form of punishment*](https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=india+bulldozer+justice+apnews&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8); banning Islamic schools in some states; and restricting the volume of loudspeakers at mosques.

“There is an effort to create problems for us. We can’t even speak freely,” he said.

His voice is cut short by Santosh Kumar Aggarwal, a man in a cotton vest who sat cross-legged on the upper berth and listened to Subhan’s concerns.

“He is talking the language of Pakistan,” said Aggarwal, taking a swipe at Muslims, who make up 14% of the population. The stinging suggestion: If you’re unhappy with the government, move to Muslim-majority Pakistan.

A Hindu, Aggarwal has been voting for the BJP for decades. Under Modi, he said, India is reaching new heights.

What about Subhan’s concerns?

“You see, (Muslims) might be facing problems,” Aggarwal said. “We don’t have any problems at all.”

And the razing of Muslim properties?

“They (Muslims) grabbed public land under previous governments. That’s why they are crying now,” he said.

**THE AIR-CONDITIONED CLASS**

As the train chugged south, the terrain was greener, the farms bigger. The homes of the affluent stood out as the landscape rushed by.

On board for a few hours more, the highest-paying passengers pulled freshly starched white bedding from brown paper bags delivered to their berths.

Nikunj Garg, a medical officer, is worried about [*rising unemployment*](https://apnews.com/article/technology-india-economy-ca599ec7f67e2c89bd2c87b4cc3ec7dd) and trouble in the education system. She believes the quality of life should be improved for all Indians. “It is the small things that matter the most,” she said.

A berth ahead, Samodhra Meena questioned the government’s supposedly female-friendly policies, such as access to clean drinking water and cooking gas, that are a hallmark of Modi administration, saying they didn’t benefit her family. “I want a change in the government,” she said.

In the same carriage was Mahadev Prasad. Along with his family, Prasad was going to Madurai, one of the most ancient cities in India known for its Hindu temples. He carried with him holy water from the Ganges River as an offering for one of the temples.

Prasad is confident Modi is coming back to power for a rare third term. He hailed the government’s decision to revoke the semi-autonomy of Kashmir, a Muslim-majority region. And he supports Modi’s increased spending on infrastructure and the decision to build a [*Hindu temple on top of a razed mosque.*](https://apnews.com/article/india-election-temple-modi-mosque-bjp-15d678e47f869a64993b724f905653b4)

Has his life as a businessman improved?

“All the industries have slowed down. Some are even getting closed in my area,” he said. Yet, for Prasad, Modi has achieved something important.

He draws on a widely accepted theory among Modi supporters to make his pitch: “In the past, Indians didn’t get much respect while travelling abroad. But now we are being respected.”

Vinoth Kumar, who was seated next to Prasad, didn’t seem quite impressed.

Kumar, a 32-year-old telecom engineer from the southern Indian city of Tiruchirappalli, is scathing of the Modi government. He said divisions based on language, ethnicity and religion are rising because of Modi’s Hindu-first agenda.

Kumar predicts that if Modi wins another term “the country will not be secular.”

At the end of another day, the clamor in the train gave way to quiet whispers. More passengers disembarked before the train made its final stop at Kanyakumari’s sprawling beaches that were getting crowded with hundreds of men and women stepping into the water’s edge.

They looked to the east, hands pressed together, as the sun rose from the horizon.