

Indian General Elections: How some of India's brightest minds have bought into the Modi myth

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Only one man knows the mind of Narendra Modi, and his name is Narendra Modi. And yet, discarding cynicism and skepticism of political manipulation, several business executives, intellectuals and economists appear to have taken him and his supporters at their word and accepted him as an exemplar of good governance, a protector of equal rights, the harbinger of a Reaganite small government (even though in the Reagan era, US government spending only grew bigger, with larger deficits), a magician who will spark entrepreneurship, and a champion of safety and security for women.

The strategy to remake Modi begins with the claim that the Modi of 2014 is not the Modi of 2002; that he appears to have moderated his views. To support this view, many commentators point to the BJP manifesto and his recent public speeches. For example, Brown University's Ashutosh Varshney, an astute observer of Indian politics, has read Modi's campaign speeches closely to conclude that he has succeeded in presenting himself as a moderate. Varshney does not say that Modi has become moderate, but that he has managed to present himself as one.

But elections don't run on nuances, least of all this election. For Modi to remain above the fray and appear prime ministerial and development-oriented, other Bharatiya Janata Party leaders are saying the more un-sayable stuff, to reassure militant supporters that nothing really has changed. The BJP candidate Giriraj Singh said Modi's opponents should go to Pakistan, and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad leader Pravin Togadia asked Hindus in Bhavnagar to drive Muslim owners away from a property they coveted. (Varshney was writing before these divisive remarks became known; perhaps he wrote too soon?) Modi called the remarks "petty" and "irresponsible," but didn't condemn them outright—he said they diverted from the campaign's central message of governance. The activist Swami Agnivesh promptly praised Modi for distancing himself, as though not distancing himself from those statements was a feasible alternative.

Other commentators suggest that Modi's economic record and philosophy trump all other arguments now. Jagdish Bhagwati of Columbia University, who has been an adviser to Human Rights Watch and is rightly angry over the immunity which some Congress politicians have enjoyed after the 1984 massacre of Sikhs, now angles for a senior advisory position in a future Modi administration, and recommends his co-author and Columbia colleague, Arvind Panagariya, for the post of prime minister's chief economist.

Modi's relentless campaign projects him as the Indian equivalent of bapak pembangunan, or the Father of Development, as Suharto was called during his 32-year-rule of Indonesia. Indeed, Modi may potentially become India's first leader in the East Asian, and not South Asian, mould. Those seeing a Reagan in Modi are, like Christopher Columbus, mistaken about the direction they are looking in. Modi's approach and governance style are closer to China's Deng Xiaoping or Indonesia's Suharto. Deng and Suharto both bore the burden of massacres (as does Modi)—in Suharto's case several, with Deng it was Tiananmen Square, 25 years ago this June. Both put in place economic

policies that delivered sustained economic growth, lifted millions out of absolute poverty, and improved health and education indicators. But they ruled as stern authoritarians, and jailed writers, human rights activists, artists, union leaders and dissidents, sometime for years. A crucial difference: if Modi becomes India's prime minister, he would have been elected in a free and fair election, unlike Deng (who never faced an election) or Suharto (whose elections were sham).

But how valid are the claims about Gujarat's growth and Modi's role in enabling it? The evidence is mixed. Other states, large and small, have also grown rapidly, and sometimes from a weaker base. Gujarat was hardly an industrial or economic laggard before Modi became chief minister, and the growth is not a post-2001 phenomenon. From motels in American towns without tourists to shops in cashless African villages, under Communist-ruled Kolkata or entrepreneurial Mumbai, Gujarati businesses have succeeded without Modi's leadership. In fact, despite Modi's claims of leading a booming economy, fresh investments dipped soon after the 2002 massacres and new capital remained shy of Gujarat for a few years. Further, the 2002 massacres were not an aberration, and the state has not always been at peace since then. Troops had to be called in 2006 and there have been other communal incidents after. (In contrast, while there have been terror attacks in Mumbai and Delhi regularly, neither has seen mass communal violence or massacres since 1993 and 1984, respectively.)

The East Asian logic—of separating the political from the economic—is at work here. Take Deepak Parekh, chairman of HDFC Bank, who was among the few executives in 2002 to say, courageously, that Modi should resign because of the massacres under his watch. (A few months later, Modi did resign, and was re-elected.) Parekh now virtually endorses the party and finds the BJP's manifesto to offer the best guarantee for growth, as if that growth prospect is more relevant than his earlier moral revulsion. Narayana Murthy, chairman of Infosys had obliquely criticised Modi in the Darbari Seth Memorial Lecture in 2002, when he stressed the importance of secularism. But he now says Modi should not be judged solely on those massacres.

Modi's message has also influenced those who write on business. Last year at a seminar in London, the former corporate executive Gurcharan Das said that despite Modi's economic performance, he wasn't fit to be prime minister. He now presents the choice in stark terms—secularism or growth, as though such a clear-cut Manichaeian divide is the only way to look at the issue. He also suggests that India needs growth first, and those who prefer secularism are "wrong and elitist." (The fact is, of course, that India needs both.)

Jawaharlal Nehru's biographer, MJ Akbar, now expects us to forget what he wrote about Modi over the years (that he deserved Pakistan's highest honour, that he was like Hitler) because he was struck by Modi's speeches focusing on jobs and development even moments after bomb blasts went off near his rally in Patna in October last year. (Akbar's onetime idol Rajiv Gandhi showed similar courage when he continued his programme unruffled after a Sri Lankan sailor hit him with his rifle in 1987, a blow which could have seriously hurt him, if not killed him, had Gandhi not been young and agile.)

Meghnad Desai of the London School of Economics praises Gujarat's judiciary for the convictions against rioters. But, as a Stanford Law School study shows, the conviction rate of India's most widely televised rioting and killings is less than 10 percent. Vinay Sitapati, a lawyer and Princeton University doctoral candidate, estimates that in cases where the Supreme Court has intervened and outsourced investigation, prosecution, and witness protection, the conviction rate has risen dramatically, to 39 percent. Defenders of Modi claim that the Supreme Court-appointed SIT's report indicating there was insufficient evidence to prosecute Modi constituted a "clean chit" from the court. In fact, the court's amicus disagreed with the report, and the court itself has not made any observations about it. Zakia Jafri, the widow of former Congress MP Ehsan Jafri, who was brutally

murdered in the Gulberg Society massacre, has filed a criminal review petition against the report in the Gujarat High Court after a metropolitan magistrate rejected her protest petition last year.

Many Indians have long disliked the Congress—for its faux socialism, which entrenched well-connected businesses; for its lack of commitment to equality for all, which left minorities, women, and Dalits vulnerable; for its lip service secularism, which disempowered Muslim women; for its embarrassing devotion to the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty, which disregarded merit; for the scams, which enriched cronies; for its thwarting of freedoms, which saw books banned and surveillance imposed on the internet; and for the Emergency itself, which suspended civil liberties, undermining the sacrosanct constitution.

Modi has managed to convince many such voters that he can undo the Congress damage. These voters aren't communal. Despite the aura of impunity surrounding him, the weakened institutions and the diminished freedoms in Gujarat (his state has banned two books, and films critical of Modi rarely get screened in Gujarat), the sedition charges filed against critical journalists and academics and the hounding of those seeking justice (think Teesta Setalvad), Modi's new supporters project their aspirations on him and hope that he will deliver.

Some, like the economist Vivek Dehejia, hold that Indian institutions are strong, and can withstand a powerful politician. But Indian institutions have been challenged in the past and their record in responding to a leader who make arbitrary demands has not been reassuring.

Lal Krishna Advani's criticism of the media over its role during the Emergency comes to mind: you were asked to bend, you crawled. So does Arun Shourie's critique of the judiciary under Indira Gandhi's second reign (1980-1984), when he asked: by what are judges bribed? (Ambition, pride and vanity.) George Fernandes, too, comes to mind when, as industries minister in Morarji Desai's Janata Party government after the Emergency, he asked India's captains of industry: what makes men behave like rats?

The damage the institutions suffered during the Emergency was severe and many are yet to recover fully. Governments since have been able to curb freedoms without formally declaring an Emergency. Why would a leader like Modi, who has centralised so much power in his hands in Gujarat, act in a more consultative and collegial manner in Delhi?

As the country heads towards the final phase of an election, the rightful heir of Indira and Sanjay Gandhi's politics is striding towards prime-ministership, with a chorus parroting "ab ki baar Modi sarkar" as if in a Greek tragedy. Even the more thoughtful voters are failing to see that what they are projecting their expectations on is a hologram. It is disquieting watching the procession, like the dance of death at the end of Ingmar Bergman's 1957 film, *The Seventh Seal*, chronicling a death foretold, the death of an idea called India.

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P.S.

* The Caravan. May 11, 2014:

<http://www.caravanmagazine.in/vantage/minds-modi-myth#sthash.HFm4d792.dpuf>

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