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India under Modi

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In 2014 Narendra Modi promised to change India's economic fortunes but that has been his primary failure. The priority has been political change: majoritarianism has now been mainstreamed, and the country's institutions stand more eroded than before.

After Narendra Modi first assumed power in 2014, he had asked for 10 years to transform the country. The Modi government is now more than three-quarters of its way through that period. How should we look back on what we have lived through, as we consider the outlook for the last quarter of a decade of Modi's rule?

The backdrop to Modi's dramatic victory in the 2014 elections, when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won a single-party majority in the Lok Sabha for the first time in three decades, was the paralysed Manmohan Singh government caught in a web of scandal, struggling to stabilise an economy reeling from record trade deficits, rampant inflation and slowing growth. The comprehensive mess in the banking system was not fully known then but was to become evident soon. The economic boom of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government's first term, when growth averaged well over 8%, and when the poverty headcount fell at a never before rate, had long been forgotten. The country was ready for a change of government and a new leader.

2014 platform

The leader who presented himself was Modi, who put forward his credible but typically exaggerated record as chief minister of Gujarat. He positioned himself brilliantly as a clean politician and a man of action: someone who would deliver “good days” with faster economic growth, generate 10 million jobs a year, and bring back black money from abroad amounting to Rs 15 lakh per voter (which many interpreted as a promise to put that much money in every pocket—something that Modi never said). Also, he would not (could not) promote a dynasty, he would get government out of business, and put an end to politically-connected bank loans (“phone banking”). He would reform centre-state relationships, reform agriculture with “more crop per drop” and take the “Gujarat model” nationwide. There were subtler messages about the “pink economy” (meat exports), but while Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) workers at the ground level campaigned with communal messages, Modi with his post-Godhra history did not need to. Indeed, he seemed to be trying to put that past behind him by promising “sabka saath, sabka vikas” and referring to the Constitution as a “holy book”.

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Modi is, of course, a supremely gifted politician. He is a powerful speaker with smart turns of phrase, has an uncanny ability to touch the right buttons in a speech while discrediting or denigrating his opponents with withering sarcasm, and is a trained organiser who knows how to marshal his forces. He ran an election campaign in 2014 that broke new ground by intelligently using both technology and social media, and sold his record of achievements in Gujarat to back his promise of change. To all but the politically blind, it was no surprise that he won a handsome mandate.

The BJP increased its vote share by more than 60%, from the 19% it had in 2009 to 31% in 2014. In the process, Modi helped the party reverse a steady decline in its share of the vote, from a peak of 25% in the 1998 general elections. The BJP's 282 seats in 2014 were not only in excess of the 272 required for a majority, but also about 100 seats more than its previous best tally. Alliance partners brought in a further 54 seats.

In 2019, the party would go one better by taking its vote share to 37% and winning more than 300 seats.

Majoritarian political agenda

Though Modi in 2014 campaigned on the basis of a strong economic platform, it soon became clear that his priority was political. So it is his politics rather than his economics that has dominated the discourse. And the political goal has been to position the BJP front

and centre as the country's defining political force, with a new political culture and a re-definition of "the Idea of India". He sized up the principal opposition as easy meat because the Congress, the natural party of governance till then, won fewer than a tenth of the total seats in 2014. Encouraged, Modi talked audaciously of a "Congress-mukt Bharat".

Having captured what he used to call the "Delhi sultanate", his next goal was winning control of state governments, not just as an objective in itself but also to get a majority in the Rajya Sabha. This had assumed urgency when his initial attempt to change land acquisition laws that the previous government had introduced were blocked in the upper house of Parliament.

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Economics took second place, causing some initial comment that he was going slow on the promised reforms. In fact, there were few structural reforms in the entire first term, beyond the introduction of the (defective) Goods and Services Tax (GST), a bankruptcy law that has delivered less than expected, legislation to regulate the real estate business and a new framework for monetary policy that is being tested by the surge in inflation. While Modi would work hard to turn things around economically, he was at the end of the day a pracharak committed primarily to the RSS goal of cultural change that would transform a post-colonial state by taking the country back to its "authentic" Hindu roots, a revanchism that would put an end to what he called 1,200 years of slavery. He sought to marginalise the English-speaking "Lutyens" elite, reject syncretic traditions and deprive Muslims of a political voice (the BJP put forward no Muslim candidates in the 2014 elections, though they comprise 14% of the population), and create a majoritarian ethos so that India would progressively become, de facto if not yet de jure, some version of the RSS's long-held objective of a "Hindu rashtra"—a country if not entirely of, but primarily for, Hindus (who comprise 80% of the population).

The BJP has always had a problem with secularism, condemning its translation in practice as "pseudo-secularism", but Modi has tried to capture the idea in his own way.

At the symbolic level, there would be a renaming of towns, streets, railway stations, government programmes and sports awards to wipe out memories of "Muslim" and Nehru-Gandhi dynastic rule (the Congress had done its own re-naming to erase British place names). More substantively, in the style of many regimes in the world (including democratic ones), history is selectively re-interpreted, ignored, or even invented to suit current political purposes¹. In India now, Maharana Pratap did not lose at Haldighati to Akbar's forces, the Aryans were indigenous to India, and mythical tales are historical facts. There is also an attempt to re-invent/bolster the BJP's past (especially its absence from India's freedom movement) by claiming ownership of non-Anglicised politicians from the Congress stable like Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, and the re-doing of New Delhi's Central Vista and associated buildings. This last has meant a de-colonising of the symbolic architectural legacy of Imperial Delhi with a new war memorial and a statue of Subhash Chandra Bose, but otherwise amounts mostly to a bigger Parliament building and tearing down some post-Independence structures, whether ugly or functional, hopefully to be replaced by better-looking and more efficient ones. The new history that is emerging also seeks to blank out Nehru from history books, and make secularism a non-word.

The BJP has always had a problem with secularism, condemning its translation in practice as "pseudo-secularism", but Modi has tried to capture the idea in his own way. Quizzed on the subject at a media event, Modi argued that he did not deny minority communities equal rights to the benefits of government programmes. Later, he seemed to conflate human rights with access to economic benefits. Meanwhile, there have been only muted noises or studied silences when it comes to anti-minority hate talk by those from the ruling establishment, even as fringe elements like Sadhvi Pragya Thakur (who faces trial for murder) have found their way into Parliament. Attacks on Muslims have become more frequent in the name of supposed crimes like the so-called "love jihad" and cow slaughter, progressing most recently to preventing eateries from serving non-vegetarian food and a Muslim-owned hotel from opening its doors to guests. And now so-called *dharam sansads* have called openly for genocide. Modi is silent, so is the President of the Republic, and the state police take very belated and half-hearted action only when they anticipate pressure from the Supreme Court. Another red line has been crossed.

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BJP spokespersons responded initially to the charge of anti-Muslim bias with whataboutery, but have given up on this increasingly untenable tactic as Hindu vigilante groups have steadily upped the ante. They have acted with impunity and have intimidated all and sundry: Muslim cattle traders, Dalits, church groups, Christian charities and missionary schools, film-makers whose portrayal of historical figures caused offence, owners of consumer brands whose advertising met with similar disapproval, and so on. The leader of one such vigilante group has even been made the chief minister of the country's largest state. The mainstreaming of majoritarianism became clear when rival political parties gradually stopped speaking up for an increasingly worried Muslim community, for fear of losing Hindu votes, and sounding sometimes like the BJP's 'B' team. The late RSS supremo, M. S. Golwalkar's goal of reducing Muslims to survival at the mercy of Hindus is on its way to becoming a reality in some BJP-ruled states even as the RSS gets ready to celebrate its centenary. It has been a long road till here, and it is important to understand that for most of the way Modi was not there. The ground was prepared for someone like him.

You could argue on the one hand that what Modi has pulled off is what in the financial world is called a "bait and switch": Beguile the buyer (voter) with one kind of offer or promise (jobs, incomes, etc) but deliver something else in the end. It is doubtful if the BJP would have won a parliamentary majority if it had campaigned in 2014 on the promise of moving against love jihad, cattle slaughter, and the misuse of the prosecutorial agencies against those in opposition to the government, whether politicians, civil rights activists or journalists. As already noted, Modi's campaign slogan was "sabka saath, sabka vikas". But by late 2021 Modi felt bold enough to argue (as widely reported; the official text is silent on this) that colonially minded people were trying to block the country's progress by using freedom of expression, while his national security adviser lectured to police officials that they needed to be at war with civil society. Scapegoating is of course a part of every politician's armoury, to be rolled out when it is clear that things are not working to plan. More recently, Modi has gone a step further with the assertion that the stress on fundamental rights has weakened the country and there should be a stress on fundamental duties instead. Most of the latter, as listed in the Constitution, are anodyne (respect symbols like the flag, strive for excellence, etc), and it is hard to see how they conflict with any individual rights. But this is a standard RSS trope, and brings with it obvious dangers.

On the other hand, it could equally be argued that, far from doing a bait and switch, the party has delivered exactly what it had long promised: an end to the special constitutional status of Jammu and Kashmir, a Ram temple at Ayodhya (stymied for three decades by judicial gridlocks after the Babri masjid was pulled down) and a uniform civil code (delivered in part by criminalising "Triple Talaq"). The party's other longstanding promise, of making the country a nuclear power, had been delivered in 1998 by the Vajpayee government.

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The commitment, to stop and possibly reverse undocumented immigration by Muslim Bangladeshi citizens (which was a part of Rajiv Gandhi's Assam Accord of 1985), was sought to be given effect through changes to the citizenship law, which, judging by the home minister's comments, seemed to have as its real goal the disenfranchisement of large numbers of Muslim citizens. But the pause button has been hit on giving effect to these changes, and only partly because of the onset of Covid. Possibly the risk of damaged relations with Bangladesh has become a concern at a time when China has been gaining diplomatic ground in the neighbourhood.

Administrative style

When it comes to administration, Modi's style has been to work primarily through the bureaucracy, especially key bureaucrats whom he trusts. In a typical change, the appointments committee of the Cabinet now consists of just the prime minister and home minister; the minister in charge of the concerned ministry is no longer a member and therefore has no formal say in who gets appointed to his/her ministry. On the plus side, Modi has made some attempts to reform a hide-bound structure through lateral entry and a breaking down of silos. He has also made consistent attempts to strengthen the governance capacity of the BJP by inducting professionals into his government. While party heavyweights hold key portfolios, they have been joined by former officials from the Indian Administrative Service/Indian Foreign Service and techno-entrepreneurs, who have been heavily loaded with the charge of power, railways, communications, information technology, foreign affairs, urban affairs, petroleum, etc.

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One could also argue that Modi's framework of thought continues to be that of a chief minister who can launch and execute specific programmes without having to think too much about policy nuances—the Harvard vs hard work dichotomy (more on this later). But Modi is the first prime minister, after Rajiv Gandhi, to focus on harnessing technology to achieve governmental goals. He is also the first prime minister to think scale, whether it is renewable energy, mass opening of bank accounts, or the attempted universalisation of health insurance, proper sanitation, tap water supply and the like. He has also focused like no prime minister after Nehru on building the country's physical infrastructure.

In many ways, therefore, Modi is an original in Indian politics. As Christophe Jaffrelot has argued in his new book, *Modi's India*, he is the first Indian politician to have successfully mixed majoritarianism and populism for a powerful cocktail. Equally, though, he fits to a T the mould of populists in other countries and indeed through history. There is personal identification with the masses ((the repeated talk of being blessed by the people), the heroic style (working long hours in selfless service), the notion of being the chosen one (Hindu *hriday samraat*), an antagonistic mode that targets old elites and minorities, the stress on hostile external elements combined with an emphasis on national strength, the use of vigilante storm troopers who have the state's implicit blessings, and clientelist welfarism. There is also an attempt to concentrate power through creeping authoritarianism (the use of draconian laws that criminalise dissent, the creation of a surveillance state through the reported use of Israeli spyware like Pegasus, and other such), the whittling down of autonomous institutions that could stand in his way, and the alignment with that part of big capital that is close to the leader. History has plenty of examples to show that this combination of factors can only end in some kind of upheaval, for good or ill. If one accepts the thesis that only those countries do well that have strong institutional structures, the real question to be decided is how strong India's institutions prove to be when tested.

Would India's course have been different without Modi? As Marx famously argued, “Men make their own history but they do not make it as they please...but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.” And so it is that a movement towards Hindu majoritarianism, flowing from a sense of Hindus being an aggrieved minority despite comprising the overwhelming majority, had begun to take root in the 1980s. Before and after, populist welfarism had gained traction as a political necessity in an under-performing economy. And the messiness of Indian democracy had created an under-current of thought that the country needed strongman (even military) rule—a view apparently shared by the majority of those surveyed in opinion polls dating back to 2017 and more recently. The BJP, in particular, had long espoused a presidential form of government. Perhaps it was only a matter of time before these strands came together in the personage of a politician who presented himself as an all-in-one solution.

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But India is too diverse to be susceptible to one-man or even one-party rule. If the contest is viewed in the framework of the Aryavarta heartland vs the periphery (the tribal and partly Christian north-east, Sikh-majority Punjab, Muslim-majority Kashmir, and eventually the Dravidian south with its different history, ethnicity and traditions, not to mention languages), it is hard to see diversity being stamped out by an all-encompassing, North Indian brand of Hindutva. The federal impulse remains. This would explain why even now the BJP holds only 37% of the total number of legislative seats in the states. Excluding Uttar Pradesh, it accounts for less than a third. And it runs the governments of only nine (one of them, Bihar, as a coalition partner) of the 20 larger states. The party has not helped itself by losing two key alliance partners, in Maharashtra and Punjab. For good measure, Modi has been stymied in his recent attempts to ram through legislative changes to citizenship, agricultural marketing and labour laws, proving that parliamentary majorities and even a leader's mass popularity are not enough. Governance has to be by consent.

Failure in economics

What then of the original campaign promise of changing the country's economic fortunes? In every sense, this has been Modi's primary failure. First, the economy under him has grown more slowly than under his predecessor, quite the opposite of what was promised. You could blame the pandemic which derailed the economy in 2020, more than it did most other economies, though India has also seen a faster recovery. But the economy was slowing even before the pandemic: growth was down to 4.1% in 2019-20, and just 3% in the final quarter of that year. Far from manufacturing gaining traction and increasing its share of GDP, it has shrunk in relative terms. Merchandise exports have been static until the current financial year, the longest period of such stagnation. Employment has suffered in every way: the proportion of people looking for work has come down, and those within that who are actually employed has shrunk too. Worse, as economic activity has suffered in manufacturing and services, more people have fallen back on agriculture, which already

supports too many people, making most of farming uneconomic. Naturally, the number asking for work under the employment guarantee programme has soared.

Can growth recover, post the recovery from the pandemic? Yes, and no. Yes, because companies and banks are now better positioned financially to expand. Yes, also because internationally there is a search for alternatives to China as a sourcing centre, as the dangers of concentrated sources of supply have become clear and as trade tensions mount. And, yes, because the ground has been prepared in other ways: the building of the highway and railway network, the digitalisation of the economy that has both lowered costs and extended reach, and the energy levels and focus which the government continues to bring to bear on getting things done.

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But, no, for equally important reasons: government debt in relation to GDP has soared, fiscal correction is urgently needed, the share of GDP that goes into investment has drastically declined, and the economy is less outward-looking than before as tariff walls have gone up. The other reason is the fact of a two-paced economy. Corporate profits have become hopelessly concentrated, with the top 20 listed firms accounting for an astonishing two-thirds of the total. This is a level of concentration without precedent, and points to the damage suffered by small and medium enterprises because of the triple whammy of demonetisation, a defective Goods and Services Tax and the pandemic. That in turn has had the downstream effect of throwing millions out of work, thereby narrowing the consumption base and therefore the size of the market. The growing inequality implicit in these trends is bound to get reflected in macro-economic trends down the road. That argues for slower growth in the medium-term.

More basically, the fundamental shift that is required, of moving surplus manpower engaged in farming into more productive, labour-intensive manufacturing, seems no closer to achievement than in the past. If anything, the task has become more difficult, because if you need high tariff walls and production-linked incentives for import-substitution industries, it usually signifies a misaligned currency that militates against exports. This was the distortion that was corrected in 1991, but which has now re-surfaced, testified by how difficult it is proving to work out free trade agreements. Without export success, no economy has grown fast. And without more employment at higher incomes in the manufacturing sector, the bottom half or even two-thirds of the working population will not benefit from whatever growth is achieved. The Modi government shows little understanding of the problem, its “Harvard” advisers have gone back to where they came from, and the mantra of doing things right (e.g., project execution) does not compensate for not doing the right things. Naturally, the government offers no solution. To hide its failures, the government has tried repeatedly to suppress or delay survey numbers on employment, consumption, poverty, etc. The numbers do eventually get published or leaked, and they do not tell a good story. Employment has shrunk, consumption has fallen, and poverty has increased.

Prospects for 2024

Against such an economic backdrop, will Narendra Modi win re-election in 2024? The question is premature, because no one knows how issues before the electorate will be framed, and whether the opposition can present a credible front that avoids splitting the non-BJP vote. Remember that the 2019 election was swung around on a dime, better than a ballet dancer might have done, after the terrorist attack on Pulwama in Kashmir (a security failure) was spun around to claim victory through the air strike on Balakot in Pakistan (and never mind the loss of a MiG-21). On the economic front, if millions of voters may not be able to say in 2024 that they are better off than they were five or even 10 years earlier, they can still be told (with justification) that they now have access to many conveniences they did not have before: tap water, electricity in the house, proper sanitation, clean cooking energy, a bank account, digital access, and much more. Middle class India can be shown the new expressways and a more modern railway system, as visible signs of progress. Those even higher up the ladder can celebrate their increase in wealth as the stock market outperforms the economy.

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If such economic arguments fail to cut ice, there is always the option of political mobilisation along community lines. Modi also has the unmatched ability to spin a positive narrative—with or without regard to the facts—to build an emotional bond with voters. So even if he does not get a majority the third time round, the BJP will almost certainly be the largest single party in the Lok Sabha and could lead a coalition government, if it chooses to do so. It is entirely possible therefore that Modi could become the first prime

minister since Nehru to win elections thrice in a row.

What can be said with greater clarity is that India will not go back to what it was before Modi came to power. The country's institutional structures that act as a check on power may well stand up to an extreme test, but they do stand more eroded than they were before Modi came on the scene. The co-option of the police and civil administration into serving the needs of the party in power, and often targeting the opposition, has become more encompassing. These open up situations that can be exploited by any leader or party that comes to power, thereby increasing the likelihood of negative outcomes long after Modi has gone from the scene. Is a counter-narrative possible? Perhaps, but the history of countries that have gone down the authoritarian route is not encouraging. A reversal comes only after a climactic (usually traumatic) event.

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But India has changed course in the past and renewed itself through elections, as in 1977. So you could argue that Indians have learnt to enjoy their freedom and value their political rights; that Hinduism's tradition of tolerance if not acceptance of differences and diversities could re-assert itself against the RSS's deviant version that ironically mimics the Abrahamic religions; and that international experience suggests a strengthening of democracy and institutions as a country's middle class grows.

Still, there is no one template. If one focuses on countries in transition, for every East Asian example to suggest a progressive democratisation of society, you can cite two Latin American ones to point the other way, accompanied in many cases with immiserisation. The countries of Central Europe and Central Asia, freed from the Soviet yoke, have good and bad stories to tell, economically and politically. At one stage democratic rule seemed to be progressing in Africa, along with improved economic performance, but the trend has become less clear. All outcomes are therefore possible. In the end, India might well carve out its own unique future possibly by continuing to muddle along as an endless exercise in imperfection, both economic and increasingly political; a country where (as the economist Joan Robinson observed) every assertion is as valid as its opposite. In other words, contestation will remain the norm.

This is a slightly revised version of an article that was first published in the January 2022 issue of the [Seminar](#) magazine.

Footnotes:

1 Thus, colonialism's depredations are not taught in British schools, and most Americans don't know that slavery was the primary issue in their Civil War.