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Modi Machine Moves on: India at its Watershed

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Amidst euphoric hopes and subterranean worries, it may still be slightly early to pass a verdict on Prime Minister Narendra Modi's successes during his early honeymoon months, following a landslide electoral victory by his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The BJP's broad sweep in the May elections, followed by the oath taking ceremony with the South Asian heads of governments and states especially invited to Delhi, and Modi's recent highly publicised visit to the United States, certainly beckon a substantive change in India's image and mode of governance. By being at the helm of affairs in his native state of Gujarat for over thirteen years, chief minister Modi was accredited for substantive growth in technological and economic realms often in cahoots with the moneyed classes and castes. His electoral support certainly reverberated his erstwhile successes in Gujarat, and BJP's favourite slogan, "India Shining" offered a persuasive alternative to a rather lack-lustre Congress government led by a mild-mannered and soft-spoken Manmohan Singh. However, concurrently, Modi rekindles fears especially among India's minorities which include Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Dalits and even Nehruvian secularists, who feel that a masculinised Hindu nationalist movement—Hindutva-- now ensconced in Delhi and across several states signals serious strains for world's most plural and the second most populous country. Here, his critics and sceptics--and they are not just Muslims per se—cite the gory events of 2002 in his native Gujarat when 2,000 Muslims lost their lives and hearths under his watch. The police and state machinery either stayed aloof from those pogroms or simply joined the Hindu Kar Sevaks who ensured arson, rapes, killings and displacement of Muslims to their utmost. Investigations and claims of exonerations go on unendingly but the contemporary footage by daring journalists and the evidence from dispossessed families point fingers towards the culpability of the Modi administration. The reason behind this campaign was officially attributed to some Muslims who had waylaid a train of Hindu yatis returning from controversial Ayodhya Mosque/Temple site. Amidst partisan accounts, truth has been the main casualty though it is vital to remember that just a few months earlier the Samjotha train carrying mainly Pakistani passengers back to Lahore had been attacked in a planned manner causing 67 deaths. In addition, attacks on Christians due to their alleged missionary work among Hindus especially the Dalits in Gujarat only betrayed a seamy side of BJP government led by Modi.

Complexity in relationship between any given nationalism and religious forces is not ahistoric development since we see this duality all across the world though India's founding fathers, sensitive to communalist challenges had sagaciously opted for a secular polity where politicking will strictly remain a mundane affair. Unlike France or even Turkey, a secular Indian state took upon itself to protect religions of smaller population groups from their vulnerability to a so-called majoritarianism. Contestations between the Indian National Congress and the BJP are a century old though many Indians, since the death of Pandit Nehru in 1964, have felt all along as if the state had been ceding more and more public space to an ever-encroaching majoritarianism and often accuse his heirs such as Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi for this political malfeasance. The BJP, in fact, is a reincarnation of Hindu Mahasabha of yester years which pioneered the "new Hindu" movement by romanticising Aryans besides viewing Muslims as "foreigners", or sheer blood thirsty Turks who had not only conquered Mother India but also entrapped vulnerable lower-caste Hindus into a non-Indian religion. Some of the early leaders of this New Hindu movement such as Vinayak Damodar Savarkar wanted to 'Semitise' Hinduism akin to Abrahamic faiths and did not shirk from praising Hitler and Mussolini in their own quest for an exclusive nationalism. The Mahasabhais were incensed with the creation of Pakistan in 1947 and accused Mahatma Gandhi of appeasement towards this Muslim majority state, which, to them, had been carved out of a historic Bharat Varsha. In January 1948, Nathuram Godse killed the Mahatma followed by the official banning of the Mahasabha though it resurfaced under different names, and since the late 1980s is known as Bharatiya Janata Party whereas its extremist wings such as Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and Kar Sevaks consist of trained and uniformed cadres who through their regular parades and literature seek to recreate India of a classical, pre-Islamic mould. Their moral and financial support comes from Vishwa Hindu Parishad (The World Hindu Council), which has devoted supporters in Diaspora who see India and Hinduism synonymous with each other. These groups have often been able to get foreign books on Hinduism and Gandhi banned or even pulped. For instance, a biography of Gandhi by Joseph Lelyweld, the editor of the *New York Times* was banned by Modi government in Gujarat and the books by Wendy Doniger were withdrawn and pulped by Penguin Books India—a large publishing house with global links. Doniger teaches at the University of Chicago and is a well-known authority on Hinduism but some of her explanations of Hindu beliefs and murals

incensed VHP and RSS who took the publisher to the court. Instead of defending themselves, the publishers simply acquiesced.

The BJP, in recent times, was revived by Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Murli Manohar, A. K. Advani and several known Hindutva proponents from the Hindi belt, whose marches (*yatras*) extolling names and heroics of fighting Hindu gods increased Hindu-Muslim tensions and eventually culminated in the destruction of Ajothya Mosque on 6 December 1992. The demolition of the mosque in the full glare of cameras resulted into taxing Hindu-Muslim clashes across India. Since then the BJP's climactic rise amongst a wide variety of Hindu voters and supporters has stayed uneclipsed though the ruling Congress party led by Narsimha Rao and then by Sonya Gandhi and Manmohan Singh did try to retain their hold on political power. Sonya Gandhi, the Italian widow of the slain Rajiv Gandhi, despite her naturalisation and Indianisation is still seen as a foreigner, and her son, Rahul Gandhi, as witnessed in recent elections put up a lack-lustre performance resulting in almost total rout of the Congress even in its heartland of the Uttar Pradesh (UP). Instead, the BJP was able to make inroads into India's South, which has often been seen less *communal*, unlike its northern counterpart.

It is vital to remember that the Congress government during the early 1990s opened up India's economy to foreign investments and gradually replaced semi-socialist and centralised structures put in place by Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. The main brain behind these vital reforms has been the Oxford-educated economist, Manmohan Singh, who, in fact, was born in Pakistan near Rawalpindi and was the then finance minister. His reforms and a growing following amongst a rising Hindu middle class helped BJP's first administration consolidate its hold across the wide sections of Hindu opinions both within and outside India. The Indians living abroad, especially from Gujarat and other Hindi-speaking regions, by then had become the vocal supporters of the BJP and their resourcefulness—similar to that of Jewish Diaspora in the United States and elsewhere—coalesced with the forces and trajectories of a romanticised Hindu nationalism. A war with Pakistan in 1999 over Kargil Heights in the disputed Kashmir region, preceded by the nuclear tests in May 1998, worked to BJP's wider and cross-section but strictly Hinduist appeal. This was the time when Narendra Modi, a former tea vendor and without any formal higher

education but trained in the rigorous acumen of the Kar Sevaks and RSS, made his opportune entry in Gujarat. He soon became the chief minister of a state that in its recent past had produced illustrious leaders such as B. Gokhale, B. G. Tilak, M. K. Gandhi, M. A. Jinnah and V. Patel. Quite plural like some other regions of the Sub-continent but with a dynamic tradition of enterprising communities of Hindus, Muslims and Parsis, Gujaratis always led political, social and economic movements even beyond South Asia. Gujarat's Sufis introduced Islam in Southeast Asia; its traders traded with East Africa in all areas including slaves; and exported Indian tea to Central Asia and Russia. Several Gujaratis moved to the West Indies and Hong Kong with the British Raj and their Sindhi fellow bankers would often lend loans to rulers such as the East India Company, Ranjeet Singh, Shah Shuja {of Afghanistan) and Talpur Muslim Amirs of the lower Indus Valley. For Gujarati entrepreneurs, Surat, Mumbai and Karachi were the main outlets for international trade and mobility.

In the above historical and more recent context, it is not surprising to see Modi as a cheerleader of this Hindu nationalism with its vocal claims on nativism and aspiring to be an ascendant force. Accordingly, to be an Indian is to be Hindu—culturally and ethnically if not religiously—since everyone else is either a follower of a non-Indian religion (Islam and Christianity), or subscribes to some 'movement' that subsequently evolved out of an overarching Hinduism (i.e. Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism). Modi, since the Gujarat massacres of 2002, has been quite careful in his pronouncements. On the one hand, he reaches out to Hindu sensibilities of having been ruled and dictated by the outsiders (Muslims and the Raj) and need to rediscover their own place in history and India, while simultaneously he does not want to rock the boat since any kind of communal violence or intense fracas with Pakistan may simply cause proverbial million mutinies from within. Thus, his prime ministership, thanks to a heightened and accentuated Hindutva, is a hostage as well as the power engine of this majoritarianism though pragmatism demands greater care if more 'Gujarats' are to be avoided. Such a pragmatism is equally necessary to realise the dream of this new "Asian century" led by a democratic and economically vibrant India—in competition or even at par with a 'smaller' but global Japan and an autocratic but powerful China.

Terms like “the Asian century”, and “new Asian Tigers” evolved during the 1990s in post-Soviet era when politically authoritarian but technologically innovative and even proto-western countries and regions such as Taiwan, South Korea, Thailand, Singapore and Hong Kong began to emerge as new *Japans*. In a Fukuyamian way, this was the ascendance of Western capitalist model and triumph of market forces, which could take the rest on a similar route of the sameness. Anwar Ibrahim, the then deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia and still not fallen from grace, wrote a corrective volume flagging the ethical and intellectual underpinnings of this Asian renaissance. To him, more than just a material and mundane smugness, it ought to be a moral and humanist achievement as imagined by Muhammad Iqbal and Rabindranath Tagore. In general, China was still unknown or unacknowledged, and its political stability and globalising economic growth especially after the handover of Hong Kong in 1997 took everyone with a surprise. Now in 2014, Modi is envisioning a similar kind of economic and political salience for his country, and the recent visits by the Japanese Prime Minister and Chinese President to India have psychologically boosted BJP supporters who feel that unlike the erstwhile stereotypes of poverty, inequalities and primitiveness, a new, formidable and energised India is receiving a universal recognition.

For many BJP supporters abroad, preponderance of Hindu nationalism, India’s growing prestige and prosperity and Modi’s rise to leadership are interconnected and that is how a greater sense of self-felicitation has been evident especially in his recent visit to the United States. New Delhi’s relations with Washington have moved closer especially following the strains due to the arrest of India’s Deputy Council-General in New York in December 2013 for lying on her housekeeper’s visa application forms. Devyani Khobragade had been arrested by the U.S. federal agents and despite her repatriation back home amidst serious allegations, is still facing litigation after having touched the raw nerve in Indian patriotism. For Modi’s critics, and they are mostly middle class intellectuals, liberal and leftist groups, Modi has raised expectations over and above the possible and even harsh realities and any kind of political and constitutional manipulation of India would threaten its very foundation. Pankaj Mishra, a well known author, speaker and critic of hegemonic politics, published his piece in “Bloomberg View” where he noted rather critically: “One of Modi’s political feats is to have tapped into the complex insecurities of rising Indians with his

potpourri of fantasies tinged with defiant, if under-educated, Hindu nationalism”. Mishra, like several Indian Muslim observers, is concerned that given the statements by Islamophobic BJP leaders such as Amit Shah and Yogi Adityanath, and the anti-Muslim campaign in Muzaffarnagar (UP) in 2013, BJP’s anti-Muslim tirade is going to become even more incendiary. According to him, an ally of Modi’s own close circle had complained that while "discrimination and the distrust of the Muslim were covert" in the past, "now the gloves are off and the hatred is in-your-face." Mishra is certainly distrustful of Modi, as he observes: “The powerful Indian leader may actually be the most dangerous of clichés, since the force unleashed by him can swiftly turn malevolent.” Cancellation of Indo-Pakistani talks at the ministerial level by India just after a few weeks of his oath taking which, among others, had been attended by Nawaz Sharif, the Pakistani Prime Minister, has disheartened many peaceniks on both sides. Again, the excuse was Pakistan’s trans-border support for Kashmiri militants, which put both the countries back to proverbial square one. A tough stand against Pakistan is viewed as a strong component of rightist trajectories in India, irrespective of their party affiliations and Pakistan is often posited as a rebellious sibling, a threatening *Turk* once again intent upon conquering and destroying Bharat and thus the contrasting images vary between trivialization and exaggeration. Pakistanis, in general, view India as a *Hindu* nation, intent upon their decimation and thus governments, defense establishments and their clerical groups along with opinion makers on both sides share similar xenophobia. The communal riots of 1947 and bilateral wars ever since have kept the two neighbours deeply suspicious of each other. So Modi’s toughness on Pakistan is seen symptomatic of this masculinised nationalism where history, if it cannot be rewritten, at least can be presumably redressed. In the same context, “Love Jihad”, an Islamophobic term popular with the RSS and even mentioned by several BJP leaders, accuses Muslim men of kidnapping Hindu women which is not true and is nefariously aimed at building up Hindutva. Many of his women critics feel that Modi’s denial of his marriage of over fifty years and a belated acknowledgement just before the elections also reveal dichotomies in his views about the rights of women and minorities.

Modi was refused visa by the U.S. Department of State in 2005 and it dismayed his supporters amongst the Non-Residents Indians (NRIs) especially from Gujarat whose own vocality and prosperity had afforded enough confidence in

sharing a more positive image of their country of origins. Washington, like London, harboured serious reservations about Modi over his handling of anti-Muslim violence and it appears that many Western diplomats would see Modi not just a helpless bystander but instead a perpetrator who allowed gruesome crimes against a section of his own people. However, foreseeing the writing on the wall, a major diplomatic shift began to take place in early 2014 and Ahmedabad started to receive visits from Western ambassadors trying to cultivate better relationships with this budding leader, who had already sidelined veterans like Advani and had even won over the support from Vajpayee.

Modi's appearance at the Madison Square Garden on 28 September 2014 before his NRI supporters typified a Bollywood extravaganza, featuring dancing girls and exuberant music while a sizeable number in the audience proudly wore t-shirts exhibiting Modi's portrait. Nine years earlier, Modi could not visit the place and now he was being garlanded and celebrated as a global statesman and a national redeemer. When Nehru went to the United States in 1949, he had to visit several cities where he delivered speeches to introduce his vision of India, which to most Americans, was totally a new reality. For Modi, New York itself unfolded the stage where other than his address to the United Nations, he met financiers from the Wall Street before addressing this gala event at Madison Square Garden which, as per *The Economist*, resounded like a jovial party: "Even Jon Stewart, host of a satirical television show, was impressed. "No world leader has drawn that many Americans for anything. Except maybe one of Berlusconi's bunga-bunga parties". For many Indians, both at home and abroad this was Modi's moment and certainly a triumphalist march from an obscure tea stall in Gujarat to the heart of the Big Apple. However, for his critics such as Vinod Mehta, this was a journey paved with rude jolts since it only reflected a major complex on the part of the BJP train. Mehta, who like Manmohan Singh, was born in Rawalpindi and grew up in a cosmopolitan Lucknow, this entire bonanza somehow did not bode well, as the senior journalist noted in a piece in *Outlook*: "One of the great mysteries of the Indian Establishment is its one-sided love affair with the US. When Manmohan Singh told 'the worst US president in history', George Bush, "the people of India love you", he may have sounded dotty but he was mostly accurate. The people of India do love the people of the US. The question to ask is whether the reverse is also true." Vinod Mehta is critical of fellow Indian journalists

for offering hyped up account of Modi-Obama parleys as if the Americans were heartily reciprocating to the Indians: “Now, I don't wish to be critical of my colleagues, but their hoopla and hype in covering the 'historic visit' is completely over-the-top.” He goes on: “Our distorted relationship with the US results from two factors. Ninety per cent of our civil servants, academics, politicians and industrialists ensure their children are educated in the US and imbibe American values, chiefly individualism.

“Thus, we are madly pro-America because those who make and influence policy have a vested interest in that country. The Indian elite is sold out to Uncle Sam, who occasionally throws some crumbs”. Mehta is unremitting of NRIs as he took a very serious note of their proclivities: ”And then we have the three-million strong NRI and PIO community. I have yet to meet a more smug, selfserving, patronising, opinionated lot. Ideologically, they are a little to the Right of Yogi Adityanath. Till a decade ago, these superior folk could not stand India: it was dirty, corrupt, lazy, poor and inefficient. Third-rate, in other words. Today, they queue up to buy luxury apartments in gated colonies in Gurgaon saying they always wanted to return home.”

Irrespective of one's opinion about Modi, the BJP and the future ideological orientation of India, the country is certainly changing and given the size of its population and major challenges, it might take a few more years to judge the extent and impact of this transformation. Certainly, India's political stability despite serious problems in Kashmir, the Northeast and Jharkhand, there is a greater consensus on democracy though Indianness remains contested. India may have the world's largest middle class and a major presence amongst its billionaires but a sizeable number of its people still struggle for a day-to-day life and abject poverty along with caste and class based stratification pose major challenges.

Graduating from a country into a cohesive nationhood is a gigantic project and in a definitional sense every nation keeps evolving all the time, as it is a continuous process. India's pluralism, secularist politics and an alert civil society have ensured its integrity and for its endurance it needs to keep on mediating between the contentious forces of creed, caste, class and ethnicity by avoiding any kind of unilateralism which may only cause internal volatility. Here the BJP under the spirited leadership of Modi will have to display a greater sense of responsibility and ingenuity and learning from

Nehru, Azad, and Gandhi will be immensely instructive. Modi can offer hope to a large section of his country and they are prepared to listen to him but in the process both India and Modi will have to learn hard lessons such as protecting and celebrating pluralism and not tipping the balance that the founding fathers created seven decades back. *The Economist*, quoted above, thus concluded its report: “Mr Modi has so far favoured an odd combination of building sky-high expectations, courting adulation and moving on. That has its risks. As Mr Nehru observed in a speech at Columbia University in 1949, if the hopes of the poor are not met, “then there is the apathy of despair or the destructive rage of the revolutionary”. Surely, India will have to redefine its relationship with her neighbours as well by involving them in processes for enduring peace and regionalization so as to change South Asia from an area of multiple conflicts into a region of unlimited possibilities and mutualities. Only time will tell.

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