

May 14, 2014 6:20 pm

Narendra Modi should stick to his pledge of toilets before temples

By David Pilling [Author alerts](#) 

The man set to lead India needs to prioritise development over his Hindu nationalist roots

Narendra Modi, the man most likely to become India's next prime minister, has a wicked turn of phrase. In one of his most memorable remarks, he subverted his strong association with Hindu asceticism by declaring his support for "toilets before temples". The same phrase, spoken by a Congress party cabinet minister, had provoked outrage from the Bharatiya Janata party of which Mr Modi is head. The BJP said the remark threatened to "destroy the fine fabric of religion and faith". But the party hierarchy, knowing that its fate depends on the so-called "Modi wave", barely demurred when its candidate adopted the slogan as his own.

The BJP leader is quite right to declare that India should spend less money on devotion and more on sanitation. According to 2011 census data, nearly half of households have no access to a toilet, forcing inhabitants to defecate in the open. More Indians own a mobile phone than a lavatory of their own. Poor hygiene, not lack of food, is the main reason that 40 per cent of children are malnourished. Much of Mr Modi's appeal, which has swept through India like a brush fire, lies in his promise to conjure the growth that will eradicate such dire conditions and set his supporters on the road to a middle-class life.

Therein lies one of the conundrums of a likely Modi premiership, which will become certain only if the BJP proves to have secured enough votes when results are declared on Friday. Is he a leader who will prioritise development, providing jobs and bulldozing bureaucracy? Or will he revert to his Hindu nationalist roots and impose a sectarian agenda on a state largely moulded by the Congress party's secular principles?

The question is not unlike that posed of Shinzo Abe, the Japanese nationalist who in 2012 stormed to the premiership on a Modi-like platform of halting the economic rot. In practice, Mr Abe has managed to be both a reactionary and a reformer. He spent his initial months putting in place an economic revival plan whose outcome remains uncertain. But he soon went on to indulge his rightwing predilections, passing a draconian secrecy bill and inflaming already volatile relations with China by visiting a nationalist shrine. Mr Modi, too, has his potential problems with neighbours, particularly Pakistan. The primary concern, though, is domestic; that he will stir up Hindu chauvinism and create the conditions for intolerance towards India's 175m Muslims.

Fears about Mr Modi, a celibate who abandoned his wife to pursue religious devotion, are based not only on revenge killings in Gujarat in 2002 when, as the state's chief minister, he was accused of standing by while more than 1,000 people, mostly Muslims, died. More fundamentally, many liberal Indians worry about his links with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, an organisation with its roots in a paramilitary group dedicated to the cause of Hindu nationalism. The BJP manifesto contains a pledge to protect the cow, considered holy by Hindus but eaten by some Muslims. It also seeks to rebuild the temple to the Hindu god Ram on the site of the Babri Masjid mosque in Uttar Pradesh. The mosque was torn down in 1992 amid much bloodshed by Hindus who believed it was erected on the site of Ram's birthplace by Mughal invaders in the 16th century.

The hope, shared by most of the pro-Modi business elite, is that Mr Modi will listen to his better angels. A common refrain is that he has matured. Gujarat has been peaceful, and increasingly prosperous, since 2002. Another is that India, with its independent institutions and federalist system, can never fall under the sway of one man. Mr Modi may be, in the words of one of his admirers, "a one-man army"; it is his decisiveness that some find so compelling. But there is faith that, as one pundit puts it, "you cannot run a dictatorship in this country".

The comparison with Mr Abe takes us only so far. A second aspect of Mr Modi's electoral appeal more closely resembles that of Thaksin Shinawatra, another firebrand who rode to power on a wave of political and economic frustration. Mr Thaksin, now in self-exile after being ousted in a coup, was elected Thai prime minister in 2001. His main support base was in the poorer, rural, northeast where people felt ignored by the Bangkok elite.

Mr Modi, too, claims to speak for the marginalised against a corrupt and self-serving urban elite. He trades on his lower-middle-class status as the son of a tea-stall owner. Unlike previous BJP leaders, he is not from the upper Brahmin caste. He mocks Rahul Gandhi, Congress party leader, as a shahzada, or princeling. For many, a Modi victory would be a torpedoing of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty, whose patrician grip on post-independence India the author William Dalrymple calls "sexually transmitted democracy".

Mr Modi has stirred the pent-up yearnings of millions who have glimpsed India's economic awakening from afar. He has also encouraged those who long for the birth of an identity politics based on a narrow definition of Hinduism. The former is to be welcomed. The latter decidedly not. Mr Modi should stick to toilets – and leave temples to the priests.

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May 7, 2014 4:15 pm

India's Congress party has done itself out of a job

By David Pilling [Author alerts](#) ▾

Indians are no longer satisfied with the schemes and handouts on which it has increasingly relied



For the Congress party, which has ruled over independent India for 54 of the past 67 years, the only thing in doubt about this general election is the scale of its defeat. After a decade of the increasingly feeble leadership of Manmohan Singh, the country's 815m-strong electorate is in fierce anti-incumbency mood.

Voters are rejecting not only the past 10 years. There is a more fundamental backlash against the Delhi-centric politics of paternalism represented by the family-run business otherwise known as the Congress party. Narendra Modi, leader of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata party, is non-metropolitan, non-elite and – the son of a Gujarati tea seller – decidedly not a member of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty. It would be hard to dream up anyone better placed to cash in politically on public disillusion.

The most common explanation for Congress's impending implosion is that it has done a lousy job. Under its watch, India's growth story has come off the rails. The rate of expansion has halved, something that cannot be said for the rate of corruption. Investment has stalled. Confidence has been sapped. In his second term, Mr Singh has been little more than a seat-warmer for Rahul Gandhi, the not-so-great great-

grandson of Jawaharlal Nehru. There is some truth to this narrative. But there is another, counter-intuitive, explanation that sheds a different light on the state of modern India. This is that Congress, by making progress in its mission to eradicate poverty, has done itself out of a job.

It was Congress that in 1991 ditched its Nehruvian socialism and, forced on by crisis, unleashed India's caged growth potential through market reforms. The BJP, which ran things from 1998 to 2004, built on that record by overseeing further economic expansion. Growth in the past decade under Congress has averaged 7.7 per cent, nothing to sneeze at. But, inconveniently, the rate has dipped below 5 per cent in the run-up to this election year. "We gave you eight good years and two lean years," is how one senior government official puts it. That has been enough to more than double per capita income, which is now higher than \$4,000 on a purchasing power basis, according to the International Monetary Fund.

India in 2014, in other words, is not the same country it was in 2004. Congress's undoing is that it has failed to recognise this. It has instituted socially laudable right-to-work and right-to-food programmes. But such schemes are costly and prone to rampant theft. By putting a strain on the Treasury, they have contributed to persistent inflation. That in turn has forced the central bank to raise interest rates, slowing growth.

Worse, from an electoral – if not a humanitarian – standpoint the desperately poor are a shrinking constituency. If we take the government's estimate of 22 per cent living in poverty, that means 935m Indians have escaped misery and are looking for something better. They have graduated from what Rajiv Kumar of the Centre for Policy Research calls the "petitioning" class to the "aspirational" one.

Even those who have not yet clawed their way on to the bottom rung of the aspirational ladder have seen what it looks like, courtesy of the satellite television

Most Indians are no longer satisfied with the make-work schemes or food handouts in which Congress has increasingly specialised. Many have caught the whiff of a better life. Now they want jobs and opportunity. Even those who have not yet clawed their way on to the bottom rung of the aspirational ladder have seen what it looks like, courtesy of the satellite television channels that beam images of a middle-class life into even the most benighted corners of the country. India's villages are not what they once were. The bullock cart has given way to the motorbike; the dirt road to tarmac.

Mr Kumar says Congress is stuck in a time warp. It is addressing the needs of what novelist Aravind Adiga called "the Darkness" of rural India. "But the whole notion of the legions outside the gates; that India has gone," says Mr Kumar, with perhaps only slight exaggeration.

India is also undergoing a demographic transformation. An astonishing half of its 1.2bn people are below 26. In this election, results of which are due next week, 70m young voters are casting their ballot for the first time. They have no memory of the pre-1991 "Hindu rate

of growth". They know only an economy, that albeit haltingly and unevenly, offers the prospect of a gradually better life.

Sanjaya Baru, who has written an insider's account of Mr Singh's first term, argues that Congress has been too defensive about its record. Party bigwigs have put the blame for what has gone wrong on Mr Singh, while presenting Mr Gandhi, scion of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty, as an improbable source of change. That is precisely the wrong message for a country that has outgrown feudal patronage. Mr Modi, who hails from outside the system, comes across as a far more plausible change agent.

The India that Congress is talking to is fast vanishing. It has failed to understand the magnitude of the social and economic changes it has helped create. Therein lies its downfall.

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FINANCIAL TIMES

GLOBAL INSIGHT

April 8, 2014 9:40 am

Modi personality cult dominates India election

By Amy Kazmin in New Delhi [Author alerts](#) ▾

Opposition leader being sold as solution to country's ills



In India's capital – Delhi, Narendra Modi is everywhere. His brooding face looms from billboards, bus-shelters, metro trains – and paid ads on newspaper front pages. On radio ads, his deep voice growls: “I swear by this soil, I will not let this country sink into oblivion.” Television news channels carry live feeds of his rallies.

With parliamentary elections under way, the implied message of the bombardment is to contrast the vigour and drive of Mr Modi – prime ministerial aspirant of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party – with the Congress' reticent, indecisive incumbent Manmohan Singh.

Yet not since the days of Indira Gandhi – whose landslide 1971 election was followed by her 1975 suspension of democratic freedoms during the Emergency – has India seen such a personality cult created around a single national leader.

“If you look at all the symbolism of brand Modi, it's about him as a personality – a decisive personality that has so much force that it is going to break the incapacity of the last 10 years,” says Dheeraj Sinha, chief strategy officer for South Asia for Grey, the advertising agency.

Back in the 1970s, Mrs Gandhi, daughter of India's first post-independence prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, was depicted as a national saviour, compared admiringly by a political rival to Durga, a powerful Hindu Goddess.

Her sycophants later coined the slogan, “Indira is India, and India is Indira.” Little wonder, perhaps, that Mrs Gandhi grew highly autocratic and purged her Congress party of any internal dissenters – damage that many analysts say still haunts the ruling party.

Today, it is Mr Modi, the three-term Gujarat chief minister and darling of rightwing Hindu nationalists, who is being deified by a campaign aggressively promoting him as the sole solution to the ills of contemporary India – including inflation, corruption and lack of jobs.

With its catchy Hindi slogan *Abki Baar, Modi Sarkaar* (this time Modi government) the campaign is using every opportunity – from old media to social media – to project Mr Modi as the virtually divine answer to India's prayers.

Last month saw the release of *Bal Narendra*, a comic book depiction of Mr Modi's childhood. Patterned after the popular comic book series *Amar Chitra Katha* – which retells traditional Indian myths, *Bal Narendra* offers early evidence of the BJP candidate's ostensibly innate leadership qualities and administrative prowess.

Stories told include his swim through a crocodile-infested lake (bravery); his freeing of a pigeon entangled in kite-string (compassion); helping his parents with their work (duty), using spending money for a carnival to set up a tea-stall to raise money for flood victims (entrepreneurship; social service.)

Mr Modi's media managers – who answer directly to him rather than the wider BJP leadership – also organised a slightly more grown-up version of the comic book: a fawning biography by a little-known British writer, with limited experience of India.

The campaign is not without controversy. The BJP was forced to publicly disassociate itself from the slogan “Har, Har Modi,” (Hail, Hail Modi) – which his supporters derived from a religious chant normally used to pay homage to Lord Shiva, one of the most powerful Hindu deities.

In the sacred pilgrimage town of Varanasi – one of two handpicked constituencies for Mr Modi's maiden Parliamentary bid, traditionalists were also offended when party workers changed a paean to Durga – replacing the Goddess's name with Modi – and used it as a slogan on campaign material.

Analysts also say the projection of Mr Modi as white knight-in-waiting – at the expense of the broader BJP leadership – is an ironic turn for a party that is traditionally more internally democratic than its rival Congress that it has long criticised for its fetish with the Gandhi family – the party's so-called “high command”.

“Congress has been blamed all these years that they have promoted a family or personality cult,” says sociologist Dipankar Gupta. “But Modi has done what Indira did to the Congress. The organisational strength of the BJP has been vastly undermined.”

Swapan Das Gupta, a conservative political commentator, downplays Modi's dominance in the electoral discourse and BJP structure, saying India's current polls evolved into a “presidential-style election” due to the glaring leadership vacuum in New Delhi.

But Mr Sinha said Mr Modi's personality cult does pose risks for a new administration. “In a government, you don't just need one leader – you need multiple leaders,” he says. “If he looks at himself as much bigger than everyone around him, his delivery might suffer.”

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March 19, 2014 1:47 pm

A vote for Modi could make India more Chinese

By David Pilling [Author alerts](#) ▾

The election frontrunner is more about making the economic pie bigger than slicing it up fairly



China's ability to get things done has long caused many Indians to marvel. Whether the planners in Beijing are overseeing the biggest rural-urban migration in human history or building the world's longest high-speed rail network faster than you can say "tickets please", there is a sense of purpose to everything they do. India – democratic, federal, chaotic – has never been able to pull off anything like that speed of execution.

For years, Indians have hoped that their virtues will win out in the end. Their country may plod, goes the narrative, but it plods in the right direction. China's authoritarian system, which operates without the constraints of electors, independent courts or a free press, can dash off in any direction. It is capable of engineering 10 per cent growth year after year (though even that miracle has recently run out of road). Equally, it can produce the disaster of the cultural revolution and may yet conjure an economic catastrophe – say an explosion of the property sector or an implosion of shadow banking. China has only a gas pedal.

But what if Indians voted to become more like China? That is one plausible interpretation of the seemingly decisive swing in electoral support towards Narendra Modi, Gujarat's chief minister and a prime ministerial candidate with Chinese

characteristics. If nothing else, Mr Modi, whose leadership style brooks little opposition, has a reputation for getting things done. His supporters, including most of the country's business leaders, who have flocked to Gujarat to pay homage, praise his decisiveness and hatred of red tape. In 2008 Ratan Tata, whose plan to build the Nano mini-car in West Bengal fell foul of local politics, came to him with a proposal to switch the factory to Gujarat. Mr Modi nodded – and it was done. Modinomics is the triumph of implementation over prevarication.

The parallels with a Chinese-style leadership should not be overdone. But there is at least one other way in which a Modi administration might resemble a Chinese-style approach. Like Deng Xiaoping, who departed from Communist ideology with his pragmatic entreaty to “let some people get rich first”, Mr Modi is more about making the economic pie bigger than slicing it up fairly.

Critics of Manmohan Singh's Congress administration, which in its second five-year term has watched helplessly as the growth rate has slid below 5 per cent, say it has prioritised redistribution over expansion. Its profligacy on subsidies and social programmes, charge detractors, has obliged the central bank to tighten monetary policy, thereby choking growth.

Sadly for Congress, its redistributive policies are seen to have failed even by those who are supposed to have benefited. A recent Pew Research Center survey, which polled almost 2,500 people across the country, found that rich and poor Indians, educated and non-educated, urban and rural, want a switch to Mr Modi's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata party by a hefty majority. Fully seven in 10 are dissatisfied with the way things are going, and 63 per cent favour a BJP administration over a Congress one. No fewer than 78 per cent have a favourable view of Mr Modi, with just 16 per cent disapproving.

What do people expect from him? Asked which party would do a better job helping the poor, 54 per cent had faith in the BJP, with only 21 per cent selecting Congress. That is surprising given that Congress has funded a food-guarantee programme covering almost two-thirds of the population and a rural employment guarantee scheme ensuring 100 days of subsidised work per household. Similarly, asked which party would be better at controlling price rises, another crucial concern for poor people, the tally was 55 per cent in favour of Mr Modi's BJP against 17 per cent for Congress.

Since faster growth was unleashed with the reforms of 1991, which dismantled the red-tape restrictions of the licence Raj, hundreds of millions of Indians have done better. But hundreds of millions more have been left behind. The crucial point, though, says Jagdish Bhagwati, a prominent Indian economist at Columbia University, is that those 20 years have demonstrated poverty to be a “removable condition”. Indians have undergone what he calls a “revolution of perceived possibilities”.

Part of Mr Modi's attraction is that, by sheer force of will, he may be able to override some of the checks and balances of Indian democracy and introduce some of the clearheadedness of growth-driven China

Increasingly, according to this theory, they may be attracted not to promises of Nehruvian-style equality but rather to the prospect of Deng-style growth. Part of Mr Modi's attraction is that, by sheer force of will, he may be able to override some of the checks and balances of Indian democracy and introduce some of the clearheadedness of growth-driven China. Under a Modi administration, the hope is, land will be cleared, permissions will be granted, and roads and other infrastructure will be built. In this cheerful scenario – far too optimistic, according to his many detractors – he will do for India in its entirety what he has been able to achieve for Gujarat.

Of course, India will never really be like China. Mr Modi is a fiery orator who can rouse a crowd – a quality that, at least since Mao Zedong, has hardly been required by unelected Chinese leaders. Nor can India, fractious and with significant power devolved to the states, ever emulate an authoritarian China in which power is concentrated in the centre. And even if, after the general election in May, Mr Modi is crowned prime minister and goes on to wield power more single-mindedly than his predecessors, there will always be one crucial difference with China. If Indians decide that they do not like him, they can always kick him out.

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Letter in response to this column:

'Chindia' and 'Brics' stoke unhelpful envy / From Mr Arnab Das

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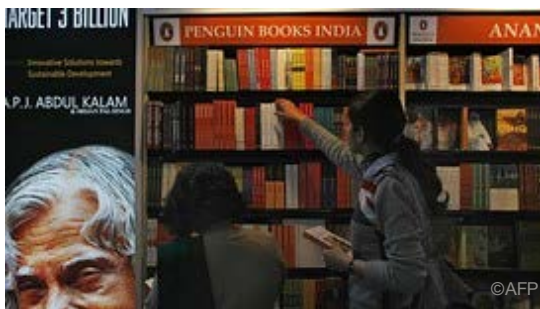
GLOBAL INSIGHT

February 17, 2014 12:42 pm

Freedom of speech shrinks in India, the world's largest democracy

By Amy Kazmin in New Delhi [Author alerts](#) ▾

Publishers under pressure to withdraw contentious books



India often boasts of the robust health of its electoral democracy. But at least one crucial pillar of its democratic edifice – the right to free expression – is being rapidly eroded, with ominous implications.

The latest symptom of this fragility was the recent decision of Penguin India, an arm of US-based Penguin Random House, to destroy all unsold copies in India of *The Hindus: An Alternative History*, by Sanskrit scholar Wendy Doniger, a University of Chicago professor.

An Alternative History, by Sanskrit scholar Wendy Doniger, a University of Chicago professor.

The destruction of the books is part of a court-supervised settlement of criminal and civil cases filed against Penguin by Shiksha Andolan Bachao, or the Save Education Movement, a Hindu fundamentalist group seeking to purge India's educational curriculum and bookstores of works it deems insulting or threatening to Hindu culture.

Ms Doniger's treatment of ancient Hindu myths as human creations rather than divine truth – and her Freudian analysis of the tales – outraged the self-appointed guardians of Hindu orthodoxy. Penguin, which is 47 per cent owned by Pearson – the Financial Times' parent company – battled for four years to defend the book before settling.

After the settlement, Penguin warned of the increasing difficulties all publishers will face “to uphold international standards of free expression” in India – citing highly elastic legal limits on free speech, which academics say encourage radical groups to mobilise for the suppression of works not to their personal taste.

Indeed, Ms Doniger's book is just the latest of many works to be hounded out of India – or underground – by affronted religious conservatives emboldened by British colonial-era laws that make it a crime to “insult” a religion, or “promote disharmony” between groups.

Although India's constitution guarantees free expression, liberal academics and writers say Indian authorities typically respond to attacks on creative works by pandering to the ranks of the offended rather than by vigorously defending the principle of free speech.

Meanwhile, Indian courts' convoluted rulings in free speech cases have also eroded the confidence of writers and publishers of legal protection – or even of protection of their physical security – when confronted with individuals or groups upset with their work.

Until now, the primary targets in India's intensifying culture wars have mostly been interpretations of religion and distant history.

In October 1988, then prime minister Rajiv Gandhi's administration prohibited the import of Salman Rushdie's "The Satanic Verses", fearing the novel would inflame its Muslim minority. India has subsequently banned several other books – two by rightwing Hindus – considered highly inflammatory because of their critique of Islam.

India's lack of commitment to free speech does not only constrain depictions of faith and distant history. It also poses a growing threat to Indians' ability to vigorously debate the present

More recently, Hindu fundamentalists have aggressively mobilised against works they deem disrespectful to their pantheon of deities. In 2004, authorities banned a history of a venerated 17th century king, Shivaji, after an irate mob ransacked a manuscript library where the author, an American professor, had researched the book.

The late Maqbool Fida Husain, India's most celebrated modern painter, was driven into self-imposed exile in 2006, after his canvasses – some of which depicted Hindu deities naked – were repeatedly vandalised by rightwing Hindus, who also filed multiple criminal complaints against him.

But India's lack of commitment to free speech does not only constrain depictions of faith and distant history. It also poses a growing threat to Indians' ability to vigorously debate the present – including the nexus between politicians and large Indian companies, the performance of key institutions, and the track records of political parties, or powerful individuals.

In January, Bloomsbury India withdrew *The Descent of Air India*, by a former executive director of the money-losing state carrier, after the former civil aviation minister, Praful Patel, filed a lawsuit against it. Bloomsbury publicly apologised to Mr Patel for any embarrassment it might have caused.

The Kolkata High Court also in January suppressed publication and distribution of *Sahara: The Untold Story*, about one of India's most mysterious business groups, which is currently locked in a bitter stand-off with the Securities and Exchange Board.

Three years ago, an award-winning 1991 novel was removed from the University of Mumbai's curriculum, after the late Bal Thackeray, leader of the rightwing Shiv Sena, objected to how he and his party were depicted in the fictionalised account.

Ten years ago, courts also suppressed a sociological monograph, *Taking the State to Court – Public Interest Litigation and the Public Sphere in Metropolitan India*, by issuing a contempt notice to the author, Hans Dembowski, and publisher, Oxford University Press.

The case was never heard, but the book remains out of circulation, a case of what Mr Dembowski has called "stealth censorship."

India is not the only place where books and art have been accused of offending public sensibilities

but as India gears up for parliamentary elections that the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party is widely expected to win, liberal Indians are increasingly anxious about further restrictions on the space for public discourse, and dissent. Certainly under the past 10 years of Congress rule, dangerous precedents have been set.

Letters in response to this article:

India does value freedom of speech

An artist admired across many faiths

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