



## Hindu Nationalism in Action: The Bharatiya Janata Party and Indian Politics

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India went to the polls in a general election in April–May 2014. The prime ministerial candidate of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Narendra Modi, was pitted against Rahul Gandhi (great-grandson of India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru), who led India's long-standing party of government, the Indian National Congress, which had headed a coalition government over the previous ten years. Mr. Modi was a controversial figure because, as chief minister of the state of Gujarat (2001–14), he had been in charge of a government that was widely considered to have been responsible for the deaths of many Muslims in 2002 in the most serious outbreak of violence between Hindus and Muslims that independent India had experienced. The events of that year have been described as a 'pogrom'. But, drawing on his considerable rhetorical skills,<sup>1</sup> and the reputation he had established for the success of the Gujarat 'Model for Development', as he called it,<sup>2</sup> Modi successfully projected himself as capable of delivering on the promise of national economic development after what were represented as years of stagnation and corruption under the Congress. Christophe Jaffrelot, in his contribution to this special issue, refers to the description of Gujarat's economic success under Modi as 'miraculous'. This panegyric was suggested by Arvind Panagariya, professor of economics at Columbia University and appointed as the first vice chairman of the NITI Aayog, which has now replaced the Planning Commission<sup>3</sup> (a change discussed in her article here by Mitu Sengupta). The promise of rapid economic development, together with the idea that he would promote 'Minimum Government, Maximum Governance' (discussed in this collection by Sanjay Ruparelia), was a message that was very successfully projected to the electorate, via Modi's own speeches across the country and through a skilful use of media, including social media. This effort was massively funded by major corporate groups. The BJP campaign was focused around Modi and resembled that of an American presidential candidate in a way that had never happened before in India. It was supported by the extent of the control exercised by the BJP over a significant fraction of the media.

In the event, Modi won an extraordinary victory. The Congress was reduced to a small rump in the new parliament, and for the first time in a quarter of a century, a single party secured an absolute majority in the Lok Sabha, the lower house of the Indian parliament. This confounded the expectations of many astute observers who had reckoned that the coalition arrangements entered into by strongly-supported regional political parties would continue to

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<sup>1</sup> Modi's rhetorical skills are widely applauded in the press, but not recognised by all. It has also been said that he reverts to rustic sarcasm in a way that is unbecoming of a national leader (Andrew Wyatt, personal communication, 10 July 2015).

<sup>2</sup> 'How did Gujarat Emerge as a Model for Development?' [<http://www.narendramodi.in/how-did-gujarat-emerge-as-a-model-for-development>, accessed 7 July 2015].

<sup>3</sup> Arvind Panagariya, 'Why the Gujarat Miracle Matters', *The Times of India* (Ahmedabad edition) (29 June 2013).

determine the character of the central government of India for a long time to come, as they had over the preceding two decades. Sumantra Bose, for example, opined that ‘Coalition governments in New Delhi are a certainty for the foreseeable future’, a claim that would have seemed unexceptional to most observers of Indian politics at the time that he made it in 2013. The Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition government had been mired in corruption scandals and seemed to lack decisive leadership, but the principal alternative party at the national level, the BJP, with leadership problems of its own, had failed to offer convincing opposition. So, looking forward from early–mid 2013 to the general elections of the following year, it appeared more or less certain that the post-election alignments of the regional parties would once again shape the central government. Bose and others could not have anticipated the dramatic consequences of the BJP’s decision in September 2013 that Narendra Modi would be its candidate for the position of prime minister.<sup>4</sup> The idea, too, also expressed by Sumantra Bose, that ‘the era of nationwide leaders is definitively in the past’<sup>5</sup> was also confounded, for Modi had clearly come to dominate Indian politics in a way that no other national leader had managed since the days of Mrs. Indira Gandhi (prime minister of India, with only a short interruption, from 1966 to 1984). Like Mrs. Gandhi, as articles in this collection show, Modi as prime minister has sought to centralise power into his own hands, relying heavily on a small group of close associates and civil servants. As Ronjoy Sen concludes in his contribution here, Narendra Modi ‘is a reluctant parliamentarian, much like the last “presidential” prime minister that India saw: Indira Gandhi’.

The Bharatiya Janata Party, Modi’s party, is the party political wing of the Sangh Parivar, the ‘family’ of organisations formed around the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).<sup>6</sup> This is a quasi-military brotherhood founded in 1925, organised by *pracharaks*—full-time party activists and propagandists, of whom Narendra Modi was one at an earlier stage in his career—around local *shakhas* (units or cells). ‘Expressed in the simplest terms’, the RSS declares, ‘the ideal of the Sangh is to carry the nation to the pinnacle of glory, through organizing the entire society and ensuring the protection of Hindu Dharma’. Its mission is now stated in these terms:

The Hindu culture is the life-breath of Hindusthan. It is therefore clear that if Hindusthan is to be protected, we should first nourish the Hindu culture. If the Hindu culture perishes in Hindusthan itself, and if the Hindu society ceases to exist, it will hardly be appropriate to refer to the mere geographical entity that remains as Hindusthan. . . . Strength, it should be remembered, comes only through organization. It is therefore the duty of every Hindu to do his best to consolidate the Hindu society. The Sangh is just carrying out this supreme task. The present fate of the country cannot be changed unless lakhs of young men dedicate their entire lifetime for that cause. To mould the minds of our youth towards that end is the supreme aim of the Sangh.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Sumantra Bose, *Transforming India: Challenges to the World’s Largest Democracy* (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 2013), p. 109.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 293.

<sup>6</sup> A key source on the history of the RSS and of Hindu nationalism is Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics: 1925 to the 1990s* (London: Hurst & Co., 1996). See also Christophe Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalism: A Reader* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> These statements are taken from the English-language website of the RSS [<http://www.rss.org/knownus//Encyc/2012/10/23/Vision-and-Mission.aspx>, accessed 7 July 2015].

The RSS is, therefore, dedicated to the cause of Hindutva,<sup>8</sup> or Hindu nationalism (it is described by the BJP as a form of cultural nationalism), and the establishment of a Hindu *rashtra*, or Hindu polity. RSS volunteers played an important part in Modi's campaign in many parts of the country, and it may sensibly be presumed that many of them expect the BJP to deliver on long-standing key demands of the RSS. These demands would have India's Muslims and Christians conforming with a common civil code, rather than being able to order their family lives according to their own religious traditions; they would change the special status in the Indian Union (under Article 370 of the Constitution of India) of Kashmir—India's only state with a Muslim majority; and they would see the completion of the construction of a Hindu temple on the site of an old mosque (the Babri Masjid) at Ayodhya, in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, which was destroyed by activists from the Sangh Parivar in 1992. These all remain core issues for Hindu nationalists, some of whom were quite virulently critical of the earlier BJP-led coalition government for its clear failure to address them whilst it was in office from 1998 to 2004.<sup>9</sup> Their accomplishment remains a thorny issue for Narendra Modi, as James Manor explains in his contribution to this collection.

What are the implications for Indian society, for Indian politics over the longer run, and for the country's economic development, of the ascendancy of a party which is apparently dedicated to the cause of Hindu nationalism? Is Prime Minister Modi delivering on the promises that he made to the electorate? Does the experience of Gujarat over the thirteen years in which he was chief minister of the state constitute a model for the country as a whole? Has the BJP, indeed, broken the mould of Indian politics? Will it establish itself as the party of government for a long period, like the Congress Party in the past, or does hubris attend its triumph of 2014? How is it to be compared with political developments elsewhere in Asia, and in other parts of the world?

These are all questions that are addressed in the articles included in this collection.<sup>10</sup> It is of course early days, after only a little over one year of the Modi government (at the time of writing), for attempting an assessment of its performance, and the articles here are concerned rather with the implications of the emergence of the BJP as the dominant party in India, and with Narendra Modi's role, in the context of long-run trends in Indian politics and society.

Suhas Palshikar asks whether the ascendancy of the BJP means that its core agenda of Hindu nationalism has become central to the politics of the country, or whether, on the other hand, it is indicative of the party having adapted to the mainstream of Indian politics. Analysing its widening base of support amongst different social groups, the way in which the BJP presented itself in the 2014 election campaign, and its subsequent actions in government, Palshikar argues that the BJP government 'has so far avoided becoming involved in controversy on issues of Hindutva'. On the other hand he, like James Manor, believes that 'the public discursive space is being carefully occupied by imagery and propaganda on Hindutva issues, indicating that the party is far from shifting towards a centrist position'. He finds that there is a dual process going on whereby the BJP is indeed occupying the central space of Indian politics, while that space itself is becoming increasingly majoritarian, and the Hindutva point of view becomes increasingly acceptable.

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<sup>8</sup> Hindutva refers to the idea of 'Hindu-ness', or to Hinduism as a way of life.

<sup>9</sup> See Stuart Corbridge, John Harriss and Craig Jeffrey, *India Today: Economy, Politics and Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), Chap. 9.

<sup>10</sup> The articles are based on papers presented at a workshop organised under the auspices of the Jarislowsky Chair in Religion and Social Change, School for International Studies, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, Canada, in May 2015.

Key social groups in accounting for the way that the BJP has occupied this central space, Palshikar argues, are both the new middle classes and the newly-mobilised OBCs (Other Backward Classes).<sup>11</sup> Christophe Jaffrelot, in his contribution, shows how important these groups became in Gujarat in sustaining political support there for a ‘model’ of economic development that, far from delivering on Modi’s promises of ‘inclusive growth’, has a poor record with regard to human development,<sup>12</sup> has increased inequality and has sacrificed the interests of the poorest groups in Gujarati society to those of big business. And since he became prime minister of India, the erstwhile chief minister of Gujarat has had to protect himself against accusations from both inside and outside parliament that he is in the pocket of big corporate interests, as Ronojoy Sen explains in his paper. This issue came into focus especially over the Modi government’s attempts to amend the land acquisition act—the official title of which is the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in the Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act—passed in 2013, with the support of the BJP, in the last few months of the UPA government. The proposed amendments (which have still not been passed into law at the time of writing) clearly are intended to make the acquisition of land easier for business, and Modi has felt compelled to defend them before BJP members of parliament (MPs)—many of whom were concerned, for electoral reasons if for no other, about the proposed changes to the Act. As Sen reports, Modi claimed then that ‘All decisions I’m taking are for the welfare of the poor’;<sup>13</sup> and he sought to convey the same message to the massive constituency of Indian farmers in one of his regular radio addresses.

The difficulties that the BJP government has experienced over land acquisition relate to just one area that is of central concern to those who have looked to Modi to carry forward the further liberalisation of the Indian economy. As Sanjay Ruparelia explains, many commentators have concluded that with regard to economic policy, the actions of the Modi government have been more timid than had been hoped for. To cite just one assessment, *The Economist* concluded:

A year ago Narendra Modi came to office promising to bring India ‘good times’, by which he meant jobs, prosperity and international renown. His progress has been frustratingly slow. The problem is hardly a lack of opportunity. Voters gave his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) the biggest parliamentary mandate for change in 30 years. Mr. Modi has concentrated more power in his own hands than any prime minister in recent memory. The problem is that India needs a transformation—and the task is too much for a one-man band.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> ‘OBC’ is the official term for the large numbers of lower-ranked middle castes who make up the largest single share of the Indian population.

<sup>12</sup> The poor record of Gujarat under Narendra Modi’s stewardship with regard to welfare was discussed by *The Economist* under the heading ‘Sparing Mr Modi’s Blushes’ (27 June 2015) [<http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21656239-missing-data-should-embarrass-prime-minister-sparing-mr-modis-blushes>, accessed 30 Aug. 2015]. The newspaper reported that figures on nutrition and health across India, based on a survey involving 200,000 interviews conducted by UNICEF in 2013 and 2014, had not been published in full. Results on immunisation published in October 2014 by the Ministry of Health had ‘covered most large states, but figures on Gujarat, oddly, were excluded’; and ‘The full set of figures on immunization rates, obtained by *The Economist*, suggests a striking lack of progress under Mr Modi’. The report concluded that ‘As prime minister, just as previously, Mr. Modi has paid scant attention to health’, a view that is sustained in essays in this collection by Ruparelia and Jaffrelot. Both call into question the claims for ‘inclusiveness’ made in the text on the ‘Gujarat Model’ which appears on Modi’s website. See footnote 2.

<sup>13</sup> Liz Mathew, ‘Poor Make for Rich Pickings’, *The Indian Express* (20 April 2015).

<sup>14</sup> *The Economist* (23 May 2015), p. 9.

On the other hand, as Ruparelia points out, the Modi government has managed, quietly, to bring about the relaxation of much environmental regulation and to weaken labour protocols in ways that should gladden the hearts of liberal economists. It is also bringing about, Ruparelia argues, an ‘increasingly neo-liberal approach to social welfare’, whilst overseeing ‘drastic reductions in social development outlays’ (with cuts in public expenditure on basic education and primary health care).

James Manor’s essay here picks up on the concerns expressed by *The Economist* about the limitations of the one-man band, as he analyses the several antagonisms and cross-currents that make Modi’s project precarious. Manor refers to the tension between a commitment to fiscal discipline on the one hand, and on the other to public spending in the interests of economic growth—though in this regard, Modi has so far been a lucky political leader, since the Indian economy has gained enormously from the sharp fall in oil prices that occurred soon after his election. The ‘frustratingly slow’ progress (for economic liberals) with reforms, to which *The Economist* referred, is obscured too by India’s resumption of a higher rate of economic growth, now outpacing that of China—in spite of concerns about weakness in the manufacturing sector.<sup>15</sup> The caution which has been urged even by Raghuram Rajan, the governor of the Reserve Bank of India, over Modi’s ‘Make in India’ campaign—as Ruparelia reports—reflects these concerns.

Manor concentrates, however, on the contradictions between Modi’s centralisation of power (brought out also by Sengupta in her assessment of the significance of the abolition of the Planning Commission) and, on the other hand, the fiscal decentralisation that his government has approved, following the recommendations of the Fourteenth Finance Commission; the tensions between Modi’s commitments to curbing corruption and to curing the paralysis of government; and his difficulties over the Hindutva agenda, which has created antagonisms between the prime minister and many in his party, and between him, the party and the Sangh Parivar. Key figures on the Hindu Right are showing themselves increasingly antipathetic to Modi. And whilst paying tribute to Modi’s political skills, Manor sees dangers ahead because of his ‘trademark abrasiveness’ and a tendency to be erratic. Manor’s conclusion is that these aspects of his political style, together with the stubborn cross-currents that buffet his government, make Modi’s political enterprise appear precarious.

Robin Jeffrey’s engaging account of the prime minister’s strong personal identification with the *Swachh Bharat!* (Clean India!) campaign also points to risks that are inherent in Modi’s politics. In his first Independence Day speech on 15 August 2014, Modi declared ‘Clean India!’ to be a top priority of his new government, and he followed this on 2 October, the national holiday for the birthday of Mahatma Gandhi, with a call for every Indian to play a part in creating a cleaner country and making India free of open defecation by 2019, Gandhi’s 150th birth anniversary. In a master-stroke of political symbolism, Modi has associated Gandhi with the campaign by making his round-rimmed steel spectacles its central symbol. As Jeffrey says, ‘Adopting Gandhi and putting him on a pedestal of cleanliness allowed the BJP to reinforce its claim to speak for the entire nation’. But the practical risks for a government elected on a platform of development are clearly considerable. India confronts enormous problems in handling the rapidly-increasing amounts of waste that are generated by its new consumerism, and the realisation of the promise in the BJP Manifesto to give every Indian household a toilet by 2019 must involve a massive effort on the part of a public service not

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<sup>15</sup> There is considerable controversy over the revision of the measurement of India’s GDP in the National Accounts Statistics. See ‘Editorial: Some Answers, Some Questions’, in *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. 50, no. 6 (7 Feb. 2015), p.7; and R. Nagaraj, ‘Growth in GVA in Indian Manufacturing’, in *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. 50, no. 24 (13 June 2015), pp. 117–20.

noted for its efficiency. It confronts, as well, the cultural obstacle that many rural people apparently regard open defecation as a healthy activity. So why make such a promise? Jeffrey suggests that it is an appeal to younger, middle-class Indians, and to the non-resident Indians (NRIs) who are increasingly influential within the country—both of them groups that are appalled by the filth of all kinds that disfigures much of the country. But citizens see their neighbourhoods every day and the promise to clean India, if it fails, will be obvious to every voter and easy prey to derision come the next election.

Suhas Palshikar implies that the way in which the BJP is situating itself as a central force in Indian politics might well mean that the coming decade will see the rise of a new hegemony, comparable with that of the Congress in the first three decades of the post-Independence era. Jaffrelot's account of the political sociology of support for the BJP and for Modi in Gujarat argues in the same vein. On the other hand, James Manor's assessment, which gains some support both from Jeffrey's arguments and from those of Ronojoy Sen and Sanjay Ruparelia, casts some doubt on such a prognosis. The longer-run prospects of the BJP may well be compromised by the hubris around Modi.

Finally, it is worthwhile reflecting upon the significance of the rise of Narendra Modi, and of the ascendancy of the BJP, in the context of political developments elsewhere in Asia and in other parts of the world. India is one of a number of countries that have seen the rise of political leaders who portray themselves or are portrayed as 'strong men'<sup>16</sup> who will promote national economic development, partly by stamping out corruption and promoting 'good governance', whilst playing on appeals to nationalist sentiment. The similarities between Modi and Shinzo Abe, the prime minister of Japan—the two are reputed to have a kind of special relationship—were noted by Brahma Chellaney at the moment of Modi's election: 'Just as Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's return to power in late 2012, after six years of political instability, reflected Japan's determination to reinvent itself as a more competitive and confident country, Narendra Modi's election victory reflects Indians' desire for a dynamic, assertive leader to help revitalize their country's economy and security.... The 63-year-old Modi mirrors Abe's soft nationalism, market-oriented economics, and new Asianism, seeking close ties with Asian democracies to create a web of inter-locking strategic partnerships'.<sup>17</sup> There appear to be some similarities in these respects between Modi and Xi Jinping in China, too. The latter is widely regarded as having centralised power in a way that far exceeds that of his predecessors, and he is noted for cracking down on corruption amongst very senior Chinese leaders. Another political leader with whom Modi invites comparison is Recep Erdogan of Turkey, the long-serving prime minister and now first directly-elected president of his country. Erdogan is commonly reckoned to be a moderate Islamist who founded the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), projecting a Turkish nationalism that looks back to the Ottoman Empire, and is more or less explicitly critical of Kemalist secularism—established in Turkey in the 1920s and 1930s under the rule of Kemal Ataturk. The hegemony of the Justice and Development Party (its rule started in 2002 and continues), of the kind that Modi hopes to emulate, has partly been founded on Turkey's economic success—with GDP per capita having increased by three times in real terms during its time in power. Yet, as *The Economist* notes,

<sup>16</sup> Narendra Modi's claims to being a 'strong man' were sometimes emphasised in the 2014 elections with reference to his '56 inch' chest.

<sup>17</sup> Brahma Chellaney, 'Narendra Modi, India's Shinzo Abe', *The Diplomat* (16 May 2014) [<http://thediplomat.com/2014/05/narendra-modi-indias-shinzo-abe/>, accessed 7 July 2015]. Indeed, in his first year in office, Modi has been perhaps the most remarkably energetic Indian prime minister in foreign affairs since Jawaharlal Nehru.

the Turkish economy is 'strong but vulnerable' in ways that, to a significant extent, resemble the strengths and weaknesses of the Indian economy.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, Erdogan has become increasingly and openly authoritarian, and Modi's style of government leads observers (such as Ruparelia and Sengupta) to fear this will be the case in India, too.

There are also ways in which the role that Narendra Modi has carved out for himself in India compares with that of President Vladimir Putin in Russia, and with several Latin American leaders; and while Europe has not seen the emergence of such political leaders as heads of state, there too we see clear signs of the increasing importance of populist nationalisms in a context of increasing inequality, of immigration from outside Europe, of unemployment—especially amongst youth—and of steeply declining engagement in democratic politics. Recent political developments in India are of course distinctive, but may be understood in the context of these wider trends.

Underlying them are contestations over democracy. There has been, since the financial crisis of 2008, a series of episodes of protest politics in more than seventy countries. They have had different immediate causes and differing characters, but they have reflected a shared sense of moral indignation and of mistrust of elites (both in authoritarian and in formally democratic contexts—as, for example, in the Arab Spring, in the first case, or in the protests of Los Indignados in formally democratic Spain, of the young people who looked, as their banners proclaimed, for 'real democracy' rather than the alternation of political elites in 'democracy without choice'). Many of these protests evidence a passion for transparency and accountability, and the performative practice of decision-making through deliberation, alongside a revolt against representative democracy.<sup>19</sup> But this revolt has opened the way, in some instances, for a resort to technocratic practices—better to leave decision-making to skilled technocrats, or to non-elected 'wise men', than to trust to democracy.

The tensions between the search for more substantive democracy on the one hand, and looking to technocratic leadership on the other, have been shown up in India, for example, in the mobilisation of the India Against Corruption campaign around Anna Hazare in 2011. The noted political commentator and public intellectual Pratap Bhanu Mehta pointed out at the time that what Hazare and his supporters sought in their then-preferred version of the Jan Lokpal Bill (intended to check the corruption of politicians) was an institution which would represent a tremendous concentration of power, commanded by a few people who would be selected, in turn, by a small body of people with supposedly unimpeachable credentials. But what would ensure that this body itself would be incorruptible? The whole idea was of a piece with the technocratic impulses of a good many civil society organisations whose ideas and actions imply mistrust of democratic institutions and sometimes an inclination towards an authoritarian elitism. Democratic institutions may, at the very least, get in the way of securing the best possible solutions to particular public problems, even if they do not subvert them for the private benefit of particular individuals. Mehta argued, indeed, that the civil society agitation over the Jan Lokpal Bill showed an absolute contempt for representative democracy: 'the claim that "the people" are not represented by their elected representatives, but are represented by their self-appointed guardians is disturbing'.<sup>20</sup> The rise to power of Narendra Modi reflects just these contemporary antinomies of democracy.

<sup>18</sup> See 'The Turkish Economy: Strong but Vulnerable', *The Economist* (15 June 2013), which describes economic problems that are quite comparable with India's.

<sup>19</sup> See John Harriss, 'Youth and "Refo-lution"? Protest Politics in India and the Global Context', Simons Working Paper #34, School for International Studies, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, 2014.

<sup>20</sup> *The Indian Express* (7 April 2011).