

In September 2014, three months after being elected India's prime minister, Narendra Modi travelled to Japan. He was familiar with the country, having visited it more than once as head of the provincial government in the Indian state of Gujarat. Nevertheless, arriving in Japan, which is in many ways the model for Asian societies embarking on rapid modernisation and industrialisation, was special for him in his new role as prime minister.

By conventional parameters, the visit was successful. There was much reportage on the "personal chemistry" between Modi and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. The two count each other as personal friends, with Modi, at the time at least, being one of only three people the Japanese leader followed on Twitter. Agreements were announced on economic cooperation and Japanese investment in India, modernising India's railways, and exporting Japanese military equipment and civil nuclear technology. Yet what stood out was the choreography of their meeting and the delicate and deliberate choice of symbols drawn from both Hindu and Buddhist tradition.

It is easy to interpret such semiotics as a concession to the traditionalist constituency that forms an important element of Modi's Indian People's Party (Bharatiya Janata Party, BJP). However, that would be a limiting assessment, perhaps even unduly cynical. The tug of tradition is not merely an act. As one Japanese diplomat put it, "Mr Modi is an economic moderniser who sees heritage, tradition and faith as important aspects of his political persona and his conception of India. In this he is remarkably similar to Prime Minister Abe."

The twin – if paradoxical – attributes of an economic moderniser and a social conservative make Modi a captivating politician. But it is facile to categorise him, as some have, as one among a new generation of nationalist leaders in Asia

who are almost democratically elected “strongmen”. Like Abe, Modi embodies a wider concern in his society that China’s economic gallop may be reducing Asia to a one-horse race. However, in 2014, India responded to Modi’s appeal and voted him into power in an equally important context of long-term social currents. Modi represents those currents today, but they exist independently of him and will survive him. As such, to understand Modi and his multiple identities, it is crucial to understand the context that he thrives in.

### *Youth, urbanisation, and technology*

Modi arrived as India’s leader at the junction of three important currents.

First, India is the beneficiary of (or burdened by, depending on how one sees it) an unprecedented youth bulge. It will have the largest working-age population of any society in the first half of the twenty-first century, with a million people added to the job market every month for the coming two decades. This population of job seekers – and impatient young voters – is set to peak in 2030 with 485 million Indians aged between 15 and 34 (of a total population of 1.5 billion). Many of the members of this cohort have not yet been born, but its oldest members began to vote in 2014. The 2014 election was also the first in which those born after 1991 – when India began its process of economic reform – came of voting age.

This “youth vote” proved to be a game changer for Modi as he won over young voters, even in families and communities that had hitherto been hostile to his party. This was the product of an extraordinary revolution in expectations triggered by a decade of very high GDP growth: between 2003 and 2011, the Indian economy grew at an average of 8.3 percent a year. The dynamism and pent-up aspirations from this youth dividend will define Indian elections until at least the late 2020s, probably longer. In that sense, the Modi mandate is not *sui generis* but may signal a new politics in India.

Second, there is India’s urbanisation. Officially, 32 percent of India’s population are full-time residents and voters in urban areas (by 2011 census figures). However, some 60 percent of the GDP is linked to cities, constituting the urban economy. By 2030, this figure will rise to 70 percent.<sup>1</sup> The discrepancy between the GDP and population numbers is glaring. It masks the fact that

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<sup>1</sup> “India’s urban awakening: Building inclusive cities, sustaining economic growth”, McKinsey Global Institute, April 2010, available at [https://www.mckinsey.com/-/media/McKinsey/dotcom/Insights%20and%20pubs/MGI/Research/Urbanization/Indias%20urban%20awakening%20Building%20inclusive%20cities/MGI\\_Indias\\_urban\\_awakening\\_full\\_report.ashx](https://www.mckinsey.com/-/media/McKinsey/dotcom/Insights%20and%20pubs/MGI/Research/Urbanization/Indias%20urban%20awakening%20Building%20inclusive%20cities/MGI_Indias_urban_awakening_full_report.ashx).

a larger section of people – more than 32 percent – are associated with or dependent on the urban economy. It fails to factor in migrant workers or recipients of remittances, for instance, whose household income and family prosperity is tied to the city, even if they vote in the village. This means, and there is empirical evidence to support it, that voters are learning to distinguish between provincial and national elections, and realising that jobs in the big city cannot be fixed by a local politician. India is therefore seeing the beginnings of a broader middle class with a heightened sense of macroeconomic issues.

The third current is technology. India is in the midst of a massive communication boom encompassing television and the internet, including social media tools such as Facebook and Twitter. In business, these are disrupting local markets and allowing regional brands to go national, using mechanisms such as e-commerce. In popular culture, soap operas and reality shows are carrying customs and lifestyles from one part of the country to another, influencing consumer habits.

The Modi campaign was the political analogue of these trends. Modi deftly used television and social media to go national,<sup>2</sup> effacing the gap between local and pan-Indian recognition to transform himself from a leader of Gujarat state to the prime minister India was waiting for.

### *A bottom-up phenomenon*

India has seen widely popular national leaders before, but they spoke to their people from a certain elevation. In contrast, Modi's rise is a bottom-up phenomenon – the attainment of an outsider, from the periphery of national politics and a humble family background. Communication technology was the force multiplier here, not the privilege of a famous surname. It made and continues to make Modi the classic twenty-first century underdog. It would follow that the principal appeal of Modi in contemporary India is not religion or caste or even hyper-nationalism. It is class. The narrative of a self-made man – whose father sold tea at a railway station and whose mother went house-to-house washing dishes to pay the school fees – is an arresting and powerful one. Being a *chaiwalla* (Hindi for tea seller) is a badge of honour for Modi.

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<sup>2</sup> In March 2013, the Indian Information and Broadcasting Ministry announced that there were 410 television news channels in a variety of Indian languages. Today, the number is estimated to be some 500. According to PTI, the number was still around 400 in December 2014. See "Number of TV channels rises by 37 in one year", *Zee News*, 7 December 2014, available at [http://zeenews.india.com/news/india/number-of-tv-channels-rises-by-37-in-one-year\\_1510793.html](http://zeenews.india.com/news/india/number-of-tv-channels-rises-by-37-in-one-year_1510793.html).

If Modi's electoral successes have capitalised on a class revolt, this expression has to be understood correctly. The reference here is not to class in a Marxist sense. It is simply to primarily young, small town, semi-urban people – or even rural folk, exposed to or associated with city life and the city economy – usually from non-English-speaking backgrounds. They are hungry to learn the language, though – not to read Shakespeare and join the Anglosphere but simply to get a job. They are too well-off to be satisfied by an anti-poverty dole programme (favoured by the previous Congress government) but too poor to be genuinely middle class. They see themselves as socially underprivileged and their progress as thwarted by invisible social hierarchies that set up complicated, if not impossible, rules for entry – for professional advancement as much as political office – that usher in only the initiated.

Modi's voters are motivated by a complex mix of emotions. There is undeniable ambition here, from talented people who have simply not been given the opportunities they deserve. There is also a degree of resentment and anger, sometimes excessive. Inevitably this segment, this middle India, represents a far greater section of the population than the narrow apex of the pyramid that dominates the older Congress Party, constitutes its reference points, and writes its policies in the salons of New Delhi.

Similar binary splits have caused upheaval in other societies as well. In several countries of Africa and Asia, the first generation of genteel post-colonial leaders and *noblesse oblige* elites usually gave way to more angular native (or nativist) politicians who grasped popular hopes and fears more easily simply because they had lived them. India has been lucky. It has accomplished a similar change through the ballot box. Modi is a political product of these forces.

It needs to be reiterated that Modi packaged himself for a market that was ready for him. He didn't invent the market: India's society and polity were primed for such a transition. As a corollary, irrespective of whether Modi himself succeeds or fails as prime minister, India's essential quest will not change. It will continue to determine politics and affect electoral outcomes in the near future, and will set the template for those who want to follow or replace him. Modi the idea has far outstripped Modi the individual.