

What Does Modi Symbolise?

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Narendra Modi is Chief Minister of Gujarat and has won three elections in a row in that State. He was Chief Minister in 2002 when widespread communal rioting took place in central and south Gujarat and ever since then his name has been anathema to the Congress, to the Left, to the neo-liberals and to what L.K. Advani termed pseudo secularists. At the same time he has given good, firm, decisive government to Gujarat, relatively more honest than what one finds in other States and highly development oriented. Without even mentioning industrial progress in the State one could cite the extraordinary growth in the agricultural sector in Gujarat, which State was not hitherto considered of great agricultural importance because of lack of water. At present the growth rate of agriculture in Gujarat is a multiple of the national average. What is more, in the last eleven years there have been no major incidents of communal violence, not even in those districts where such violence was endemic even under Congress rule. One could safely state that the law and order situation in Gujarat is well under control. All these achievements have resulted in Modi being projected as a politician who is personally honest, is decisive, firm and administratively capable and who has delivered on a promise of development. BJP is projecting this persona to an extent where Modi is attempted to be shown as an iconic figure.

After being chosen to lead the election campaign of BJP for the 2014 general election and the end of 2013 state elections the party has declared Narendra Modi as the possible Prime Ministerial candidate in case BJP is in a position to form the government. Since then Modi has undertaken a series of tours in the States and as he addresses one large public meeting after another his image grows larger. There have been well attended public meetings in Kolkata, Hyderabad, Thiruchirappalli, Delhi, Bhopal, Mumbai, etc., and the campaign continues. The meeting at Bhopal on 25th September 2013 was said to be the biggest political gathering ever in India. He has also addressed special interest groups, such as the International Advertising Association meeting recently in Mumbai. In the public meetings Modi has point by point attacked the record of the UPA government, referred to the Prime Minister's weakness and the growing dynastyism in the Congress Party. He has simultaneously criticised the foreign policy, the timidity of government vis-à-vis Pakistan and China, the failing economy, devaluation of the Rupee, high inflation and growing unemployment, blaming the policies of UPA for this. He has been highly critical of corruption, deteriorating law and order and decline of public confidence in government, politicians and the system. On every point he seems to have struck a chord, judging by audience reaction. In fact it almost appears as if Narendra Modi has felt the pulse of the Indian nation and sensed the growing disillusionment of the common man with the system of governance and the manner of governance in the country. It is almost as if he has an awareness of how disgusted people are with the way things are deteriorating all round and the fact that people are yearning for change. Narendra Modi is projecting himself as the agent of change.

If one compares the Modi who came to power twelve years ago in Gujarat with the Modi of today one finds an enormous change in the man as a politician, a leader and a moulder of public opinion. The 2001-02 Modi was almost a rabble rouser and all his public speeches then were aimed at his Hindu electorate on whose votes he rode to power. The Modi of 2013 still speaks powerfully and appears to address each individual member of his

audience, but he has matured enough to project himself as a leader of India and not just a particular group. He now states that government has only one religion, which is, "Nation First, India First". In the Mumbai address to the International Advertising Association he talked of our colonial mindset which has made us lose our sense of pride in India and Indianness and has stated that there is so much in our tradition, in our culture and in our past of which we can be justifiably proud and whether it be issues of environment, global warming, architecture, art, music, dance, theatre or even science, India has so much to be proud of. Once we establish a brand called India we can take on the world without pretending to be a clone of the West. But most important of all, he said, was to stop trying to impress the world and instead striving to inspire the world. In business circles this speech was extremely well received.

Is Modi an icon? Certainly not. Is he a good, competent, relatively honest Chief Minister? Certainly he is. Can he build upon his Gujarat experience to provide good government to the country? That remains to be seen. But what is clearly evident is that the people of this country are fed up with a weak government at the Centre, the components of which constantly bicker with each other and even resort to mutual blackmail. People find it difficult to swallow the ad hoc populist decisions of their government, both because they are meaningless and because we Indians have enough reason to believe that all populist measures result in vast sums of money being siphoned off into illicit channels. Populism is the last resort of a government under siege. A confident government takes rational long term decisions which, over time, strengthen the economy and polity. It is only a government in panic which forgets the basic Keynesian principle that it is the duty of government to kick-start a lagging economy by making public investment, even if it involves deficit financing. A revived economy repays the investment multi-fold and deficit financing here does not lead to inflation. However, it is only a government rooted in populism which can use deficit financing to pay for doles and subsidies, all of which is money down the drain.

As the Modi image grows one can sense a degree of alarm amongst the opponents, especially the Congress Party. This takes two forms, the first of which is the mobilisation of Muslims against Modi, with an effort to demonise him for the 2002 riots. The second sign of alarm is the knee-jerk reaction of Congressmen to various events, the latest of which was the preparation of an Ordinance to enable convicted criminals to continue to remain Members of Parliament and State Legislatures in defiance of the judgement of the Supreme Court in this behalf. The purpose of this Ordinance is allegedly a desire to protect the parliamentary seat of Lalu Prasad Yadav in case he is convicted in the fodder scam case, thus retaining the support of Lalu Prasad's party. (Lalu Prasad has been found guilty by the court). The proposed Ordinance led to anguished howls from all over India and the Congress panicked that the enactment of the Ordinance will bring it great unpopularity. First Milind Deora, a junior minister, opposed the Ordinance and thereafter Rahul Gandhi in a press conference used strong, perhaps unparliamentary language to condemn an Ordinance brought forward by his own party. Being inexperienced Rahul Gandhi used language more suitable for the street than for a press conference and I certainly sensed some panic in the manner in which he rejected his own party's Ordinance. One could see evidence of frayed nerves and the apparel is beginning to unravel at the seams.

I make this point because people feel that Modi will take hard decisions, not be encumbered by populism and that this will not only revive the economy but also provide gainful employment to all. Perhaps it is this perception which is building Modi into a larger than life figure. On law and order, on strategic planning to contain China and neutralise Pakistan, people feel that Modi will be much more effective than any other leader. They also feel that India's international image will, therefore, become stronger. Unless the Congress Party is able to come up with a convincing case that its economic agenda will be growth with equity and not just populism, there will be public safety and security for all and there will be a polity which favours not a particular class, caste or religion, together with a dynamic foreign policy backed up by credible military force which keeps India safe and secure, it cannot stop the Modi bandwagon. He is no icon, but one can sense that he is growing into a snowball which keeps becoming larger as it rolls along. Irresponsible and poorly crafted statements in press conferences cannot counter Modi. He can be stopped in his tracks, but only through a consistent and well demonstrated agenda of development and good government, both areas in which the Congress and many elements of the so called Third Front are sadly lacking.

If Modi is not an icon then he certainly is a symbol of a recognition of the growing unease of our people about the way in which we have been governed. At one time Anna Hazare became a symbol of the disgust of the people with corruption, but his movement did not last because he himself had a very limited vision of how to fight corruption and was easily misled by his advisers into thinking that if a particular law of their drafting was enacted, corruption would end. If laws could by themselves counter evil Satan would have been abolished long ago and the Garden of Eden would have returned to Earth. But that is not how systems function, not even religions. Divinity provides the basic framework of a religion and gives precepts, principles and guidelines to the people. The clergy interprets these precepts, these tenets and in a practical form guides the faithful in reaching up to the Godhead. This is true of every religion. However, within the system every individual is given his quota of brain and intelligence and he is then free to choose his course of action. The social contract which determines the relations between individuals and between individuals and society provides the limits within which each individual may operate. When the social contract weakens, when those whose job it is to implement the social contract, the clergy in the case of religion and government in the matter of polity, fail to perform their duty, social and religious chaos follow. Therefore, it is absolutely vital that government should function effectively, honestly and competently and it is then alone that there can be good governance and corruption can be curbed or eliminated, Anna Hazare never appreciated this, nor was capable of doing so and, therefore, his movement failed. Narendra Modi has obviously learnt a lesson from this and from the manner in which the UPA Government has functioned and, therefore, has made a promise of good government which has not only appealed to people but is appearing to be both possible and credible. He thus symbolises the hope of good government in a country where the downright incompetence of government is wrecking the whole polity. That is what makes his image grow.

The above arguments are indicative of what is possible but not necessarily of what is probable. India is a genuinely pluralistic nation, so much so that our Constitution recognises that even in the matter of mutual communications we do not have a single language which can embrace the whole of India. That is why there is no single national language and Article 343 of the Constitution only talks of the official language of the Union, which will be Hindi.

The same Article permits the parallel use of English, initially for the first fifteen years after the adoption of the Constitution, but now under Article 343(3) almost indefinitely. Under Articles 345 and 346 English is the link language of correspondence between States or even within a State, unless the States agree to correspond in Hindi. In such a pluralistic country in which the Constitution in Articles 25, 26, 29 and 30 gives special guarantees to all religious and linguistic minorities, only that government can function which has a deep rooted awareness of pluralism and is committed to protecting it. Only that government can function which recognises that Article 14 makes equality before law a Fundamental Right and Article 15 prohibits discrimination by the State on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth.

We would be blind if we did not recognise that there is a chasm between the majority community, the Hindus, who constitute about eighty-two percent of the population of India and the next biggest religious group, the Muslims, who constitute about twelve percent of the population. The third largest group is the Christians who constitute two and a half percent of the population. Percentages apart, what we are talking about is numbers. The Muslims number more than fifteen crores, which is more than the population of at least ninety countries of the world. Similarly the Christians number about three crore. Even if we were to exclude the Christians and other groups, fifteen crore people represent so large a number that they cannot be eliminated either through physical liquidation or through forced out-migration. Nor can they be enslaved or kept as second class citizens because if we remember the revolt of Spartacus against enslavement by the Romans, we would realise that at some stage even a slave will rise against a tyrannical master. By the simple process of *reductio ad absurdum* we have to realise that the minorities have to be an integral part of our social fabric, with neither caste, nor religion, nor region being the dominant factor in determining to what extent one is an Indian. We are all Indians and unless this realisation comes to the minorities as it must to the majority, India cannot hold together or prosper.

The Muslim question looms large on the communal front because of our unfortunate history in which in 1947 one part of India broke away from us on grounds of religion. The fortunate part of that history is that the major part of India rejected this communal divide and opted for secularism. This was not an option forced on us by some leaders. The decision to be secular was one in which all our people acquiesced and, therefore, we have ended up with the largest Muslim population in the world next only to Indonesia. This is a reality and we should be proud of it. What is more, the Muslim of 2013 is not the Muslim of 1947. He revels in his Indianness, he recognises no other country as his home and not even the riots of Mumbai in 1992-93, nor of Gujarat in 2002 have driven the Muslim away from his home. His aspirations, his anxieties, his desires, his expectations of government are exactly the same as those of Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsees, Agnostics, Atheists and Animists. The Muslim wants security, he wants self respect, he wants education for his children, he wants employment and he wants a share of the development pie. If Narendra Modi really aspires for power then he must publicly reach out to the minorities, especially the Muslims and convince them that he recognises their Indianness, their aspirations and their dreams and that his government will help the Muslims, as it will help every other Indian, to achieve their dream. This would not be a sectarian appeal for the votes of a particular group, but it would be a very categorical policy statement in which even if the minorities do not vote for Modi they would stand convinced that a government led by Modi would look after their interests, as it would of those of all other Indians. When Modi says, "Nation First, India

First” he must also state that this applies to all Indians and no one is excluded on grounds of religion, caste, or any other factor. This, incidentally, also applies to other political parties, especially to those who are making a highly sectarian appeal to the Muslims in an attempt to polarise their votes. Nothing can be worse for this country, nothing can damage communal harmony more, than if the minority votes polarise and this leads to a counter polarisation of the majority votes. Modi must avoid this, as must the Congress.

Hitherto the strong speeches of Narendra Modi which are highly critical of government have attracted a positive audience reaction. But such reaction is ephemeral because whereas the speeches project an image of Modi they still do not tell us how Modi will govern and what are the practical, achievable goals he will set himself and the measures he will take to achieve these goals. What proposals does he have in the matter of foreign policy, our relations with the developed world, with our neighbours, with West Asia and with South East Asia? What does he intend to do to contain China and to deter Pakistan from adventurism? What is his programme for agriculture, forests, environment, industry and business? How will government generate employment which is gainful and which strengthens our economy? In the matter of infrastructure how will government coordinate the functioning of different agencies so that without compromising on environmental issues the infrastructure of roads, railways, irrigation projects, power projects, etc., is completed in as short a timeframe as is feasible? What will be the economic policy of government which strengthens the Rupee, encourages economic growth and simultaneously promises equity and inclusiveness? What will happen in the social sector, mainly health care and education? What measures will be taken to curb corruption, make the police effective, strength the administrative machinery so that it is able to implement policy honestly and competently? How will corruption be dealt with, including administrative measures to ensure the rationalisation of and simplification of rules and regulations, the setting up of an investigative machinery for corruption and the swift award of penalty to the corrupt? How will the bureaucracy be made sensitive to public opinion, become people friendly and thus ensure efficient participative government? Whosoever aspires for power, including Narendra Modi, must seriously address these questions and give us a blueprint of government in the next five years, but within an overall tranche of twenty years. For Narendra Modi to cut through the communal divide and the general disillusionment of people with government he will have to put before us convincing arguments that he can not only govern but can become Prime Minister not of a BJP led government but of the whole of India and of Indians. Then alone can he symbolise good, meaningful government which can take India forward.
