

The One Man Festival of India

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When Indira Gandhi was Prime Minister of India she organised the first festival of India in Britain, starting with London in 1982. The objective of the festival was to display to the world the thousands of years of culture of India, whilst at the same time showcase the skills, the scientific and technical achievements and the advancement in industry of India, since independence. Undoubtedly there was no shortage of carping critics, but the fact remains that India which had been treated with suspicion because of the 1971 Bangladesh War, the first atomic weapons test at Pokhran and the lapse into authoritarian rule between 1975 and 1977 was now projected on the world stage as a vibrant democracy fast modernising itself. Suddenly the West was made aware of the newly emerging butterfly from its chrysalis after its metamorphosis from a pupa. It is almost as if India had now matured and was casting off the shackles of colonialism. Thereafter the festival was held in the United States, France, Germany, Japan, Australia, etc., and in every case India was presented before the world as a modern nation whose culture was rooted in antiquity. In terms of hard cash cost benefit the festivals of India may not have recorded a positive balance sheet, but in terms of creating an interest in this country which subsequently paid off, the value of the festivals was incalculable.

Towards the end of September 2014 Narendra Modi visited the United States, ostensibly to address the General Assembly of the United Nations but more positively at the invitation of the President of the United States. There was a symbolism attached to this visit in that a man who, as Chief Minister of Gujarat, had been refused a visa by the United States Government, was now suddenly honoured by that very government. The transformation from a man reviled for his handling of the Gujarat riots in 2002 to a statesman much in demand was the true emergence from the chrysalis. From time to time Indian Prime Ministers have visited the United States. When Jawaharlal Nehru did so in 1949 President Harry S. Truman, in a departure from protocol, personally received him at the airport in Washington. Indira Gandhi's visit prior to the Bangladesh War was one in which the mutual hostility between her and Richard Nixon was clearly visible, though Rajiv Gandhi's visit in a way was a triumph because he was invited to address a joint session of the Congress, which is the United States Parliament. Manmohan Singh made more than one visit and the favourable chemistry between him and President George W Bush was evident. The two signed the nuclear deal between India and the United States. However, the visits of the Indian Prime Minister tended to be official affairs and though there was an interaction between the expatriate Indian community and Rajiv Gandhi, the level was low key. Then in September 2014 Narendra Modi arrived on the scene and he did so with a bang.

In a totally unprecedented move hundreds of people of Indian origin lined the streets outside JFK airport, New York chanting the kind of pro Modi slogans more familiar to us at Indian railway stations and airports than in the United States. The Prime Minister made a very measured, scholarly and temperate speech at the General Assembly, in sharp contrast to that of Nawaz Sharif who had spoken a couple of days earlier. The Pakistan Prime Minister had only two issues before him, Kashmir and terrorism, of which he claimed that Pakistan was a victim. Conveniently forgotten was the fact that Pakistan has both supported state sponsored terrorism and has given refuge to a whole host of terrorist groups, including the leader of Al Qaeda, Osama Bin Laden. Modi stated that Kashmir is non-negotiable because it is an integral part of India and as for terrorism, India stood for eliminating terrorism throughout the world. He also cautioned against trying to differentiate between good Taliban and bad Taliban because there can be no such a thing as good terrorism. He then went on to speak of peace in the world and about India's development programmes in the future. He named no country including, Pakistan, but he made no bones about the fact that terrorism in any form would not be tolerated.

Thereafter there were two major interactions with people at large. The first was in Central Park where a huge rock concert had been organised against poverty and ill health. This was a purely American function, attended by more than sixty thousand people. Modi appeared on the stage at the invitation of the organisers, he addressed the crowd in home spun English and by his candour he won the hearts of the entire audience. This is

the first time that a visiting statesman from abroad has had such direct interaction with American people at this scale. The second public appearance was Modi's address to the gathering at the Madison Square Garden Stadium, which has an accommodation of about twenty-thousand people and which was full to the rafters on this occasion. This was a function organised by a group of Non Resident Indians and, therefore, the audience was largely of Indian origin. However, more than two dozen Members of Congress and half a dozen Governors of different States were present to hear Modi. Here Modi's performance was absolutely brilliant and though the media has been full of news of all the events attended by Modi, some points that he made in his address should be highlighted because they tell us not only what Modi the man is but they also present a picture of where India is headed. The first point is Modi's reference to Mahatma Gandhi. He said that in 2019 India will celebrate the 150th birthday of the Mahatma. The Mahatma gave us freedom and what has the nation given back to him? This question has never been asked before, not even by the Gandhians. What Modi said was that the least we can do for the Mahatma is that by the time his 150th birthday comes around we should present him with a clean India, an India in which universal sanitation has been achieved and we have begun to master our pollution problems. In this context he also said that cleaning the Ganga was not only an emotive issue, but it was a very largely an economic issue also. Forty percent of the population of India lives in the Ganga basin and a clean Ganga would transform their lives and enable them to earn a better living. This approach is significantly different from merely stating that the Ganga is our mother and must be kept clean.

In another reference to Gandhi Modi reminded the audience that like most of them Gandhiji was also a non resident Indian who, in 1915, decided to return to India. Between 1915 and 1947 he led the freedom movement so that in 1947 India became free. The time has now come when persons of Indian origin who formed the Indian diaspora also think of repaying their debt to the country of their origin, which nurtured them sufficiently to enable them to go abroad and earn a decent living. He invited the NRIs and PIOs to return to India, set up industrial units and business houses, invest in the country and help it to develop fast. In other words, he asked them to straddle two worlds, with one foot in the United States and the other in India. He also promised that India will give them the opportunity to make in India and sell to the world, to the mutual benefit of both.

Never before in our history has an Indian Prime Minister spoken in this manner to such a huge audience of Indian origin, touching both an emotional and practical chord in them and arousing a completely unprecedented enthusiasm about India. What the festivals of India collectively achieved at a cost of thousands of crores of rupees Modi achieved as a one man festival of India at the mere cost of his travel to and from India. In fact this fits in with his analogy about the Mars mission which he presented to the Madison Square Garden audience. In a tribute to Indian scientists he submitted that our mission to Mars was the only one of fifty-one missions undertaken by the top economies of the world, of which only twenty-one were successful to achieve success at the very first attempt. This makes the mission unique because it is the first of its kind. In a comparison which only a Gujarati could give he said that the fare of an auto rickshaw in Ahmedabad is Rs. 10 per kilometres, whereas the mission to Mars cost Rs. 7 per kilometre. The U.S. mission to Mars, almost simultaneous with our mission, cost over Rs. 64 per kilometre, which means that not only can Indian scientists achieve great things but they can do so at a fraction of the cost incurred by the developed world. Vis-à-vis the other festivals of India, the single man Modi festival is, in cost benefit terms, like our mission to Mars and, therefore, in cost benefit accounting terms this festival can be deemed to be a success.

Two other stages of the visit also bear mention. The first is Modi's interaction with the heads of some of the top American businesses at a breakfast meeting. Here also Modi's message was that he invited American industry and business to set up base in India, to manufacture in India and then sell throughout the world. In other words, he is not looking for short-term investment but rather a long term commitment on the part American industry to do business from India. The American industrialists and businessmen asked some very hard questions about infrastructure, land availability, labour relations, taxation policy, etc., and the universal feeling expressed by the businessmen was that the Prime Minister handled the question brilliantly, he was open and frank, he readily admitted to shortcomings and he gave convincing replies on how the situation would be

improved. This did not result in the normal practice of so called global investors meets in India, as is being organised at Indore in October 2014, in which Memoranda of Understanding are signed for thousands of crores of rupees by way of future investment, but in which very little materialises. In other words, the industrialists have not made any promises but it is obvious that they are viewing India through a new prism and their interest in this country had definitely been aroused. To expect more of any single interaction would be incorrect. However, the ground work has been done and it is now for government and for its various departments to follow up with those specifics which would attract investment, transfer technology and lead to actual manufacture in India.

The last stage of the visit, of course, was the Prime Minister's interaction with President Obama and the United States Government. Obama is a product of the western world whereas Modi is very much rooted in India. For example, the entire visit coincided with the nine days fast of Navaratri and Modi steadfastly adhered to it, virtually living on warm water. Even at the working dinner and the lunch hosted by Obama Modi ate nothing, though he made it clear that he expected his host and guests to eat normally. This was in the context of Obama also offering to fast along with Modi, a suggestion firmly rejected by the Indian Prime Minister. These personalities, who are in some ways convergent in that both were strangers to national politics but were projected to the top of the pyramid by their own merit, and divergent in that they belong to two different cultures, cannot be spoken of in terms of the chemistry of their interaction. Their relationship has to be much more complex, but the fact remains that the meeting that Modi had with Obama has resulted in a better understanding of each other and laid the foundation of U.S. – India inter-government interaction in which we move from a mutual distrust to a position first of neutrality and then of mutual understanding. This is a substantial achievement, perhaps aided by the fact that Modi is the first Indian Prime Minister who has publicly stated that the United States should not withdraw from Afghanistan precipitately as did it in Iraq so that there is a stabilising force in Afghanistan which could consolidate its democracy. This statement has gone down extremely well with the American Government, it is bound to be welcomed by the Afghanistan Government and the only people who would be unhappy are the Pakistanis. That is their bad luck.

This paper began with a reference to the various festivals of India held abroad and stated that Narendra Modi has been a one man festival. The article is not meant to eulogise Modi, the man, nor is it directed towards exultation in achieving of goals because in fact this is only the start. There is so much to do in India before it becomes an attractive destination for the establishment of industry with foreign investment. We have to sort out the power situation and for this purpose we have to kick start the coal mining industry after the Supreme Court cancelled 214 out of 218 coal blocks which had been allotted. We have to completely reverse the paralysis of the bureaucracy born out of political indecision, witch-hunting by vigilance agencies and general lack of support even where mistakes are bona fide, leading to indefinite delay of decision making even in minor matters. In other words, not only has Civil Service morale to be reestablished but Civil Servants have to be actively encouraged to take firm decision within their respective domains. The State Governments have to be brought on board so that there is commonality of purpose between them and the Central Government. For example, if the Ganga is to be truly cleaned the governments of U.P, Bihar and West Bengal, through whose territory the major part of the Ganga flows, have to be made enthusiastic and willing partners in a venture which would benefit all of them. Structurally we need a strong Ganga Development Authority in which the participating states are partners, but which has overreaching authority to ensure proper planning, implementation of projects and subsequent maintenance of the created infrastructure. We need a labour policy which, while providing a security net to labour, also gives industry a fair deal in that it is permitted to prune deadwood and retire redundant staff. We need to revamp our education system, especially in the context of vocational education, but that can be the subject of a separate paper because in any case the entire education system is in an unholy mess. We need to review our tax laws and the method of administering them and we have to set up a machinery whereby the grievances, suggestions, requirements and plans of investors, especially foreign investors, can be attended to very fast and problems solved speedily. In other words, we need the nuts and bolts of everyday operations. The festival is over, now we have to set our backs to performance and delivery of the things that have been promised. That is the real challenge before Narendra Modi, who will find

that whereas the audiences in America were responsive, here he will have to face the kind of carping criticism with which the Congress Party, unable to fix Modi on his performance in the United States, has chosen to attack him because inadvertently he referred to Gandhi as Mohanlal Karamchand rather than Mohandas Karamchand.
