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Why Narendra Modi must ask his followers to heed his namesake

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Synopsis

Modi has a challenge to build a positive nationalism where we all work hard and honestly, and not spend our lives watching each other furtively and maliciously.



Chaitanya Kalbag

Three weeks and counting, and besides a bit of soft power-mongering there is no flurry of executive actions to take away one's breath. Our impatience is understandable, but then the new dispensation is taking its lumps. Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) warned party workers in Goa that we will have to swallow bitter medicine if we want to get the economy back on track. [Inflation](#) has reared its ugly head again, our stock markets and the rupee are skittish about the exploding crisis in Iraq, and it looks like Finance Minister Arun

Jaitley, who reached for his cliché dictionary to pull out "speculative hoarding", will have to re-order his checklist ahead of the Budget. It will not be

a feel-good exercise. Jaitley has to slash expenditure, raise more revenue, hack through thickets of subsidies and regulation, and perhaps inflict more pain on those of us who are honest taxpayers and customers.

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Fixing a minimum export price for onions is a tiny band-aid for the economy as food prices soar along with unrelenting temperatures. Suddenly governance has taken on a whole new meaning, and you can see that the Modi team is feeling its way, or as Reserve Bank of [India](#) Governor Raghuram Rajan put it in a speech on Tuesday: "As the Chinese would say, let us recognize the value of crossing the river by feeling each stone before we put our weight on it. Let us not take a blind jump hoping that a stone will be there to support us when we land."

Fording the suddenly swift river should be taking nearly all of the [government's](#) attention, but too much time is being taken up with trivial pursuits. For instance: the prime minister will speak only in Hindi, and English is the language of the barbarian and the heretic, never mind that China is making a huge push to spread English among its people so they can compete globally, or that Japan's long and slow decline can also be attributed to its stubbornness in sticking to Nihongo with its three complex scripts. Never mind that India has at least 780 languages, and that the world can enjoy reading Tamil Sangam poetry, or the stories of Premchand, or the novels of Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay that were immortalised by Satyajit Ray, only because they were translated into English. We are seeing the rise of the right-wing "Hindi" nationalists.

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Vaibhav Suryavanshi

Every second day the defenders of Bharat Mata draw a new red line. The Mata Dors, for that is what they are, go about looking for the next bullfight. From history textbooks to images to social media to literature, they hunt in packs. They have been aided and abetted by our intrepid domestic spies who have suddenly woken up to foreign-funded Non-Governmental Organisations, principally Greenpeace, that are said to be sabotaging development. There is no doubt that we have too many NGOs, about two million or one for every 600 Indians. If they are tax-exempt they ought to be audited thoroughly. But let us not forget that NGOs thrive where there is a vacuum in government. If we want to cut down on our weeds, we must grow healthier gardens.

NGOs are just one class of witches being hunted. Television advertisements brazenly tout fountain pens that secretly film or record our foes, and matchbox devices that we can plant in our offices and homes to spy on our colleagues and family. Do we really want a new breed of Torquemadas to don their saffron hoods and lead sinister inquisitions? The prosecutions of college students in Kerala for pictures in a magazine, and 'defamatory' crossword-puzzle clues, or the invoking of the dreaded Section 66A of the IT Act for social-media transgressions, are keeping our thought police busy. India enjoys the dubious honour of being listed by Index on Censorship as one of 11 countries - alongside Croatia, Tajikistan, Swaziland, and Malawi -- that are very intolerant of even the slightest insult to the powers that be.

Most nations suffer their convulsions and India is experiencing one now. This is predictable, for we are just emerging from ten years of uninterrupted rule by Congress-led coalitions. The last time any single-party government lasted that long - with all its attendant abuses - was Indira Gandhi's regime from 1966 to 1977.

Narendra Modi looks very much like he will break this jinx, so he has a special challenge on his hands: to build a positive nationalism where we all work hard and honestly, and not spend our lives watching each other furtively and maliciously. It is a big challenge: suffused with the elation that this time they are in for a long haul, the fact-checkers and re-writers clearly think they have the licence, the time and the opportunity to throw out old shibboleths and set their new histories in stone. Here Modi must turn to the historic speech made by his namesake and hero, Narendra Nath Datta aka Swami Vivekananda, at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago on September 11, 1893. "I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance," Vivekananda said. "We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true." Do we?

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(The author is former Reuters Asia Editor)

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