

Modi's Power: A Riddle Wrapped in a Mystery Inside an Enigma

The Needle's Eye



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In a striking exposition of what could be termed the Modi Doctrine, NSA Doval said if you are not able to exercise the power you possess because you don't have the will, that is as good as not having it

It is difficult to discern if Prime Minister Narendra Modi is beginning to lose his footing, or whether he is merely circling his wagons against the attacking hordes out there as he prepares us for newer achievements we cannot even comprehend. Fifteen months after he won power, Modi is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.

First the mystery of how Modi views governance, and the need to take the people into confidence. On August 3, the prime minister tweeted "Today, we would be witness to an important & landmark event at 6.30 pm at RCR" (Race Course Road, his official residence). Television channels went berserk trying to guess what Modi was about to announce. A breakthrough in the paralysis gripping Parliament? A new political alliance? A diplomatic coup? It turned out to be an exchange of papers with the largest Naga insurgent group in the Northeast. But was it a peace accord?

In the ten days since, the Naga 'framework agreement' has not been made public. RN Ravi, the retired police officer who was Modi's main interlocutor with the rebel faction led by Isak Chisi Swa and Thuingaleng Muivah, has said several details still need to be sorted out. When will the 'accord' be made public? "At a proper time it has to be revealed to the country, and to the legislature. Perhaps we may have to wait for some more time," he told rediff.com. Wait a minute. We have the PM and his senior colleagues applauding while Muivah and Ravi sign some pa-

pers and exchange them, but those papers are secret? Three Northeastern chief ministers have said they were not consulted about the agreement. Didn't the Isak-Muivah wing of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland negotiate for 18 years for a Greater Nagaland that would include Naga-inhabited areas of neighbouring states? Did we just hear that India's Home Ministry itself was in the dark about the agreement? Exactly what has been promised to the Nagas that made Muivah say very warm things about Modi's vision and leadership? We should be in no doubt at all that the prime minister and his aides will eventually hammer out a Naga agreement that is in India's interest. Why the secrecy over the terms then?

Here is the riddle: does Modi need a government to run India? Often, you get the feeling that he would rather run the affairs of state on his own, helped by a tiny handful of trusted and utterly loyal lieutenants and a team of ministers who occasionally gleam and glimmer in his huge shadow — unfettered by a dysfunctional Parliament and an obstreperous and impossible opposition.

Take the state of Bihar, where election dates are likely to be announced before Modi mounts the ramparts of Delhi's Red Fort on Independence Day this Saturday. Back in June two rather low-key ministers, Ananth Kumar and Dharmendra Pradhan, were named to oversee the make-or-break Bihar elections. In the weeks since, with CM Nitish Kumar and his fere-

my Lalu Prasad creating a potential lethal alliance, Modi has decided to take charge himself. On August 9 — coincidentally the anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi's Quit India call in 1942 — Modi and BJP president Amit Shah launched a frontal attack on Kumar and Prasad, saying their re-election would mean the return of the

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'jungle raj' and promising a glorious future if the BJP won the election. Modi's Gaya speech carried all his feisty trademarks. Little wonder

Nitish has become a Twitter warrior himself, attacking Modi on websites like takebackyourwords.com for his remarks at Gaya and at Muzaffarpur. Bihar has somehow become the litmus test of Modi's power, and a loss there would deepen the sense of his vulnerability, after the BJP's huge defeat in Delhi in February. But you wouldn't think anything so big is at stake if you looked at how blithely the government views news on the economic front. On a day when the rupee fell to a two-year low against the dollar and the stock markets skidded on fears unleashed by China's devaluation of the yuan, India was in the news for filing a \$99 million class-action suit against Nestlé over the

Maggi noodles recalls, and of course for the imminent stalling of the Goods and Services Tax Bill.

Here is where Modi's exercise of power through his silence seems to be paying off. The Congress is about to win a pyrrhic victory with its relentless blocking of Parliament. With the session in its dying hours, Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj made an aggressive speech on Wednesday in which she attacked Rahul Gandhi and his mother over the Bofors scandal and the Congress government's handling of the Bhopal gas disaster, both during Rajiv Gandhi's 1984-89 term as prime minister. Top business leaders and thousands of other frustrated Indians signed an online petition criticising Congress for its behaviour. And UP strongman Mulayam Singh Yadav's breaking of ranks with the Gandhi's holds much meaning for caste-ridden Bihar, where the Yadavs so far seemed to be standing together against Modi and the BJP.

If Modi wins Bihar, we will begin to unravel the enigma of how the exercise of power. There were several clues in a speech by National Security Advisor Ajit Doval in Mumbai last week. Doval, who apparently drove the Naga 'understanding' and wielded influence disproportionately larger than his office, is one of Modi's most trusted trouble-shooters. In July, after tensions with Pakistan rose over the Gurdaspur terrorist attack and ceasefire violations in Kashmir, Doval directly met the Pakistani high commissioner in Delhi twice to deliver stiff warnings, by-passing minis-

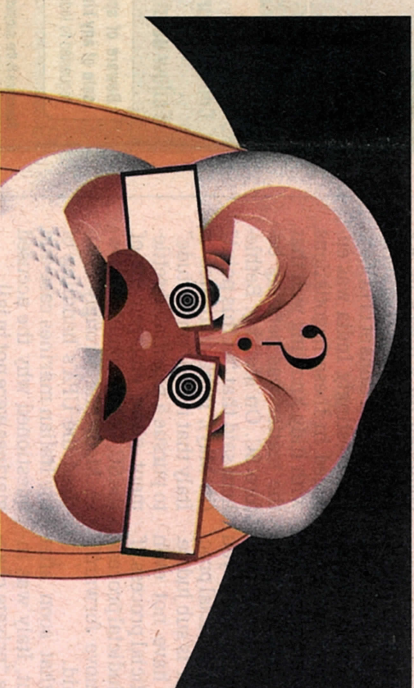
ter Swaraj. He told his Mumbai audience that when 'important and immediate' coincide, people in power don't deserve their places if they dither over protocol or bureaucracy.

Asked if he justified violence to maintain state security, Doval answered emphatically: "Absolutely yes! There is no confusion, but there are riders (in consonance with the law). Should it come to protect the supreme interest of the nation, there is nothing that the nation should stop (at). It should go to any length, if need be."

In an exposition of what could be termed the Modi Doctrine, Doval said if you are not able to exercise the power you possess because you don't have the will to exercise it, "That is as good as not having it. Power is not as much as you have it but as much as you can exercise it... India has a mindset where it punches below its weight. We have to punch not above our weight, we have to punch not below our weight, we have to increase our weight and punch proportionately."

National interest is supreme, Doval repeated. "Either we will sail together or we will sink together. The day we sink all this freedom of press and the freedom of the individual will also sink with that."

Something to keep in mind the next time we get excited about the government's ban on hundreds of porn websites, or the AG's insistence in the SC that privacy is not a fundamental right. Doval quoted an unnamed survey to say that only 1/3 people wield all the power in the US. The number seems far smaller in Modi's India.



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