

# Instafame! Modi Zooms In and Out of Your Viewfinder

## The Needle's Eye



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I am nagged by a disturbing question: how will historians compile the "collected works of Narendra Modi" when so many of his thoughts are so, well, instant?

What better setting to join Instagram than Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar's new capital, back-dropped by visuals of spectacular pagodas, with thousands of swooning followers now able to follow our peripatetic prime minister in nearly every digital form. A gushing government announcement listed the social-media forums he frequents, but I was nagged by a disturbing question: how will historians compile the "collected works of Narendra Modi" when so many of his thoughts are so, well, instant?

No such problem for Jawaharlal Nehru, whose 125th birth anniversary on Friday will see the launch of a new Nehru Heritage Portal by Home Minister Rajnath Singh. The portal will house hundreds of thousands of photographs, audio clips, restored Films Division footage, letters, books, speeches—a treasure trove on India's first prime minister. Every six weeks a new volume of Nehru's Collected Works is hitting bookshelves. The numbers are impressive. When the current editor-in-chief of the series, historian Madhavan Palat, took over in late 2011, 43 volumes of the 'second series' had been published in addition to the 15 of the first which ran to 1946. This week Palat held No. 58 in his hands. In all, the Works may total 100 volumes. After he took charge, Palat began to publish the speeches

Nehru made in Hindi in their original glory, with translations, something that ought to gladden Modi. Thousands of hours of All India Radio archival tapes have been painstakingly transcribed. Most fascinating for history buffs will be the years 1947 to 1951, when Nehru led an unelected, transitional government in a new nation and had to deal with the integration of the princely states, the making of the Constitution, the holding of the first general elections, the beginnings of the planning process, the Kashmir crisis, and a newly nationalistic China where the Communists had seized power in 1949.

But to come back to Modi's choice of destinations. He chose not to go to Beijing for the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation summit this week, but is in Myanmar for the East Asia summit and meetings with leaders of ASEAN—the Association of South East Asian Nations. Then on to Australia for a Group of 20 summit, and Indian-community razzmatazz in Sydney and Melbourne.

But it is Fiji that shows how a Pax Modiana will likely play out. U.S. President Barack Obama and China's President Xi Jinping struck a historic climate deal in Beijing on Tuesday, with both countries giving ground on their positions on emissions. Their newly-agreed emission

targets will pile pressure on India, which with China was so far resistant to caving in to demands that developing countries slash their emissions. What does this have to do with Fiji? Let's look at some facts. Although Fiji's capital Suva is 12,000 km from New Delhi, one-third of the island's population is Hindu. Indians now constitute only 37.5 per

**Faster Work**  
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cent of Fiji's population, down from 51 per cent in 1966. Suva is also headquarters of the Pacific Islands Forum, a grouping of 14 island states along with Australia and New Zealand, and those islands have been getting increasingly alarmed and upset by India's (and China's) stand on climate change. Many of them fear that their fragile archipelagos, just two or three metres above sea level, will be submerged by the Pacific if global warming continues unchecked. Modi is the first Indian prime minister to visit Fiji in 33 years. He will host a lunch summit with at least ten island heads of state on November 19, and a little bit of goodwill and aid diplomacy is bound to yield dividends. Don't forget those 14 votes will count at the United Nations and in climate talks. Modi's

trip is not a day too soon. Two days after him, China's Xi will also come calling in Suva. Beijing has pledged about \$1.5 billion in developmental aid over the past few years to the islands. China wants to consolidate its China-Pacific Islands Countries Economic Development and Cooperation Forum. You can see why our prime minister needed to earn those air miles.

I nearly forgot—between November 14 (Chacha Nehru's birthday and Children's Day) when Modi will be rubbing shoulders with G-20 leaders in Brisbane, and the 19th (Indira Gandhi's birthday, which coincides with World Toilet Day), officials here in India will be mobilising thousands of schoolchildren for the Bal Swacchta Mission. Thanks to social media, don't be surprised if you see an Instagram of a clean loo at the Nehru Memorial School in Suva to mark the day.

But in Nay Pyi Taw and later Brisbane, with emergent India seated at every high table you can imagine, the problems of running a nation of 1.3 billion people can seem ethereally distant. And Modi has travelled the distance. In November alone he will be on the road for 14 days. By next month he will have visited all continents except Africa. He needs all the help he can get in running India. Barely will he have caught his breath after a gruelling

trip that also takes in four cities in Australia and the Pacific island nation of Fiji when he will be off again to Nepal for his second visit in three months. It is good that the latest expansion takes his ministerial team to 66 and all that kerfuffle about a lean and mean team has been quietly jettisoned. You can be sure Modi will be keeping a sharp eye on his 21 new ministers, who now know that they can be demoted for under-performance and rewarded for their ceaseless labours. The multi-talented Suresh Prabhu and the slippered, chaat-eating technocrat 'Manu' Parrikar bring refreshing simplicity, and with the likes of Jayant Sinha and Rajyavardhan Rathore will significantly raise the intelligence quotient of the leadership team.

Just in time. A truckload of legislative work awaits Parliament's month-long winter session. The economy is treading water and manufacturers are bashful when they should be bashing ahead. Modi's economic team is nearly complete—the only missing piece is the head of the (un)Planning Commission—and decision-making has to speed up. Modi looks set to set to pour more concrete into the foundations of reform. Along the way he has also set down a new coalition dharma: take it or lump it, as in Maharashtra, where a chastened Shiv Sena is now coloured black, blue and saffron.



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