

Is Modi Hoping Public Memory Will Stay Short?

The Needle's Eye



Chaitanya Kalbag

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Did Narendra Modi just experience his Sharm el-Sheikh moment? The joint India-Pakistan statement issued in the Russian city of Ufa last Friday, after Modi initiated a meeting with Pakistani PM Nawaz Sharif, has been all but repudiated by Sharif's

National Security Advisor Sartaj Aziz. Aziz said no talks with India can be held without Kashmir on the agenda, and also brought in India's alleged support for the insurgency in Pakistan's Balochistan province. The Ufa statement had said both countries would cooperate to eliminate terrorism from South Asia, which is interesting knowing that India says it is plagued by Pakistani-sponsored terrorism and does not itself interfere in its neighbour's affairs. Interesting also that Modi, who is usually all a-twitter about his activities, did not tweet at all about his meeting with Sharif.

Almost exactly six years ago, when Prime Minister Manmohan Singh issued a more or less similarly worded statement with his Pakistani counterpart in the Egyptian resort of Sharm el-Sheikh, he was attacked ferociously by the Bharatiya Janata Party for having capitulated to Pakistan. "No sooner was the ink dry on the joint statement, Pakistani leaders were accusing India of supporting insurgency in Balochistan... All the waters of seven seas will not wash the shame at Sharm-el-Sheikh," BJP leader Yashwant Sinha thundered.

Sound familiar? This time the shoe is on the other foot, but we are assured the Modi government will walk the talk, and talks will take place soon between Aziz and India's

NSA Ajit Doval.

The shortness of public memory never ceases to amaze me, and this more so in India where most of us seem to behave like pebbles skittering across a pond's surface—bounce, splash, bounce, splash.

Look at the speed with which we zoom in and out of our latest titillation. TAM Media Research data show that from about 40 hours a day on June 15, English TV news channels' coverage of the Lalit Modi affair plunged to nearly zero by July 3. Two days later it was nearly 40 hours of the Vyapam scam. How many of us know what Vyapam stands for? It is Vyavasayik Pariksha Mandal—the professional examination and recruitment board run by the Madhya Pradesh government.

PM Modi obviously has very savvy media advisers even if we don't ever hear their names. He took one of his customary breaks with an eight-day trip to the five 'stans' of Central Asia, and the BRICS and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summits in Ufa. He was obviously betting that the heat and dust back home would settle down with the advancing monsoon. Although he did not have his favourite Indian-diaspora audiences in Tashkent, Astana, Ashgabat, Bishkek and Dushanbe, he was as energetic as ever, making speeches, signing agreements, unveiling Gandhi busts, and reciting Uighur

poetry.

All five Central Asian republics Modi visited are Muslim. There is concern that the Islamic State terror organisation is finding easy pickings in these former Soviet satellites. All five are led by strong leaders who do not brook any opposition. Turkmenistan's ruler Suparmurat Niyazov, who died in 2006, erected a 50-foot gold-plated statue of himself in the centre of Ashgabat that would rotate with the sun. President Nursultan Nazarbayev has ruled Kazakhstan since 1989. Three months ago he won re-election with 98 per cent of the vote.

Modi was in quest of a Silk Road for the 21st Century, as he put it, seeking trade and cooperation on culture, de-

fence, oil and gas, uranium, and combating terrorism. I was surprised that Sanskrit did not figure on the agenda. One school of historians theorises that the Aryans swept down into India from the rugged reaches of Central Asia. But a lot of research has been done on a different kind of traffic. Before the advent of Islam, Central Asia was heavily Buddhist, and Sanskrit was the main vehicle for the spread of Buddhism. Seishi Karashima, a scholar of Buddhism and Sanskrit at Japan's Soka University, wrote in a recent paper that in the late 19th and early 20th centuries great-power rivalry between Britain and Russia extended even to the discovery and deciphering of thousands of Sanskrit manu-

script fragments scattered around Central Asia.

"The Sanskrit fragments, which could number twenty-five thousand, are now preserved in various institutions in Ankara, Berlin, Harvard, Helsinki, Kyoto, London, Lüshun (China), Munich, Paris, St. Petersburg, Washington and Yale," Karashima wrote, adding that even more fragments found in Xinjiang recently are now preserved in Beijing's National Library.

Clearly, these are signposts in an exciting journey of discovery, but are India's Sanskrit scholars involved and interested? They seem mostly to harken back to championing Sanskrit as a Hindu language that will re-establish India's greatness as a 'vishwa guru', a global mentor. Karashima attended the World Sanskrit Conference in Bangkok two weeks ago. That was where Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj, sliding past the Lalit Modi din, announced her ministry would establish a Joint Secretary's post to promote Sanskrit. Is Sanskrit also going to be a language of diplomacy? It boggles the mind, but be prepared to read dé-marches in Sanskrit on www.narendramodi.in.

I was saying (if you are still with me) that public memory is exceedingly short in India. Sure enough, things had simmered down by the time Modi returned home. There

was a new cricket sensation, with the IPL inquiry handing down harsh bans and suspensions, but nearly forgotten were the revelations of the 2011 Socio Economic and Caste Census.

The Modi government, staring at a nasty battle in Bihar, is apparently sitting on the caste part of the census. But the socio-economic data is shocking. A few highlights: in three-quarters of 179 million households, the monthly income of the highest-paid member is less than ₹5,000 (\$79); 38 per cent are landless, manual labourers; and unsurprisingly, only 4.58 per cent pay income or professional tax. This data came close on the heels of a Rapid Survey of Children conducted by UNICEF and the Ministry of Women and Child Development, which also the government was apparently sitting on since last October. Those findings, leaked by The Economist, show Gujarat during the Narendra Modi years doing worse than the national average in immunisation, malnutrition, and stunting.

Instead of reacting defensively to these surveys, the government would have done well to embrace the findings, and then vowed to dramatically raise the standards of health, education, livelihood and nutrition for the vast majority of our population dramatically over the next four years of its term. That is, if we can remember long enough to make it accountable.



ANIRBAN BORA