

Modi in the US: Time for Two Steps Forward

The Needle's Eye



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Travelling overseas must seem like valuable time outside looking in

"When you come to a fork in the road, take it," said Yogi Berra, the legendary catcher for the New York Yankees, who died on Tuesday.

Funny that may be, but not for Prime Minister Narendra Modi as he flies to New York at the start of a week-long visit to both U.S. coasts.

Modi has come to quite a few forks in his road as he coaxes his people towards a prosperous, developed future. It is not at all an easy task. Often, for

every piece of good news on India, there are nearly always a few setbacks or hurdles. Sometimes too much time is wasted on needless, diversionary controversies. Travelling overseas must seem like valuable time outside looking in.

During his U.S. trip, Modi will meet a large number of Fortune 500 CEOs as well as investors and start-up entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley. On Tuesday, foreign minister Sushma Swaraj said "The business of diplomacy in India's present government is business." Modi and his senior ministers have been at pains to reassure American business that it is welcome in India, and Swaraj told the U.S.-India Business Council that New Delhi was determined to use technology, innovation and research to leapfrog "some of the physical infrastructural constraints". It was the same message that Finance Minister Arun Jaitley kept repeating during a trip earlier this week to Singapore and Hong Kong.

But is doing business in India getting any easier, and is foreign investment going to flood into infrastructure projects? The World Bank's Ease of Doing Business report for 2015 says that India, in fact, slipped two notches to 142 out of 189 countries surveyed. Modi is likely to be quizzed about this on his U.S. visit. Yet, instead of concern and a serious resolve to get better very fast, several Indian states cele-

brated their ranking in a separate World Bank-KPMG survey on their implementation of business reforms. Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan topped the rankings; the BJP rules all of them except for ally-run Andhra. The exultation was understandable but a trifle premature: the survey said only 32 per cent of reforms had been implemented.

The World Bank's Onno Ruhl, in his foreword to the report on Indian reforms, noted that it is still very difficult to do business here. India does not even feature in the top 100 countries on eight out of 10 indicators in the parallel Doing Business survey. He said India ranked among the bottom 10 economies in the world on dealing with construction permits and enforcing contracts. "Thus the need of the day is reform, and the reforms must be led by the Government at both Central and State levels," Ruhl wrote.

The states' survey was at Modi's behest; he is serious about measuring the success of his Make in India mission. The size of the challenge is daunting. By 2020, India will be home to 1.35 billion people, of whom 906 million will be of working age. Each one of them will need a job.

Going into Silicon Valley, Modi can boast more than 15 million followers on Twitter, second among world leaders to Barack Obama, whom he will be



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BAD TO WORSE



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meeting on the last day of his trip (Modi is nearly level with Shah Rukh

Khan but still two million followers behind Amitabh Bachchan). On the 27th when he takes part in a townhall meeting at Facebook's headquarters alongside Mark Zuckerberg, he may be asked why his government is trying to interfere with privacy and personal data while proclaiming that it is passionate about Digital India. On Tuesday, the government was forced to withdraw a draft policy on data encryption which would have required all businesses and private citizens to open up their emails and social-media messages to official scrutiny.

This came close on the heels of the government having to pedal back after outrage over attempts to re-define net neutrality, which guarantees unfettered access to all users across the Internet. It coincides with attempts by other countries to try and police the oceans of data and communication swirling across the planet. Back in June, a UN Human Rights Council report called for legal protection to encryption and anonymity. Apple's CEO Tim Cook, whom Modi will be meeting in California, has said privacy is a fundamental right.

Internet and social media services were cut off in parts of Gujarat earlier this month to thwart the rising protests by the Patidar community over caste reservations. Similar clamp-downs have occurred in Kashmir. It will also be embarrassing if Modi is asked at his session with Zuckerberg

once," BJP national secretary from r. cussis

why India made so many government requests to Facebook for user data and content restrictions. Between July and December 2014, after Modi took office, India made 5,473 requests for 7,281 user accounts. Facebook produced 'some data' in nearly 45 per cent of those cases and agreed to restrict content in 5,832 cases. These numbers far outstrip any other country in the world, except the United States.

The row over encryption couldn't have come at a worse time. Late last month about 120 leading academics, most of them Indian-American, raised concerns about Modi's Digital India plans. In a statement they said there was almost certain that "digital systems will be used to enhance surveillance and repress the constitutionally-protected rights of citizens". They also accused Modi of attacking academic freedom in India. In response, Modi's supporters gathered more than 1,000 signatures from academia on an 'Oppose Prejudice and Fear-Mongering' petition, charging that most scholars of South Asian studies in the U.S. were a discredited lot and had no business criticising the prime minister.

Early this month, at a Hindu-Buddhist conference on conflict avoidance and climate awareness, Modi made an interesting distinction between philosophy and ideology. His philosophy is simple enough - it is a quest for contented, peaceful and in-

clusive development. This is a reasonable goal.

"The essence of philosophy is that it is not a closed thought, while ideology is a closed one. So philosophy not only allows dialogue but it is perpetual search of truth through dialogue," Modi said. "So ideologies which close the gates for dialogue have the propensity for violence while philosophy seeks to avoid it through dialogue."

Philosopher he may be, but Modi also has to tackle the ideologues in his camp. Soon after the Vishwa Hindu Parishad's Pravin Togadia wrote in the *Organiser*, the mouthpiece of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, that it was time to punish Muslims who had more than two children to combat their 'population jihad', RSS supremo Mohan Bhagwat had his own say, calling for a 'non-political' committee to decide which sections of Indian society needed job and education quotas, and how much.

This, just as campaigning heats up for the election in Bihar, where caste seems to drown out all talk of development or law and order. In an extraordinary rebuff of Bhagwat, its spiritual leader, the BJP issued a strongly-worded statement that it opposed any second thoughts on reservations for Scheduled Castes and Tribes, Other Backward Classes, and Extremely Backward classes. Gives 'one step forward, two steps backward' a whole new meaning, doesn't it?