

# Totems, Idols and Symbols: The Modi Almanac

The Needle's Eye



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Twice in the past four months, Narendra Modi has spoken with unalloyed pride and excitement as he stood among our super-achieving space scientists — at Sriharikota on June 30, and on Wednesday when the Indian Space Research Organisation celebrated the success of our Mars orbiter Mangalyaan. "History has been created today. You have dared to reach out into the unknown and have achieved the near-impossible," he said. The Mars mission cost only a little bit more than Sandra Bullock made for her role in 'Gravity'. Modi spoke of how ISRO had taken just three years from conception to execution. He could have thanked his predecessor for funding the dream mission, but did not. That is a minor lapse of grace in an otherwise inspirational and statesmanlike speech that is sure to spur interest in science, technology and meritocracy.

Modi is an unabashed nationalist who revels in anniversaries, festivals, and other Red Letter Days. ISRO was just a trailer for the next 10 crowded days. On the 25th the prime minister will mark Jana Sangh idol Deen Dayal Upadhyaya's birth anniversary by launching two big, ambitious missions. He says he has asked every government office to be scrubbed and cleaned in the week to October 2, Mahatma Gandhi's birth anniversary, when he is going to launch his five-year Swachha Bharat *andolan* (agitation). If you have wondered how dirty a people we are, the PM wants every Indian to donate 100

days to the cleanliness drive. He's promised to wield a broom himself on Thursday. The same day he will also launch his 'Make in India' campaign. Around 3,000 CEOs have been invited to hear him pledge to make their businesses easier by slashing through the "jungle of laws" (his words) on labour, land, and environment. He wants India to be a 'zero defect, zero effect' manufacturing paradise. That will take some doing. You need massive scale to spar with the manufacturing muscle of the United States, China and Japan — whose leaders will all have separately submitted with the man from Vadnagar in September. This is not a pipe dream: Hyundai has made India its small-car hub, exporting about a million-and-a-half units so far, but even the South Koreans, who probably face nastier trade unions at home, fret that setting up a new plant in India takes about a year and a half. Modi wants to cleave thickets of rules and offer the CEOs a one-stop hop to manufacturing nirvana. Good luck to him.

On Friday Modi leaves for New York, where he is going to meet practically every Indian-American at a sold-out Madison Square Garden and be beamed simultaneously to Times Square (eat your heart out, Bruce Springsteen), visit Ground Zero and Central Park, speak at the UN General Assembly, and meet more CEOs and Wall Street sharks before heading for two meetings in Washington with Barack Obama.



ON MARS MISSION

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But Modi will not be addressing a joint session of Congress, something that the President of Ukraine did last week. That's because US politicians are preoccupied with their own mid-term elections.

Yes — it all boils down to elections. You can jet around the world but you cannot ignore the voters at home. Nor can you forget the scare earlier this month in the UP by-elections. So are we betting that Modi will not be doubling natural gas prices? He's already postponed the total decontrol of diesel prices until after

Maharashtra and Haryana vote on October 15. After years of waffling, the UPA doubled gas prices from April 1. That was put on hold by the Election Commission for three months, but the new rulers in Delhi got cold feet when the July 1 deadline came up so they bought time for three more months. Now it's a September 30 deadline. India's gas producers say they cannot pump out any at the current price of \$4.20 per mmBtu (million British thermal units). The problem is that for many months now, in the face of low demand and a supply glut, global gas prices have been at that level or lower. How Modi tackles this wretched issue will signal his attitude to both our coddled state oil companies as well as the private power of Reliance or BP.

But wait — we aren't done with symbolism. The day after Gandhi's birthday, and two days after he's returned from his US trip, the still-fasting Modi will reincarnate Franklin Roosevelt's famous fire-side chats. At 11 am on October 3, Modi will launch his '*Baatein Man Ki*' (thoughts from the heart) on All India Radio. If you're wondering why he's doing this on a Friday, it is Vijaya Dashami or Dussehra, when Goddess Durga slayed the buffalo-demon. Hundreds of young people have logged into mygov.in to urge Modi to slay corruption or nepotism and create more jobs and hope. Something for you to tune into as you sit motionless in gridlocked

traffic in Gurgaon, Worli, Ballygunge or Marathahalli.

Do you get the uneasy feeling that Modi is a trifle stretched, and that decisions on the economy are slow in coming? Arun Jaitley, who runs three key ministries, is in poor health and was back in hospital this week, ostensibly for follow-ups. Three ministries handled by Gopinath Munde (including water and sanitation) were passed on his death to Nitin Gadkari who now runs five big departments in all. Munde has not been replaced and we do not have a full-time defence minister with the Chinese nibbling at Ladakh. It is certainly less government, but more governance? There is no new chief economic adviser; the 'new' non-Planning Commission was rumoured but not appointed; the head of the Independent Evaluation Office, who had recommended the demise of the Planning Commission, was himself axed and his (recent) department shut down; and the government's Performance Management office is also headless, as is the Central Information Commission, the apex Right to Information forum.

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