

Trumpism & Moditva: A Parallax View of Past, Present & Future

The Needle's Eye



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There are some remarkable similarities – and dissimilarities – between Narendra Modi and Donald Trump. Both men ran insurgent presidential campaigns that upended conventional political structures (I use ‘presidential’ advisedly for Modi; does the Bharatiya Janata Party matter any longer to our prime minister, when all around us people refer to his government as ‘Modi sarkar’?). Both men were swept into power by the disenchanted, the disgusted and the disgruntled. Both men share a healthy contempt for journalists, calling them liars and ‘news traders’. Both men prefer to communicate via social media, though Modi is suave and Trump savage. Both men named singularly incompetent education ministers. Smriti Irani has already exited that role, and we will see how long Betsy DeVos lasts. Both men swore to stamp out corruption (although one of them has clearly cleaner creden-

tials for this). Both have rubbished the systems they inherited; although Trump went too far in painting a dark picture of ‘American carnage’, and Modi has lost no opportunity to colour the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty and the Congress legacy in lurid hues. Both men have railed against the elites they want to demolish – Trump versus the ‘inside the Beltway’ cabals, and Modi versus the ‘Lutyens Delhi’ denizens. At heart, both men are populists, quick to please their constituencies. Both men swear they will transform the lives of the poor. Trump spoke at his inauguration of ‘mothers and children trapped in poverty’, and Modi has become progressively more stridently pro-poor in his agenda. He hammered this in again on Tuesday in parliament, saying “However big you are, you will have to give back their rights to the poor; and I will not turn back from this path... I will continue to fight for the poor.”

The dissimilarities are interesting too. Trump is a ruthless businessman who knows how to cut corners in order to cut deals; Modi is a battle-hardened politician who had already run a state government before moving to the nation’s top job. Trump came from a privileged background; Modi rose from a hard-scrabble past. Modi has pursued an assertively friendly foreign policy, even, initially, with Pakistan. Trump is poking fingers in the eyes of both America’s friends and foes. Although both men

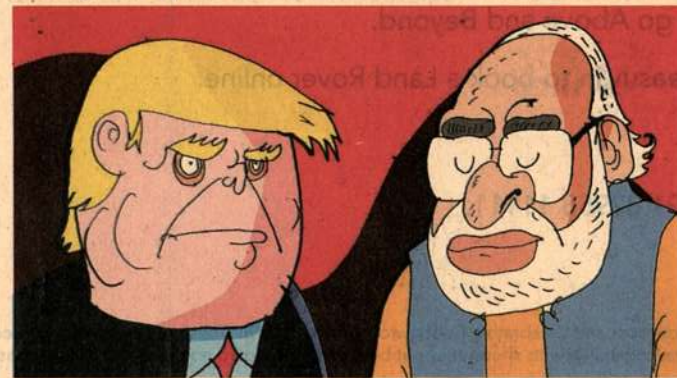
were labelled right-wing, Trump and his alter ego Steve Bannon represent the extremities of a bigoted, xenophobic and protectionist world-view, while Modi has ploughed a more inclusive and globalized furrow. Trump is now supreme in Fortress America, while Modi is unchallenged in an India that is eager to look beyond the ramparts as it competes in an increasingly polarised and slowing global economy.

There is another striking similarity between Modi and Trump. Both men have issued executive orders that alter their countries’ immigration policies. Trump’s order, issued a few days after he took power, banned all immigrants from seven mostly-Muslim countries for 90 days and suspended all refugee arrivals for 120 days. Modi’s government issued an executive order in September 2015 granting unconditional citizenship to illegal Hindu, Sikh, Parsi, Christian, Jain and Buddhist immigrants from mostly-Muslim Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Trump has also said Christians from the six targeted Muslim countries can enter the United States. Both orders have been questioned on their constitutional validity. While a U.S. appeals court is about to rule this week on a federal judge’s staying of the Trump order, an Indian parliamentary panel is wrestling with the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, 2016, which has been pending in parliament since

August last year (the panel is due to submit its report by the last week of the current Budget session of parliament). At issue is whether the Indian bill will violate Article 14 of the Constitution, which confers equality before law to all religions.

This tricky question will rear its head when the BJP government that won power in Assam last year is presented with the results of the

Similar Thoughts
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National Register of Citizens (NRC) sometime this summer. The antecedents of millions of Muslim immigrants whose papers are suspect are being vetted by a huge team of officials backed by data-parsing technology. Prateek Hajela, the official heading the NRC mission, told me over 50 million documents have been verified so far by his team, which works out to about 90% of the total. About 350,000 documents have been sent to other states to track down immigrants, and 402 to other countries. The NRC team is now picking apart hundreds of thousands of family trees; 95% of that work is complete. In other words, the NRC should be complete by this summer. At that point Modi and Assam chief minister Sarbananda Sonowal will be confronted by the Hobson’s choice of what to do with

those Muslims identified as illegal immigrants. It is easy to vow, as Sonowal did on the campaign trail last year, that the illegals will be thrown back into Bangladesh. How will it all pan out?

All this turmoil over inclusion and exclusion reminded me of William Wilson Hunter, the 19th century English bureaucrat who wrote, among several other books on India, ‘The Indian Empire: Its People, History and Products’, published in 1892. Hunter saw a commonality between peoples of different countries and continents. “The forefathers of the Greek and the Roman, of the Englishman and the Brahman, dwelt together in Asia, spoke the same tongue, worshipped the same gods,” he wrote. “The languages of Europe and India, although at first sight they seem wide apart, are merely different growths from the original Aryan languages, whether spoken on the banks of the Ganges, the Tiber, or the Thames.” Hunter, a prodigious administrator who arrived in Bengal in 1862, is remembered chiefly for the nine-volume *The Imperial Gazetteer of India*. Twelve years earlier he was asked to conduct a Statistical Survey of British dominions in India, one-third of which were in the hands of hereditary rulers. Already by 1891 India’s population was 288 million, which Hunter notes was more than double the people in the Roman empire at the height of its power. The

Statistical Survey filled 128 printed volumes aggregating 60,000 pages.

Hunter also wrote about the political structure in late 19th century India: “[The] Government, as suzerain in India, does not allow its feudatories to make war upon each other or to have relations with foreign States. It interferes when any chief misgoverns his people; rebukes, and if needful removes, the oppressor; protects the weak; and firmly imposes peace upon all.” Interesting insights here in a cooperatively federal India where states do feud with one another over issues like water; and are allowed to have ‘relations’ with foreign nations if they promise large investments at events like Vibrant Gujarat.

And talking of insurgent campaigns, the Aam Aadmi Party has just waged just that in Punjab and Goa. I believe Goa is a battle exercise for AAP’s Arvind Kejriwal, and it will be a surprise if he wins there. But Punjab is another matter; there, AAP and Congress are likely to split the anti-incumbency vote, and the BJP and the Akali Dal both look like they are headed out the door. But why insurgent? Especially in Punjab, AAP has attracted the dispossessed, the disenfranchised and the dissatisfied from both the religious right as well as the disappeared left. If Kejriwal indeed emerges as the new leader in Punjab, at the head of a ‘full state’ rather than the clumsy hybrid of Delhi, we will see interesting times.