

# Who's Afraid of Modi?

## The Needle's Eye



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Certainly not the growing number of people who believe that "free speech" means a loose mouth and the abuse of certain classes or communities. Imran Masood, Azam Khan and Mulayam Singh Yadav are not afraid of Narendra Modi. Nor is the swelling saffron sena if you believe Ram Rajya is about to dawn. In its ranks are luminaries like the BJP's Giriraj Singh, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad's Pravin Togadia, and the Shiv Sena's Ramdas Kadam.

But if you are among those who believe free speech is sacred, then beware. You don't have to be a Wendy Doniger to attract the ire of the Hindutva hunter-gatherers. You could be any author, blogger, movie-maker, journalist, student getting excited by a cricket match, or Pakistani Sufi musician. India's intolerance index is steadily rising. A rogue's gallery of right-wing rabble-rousers has been hard at work warning the "minority community" and Modi critics to shape up or ship out.

It is true that there has been no communal riot in Gujarat since 2002, but it is interesting that Togadia, who had had a falling-out with Modi, cited the so-called Disturbed Areas Act to urge that a Muslim interloper in a Hindu neighbourhood in Bhavnagar be ejected. Modi, who in a dozen interviews has projected a kinder, gentler image, tweeted a mild rebuke about "petty" and irresponsible statements and asked the hate-mongers to "kindly refrain from doing so".

Modi runs a tight ship, and if you live in many parts of Ahmedabad, or indeed Gujarat, you will know how tight it is. The Gujarat Prohibition of Transfer of Immovable Property and Provisions for Protection of Tenants from Eviction from Premises in Disturbed Areas Act, 1991, was intended to prevent distress sale of property between members of different communities immediately after riots, but Modi's government has expanded that definition after the 2002 riots and made it permanently applicable across 40% of Ahmedabad, ensuring that Hindus and Muslims live in closely-monitored ghettos.

You will also be afraid of Modi if you are corrupt or incompetent or ambitious enough to challenge the loth purush politically. In Gujarat, the absent Modi does not even brook a deputy chief minister, and the state has been run by a troika of Patels in his rubber-stamp ministry during his long campaign - Anandiben, Nitin and Saurabh. He does not have to worry about dissidence; his political opponents have one by one been neutralised. This includes Shankarsinh Vaghela, a former BJP leader and now head of the Congress opposition party in the state; Gordhan Zadaphia, and Keshubhai Patel. At the national level, Modi has seen off a formidable array of BJP naysayers including Lal Krishna Advani, Jaswant Singh, Murli Manohar Joshi and Sushma Swaraj. As the BJP's sail billows with the anti-Congress wind, most of Modi's rivals have decided to stop being foolhardy and start being fulsome (my dictionary defines this word as "said of praise, compliments etc, so overdone as to be distasteful").

This is a presidential election with one candidate, and we are reminded about Narendra Modi's Viraatroop in various

## RULING VIRTUAL WORLD

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ways - in the torrent of books that have been written on him, in the Namoraths that have fanned out across Uttar Pradesh, in the 10-foot three-dimensional holograms that projected him to a hundred campaign rallies across the nation on April 23, and even in his weight in blood donated by zealous party workers (it is not clear whether that happened before or after Modi lost some avoirdupois with a lemon juice and water diet during the Navaratri festival). It is a vote on one man, as Modi himself has reminded us several times - every time you press the BJP's lotus button on an electronic voting machine, he said, "your vote will come to me".

Yashwant Sinha, fresh back from campaigning in Hazaribagh for his son Jayant, told me that Jawaharlal Nehru too was a presidential candidate, so dominating was his personality in the first 17 years after Independence. So was Indira Gandhi. But the presidentiality of the clan dimmed considerably with Rajiv Gandhi, and has dimmed further with Sonia and

## WORRYING SIGNS

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Rahul Gandhi.

When John F. Kennedy won election in 1960 he was called the first "television president" in the United States. Narendra Modi, if he makes it to South Block next month, will be India's first "internet prime minister". Here is a supremely image-conscious man who knows what he is doing, and does not need an attendant spin doctor hovering around him.

Three years ago when I interviewed him in his Gandhinagar office I was struck by five things: the profusion of billboards in Ahmedabad blazoned with Modi's portrait and the relatively invisible BJP symbol; the world-class highway that transported me from the airport; the absence of fawning crowds and courtiers at the spare office complex; Modi's careful focus when he was speaking; and his willingness to spend more than half an hour posing for my photographer colleague in varied attire.

Modi can change chameleon-like from hectoring machismo to purring reasonableness, and he exudes the robust, earthy and sometimes breathy aura of an impatient evangelist. His website is crowded with messages, projects, and fervid adulation. I sought relief from the inundation of Modi images on television by watching Shyam Benegal's "Samvidhan" on the Rajya Sabha channel. Nicely timed, the excellent serial underscores the magnificence of India's Constitution and the men and women who crafted it. Then I read the concluding speech to the Constituent Assembly by Dr BR Ambedkar, whom Modi frequently invokes. Speaking on 25th November 1949, Ambedkar made a passionate and percipient speech, warning that in India, "Bhakti or what may be called the path of devotion or hero-worship, plays a part in its politics unequalled in magnitude by the part it plays in the politics of any other country in the world. Bhakti in religion may be a road to the salvation of the soul. But in politics, Bhakti or hero-worship is a sure road to degradation and to eventual dictatorship." How fitting as we anticipate Narendra Modi.



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