

Why There is So Much More at Stake Than Gujarat

The Needle's Eye



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"Those who make you believe absurdities, can make you commit atrocities." – Voltaire

Absurdity was piled atop absurdity as seven weeks of vitriol ended in a splash on Tuesday with Prime Minister Narendra Modi taking a seaplane ride. When this prime minister, arguably the most powerful mass leader we have had in a generation, breaks security rules, his loyal ministers fall over themselves to promise a review. He sets the rules.

Our politicians have plumbed new depths in slander and abuse. This is a bottomless pit: with social media amplifying every word and gesture, we have heard enough about everything from imported mushrooms to Allaudin Khilji's offspring. Although Modi has only seven million fewer followers than Donald Trump's 44 million on Twitter, he has to work much harder, making speech after stump speech.

He cannot take anything for granted, least of all the seven million Gujaratis between 18 and 25 who were eligible to vote in the 2017 election – which is why hopping from river to dam reservoir in a single-engined aircraft makes for such good visuals.

Followers aside, Trump and Modi have been brushed by an eerie confluence of events. Modi

announced demonetisation on the day Trump was elected; Trump bowed to Jewish cultural nationalism by recognising Jerusalem as Israel's capital on December 6, the anniversary of the Babri masjid demolition. The Bharatiya Janata Party's general secretary Ram Madhav described the Ram Janmabhoomi movement as the ideological sheet-anchor of the nationalist movement, and said the mantra of good governance and development propelled the BJP to power in 2014.

"The tragedy is that the principal Opposition party is still stuck in identity politics," Madhav wrote unself-consciously in The Indian Express on the anniversary. But of course, it is all about identity politics. When Modi inaugurated the Ambedkar International Centre in New Delhi the following day, the prime minister dominated the occasion, putting even two big statues of our first law minister in the shade. Rahul Gandhi has just been elected unopposed as Congress president. You cannot get more dynastic than to see a political post becoming a fifth-generation hereditary fiefdom. But was there a contest for the post of BJP president when Amit Shah was 'unanimously' appointed to that post by the party's parliamentary board in 2014 and re-elected to a three-year term in 2016?

The same day as the Babri anniversary and the Jerusalem news, a video went viral of a migrant Muslim worker hacked to death and his body burnt by his attacker in Rajasthan. Such atrocities are becoming commonplace. Not a single senior BJP leader has spoken out against the savagery. When our political discourse is suffused with anger and prejudice (and this applies to all our parties), you can be excused for being cynical if you peer through jaundiced eyes at the combatants trooping into Parliament on Friday for a

winter session that has been slashed to only 14 working days because, well, law-making is less exciting than law-breaking.

We have to take a cleaver to the overgrowth of rhetoric to be able to see more clearly. Gujarat was a good opportunity to talk about development, and about how good economics can subsume caste and religious animosities – it was the test-tube in which Modi created the formula for national domination –



but the opportunity has been lost.

By evening of the day this column appears, you will be inundated by exit polls on who is likely to emerge victorious – Modi or the newly-crowned Rahul Gandhi. Gujarat is the BJP's to lose. From 2002 when Modi fought his first election as Gujarat chief minister, the BJP's vote share has remained in the 47-49 percent range, while Congress has been stuck around 38 percent and won less than one-third of the assembly seats. There has to be a huge swing to reverse this, even if you take into account the reported discontent among the KHAM (Kshatriya, Harijan, Adivasi and Muslim) voters, and the Hardik Patel-led Patidar revolt.

Modi was easily the colossus bestriding the Gujarat stage. Yet, he resorted to devices like alleging

that Pakistan was trying to topple the BJP in Gujarat (and by extension, himself). Being at the apogee of popularity does not seem to confer security. In early March 1976, when she was seemingly at the height of her power, with the Emergency in force and her opponents in prison, Indira Gandhi complained that a 'foreign hand' was trying to destabilise her when she was taking strong steps to unite the nation. One year later, she was tasting the ashes of defeat. Modi, on the other hand, is likely to be a shoo-in in 2019 if he sticks to his economic knitting.

Law Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad set out the extent of Modi's power in a recent speech when he ticked off the senior judiciary for not letting the executive play a bigger role in the appointment of judges. "The prime minister is the principal player in the appointment of the president of India; in the vice-president of India; in the speaker of the Lok Sabha; in the three armed forces' chiefs... the chief election commissioner... a whole range of other constitutional bodies," Prasad said. "The prime minister possesses the nuclear button; that is how much the people of the country trust him."

Such power needs delegation. Back in May 2014, a few days after he took power, Modi listed his Ten Commandments. No.1 said "Build confidence in bureaucracy." No.2 read "Welcome innovative ideas and give freedom to bureaucrats to work." The prime minister has held regular meetings with top bureaucrats. But recent conversations with senior civil servants reveal that there is a fair bit of angst and demoralisation. The reasons seem to be a combination of the 'empowerment' that lists senior bureaucrats for Secretary-level appointments (and punishes those not in

favour), an opaque 360-degree appraisal system, and frequent changes at the top levels of key ministries. Here is a sampling of Secretary-level personnel changes in important departments since May 2014:

- Five Secretaries in Chemicals & Petrochemicals
- Five Secretaries in Department of Fertilisers
- Four Secretaries in the Ministry of Coal
- Three Secretaries in the Department of Commerce
- Five Secretaries in the Department of Posts
- Three Secretaries in Telecommunications
- Five Secretaries in Ministry of Development of North-Eastern Region
- Six Secretaries in Electronics and Information Technology
- Four Secretaries in the Department of Economic Affairs
- Four Secretaries in the Department of Higher Education
- Five Secretaries in School Education & Literacy
- Four Secretaries in Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises
- Five Secretaries in Minority Affairs
- Five Secretaries in New & Renewable Energy
- Five Secretaries in Rural Development
- Four Secretaries in the Ministry of Textiles
- Five Secretaries in Urban Development

Getting our administrative machinery into top gear is just one urgent priority. Several forecasts now see India's gross domestic product growing at a middling 6.7 percent in 2017-18. Core inflation is at a 15-month high, and industrial production is limping. Hopefully the Modi government will move past Gujarat, GST and demonetisation to focus on making sure our economy vaults over the New India bar.

