

Modi's Decade: Development, Controversy, and the Quest for a Third Term

“The BJP is now the largest political party globally, surpassing the Communist Party of China. Unfortunately, this vast organization has consistently been hostile to minorities, particularly Muslims. Opposition voices have also faced severe suppression. A third term, especially with a two-thirds majority, could lead to more intense marginalization of minorities and a shift towards dictatorship. Given the corruption, rising unemployment, and economic disparity, there is no guarantee that the majority of Hindus will experience a better life either. The 4th of June will surely be a pivotal moment in India's history.”



In 2014, as the Indian National Congress-led UPA coalition was struggling under the weight of numerous corruption scandals, India's political landscape seemed ripe for change. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), long the second-biggest party and a previous ruler of the nation, saw its chance. Despite having only completed one full term in office by 2004, the BJP's 2014 campaign was notably stronger. They leveraged the Congress's corruption woes and the nation's dire economic situation, rallying under the slogan, "Achhe din aane waale hain" (Good days are coming). Promising to tackle all these issues, BJP put forward Narendra Damodardas Modi as their Prime Ministerial candidate. Modi, then the Chief Minister of Gujarat since 2001, was renowned for transforming the once-backward province into a modern, developed one. [1]

However, another dimension exists for BJP and Narendra Modi. The party is viewed as the political wing of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), an organization founded on the premise of Hindu supremacy. The RSS has faced accusations of intolerance towards minorities, particularly Muslims, and has been banned three times in independent India. [2] Narendra Modi himself has a contentious past. In 2002, Gujarat, under his leadership, witnessed communal riots that resulted in the deaths of over a thousand people, mostly Muslims. Modi was accused of condoning the violence, earning him the moniker "Butcher of Gujarat" and leading to his US entry being banned until he became Prime Minister. [3] Despite these controversies, the Indian populace trusted the promises, awarding BJP an absolute majority with 282 seats out of 550, while the Congress was reduced to 44 seats. [4]

Ten years have passed, and Modi secured an even larger victory in the 2019 elections. With a third term on the horizon, it is crucial to evaluate the development, controversies, and strategies Modi is employing to continue his stay in power. These three key features of Modi's rule are deeply interrelated and tell a comprehensive story of his decade-long premiership.

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Development

The BJP's most touted success has been its economic development, a cornerstone of its 2014 campaign. When the BJP took power, India was the world's 10th largest economy; today, it ranks 5th. The country has consistently posted GDP growth rates exceeding 7%, among the highest globally, even maintaining this growth during the COVID-19 pandemic. Infrastructure development has been equally impressive. Over 10,000 kilometers of gas pipelines have been laid, and more than 25,000 kilometers of railway tracks have been added. Metro services have expanded to 20 cities from the initial five, and operational airports have risen to 140 from 74. The 'Make in India' initiative has significantly impacted the manufacturing sector, with India becoming the world's second-largest assembler of mobile phones. Furthermore, the tax-free annual income level has increased to 700,000 rupees from 200,000. The government has initiated direct money transfers to the needy as part of various schemes. The digitalization of transactions has soared, with 76% now occurring digitally, compared to just 8% five years ago. [5]

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These numbers suggest a massive economic boom. However, the extent to which this growth benefits the common people is questionable. By 2022, the number of hungry individuals had risen to 350 million from 190 million in 2018, and India ranked 111th out of 125 countries on the Global Hunger Index. The situation necessitated the government providing free food grains to over 800 million people. India's children have the highest malnutrition rate globally, at 19.3%. Despite Modi's promises to eradicate poverty, urban poverty has increased by 2% annually. While global crude oil prices fell by 21%, petrol prices in India rose by 37%, diesel by 64%, and LPG by 120%. The Indian National Congress recently published a "black paper" exposing what it views as the BJP's failures, highlighting that despite Modi's promise to create 20 million jobs annually, only 270,000 jobs have been created yearly. Unemployment is at its highest, particularly among college graduates, with one in three graduates unemployed. Alarmingly, one unemployed person commits suicide every hour in India. [6]

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So, if the Indian economy is numerically booming, why is the common man's plight worsening? The answer lies in Modi's prioritization of the wealthy and influential, who have significantly bolstered his power. Time magazine states, “India's income inequality is now worse than under British rule.” [7] Reports indicate that 10% of Indians possess nearly 80% of the total wealth, and the top 1% hold 70%. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when many lost their livelihoods, the number of billionaires in India increased by 60%, from 102 to 169. Gautam Adani, often referred to as one of Modi's closest associates, soared from the world's 106th richest person to the 2nd richest during Modi's tenure. However, a report by the Hindenburg Group exposed Adani's billion-dollar corruption scandals in 2023. Modi's 'preference' and 'assistance' resulted in such a scale. While billionaires thrived, 700 million Indians saw less than a 1% increase in their income. This stark income inequality is a pressing issue. When Modi was asked about this, he retorted, “Should Everybody Be Poor?” [8]

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Although the wealthy were not impoverished, he has cut resources for the poor. The Modi government has slashed funding for education and scholarships, affecting 20% of the population. Allocations for Dalits (lower caste) have been reduced from 700 million rupees to 100 million, and funding for cleaners and sweepers has plummeted from 100 million to a mere 100,000 rupees. Farmers, in particular, are facing dire conditions. According to government reports, their average monthly crop income is 810 rupees (approximately \$9.50). Despite this, the government imposed up to 18% taxes on input materials for the first time in India's history. The enactment of three farm laws, deemed "black laws" by the opposition, allegedly favored large corporations by allowing unrestricted trade and undermining farmers' bargaining power. This led to widespread protests for 300 days. The government's violent crackdown on that resulted in the deaths of over 700 farmers. In one incident, the son of BJP Union Minister Ajay Misra Teni drove into a group of protesting farmers, killing several. Reports say that two farmers commit suicide every hour in India. While Modi's government has increased taxes and cut funds for marginalized groups, it has provided a 25% tax cut for large industrialists. Additionally, government mismanagement remains a significant issue despite the failure to generate new employment opportunities. Congress claims

there are 979,000 vacant positions in various central government departments, totaling nearly 3 million nationwide. Yet, the government has not taken any steps to fill these. [9]



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Controversies

More headlines have been occupied by the controversies of the Modi government than its developments. The most controversial aspects of the BJP's tenure have been its anti-Muslim actions, including mosque demolitions and targeting Muslim-owned properties. The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) has drawn criticism for excluding Muslims from gaining citizenship, leading to many Indian Muslims being labeled illegal refugees and imprisoned over minor document discrepancies. Some of them faced imprisonment. In places like Assam where Muslims are significant minorities, detention camps have been built specifically for that purpose. [10] The BJP is also accused of sponsoring inaccurate films that disrupt communal harmony. Reports indicate a tenfold increase in anti-Muslim hate speech during the BJP's rule. [11] The party also argues that historical Muslim rulers oppressed Hindus consequently the current Muslims aim to dominate India and that the Congress party, if elected, would support this agenda. Thus, the BJP insists that to protect Hindu interests, voters must support them. As political challenges for the incumbent increase, the use of fearmongering against Muslims has been intensified to rally support.

Some notable comments from the top BJP leaders are:

“Congress will take the wealth from the Hindus and distribute among those who have more kids (Muslims). Congress manifesto is saying this (in reality there is nothing like that in the manifesto).” [Narendra Modi]

“Congress is the shadow of Muslim League.” [Narendra Modi]

“If Congress comes into power, they will send lord Ram into the tent and will bulldoze the Ram Temple.” [Narendra Modi]

“You tell us, how the country should run? By the constitution adapted by Ambedkar or ‘Sharia’?” [Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath]

“Congress will change the slogan of ‘Ma’, ‘Mati’ and ‘Manush’ (mother, homeland, human) to ‘Mullah’, ‘Madrassa’ and ‘Mafia’ (Muslim clergy, Islamic school, Mafia)” [Minister of Internal Affairs Amit Shah]

“Congress will give all the CBC quota (a priority quota) to the ‘Vote Jihadists’.” [Narendra Modi]

Interestingly, just before making the last comment, Modi confidently claimed that he does not target Muslims. [12]

Another major controversy has revolved around attempts to manipulate the election process. The BJP faces more challenges in this election than in 2019. The economic situation is dire, and unemployment remains high. Unlike in 2019, there has been no Pulwama-like incident to generate nationalist fervor. Following the Pulwama attack, Modi ordered an air raid on Pakistan, using this narrative to assert his strength, contrasting with Congress's perceived cowardice. This nationalist hype contributed to the BJP's larger victory in 2019. This time, the BJP's ambitions are higher with the slogan "Abki Baar 400 Par" ("This time over 400"), aiming for over 400 seats to amend the constitution. Analysts are concerned this could lead to increased persecution of the opposition, restrictions on freedom of speech, and further marginalization of minorities.

To achieve this goal, the BJP is alleged to be employing various manipulative tactics. A few years ago, the BJP introduced electoral bonds to facilitate anonymous donations to political parties. Investigations revealed that the anonymity was compromised, with donors to the BJP receiving contracts and privileges. The Supreme Court later declared the system unconstitutional. Additionally, the BJP is accused of manipulating the election commission. When two positions in the three-member central election commission became vacant, the selection committee, traditionally led by the chief justice, was altered to include the Prime Minister, a union minister, and an opposition leader. The opposition leader reported receiving an overwhelming number of names to choose from just before the selection meeting, limiting his ability to research the candidates.

Furthermore, investigative agencies have been used to harass the opposition, with a fivefold increase in corruption investigations, 95% of them targeting opposition members. Those who switch allegiance to the BJP often see their cases dropped and even receive nominations from the party. Critics describe the BJP as a 'washing machine,' where corrupt individuals emerge clean upon joining the party. Recently, Delhi's Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, a prominent opposition figure, was arrested without trial. The Congress party claims its assets were frozen and it was fined 17 billion rupees (204 million USD) in a decades-old case. Congress also alleges that many of their candidates faced immediate legal challenges upon announcement. [13]

New controversial laws have been enacted, perceived as suppressing opposition voices. The Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) has shifted the legal principle from 'innocent until proven guilty' to 'guilty until proven innocent,' enabling the security apparatus to arrest and imprison individuals until proven innocent by the court. With mainstream media either supporting Modi or practicing self-censorship, people increasingly rely on YouTube channels for news. However, the BJP is pushing for the Broadcasting Services Regulation Bill, which would allow the government to shut down social media handles at will. When a retired Justice invited Modi and Congress leader Rahul Gandhi to debate their manifestos, Gandhi accepted immediately, but Modi did not respond. [14]

Election Strategies

One of the key electoral strategies of BJP has been telling the voters that it has made India the ‘Vishwaguru’ (global leader). Political analyst Badri Seshadri notes, "Modi is projecting a muscular India like never before." [15] Some achievements, such as evacuating 20,000 Indians from Ukraine during the Russia-Ukraine war and managing backlash from Arab countries after derogatory comments about Prophet Muhammad by a BJP spokesperson, are genuine.

Two recent incidents highlighted India's diplomatic prowess. First, despite accusations from Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau regarding the assassination of an Indian-origin Canadian Sikh activist linked to the Khalistan movement, India avoided severe diplomatic fallout and

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sanctions. Second, India successfully negotiated the cancellation of death sentences for eight Indian naval officers in Qatar accused of spying for Israel, leading to their repatriation. [16]



“Modi’s most potent tool has been Hindu nationalism or ‘Hindutva’. In times of economic hardship, nationalist pride can be a powerful unifier. Hindutva is an ideology seeking to define Indian culture in terms of Hindu values and promote Hindu supremacy. The BJP positions itself as the sole defender of Hindu interests and asserts that parties like Congress have hindered Hindu advancement to appease minorities. This ideology has been manifested in various state policies and actions, often resulting in the persecution of minorities.”

While these events are significant, they are sometimes exaggerated. Claims that India halted the Ukraine war to evacuate its citizens are unfounded. The G20 summit in New Delhi further bolstered Modi's image, with India officially presented as 'Bharat', a name rooted in Hindu tradition. BJP leaders advocate for an 'Undivided India', envisioning a greater India including present-day Bangladesh and Pakistan. [17] These actions resonate with Hindu voters, who view Modi and the BJP as champions of Hindu pride and supremacy on the global stage.

This strategy has effectively convinced a large Hindu voter base to support Modi, even if it means enduring economic hardship. A former Modi supporter, Sanjay from Bihar, a BJP stronghold, told Al Jazeera's Sreenivasan Jain that the BJP is “mindwashing” people with rhetoric of pride. Sanjay, who once supported the BJP, has become disillusioned by the country's worsening economic situation.

Jain interviewed several BJP supporters. Most praised Modi for taking India to new heights. However, when asked to provide examples or address the unemployment issue, they struggled to respond. One supporter became agitated, stating they did not care about development as long as Modi upheld their pride. Another supporter cited The New York Times and Voice of America, claiming they lauded Modi as the best leader in India’s history. But nothing was found like this. A Modi supporter justified her vote by citing the Ram temple's construction and mocked unemployment concerns, suggesting the unemployed beg at the temple gate. Another supporter stated that she would vote for Modi even if the cylinder price goes to 90000 from 900 rupees, as he has elevated their pride. [18]

Another significant factor is the backing from oligarchs and powerful entities. Business magnates like Adani are pouring billions into BJP campaigns. Modi’s adept use of media further bolsters his position. Letters from him reach every phone, and his image is omnipresent—from streets to vaccine cards and ration bags. [19] Direct cash transfers to beneficiaries foster a sense of special attention and care. Modi also hosted luxury events for social media influencers, swaying their support. Mainstream media rarely question his administration's shortcomings, rather asking about his emotions, how he works all day, who is his BFF (best friend forever), etc. [20] Critical media outlets have been either pressured or bought. Throughout his tenure, Modi has never faced a single press conference. [21] The BJP, as part of the Hindu nationalist 'Sangh Family,' has a vast grassroots network that effectively disseminates its message door to door. In contrast, the Congress party's organizational strength at the grassroots level is relatively weak, and its INDIA alliance,

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comprising numerous opposition parties, remains indecisive even about its Prime Minister candidate.

Undoubtedly, these factors aid Modi, but his most potent tool has been Hindu nationalism or 'Hindutva'. In times of economic hardship, nationalist pride can be a powerful unifier. Hindutva is an ideology seeking to define Indian culture in terms of Hindu values and promote Hindu supremacy. [22] The BJP positions itself as the sole defender of Hindu interests and asserts that parties like Congress have hindered Hindu advancement to appease minorities. This ideology has been manifested in various state policies and actions, often resulting in the persecution of minorities. The construction of the Ram temple at the site of the demolished Babri Mosque, the Citizenship Amendment Act excluding Muslim refugees, the revocation of Kashmir's special status, and the ban on 'triple talaq' are some examples. These actions, along with an emphasis on Hindu symbols in education and culture, bolster Hindu nationalism, overshadowing other governmental shortcomings. This focus is evident in the BJP's whitepaper, which prioritizes the Ram Temple construction over significant achievements like becoming the 5th largest economy or landing on the Moon's south pole. Some supporters even deify Modi, with Modi himself claiming his divine origin rather than a biological birth. [23]

Conclusion

As seen here, throughout the campaign the BJP has adopted a three-pronged campaign strategy. First, leveraging their root-level workers with RSS support, they conduct door-to-door campaigns highlighting the BJP's achievements over the past decade. Second, they use various means to hinder opposition campaigns, preventing their messages from reaching the public.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, they portray themselves as champions of Hindu pride domestically and internationally while casting the opposition as threats to Hindu resurgence.

Analysts are deeply divided in their predictions about the election outcome. Some believe the BJP will achieve their goal of over 400 seats, while others think they will fall short but still maintain a majority. Some predict an increase in BJP seats without reaching 400, while a few foresee a decrease in their seat count compared to the previous election. Despite the uncertainties, most expect the BJP to secure a comfortable victory.

The BJP is now the largest political party globally, surpassing the Communist Party of China. [24] Unfortunately, this vast organization has consistently been hostile to minorities, particularly Muslims. Opposition voices have also faced severe suppression. Critics argue that under BJP rule, India is operating under 'Majoritarian Authoritarianism'. A third term, especially with a two-thirds majority, could lead to more intense marginalization of minorities and a shift towards dictatorship. Given the corruption, rising unemployment, and economic disparity, there is no guarantee that the majority of Hindus will experience a better life either. The 4th of June will surely be a pivotal moment in India's history.



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