

Two Tyrants in the Age of Television

ARVIND RAJAGOPAL

The politics of Narendra Modi and Rahul Gandhi analysed through two recent speeches to the highest bodies of their respective parties.

Election speeches in India are usually subject to token analysis at best. But as television-driven and personality-centred campaigns become more important, such speeches offer insights into the ways in which media and politics are increasingly internal to each other.

Thanks to YouTube, one can watch Rahul Gandhi's address to the All India Congress Committee (AICC) on 17 January, as well as Narendra Modi's speech at the meeting of the national council of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) on 19 January, two days afterwards. But, first, some general reflections.

Modi as Simulacrum

One can think of other chief ministers who delivered economic growth and good governance in their states. In fact Gujarat's human development indices are woeful in comparison with its wealth. Nevertheless, influential sections of society and a portion of the middle and aspiring classes regard Modi's performance as better by far than that of any other political leader. They claim to rely solely on facts and to be above all ideology, but no amount of contrary information or testimony can

budge Modi's supporters. Rather, it is those who question his governance record or dredge up his political history who are treated as biased. The only correct way to view Modi, apparently, is to regard him as a peerless visionary, and as possibly the future prime minister.

Narendra Modi has in fact become a simulacrum, a media artifact regarded as more true than any amount of information and, in fact, capable of correcting that information. Modi is the leader who will drag the country out of its trouble and propel it to greatness: accepting this basic premise amounts to political realism today, and offers a basis upon which plans can be made for the nation's future. Corporate-owned media together with a section of the urban middle classes have combined to render such a view as common sense. India's experiment in non-aligned socialist development has devolved into a set of problems that only a business-minded technocrat like him can solve, apparently. And in solving these problems Modi creates a virtuous cycle, since people believe in him, and thereby reinforce his capacity to go further. As if the media were anticipating Modi's anointment as prime minister, and a draconian one at that, censorship is already in full swing. I. K. Advani's remark on the behaviour of the media during Indira Gandhi's Emergency is well known: they were asked to bend, and they crawled. In this case of course, no one has asked the media to bend, and yet they crawl. Popular

Arvind Rajagopal (arvindnyc@gmail.com) teaches at the Department of Media, Culture and Communication, New York University.

enthusiasm for Modi is pre-empted, reflected and amplified by the media.

The current phase of mediated politics can be seen as a sequel to the anti-corruption crusade of Anna Hazare. Modi like Hazare, has spawned imitations of a sort; we have gone from Anna masks to Modi masks (Rajagopal 2011). The intriguing aspect of the Anna mask was its naïvety. One could disagree with the analysis Hazare offered, but there seemed to be little hidden behind it. By contrast, Modi is a man of many masks – humble man, strongman, Hindu militant and secular developmentalist, to name a few.

Modi has educated his constituency in doublethink, affirming the peaceful nature of the Gujarati, while asserting Hindu pride after the massacre of Muslims. As such, the Modi mask is itself the point of identification for those who wear it. The mask signals the wearer's ability to move between different roles, rather than avow a single identity. It suggests that identity is a strategic choice rather than an expression of truth. If this seems like the very opposite of popular mobilisation, it resonates with Modi's top-down governance. The very symbols used to solicit people's support are committed in advance to delegate power to the leader.

Now, the Congress Party has always treated itself as the mirror of the masses and as the soul of the nation; this has been its image as well as its political strategy. Protests against the party routinely end up being absorbed in the party's own campaign rhetoric. Just as the party of establishment turned into the party of *garibi hatao*, the Congress has been able to simulate and, as it weakened, even tolerate, a measure of grass-roots ferment while aiming to be or remain the party of government.¹

The BJP has adopted similar methods, except that as the challenger, the popular ferment they created had to be more than mere show. Once in government, however, the distinctions between the parties diminished. Once upon a time, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) represented the difference between the Congress and the BJP. As a grass-roots organisation with an ideological cadre, the RSS acted as a pressure group for Hindutva, and members of both parties were susceptible

to such pressure. Today, the RSS's role has diminished, and Hindutva has shifted from a goal to a means of achieving power.

We might think of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) as a successor to the RSS, of sorts, albeit one replacing Hindutva with a secular, but otherwise fluid populist ideology of anti-corruption. Its commitment to insurgent opposition expresses this inheritor status, one that is made more difficult since it is now in government. Whereas the RSS's grass-roots activity was discreet and tended to shun publicity, AAP is in a hurry and the media are essential to its success.

Top versus Bottom Strategies

All three parties express a similar characteristic of mainstream Indian politics today. The urban educated may divide themselves in terms of left and right, or pro-market as opposed to pro-welfare. But the electoral campaign strategies of the three parties express a different sense of the political space, not left-versus-right so much as top-versus-bottom.

Revealingly, each party claims to speak for and from the bottom while finding ways to accommodate itself at the top. It is in their rhetorical styles that we can discern dissimilarities between the BJP and the Congress. They are both authoritarian and populist simultaneously, but in different ways. AAP is, in market terms, the arbitrageur, a pressure group turned into a party, taking advantage of the shortcomings of the established formations while claiming affinity with the bottom.

The BJP is campaigning on its record as a business-friendly and pro-growth party with a strong claim to the centre, although the fact that this largely rests on its Hindu appeal is not supposed to be mentioned any more. The Congress is running against the BJP, and defining itself as the true party of the people, although it occupies the centre. The BJP promises good governance and makes little mention of welfare, since it believes the two are incompatible. It makes no promises of popular mobilisation or meaningful grass-roots participation, as opposed to the Congress, which now claims to have conceived and sponsored the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, the Right to Information Act and the Lokpal Act.

Based on the latter's claim of openness to insurgent action, a national alliance between AAP and the Congress against the BJP would not be surprising, following on the experiment in Delhi.

In the heyday of Congress rule, the relationship between media and politics was maintained through government monopoly over broadcast media, film censorship, newsprint controls and perquisites for members of the jute press (better understood in Hindi, as the *jhoot* press).² National culture was defined by official secularism and state developmentalism, whereas the realm of everyday life had an unofficial status, and was largely invisible in the major media. The media were largely instruments of state propaganda, but mainly addressed an educated minority. It was through grassroots campaigning that elections were fought and won.

In the era of market reforms, electronic media are able to reach the majority of the population, and have become significant political actors in their own right while operating in the market. New government regulations have been crucial for the growth of the commercial media industry while doing little to ensure a viable public media.³ Nevertheless, the state and the political class in general has become the butt of media criticism. The command economy of the licence-permit raj is no more, but corporates and the political class seek to put a command economy of opinion in its place.

Such a task is obviously fraught with difficulty. A small elite seeks to define and delimit political agenda, nominating leaders and staging popular consent so as to win elections. Reasoned debate, of the kind that is supposed to characterise the public sphere of news media, has little scope, since the right answers are known already. It is the rule breakers who therefore have the advantage; such a metarule extends even to chief ministers who may stage sit-ins to achieve their aims, as we have recently seen in New Delhi (Chakrabarty 2007).

Here the Congress has already set the model: mirror popular dissent, deflect and incorporate it. The Anna *andolan* grew to depend on the media, only to find its fawning news coverage suddenly turn hostile when the campaign itself became

too big. Arvind Kejriwal has gone one up on the media by winning a chief minister-ship; he is a wild card in the political scene today. But for the moment the contest as staged in the media is between Narendra Modi and Rahul Gandhi. Their election speeches are worth examining.

Two Tyrants Speak

In the ancient Greek usage, the word “tyrant” merely denoted an authoritarian leader without reference to character. This is a usage worth retrieving, so as to bracket our democratic prejudices when assessing the distinctions between political leaders. In the current context, leaders can only choose their styles of authoritarianism; dispensing with it is not an option if they are to achieve power.

Narendra Modi appeared calm, relaxed and expansive as he presented his 19 January speech to the BJP national council. It has to be said that there is no trace of the tea seller in Modi’s comportment – at least, the kind of tea seller invoked by Mani Shankar Aiyar in his great gift to the chief minister of Gujarat. Modi may have arisen from the people, but whether in terms of a spontaneous humility, verbal awkwardness, lack of erudition, or naïvety of sentiment, he has fully worked over himself. Even in his persona, he conveys the sense of a man who needs to control how others perceive him. Shankarsinh Vaghela once remarked during the 2004 election campaign that Modi had no charisma, and that he was not cut out to be a leader.⁴ Perhaps Modi compensates for his lack of inborn charisma by diligence. But he appears as a made-for-television personality, not a hair out of place or a garment out of order, and not one unbecoming sentiment at an inappropriate moment.

A tea seller Modi may have been, but he came across not as an upstart or as a rabble-rouser, but as a portly, charismatic chief executive officer (CEO), tailor-made for popularity in a business-minded state like Gujarat. Modi presented himself as the challenger, but looked every inch the confident ruler. He has been the chief minister of Gujarat for more than 12 years, more than twice as long as Hitendra Desai (1965-71), the Congress leader who held the previous record for

longest-serving chief minister. This is in a politically volatile state where short and turbulent reigns have been the norm.

In his new developmentalist guise, Modi now stokes Hindu pride only in Sanskrit, as in his concluding list of “ideas of India” – *satyameva jayate, vasudhaiva kutumbakam, sarva pantha sambhava, ekam sat viprah bahudha vadanti*. Among other things, he was providing coded reassurances to the Hindutva cadre that he was still one of them. What he offered was a recitation of mantras, however, not soaring rhetoric. There was in fact a series of lists, including five *rs* (talent, tradition, tourism, trade and technology), three *ss* (skill, scale and speed) and seven colours in the rainbow, another of Modi’s ideas of India, in which family, motherhood, and village stood for the first three colours; democracy and knowledge were in the last two places.⁵

Perhaps the most far-reaching image in Modi’s speech was that of a Bharat Mata, one side of which was healthy, while the other was weak and sickly, and needed to be made strong again. The demographer Ashish Bose, when asked to summarise India’s problems in one page for a new prime minister, Rajiv Gandhi, had responded with one word – BIMARU, standing for the “sick states” of Bihar, MP, Rajasthan and UP. Modi has rendered this idea visually, and with a hoary nationalist image at that, omitting Rajasthan but extending it to the entire north-east. It is also part of his attempt to turn the idea of India into a brand. The demands of contemporary communication and the BJP’s alertness to the moment require “branding India”, Modi could say, making accusations of ideology or religious prejudice irrelevant.

Expanding on this theme, Modi announced that regional empowerment was the need of the moment, as shown by uneven development within India. Regional aspiration should not be seen as a danger; it was an opportunity, he said, but Delhi needed to join hands with the states rather than oppose them. His experience when the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) was at the centre showed him it could be done, he noted. In a rhetorical flourish, he concluded that the centre and states should behave like equal partners, with ministers in Parliament and legislative assembly

members proceeding hand in hand, cooperating to restore Bharat Mata to health. The fear of popular politics could not have been more pronounced. By comparison, it was Rahul who came off as a hellraiser, demanding and promising popular empowerment, avowing that no one would be denied the chance to express themselves, and condemning “the system” which, he said, the Congress was more committed to changing than their opposition.

Modi described India as a *sanghiya dhaancha* (an organised structure), one that could not be limited by the Constitution. It was animated, he said, by a “latent” spirit (sic), a word that perhaps his comrades in the Sangh felt they understood best. India is also, of course, a *vivaadhit dhaancha*, a disputed structure, since the form of its organisation – based on caste, for example – is far from harmonious. In the BJP’s view, the *vivaadhit dhaancha* is history in Henry Ford’s sense, and has already been reduced to rubble. There may be more disputed structures ahead, however, more free-floating and not site-specific like the Babri Masjid.

Rahul Gandhi was indeed a study in contrast. Although he was the youthful inheritor and Modi was the self-made man, or perhaps because of it, Rahul looked much less sure of himself. For a 43-year-old scion of the first family, his discomfort in performing his role could not be more striking. He often appeared, in fact, like a functionary rather than a ruler, as someone requiring direction and tutelage and not as a would-be leader. He denounces the system but gives the sense that he is a creature of it.

Rahul has avoided interviews with the press, although when he finally gave one, he chose one of the most aggressive news reporters, and subjected himself to the kind of grilling that Modi has taken pains to avoid.⁶ His innocent and vulnerable appearance are clearly expected to compensate for his inexperience and lack of confidence. It is not surprising therefore that at the AICC meeting, Rahul’s speech did not seem rehearsed; parts of it appeared so ingenuous that he must have written it himself. He is the fourth generation in his family to have attended Cambridge University, but it is the tea seller who was more polished and erudite in his speech.

Modi in his speech seized on particular acts, phrases or events, and used them to sketch an extended portrait of a disreputable and unworthy party. His analysis proceeded through metaphor and simile (the mother's love for her son, the party's national vision reduced to the grant of a few gas cylinders, and so on) and was propelled by humour. By comparison, here is Rahul on his opposition: *Inki marketing bahut badhiya hai. Chamak hai, gana hai, naach hai, sab kuch hai.* (Their marketing is great. They have glitter, song and dance, they have everything.)

Rather than use a detail to illuminate the whole, Rahul provided a much more vague criticism. He alluded to the BJP's desire to divide rather than unite, but to say much more than this is assumed to be risky. Instead, he presented the Congress as the party of love and brotherhood. It was hard to doubt Rahul's sincerity; one liked him for saying it so simply, although ordinary voters might be more cynical.

Modi has had to struggle to overcome his lay origins. He presents a hard-won façade of technocratic empathy for the poor. Rahul has the opposite problem. He has to struggle to assert his identity with the common person because there are so many reasons to doubt it. The difference between the two, however, is that Modi conceals his struggle, and has to conceal it, whereas Rahul shows it, and has to show it. This is a difference which, when one tries to distinguish between the two parties, may matter a good deal.

NOTES

- 1 This paragraph follows from a conversation with Bharat Thombre in Mumbai, in August 2011. My thanks to him.
- 2 For a discussion of the relationship between the Hindi and English press, see Rajagopal (2001).
- 3 For example, cable operators are not obliged to carry available state-owned channels, and frequently choose not to do so. See Ninan (2013).
- 4 Personal interview with Shankarsinh Vaghela, Gandhinagar, March 2004. Vaghela led the Congress Party in Gujarat and campaigned against Modi in the 2004 elections. Modi had

served under Vaghela when the latter was chief minister of Gujarat (1996-97); both were long-standing members of the RSS.

- 5 "India has its strength in these seven colours. The first colour is our family system which helped us not only to survive but also to progress. Second colour is our villages third is our Matri Shakti (strength of our mothers), fourth is water resources, forest, land and environment, fifth is our youth power, sixth is democracy and the seventh colour is our knowledge. These colours are key to our all round development and prosperity." <http://namomantra.org/brand-india>, accessed on 23 January 2014.
- 6 Frankly Speaking with Arnab Goswami, 27 January 2014, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xB_eWW5ttaM, accessed on 8 February 2014.

REFERENCES

- Chakrabarty, Dipesh (2007): "In the Name of Politics': Democracy and the Power of the Multitude in India", *Public Culture*, Winter, 19(1): 35-57.
- Ninan, Sevanti (2013): "New Hindi channels for whom?" *The Hoot*, 29 July, <http://thehoot.org/web/NewHindichannelsforwhom/6933-1-1-14-true.html>, accessed on 23 January 2014.
- Rajagopal, Arvind (2001): "A Split Public in the Making and Unmaking of the Ram Janmabhumi Movement" in *Politics After Television* (Cambridge).
- (2011): "Visibility as a Trap in the Anna Hazare Campaign", *Economic & Political Weekly*, 19 November, pp 19-21.