Modi the 'Hindu Messiah' Manipulated Hope and Hate to Win India's Election

Modi campaigned less as prime minister, and more as leader of India’s largest cult, his popularity barely dented by his obvious failures. He is selling illusions of grandeur – and Indians are still eager customers.

India is now waiting for confirmation that Hindu nationalist and current Prime Minister Narendra Modi has won the mandate to run the country for another five years.

The total sum of eligible voters represents more than 10% of the world’s population, nearly four times as many as the United States – the next largest and oldest democracy. For the past five weeks, 543 candidates have sought support among 900 million voters. But Modi has stolen the limelight at a decisive moment for India’s democracy.

Indian voters are enthusiastic and aware, good at political bargaining to leverage the value of their vote. National and local elections are theatrical spectacles, like the grandiose Indian weddings. The Election Commission of India captured this celebratory mood in its official advertisements which urged people to partake not only in an electoral process but also the country’s "grand festival."

For the many millions among India’s poor, lower castes and untouchables, women and minorities, elections and their one-person-one-vote principle are a moment of empowerment and equality. That feeling may be transient - but it still expresses an authentic trust in democracy and a hope for bettering their conditions of life.
Voting as participation and as leverage is a rare tangible asset for inhabitants of a Third World country who don’t enjoy equal access to education, health or jobs. Indians suffer from corruption and political manipulations perpetrated by its ruling class, and the state and its institutions struggle to confront them. For weaker sections of society, the rule of law is not consistent or dependable.

Narendra Modi was at the right place at the right time when he presented himself for the role of prime minister in 2014. It was hope that got him in.

He promised to end corruption and fast-track economic development, and was rewarded with an extensive electoral majority. Among his many promises, the two loudest slogans were that he would bring India "good days" (achhe din) and "collective efforts, inclusive growth" (sabka saath, sabka vikas). Modi became the "Man for Development" (vikas purush) that India needed.

This month, Time magazine put him on its cover again, but the strapline was quite different: "India’s great divider in chief," and asked if the world’s largest democracy could endure another five years of Modi.

But there’s an even more important question for India’s future.

Most polls predict a Modi victory when the results come out on 23 May. The important question is: Why? Why has the Indian public not punished Modi for his broken promises?

Indian voters are certainly not gullible. But Modi still captures the aspirations of Indians who retain hope in him not because he will fulfil his grand commitments but because no other candidate offers that kind of hope, even if it’s illusory. The main opposition Congress party, and its chief Rahul Gandhi, are too burdened by their past.
The other reason Modi is immune from delegitimation on the grounds of his actual performance is India’s growing obsession with pride: Hindu pride, as well as national pride.

Much before Modi, his political party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), laid the foundations for an Indian identity that was assertively Hindu and aggressively nationalist.

Those two elements inform Hindutva, the political ideology that Modi hasBoosted enthusiastically, glorifying Hindu nationalism and dismissive of pluralism, social solidarity and diversity. Modi has no other cause dearer to his heart than this - and like the chauvinistic populism resurgent around the world, it has resonated for many Indians.

![Image of supporters of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) wearing T-shirts supporting Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Bhopal.](https://example.com/image)

April 23, 2019 supporters of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) wear T-shirts supporting Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Bhopal. AFP

Modi did not create India’s fixation on pride. He himself is a product of it. The upper caste Hindus who have been the BJP’s traditional support base found in Modi the perfect vehicle to push the Hindu pride agenda in which they’re so invested. They found a "man of the people" who is also a charismatic mass leader to revive what they see as the glorious Hindu past and make India once again the vishwa guru (world's guru).

Modi claims he is dedicated to revive the mythical India of popular Hindu belief: wealthy, militarily strong, a world power.

He has said India has already achieved global guru status thanks to him coming to power, and thanks to how he’s raised India’s international stature with his outreach and robust personal relations with other heads of states, from Obama to Trump, Putin, Macron, Shinzo Abe and Netanyahu. Obama even wrote the short profile of Modi that appeared in Time magazine in 2015.

For those in lower castes, for whom the Hindutva project and its promise of reviving an imperial status in which they were never beneficiaries, Modi is still a rallying figure.

That’s thanks to his populist appeals to a more general nationalist pride: talk about a strong army, about revenge and war against Pakistan, about India’s nuclear capabilities, his own
56-inch chest - even how India now boasts the world’s tallest statue (of independence hero Sardar Patel.)

This obsession with national pride and noisy patriotism is just as oppositional and insular as its Hindu revivalist twin.

Modi has built an enormous and fiercely loyal fan base; in some ways he has become a cult leader as much as a political figure. In India, his supporters are known as bhaktas (super-loyal followers). It is a term requisitioned from Hinduism that refers to devotees of God.

It seems clear that this is hardly a healthy relationship between the people and those they elect to serve them. Such blind loyalty critically diminishes the leader’s accountability to the people, and constrains the people’s freedom to ask tough questions.

BR Ambedkar, the architect of India’s Constitution, cautioned against bhakti, or hero-worship, for a democracy like India. One of his famous speeches from 1949 could have been written about Modi himself:

"For 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."

Khinvraj Jangid teaches at the Jindal Center for Israel Studies at the OP Jindal Global University in Delhi. He recently completed a one-year research project at The David Berg Institute for Law and History at Tel Aviv University

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