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Modi's India: Hegemonic Narrative and the Reality of an Authoritarian Regime (2014–2025)

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Marzia Casolari

CESPI - CENTRO STUDI DI POLITICA INTERNAZIONALE ETS

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The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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FOREWORD

GOING BEYOND THE LOOKING GLASS: A FIVE-PRONGED ENQUIRY INTO THE REALITY OF MODI'S INDIA

The global perception of India under Narendra Modi (2014-2025) is usually shaped by a powerful, quasi-hegemonic narrative that presents him as an all-powerful demiurge: a singularly transformative leader who has broken with a stagnant past to lead India to, at long last, playing a worldly-acknowledged role as a superpower in the making. This polished image, reflected at the domestic level in grand architectural spectacles and a pervasive personality cult, is amplified at the international level by an increasingly influential Indian diaspora and Indian and non-Indian analysts who portray India as a vibrant democracy, an economic powerhouse, and an indispensable brake on China's hegemonic ambitions.

As just mentioned, this is an almost hegemonic portrait. But here, the key word is «almost». Certainly, the authors of the essays collected in this volume do not share the enthusiastic pro-Modi assessment nowadays so widespread. Rather, they hold a decidedly more critical view of Modi's India and its leader. Based on an in-depth analysis of a wide array of primary sources deftly utilised, the five articles included in this volume provide a decidedly sobering analysis, suggesting that the quasi-hegemonic «looking glass» version of a prosperous and successful India crafted by Modi and his apologists masks a starkly different reality of institutional decay and economic fragility. Furthermore, in their opinion, even the claim that Modi is the author of a strikingly innovative and successful foreign policy is disconnected from a reality which appears strongly characterised by strategic continuity and limited positive results.



The primary pillar of the Modi myth is his portrayal as a decisive architect of national destiny. This narrative is the other face of a pervasive cult of personality, which, since its beginning – when Modi was still only the chief minister of Gujarat – has found expression in the custom followed by his supporters of wearing facial masks representing Modi's features at public events.

In parallel with Modi's rise to supreme power, as the undisputed head of the majority party and a prime minister without any credible actual or potential adversary, this cult has become increasingly pervasive, acquiring extravagant dimensions. Modi's leadership is no longer presented as merely

political but as providential. This cult reached a peak when Modi – as remembered by James Manor in this volume – even suggested his own «divine origin». Of course, this is a claim which, regardless of its oddity, cannot but have the political aim of placing Modi’s authority beyond traditional institutional or democratic critique. Also, it is a claim that no scholar worth their salt can view as anything other than a performative construction – namely, a statement that does not just describe a reality, but actually acts upon the world to change it. In India’s case, it is designed to justify a radical centralisation of power and the hollowing out of democratic institutions.

As argued by James Manor in this volume, and by others,¹ all the above represents the emergence of a «Second Indian Republic», characterised by the systematic dismantlement of the pluralistic and secular foundations of the post-colonial state. In fact, almost every independent institution which once served as a check on power – including the central bank, the election commission, and the judiciary – has been brought under centralised control. Power, indeed, is now radically concentrated in the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO). Parliament has lost its political centrality and has seen numerous bills «rammed through» without significant scrutiny or discussion, leading opposition members to ask if they are «passing legislation» or merely «delivering pizzas».² Also – as pointed out once again by Manor – while core government institutions have been weakened, eleven investigative agencies have been kept strong but flagrantly misused to mount raids and probes on dubious charges to bring the media, civil society, and political opponents to heel.



The government’s official slogan, *Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas* («Together with all, development for all»), projects a vision of inclusive prosperity. Yet, as shown by scholarly data skilfully deployed in this volume by Elisabetta Basile and Claudio Cecchi, the economic model applied by Modi is a specific, exclusionary variety of authoritarian-hegemonic capitalism. It has replaced market competition with a crony variety of capitalism, characterised by aggressive state support for a few massive corporate conglomerates, most notably the Adani and Tata groups. This system links business success to political connections – enabling the capture of public resources – rather than innovation.

This crony capitalist system, nonetheless, appears to have promoted a massive GDP growth rate, which, according to available data, propelled India to the position of fifth largest world economy in 2021 (surpassing

1. E.g., Milan Vaishnav, ‘The Rise of India’s Second Republic’, *Journal of Democracy*, 35/3, July 2024, pp. 38-56.

2. E.g., ‘«3 Days, 3 Bills, Is It Pizza Delivery?» Derek O’Brien In Parliament’, *NDTV*, 31 July 2019.

the UK) and fourth in 2025 (surpassing Japan). It is a rate of growth that, if maintained, puts India on the path to becoming the third largest world economy, surpassing Germany, by 2030. Not surprisingly, this apparently rapid and unstoppable economic growth is continuously paraded by Modi and his apologists as undeniable proof of the resounding success of the Modi-promoted developmental path.

Although quasi-hegemonic, this picture has been challenged by a number of economists.³ In this volume, its deconstruction is carried out by Elisabetta Basile and Claudio Cecchi. They challenge the official GDP figures, characterising them as unreliable and failing to capture the structural reality of the Indian economy. They point out a significant «gap in official poverty statistics», caused by the Indian government's decision to withhold the results of the 2017/18 consumption expenditure survey. They stress that this survey is the fundamental source of data for estimating poverty and, by extension, the real impact of GDP growth. Consequently, the withholding of these results leaves a vacuum of key data, forcing economists to rely on proxy indicators. This results in widely varying and «unreliable» inferences. In reaching this conclusion, Basile and Cecchi align themselves with a group of influential economists who have highlighted the unreliability of India's official economic and statistical data. It is worth stressing that, while some of these critics hold clear leftist views, most are actually mainstream economists.⁴

Furthermore, Basile and Cecchi argue that Modi's economic policies do not represent a radical break from the past, but rather an intensification of the neoliberal shift which began in the late 1980s. Therefore, they assess economic growth under Modi less as a «growth surge» than as a continuation of established trends. Indeed, growth rates under Modi have not exceeded those observed during the period of economic liberalisation that began in 1991. Basile and Cecchi note that India's transition to a lower-middle-income status occurred in 2007, and growth rates remained relatively stable at approximately 6-7% throughout the first twenty years of the century. They point out that growth in the second decade (under Modi) was more volatile than in the first, interrupted by significant falls in 2019 and 2020, due not only to the pandemic but to existing structural issues.

3. A non-inclusive list of some of the most prestigious critics of Modi's economic policy includes, in strictly alphabetical order, Jan Drèze, Arun Kumar, Ashoka Mody, Thomas Piketty, Raghuram Rajan, Pronab Sen, Arvind Subramanian.

4. With reference to the names indicated in the preceding footnote, only Jan Drèze and Thomas Piketty can be classified as belonging to the intellectual Left. All the others are mainstream economists; more precisely: Arvind Subramanian is a former chief economic adviser to the Modi government; Arun Kumar is Malcolm Adiseshiah Chair Professor in the Institute of Social Sciences (New Delhi); Ashoka Mody is a professor at Princeton; Pronab Sen is a former Programme Director for the International Growth Centre India Programme; Raghuram Rajan is a former governor of the Reserve Bank of India.

A key aspect of Basile and Cecchi's criticism is the emphasis they place on the informal sector. Made up of micro-enterprises employing approximately 90% of workers in rural areas, the Indian informal sector is characterised by precarious labour conditions, low wages, and a significant lack of legal protections. Furthermore, Basile and Cecchi stress the «structural disconnect» between high GDP figures and actual employment generation. Growth has been concentrated in capital-intensive, high-skill sectors like IT, while traditional job-creating sectors like manufacturing have stagnated. The authors argue that the reliance on «trickle-down» economics has failed; benefits have not reached the poorest sections of the population, leading to stalled poverty reduction and stagnant real wages.

The end result of this policy has been the concentration of national assets in the hands of a few corporate conglomerates (in particular the Adani and Ambani groups), with wealth increasingly concentrated in the top 1% of the population. In other words, the result of the alleged «surge» of the Indian economy under Modi's dispensation has been the concentration of wealth in the hands of the top tier of the population. In this situation, even the middle class has been shrinking and inequality has been rising sharply. In this situation, the *Hindutva* ideology – the idea that the only real Indians are Hindus – is deployed as a tool of social control. Through *Hindutva*, the working class is fractured along religious lines, while minorities (particularly Muslims, Dalits, and Christians) are marginalised, successfully preventing collective resistance.



Like many authoritarian regimes, the Modi government feels the need to exalt its power through high-impact, high-visibility public works. This theme is skillfully analysed by Pilar Guerrieri. She argues that the government has transformed architecture and urban planning into «pivotal tools» for manifesting symbolic power, realising grandiose projects aimed at redesigning icons of Indian identity.

Conspicuous examples include the multi-billion-rupee redevelopment of New Delhi's Central Vista, the erection of the world's tallest statue, and the construction of the world's largest cricket arena. Guerrieri points out how the restructuring of the Central Vista has been presented as a move to erase colonial symbols, but has also targeted buildings representative of the Nehru era. The demolition of the iconic Hall of Nations compound is seen by many as a form of *damnatio memoriae* of Nehru and his political legacy.

These buildings have been replaced by new edifices featuring Hindu-centric symbols. These include not only traditional religious icons like the peacock and lotus, but also the reinterpretation of secular historical symbols. This is the case with the lions of Ashoka; their stone reproductions

on the new Parliament have a visibly aggressive aspect, in line with the belligerent *Hindutva* ideology, and totally absent from the Nehru-era versions. Similarly, the «Statue of Unity» in Gujarat represents Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel – a protagonist of the freedom struggle but also a politician who held sympathies for Hindu religious fundamentalism and a die-hard political adversary of Nehru. Finally, the largest cricket stadium in Ahmedabad was renamed the «Narendra Modi Stadium» in 2021, a symbolic assertion of his personal legacy.



On the world stage, the prevalent narrative depicts Modi's rise as a watershed moment for Indian strategic autonomy. However, Michelguglielmo Torri and Filippo Boni challenge this as largely rhetorical, noting deep continuities with the pre-Modi period.

As Torri points out, the true watershed in India's international alignments – specifically its pivot toward the United States – occurred between 2005 and 2008 under the Manmohan Singh government.⁵ Most core parameters of Modi's policy exhibit substantial continuity with this framework. Furthermore, as shown by Boni, despite persistent claims to leadership in South Asia, India has struggled to sustain regional primacy. China's economic inroads through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Nepal have encroached on traditional Indian spheres of influence. Torri also notes that India's «strength» during the Ukraine crisis is actually rooted in a structural dependency on Russian military hardware. Up to Donald Trump's return to power, this dependency was so clear that Washington exercised little pressure on New Delhi to side against Russia, as India's support against China is what the US truly prizes.

Considering all the above, the conclusion to which both authors arrive is that any claim that India's international position has significantly strengthened since Modi's rise to power in 2014 is highly dubious; what is clear is rather the widening gap between the rhetorical ambition of the Modi regime and its strategic substance.



The articles in this volume arrive at a dual conclusion. First, the most significant change under Modi has been ideological: neoliberal restructuring coupled with *Hindutva* as a mechanism of social control. This ideology has redefined Indian citizenship on the basis of membership to the Hindu

5. Manmohan Singh, a member of the Congress, had been handpicked by Sonia Gandhi, the president of the Congress, to head a coalition government totally dominated by the Congress Party. The alignment with the US had been opposed by the BJP, namely the party to which Modi belonged.

religion and, in so doing, has reoriented the state toward a Hindu exclusionary, ideologically homogenous future. Indian citizenship has been redefined, abandoning constitutional commitments to pluralism and secularism.

Identity-based exclusion – which pre-existed Modi's rise to power but was far from being hegemonic – is no longer just a social phenomenon but has been institutionalized in state policy – a process that, by itself, has deepened and made starker socio-political divisions. This exclusionary policy has nicely dovetailed with the needs of the predatory crony capitalism which supports Modi and is supported by him. In fact, the successful framing on the part of the Hindutva ideology of economic grievances in terms of religious identity has resulted in the fragmentation of labour and the consequent prevention of the emergence of a broad-based opposition to Modi's pro-corporate agenda.

The second conclusion which can be drawn from the scholarly analyses included in this volume is that Modi's India is a project of performative power – namely it's about *appearing*, rather than *being* powerful. After all, it is much easier to conjure up enticing images of strength and success than building up, necessarily slowly and painfully, something of substance. By falsifying or concealing economic data, dominating the media, relying on pliable or deluded intellectuals or self-styled ones, and constructing grand architectural spectacles, the Modi regime has been hugely successful in projecting the image of an India which is an unstoppable rising superpower led by an all-powerful, infallible demiurge of boundless talent and unbreakable will. Unfortunately, as shown by the essays collected in this volume, the looking glass on which this alluring image is projected masks a dark and fragile reality. Beneath the surface of the looking glass lies a nation divided by religious polarization, an economy marked by extreme wealth concentration and structural fragility, and a state where the institutions of democracy have been traded for the perceived efficiency of personal rule. To look beyond the looking glass is to see that the very tools used to build this image of success and strength - centralization and exclusion – are the sources of India's long-term vulnerability. So, in the final analysis the crucial question becomes: «For how long the looking glass will be able to project the reassuring and appealing image crafted by the regime's spin doctors before the socio-economic contradictions that it conceals explode and catastrophically break it?». History, of course, will answer.

Michelguglielmo Torri