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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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Articles meant for publication should be sent to Michelguglielmo Torri (mg.torri@gmail.com), Filippo Boni (filippo.boni@open.ac.uk), Diego Maiorano (dmaiorano@unior.it); book reviews should be sent to Michelguglielmo Torri (mg.torri@gmail.com).



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tel. 06 84 17 758

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ARCHITECTURE AND URBAN PLANNING AS PIVOTAL TOOLS
IN NARENDRA MODI'S POLITICAL AGENDA

Pilar M. Guerrieri

Dipartimento di Architettura e Studi Urbani (DASTU),
Politecnico di Milano
pilar.guerrieri@polimi.it

The contribution aims to analyse how Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has used architecture and the city in his political strategies to redesign the image, icons and symbols of Indian identity. Notable initiatives in this regard include the Smart Cities Mission, Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana's «housing for all» project, 12,000 crore invested in projects for Varanasi and many more for redevelopment of Indian historic heritage under the Heritage City Development and Augmentation Yojana Project, the inauguration of countless infrastructures under the Sagarmala and Bharatmala Pariyojana Projects, the 182 metres «tallest» Statue of Unity and the world «biggest» Narendra Modi cricket arena in Gujarat and many more. In particular, this study will present the case study of the capital of India, where many of Modi's projects are under construction, such as the bold redevelopment of New Delhi's iconic Central Vista. Through the most significant architectural-urban initiatives undertaken during the Modi era, this analysis aims to provide an overall critical understanding of the Prime Minister's political-strategic vision.

KEYWORDS – India; Modi era; architecture; urban planning; history of contemporary architecture; Indian politics.

1. Introduction to architecture and power relationships in India

Architecture has always been a powerful tool for expressing and consolidating power, adapting to every era's political, social and economic contexts. Throughout history, it has acted as a visible symbol of direct domination, as in the case of fascism or colonial regimes, and as a means of conveying more subtle and pervasive forms of power, such as those associated with global capitalism. Through buildings and urban spaces, architectures not only manifest the authority and cultural identity of the dominators but also become tools for legitimising imperialism and cultural control strategies. For example, architecture has been used to assert imperialist ideologies or to simulate attitudes of respect towards minorities and local cultures. In many cases, these forms of architectural hybridisation, combining elements of dominant styles and local traditions, have had a dual purpose: on the one hand, to consolidate the domination of central power; on the other, to mitigate opposition and gain consensus.

India represents a significant example of this relationship between architecture and power. During the Mughal era, for example, emperors built a rich heritage of iconic buildings that today represent an essential part of the country's cultural and historical image. The Taj Mahal, built by Emperor Shah Jahan in memory of his wife Mumtaz Mahal, is not just a mausoleum but an architectural masterpiece that expresses the grandeur and wealth of the Empire through its perfect symmetry and marble details. Contradictorily, it became the symbol of India despite being a «foreign» imported element and a product of a dominant power architecture.

With the arrival of British colonialism, architecture became a tool to assert the cultural and economic dominance of the Empire. At this early stage, the Palladian style was widely adopted to represent British power and modernity. The Governor General Lord Wellesley promoted this style through iconic buildings such as the Governor House in Calcutta, built in the early 19th century. As Guerrieri [Guerrieri 2021] points out, the adoption of the Palladian style in the Indian context served to transfer the classical European aesthetic, evoking stability and order, while at the same time marking the territory with the cultural imprint of England. These buildings, with their classical columns and strict symmetries, represented colonial power as heir to a superior cultural and political tradition. During late colonialism, however, there was a strategic shift in using architecture as a political tool. The Indo-Saracenic style, which fused Indian and British Gothic architectural elements, was used in the administrative buildings and infrastructure of the new capital, New Delhi. This style had a precise function: on the one hand, to express «respect» for local culture at a time when the Indian independence movement was growing; on the other hand, to represent a synthesis of tradition and modernity that legitimised the British presence as the supposed «cultural arbiter». Significant examples include the Rashtrapati Bhavan (the Viceroy's residence and the Secretariats), designed by Edwin Lutyens and Herbert Baker, and the Parliament House, both featuring domes, arches and decorative motifs inspired by traditional Indian architecture. These buildings served as symbols of political authority and sought to mediate tensions between local aspirations and colonial rule.

The use of architecture and town planning as instruments of power is not relegated to the past; in India, it continues in the contemporary context with the government of Narendra Modi, where these elements have been employed to assert a political and cultural vision. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, elected on May 26 2014, has, during his terms in office, focused on architecture, infrastructure and the city development. As noted by Shubham Bajaj: «Modi has been using the built environment to affirm his political conquest, a practice seen even before he entered national politics» [Bajaj 2024a]. Modi has promoted ambitious programmes that use urban and architectural space transformation to consolidate his political project. Among the most emblematic examples is the Central Vista project, a large-scale

redevelopment of the administrative heart of New Delhi. The intention is to represent a strong and independent India, but the choice to demolish colonial and postcolonial structures and build new architecture can be read as a statement of rupture with the past and an attempt to rewrite collective memory centred on the current leadership.

Another major initiative is the Smart Cities Mission programme, launched in 2015, which aims to transform a hundred selected cities into technologically advanced and sustainable urban centres. The programme promotes an image of progress and innovation. However, criticism has been raised for its impact, particularly on the actual effectiveness of solving deeper structural challenges of Indian cities.

Equally symbolic is the Statue of Unity, the world's tallest statue, dedicated to Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. While intended as a tribute to national unity, the project has been contested for the substantial financial investment required, raising concerns about social justice. It deserves inclusion among the most grand-scale initiatives, the Yashobhoomi (India International Convention and Expo Centre – IICC) in Dwarka New Delhi, conceived as the largest Indian convention and exhibition centre.

Finally, urban redevelopments, such as the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor in Varanasi, exemplify the intersection of religious symbolism and urban development. Supposedly aimed at facilitating access for pilgrims and enhancing religious tourism, the project also serves to strengthen the link between state power and Hindu religious identity.

The aforementioned initiatives illustrate how architecture and town planning are used to create «functional» infrastructure while consolidating a particular political power narrative.

Ultimately, architecture has always been more than just an artistic or functional expression: it has been and continues to be a language through which power asserts, adapts and seeks to control. India, with its rich history of empires and colonial influences, offers an emblematic example of how architecture has been used to shape a country's image and control, leaving a legacy that still defines its identity today. This contribution highlights how Modi has been widely using architecture and planning – by implementing infrastructure, services, architecture and urban planning – to reshape a new image of India.

2. Bibliographical references and methodology

The bibliographical references on the topic are contradictory; there is an official «top-down» government version of facts and a people's «bottom-up» perception that can be read from the newspapers, where the magnificent projects presented by the government are explained with some doubts and criticism.

The government of Narendra Modi introduces its urban and architectural policies as symbols of progress, innovation and national strength. Official narratives, including in particular the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs' websites, emphasise modernisation, sustainability and the enhancement of India's global image through flagship programmes. On the government's site, it is possible to find detailed explanations of the Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation Programme (AMRUT) that focuses on urban renewal to improve water supply, sewerage systems and open spaces [MyGovScheme 2025]. Other relevant initiatives include the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (Housing for All), which is a significant housing initiative aimed at providing affordable homes to urban and rural populations [PMAY(Urban)]; the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (Clean India Mission), which addresses sanitation and cleanliness across India [Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs. 2025. Clean India Mission. Retrieved from <https://swachhbharatmission.gov.in>]; the Heritage Development and Augmentation Yojana (HRIDAY), which focuses on preserving and revitalising heritage cities [Guidelines for HRIDAY]; the Smart Cities Mission, which aspires to modernise urban infrastructure with sustainable and technologically advanced solutions [Smart Cities Mission 2025]; the Central Vista redevelopment project, which reshapes New Delhi's administrative core, aiming to create a monumental architectural identity, reflective of India's new aspirations under Modi's leadership [CENTRAL VISTA PROJECT]; initiatives related to transport infrastructure - such as the Metro Rail Project, which enhances urban mobility and connectivity - presenting modernised cities as efficient hubs of progress [India's Metro Revolution 2025]; and more. These programmes, documented in government reports and official platforms, frame the narrative of an India innovating while preserving its heritage, constructing a vision of Modi's urban policies as transformative, sustainable and inclusive.

While official narratives portray these projects as unequivocally positive, newspapers often offer a more complex and critical perspective, highlighting the contradictions inherent in Modi's urban and architectural initiatives. Shubham Bajaj, in *Narendra Modi's Conquest of Delhi Through Architecture* [Bajaj 2024a], examines how architecture is used to consolidate political power and craft a lasting legacy, with the Central Vista Project serving as a symbol of control over public spaces. Similarly, in *How Modi is Using Architecture to Build His «New India» Political Legacy* [Bajaj2024b], the author explores how monumental projects contribute to Modi's vision of nation-building and political branding. Daniel Brook, in *Narendra Modi's New New Delhi* [Brook 2023], contextualises the redevelopment of New Delhi within Modi's broader political ambitions, linking it to the erasure of colonial and democratic histories in favour of a narrative aligned with contemporary political ideologies. Parul Chandavarkar, in *Monumental Mistakes: The Undemocratic Vision Behind the Redevelopment of Delhi's*

Central Vista [Chandavarkar 2020], critiques the lack of public consultation in the Central Vista project and highlights how it prioritises monumental aesthetics over public needs. Deepika Ray, in *Is Modi Out to Destroy New Delhi?* [Ray 2021] and Sayyad Sutar, in *India's New Parliament Building: A Story of Corruption* [Sutar 2023], examine controversies surrounding Modi's architectural initiatives, including allegations of corruption, displacement of communities and environmental degradation. Ayona Datta, in *Postcolonial Urban Futures: Imagining and Governing India's Smart Urban Age* [Datta, 2018], critiques the Smart Cities Mission as a governance model that privileges global investment over the needs of local populations. Similarly, Shalu Yadav's BBC documentary *Building Power: India's New Parliament* [Yadav 2023] explores the socio-political implications of Modi's architectural projects, particularly the new Parliament building. Articles by Srivastava and Pandya in *Bloomberg*, *Modi's Sprawling Delhi Makeover Fuels Anger in Virus-Hit India* [Srivastava & Pandya 2021], highlight the economic strain some of these government projects impose, especially during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. These critical perspectives collectively counterbalance the government's narrative of progress and modernisation, offering insights into the social, environmental and political costs of Modi's urban transformation initiatives.

The study adopts a comprehensive literature review methodology incorporating official and critical sources. By analysing government reports, press releases and official websites, it examines how the state constructs a narrative of progress and innovation. Simultaneously, it integrates critical journalism, academic studies and documentaries to uncover these projects' socio-political, economic and environmental complexities. This dual approach ensures a balanced understanding of Modi's urban and architectural policies, highlighting their achievements while interrogating the broader implications of their implementation.

3. A Multi-level Architectural and Urban Strategy

The urban and architectural policies under Narendra Modi's leadership have introduced a complex range of initiatives, allegedly designed to transform Indian cities into more «sustainable» and «citizen-friendly» environments. These include the previously mentioned projects, along with several others that will be analysed in more detail. Even before his prime ministership though, Modi demonstrated a commitment to urban transformation during his tenure as Chief Minister of Gujarat. His leadership saw large-scale projects such as the Sabarmati Riverfront Project, which revitalised urban areas around the Sabarmati River and the more recent Sabarmati Ashram Project, showcasing his inclination toward architecture and urban development, blending modernisation with heritage conservation [Bajaj 2024a].

3.1. *Smart Cities Mission*

The concept of «smart cities» emerged as a global response to challenges such as rapid urbanisation, climate change, traffic congestion and inefficient resource management. Rooted in earlier concepts like digital and wired cities, smart cities integrate advanced technologies, including Big Data and the Internet of Things (IoT), to improve urban living standards. The Indian Smart Cities Mission was launched in 2015, by Narendra Modi, with the bold commitment to develop 100 smart cities across the country.

«It [the Indian Smart Cities Mission] aims to enhance the quality of life in 100 selected cities by providing efficient services, robust infrastructure and a sustainable environment» [UN-Habitat, 2023, p. 17]. The mission incorporates innovative solutions for energy management, waste disposal, traffic control and public safety while citizen engagement remains central. Key interventions include: «enhancing water supply, expanding the provision of sewage collection, revitalising natural water bodies, construction of water toilets, construction of public toilets, enhancing avenues for clean and sustainable energy, reducing reliance on the grid, incorporating wind and solar energy, convert waste to energy» [UN-Habitat 2023, p. 38-49]. «The ‘challenge’ introduced by the Mission—Streets for People, Cycles for Change, Place Making and Nurturing Neighbourhoods—encouraged people-led design interventions to transform streetscapes and neighbourhoods in selected cities» [UN-Habitat 2023, p. 19]. Cities like Pune, Bhubaneswar and Surat have implemented solar power generation, intelligent traffic systems and efficient waste management projects. However, «some cities like Chennai and Bengaluru faced delays due to regulatory bottlenecks, hindering the rapid deployment of planned initiatives» [UN-Habitat 2023, p. 38]. Over the past eight years, the mission has mobilised 7.32 billion USD, significantly transforming urban areas, yet challenges in scaling these innovations persist.

3.2. *Housing for all?*

The Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY), launched in 2015, represents one of India’s most ambitious efforts to address the housing crisis, aiming to provide affordable housing to economically weaker sections (EWS) and lower-income groups (LIG) in both urban and rural areas. With the overarching goal of ensuring «Housing for All» by 2022, the programme set out to construct millions of housing units across the country.

By 2024, the government reported the completion of over 8.5 million housing units; however, this represents only 65% of the 12.3 million sanctioned homes [Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs 2022]. Additional efforts, such as the Scheme of Shelter for Urban Homeless (SUH), have established nearly 2,000 shelters, providing temporary accommodation for over 140,000 individuals. Despite these initiatives, the available infrastructure

remains insufficient to meet the overall demand. The estimated housing shortage in urban areas ranges between 31.8 and 50 million units. Even if all pending units are completed by the revised deadline of December 2024, the scheme addresses only 37% of the estimated shortfall, leaving millions of households, particularly those in EWS and LIG categories, without adequate housing [Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, 2022].

Several factors have contributed to this shortfall. Delays in obtaining approvals, challenges in land acquisition and inconsistent implementation across states have hindered the programme's progress [Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, 2022]. Official acknowledgements of these delays suggest that the programme's goals require further extensions and systemic improvements to become a reality [Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs 2022].

In this context, PMAY represents a landmark initiative addressing India's housing needs and a case study of the challenges of executing large-scale welfare programmes in a diverse and populous country. Its successes and shortcomings highlight the complexities of bridging policy ambitions with on-the-ground implementation.

3.3. *Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT)*

The Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation also started in 2015; it includes 500 hundred cities and 12 billion dollars investment. According to the India Government Portal: «The purpose of Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT) is to (i) ensure that every household has access to a tap with assured supply of water and a sewerage connection; (ii) increase the amenity value of cities by developing greenery and well maintained open spaces (parks); and (iii) reduce pollution by switching to public transport or constructing facilities for non-motorised transport (e.g. walking and cycling). You can find detailed information about the mission's objectives, planning, funding, etc. » [India Government Portal, accessed January 3 2025: <https://www.india.gov.in/atal-mission-rejuvenation-and-urban-transformation-amrut>].

While AMRUT has made notable progress in addressing urban challenges, its implementation has faced mixed outcomes. According to recent reports, the mission has succeeded in improving water supply and sewerage systems in several cities and enhancing urban greenery through park development. However, challenges remain, particularly in smaller towns where infrastructure gaps persist. Critics have pointed out delays in project execution, uneven distribution of benefits across regions and limited citizen participation in decision-making. Furthermore, while efforts to reduce pollution through non-motorised and public transport initiatives have been launched, the scale of impact has been less transformative than anticipated. Thus, while AMRUT has laid a foundation for urban rejuvenation, significant work is still needed to realise its ambitious goals fully [Agarwal 2024].

3.4. *India's Transportation Networks Project*

The Bharatmala Pariyojana, launched in 2017, is a landmark infrastructure initiative under the Modi government. With a budget of approximately 83 billion USD for its first phase, the programme is designed to optimise freight and passenger movement by developing economic corridors, feeder routes and green-field expressways [India Government Portal 2025]. It also integrates components like the National Highways Development Project (NHDP), National Corridors of India (NC) and the National Corridor Efficiency Programme (NCEP). These efforts aim to bridge critical infrastructure gaps, improve connectivity and ensure the seamless movement of goods and people across the country.

As part of this initiative, six high-volume corridors and additional interventions, such as border and international connectivity roads, coastal and port connectivity roads and industrial corridors, are being developed. These efforts reflect a broader strategy to enhance India's logistics and transportation networks. According to official sources: «The Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH) has announced that the Bharatmala Pariyojana Phase-I is expected to be completed by 2027» (Economic Times, 2025). The project is anticipated to carry most of India's road freight traffic, contributing significantly to economic efficiency and regional development (India Government Portal, 2025).¹

Complementing Bharatmala is the Sagarmala Programme, an ambitious initiative launched in 2015 to promote port-led development. This programme leverages India's extensive 7,500 km coastline and 14,500 km of potentially navigable waterways to boost maritime trade and economic activities. The initiative includes port modernisation and new port development, coastal and inland waterway connectivity, port-linked industrialisation and community development for coastal regions [India Government Portal 2025]. Bharatmala and Sagarmala represent a cohesive approach to transforming India's transportation infrastructure and positioning the country as a global leader in logistics and trade.

Adding to this landscape of transformative infrastructure projects is the Metro Rail Project, launched in 2015. This initiative seeks to enhance urban mobility by developing metro rail systems in major cities across In-

1. Delhi's infrastructure has undergone a significant transformation under Modi's leadership, focusing on metro expansion, expressways and railway modernisation. The Delhi Metro network now exceeds 1,000 km, enhancing urban mobility and reducing congestion, with new corridors like Namo Bharat improving connectivity. The Delhi-Mumbai Expressway, a 1,350 km project under Bharatmala Pariyojana, is set to cut travel time between the two cities from 24 to 12 hours, boosting economic integration. Additionally, the redevelopment of major railway stations, including New Delhi and Anand Vihar, aims to upgrade facilities, ensuring seamless multi-modal transportation. With an investment of billions, these projects modernise Delhi's transport infrastructure while promoting sustainable urban development.

dia. The metro rail expansion aims to reduce urban congestion, promote sustainable transportation and provide citizens with efficient and affordable transit options. By incorporating cutting-edge technology and prioritising seamless integration with other modes of transport, the project underscores the government's commitment to modernising urban infrastructure.

These infrastructure projects are critical to Modi's broader urban and economic vision, aligning with key initiatives like the Smart Cities Mission and AMRUT. Collectively, they aim to create an interconnected and efficient network of urban and regional transportation systems, fostering economic growth and improving the quality of life for millions of citizens.

These ambitious infrastructure projects have not been without criticism. Regarding Bharatmala Pariyojana, an article in the Deccan Herald titled «Is Everything Alright with Bharatmala Pariyojana?» highlights significant delays and cost overruns, questioning the project's effective implementation [Shah 2023]. Similarly, Moneycontrol reports in «Government's Ambitious Bharatmala Project Appears to Be in Slow Lane» that the initiative has struggled to keep pace, with only a portion of the proposed roads completed, reflecting challenges in timely execution [Punj & Khan 2024]. The Sagarmala Programme has also faced scrutiny; a detailed analysis by Gateway House, titled «Sagarmala or Sagar? Our Maritime Dilemma» examines the difficulties in modernising India's maritime infrastructure. The report points out challenges in balancing economic ambitions with strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific region and notes the limited progress in some port modernisation efforts [Chopra 2016].

3.5. *Heritage City Development and Augmentation Yojana (HRIDAY)*

The Heritage City Development and Augmentation Yojana (HRIDAY), launched in 2015 [Desai *et al.* 2017], represents an innovative initiative to preserve India's historic cities' cultural identity and heritage. Rooted in the idea of integrating urban modernisation with heritage conservation, the programme seeks to revitalise urban infrastructure tied to heritage assets such as temples, monuments, ghats and other culturally significant sites. The programme guidelines state that HRIDAY aims to «preserve and revitalise the soul of the heritage city to reflect the city's unique character by encouraging aesthetically appealing, accessible, informative and secure environment» [Ministry of Urban Development 2015].

HRIDAY's objectives extend beyond architectural conservation, encompassing the strategic development of heritage cities to improve the overall quality of life. These goals include enhancing sanitation, strengthening security, promoting tourism and supporting livelihoods through heritage-linked economic activities. The programme also emphasises the revitalisation of intangible assets, such as cultural practices, traditional crafts and festivals, which are integral to the identity of these cities. By fostering a blend of cultural preservation and urban development, HRIDAY seeks to

create spaces that are not only historically significant but also livable and economically sustainable.

The initiative supports the development of core heritage infrastructure projects, such as improving access to monuments, restoring ghats along riverbanks and creating visitor-friendly amenities. It also incorporates environmental measures, such as waste management and water conservation, to ensure the long-term sustainability of heritage sites. As part of its broader vision, HRIDAY emphasises inclusive planning and community engagement, involving local stakeholders in the preservation process to retain the authenticity of intangible cultural practices and traditions. Among the cities selected under HRIDAY are iconic heritage hubs like Varanasi, Amritsar, Ajmer and Jaipur. Each municipality receives tailored interventions based on its unique cultural and historical context. For instance, in Varanasi, the programme focuses on restoring ghats along the Ganges River and improving access to spiritual and cultural landmarks. At the same time, in Amritsar, efforts are directed at enhancing the areas around the Golden Temple and other religious sites.

HRIDAY contributes to preserving India's rich cultural heritage and aligns with the government's broader agenda of leveraging cultural tourism as a driver of economic growth.

Despite the well-meaning objectives of the Heritage City Development and Augmentation Yojana (HRIDAY), the programme has faced significant criticism regarding its implementation and effectiveness. Critics argue that while the initiative aims to revitalise heritage cities, it often neglects other practical urban challenges of governance and infrastructure. A significant issue highlighted is the lack of a coherent long-term strategy for the preservation of heritage amidst rapid urbanisation, which may lead to gentrification, displacing local communities in the process. In cities like Varanasi, where heritage conservation efforts are intertwined with religious tourism, the focus on beautification and infrastructure development has sometimes overshadowed the needs of the local population, especially affordable housing and basic services [Desai 2018].

Furthermore, the programme has been criticised for its top-down approach, where local stakeholders and heritage practitioners are often side-lined in decision-making processes. Scholars have also raised concerns about the programme's reliance on tourism-driven economic models, which, while generating revenue, can exacerbate the strain on local resources and infrastructure, especially in cities like Jaipur and Amritsar, where tourism is already highly concentrated [Raghavan 2017]. Additionally, issues related to the maintenance and sustainability of newly developed infrastructure have been pointed out, as there are doubts about the long-term viability of some of the projects, particularly regarding environmental impact and resource management [Jain 2019]. As part of the broader agenda of heritage revitalisation, it is important to include the Ram Mandir project in Ayodhya,

where a new Hindu temple has been built on the site traditionally regarded as the birthplace of the deity Ram. The development has transformed the surrounding areas and carries a strong symbolic weight.

4. *New image of power*

The urban and architectural transformations led by Narendra Modi's government in Delhi reflect a deliberate effort to reimagine the capital's physical and symbolic landscape, intertwining political power, historical revisionism, national identity narrative and global image. These interventions, often executed rapidly and controversially, have drawn both criticism and acclaim, with their impact extending beyond aesthetics into the realms of governance and memory.

The demolition of Pragati Maidan, including its iconic Hall of Nations designed by Raj Rewal, marked a significant departure from India's post-independence architectural legacy. Built in 1972 to commemorate 25 years of independence, the Hall of Nations symbolised India's technological and cultural achievements, being one of the first significant structures built with reinforced concrete and without steel. As Arun Rewal noted, the building «illustrated Indian craftsmanship» and reflected «India's postcolonial spirit» [Ray 2024]. However, its demolition in 2017, facilitated by a redefinition of heritage criteria, paved the way for the Bharat Mandapam, a convention centre inaugurated in 2023. Used during the G20 summit, the Bharat Mandapam was framed as a symbol of India's economic growth, presenting what Modi described as the «unstoppable development journey of India» [Bajaj 2024b]. Critics, however, saw this as an erasure of collective memory, replacing a monument of Nehruvian ideals with a structure embodying Modi's vision of a «New India» [Ray 2024].

The Central Vista redevelopment is perhaps Modi's most ambitious and controversial urban project. Announced in 2019, the approximately US\$ 2.7 billion initiative involves constructing a new Parliament building, redeveloping the Kartavya Path promenade (formerly Rajpath) and building a monumental new residence for the Prime Minister. Critics argue that the project was pushed through with «a tearing hurry», fast-tracking public consultations and heritage audits, with Bimal Patel's selection as the lead architect finalised within weeks [Chandavarkar 2020]. «The original Lutyens design ethos, symbolising India's transition from colonial rule to democracy, was side-lined in favour of monumental architecture emphasising nationalism and centralised power» [Ray 2021]. The new Parliament building, inaugurated in 2024, prominently incorporates symbols significant in Hindu culture, including the peacock, lotus and banyan tree, which critics interpreted as aligning governance with Hindu-oriented ideology [Srivastava 2021].

Additionally, the Museum of Prime Ministers, located near Central Vista, offers a selective portrayal of India's leaders, culminating in the overt glorification of Modi's tenure. Sameer Bajaj notes that the museum presents a «sanitised and glorified image» of Modi, underscoring his intent to dominate India's historical narrative [Bajaj 2024b]. The proposed Prime Minister's residence, part of the Central Vista redevelopment, has also drawn some criticism. The project involves relocating the Prime Minister from his current residence on Lok Kalyan Marg to a massive complex with underground tunnels and 25 watchtowers. Critics argue that such a move represents «the pursuit of grandeur» rather than practical governance, with many questioning the necessity of replacing the existing facilities, which are already expansive and well-equipped [Pandey 2021]. The transformation of Rajpath into Kartavya Path, inaugurated in September 2022, encapsulates the ideological thrust of Modi's interventions. Declaring that «Kingsway, or Rajpath, the symbol of slavery, has become a matter of history», Modi framed the project as a break from colonial legacies [Harigovind & Divya 2022]. Yet, critics argue that the changes, including dynamic LED lighting systems described as «Disneyland-esque», diminish these spaces' historical and cultural gravitas [Bajaj 2024a]. Beyond the aesthetics, the redevelopment projects have sparked significant opposition on economic, environmental and democratic grounds. Scholars, activists, and politicians, including Rahul Gandhi, have labelled the Central Vista redevelopment a «criminal waste» of resources, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, when public funds were desperately needed elsewhere [Pandey 2021]. Environmentalists have warned of irreversible damage to Delhi's ecological «lungs» with dense office buildings and increased congestion threatening the city's fragile environment [Ray 2021]. Architect A.G. Krishna Menon criticised the project as a form of «surgical attack» on public space, asserting that it seeks to «rewrite the history of the country» by overwriting both colonial and Islamic heritage [Ray 2024]. Similarly, urban planner K.T. Ravindran argued that the redevelopment aligns political power, military presence and Hindu cultural dominance, creating a «new symbolic alignment» reflective of ideological goals [Ray 2021].

In addition to these projects, Modi's administration has also focused on revitalising parts of Old Delhi (Shahjahanabad), particularly Chandni Chowk, one of the city's most historic marketplaces. The Chandni Chowk Pedestrianization Project was initiated in 2018, spearheaded by the Shahjahanabad Redevelopment Corporation and supported by Pradeep Sachdeva Design Associates, transformed this chaotic yet culturally rich area by limiting vehicular access and prioritising pedestrian-friendly infrastructure. The stretch from Red Fort to Fatehpuri Masjid has been redesigned to restrict motorised traffic during the daytime, allowing residents and visitors to experience the space with improved walkability and reduced pollution. The project aims to preserve the historical character of Chandni Chowk while

making it more accessible and liveable. Another key development in Old Delhi is the construction of a multi-level parking and commercial complex Omaxe Chowk Mall at Gandhi Maidan, addressing long-standing issues of congestion and space constraints. The eight-story structure, built through a ₹10 billion public-private partnership, accommodates over 2,300 vehicles while integrating commercial and retail spaces to support local businesses. These interventions indicate an effort to modernise Old Delhi, but many concerns remain about the potential impacts of mall commercialisation on historical commercial dynamics.

In a broader context, Modi's projects in Delhi have been seen as echoing historical approaches to reshaping collective memory, where leaders reconfigure the monuments of their predecessors to assert new narratives. As Srivastava observed, these interventions aim to «reframe the identity of the nation», turning public spaces into instruments of political messaging [Srivastava 2021, p. 298]. Ultimately, Modi's interventions in Delhi epitomise the use of urban spaces as a medium for political expression, blending historical revisionism with an ambition to spatialise his vision of India. While these projects have undoubtedly transformed the city's landscape, their legacy will remain deeply contradictory, reflecting the tensions between political ideology, heritage and collective memory.

5. *Struggles of democracy through an architectural lens*

The urban and architectural transformations led by Narendra Modi represent a complex paradigm where modernisation and monumentality intertwine with political narratives and democratic tensions. Their rapid and controversial implementation has elicited both praise and criticism, highlighting fundamental issues concerning the role of power, memory and cultural identity in contemporary Indian urbanism.

The case of Central Vista is emblematic. The symbolic redefinition of New Delhi's administrative heart marked a break with the colonial and post-independence past, replacing earlier architectural narratives and heritage with monuments that exalt a centralised vision of power. The city's Central Vista was reshaped to emphasise monumental governance, highlighting a shift from public space life towards controlled spectacles of power [Brook 2023]. However, the project's urgency suggests an undemocratic process [Chandavarkar 2020]. The demolition of structures like Pragati Maidan, a symbol of post-independence India, in favour of alternatives emphasising monumentality and authoritarianism, has been interpreted by critics as a form of *damnatio memoriae* rather than real functional evolution.

Proponents of the Central Vista project argue that the old structures were no longer adequate for the needs of modern administration and that the changes will ensure greater functionality. Supporters also highlight

modifications, such as including prayer spaces, as evidence of responsiveness to public input. However, such arguments overlook a crucial aspect: the lack of a participatory approach that meaningfully incorporates citizens' perspectives and aspirations concerning the preservation of India's cultural heritage.

The centrality of Gujarat in Modi's strategy underscores further imbalance. Iconic projects - such as the Statue of Unity, dedicated to Sardar Patel, the tallest monument in the world - reflect the desire to construct a legacy celebrating not only national unity but also Gujarat's political and cultural primacy. On 31 October 2018, Modi unveiled the statue on Patel's birth anniversary, a project that cost Rs 29,890 million and is described as part of a pattern reflecting Modi's ambition to construct monuments to his legacy [Jose 2018]. Similarly, the redevelopment of central vista in Gandhinagar, led by Bimal Patel under Modi's tenure as Chief Minister, illustrates this approach. Another prominent example is the Narendra Modi Stadium in Ahmedabad, the largest cricket stadium in the world, which further exemplifies the focus on monumental projects within Gujarat. Renamed in 2021, the stadium not only reinforces the state's centrality in Modi's narrative but also serves as a symbolic assertion of his personal legacy.

Statues, monuments and symbols used during Modi's tenure are not neutral. They often represent a specific political narrative that privileges cultural and religious elements associated with Hinduism. For instance, the lions of Ashoka were reinterpreted atop the new parliament building with an expression of aggressiveness and prominent fangs, which contrasted with the traditional portrayal of the emblem. Bajaj [2024a] interprets this juxtaposition as connected to an authoritarian narrative, emphasising dominance over inclusivity. Similarly, the installation of a statue of Subhas Chandra Bose near India Gate as part of the Central Vista redevelopment underscores this selective valorisation of historical figures to serve a specific ideology.

Another critical aspect concerns the choice of architects and design models. Figures like Bimal Patel, tasked with the redevelopment of Central Vista, have been criticised for the proposed solutions, leading to the demolition of historically and culturally significant architecture. As Bajaj [2024a] notes, Bimal Patel's role represents a continuity of Modi's vision of reshaping spaces to reflect centralised power.

Evaluating India's urban and architectural transformation under Modi is far from straightforward. First of all, implementing central government policies is often contingent upon state policies, which may not always align with or effectively execute the broader national vision. This discrepancy is particularly pronounced in urban development, where land is a state subject, granting individual states considerable authority over land-use decisions. Consequently, while national programmes outline ambitious urban strategies, their success heavily depends on how state governments choose to realise them. This decentralised approach determines significant vari-

ations in urban and architectural development outcomes across different states. Because land is a State subject, the central government controls urban development by financing a major part of its cost on the condition that the State finances the balance either by raising municipal taxes or arranging commercial loans. Financing by the central government is also contingent on the States improving their systems of municipal governance. Both rising resources locally and improvement of municipal government are strategies which impact the political relationship between the State governments and their local electorates. Thus, while on the one hand the outcomes of these projects are uneven, on the other their choice cannot but be oriented by the fact that they are co-financed by the central government. In the end, the financing of urban development by the central government reinforces centralisation of governance and weakens federalism, which impacts the culture of democratic politics.

While critics argue that Modi's large-scale projects reinforce a centralised, authoritarian and personal vision of power, it is essential to recognise that the Prime Minister has led his party to three consecutive national election victories, maintaining strong electoral support across diverse demographics. This dynamic suggests that Modi's urban policies are not solely «his» vision but rather a reflection of the desires and aspirations of India's political and economic elites. The ongoing transformation of Indian cities, therefore, cannot be attributed solely to Modi's leadership but must be understood as part of a broader, complex interplay between governance, capital and the evolving preferences of India's influential classes.

There are visible contradictions in a government that, while promoting a narrative of development and sustainability, leaves many challenges unresolved, as shown by the fact that, as shown in a global report by IQAir — a Swiss air quality technology company, in 2023, India stood as the third most polluted nation globally [Basu 2024]. The bold goals of Modi's urban policies often clash with ground realities [UN-Habitat 2023]. Despite the rhetoric of sustainability, which includes programmes like the Smart Cities Mission, the realities of air and water pollution contradict claims of progress. Could funds allocated to gigantic monuments and grandiose infrastructure have been invested in more positively impactful social and environmental actions? UN-Habitat [UN-Habitat 2023] highlights that while cities may be installing environmental sensors for real-time air quality data, the broader issues of river and air pollution remain inadequately addressed. Such initiatives often reflect imported high-tech models disconnected from local needs. The Smart Cities Mission, heavily influenced by Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), illustrates the reliance on foreign expertise, which limits the potential for bottom-up solutions tailored to India's diverse urban issues [UN-Habitat 2023].

In conclusion, Modi's use of architecture is not limited to constructing an internal national imagery but is also a tool for geopolitical positioning:

monumentality becomes a message of global power intended to portray India as a leading civilisation of the 21st century. However, the difficulties in implementing many projects reveal the unresolved tensions between ideological ambition, local reality and administrative capacity. This interplay between aspiration and limitation offers critical insight into the developmental trajectory and international profile that Modi seeks to shape for India.

Ultimately, Modi's urban transformations raise important reflections on the future of democracy in India. While the emphasis on monumental architecture and centralised decision-making reflects ambitious national aspirations, it remains crucial to safeguard that urban development is pursued in harmony with democratic and inclusive principles. The challenge for India lies in balancing these grand visions with a development model that encourages participation and respects the cultural diversity that enriches and continues to shape its identity.

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