

Cuckoo nationalism: Gandhi in Modi's India

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By Gayatri Menon
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The right-wing Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), with Narendra Modi at its helm, won the Indian national election in 2014, and again in 2019. Its tenure has been marked by growing authoritarianism, where dissent is increasingly criminalised, violence against minorities finds increasing impunity, and policymaking by diktat is becoming the norm. The deterioration of democratic practice has been accompanied by deteriorating material conditions for the working poor. Many flagship development initiatives introduced by the BJP government, such as the Swachh Bharat (Clean India) Mission, which sought to bring open-defecation to an end, or economic policies such as demonetisation, which sought to rid the economy of 'black' money, have failed to meet their stated objectives. However, despite these policy failures, Modi appears to have emerged untainted; his image as a strongman is undiminished and his ability to rule by fiat and remain unaccountable has in fact been bolstered. Part of his success in deflecting critique of his governance is the BJP's ability to neutralize the opposition by either denigrating (in the case of Nehru) or appropriating (in the case of Gandhi and Sardar Patel) the defining symbols and icons of the opposition. On occasion it does both. Modi deploys two avatars of Gandhi - one in which Gandhi is neutralized and another in which Gandhi is appropriated - effecting a political tactic I call "cuckoo nationalism."

Gandhi spectacles

Exhibiting the brood parasitism of a cuckoo, what the BJP has been able to do since 2014 is to wrest possession of the symbols of Indian nationalism that the opposition Congress party had taken for granted as its own and to harness them to its own project of rule. It has co-opted icons of the Indian nationalist struggle against British colonial rule – like Gandhi - in the revisionist history that it has crafted for itself. This is a critical narrative step for a party that positions itself as "authentically" Indian but has precious little historical evidence to show with respect to its role in the freedom struggle. It has gone on a re-naming spree, from roads and railway stations to government programs and colleges, to erase traces of the Congress and its anti-colonial antecedents, as well as an earlier Mughal (Muslim) past, laying claim to those public institutions and making them hosts for its ideological project.

The Hindu Right cannot write Gandhi out of the nation's history, but it can and has re-written him to diminish his commitment to religious pluralism in India and to sweep aside his strong critique of the totalitarian tendencies of the modern nation-state. By attaching Gandhi to the government's zero open-defecation initiative, the political critique of the BJP's political project that Gandhi represents has been drained. Instead, he has been reduced to a homily-spewing caricature whose trade-mark spectacles provide the

logo of the sanitation campaign, one that festoons a great many incomplete or unused and dysfunctional toilets littered across India. Importantly, while Modi has made a concerted effort to imprint his image on everything from the cooking gas cylinders found in every Indian home to COVID vaccination certificates, he clearly chose to have Gandhi's rather than his own image associated with the toilet scheme. The message is clear: in Modi's India Gandhi and his spectacles have been relegated to the outhouse.

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The toilets built under the Swachh Bharat Mission are often found in a state of disrepair, largely unused. They are anticipated to increase, rather than eliminate, the use of manual scavengers (belonging to oppressed castes) since most toilets have been built using a single or soak-pit design. Widely recognized as a policy failure, the scheme has succeeded in one crucial dimension: it has enabled a re-inscription of Gandhi. The social media campaign around the policy initiative has sought to blunt the political challenge that Gandhi poses to the Hindu Right. Having de-politicised him by rendering him into a tame cleanliness mascot for its sanitation campaign, the BJP government appropriates this hollowed-out Gandhi and inserts itself, cuckoo-like, into a refurbished, sanitised Gandhian legacy that enables it to claim the moral, and now historical, authority to realise the political project of Hindutva – namely a Hindu nation in India.[1] Gandhi as adversary of the Hindu Right and authoritarian tendencies, is transformed into a benign symbol of the government's improving efforts.



Ghosting the Mahatma

As Gandhi, a larger-than-life figure of the nation's history, shrinks to a loo-sized logo, the figure of the Maha-Atma (Great Soul) that emerged out of and shored up Gandhi's performative moral critique of colonialism and modernity appears to have found a new avatar - Modi. This mimetic Mahatma came into view most markedly during and since the nation-wide COVID-19 lockdown ordered by Modi in May 2020. This was not the strongman version of Modi who is given to remark on the size of his chest to signal his potency. This was Modi-the-yogi who successfully campaigned for a world yoga day, who meditated in a cave like the great sages of Hindu lore, and whose grey beard and hair kept growing through the pandemic to mimic the sartorial style of the quintessential Hindu holy man.

India's lockdown was novel in that it was staged as a spectacle – a sudden announcement of a nation-wide lockdown followed by a series of highly choreographed acts – from the banging of plates to the lighting of candles – that demanded whole-hearted participation from the nation. Like the BJP's 2016 demonetisation policy, where the population was given less than four hours' notice that much of their currency would be worthless at the stroke of midnight, the lockdown too was announced with theatrical flourish by Modi on television giving the nation less than four hours before everything would grind to a halt and everyone was required to stay at home. As has been well documented, the lockdown precipitated the worst humanitarian crisis in independent India. With the nation riveted by images of desperate caravans of migrant labour fleeing the city by foot and making their way to faraway villages, this spectacle threatened to overwhelm the strongman spectacle of total control that Modi was hoping to stage with his sudden lockdown announcement. The silence from Modi as the crisis unfolded began to seem like a rare misstep from the media-savvy and image conscious leader.

However, what we saw emerging is a version of Modi-as-Mahatma as he began to assume the physical form and mien of a sage, or at least the popular imagery of one. As he sat sage-like in his garden feeding peacocks (rather more adroitly than Brazilian strongman Jair Bolsonaro's feeding of the rhea), unmoved by the mounting toll of the lockdown and COVID-19, he laid the ground for legitimising the withdrawal of social welfare and abandonment of migrant labour and others whose lives were wrecked by the lockdown. In this sage-like avatar, the trials of the migrant labourers, the insecurely waged, and the infected were not issues he stooped to concern himself with. His lack of empathy for, or even recognition of, the inhumane cost of his policies was not seen as a failure of leadership, but as an expected response of one who has fashioned himself as a renouncer in the Hindutva sense of the term – detached[2] -- and therefore not perceived to be criminally negligent.

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It is in this sage-like avatar that Modi, in April 2020 against the backdrop of the migrant labour caravans, exhorted citizens to practice atmanirbharta (self-reliance). Atmanirbharta enjoys a surface similarity to Gandhi's insistence on self-reliance but is in fact firmly rooted in the neoliberal refusal to recognise a collective right to welfare. Whereas Gandhi's call to self-reliance was based on principles of autonomy and freedom from colonial exploitation, Modi's call is about the dissolution of any claim to welfare as an entitlement (the most recent political gambit of the BJP to launch a broadside against public welfare entitlements by denigrating them as 'freebies' is a continuation of this discourse). The sage-like Modi can both command the moral authority that is needed to legitimise this policy of abandonment and, as sage, can detach himself from the world of the profane where leaders are required to be accountable to citizens. Even before this moment, it is useful to recall that Modi has not held a single non-choreographed press conference, preferring to address the nation through his periodic mann-ki-baat discourses that, as a rhetorical form, bear a similarity to the pravachans (religious discourses) with which most of his Hindu supporters are already familiar.[3] The broader affective politics set in motion through the cooptation of Gandhi – his spectacles and his Maha-atma - and through ritualized national performances and exhortations of sacrifice, purification and self-reliance briefly described here, partners with the culture of impunity that has been a hallmark of the BJP majoritarian project, to give shape and legitimacy to authoritarian governance in India today.

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