*The explosive new book by the No.1 bestselling author*

# *THE PARADOXICAL* PRIME MINISTER

## NARENDRA MODI AND HIS INDIA

## SHASHI THAROOR

# chapter forty-three

## KOWTOWING TO CHINA?

The kowtow (or koutou in the pinyin form of Mandarin Chinese) was to be performed before the emperor of China from ancient times. Although it possibly originated in an even earlier era, it was well established by the time the Qin dynasty came to power around 221 BCE . Although there are various forms of the kowtow, it is essentially a gesture of deep respect towards one's elders and superiors and can involve bowing, prostrating, kneeling or a combination of all three. In the past, the requirement of the kowtow in the presence of Chinese rulers caused resentment among foreign ambassadors and non-Chinese dignitaries because it was a gesture of submission. Today, the kowtow is no longer in vogue. But as President Xi Jinping grows ever more powerful it is clear that he expects most of the foreign heads of states he deals with to kowtow to him in all but form. This is a problem that India has to deal with head-on, as more than most we have to figure out how to deal with China and its all-powerful ruler in a way that best suits our own interests.

As I have pointed out earlier, Narendra Modi has visited China and the US more than he has visited any other country in the world. [694] He and President Xi Jinping have met on numerous occasions, most recently in Wuhan and then in Johannesburg. But for all this, there doesn't seem to have been much headway made on the most serious issues confronting the two nations—border conflicts, the trade imbalance, China's growing aggressions as it seeks to fulfil its regional and global aspirations, to name just a few. As with the chapter on Indo–US relations that precedes this, a detailed analysis of the India–China relationship is beyond the scope of this chapter, so let me just focus on a few aspects.

Possibly the most pressing issue is the conflicts on the border, the Doklam standoff continued for many months in 2018 before the two sides stood down; but the problems this year have their genesis in a long-standing dispute over the border that does not seem to be likely to ease up any time soon, notwithstanding the conciliatory noises that are made from time to time. To sort out the long-unresolved border issue alone would require an extraordinary act of statesmanship and there are no signs that Mr Modi, as prime minister, has either the inclination or capability to achieve it.

Before Doklam, relations between the two countries took on an icy chill when Chinese leaders turned furious over the Dalai Lama's April 2017 visit to the northeastern Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, which China claims as its own. On 8 April, over loud protests from China's government, the Dalai Lama addressed devotees from far and wide at the historic monastery in the border town of Tawang, where the sixth Dalai Lama was born more than three centuries ago. [695]

India and China view both the Dalai Lama and Arunachal Pradesh very differently. From India's perspective, the Dalai Lama is the spiritual leader of the Tibetan Buddhist community, and so has the right to minister to his followers at the great Tibetan Buddhist monastery in Tawang. And, because Arunachal Pradesh is a state of the Indian union, what happens there is India's decision alone.

In China's view, however, Arunachal Pradesh is not really India's. Yes, it officially belongs to India, they say, but only because of the McMahon Line, a boundary drawn by British imperialists in 1911, which China no longer accepts (though China did settle its boundary with Myanmar along the same line). The Chinese government refers to Arunachal Pradesh as South Tibet.

In any case, says China, the Dalai Lama is not a spiritual leader, but a political one. And, given his support for Tibetan self-rule (Chinese officials angrily call him a 'splittist' [696] ), his visit to a sensitive border area was viewed as a deliberate provocation.

According to China's spokesman, allowing the Dalai Lama to visit Arunachal Pradesh could harm bilateral relations, with India facing the 'consequences.' China also summoned Indian Ambassador Vijay Gokhale to register a formal protest. [697]

India, for its part, took a conciliatory approach. The Ministry of External Affairs first attempted to assuage China, stating that 'no additional colour should be ascribed to the Dalai Lama's religious and spiritual activities.' And, in the face of China's increasingly intemperate fulminations, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government reiterated its respect for the 'One-China' policy, urging China's government not to generate 'artificial controversy.' [698]

But China was not mollified. Instead, when the Dalai Lama arrived in Arunachal Pradesh, the Chinese official media declared that China might be 'forced to take tough measures.' The *Global Times* , an English language tabloid published by the Chinese Communist Party mouthpiece the *People's Daily* , took a particularly belligerent tone. Citing China's GDP, which is 'several times higher than that of India,' and its military capabilities, which 'can reach the

Indian Ocean'—not to mention its proximity to troubled Kashmir—it asked, 'if China engages in a geopolitical game with India,' who will win? [699]

The same *Global Times* editorial stressed that this visit by the Dalai Lama to Arunachal Pradesh was different from his previous six—the last of which was in 2009—because he was 'received and accompanied' by India's junior home minister, Kiren Rijiju. India saw nothing unusual in Rijiju, an Arunachali politician, being present for a major spiritual occasion. In democracies, such public events involving popular religious figures are common, and politicians often enjoy the attention they attract by attending them.

But China preferred to use Rijiju's attendance as evidence that the event was, in fact, political, suggesting that India was using the visit as 'a diplomatic tool to put pressure on China.' The fundamental point, the *Global Times* stressed, was that the Dalai Lama 'is a highly politicized symbol in China's diplomacy,' so much so that a country's attitude toward him affects almost 'the entire relationship' with China. [700]

Despite the Modi government's refusal to back down in 2017, it climbed down in 2018, when it asked 'senior leaders' and 'government functionaries' to stay away from events planned in March and April by the Tibetan government in exile to mark the 60th anniversary of the Dalai Lama's arrival in India; this move was, ostensibly, to avoid exacerbating the Doklam crisis. [701]

The Modi government has been engaged in an awkward diplomatic trapeze act to avoid provoking China while simultaneously avoiding the impression of bending too far to accommodate its powerful neighbour. To give credit where credit is due, Mr Modi has tried to work with China, but with little to show for his efforts. His government hailed his July 2018 meeting with President Xi Jinping as an example of getting diplomacy back on track, only to be confronted with the embarrassment of confirming that it had been a 'no-agenda meeting'—in other words, one in which India has been unable to raise any of the issues relating to its neighbour's troublesome conduct, from Kashmir and CPEC to Masood Azhar, stapled visas, Arunachal Pradesh and Doklam. It does not appear to have occurred to Mr Modi that to have no agenda is in fact to adopt your adversary's agenda, since he prefers to talk on his own terms rather than about your issues.

Such setbacks in dealing with China have been common throughout Mr Modi's tenure. For example, in 2014, PM Modi not only welcomed Chinese President Xi Jinping to his hometown, Ahmedabad, on his own birthday; on that same trip, he also lifted the previous government's restrictions on Chinese investments in sensitive sectors of the Indian economy, such as ports and

telecoms. [702] Chinese soldiers promptly crossed the disputed frontier with India in the Ladakh region of Jammu and Kashmir, going so far as to pitch tents on land that India considers its sovereign territory. [703]

That mini-crisis was followed by a series of policy setbacks that reflected China's scant regard for India's sensitivities on various issues. China opposed India's bid (strongly supported by the United States) for membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group. [704] It blocked India's request to name Masood Azhar, the head of Jaish-e-Mohammed (a Pakistani terrorist group), to a United Nations Security Council blacklist, despite support for the move from the council's fourteen other members. [705]

China has also built its CPEC through Pakistan-controlled parts of Kashmir. [706] China itself recognizes that the territory is disputed, yet its government completely ignored India's objections to the violation of its sovereignty.

Against this background, China's expectation that India would respect its sensitivities was a bit rich. Yet China's arrogant approach is not new. In fact, its reaction to the Dalai Lama's visit to Arunachal Pradesh as well as Doklam, is of a piece with its behaviour in the South China Sea, where China insists that sovereignty should be determined according to its 'nine-dash line.' [707]

China expects other countries to fall into line when it makes such a demand, as the Philippines has done under President Rodrigo Duterte. [708] And China has proved willing to turn up the heat on those that don't, such as Japan and Vietnam. [709]

But India is somewhat bigger than China's other regional neighbours, and is made of sterner stuff. Rather than adopting a confrontational stand, China's leaders should work with us. If they don't, and instead move to follow through on their threats, they may well discover that India, too, has cards to play.

In *Pax Indica: India and the World of the Twenty-first Century* , I laid out a number of areas for possible cooperation with China, particularly in the multilateral arena. It is entirely possible that the relationship with China can veer away from confrontation towards at least coexistence if not extensive cooperation. That was also the conclusion reached by the Parliamentary Standing Committee for External Affairs in its review of India-China cooperation in 2017–18. But to pull this off successfully requires an adroit combination of political firmness, military preparedness to discourage any PLA adventurism (strong defences would serve to prevent military means actually having to be used), hard-headed economic negotiations and skilful diplomacy. It cannot be achieved through bursts of enthusiasm followed by sullen negativity, which have characterized the Modi government's attitude so far. Polite

namaskars must be India’s alternative to the kowtow.

694 Varun B. Krishnan, ‘Modi’s foreign visits: A look at the PM’s travel patterns and expenses’, *The Hindu* , 21 July 2018.

695 ‘Live: China Wrong to Slam Delhi Over Dalai Lama, Says Arunachal CM’, *The Quint* , 5 April 2017.

696 Jaime FlorCruz, ‘Analysis: Why the Dalai Lama angers China’, *CNN* , 18 February 2010.

697 Apurva, ‘Don’t use Dalai Lama to harm our interests: China to India’, *Indian Express* , 7 April 2017.

698 ‘Elizabeth Roche, ‘India stands firm on Dalai Lama’s Arunachal visit in face of China opposition’, *Livemint* , 5 April 2017.

699 ‘India’s use of Dalai Lama card tactless’, *Global Times* , 6 April 2017.

700 Ibid.

701 Shubajit Roy, ‘Dalai Lama events in Delhi cancelled, Tibetans shift “Thank You India” function to Dharamsala’, *Indian Express* , 6 March 2018.

702 ‘PM Modi welcomes Xi Jinping in Ahmedabad; India, China sign 3 pacts’, *Times of India* , 18 September 2014.

703 Victor Mallet, ‘China-India border standoff overshadows Xi Jinping’s deals’, *Financial Times* , 18 September 2014.

704 ‘US reaffirms support to India’s NSG bid’, *Indian Express* , 11 January 2018.

705 Elizabeth Roche, ‘China again blocks bid in UN to list Masood Azhar as a global terrorist’, *Livemint* , 2 November 2017.

706 ‘China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Pakistan’s road of high hopes’, *Indian Express* , 18 April 2016.

707 David Lague, ‘Analysis: China’s nine-dashed line in South China Sea’, *Reuters* , 25 May 2012.

708 Panos Mourdoukoutas, ‘Duterte’s South China Sea Flip-Flops Will Put The Philippines In A Place It Doesn’t Want To Be’, *Forbes* , 30 May 2018.

709 ‘Japan Will Soon Help Vietnam Extract Gas from the South China Sea. How Will China Respond?’, *National Interest* , 11 August 2018.

# chapter forty-five

## HAVE WE LOST NEPAL?

In the United States of the early 1950s, as Mao's Communist party regime consolidated its hold on China and marched into Tibet, exiling Washington's favourite Generalissimo, Chiang Kai-Shek, to the island of Taiwan, the American strategic community was convulsed in a debate over 'Who Lost China?' I only hope that nearly seven decades later their Indian equivalents will not be letting out the anguished cry, 'Who Lost Nepal?'

As a result of a slew of unpopular decisions, India seems bent on driving Nepal into the arms of China and others. As I have pointed out, it is significant that the first state visitor, Prime Minister of Nepal K. P. Sharma Oli received, after being sworn in on 15 February 2018, was the Pakistani prime minister, S. K. Abbasi. [714]

There is, of course, only one place for fingers to be pointed, and that is at our own government in New Delhi. Despite its increasingly feeble denials, India's de facto blockade of Nepal for the past few years has choked the country's economy, cut off its oil supplies, caused genuine hardship and provoked a groundswell of hostility against our country—from the one place on the planet whose relationship with us is so fraternal that we maintain open borders with it.

How did this come to pass, and why? India's displeasure at Nepal's new constitution and its refusal to accommodate the desires of its Madhesi and Tharu population was understandable. The people of the Terai (or the Madhes, as Indians prefer to call the region south of the hills abutting our border) are in many ways kin to—and essentially indistinguishable from—their brethren on our side of the frontier.

Some Nepalis consider Madhesis to be essentially transplanted Biharis, but they have been there for centuries and more, and no one contests their legitimate claim to an honoured role in shaping Nepal's political destiny. But rather than choosing an inclusive path by giving them their own autonomous regions or provinces, the new constitution of the country that came into effect in September 2015 essentially rendered them a minority in almost every province bar one.

The unhappiness of most of the Madhesi people with this decision, and the rioting that followed the announcement of the new provinces, added to India's

disquiet, since problems in Nepal inevitably spill over into India. It is unofficially estimated that at the height of the Nepalese civil war less than a decade ago, 7 million of Nepal's 27 million people had sought refuge in India (undocumented, since Nepalis need no passports to come here).

If the anger in the Terai leads to a separatist movement, for instance, India will likely bear the brunt of a new refugee crisis. New Delhi felt, understandably, that Kathmandu's leadership, overwhelmingly composed of the dominant hill elites, should have taken India's concerns into account before announcing a constitution so fraught with potential problems.

But it's a far cry from feeling fraternal concern about a vital neighbour making a major political error and manifesting that irritation through virtually cutting off that country's lifeline from our country, thereby giving rise to profound resentment of what is justifiably portrayed as Big Brother's bullying. The suspicion that in doing so the BJP government was pandering to voters in Bihar's assembly polls that were being held at the time was not entirely unfounded.

The fact is there's enough blame to be cast on our side too. The foreign secretary was sent as a special envoy to warn Kathmandu not to embark on a negative course, but that was just days before the constitution was promulgated and after it had already been agreed among all the major national political parties. The time for discreet but strong-arm diplomacy was months earlier, when the signs were apparent that the constitution was likely not to be the inclusive one India had hoped for.

The then foreign secretary was an outstandingly able diplomat, but he was no Nepal expert and had never served there. A political envoy, or an all-party team of Indian political leaders with well-established contacts in that country, should have been dispatched before the summer with a clear and unambiguous message of the importance India attached to a formula acceptable to all shades of Nepali opinion.

I have reason to believe our embassy, which was led by Ambassador Ranjit Rae (who was succeeded by Manjeev Singh Puri in 2017), read the warning signs in time and sent urgent messages to New Delhi calling for early diplomatic intervention. These were ignored. As I have mentioned earlier, one astute observer told me privately that the 'PMO took its eyes off the ball'.

That was the Modi government's first mistake. By the time it woke up to the impending crisis and dispatched the foreign secretary to Kathmandu, it was already too late. The time for quiet, discreet but effective diplomacy had long since passed; the constitution was already a 'done deal' before we even showed our cards.

When the constitution-makers in Kathmandu went ahead and issued the constitution they had already agreed upon, India reacted with a pique unbecoming of a major regional power. We showed our displeasure publicly by, in effect, cutting off essential supplies on which all Nepalis are dependent.

The problem was not just that this came across as overbearing, but that it had all the subtlety of a blunderbuss: instead of sending a message to the elite in the hills, we hurt people we didn't want to hurt—the aam aadmi of Nepalis. An ordinary worker in Kathmandu who can't get an auto-rickshaw to take his pregnant wife to a hospital because there's no petrol in the pumps isn't going to worry about the niceties of constitutional inclusiveness. He is just going to curse India for doing this to him. We made enemies of the very people we have always claimed are our brothers.

And what has the Modi government achieved by doing this? A basic rule of international politics is that you apply pressure calibrated to a desired outcome—in this case, changes acceptable to the people of the Terai. But instead we imposed a blockade after the constitution had already been adopted; it would be impossible for any government in Kathmandu to change it at this stage under Indian pressure without being perceived as surrendering its sovereignty. So we incurred deep unpopularity in the hills without gaining anything concrete for the Madhesis—a lose-lose proposition.

On top of that New Delhi allowed itself to be identified with the losing side in the prime ministerial race, unsubtly backing Sushil Koirala and turning the once-Indophile Oli into a raging anti-Indian chauvinist. Well, Oli is now the prime minister, Delhi: deal with it.

That was how an over-centralized Modi regime succeeded in alienating Nepal. Today, China is busy making inroads into the north, building roads, opening railway lines into Nepal, and grandly offering landlocked Nepal access to its ports as an alternative (though hardly a credible alternative, given their distance from the country) to Nepal's traditional sea outlet in Kolkata. For all the professions of fraternal bonhomie that have accompanied later interactions between the Indian and Nepali prime ministers, it is clear that a significant change has occurred in the relationship, to which India has no choice but to adjust. The decision by Prime Minister Oli to pull his country out of the BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) military exercise at the last minute in September 2018 pointed to continued mistrust between the two governments, to which Mr Modi's policies and conduct appear to have contributed. [715]

The Modi mess in Nepal adds to the growing sense of disquiet amongst students of Indian foreign policy about the Modi government's management of

relations on the subcontinent. A combination of arrogance and ineptitude is all too often visible where subtlety and pro-active diplomacy could have delivered the desired results.

714 Elizabeth Roche, 'Why India is keeping a close eye on Pakistan PM's visit to Nepal', *Livemint* , 5 March 2018.

715 Shastri Ramachandran, 'Nepal PM KP Oli sees "mischief" in India visit of ruling party chairman', *DNA* , 13 September 2018.

# chapter forty-six

## LET US BE HUMANE TO THE ROHINGYAS

I The Rohingya crisis has led to a great deal of incoherent commentary in our media and around the world of late. Globally, the story has centred around the demonization of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the Nobel Peace Prize laureate who is the de facto leader of her country. She is being assailed as complicit in her military's ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya minority. There have even been calls to strip her of her Nobel; headline writers have dubbed her 'ig-nobel'. This is misguided and ill-informed, since it is the Burmese military that controls the Rohingya policy and not her, but that is another story and need not detain us here.

There are roughly 40,000 Rohingyas in India at the moment and our attitude towards them has ranged from the appalling to the less than humanitarian. When the crisis first spilled over our border our response was disgraceful. The minister of state (Home), Kiren Rijiju, declared his government's intention to deport all Rohingya refugees—even those with documents from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) recognizing them as such—as illegal migrants. [716]

This would have been an extraordinary step to take, because India has had a proud humanitarian record of granting asylum to persecuted groups for over 2,000 years. Swami Vivekananda, in his famous address to the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, spoke of his country as a haven for the persecuted, taking pride in Hindus' acceptance of Jewish and Zoroastrian refugees. [717] In recent years, Tibetans, Bengalis persecuted by the Pakistani army in 1971, ethnic Tamils from Sri Lanka, Nepalis fleeing their civil war, the Chakmas of Bangladesh, Afghans and an assortment of individual Iranians, Iraqis and Syrians, and Africans have been among those given refuge in India, with various degrees of formal legality. This is our traditional practice and there has been little serious dissent about it anywhere in the country.

There is one major difference, though: unlike the majority of those cases (the individual Middle Easterners and Afghans excepted), the Rohingyas are all Muslim. The arguments advanced by Mr Rijiju all revolve around this inconvenient fact. The Rohingyas, he says, are susceptible to recruitment by terrorist groups; they 'pose grave security challenges'; their presence leads to social, political and cultural problems; and the government is anxious to 'ensure the demographic pattern of India is not disturbed'. [718] In other words, we didn't want to play host to large numbers of Muslim refugees. This is, in a word,

appalling (and the government has not offered a shred of evidence for the suggestion that Rohingyas are in any way complicit in terrorism in our country).

There was no immediate threat to the Rohingyas, however, because our government had overlooked an inconvenient fact before Mr Rijiju made his statement: we had no place to deport the Rohingyas to. They all hail from Rakhine province in Myanmar, where their ancestors settled under British rule some 150 years ago, but Myanmar refuses to recognize them among the 135 ethnic groups listed under its 1982 Citizenship Act, considering them foreigners. [719]

Yangon therefore has no obligation to take back people it considers foreigners, whose presence in their country they, however outrageously, deem illegal. (Indeed, in Myanmar, the very word Rohingya is taboo: they can only be called 'Bengali', in other words illegal migrants from Bangladesh. [720] ) But Bangladesh acknowledges no responsibility for people who have, for the most part, resided in the Arakan area for a couple of centuries.

After a massive outcry, the government walked back its inhumane idea of involuntary deportation and has now begun talking of providing assistance to Bangladesh to resettle Rohingya refugees there as well as providing assistance to Rakhine state so that the refugees can return there safely. [721] All this is much better than our government's initial reaction to the Rohingyas, but it is still far from implementability. In the meantime, the legal status of these unfortunates remains indeterminate, depriving them of the possibility of finding legal employment, or of improving their makeshift (and often wretched) living conditions.

Legalities aside, there is also a simple moral case here. Our so-called Hindu nationalists are, as usual, forgetting the values on which the Hindu faith is based, one cardinal principle of which is 'atithi devo bhava', the guest is like God. The timeless values invoked by Swami Vivekananda—and more recently by Pandit Nehru in welcoming the Tibetan refugees—cannot be cast aside to suit the prejudices of the ruling party, without doing violence to the principles they embody. To make matters worse, the BJP government has been actively promoting the passage of a new law, the Citizenship Amendment Bill, that would grant the right of Indian citizenship to refugees from Myanmar and every other of India's subcontinental neighbours, provided they are not Muslim. [722] The Bill proposes citizenship to six persecuted minorities who come to India from neighbouring countries, but it names Hindus, Jains, Sikhs, Parsis, Christians and Buddhists alone—not Muslims. Humanitarian policy that discriminates on the basis of religion is not humanitarianism at all, but bigotry.

Refugees bring a great deal to their host countries. Albert Einstein was a refugee. Tom Stoppard was a refugee. In our own country, Milkha Singh was a refugee. They fled their homelands for their lives and found a welcome in a new home, to which they brought lustre through their own achievements.

A country of over 1.3 billion people can easily welcome 40,000 Rohingyas. Let us stop allowing the ruling party's bigotry to undermine more than two millennia of Indian tradition. Let us be humane to the Rohingyas—and in that way, let us be true to ourselves.

II The Rohingya situation finds an echo in a second potential humanitarian disaster that also involves Bengali Muslims, this time in Assam. Seventy-one years after the partition of India, and forty-seven years after the subsequent rebirth of the former East Pakistan as Bangladesh, one of the legacies of the messy division of the subcontinent has come back to haunt the country. The crisis in mid-2018 over the publication of a National Register of Citizens (NRC) in the Indian state of Assam has thrown into doubt the citizenship, and the future, of some four million human beings, with incalculable consequences for the peace of the region.

The departing British partitioned India in 1947 on the basis of religion, in order to create a Muslim state, Pakistan, out of Muslim-majority provinces in the West and East of India. East Pakistan seceded in 1971 to form Bangladesh after a brutal and genocidal campaign by the Pakistani army had driven some 10 million refugees to India. Once India had vanquished Pakistan in war and the Pakistani army in the east surrendered, the refugees streamed back home to newly-independent Bangladesh. But some, perhaps, stayed on in India, merging seamlessly into the population.

Over the course of the next few years, they were joined by millions of other migrants from Bangladesh, fleeing economic hardship and land scarcity in an overcrowded country. While those who slipped into the Indian state of West Bengal were easily assimilated by their fellow Bengalis, those who made new homes in the north-eastern state of Assam were culturally, linguistically, ethnically and religiously different from the majority of their Assamese neighbours. Fearing they were being squeezed out of land and job opportunities in their own country, Assamese students began mass protests in the 1980s, which occasionally erupted into violence and made Assam all but ungovernable. A pair of savage massacres of Bengali Muslim migrant groups, including of some 3,000 in the Assamese village of Nellie in 1983, revealed the extent of the crisis. The agitation was only defused when then Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi concluded an 'Assam Accord' in 1985, pledging to identify all those who had migrated illegally from Bangladesh into Assam since 1971.

This was easier said than done, and despite estimates of 20 million illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, an assortment of tribunals set up to identify

foreigners failed to spot more than a few thousand over the years. No concrete action was taken, and the problem was left to simmer for decades by successive governments. But the election of a hardline Hindutva government in 2014 revived the process, under Supreme Court supervision. When it concluded the main phase of its work at the end of July, it published the NRC, a list of persons who could provide proof of antecedents in Assam preceding the accord's cut-off date of 1971. Just over 4 million people, who could not, found themselves rendered, in effect, stateless.

There is still time to appeal the findings of the register, and it is anticipated that some of the more obvious errors of omission—some members of a family listed and others not, for instance—will be swiftly rectified. But the question that bedevils Assam today is: what happens to the rest?

The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party of Prime Minister Narendra Modi is simultaneously taking credit for having identified 'foreigners', and sheltering behind the protection of the Supreme Court's supervision of the process. The implication is that this is a neutral exercise that has nothing to do with politics. But at bottom the exercise is indeed intensely political—since it is about who can own land, claim jobs and vote in BJP-ruled Assam.

Whatever the size of the final list of foreigners deemed ineligible for Indian citizenship, it is assumed that the excluded will be overwhelmingly, if not entirely, Bengali Muslims. What will happen to them? Some speak glibly of deporting them to Bangladesh. But there is no deportation agreement in place between New Delhi and Dhaka, and Bangladesh has made it clear that it assumes no responsibility for people who are not on its soil. Will they be turfed out of their homes in Assam and find themselves with no place to go?

Some suggest the setting up of camps to house these people temporarily till Bangladesh can take them back, a prospect that has human rights groups horrified—not least since that day may never come. Indeed, Bangladesh is one of the few neighbouring countries with which the present government of India has been able to maintain good relations. Creating a migration crisis, or worse still, attempting forced deportations, will destabilize a relationship that is vital to India.

The human implications of the NRC list are also troubling. Many who may indeed have come to India after 1971 (and are therefore deemed ineligible under the terms of the accord) have lived in Assam for over four decades and know no other home. Can they now be stripped of the rights they have exercised in democratic India most of their lives?

It has been cynically suggested that a principal purpose of the exercise has been to strip Bengali Muslims of the right to vote, as general elections loom in

early 2019. In a state of 26 million inhabitants, disenfranchising 4 million could have a significant impact on the electoral fortunes of the ruling party, which is not known to enjoy much support among India's Muslim electorate. But the legal implications of such an action have yet to be parsed, and will be open to challenge in the courts.

So far, the crisis created by the NRC has been non-violent, but as tensions mount on both sides of the issue, the risk of an eruption is ever-present. Is an accord arrived at in 1985, setting a cut-off date in 1971, necessarily the best framework to resolve the issue in 2018? Can democratic India afford to ignore the human rights of a few million people who have been living on its soil for decades? While protecting India's sovereignty and the integrity of its citizenship are laudable principles, can they be applied in practice to create stateless people whose lives would suddenly be plunged into limbo?

There are no clear answers to any of these questions, though passionate voices on both sides of the argument have no doubt what those answers should be. At a time when the BJP's majoritarian assertiveness has already raised concerns around the world, the answers India finds will mark a hugely important step in the evolution of its turbulent democracy.

---

716 Krishna N. Das and Sanjeev Miglani, 'India says to deport all Rohingya regardless of U.N. registration', *Reuters* , 14 August 2017.

717 'Full text of Swami Vivekananda's Chicago speech of 1893', *Business Standard* , 11 September 2017.

718 Deepak K. Singh, 'Embrace the Rohingya', *Indian Express* , 13 September 2017.

719 Angela Dewan, 'Who are the Rohingya and why are they fleeing?', *CNN* , 13 September 2017.

720 'The Most Unwanted: A gripping account of Rohingya refugees living in India', *Indian Express* , 26 June 2018.

721 'India extends support to Bangladesh for resolving Rohingya crisis', *The Hindu* , 9 April 2018.

722 Nafees Ahmed, 'Rohingyas flee Myanmar: India must drop religious criteria in refugee law', *Business Standard* , 6 September 2017.

# chapter forty-nine

## A MAN OF DESTINY**?** NOT QUITE

The phrase ‘man of destiny’ is most commonly associated with Napoleon Bonaparte. It is used to describe Napoleon’s unshakeable belief in his own destiny as someone who would rule the world despite his origins as a member of an impecunious Corsican family and the numerous setbacks he encountered in his drive to greatness.

Narendra Modi can certainly be described as Napoleonic in his single-minded pursuit of power and his belief in his own destiny from a very young age. Many of his admirers point to his visionary speeches, his soaring ambition, and his unshakeable faith in his own and India’s destiny, as evidence that he has the special qualities that the iconic French leader possessed. However, while Napoleon is remembered, despite all his shortcomings, for his brilliant foresight and his belief in, and implementation of, many of the ideas that are fundamental to the world today—among them religious tolerance, property rights, and equality before the law—the same cannot be said of Narendra Modi. His speeches have been compelling, but he has been unable to implement his ideas. At the same time, he has failed to prevent or stop forces that have undermined India’s prospects. On his watch, forces of bigotry, communalism and division have been unleashed that have set India back decades, and make it difficult to rate him positively on practically any quality that defines a great statesman and ruler.

In this chapter I will try and sum up much of what I have examined in this book about the record thus far of India’s paradoxical prime minister. (Any repetition of ideas previously expressed in the book is deliberate as I am seeking here to reiterate what I believe are the main failings and contradictions inherent in Narendra Modi.) Let’s start with Mr Modi’s impact on the lives of Indians and Indian society that I look at in Section II , ‘The Modi-fication of India’. Just one incident will serve to sum up the deleterious effect he has had on so much that is good and intrinsic to our country. His failing was hammered home to him by Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the greater BJP prime minister in most Indians’ reckoning, in 2002, when Mr Vajpayee rapped Mr Modi on the knuckles for failing to observe raj dharma, the dharmic code of conduct that rulers are expected to

follow. One of the texts in which raj dharma is explicated is the Shanti Parva of the Mahabharata. In the last essay he ever wrote, ‘Living with the Mahabharata’, published in *Seminar* in April 2010, the great philosopher, writer and Mahabharata scholar Chaturvedi Badrinath (1923–2010) defined the dharma of the ruler in the following way: ‘The protecting of the people, this is the highest dharma of the king. Indeed, the protecting of all living beings with kindness towards them, is the highest dharma. Therefore, that king who has the character of protecting with kindness, those who know what dharma truly is regard as the highest dharma.’ [730]

Mr Badrinath then goes on to say that good governance, according to the Mahabharata, is to protect people from fear. He quotes the epic as laying down the following injunctions: ‘Let the king protect his subjects from their fear of him; from their fear of others; from their fear of each other; and from their fear of things that are not human.’ Yet today the Modi regime has generated what I have already quoted a columnist as dubbing ‘an ecosystem of fear’. On every one of these counts, Narendra Modi and the government he leads have failed dismally. The India we live in now is a society that is polarized and fearful. Minorities, liberals, women and Dalits are harassed and brutalized with impunity and lumpen thugs terrorize all and sundry in the name of Hindutva.

This is the India Prime Minister Narendra Modi presides over, not the secular, plural, free and equal society that our founding fathers had envisioned and was built in its first six and half decades as a free nation. This is the first test Prime Minister Modi fails when it comes to being regarded as a ‘man of destiny’. No leader whose destiny is built on corroding the destinies of millions can be said to be worthy of the name.

Let’s move on to his sorry record of misgovernance. In Section III , ‘Moditva and Misgovernance’, I take a close look at the multiple areas in which Mr Modi and his government have made a hash of governing India, often taking the country backwards rather than letting it surge forward. The rise of widespread communal violence, mob lynchings and the bizarre phenomenon known as ‘cow vigilantism’; the shrinking space for dissent, with those who dare to think differently experiencing the daily fear of vulnerability to intimidation and coercion; the etiolation of freedom of expression and freedom of the press, the bulwarks of any democracy; the sidelining and often demonization of India’s minorities, to a point where many feel unwelcome in Modi’s new India; the unleashing of a crude form of mob bigotry, both on the streets and on social media, that are perceived as enjoying the patronage of the authorities; the hollowing out of institutions built up over decades, whose independence and impartiality are being systematically stifled; the eradication of checks and

balances and the exaltation of government-sponsored definitions of nationalism that reduce alternative viewpoints to the category of ‘antinational’ and ‘anti-Hindu’, themselves seen as largely synonymous; and the creation of a ‘new normal’ in society which makes acceptable the diffusion of a malevolent communal poison in the name of a triumphant majoritarianism that has eroded the fundamental values of India’s secular and nominally egalitarian republic—all of these have cast a blight on the meaning of our citizenship in Modi’s new India.

Moving on, we come to an area in which PM Modi’s performance has been inglorious—the economy, as described in Section IV , ‘The Failure of Modinomics’. The book details a checklist of spectacular failures, headed by a GDP growth rate that, as has been noted, has fallen by nearly 2 per cent because of the twin self-inflicted blows of demonetization and the botched rollout of GST. Demonetization, in particular, has badly dented investor confidence, drastically reducing much-needed investment in the economy. The recently released ‘back-series’ figures show that GDP growth under UPA-1 (8.87 per cent) and UPA-2 (7.65 per cent) was higher than the first four years of NDA-2 (7.35 per cent). Worse, the GDP fell for five consecutive quarters under Mr Modi, hitting a low of 5.7 per cent in the first quarter of 2017–18. The IMF projects GDP growth of 7.3 per cent in the current financial year, lower than it was under UPA and than it might have been had the economy not been dealt the ‘double tap’ of demonetization and GST. The growth that has occurred has largely been because of an unsustainable government spending spree (at two and a half times private consumption). Manufacturing has contracted, exports have declined (well below the UPA-era peak of $312 billion in 2013–14) [731] , growth in industrial production has slowed and agriculture is stagnating (or worse, given the annual rise in the number of farmer suicides). The current account deficit is projected to grow from 1.9 per cent to 2.6 per cent of GDP this year. Unemployment is on the rise, despite far-fetched claims of new jobs being generated, which are not apparent to those who should supposedly be working in them. Petrol and diesel prices, whose worldwide fall was not reflected in India thanks to the Modi government’s disgraceful decision to dip its hands into the pockets of the public with record levels of fuel taxes, are again on the rise, hurting the common man and having a knock-on effect on the prices of all essential commodities. [732] And after declaring ‘No more tax terrorism’, the Modi government inflicted tax demands on entire new categories of victims, shaking investor confidence.

Amid this sorry catalogue of economic ruin, the BJP has built itself up into

the wealthiest political party in India by far. [733] It is flush with funding from business and has passed a law allowing political parties to receive foreign financial contributions that permit it to tap into its network of supporters abroad who no longer carry an Indian passport. [734] It has also introduced 'electoral bonds' that can be purchased anonymously and donated to political parties, in order to ensure that it can collect additional contributions while assuring contributors that the sources of its funding need not be revealed. [735]

Finally, we come to another great example of the image-building PM Modi excels at, this time on the global stage. Here we have a decidedly mixed record of pretension—the prime minister claims that India's standing has gone up in the world thanks to him, that an Indian passport finally has value it did not enjoy before his ascent, and that prior to his ascendancy, Indians abroad were ashamed to call themselves Indian—that contrasts embarrassingly with what has actually been achieved on the ground and the reality of global perception as I have discussed in Section V , 'Flights of Fancy'.

Yes, Mr Modi is capable of evolution. His reaction to my Dubai Ports World proposal was in my mind when I publicly raised the question of why Mr Modi, in the extensive international travels of his first year, had not visited a single Islamic country. It must be said that he amply made up for it in subsequent years, in particular focusing on improving bilateral relations with the UAE and Saudi Arabia, to both of which he made successful visits. (He nonetheless also managed a visit to Israel in a way that did not elicit any protest from the neighbouring Arab states, and welcomed an Israeli prime minister to India for the first time.) If as prime minister he has been able to overcome his prejudices and those of his followers in the greater interests of the nation, that is certainly to be welcomed. But in this he was following the well-worn footsteps of his predecessors, who had laid the groundwork for him to tread upon.

Where he acted in accordance with the time-honoured traditions of continuity in foreign policy, Mr Modi kept India on an even keel. But where he attempted his own initiatives, he has left behind a sorry legacy—with Narendra Modi's India snubbed in the Seychelles, marginalized in the Maldives, negated in Nepal, sidelined in Sri Lanka, undermined in the US, compromised by China and provoked by Pakistan (and found wanting). Meanwhile, India's inestimable asset, its global soft power, was battered by the unsavoury reporting worldwide of the mounting intolerance, bigotry and lumpen violence unleashed by his supporters. [736] To compound matters came the Rafale fighter deal. The UPA government had chosen to purchase 126 Rafales from France that would be assembled by the public-sector Hindustan Aeronautics Limited in Bangalore.

Prime Minister Modi abruptly reduced these to 36 aircraft off the shelf at three times the price per aircraft. In addition, there were several other questions that were raised, especially by Congress president Rahul Gandhi who demanded a JPC probe into the Rafale deal; the prime minister has simply refused to answer them. [737]

As I hope I have managed to show in this book, much of what the Modi government is all about has turned out to be little more than a series of empty gestures and marketing gimmicks, while only smidgens of substance have been achieved on the ground. I have demonstrated how all his highly touted initiatives in Gujarat, over three terms as chief minister, have actually left the state worse off on several fronts. In similar fashion, as he nears the end of his term as prime minister, the country is reeling on several fronts—a fearful populace, an economy that has been hobbled by foolhardy initiatives, a painful lack of jobs, a devastating number of farmer suicides, insecure borders, instability in Kashmir and the palpable failure in implementation of even laudable initiatives like Swachh Bharat, skill development and Beti Padhao Beti Bachao. In short, Mr Modi's rule has been bad for India, and it all rises from the Modi paradox that I have described in chapter after chapter—his inability to rise above his narrow-minded, mean-spirited, sectarian political origins to the levels of statesmanship and good governance that a country like India needs and that many hoped he could deliver. Winning elections thanks to the ruthless management of constituencies, as well as the exploitation of the worst traits of his core constituency, does not a great leader make.

As the writer Arundhati Roy observed in late August 2018, when a half-dozen left-leaning civil rights activists were suddenly arrested on what were widely seen as a flimsy grounds, 'the BJP and Prime Minister Narendra Modi are losing popularity at an alarming pace (for them). This means that we are entering dangerous times. There will be ruthless and continuous attempts to divert attention from the reasons for this loss of popularity, and to fracture the growing solidarity of the opposition. It will be a continuous circus from now to the elections—arrests, assassinations, lynchings, bomb attacks, false flag attacks, riots, pogroms. We have learned to connect the season of elections with the onset of all kinds of violence. Divide and Rule, yes. But add to that—Divert and Rule.' [738] The arrests and prosecutions would be one form of diversion; worse might yet follow, though perhaps warning about it in advance might discourage it.

There is no doubt that the one area Narendra Modi has succeeded in is his own self-projection. Many who have not examined his record in detail still

ascribe to him qualities of decisiveness, devotion to duty, incorruptibility and determination that in their eyes mark him out as a great leader. He continues to lead in most public opinion polls as the most deserving prime minister of the country. This may be a tribute to his marketing savvy, his stirring speeches, his repeated projections of his own personality, his assiduous and mellifluous use of every communications tool from monthly radio broadcasts to daily tweets, his relentless burnishing of his own outsize image, or simply a reflection that mass public opinion can be easily swayed by rhetorical flourishes and skilled PR. But this is really the ultimate paradox of our paradoxical prime minister—that his perceived stature rests on appearances that are themselves belied by the multiple failures of the administration he leads.

Compounding all this is the man's extraordinary ego. Narendra Modi had been seen, even as chief minister, as being above his party affiliation; he reported to no one, felt accountable to no one (especially after the BJP lost power in the national general elections in 2004) and took his own decisions, without regard even for the views of his old organization, the RSS. In the end, therefore, he must be judged for himself; since he claims all successes as his own, his transcendent failures must inevitably also be laid at his own door.

It is all very well to say, as PM Modi did during his Independence Day address on 15 August 2018, that he was 'impatient because many countries have moved ahead and India has to go forward… I am restless because I have to improve the quality of life of our citizens… I am concerned because India has to be at the forefront of the Fourth Industrial Revolution… I am eager because I want the country to use its resources and abilities…' [739] , but what the citizens of India need to ask their prime minister is this: when will you go beyond making fine speeches and actually do something good and lasting for this country, where in addition to being 'impatient', 'restless', 'concerned' and 'eager', you show through your actions that you are concerned about the welfare of every last Indian rather than just winning elections and imposing your fraudulent agenda on a hapless nation?

In recent months, it has become increasingly apparent that people are no longer taking PM Modi at his word. The Modi paradox is beginning to take effect. His government's failures are being highlighted and it is to be hoped that voters in 2019 will no longer give him the mandate to play fast and loose with the lives and fortunes of millions of his countrymen.

Perhaps one indication that the tide may be turning against him is the fact that some of his closest supporters are breaking ranks with him and his party. A BJP MP, Nana Patole, resigned from his party and from the Lok Sabha in 2017, declaring that the prime minister was a one-way communicator who did not care

to listen to voices on the ground, even of his own party. His two largest allies in the NDA coalition (in terms of Lok Sabha seats), the Telugu Desam and the Shiv Sena, have repeatedly and publicly expressed their disenchantment with him, with the Telugu Desam going so far as to quit the coalition and move a motion of no-confidence in his government in 2018.

On 12 March 2017, writing in *The Pioneer* , erstwhile BJP Rajya Sabha MP and newspaper editor Chandan Mitra had this to say: 'Indians cutting across caste and class, religion and belief have reposed faith in a man they believe is India's Man of Destiny, one who will lead the country to a Golden Age of Peace and Prosperity.' In July 2018, Mitra quit the BJP and shortly thereafter joined the Trinamool Congress party of Modi's bitter critic Mamata Banerjee, in whom he now publicly reposes his faith. If so many of Modi's most prominent erstwhile followers no longer see him as India's 'Man of Destiny', then neither should anyone else.

---

730 Shanti Parva, 71.26, 27.

731 (In a few places in the text figures denominated in foreign currencies have not been converted into Indian rupees for reasons of context, source material or comparison.) 732 As of 3 September 2018, a litre of petrol was selling at ₹79.15 in Delhi, ₹86.56 in Mumbai, ₹82.24 in Chennai and ₹82.06 in Kolkata; 'Petrol, diesel prices hit all-time high', *NDTV* , 3 September 2018.

733 Sunetra Choudhury, 'BJP richest national party, with ₹1,034 crore declared income: report', *NDTV* , 11 April 2018.

734 Pragya Srivastava, 'Modi govt legitimises foreign poll funding; Subramanian Swamy calls it "terrible": What you must know', *Financial Express* , 22 March 2018.

735 Anshuman Tiwari, 'Electoral bonds: How Modi government is incentivising India's biggest political scam', *DailyO* , 18 January 2018.

736 Ellen Barry, 'Toll From Vigilante Mobs Rises, and India Begins to Recoil', *New York Times* , June 2017;

737 Aviral Virk, 'Why the Cost of the Rafale Deal is Modi Govt's Worst Kept Secret', *The Quint* , 26 July 2018; Sagar, 'On a Wing and a Prayer', *Caravan* , 1 September 2018.

738 Arundhati Roy, 'My Name is Arundhati Roy and #MeTooUrbanNaxal', *The Wire* , 30 August 2018.

739 'PM's address to the nation from the ramparts of the Red Fort on the 72nd Independence Day', www.pmindia.gov.in , 15 August 2018.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book, more than any of my other works, has been in many ways a collective effort, with the author being inspired, guided, assisted and pushed by the extraordinary team at Aleph Book Company. My friend and editor, David Davidar, whose original idea this volume was, has been closely associated with the book at every stage of its conception and execution. His colleague, Simar Puneet, and the tireless researcher Rosemary Sebastian have also played a vital, indeed indispensable, role in bringing *The Paradoxical Prime Minister* to readers. Bena Sareen came up with a great cover. No words of gratitude can do justice to their role—so I will have to content myself with a heartfelt 'thank you, team'.

There was little time, in this process, to consult and seek inputs from others, but I have benefited from the counsel of those close to me who have read parts of the manuscript at various stages, especially Manu Pillai, Raghav Sharma, my niece, Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan, and my son, Kanishk Tharoor. Some of the material in the book also benefited from the inputs of my dedicated colleagues John Koshy and Arvind Abraham. To all of them, my grateful thanks. Though their insights have greatly improved the book, the responsibility for its contents and conclusions remain mine alone.

I aired some of the ideas in the book, in different forms, in my columns and writings for a variety of publications, notably *Project Syndicate* , *NDTV.com* , *The Quint* , *The Print*, *The Week* , *The Hindu*, *Urbane* , *National Herald* and *Indian Express* . Their offering a home to my words and ideas is gratefully acknowledged.

Shashi Tharoor September 2018