One Strongman, One Billion Voters, and the Future of India

0:01

from The New York Times I'm Sabrina tavernes and this is the [Music]

0:12

daily India the world's largest democracy is in the midst of a national election and India's prime minister

0:19

Narendra Modi is running to extend his 10 years in power Modi has become one of

0:25

the most consequential leaders in India's history but he is also one of its most controversial drawing criticism

0:32

for anti-democratic practices and charges of religious persecution today my colleague mujib

0:40

mashall on the many Narendra Modis and which one India will get in his historic

0:46

third [Music]

0:52

[Applause] term it's Thursday May 9th

1:01

[Music]

1:08

so mujib you are covering India's elections which is of course an enormous undertaking it's a country of over a

1:14

billion people so the election takes weeks and we are right now in the middle

1:20

of that process so first of all where do things stand now in the race well it's

1:26

hard to know exactly right now there's so much noise around the campaigning and both sides Prime Minister Modi and his

1:33

opposition are pitching their side but most observers expect Modi to be the

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favorite in this race because of his own popularity this race has become a test

1:45

of the popularity of a leader who's been in power for 10 years and who has a

1:51

confidence that even if his party's struggling his popularity can lift up

1:57

their chances and that's what I want to talk to you about his popularity I want

2:02

to understand how that fits with the other thing I think of what I think of

2:08

Modi which is his authoritarian Tendencies and the last time you and I talked it was after a political

2:14

assassination in Canada that had been traced back to Mod's government so how is it that Modi has managed to become

2:22

such a prominent durable figure in India in the world's largest democracy so I've

2:28

been in India for over three years now and one of the central questions that

2:34

has fascinated me is exactly that he just has this enormous grip over the

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imagination of what is a hugely diverse country the number of languages the

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number of ethnicities the number of religions you know across 1.4 billion

2:51

people and and a huge geography but he just has this Talent of making them feel

2:58

one making them feel United as the new India that he imagines and he's put

3:05

himself at the center of reimagining what it means to be Indian in this age

3:13

and how is he doing that mujib a lot of it comes from the fact that he knows this country very well that he's

3:20

traveled he's spent time across the districts so he understands I think the

3:26

pulse of this country very well but he also does it by using technology by

3:33

using both old and new methods by constantly painting narratives that

3:41

project India as this one nation on the March and one of the ways he does that

3:48

is through this monthly radio show that he has a monthly radio show kind of like FDR's fireside chat sort of but a lot

3:57

more personal in the way that he draws on his own story that most Indians are

4:04

very familiar with that here is a man very much like them that he comes from a

4:10

really humble economic background you know his father was a te- Celler also in

4:15

India's rigid cast hierarchy he is not from the top communities and also that

4:21

he has dedicated his life almost entirely to what he says is his Nation

4:27

the national cause he doesn't have a family he was married at one point but

4:33

he sort of separated from his wife and he never talks about it he always projects himself as a bachelor who

4:40

Around the Clock only thinks about India and this comes into the radio

4:49

show the range of topics that he discusses lifestyle related disase from

4:56

Health to food and nutrition to transport drone to technology it's almost like

5:04

telling the listeners that all his time is spent thinking about all the issues

5:10

that could pertain to their lives he's got advice for them he's got

5:17

thoughts for them and the way he does it is in a very personable

5:28

way where he has callers connect where he

5:34

jokes where he references the places he's visited in the

5:42

country he makes it very relatable across a huge nation and he goes into

5:50

issues that might be very local to a community and then he tries to connect

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it to a national narrative and then he goes to issues that are very crosscutting for example exam

6:03

preparations right this is a country that cares about its studies and every

6:08

year around the exam period Modi becomes their favorite exam tutor he does this

6:16

on the radio show but he does a special broadcast for exam

6:28

preparation where sort of fills the hall with students and he gets up almost as a

6:36

tet talk speaker you know he walks around with pointers he walks around

6:41

with that kind of confidence and he knows that here are 16 17 18 year olds

6:47

potential voters in the future but even for their families he is a man who tells them hear

6:55

it from me

7:07

as someone like you who has made it Big M here are some of the things that worked for

7:13

[Music] me so he's basically connecting with the

7:21

Indian people kind of somewhere between like Oprah and Dr Phil on American

7:27

television basically basically that that that actually might be a better

7:32

reference than FDR in a way just the range of things that he addresses and

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the tone in which he does and sort of this hope of Mobility this hope of

7:45

making it right he personifies that as well and there's something hugely

7:50

powerful about that and he's very consistent in it as well since he rose

7:57

to National Power 10 years ago he's barely missed an episode wow so every

8:03

month he is in the years of this huge country right and wherever the

8:11

information space moves he wants to be there whether it's the Billboards

8:16

whether it's the radio whether it's the television and especially social media

8:22

right this is something that he understood much earlier than other Indian leaders the value of social media

8:31

across a country this huge to get your message um particularly a country that

8:37

is very rapidly digitizing right and a country that's so young exactly a

8:42

country that is so young a country that's so huge and and a country that has access to cheap smartphones cheap

8:48

data so he understood this very well and in the past few years he senses that

8:56

some of the people some of his potential voters might actually be shifting to these

9:02

independent spaces of information the YouTube show people the Instagram

9:07

influencers and all and he wanted to be there he wanted to make sure all of them

9:13

project him and his image the same way so what did he

9:21

do just a couple months before the election he held this huge award

9:28

ceremony for the influenc ladies and gentlemen join your hands together for the influencer of the

9:35

influencers the OG the goat honorable PM Narendra Modi

9:42

G for 2 hours he was standing on stage and the best Storyteller award goes to

9:51

Kika goind dasami and he was handing out award after award to hundreds of

9:58

influencers from across India and the next category is disruptor of the Year award while the hall filled with people

10:06

who have millions of followers across these different platforms all of them had their phones out recording Modi on

10:17

stage you know giving him a pat on the back you know dropping a little detail

10:22

having something relatable with each one of these young folks who came on stage

10:28

to receive the award from

10:37

him you know so it's just somebody who is so sharp to latch on to every

10:44

opportunity to connect with a pocket of

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audience and that was on

10:56

display just imagine the power of those hundreds of influencers with millions of

11:02

followers across these platforms walking out of that Hall thinking one of the most powerful men in the world not only

11:09

had time for us but he made us feel that he knew us right mhm and what they will

11:16

do to then carry his [Music]

11:26

message and this is what a successful politician is right they connect with voters and they find people that can

11:33

spread their message but a successful politician is also someone who gives people a story about what their country

11:40

is and who they are in it they help people understand themselves as Citizens

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so what is Modi actually telling them what is that story well it's a story of

11:51

India's rise think of a country coming out of you know a long history of

11:57

colonial oppression a foreign Invasion he is telling the same people that we

12:04

finally found our footing that we're being respected on the world stage that

12:09

our economy is growing that The Prestige of what it is to be Indian now is

12:15

changing on the world stage that for the longest time the world treated us as

12:21

this poor country where you had to send Aid now the world is treating us as a

12:27

major power that can offer Solutions and again the way he communicates this is

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very important one of the things he did recently was to have Bill Gates over

12:42

Bill Gates as in Bill Gates Bill as in Bill Gates as in for all in you know

12:47

intensive purposes in the Indian mind the man who invented computers

12:54

right and modi's government actually released a full you know very heavily

13:00

produced video to promote that visit and that conversation between Modi and

13:06

Gates morning great to see you you know these beautiful sort of

13:12

video shots of Drone footage and music and all of this he shakes hands with

13:17

Modi and they sit down for a [Music]

13:24

conversation but the body language in this conversation is very important uh I'm just curious in terms of your

13:31

journey of using you know PCS or phones or different types of software was there

13:37

uh something that really Drew you in or how what's that been like Bill Gates is asking a lot of the questions he's

13:44

asking an English Mod's answering in

13:52

Hindi and Modi is giving him the solutions right on techn ology on sort

14:00

of how do you spread technology to The Villages how do you sort of inject

14:05

technology into simplifying governance and what this is telling his

14:11

audience is that I have brought India to a stage where the man who's associated

14:20

with computers is coming to me for answers right right I'm the guy giving

14:26

that computer inventor the answers exactly exactly and again that's a

14:31

powerful thing right that if you were a village boy you know a teenager

14:36

somewhere deep in rural India and you watch this man in a suit asking the

14:44

questions and you watch the man who speaks your language giving him the answers and

14:51

explaining to him how the world should work and what the solutions are to the

14:56

AI problems of the world what the Solutions are to you know incorporating

15:01

technology in agriculture he is reinforcing the same narrative that I

15:07

have made it for I am Clinging On to the identity that is very Indian and look

15:15

the world is coming for answers that my country truly is on the top of the world

15:22

my country is on the top of the world but my country is on the top of the world on its own terms in terms of

15:29

holding on to a cultural identity as well that my country can advance and

15:35

sort of progress without necessarily letting go of its cultural values and it

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could offer the world Solutions in terms of technology and modernity so Mod's

15:48

very skillfully leveraging this Gates visit right he's using it to drive home his Central message which is India is on

15:54

top of the world I'm on top of India and even the inventor of the personal computer is coming to me for technology

16:01

advice so that's the story he's telling yes but on the ground it's a much more

16:08

mixed reality yes India's economy is growing but it's an economy that is not helping

16:17

lift up a lot of people that it's a deeply unequal economic reality in this

16:23

country you've got the fastest growing economy in the world it's become the

16:29

fifth largest economy in the world and yet unemployment is a major problem it

16:34

can't generate enough jobs for its huge youth population and 800 million people

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are dependent on government ration handouts every month but Modi in his

16:48

sort of control of the information space and in his political cunning he defines

16:55

these handouts and rations as development that looked you are getting help from

17:01

the government you're not starving that looked uh you might not get a job but

17:06

you know you got a gas cylinder your mom got a gas cylinder a gas cylinder like a

17:12

propane take for cooking yes and the political Genius of it is in how he then

17:19

follows up he's created this huge welfare state where he uses resources

17:26

from a topheavy economy to give handouts to the poor and then after those

17:32

handouts have been given he's got a huge party apparatus that knocks on each door

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and says remember that monthly ration of rice and doll and cooking oil that you got that came from Modi and in a lot of

17:46

these places his picture is on it his picture is on this sort of uh government stores that gives the handout

17:52

interesting like the picture of his face yeah the picture of his face his picture was on the vaccine certificate that

18:00

every person in this country got he does not miss an opportunity to be in the

18:06

face of every citizen of this country to tell them whatever solution you're getting is from my end interesting so

18:16

he's essentially giving people these essential things but he's taking pains to make sure that people really down to

18:23

the household level understand that he's the one giving them his face is there

18:28

like really branding it as his own accomplishment yes and I think one part of it is his Mastery of narrative

18:36

building and communication but the other part of it is the economic context of this country that for the longest time

18:43

these sections of society that we talk about what he's giving them is more than what they had before him yeah they were

18:51

always so weak and so poor and the state was failing them for so long that even a

18:57

small passion handout a month is a sign of an improved state is a sign of a

19:05

changed India and he drives that point home by The Narrative he builts around

19:11

it that hey I've given you a little bit imagine how much more I can give you if India keeps Rising so it sounds like

19:18

Modi has really found this very unique recipe to speak to this incredibly vast

19:25

country he's organized with his party machine and his face on aid but he's

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also deeply appealing and present in almost every Indian's life and that's

19:36

kind of the textbook definition of a skilled politician yes that's one version of

19:42

Modi but there's also another Modi a more divisive even dangerous Modi and

19:51

we've seen that side of him come out in recent weeks [Music]

19:58

[Laughter] we'll be right

20:03

[Music]

20:14

back so mujib tell us what happened over the past couple of weeks what changed

20:19

over the past couple weeks in this election campaign is all of a sudden

20:24

Mod's rhetoric directly started targeting Muslims all his life he spent as a foot soldier

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of a right-wing Hindu organization called the RSS and the goal of that

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organization has always been to turn India into a Hindu State the secular

20:43

Republic that India was created as in 1947 after the British left uh they see

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that as unfair so Mr Modi comes from that kind of a background and so in his

20:56

10 years in office as Mr MO firmed up this vision of a Hindu first

21:02

state many of his policies were seen as discriminatory towards Muslims India's

21:08

200 million Muslim minority population beyond the basics of welfare the states

21:15

sort of allowing Muslims participation in the political space in the cultural

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space has shrunk completely during his time and Modi himself in those years

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would continue targeting of the Muslims but in a very subtle way he would make

21:33

references to their clothes he would make references to their choice of food he had all these ways of referring to

21:40

Muslims but then he did two things one is he mentioned the Muslims by name and

21:47

then second thing he did was to define the Muslims as Outsiders as infiltrators

21:54

who don't belong here who've intruded into his vision of the Indian

21:59

Society he started saying that if his opposition comes to

22:10

power they will take the wealth of the

22:15

Hindus and they will give it to the [Music]

22:20

Muslims and he didn't just say wealth land property he said they would take

22:27

the women's jewelry

22:32

[Music] they would take the necklace that Hindu

22:38

women wear as a sign of their marriage so he went very specific to something

22:45

that is very associated with honor and not just

22:51

wealth and then as he repeated the point the way these sort of you know populist

22:57

politicians do he threw a question to his

23:04

audience a huge crowd of the campaign rally and he said do you want your

23:11

wealth to go to the [Music]

23:21

infiltrators so he's kind of saying the quiet part out loud here right that

23:27

Muslims are not actually part of this big National project even though they are as

23:35

you say 15% of the population of India they are Indian citizens so it seems

23:40

like a pretty big deal that Modi himself would say this right I mean why did he

23:45

say this do you think we were all left wondering why would he Veer from a formula that had

23:54

worked for him that others will do the Dirty Work of directly targeting Muslims

24:01

where he would just make subtle references and that was good enough particularly in a moment where he

24:06

projects himself as a global Statesman as somebody who believes in these Democratic Values but I think the place

24:15

where he made this comment give us Clues it was in the state of rajastan in sort

24:22

of Northern India this Northern more populated belt of India that is his

24:29

stronghold and within that state there's talks that some of the Hindu casts were

24:35

not happy with him that there was discontent

24:41

and as a way of uniting the Hindu divisions within his support base he has

24:50

always United them against someone against something and that someone and

24:56

something has consistently the Muslims so despite his popularity he's

25:03

anxious about the margin of his victory and kind of resorted to this nasty form of nationalism to bring out his Hindu

25:10

base to kind of bring together those divisions yes and it has worked for him in the past this sort of Hindu Muslim

25:17

division this fear of the Muslim has helped him overcome his other moments of

25:23

political weakness but mujib just to play devil's advocate for a second here

25:28

I mean isn't it possible that these things are all signs that he's actually feeling very secure you know that he's

25:36

not just resorting to this to bring out his base but that he's feeling so secure

25:42

that he's able to just kind of wear this ethnonationalism on his sleeve and do these very illiberal things because you

25:49

know he's so powerful and popular that it doesn't matter that's one possibility absolutely

25:55

that this is the peak of uncheck power that I can govern this country and I can

26:02

use the levers of power in any way I want the institutions and I can say

26:08

whatever I want that there will be no checks on it domestically and we're

26:13

seeing this he's resorting to crackdowns on the opposition he's resorting to

26:19

throwing opposition leaders in jail he is resorting to drying up the source of

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funding for his political opponents to kind of tilt the playing field in his

26:30

favor and there's also this security that internationally beyond the borders

26:36

of India nobody will say anything at all because he's created the sense

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of his story his power is so intertwined with the story and the power

26:50

of this Rising India and for these outside countries who want deals with

26:55

India who want trade with India one transactions with India he is confident

27:01

that they will not criticize him that they will not stand up and say your

27:06

Crossing Lines right so mujib we've been talking about Modi as a leader with just

27:13

this wild popularity in part because his vision of a shining Modern India appeals

27:21

to a lot of people but there's also this darker streak this Hindu fundamentalism

27:26

that we've been talking about and I guess the the kind of amazing and confounding thing about India and about

27:33

Modi is that all of these things are true so if you had to come up with a

27:39

category for Modi what would you say I guess the fascinating thing about him is

27:46

that he's not easy to label one thing I've learned in my years of reporting

27:53

here is that he's many things at once

27:58

he sees himself as someone who after the founding fathers

28:05

of India right after the founding fathers of this Republic he speaks of an

28:11

ambition that no prime minister before him would speak of in the way of

28:18

completely reshaping this country for the

28:25

future but at the same time he is someone who has

28:32

demonstrated that he is amassing power around himself

28:39

that he's consistently brushing aside any checks

28:45

on his power that he has an ideology that does not see this

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country's entire population as equal that that ideology has a vision of a first class Citizen

29:01

and a second class Citizen and which one of these many

29:08

modies we see in the future it's hard to tell but in moments of tension and in

29:16

moments when he is anxious that darker sight comes out more clearly and the

29:24

efforts at a Visionary Statesman that wants to pull up the entirety of this

29:30

country to that sort of higher place that he has in mind ends up taking a

29:36

back

29:42

seat mujib thank you thank [Music]

29:54

you we'll be right back [Music]

30:05

here's what else you should know today on Wednesday well hello everyone it's just

30:10

another Wednesday on Capital Hill I for the second time in less than a year republicans in Congress sought to

30:18

depose their own speaker in the House of Representatives but this time the effort

30:24

failed the attempt was made by representative Marjorie Taylor of Georgia house Speaker Mike Johnson

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easily batted it down I I uh I want to say that I appreciate the show of Confidence from my colleagues to defeat

30:38

this misguided effort that is certainly what it was Johnson survived because

30:43

Democrats came to his rescue the vote to kill Green's effort was an overwhelming

30:49

359 to 43 the democrat's support allowed Johnson to avoid the messy Showdown on

30:57

the house floor that had led to the historic ouster of former speaker Kevin

31:02

McCarthy last fall green had threatened to make the move for weeks since Johnson

31:08

pushed through a long-stalled $95 billion foreign aid package to Ukraine and Israel in the end her effort was

31:16

largely symbolic green was widely booed by lawmakers as she called up the

31:22

resolution and read it aloud and they go into Rafa I'm not

31:28

supplying the weapons that have been used historically to deal with Rafa to deal with the cities to deal with that

31:34

problem a day after the White House acknowledged that it had halted the shipment of 3,500 bombs to Israel last

31:42

week out of concern that they might be used on Jerusalem's planned assault on Rafa in southern Gaza President Biden

31:49

told CNN in an interview that he would also block the delivery of weapons and

31:55

artillery shells that could be fired into densely populated areas of Rafa

32:01

Biden also acknowledged that American bombs had been used to kill Palestinian

32:07

civilians Biden's remarks underscored the growing Rift between the US and

32:13

Israel over its war in Gaza but it's uh it's it's just wrong we're not going to

32:19

we're not going to supply the weapons and the artillery shells used today's episode was produced by ASA

32:26

chatra ER krupy will Reed Shannon Lyn and summer tamod it was edited by

32:33

Brendan clink BG and Michael benois contains original music by Rowan Nimo

32:40

Marian Lozano and Dan Powell and was engineered by Chris Wood our theme music

32:47

is by Jim brunberg and Ben Lanser of wonderly

32:52

[Music]

32:59

[Music] that's it for the daily I'm Sabrina

33:04

tavernes see you tomorrow [Music]