

# Modi: Breadth of vision that is almost Gandhian

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The principles of non-violence with which Gandhiji led India to independence and his efforts to unite Indians across religions, castes, regions, class, etc, earned him the title of 'mahatma,' which means "great-soul". Albert Einstein said this of Mahatma Gandhi: "Generations to come will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth."

Since independence, India has been successful in many respects. We have an excellent Constitution, we are a vibrant democracy, we are secular, and we have built and nurtured institutions (a free and vibrant media, independent judiciary, election commission, institutes of higher learning, etc. Notwithstanding these successes, India has not lived up to its potential. The economic path that India chose stifled growth and bred poverty. India's administrative machinery is inefficient and mired in corruption. Our politicians indulge in vote bank politics to gain power; and do nothing for their vote bank when in power. India stands divided on the basis of caste, religion, region, and class.

When India went to the polls in 2014, the mood was that governance was no longer about serving the people, but about enriching oneself when in power. Since coming to power in 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has sought to change the narrative.

As his government gets ready to complete three years in office, an appreciation of the larger picture of the initiatives Mr Modi is weaving together shows that these are not just about providing good governance but are a part of a larger plan to lift India's underprivileged to a better level of existence. The breadth and sweep of what Mr Modi is attempting to achieve as an agent of change is Gandhian in proportion.

Consider the numerous initiatives that he has taken to empower women and work towards greater gender equality. As Chief Minister of Gujarat, he was committed to empowering women: before the start of the school session, he would move his administration into the districts of Gujarat and would go from door to door to convince parents to enroll their daughters in schools. He eliminated stamp duty on properties registered in the names of women, and he doubled the grants to panchayats that elected only women.

As Prime Minister, his 'beti padhao beti bachao' initiative; the drive to build toilets for girls in schools so



that they remain enrolled; the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana and Housing for all, are decisions in the same direction.

The stand of the government on triple talaq, polygamy, and nikah halala are also aimed at empowering women. Mr. Modi is trying to bring about a change in how we as a nation view and treat women. Take for example the issues of polygamy. Proponents of the practice on religious grounds argue that polygamy does not violate a woman's rights as a man cannot take a second wife without the consent of the first wife. Whereas the reality is that if the first wife does not give her consent, her husband will divorce her using the option of triple talaq. The psychological impact that the practice of polygamy and triple talaq have on society is that girls are brought up to be subservient to men. They are expected to be submissive, to not study too much lest they fail to "adjust", taught how to clean, cook and keep their husbands happy. A stand against such practices will move society towards greater gender equality.

By seeking to empower women and bring about greater equality, Mr Modi is attempting to empower one

half of India's population that has traditionally been suppressed and discriminated against. This could be a game changer.

The effort to free India from the clutches of politics based on caste or religion could also be transformative and could lift the underprivileged to a higher and better level of existence, if implemented in earnest. Instead of looking at the underprivileged through the prism of caste or religion, Mr. Modi appears to address their lack of opportunity. His programmes are aimed at empowering them with education, skills, and economic opportunity. Initiatives such as Skill India, Start-Up India and the Mudra scheme must be seen from this perspective.

The Jan Dhan Yojana scheme is geared to empowering the poorest of the poor by financially including them in the banking system. The Bima schemes are geared to empowering the poorest of the poor by including them in the insurance system. The Ujjwal scheme provides the poorest women in rural India with gas connections so that they no longer have to burn twigs, leaves and wood for cooking.

The Jyoti scheme provides LED

bulbs to the underprivileged. The Swachh Bharat Abhiyan is about enabling a cleaner and healthier India. The reorientation of the government to efficiently target subsidies, whether by neem-coating fertilizers or by direct benefit transfers, enables the administration to plug leakages and save thousands of crore rupees which can be spent on infrastructure or other initiatives to uplift the poor. The initiative to promote yoga is geared towards promoting health and wellness. The Krishi Yojana is geared to provide irrigation to farmers. These initiatives are about uplifting the common man and woman. And once Housing for All fructifies, it will transform lives of the poor. India is a vibrant argumentative democracy with 125 crore people. Governing India is no walk in the park. The sheer magnitude of the transformation that is being attempted must be viewed in totality.

Given the success that some of these initiatives have had, Mr. Modi's rivals claim there is nothing new in what his government is doing, and that it was they who came up with the idea. An idea by itself is worthless; it is the ability to capitalise on the idea and execute it that is important.

Since Independence, every political party has claimed to be pro-poor, and framed policies that failed to uplift the poor, bred poverty, stifled growth, wasted the nation's resources, held India back, and deprived the common man and woman of opportunity. A change in this approach was necessary. Certainly to many, Mr. Modi's way of going about his job is refreshingly different.

The most convincing aspect of Modi's popularity is his credibility as the leader of the masses. For the first time in decades, we have a Prime Minister who is taken seriously by ordinary people out of a belief that solutions to their problems are within his grasp. This is both an opportunity as well as a challenge.

I had the opportunity, over a decade and a half ago, while in New York during a World Peace Conference at the United Nations, of having long breakfast meetings with Mr. Modi. His clarity of purpose and perception placed him in a unique space. His determination to transform India left me with no doubt that he was a politician with a difference.

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