

How the Legend of Modi, Hindu Hero and Political Messiah, Is Breaking India's Politics

Cultivating the Modi myth: How the illustrated booklets I bought for 50 rupees at a train station kiosk explain his devotees' loyalty, despite COVID and Pegasus, eclipsing Trump and Netanyahu, and why it's such grim news



Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi addresses Independence Day celebrations at the Red Fort in New Delhi last month, touting his government's COVID achievements.Credit: Manish Swarup/AP

[Khinraj Jangid](#)

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Narendra Modi is presiding over multiplying human and political calamities in India. From COVID to Pegasus spyware, Indians' lives and the fabric of their democracy are unravelling.

But his self-assurance hasn't taken a hit. Nor has he lost significant grassroots support: The voters who believed him to be their political messiah are still staunch in their belief, even when Modi has failed to protect their rights and even their lives.

How can this be? In today's [India](#), it seems the notion the premier must be held accountable for his actions, and will get pummeled at the polls for failure, no longer holds water. In other words, the normal rules of politics don't apply to Modi.

To understand this phenomenon requires a dive into how India's prime minister has harnessed his party apparatus, [Hindu culture](#) and India's national narrative to create a mythologized persona that absorbs adulation and success but is often impermeable to blame. And the best way to enter this parallel world is through comic books.

Modi's self-mythologizing has been a conscious project over decades. His political rise, revolving around promises of economic development, took shape within the political milieu of Gujarat, the state he led for almost 15 years (2001-2014). Once he decided to bid for the number one position within the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, in 2013, that socio-cultural and religious image-building campaign accelerated.



Covers of two illustrated storybooks mythologizing the life of India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi

Credit: Khinvraj Jangid

One medium cleverly chosen to push the Legend of Modi far and wide is illustrated story books, aimed at (voting) adults as well as (impressionable) young people. Comic books recounting national and religious legends, cheap, accessible, requiring only basic literacy and vibrantly illustrated, are sold in countless numbers across India.

I picked up two booklets in Hindi starring Modi, one a form of parable, the other a fictionalized biography, from a book stall at the train station of Ajmer in early 2014 for 50 rupees each, around 70 U.S. cents: *Bhavishya Ki Aasha Narendra Modi* (Narendra Modi: Hope for the Future) and *Pragati Purush Narendra Modi* (Narendra Modi: The Man for Development.)

The first illustrated booklet tells the tale of a small village in Gujarat, whose inhabitants were flustered. Their only temple was in the middle of a crocodile-infested river: no-one could reach the temple or even change its tattered devotional flag.

One day, a boy auspiciously called Narendra fearlessly jumped into the river, fought the crocodiles, reached to the temple and renewed its prayer flag. A courteous, precocious child who loved books, Narendra had been prepared to die for the sake of the temple. Unsurprisingly, he was also devout follower of Lord Shiva and each day he worshipped him without fail.

Narendra also had a Muslim friend, called Jasud Khan, to whom he gave home-made sweets. He served chai and refreshments to Indian soldiers passing through the local train station and spent many nights awake, ministering

to their arrival and departures, during the India-China war of 1962. He was, in short, a model patriot, Hindu devotee and dedicated volunteer for public service.

The second comic book begins in a similar fashion, but pivots towards Modi's political trajectory. This time around, Narendra is a young adult, and decides to leave home one day in search of nirvana. Out in the wilds, he meets a sage, and asks him how to liberate oneself from the cycle of birth-death. The sage scolds him: The motherland, India, is in crisis, and that the first duty of youth like him should be to serve it, rather than seek personal salvation.

Returning home, Narendra decides to serve the nation. While selling tea at his father's small stall he comes across volunteers of the [Hindu nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh](#) group and [joins them](#). He swiftly rises in its ranks, propelled by popular recognition of his passionate commitment, and enters the state politics of Gujarat – which becomes his stepping stone to the premiership of India.



Members of the Hindu nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) stand during Varsh Pratipada festival, the Hindu New Year, in Ahmadabad, India. Credit: Ajit Solanki / AP Photo

This myth-making is not just a curiosity. It is a core component of the reverential aura Modi has cultivated around himself, which also functions as a protective bubble against the usual vicissitudes of electoral accountability.

Nowhere has the effectiveness of this strategy been more apparent than in the last few months, when Modi and his leadership of India has faced indictments of their policies and behavior that would surely have meant political death for national leaders elsewhere, in the form of the [COVID pandemic](#) and the [Pegasus spyware](#) saga.



Drone view of a mass cremation of victims who died due to COVID-19 at a crematorium ground in New Delhi, India, in April.Credit: Danish Siddiqui/Reuters

Official statistic put India's COVID death toll at approaching 450,000. But a recent study suggests that the real total, taking into account excess deaths, is ten times more terrible, and likely to surpass [four million dead](#) – India's deadliest disaster since partition. That a Third World country like India cannot count its COVID dead correctly is not in itself surprising or shameful, because it doesn't even have an accurate count of its living.

There have been damning denunciations of [Modi's mishandling](#) of the pandemic, from declaring premature victory over it to holding mass political rallies at the height of the second wave of infections, which he has brushed off.

More recently, his government has committed to the full denial of facts that Indians witnessed with their own eyes and were reported on [in full](#) by the [international media](#): That there was a desperate shortage of oxygen in hospitals during April-May 2021, and that led to people dying.

But in parliament, Modi's officials stated, shamelessly, that India suffered "[no deaths](#) due to an oxygen shortage." That came as a punch in the gut to the medical staff and hospital administrators who had pleaded for supplies, and to the international donors, including Israel, who airlifted oxygen cylinders, meters and concentrators to India during that period.

There was a social media outcry, and Modi's popularity suffered its first blow since 2014.

India Today, one of the country's largest media groups, found in its biannual ['Mood of the Nation' survey](#) that his personal approval had fallen from 66 percent to 24 percent. But the same survey found that 36 percent of respondents actually rated Modi's handling of the pandemic as "good," and that voters *still* regarded him as the best candidate to fill the office of India's prime minister.

In similar fashion, Modi's government has evaded any real response to Pegasus controversy: the alleged use of Israeli high-tech firm NSO's spyware to [surveil journalists](#), civil society activists and political opposition figures.



Congress workers in Kolkata shout slogans during a protest against Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Pegasus spyware scandal last weekCredit: DIBYANGSHU SARKAR - AFP

The government refuses to admit or deny that the use of Pegasus by any state agencies. Despite opposition parties stalling parliamentary proceedings in an attempt to force the government to debate the scandal, its potential illegality and its breach of privacy, Modi's ministers called Pegasus a "non-issue" that's not worth parliamentary time.

Through all this, Modi simply ignores the criticisms, keeps his head down when needed, instructs his troll army to [deny and deflect](#) on social media, and then loudly pivots to populist issues to rally voters.

Modi effectively projects self-assurance because he still enjoys a level of support that is more immune to failure than the leaders to which he has often been compared, Trump and Netanyahu. His Indian fans, who act more like devotees than voters, cannot see that the leader they believed to be their political messiah has failed to protect their very lives.

My regular barber, when I'm in Israel, told me he was optimistic that Indians would not spare him in the next elections because of how he mismanaged the second COVID wave. I walked out of his shop wishing that is how democracy should be – holding leaders accountable – but I knew this was not going to happen in India any time soon.



A supporter holds up a cut-out of a lotus, the election symbol of India's ruling BJP, with an image of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Ahmedabad, India, December 8, 2017Credit: \ Amit Dave/ REUTERS

Modi has demonstrated some very complex, if not contradictory, leadership characteristics.

He is an incorrigible ideologue, conceited and imperious, but presents himself as the people's *chowkidar*, or protective watchman. He has extravagant taste in clothes yet claims to be modest and austere.

He is an authoritarian who unblushingly calls himself the Indian people's *pradhan sevak*, or principal servant. He is both provincial and an entrenched nationalist who sees India's mission as nothing less than being the *vishwa guru*, or mentor to the world.

In his public performances, he appears aloof and uncongenial, yet he frames the national radio monologues that he's given every month since 2014 as *man ki baat* – heart-to-heart fireside chats.

The truth is that Modi's base is in love with the figure presented in those comic books, and as a fictional being, inconvenient truths about his performance or inconsistencies between his projected image and his real character and leadership abilities are simply irrelevant.

His base, heavily populated by Hindu devotees (*bhaktas*), have bought the conflation between Modi as a political leader and spiritual father of the nation, considering him a Hindu saint – a celibate *fakir*, or religious ascetic, a term he has used about himself, 'married' to India, just as the comic books sold in numerous railway stations foretold.

They see his growing beard – a sign of devotion – as a sign of his commitment to building India's existential power, arrayed against what they see as the inconsequential accusations of his critics that he is never properly held to account, and that he has no genuine respect for democratic transparency, the freedom of the press or of conscience.

A base that believes in the Legend of Modi, and equates it with the welfare and survival of India itself, is not susceptible to rational persuasion. That ‘transcendence,’ or subversion, of politics is this prime minister’s most notable, and grim, achievement.

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