

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

The Modi Decade



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SHASHI THAROOR

Last week, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s government inaugurated a new parliament building in New Delhi. It was supposed to symbolise the vision of a “new India” that Modi and his ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) claim they have been realising during their nine years in power. But the building has proved highly controversial, with 20 opposition parties boycotting the inauguration ceremony – the latest manifestation of the seemingly irreparable breakdown in relations between the opposition and the government. As a member of the opposition, I, too, have strongly criticised the Indian government’s policies, rhetoric, and functioning. But the

women are unable to afford to refill gas cylinders, and electricity supplies are erratic. But they have undoubtedly improved the quality of rural life, especially in the poor states of the northern “Hindi Belt.” The Modi government has also overseen progress in the diffusion of technology. The proliferation of smartphones with cheap data plans has connected nearly a billion Indians to the internet. The much-vaunted “India Stack” – comprising government-backed application programming interfaces (APIs) – has enabled private companies to build the online commons. A startup culture has developed, mainly in the tech domain, and several unicorns (startups valued at more than \$1

surprise that violence has surged. Muslims have faced lynching by so-called cow vigilantes, and some Christians have been subjected to vandalism and assault during the Christmas season. Though Indian elections remain free and fair, anti-democratic trends have taken hold between votes. Dissent is framed as disloyalty, with criticism of government policies labeled “anti-national.” The tax agencies and financial police have been unleashed against opposition leaders and their supporters, and “bulldozer justice” has been dispensed mainly against Muslim protesters – whose homes and businesses are literally bulldozed – without due process. Moreover, the autonomy of Indian institutions – from the Reserve Bank of India to the Election Commission – has been weakened. Even the judiciary has come under pressure. Parliament has been reduced to a bulletin board for government decisions. The Modi government has also fallen far short on economic



Indian PM Narendra Modi holds a sengol with Hindu priests during the inauguration of the new parliament building in New Delhi on May 28.

PHOTO: REUTERS

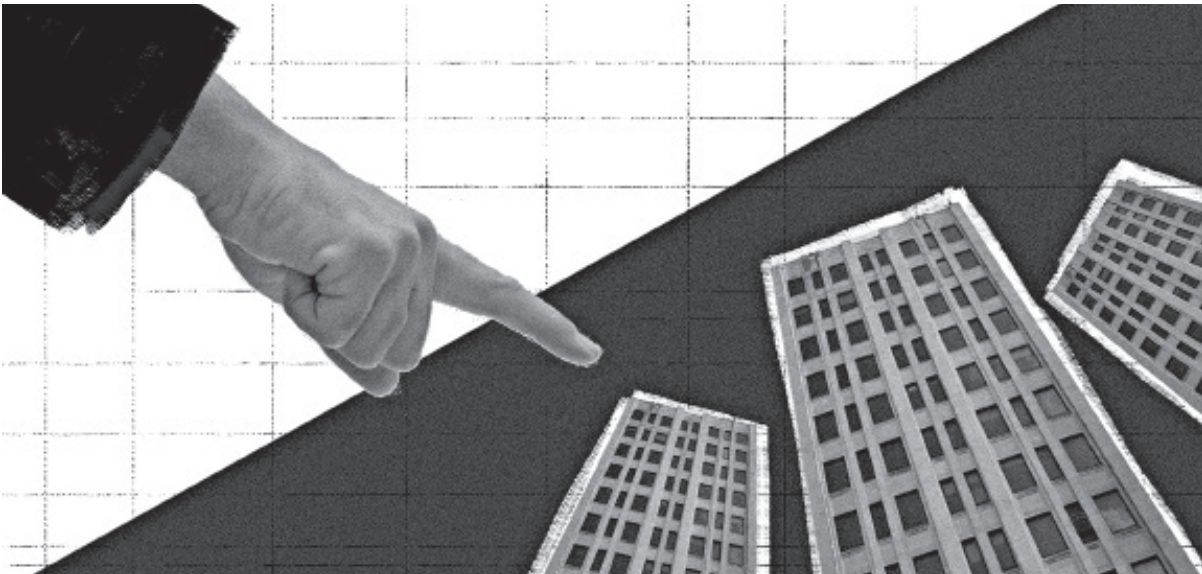
fact is that Modi reportedly enjoys the highest approval ratings of any world leader. As we approach the beginning of an election year, it is worth considering the sources of this support. The Modi government can claim some notable accomplishments. The most obvious has been the rapid construction of much-needed infrastructure, including new airports, ports, and highways, enabled by streamlined procedures, quick approvals, and extensive reliance on private contractors. The

billion) have emerged. When a Pakistani video blogger gushes about Indian street vendors offering Paytm QR codes on their tea carts, or bankers rave about India’s Unified Payments Interface (which transfers money directly between bank accounts), India gains in global esteem. The government’s claim to have reduced “leakage” by delivering welfare payments directly to beneficiaries’ accounts is credible. Finally, Modi has invigorated Indian diplomacy, traveling tirelessly around the world, hugging

policy. Despite the progress in areas like transport infrastructure and technology diffusion, India has a long way to go on many fronts, particularly schooling, skills development, sanitation, and public health-care facilities. Likewise, the benefits of economic growth have failed to reach the poor and lower-middle class. Unemployment is at record highs, and female labor-force participation is plummeting. Many small and micro-enterprises had to be permanently closed after the disastrous demonetisation of 2016. Farmers are struggling to cope with falling incomes. Budgetary allocations for many essential welfare programmes, including the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, have dwindled. Crony capitalism is rampant.

The Modi government’s response to the Covid-19 crisis also left much to be desired. Though Indians were eventually vaccinated, images of migrant workers trudging homeward during a nationwide lockdown still haunt the country. And while the government claims that less than 500,000 people died, the World Health Organization estimates that the real figure is 10 times higher, raising questions about the reliability of official statistics. The jury is still out on the Modi government’s handling of several other challenges, from the Ukraine war to Chinese encroachments along the disputed Himalayan frontier. It is far from clear that India is prepared to handle a conflict with China or Pakistan (or both). The 2015 deal to buy 36 Rafale fighter jets from the French company Dassault Aviation continues to draw controversy, owing to contractual irregularities. India’s first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, is the only one to have won three successive terms in office. Next year, the Indian people will weigh Modi’s mixed record and decide whether it warrants making him the second.

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VISUAL: REHNUMA PROSHOON

A teachers’ leader becoming a proctor can’t be good news



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PRANAB KUMAR PANDAY

In a concerning development that raises questions about the integrity of educational institutions in Bangladesh, the president of a prominent public university teachers’ association has assumed an additional role as the proctor – which is an office of profit. Such consolidation of power, wherein the bargaining authority and administration are intertwined, has ignited fears that the rights and welfare of teachers are at stake. The educational community now faces the daunting prospect of compromised representation, potential conflicts of interest, and a severe erosion of academic freedom. The role of a teachers’ association is critical in ensuring fair treatment, representing the rights and interests of educators, and fostering a conducive academic environment. By providing a platform for collective bargaining, these associations act as crucial mediators between the faculty and the administration, safeguarding the welfare of teachers and promoting an atmosphere conducive to quality education. This move poses a fundamental conflict of interest that undermines the very purpose and autonomy of the association. The bargaining authority, traditionally entrusted with advocating for the rights of teachers, must maintain independence from administrative positions to serve the interests of its members effectively. Without a clear separation of powers, there is a significant risk that the bargaining authority, now embedded within the administration, may prioritise administrative objectives over the welfare of educators. This could result in reduced bargaining power, inadequate representation, and erosion of long-established safeguards that protect teachers’ rights and working conditions. Academic freedom, a cornerstone of any thriving educational institution, is also at stake. The ability of teachers to express their opinions, engage in critical discourse, and challenge existing paradigms are essential for the pursuit of knowledge and intellectual growth. However, when the bargaining authority merges with the administration, concerns about reprisals or self-censorship may arise. Faculty members could be hesitant to

voice dissenting views or engage in meaningful dialogue, thus stifling intellectual diversity and hindering the pursuit of excellence. Moreover, the intertwining of roles raises ethical concerns surrounding potential conflicts of interest. The president of the teachers’ association, occupying both the bargaining and administrative positions, may face conflicting loyalties and obligations. Balancing the interests of teachers while simultaneously fulfilling administrative responsibilities can create a perceived bias, undermining the credibility of the bargaining process and eroding trust among faculty members. The implications of this consolidation of power extend beyond the immediate concerns of teachers. As the primary beneficiaries of quality education, students are also likely to suffer the consequences. A compromised teachers’ association could reduce job satisfaction among educators, adversely impacting the overall quality of teaching and students’ learning experiences. Furthermore, if the association’s bargaining power diminishes due to its leader also being proctor, it may struggle to advocate for improved infrastructure, resources, and other vital components of an effective learning environment. To ensure the protection of teachers’ rights and maintain the integrity of educational institutions, immediate action is needed. The individual who has taken the administrative position despite being the association’s president should have stepped down from their latter position to avoid potential conflict of interest. The teachers should also be more aware while voting for association bodies. The vice-chancellor should not have offered the proctor position to someone heading a bargaining body such as the teachers’ association. And all stakeholders must recognise the urgent need for a clear distinction between the bargaining authority and administrative positions within public universities. It is imperative to revisit existing regulations and establish safeguards that prevent conflicts of interest and preserve the autonomy of teachers’ associations. Additionally, transparency and accountability should be central tenets of any system designed to

protect the interests of teachers. The process of selecting officeholders in the bargaining authority and administrative roles should be open, fair, and merit-based. Ensuring the election of individuals with a proven track record of advocating for teachers’ rights and upholding the principles of academic integrity are crucial in maintaining the credibility of these positions. Furthermore, fostering a culture of dialogue and inclusivity is essential. Regular consultations and open forums should be organised to facilitate communication between the administration, faculty members, and the teachers’ association. This will help address concerns, identify common goals, and strengthen collaboration for the betterment of the educational institution. A university authority also plays a pivotal role in safeguarding teachers’ rights and upholding educational institutions’ integrity. It should take immediate steps to review and revise existing policies and regulations to explicitly prohibit individuals from holding both bargaining authority and administrative positions simultaneously. These guidelines should be enforced strictly to prevent future conflicts of interest and ensure the independence and effectiveness of teachers’ associations. Promoting a culture of professional development and capacity building among teachers is crucial. Continuous learning, research, and collaboration opportunities can enhance education quality and empower educators to advocate for their rights effectively. By investing in the professional growth of teachers, the government can cultivate a highly skilled and motivated teaching community that contributes to the advancement of the nation’s education sector. Lastly, it is imperative for the wider community, including civil society organisations and the media, to remain vigilant and actively engage in discussions surrounding the issue. By highlighting the potential consequences of the consolidation of power within public universities, these stakeholders can raise awareness, advocate for change, and pressurise relevant authorities to take prompt action. A clear distinction between bargaining authorities and administrative bodies, transparency in the selection process, and establishment of independent oversight bodies are crucial steps towards ensuring teachers’ rights and welfare and maintaining educational institutions’ integrity. By prioritising these measures, Bangladesh can foster an environment where educators can thrive, students can excel, and the pursuit of knowledge can flourish.

Though Indian elections remain free and fair, anti-democratic trends have taken hold between votes. Dissent is framed as disloyalty, with criticism of government policies labeled “anti-national.” The tax agencies and financial police have been unleashed against opposition leaders and their supporters, and “bulldozer justice” has been dispensed mainly against Muslim protesters – whose homes and businesses are literally bulldozed – without due process. Moreover, the autonomy of Indian institutions – from the Reserve Bank of India to the Election Commission – has been weakened. Even the judiciary has come under pressure. Parliament has been reduced to a bulletin board for government decisions.

infrastructure boom has changed the face of many parts of India, and the work continues, with large new investments in modernising India’s railway network – one of the world’s largest, but among its creakiest. The government has also strengthened the social safety net for millions of poor Indians. Though Modi campaigned in 2014 against the previous government’s welfare schemes, which he claimed were colossally wasteful and bred a culture of dependence, his government has presided over the provision of toilets, cooking gas cylinders, cash transfers to farmers, and access to electricity and clean drinking water in rural India. Such initiatives are not perfect – toilets lack enough running water,

world leaders, and addressing raucous rallies of Indian expatriates in foreign capitals. India’s relations with the United States and its allies have never been better, and cooperation with key Gulf countries has never been closer. But these successes have been offset by far less admirable policies. The BJP’s belligerent Hindutva nationalism – which promotes a narrow interpretation of history and demonises India’s minorities, particularly Muslims – can be likened to a toxin injected into the veins of Indian society. With BJP leaders and their acolytes in the Hindutva “Parivar,” or “family” of associated organisations, regularly spouting inflammatory and divisive rhetoric, it should be no

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

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5 Skating category

10 Tequila source

12 Band-leader Shaw

13 Sheets and such

14 “Superman star

15 Caribou’s kin

16 Concoct

18 Join forces

20 – de la Cite

21 Prepares for war

23 Last letter, in London

24 Fill completely

26 Aid illegally

28 Crony

29 Humorist

Barry

31 Archaic

32 Return to the Enterprise

36 Fill with mist

39 King Kong, for one

40 Hint of color

41 Happened

43 Door sign

44 Less common

45 Baseball’s Pee Wee

46 Some mines

DOWN

1 Parking pro

2 Nimble

3 Sri –

4 Seth’s mother

5 Trim down

6 District

7 Use Schedule A

8 Brook

9 Oozed

11 Lasted

17 LP speed unit

19 Yoga need

22 Avoid a bogey, barely

24 Soup cracker

25 Chewy, as pasta

27 Arthur of TV

28 Movie ad

30 – Dhabi

33 New Zealand native

34 Sports surprise

35 Jury makeup

37 Gets on

38 Just

42 Dre’s music

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YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS

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