

San Francisco to Dadri

Written by [Ashutosh Varshney](#) | Published: October 23, 2015 12:00 am



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From the heights of San Francisco to the abyss of Dadri — the paradoxes of Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#)'s politics have scarcely been more palpable. They are clear to the mind and plain to see.

In the Bay area, Modi embraced technological modernity, lacing it up with remarkable oratorical and theatrical acumen, winning many hearts and several minds. Back in India, when a mob — either led by local Hindu nationalists or one in which they actively participated — lynched a Muslim man to death because he apparently ate beef, gory atavism ruled. India's most technology-oriented prime minister since Rajiv Gandhi was willing to ignore for days an act of primitive savagery. And when he finally spoke, he displayed ambivalence, not clarity. In quick succession, modernity, which claims to be forward-looking, and atavism, normally viewed as backward-bending, blended into a seamless whole.

Can modernity and atavism be simultaneously embraced? Which will give in first? This question could well begin to haunt Indian politics now.

Some distinguished critics of modernity would disagree with this way of posing the question. For them, violence is at the heart of modernity. They say that more people were killed in the first half of the 20th century than in any half century before the modern age. Why? Because modernity, they argue, seeks uniformity; because its pivotal political form, the nation-state, is deeply uncomfortable with pluralism; because the modern majority seeks to erase the diversity that minorities represent.

Others like me would call this authoritarian modernity, to be distinguished from liberal modernity, which respects the idea of rights. Modernity does not come in one form. Which one is Modi's preferred form: authoritarian or liberal? We need to judge. Elections alone do not define liberalism; conduct between elections also does.

A fundamental claim of liberal modernity would be that Muslims do not live in India because of the kindness of Hindus. They live in India because they are citizens, and citizenship comes with a bundle of rights. Such rights include the notion that the privacy of a house cannot be violated by a mob and, infinitely more importantly, no one can be killed by a mob. The issue is not whether there is suspicion of wrongdoing or whether an actual offence has been committed. Even if the latter is true, a mob cannot be allowed to lynch a man to death. Only the state can prosecute an offender and that, too, following due process.

Yes, the prime minister can't speak on every violent incident. Yes, the state government is responsible for law and order, and Modi heads the Centre, not UP. But it was no routine crime. Religious differences were at the root of the lynching. According to reliable press reports, the local cadres of the prime minister's party were involved. A member of the prime minister's cabinet, a chief minister of his party, some elected [BJP](#) legislators and a flagship Hindu nationalist journal openly supported the killers, not the

victims. If it were a routine violation of the law, so much of the prime minister's ideological family would not be involved. It was a political project.

Whatever the partymen feel, a prime minister has to represent the nation, not a political party, let alone a religious group. Hindu-Muslim differences constitute a master narrative of Indian politics. They have repeatedly unleashed grisly passions. Because of India's history, when a Muslim man is lynched by a Hindu mob (and vice versa), some of the fundamental questions of India's polity break open. In such times, the prime minister has to follow constitutional morality, not take cover under quotidian legalism. Moral clarity must take precedence over ideological rectitude.

So why has moral clarity been missing? Commentators during the parliamentary campaign and his early days as prime minister saw Modi as representing the voice of economic modernisation. Many argued that the left-leaning [Congress](#) and its acts of commission and omission had depressed millions of voters, especially the young. Even Amartya Sen, a most prominent Modi critic, noted that Modi's rise to power had restored national hope.

In May 2014, and soon thereafter, the focus was squarely on the economic right. Some of us, however, wrote that the BJP had two wings, not one: the economic right and the cultural right. Three days after Modi's victory, this column said the following: "But if Modi is unable to change the RSS, considerable difficulty lies ahead. The narratives of development and anti-Muslim Hindu nationalism will become embattled twins, coexisting not peacefully but in great tension, one threatening to consume the other... Can the RSS accept development as the master narrative of Indian politics? We simply do not know." ('2014, like 1952', [The Indian Express](#), May 19, 2014).

The arrangement that Modi has struck with the RSS — implicitly or explicitly — is becoming obvious. He has surrendered culture and education to them, while keeping foreign and economic policy to himself. If he thought this arrangement would ensure a peaceful equilibrium, it has not happened. The cultural right, represented most of all by the RSS, now threatens to overwhelm the economic right.

Is Modi afraid of the RSS or does he, even after taking a constitutional oath, continue to be an RSS ideologue at heart? Those who only looked at the economic right component of Modi's political persona are beginning to wonder.

They should have known better. When Modi came to power, an entire ecosystem was empowered, including the cultural right. When you do that, the outcome remains uncertain. For the "thuggish" cultural right to be reined in, there has to be resolute action from the top. Unless Modi speaks in a forthright constitutional manner, the cultural right will keep coming back, receding only temporarily. An andarooni ishara (internal hint), expressing disapproval, may not do.

If many more lynchings happen as a consequence of ambivalence at the top, India awaits a dark turn. Make in India might also be imperilled. But that economic loss will be smaller than the diminution of India as a whole. A society that allows mobs to kill for religion cannot rise and be respected in modern times.

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