

# Is Modi the best communicator of them all?

PARLEY

A comparison of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's strategy with some of his predecessors

*Whether it is his monthly radio broadcast programme, Mann Ki Baat, or his tweets, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's outreach is unlike anything seen before. Sudheendra Kulkarni and Pankaj Pachauri analyse Mr. Modi's speeches and compare his communication strategy with those of previous Prime Ministers in a conversation moderated by Anuradha Raman. Excerpts:*

**Has Mr. Modi's strategy of reaching out directly to people been effective?**

**Sudheendra Kulkarni:** Mr. Modi is an amazingly effective communicator. I do not agree with his politics, but it must be said that he is a tireless communicator. Perhaps he has communicated more to the people of India than any Prime Minister did in the past. He's been using every available channel of communication, whether radio, Twitter, or public speeches. He's been firing on all cylinders, so much so that he is also using the Prime Minister's Office's Twitter account, and not his personal account. Using the PMO account for political propaganda is not right at all. But having said that, his communication strategy has been extremely useful to him and to the BJP in setting the agenda in the past five years in a way that no previous Prime Minister was able to do.

**Pankaj Pachauri:** Mr. Modi's communication strategy is a total flop because if you look at the indicators of this country's development – its economy and its relationship with its neighbours and the world – everything is a flop. The Prime Minister's communication strategy, as I found while working with former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, if the idea is to do good, is to reach out to people and take them along to evolve a consensus. What we are seeing is an advertising strategy. This has been a flop because the exalted PMO has been reduced to scoffing at Opposition leaders and calling them names. The country has paid taxes which have gone into the making of the Prime Minister's communication paraphernalia. So, it's a propaganda strategy. It's propaganda driven by government ma-

chinery, which includes Doordarshan and all the departments which come under Mr. Modi's control. Communication is a two-way process. You tell a narrative and the people respond. In this strategy, the response of the people has not been taken into account.

**But there was a lot of criticism of Dr. Singh for being silent.**

**PP:** The Prime Minister is chosen by a country not to regale or lampoon them. The people of India choose their Prime Minister to deliver on the promises made in the manifestos. Dr. Singh remained quiet and told me clearly, 'Let my work speak for itself'. His work is speaking now. If you look at the indicators then, in terms of trade or even in terms of the money spent on the defence force, all of them were better than the current government's. He told me when I joined him, 'I do not want to say too much than required'. And when he spoke, he measured his words. I remember on January 3, 2014, we held a press conference which had more than 200 journalists. It was a no-holds-barred question-answer session. He took 62 questions in more than 97 minutes and answered everything. None of the questions were planted. In that press conference, someone asked him about the candidature of Mr. Modi for prime ministership and Dr. Singh used the word 'disaster'. Five years later, Dr. Singh said he had uttered harsh words. Mr. Modi's communication strategy could win elections by propaganda, but cannot win people. We have seen in the recent Assembly Elections how effective this has been.

**Sudheendra, you said that Mr. Modi's communication strategy is very effective. Having worked with former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, and having been a part of L.K. Advani's team, how concerned are you by the fact that Mr. Modi has never held a proper interaction with journalists?**

**SK:** This is certainly a blot on Mr. Modi's record – that in the last five years, he has not addressed a single



press conference. Why is the press conference important? Because it gives an opportunity for members of the press. India can take pride in the fact that we have an independent, free press which can ask tough questions, inconvenient questions, which the Prime Minister has avoided all these years, though he has a lot to answer for. It not only shows that he doesn't want to take tough questions, but also shows a certain lack of respect for the media.

At the same time, let me go back to this point about the effectiveness of his communication. There is a lot in his communication that is propaganda; I agree with Pankaj. Yet, is it effective? If we're objective commentators of this phenomenon, we will see that Mr. Modi has achieved something that is remarkable. There have been very few politicians who have had a pan-India visibility and appeal. In the past, it was members of the Nehru-Gandhi family. Subsequently, Vajpayee achieved that feat. But what is remarkable about Mr. Modi is that just in five years, he has achieved that kind of visibility and appeal because of his communication strategy. He's a tireless communicator and here I am referring to the quantitative aspect of his communication, not so much the qualitative aspect. There is a lot to be said about the qualitative aspect. Much of *Mann Ki Baat* is informative, not inspiring.

I would like to contrast his communication with that of Jawaharlal Nehru. That was in an era when even television wasn't there. But

**Mr. Modi is a good communicator. But people want to see him speak on the issues that concern them. They want to hear how he addresses the issue of joblessness, the benefits of demonetisation, why we are unable to live in peace with our neighbours.**

look at the visionary communicator that Nehru was. Every fortnight he used to write letters to Chief Ministers, and there are 400 such letters compiled in five big volumes. Through Chief Ministers, he communicated to the people of India. Mr. Modi has never addressed Chief Ministers even though he said, soon after becoming Prime Minister, that he believes that India is equal to the Prime Minister plus Chief Ministers. But he has not shown this faith in the federal structure. Nehru, on the other hand, used to take all the Chief Ministers into confidence and through letters, he used to convey his policies, his vision, and everything from foreign policy to domestic policy, secularism, communal harmony, cleanliness and sanitation.

**Pankaj, would you agree that Mr. Modi is ahead of his predecessors?**

**PP:** I remember launching the social media outreach of the PMO when there was nothing. Now India is the second-largest subscriber base for all the social media plat-

forms in the world. You talk about this quantity because the platforms of communications have increased immensely. We didn't have that many TV channels in every language back then. The Prime Minister is basically an RSS pracharak. He is an expert pracharak and a good communicator. But people want to see him speak on the issues that concern them. People want to hear how he addresses the issue of joblessness, the benefits of demonetisation, why we are unable to live in peace with our neighbours. Mr. Modi may have had 82 outreach meetings abroad, but with each country he has visited, our trade is falling. What is the result of these meetings? Communication should be accompanied with accountability. Look at *achhe din*. It was a good idea that was communicated to the people. But to what end?

**Sudheendra, how concerned are you that the role of the media has been diminished?**

**SK:** I think the kind of democracy which Mr. Modi envisages is one where he wants to convert our system into a kind of a presidential system where it is him versus all others. He is not talking to the Chief Ministers or to the Opposition leaders. Even after the recent crisis between India and Pakistan, he did not address the Opposition parties, which has been the tradition all along, because he considers himself above everyone else.

Having said that, I have great regard for Dr. Singh. He was and he is one of our most erudite leaders. But he proved himself to be the least communicative Prime Minister.

**PP:** The trouble in today's world is that communication has come to be identified with sensation. Dr. Singh was never a sensational person. He just released a six-part compendium of books of what all he said during those 10 years. It is an academic exercise. There were 1,000 speeches in 10 years. Dr. Singh will never say anything which is not substantiated in his speeches in Parliament. He was very rigorous – data were rigorously examined before he spoke. Mr. Modi is a public communicator. The difference is that Dr. Singh is an academic and Mr. Modi is a political pracharak. Mr. Modi has been communicating what he's learned from

life. The nature of communication has changed, the person who is heading our country has no respect for anyone. In 2019, it can win him elections, but not the people.

**SK:** Pankaj proves my point that Mr. Modi's communication has been effective in mobilising support of a section of society which may give him another mandate in the coming elections. But winning elections is not the only achievement that a great leader should aspire to. Again, I go back to a comparison between Mr. Modi's communication and Vajpayee's and Nehru's. One thing you will notice in Mr. Modi's communication is that he does not like criticism, nor does he address criticism. There was a time when Jayaprakash Narayan criticised Nehru for being less of a socialist. Around the same time, C. Rajgopalachari criticised Nehru for being too much of a socialist. So what did Nehru do? He wrote elaborate letters, which are in the public domain. Has Mr. Modi done anything comparable? Has he engaged his critics? Has he engaged in a democratic dialogue?

Coming to Vajpayee, who did not make full use of all the communication channels which were then available, his forte was his public oratory. That won over even his political adversaries. He spoke about his *dil ki baat*, not just *mann ki baat*. So, when Vajpayee was asked by a reporter how he proposed to solve the Kashmir issue within the framework of the Constitution, his instant response was, 'Within the framework of humanism'. It won the hearts of all sections of Kashmiri people. He may have lost the 2004 elections and Mr. Modi may win in 2019, but a crucial point remains: In a nation so diverse and quintessentially democratic, the Prime Minister must act as the leader of the nation and not the leader of the party.

**PP:** I recall talking to Mr. Modi. We were discussing the Delhi-Lahore bus in 2000 and he was not very happy with what Vajpayee was saying. Mr. Modi said, '*PM toh bolte rahte hain*' (The PM keeps talking)'. Now I can say with conviction, '*Mr. Modi toh bolte rahte hain*'. Lalu Prasad Yadav was an effective communicator too and won elections. But he will be remembered for his social engineering, for the social revolution for lower classes.

## SINGLE FILE

### What the world thinks

A brief analysis of the Pew Research Center's study and findings on India

DHRUVA JAISHANKAR



There are many ways to assess a country's role in the world. Outcomes are one of them, including economic exchanges, political decisions, and military cooperation. Resources – whether economic, military, diplomatic, or cultural – are another. But public perceptions should not be discounted.

While the attention devoted by other countries' leaderships and the growth of the Indian economy since 1991 suggest that India's standing in international affairs has improved, what do the public think?

On March 25, the Pew Research Center released a study of India, based on surveys conducted over the past year. Among the findings were 27 countries' public views on India's rise. The U.S. (40%), the U.K. (46%), France (49%), Japan (48%) and Australia (40%) thought that India played a more important role in the world compared to 10 years ago, and only a minority (4 to 17%) felt it was less important. Similar patterns were discernible in Canada, Germany, South Korea, Sweden, and the Netherlands. The perception of India as a rising power in North America, Europe, Northeast Asia, and Australia should be little surprise, given that these are the places with the most active Indian businesses, diasporas, and government-to-government relations.

On the flip side, very small numbers in Southern and Eastern Europe and Latin America perceived India playing a more important role, with respondents more likely to see India's position declining. Only 17% in Poland, 21% in Brazil, and 14% in Mexico saw India's role as having enhanced over the past decade. This too is not surprising. India's presence is less likely to be felt in Latin America. Southern and Central Europe is also a more crowded space, with the U.S., the EU, Russia, and (increasingly) China jostling for influence.

Somewhere in the middle of the pack are Russia (where 22% saw India playing a more important role, and 21% less) and Africa, where the numbers are mixed in Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa. This should be expected, given their priorities and the vector of relations with India, particularly relative to other powers.

From an Indian perspective, there are two points of concern. One is Israel, where only 27% saw India playing a more important role and 31% less. This is surprising only because that relationship has appeared to be on a positive trajectory over the past decade. Defence ties, technological relations, and political links have been consolidated. Recent years saw the first presidential and among the first prime ministerial visits by Indian and Israeli leaders to each other's countries. India also remains a popular destination for Israeli tourists.

The other, more minor, surprise concerns South-East Asia, particularly Indonesia. That only 21% of Indonesians and 15% of Filipinos perceived India as a rising power means that India's Act East policy remains a work in progress.

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## NOTEBOOK

### When cacophony sounded like music

Recalling the days when the election season had a festive air

B. KOLAPPAN

Elections in India are political festivals. However, the Election Commission's restrictions during campaign season, though needed, seem to have robbed elections of their charm.

In the 1980s in Tamil Nadu, what was dismissed by many as cacophony used to be music to the ears of children. Voices of popular leaders would blare through the streets, film songs loaded with political messages would play, and professional speakers would visit every nook and corner of towns and villages in megaphone-fixed vehicles. They would address the voters with the familiar phrase, "*Periyorkalae, Thaimarkale* (Elders and Mothers)".

We would run after the vehicles, sometimes hanging on their tailgate. All we wanted was a jolly, free ride, and to collect as many as pamphlets printed in colour paper. Some boys

loved chewing the pink-coloured papers that would make their lips pink, like lipstick does.

Walls were a priced possession during elections. There used to be stiff competition among partymen to book them in advance. The political affiliation of the owner of the wall decided who got to use it. Besides serious messages, nasty comments and unparliamentary words adorned the walls. At night, rival camps would deface them by throwing handfuls of cow dung. Sometimes the messages would result in retaliations and altercations.

In the evenings, we would march on the streets holding the flags of the parties we were affiliated to. Children would be treated to *sukku* coffee (dry ginger coffee) and *paruppu vada* (dhal vada) as a reward for their participation. Tea and coffee were considered as great treats because white sugar was scarce and fami-

lies used only *karuppakattu* (palm jaggery) to make coffee. These rewards regularly resulted in defection among children from one party to another. Defectors earned the title '*Pachonthi* (chameleon)'.

At night, All India Radio would broadcast the speeches of local and national leaders. The DMK would get excited when M. Karunanidhi would start his speeches with the words, "*Singa Tamil Nadaiyum, Singara Thendra Nadaiyum thannakathy konda pooman Arignar Anna*. (Anna, the scholar, your Tamil is as majestic as a lion and flows like a breeze)." AIADMK leader M.G. Ramachandran did not campaign in the 1984 election as he had gone to the U.S. for medical treatment. The AIADMK election camps would play all day the MGR film song, "*Andavany un pathangalai naan kanneeril neeratinen* (Oh god, I washed your feet with my tears)." The Oppo-

sition sought to capitalise on MGR's absence, but R.M. Veerappan, a member of MGR's Cabinet, took the wind out of their sails by releasing a poster in which MGR was seen without his trademark cap, reading a newspaper while lying on the hospital bed. The poster proved a game-changer for the AIADMK.

What remained enjoyable during childhood proved irritating when I became a journalist and was assigned to cover the public rallies of political leaders during elections. PMK leader S. Ramadoss and MDMK general secretary Vaiko would start their speeches invariably after midnight and wind up only early in the morning. When he became Chief Election Commissioner, T.N. Seshan ensured that meetings ended by 12 midnight. Subsequently the deadline was further moved forward to 10 p.m. And the two leaders changed their campaign styles subsequently.

## FROM The Hindu. ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO MARCH 29, 1969

### HAL turns out 1000th aircraft

The Bangalore division of the Hindustan Aeronautics Limited, the kingpin of the H.A.L. complex in the country, celebrated here [Bangalore] to-day [March 28] the production of its 1,000th aircraft. The achievement was hailed by the Defence Minister, Sardar Swaran Singh, who flew in here from Delhi to take part in the celebration. The 1,000th aircraft was the supersonic jet fighter HF-24 which is being produced in numbers for the country's air arm. The H.A.L. is now engaged in a new major project, namely, the designing of a military ground attacker. Paying a tribute to the progress made by the Bangalore division of the H.A.L. in the manufacture of sophisticated aircraft, the Defence Minister, Mr. Swaran Singh, said the manufacture of the 1,000th aircraft was a great achievement.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MARCH 28, 1919.

### Village Officers' Memorial, Salem.

The Village officers and menials of the villages of Salem District have submitted to the Board of Revenue, Madras, through the usual channels a Memorial detailing the multifarious and responsible duties which their official position demands they should do to the satisfaction of the Government and the public and explaining other disabilities. After referring to certain documentary evidence in support of their claims humbly and most respectfully pray that the Hon'ble Members may be graciously pleased to view with a very sympathetic consideration the straitened circumstances and the pitiable plight to which the low paid village servants are subject to in these very hard days and to kindly accord sanction for their following prayers. (1) To raise the scales of pay of the village officers and servants. (2) To grant them allowances whatever and whenever they are granted to clerks and servants of the Taluk Offices. (3) To kindly declare the posts of the village offices, and servants as hereditary. (4) To remove the restrictions imposed upon them from enjoying or holding lands upon darkest.

## POLL CALL

### Election deposit

A deposit is the sum of money that a candidate for an elected office, such as a seat in a legislature, is required to pay to an electoral authority before she is permitted to stand for election. If the candidate is not elected, and the valid votes polled by her do not exceed one-sixth of the total number of valid votes polled by all the candidates, the deposit is forfeited. In India, candidates who stand for parliamentary elections have to pay a deposit of ₹25,000. If the candidate is a member of a Scheduled Caste or a Scheduled Tribe, the amount is ₹12,500. For Assembly elections, the amount is ₹10,000; for SC and ST candidates, it is ₹5,000.

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