

MODI'S SPEECH IN RUSSIA: MISREPRESENTING DOMESTIC CONCERNS

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



Courtesy: ABP News

"I have not come alone, but have brought the smell of the soil and love of 140 crore Indians with me, for you," said Prime Minister Narendra Modi while addressing the Indian diaspora in Russia on 9th July. This was Mr. Modi's first visit to Russia after the conflict in Ukraine that started in February 2022. While talking to the diaspora, the Indian Prime Minister's language and overall address remained defensive, assuring fellow Indians about the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP)'s initiatives back home. While Modi's presence in Moscow was largely appreciated by the Indian diaspora, his defensive approach had BJP's inability to secure the majority and the worsening socio-economic situation hidden.

Political Significance of Indian Diaspora

Prime Minister Modi's visit to Russia and interaction with the Indian diaspora was significant not just because of the Ukraine conflict, but also in the backdrop of the recently concluded Lok Sabha elections in India with the BJP emerging as the single largest party (though short of clear majority for a third consecutive term at the head of NDA coalition government. Indians in Russia were the first ones to interact with PM Modi in the post-election phase. It was important for Mr. Modi to reassure them that the BJP rule is beneficial for their families in the home country. Significantly, the Indian diaspora across the world remains important in influencing the domestic and foreign policy of India. Around 32 million Indians are living around the globe who not only serve the interest of the country of their residence but also enjoy electoral rights through supporting political parties back home.

Indian diaspora is of two types; Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) and Persons of Indian Origin (POIs).¹ So far, only NRIs are authorized to cast votes in Indian elections through registration in their respective constituency. In Russia, there are 23,590 Indians living including 21,354 NRIs and 2,236 POIs.²

Projection of Self-Proclaimed Development

Both the Indian National Congress (INC) and the BJP tried to garner support from the Indian diaspora in the 18th Lok Sabha elections. Groups like Overseas Friends of BJP and Indian Overseas Congress work for BJP and INC, respectively, abroad.³ In his address in Moscow, Mr. Modi started with the BJP's agenda for the third term. His assurances mainly focused on strengthening the Indian economy and uplifting the financial status of the poor. He assured that the BJP would work ten times faster for the betterment of poor Indians. The rest of the speech revolved around the narrative that India under the BJP is changing. He highlighted that today's India in the social, economic, diplomatic, political, and military domains is more proud and confident than it was before 2014. He said, "When Bharat builds the world's tallest bridges; when Bharat electrifies 40,000 rail lines; when Bharat builds record airports; the world praises the country by saying that Bharat is actually changing." Interestingly, during his whole address, he used the word 'Bharat' for India, giving a strong sense of nativeness, nationalism, and affection to the Indians living in Russia.

Modi's message to the Indian diaspora was that today's India is much stronger, confident, and proud. Indians living abroad must own their country and must be confident and proud of their country's standing internationally. He added, "today's Bharat is self-confident and fights till the last moment. Bharat is not only developing itself but also setting milestones for the world to achieve. Bharat contributes 15 percent to the global economy and would emerge as the third largest economy in BJP's third tenure. Today's Bharat believes in resolving the conflict that has been going on for decades." Within this context, he stressed that the Indian diaspora must be proud of their country.

India's Real Face under the BJP

However, contrary to what Modi projected to the diaspora in Russia, India's role across the world and BJP's socio-economic policies are widely criticized by Indian experts. Globally, India has acted irresponsibly in too many instances; whether it is the Russia-Ukraine conflict or India's weapons

¹ Non-resident Indian are those who retain Indian passports, while Persons of Indian Origin are those who got foreign citizenship after moving to the other countries. Both components of Indian diaspora maintain their families back in India and are dependent for their betterment on the political parties.

² "Population of Overseas Indians," https://www.mea.gov.in/images/attach/NRIs-and-PIOs_1.pdf.

³ Dr. Ajay Dubey, "The Influence of Indian Diaspora: 2024 Election Dynamics," *Reinrich Boll Stiftung*, April 29, 2024, <https://in.boell.org/en/2024/04/29/influence-indian-di>.

supply to Israel while the latter is involved in a genocide in Gaza. Regionally, India's 'Neighborhood First' policy is primarily about establishing its hegemony or seeking to intimidate or coerce the neighbors, whether Nepal, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Pakistan, or Afghanistan. Moreover, India has been involved in supporting extremist outfits in Pakistan's Balochistan like the Balochistan Liberation Organization (BLA), ultimately spreading regional instability. The election results have given a cheque to Modi's 'Hindutva'-based politics. While state-backed marginalization of Muslims has been instigated in BJP's decade-long rule, India's economic growth is also criticized to be in favoring crony capitalism, as reports reveal increasing economic inequality under the BJP.⁴ The wealth concentration in India has increased under the BJP with 22.6 percent of the country's total income concentrated in the hands of the top 1 percent including Mukesh Ambani, Gautam Adani, and Sajjan Jindal, some very close associates of the BJP's party leaders.⁵ The BJP gave only one Muslim candidate its ticket for the election, who lost it too. Although PM Modi has included Christians and Sikhs in his Cabinet, no Muslim is included. Karnell Singh, a leader from the BJP threatened to slaughter 200,000 Muslims when a cow head was found in Delhi.⁶

Conclusion

To conclude, Prime Minister Modi's promises to the Indian diaspora and glorification of India's 'rise' are based on self-proclaimed development by the BJP. The reality on the other side entails worsening socio-economic situation and increased international scrutiny. Loss of majority in the Parliament and the formation of government through a coalition have made the BJP dependent on the allies for successful policy-making. The BJP's loss in Uttar Pradesh, the state that was considered its political hub, revealed that people are no longer buying the party's extremist outlook. Seeking to hide the core issues, Mr. Modi chose to portray a '*Viksit Bharat*' picture in front of the Indian diaspora in Russia so as not to lose the support of these NRIs, in the prospective Indian state elections.

⁴ Astha Rajvanshi, "India's Income Inequality is Now Worse Than Under British Rule," *Time*, March 27, 2024, <https://time.com/6961171/india-british-rule-income-inequa>.

⁵ Rajvanshi, "India's Income Inequality is Now Worse Than Under British Rule."

⁶ "BJP Leader Threatens to Slaughter 200,000 Muslims over Cow Incident," *Aljazeera*, June 27, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/program/newsfeed/2024/6/27/bjp-leader-threatens-to-slaughter-200000-muslims-over-cow-incident>.