

Associate Paper

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Modi's Election Manifestos: Shifts Between 2014 and 2019

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Key Points

- An idealistic and ambitious 2014 Manifesto may be seen in 2019 as a report on the government's progress and its intention to move forward, presented as an uninterrupted journey.
- While reflections on a Hindu India are embedded in Modi's 2019 Manifesto, it is a further step away from the Hindu nationalism of earlier election programmes.
- Major policy areas in Modi's domestic agenda are outlined, rebadged and more ambitious, including education, youth upskilling and supporting farm enterprises.
- The intention and benefits of demonetisation are presented in the 2019 Manifesto and further taxation reform is promised.

Summary

Background: The 2014 Manifesto

Prime Minister Modi's 2019 Manifesto may be read as a report of his government's progress, or progress yet to be made. It is effectively a continuation of the Bharatiya Janata Party's 2014 Manifesto promises, communicated for the current election in practical terms rather than the earlier visionary language of persuasion.

The Preface to the BJP's [2014 Manifesto](#) flagged the need to arrive at a consensus about the "Idea" of India ... in consonance with the seekings and preferences of the Indian people' (p.2, English version). Modi's populism, short of Hinduisation, raised uncomfortable questions for minorities that were confirmed to some extent in his ongoing amendments to

the Citizenship Act. [The 2019 Manifesto](#) steers away from promoting ideas of Hinduisation except in brief and separated references, which are discussed below. This is a further step away from the political platform that was employed for the 1996 General Election, in which Hindu nationalist philosophy with roots in pre-independence right-wing political thinking saw the BJP win government from the Congress Party. Advocating the unity and integrity of India, while painting politically mobilised groups as threatening, the BJP motivated Hindus to respond to the party's call. Interestingly, the far-right wing and militant RSS (*Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*) is now, in its modern form, the self-styled cultural wing of the BJP, Modi's party.

The Constitution of India, which Modi referred to in 2014 as the 'only sacred document', sets out on the first page of its [Preamble](#) a resolution that commits the people of India to a 'Sovereign socialist secular democratic republic' that 'secures' for all its citizens 'justice, social, economic and political; liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; equality ... and fraternity....'¹ The Constitution is mentioned in the 2019 Manifesto in what is arguably a Hinduisation context, which is also discussed below.

Analysis

Commentary: The 2019 Manifesto

Prime Minister Modi's 2019 Election Manifesto opens with a modest photograph of the Prime Minister at the start of his introductory letter to 130 crore (1.3 billion) Indians, and the slogan "A New India of 130 Crore Dreams". The letter, hardly a vision statement, sets out, in superlatives, the government's achievements, since it took power: 'At that time, India's challenges were monumental ... At an unimaginable speed and scale, what seemed impossible earlier soon became a reality' (p. 3), listing programmes, many of which await completion.

In endorsing a renewed mandate, Rajnath Singh, Chair of the Manifesto Committee in his introductory note, *Sankalp Patra*, or Pledge, endorsed Modi's assertions, [confirming](#) (on page 8), the report's approach and the intention to 'continue that journey':

This ... is the vision of an uninterrupted journey ... By presenting our achievements in the last five years as proof of our dedication, we are firmly committed to continue that journey in the coming five years

This paper will briefly outline major policy areas in the 2019 Manifesto's domestic agenda, commencing with the economic reforms promised in 2014 for sustained growth that Modi has not yet successfully put in place.

This is well illustrated by the "Make in India" programme, which remains highly recognisable. Now described as an aim, it had its beginnings in initiatives such as Digital India, Startup India and Skill India (Manifesto 2019, p. 18), but the necessary upskilling was an immense project,

¹ Weigold, A., 'Redefining Modi's India?', Future Directions International, *Associate Paper*, 20 April 2017. <http://www.futuredirections.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Redefining-Modis-India.pdf>

and is now described as a “National Policy for Reskilling and Upskilling”. It aims to develop the necessary workforce eventually by lifting undereducated youth to this level through programmes like “Education for All” (Manifesto 2019, pp. 29-30).

Making India ‘a global manufacturing hub’ has a number of arms that range from a new industrial policy to a special package to uplift the MSME sector (Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises) through expanded technology centres. It is anticipated that such centres will provide high-level skills to more than six *lakh* (six hundred thousand) people annually. Alongside this, the government, upon being re-elected, will also support entrepreneurship and start-ups, especially among young people, members of Scheduled Castes and Tribes and other economically weaker communities, making this a clear statement of direction and planned progress (Manifesto 2019, pp. 18-19).

Modi’s somewhat patchy economic record in major changes included “demonetising” 500 rupee and 1000 rupee notes, rendering more than 80 per cent of India’s currency invalid in the process. The objective, initially popular, was to block corruption and illegal activity involving cash transactions, but the longer-term impact on the economy (including the agriculture sector) has been negative. Another objective was to push the country towards digital transactions, which was intended to lead to the growth of online commerce. But arguably poor digital experiences saw a failure to deliver broad change. Modi’s other major economic change was the introduction of a Goods and Services Tax in July 2017, replacing indirect tax barriers between states with a uniform tax rate. In 2019, the emphasis has shifted to an ambitious roadmap for a ‘five trillion-dollar economy’ for India that includes further tax reform.

To turn to what remains a contentious issue, the ‘idea’ of India or Hindu India cited under ‘Cultural Heritage’ (Manifesto, p. 36):

Since inception, the philosophy of the BJP is anchored in the civilizational ethos of India. As we build “New India”, we intend to actively invest in strengthening our cultural roots and preserving Civilizational continuity. Far from seeing our cultural values as hurdles to progress, we see them as essential ingredients of our future.

This is followed by a stated intention to revisit a divisive issue, aired periodically since the 1980s, particularly when the BJP has been in power: Ram Mandir. The Manifesto continues:

We will explore all possibilities within the framework of the Constitution and all necessary efforts to facilitate the expeditious construction of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya. (Manifesto, p. 36)

The history of the religious dispute over the site is well known but the Ram Mandir issue typifies Muslims as particular targets and has been aptly described as ‘an aggressive one-size-fits-all version of Hinduism’² Nonetheless, under “Development with Dignity for the Minorities” (Manifesto, p. 34), Muslims lead that list, but the proposed amendment to the Citizenship Amendment Bill (2018/2019), which seeks to provide citizenship to non-Muslim

² Robin Jeffrey, ‘A Struggle for India’s Soul’, *Inside Story*, 12 March 2019.

migrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan (Manifesto, p. 12), is seen by some voters as anti-Muslim, as they are omitted from the list of people who are seen as being eligible for citizenship. The Bill is supported by others, however, who see it offering Indian nationality to religious minorities fleeing neighbouring countries.

In addition to the national level of government activity above, each is subject to the Preamble to the Constitution that ‘resolves’ to secure justice for all its citizens. This is demonstrably not rigorously adhered to. A lack of justice also persists at local levels. Intimidation and attacks on Muslim “cow killers” are promoted below the radar, and are rarely condemned at the leadership level of the BJP. In the likely case of a further five years of a Modi-led government or coalition, it would be worthwhile watching for any overt rise in support for a “Hindu India”.

An important area to consider is the rural economy, a large proportion of which derives from agriculture. One aim of the present government was to double the incomes of farmers by 2022, which is cited again (Manifesto, p. 13). While farming incomes have risen, they appear unlikely to meet that target, having slumped recently, in especially high proportions in the marginal and small farm sector. The farm support policies that the government introduced after its election in 2014 included soil health improvement measures, an insurance scheme for crops and online trading for agricultural produce.

These undertakings remain but have shifted in emphasis or description. Soil health measures, for instance, now constitute a promise to provide quality seed varieties at affordable rates. Voluntary enrolment in a risk mitigation scheme will, from 2019, provide insurance for all farmers, while an extensive section on the “Convergence of Agriculture and Technology” announced that a dedicated e-commerce portal will be launched. The Manifesto also focused on a suite of additional supportive plans: short-term interest-free loans for farmers of up to Rs. 1 lakh (one hundred thousand rupees), expansion of warehousing, a “New Village Storage Scheme” and the future establishment of a National Warehousing Grid on highways (Manifesto, p. 13). The plight and the importance of the rural sector are clear and, like all key issues, are also strongly identified in the [Congress Party’s Manifesto](#), which was released ahead of the BJP equivalent.

Clean water and interlinking rivers remain ambitious plans and a new Ministry of Water, bringing together water management functions is promised. The new cities programme now includes metro networks, but the transformation of public sanitation, nine crore (ninety million) toilets constructed under the “Clean India” programme, retitled “Ensuring Urban Development” (Manifesto, p. 20), are a remarkable achievement and contribute to “Healthy India” (Manifesto, p. 23).

The [2014 Manifesto](#) flagged a holistic health system that is accessible, affordable and effective (p. 25). “Healthy India” today details its 2018 roll out of a massive universal healthcare programme – accessible and affordable with the provision of health cover to poor families, planned infrastructure, and planned nutrition and immunisation mass movements. It will be interesting to see whether the 2024 BJP Manifesto, should it win government, is a report card on progress or progress yet to be made.

Finally, and described in this paper as a major policy area, “Women Empowerment”, is recognised as a key concern in the development of society and the growth of the nation, their security being a precondition that includes a strict implementation of laws relating to women. Those related to rape, primarily, were painted as a key concern in the 2014 and 2019 BJP Manifestos, although “Women Empowerment” is relegated to Section 13 in the current Manifesto.

Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, the Congress Party’s General Secretary, however, presents a challenge to the government’s desired majority election result in her attempt to attract women voters, who constitute some 48 per cent of India’s electorate. The women who voted in 2014 [outnumbered](#) men in a large majority of constituencies, and Vadra, albeit from a privileged political background, illustrates women’s abilities in a society that confronts them at all levels with threatened violence, by employing their voting power.

As a result, it will be of interest to watch women’s voting numbers, therefore, and the electorate districts in which they prevail, which could, perhaps, influence Modi’s previously-overwhelming majority.

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