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**Subject:** Fwd: (BV) Modi Enchants With All-American Spectacle: Chandrahas Choud

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(BV) Modi Enchants With All-American Spectacle: Chandrahas Choud  
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Modi Enchants With All-American Spectacle: Chandrahas Choudhury  
2014-09-30 22:03:34.931 GMT

By Chandrahas Choudhury

Sep. 30 (Bloomberg View) -- The two parts of one of the world's largest mutual-admiration societies, long frustrated in their efforts to see each other in the flesh, came together Sunday at New York's Madison Square Garden, when India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi thrilled to -- and in turn enthralled -- a gathering of about 20,000 members of the Indian diaspora.

Although he enjoys a reputation for being one of the greatest orators in Indian history, it would, in truth, not be fair to say that Modi wowed the audience with his usual rhetorically punchy and calculatedly spontaneous speech, mixed with both formal and colloquial Hindi. But that's only because they were chanting a different version of "wow" -- in this case, "MO-DI!" "MO-DI!" -- long before he appeared on a rotating stage that allowed him to face every member of the audience during his 45-minute speech while conveying subliminally the sense of the Earth orbiting the sun.

The meeting was a long time coming. It had been nine years since he was denied an American visa in 2005, when he also had a speech scheduled at Madison Square Garden -- and the emotions in 2014 were therefore more than just a little pent-up. All seemed impatient for the curtain-raiser of traditional Indian dances to end. Once the prime minister appeared in his trademark garb of kurta, pajama and Nehru jacket, welcomed by a bevy of U.S. congressmen, it took only a few minutes for speaker and audience to melt into a long-awaited embrace.

Modi immediately complimented his audience for having helped change the world's perception of India from that of a country of snake charmers to -- and this was a nice touch, though it sounds a bit more forced in English -- one now focused on the mouse (that is, computer hardware). And soon he was thanking them for their invaluable support during his campaign, despite their inability to vote thanks to Indian law.

Though Modi's victory in May's elections was the result of a "Modi wave" domestically, nowhere are his approval ratings higher than among Americans of Indian origin. His election war chest was plentifully buttressed by contributions from the U.S., and his particularly ingenious brand of nationalism appeals most powerfully to Indians comfortably settled abroad but nostalgic for the aroma of the hearth and long embarrassed by the motherland's reputation for third-world dysfunction.

So it was no surprise that Modi told his audience how much he loved them. And then he told them how much they loved him, which should have had the effect of making him happy, but in this case seemed to make them even happier. "No Indian leader has ever received so much love," he declared. "I will repay this debt by building the India of your dreams."

High above the podium, in the media boxes, I had a bird's-eye view of the spectacle -- or perhaps a balloon's-eye view, as hundreds of them were fixed to the ceiling of the arena just above me to be released at the conclusion of the event, where they conjured the image, not entirely inaccurate, of the mother of all birthday parties, enjoyed by merry children innocent of life's harsher realities.

Perhaps it was this distance from the warm, positive epicenter that made me, and several other "Indian Indians," feel more skeptical than those below.



It seemed that for the overwhelming majority of the Indian-Americans who were granted much-sought-after tickets to the event, the new Indian prime minister can do no wrong. One enthusiastic attendee even declared to a New York Times reporter that Modi was already “the best prime minister India ever had.”

Given the general lack of trust in elected politicians in the world today, it's wonderful to see such faith and such confidence. What gives some cause for disquiet is their general feeling that Modi has never done wrong in the past, either, and, further, that -- and this is when one starts thinking of cults -- if anything, he is the one who has been grievously wronged by prejudice and resentful individuals back home, who deserve to be thought of as anti-national.

Prominent among these individuals are the mass of journalists and human-rights activists in India who have persistently hauled Modi from his tableau of future glories back onto the canvas of his past trespasses (of which there have been a few). Apparently, even the U.S. government bought their line when the George W. Bush administration denied Modi a visa, citing his culpability in the horrific communal violence in Gujarat in 2002, when he was chief minister of that state.

But Modi-bhakts -- devotees of Modi -- should say a particularly heartfelt “thank you” to their messiah's many opponents back home. Over the last decade, it is precisely these unconverted souls who have succeeded in getting Modi to self-censor his often vitriolic right-wing Hindu rhetoric and to focus on his other unusual talents: his genuine head for policy; his appetite for work; his ability to generate unity through the power of ideas, not the shared prejudices of mobs.

In a very real sense, Modi owes a great debt to Indian democracy for the resistance it has offered to his many missteps in the past, from his brazen repression of books and films critical of his rule in Gujarat to his illegal use of state surveillance mechanisms in Snoopgate. None of these gestures will bear repeating as prime minister of India; however, somewhat disturbingly, they may have contributed to his being judged fit for the job.

So, a slight dampener amidst all the euphoria (I want a resurgent India, too). A secure minority in their liberal adopted nation, Indian-Americans should not forget that it was only recently -- in fact, from about the time that he started entertaining the thought of running for prime minister -- that Modi began appearing to fully embrace the values of the Indian republic, treating them as part of India's capital in the world alongside such things as its “demographic dividend.”

Before 2010, it appeared he felt there was something wrong with the emphasis on secularism in Indian public discourse, that the country's commitment to diversity was an unnatural fiction that masked the core of a civilization rooted in the glories of Hinduism. It seemed that he wished to fashion a new India not in the benevolent sense in which this commitment is presented today,

but in a more ugly way. So it is his own past, as well as the company he has kept, that makes the most powerful argument for treating him skeptically until he has enjoyed at least one term in office.

To his audience at Madison Square Garden, Modi promised to build the sort of India that would lead them to resolve fondly “that one foot would have to remain anchored in the homeland.” One might say that his own challenge is to generate the opportunities that will allow the citizens of what he called “the world’s most youthful nation” to realize their dreams while ensuring that he himself keeps one foot anchored in the spirit of the Indian constitution.

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-0- Sep/30/2014 22:03 GMT