**The Modi question**

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The two-part BBC documentary titled ‘India: The Modi Question’ has caused quite a stir in India. The documentary tracks Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s complicity and inaction in the notorious Gujarat riots in 2002 when he was the CM of Gujarat. The communal violence led to mass killings and gang rapes of mostly Muslims at the hands of RSS extremists.

The Gujarat riots made international headlines and attracted widespread condemnation with many countries including the US declaring Modi a persona non grata. The documentary is based on the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s investigations into the gruesome massacre as well as the accounts of eye-witnesses, experts and the people familiar with the details of the tragedy.

The highlight of the UK report is the fact that it holds Modi “directly responsible” for the violence perpetrated on the hapless Muslims for several days as state machinery and the police led by then CM Modi looked the other way.

And how has the Modi government responded to the documentary? In the same way it deals with questions, criticism and critique of its policies – using its powers to censor and gag critical voices looking for answers. In the case of this documentary, the Modi government invoked emergency powers under the Information Technology Rules to ban the video from being shared on social media in India.

The government used its highhanded tactics to pressure the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) administration to use excuses like internet and power outages to stop a planned screening of the documentary. The university said that it did not give any permission for the airing of the film and that any such screening would disturb the peace and harmony of the campus. It warned participating students of strict disciplinary action including expulsion.

The reaction by the Indian External Affairs Ministry was hardly surprising. Accusing the BBC of a colonial mindset, it called the documentary, which the BBC claimed as “rigorously researched according to the highest editorial standards,” a propaganda piece. Ministry spokesperson Arindam Bagchi could not give a logical response to otherwise simple and straightforward questions asked by journalists.

At the heart of the Indian government’s rather predictable reaction to the BBC documentary has been the fear of its potential impact on the reputation of Narendra Modi.

India under Modi has presented itself as a key regional player, ready to do business with the world around the agenda of development, security and strategic partnerships. And given the present nature of the global world order, India is a partner of choice for many countries that are cosying up to New Delhi to checkmate their competitors through regional realignment.

Narendra Modi is a poster boy of ‘shining India’ – or ‘New India’ – as some pro-BJP commentators like to put it. A sustained but carefully calibrated strategy has been employed to create an aura around the Indian prime minister whose ‘hug diplomacy’ has globally been acknowledged as his way to bond with world leaders. ‘The Modi Question’ could throw a spanner in the works, as it recalls the sordid memories of the state-sponsored massacre of Muslims in the Indian state of Gujarat and raises difficult but pertinent questions. It punctures the myth of a ‘rising’ India and shows the true face of the Hindutva-inspired BJP regime.

The documentary is a reminder of the painful and harsh reality that marks the life of minority communities in Modi’s India. It takes the veneer off the face of India as the ‘largest democracy’ wedded to secular ideals and offers a reality check to the world.

Using a mix of soft power, strategic importance and economic weight including a planned disinformation network, the Modi government is projecting India as a ‘transformational’ country and a reliable international partner.

The world’s increasing lack of interest in the way Modi has reimagined and reshaped India as a revisionist state that believes in the political and religious primacy of the majority community to the utter negation of other minority communities speaks to the success of this policy. And more importantly, the ongoing global silence and indifference to the plight of Kashmiris following India’s revocation of Article 370 accords with the ‘manufactured reality’ away from what people in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK) have been going through after August 2019.

This BJP dream of reshaping India as a Hindu-only country could not have been possible without making state institutions and the media fall in line and share the same aspirations as those held by the BJP’s founding leaders and listed in the party’s manifesto. The essence of the political, cultural and social re-engineering has been to alter the very ethos and spirit of Indian democracy. From Gandhian and Nehruvian ideals, it is being recast in the image of Hindutva ideology under Modi’s watch.

The BBC documentary highlights dissonance between Modi’s global projection of India as a fairy tale and what it actually is, as is evidenced by the experiences of its minority communities, who have reported greater marginalization, exclusion, and exploitation in recent years.

The Modi government fears that the BBC documentary could disturb its years-long diplomatic efforts to position India as a responsible regional player, leading to human rights organizations to question its commitment to democratic ideals.

Following the ban of the documentary, the reactions of rights organizations have been intense and highly critical. The Human Rights Watch has released a strong statement and said that the BJP’s ideology has “infiltrated the justice system and the media, empowering party supporters to threaten, harass, and attack religious minorities, particularly Muslims, with impunity.” The Committee to Protect Journalists has called the ban a flagrant contradiction of New Delhi’s international commitments as a democracy.

‘The Modi Question’ has exposed Modi’s duality. In his interactions with world leaders, he is quick to profess his loyalty to Mahatma Gandhi as someone who symbolizes India’s emergence as a multi-faith and multi-ethnic country. However, in his politics as well as his work as the country’s chief executive, he has advanced a personality cult around rightist notions that are opposite to the ideals of Gandhi.

In a piece for ‘The Financial Times’ titled ‘India against Gandhi – a legacy rewritten’, author Ramachandra Guha has referred to an article Modi wrote for The New York Times on the occasion of Gandhi’s 150th birth anniversary in October 2019 and made the following observations: “What was most striking about the article, however, was what it did not say. There was not a word about the cause for which Gandhi lived his life, indeed for which he gave his life – that of inter-religious harmony. The omission was not accidental. For the idea that India is a land that belongs equally to people of all faiths is not something that Modi shares with Gandhi. Modi sees himself as a Hindu first and foremost; indeed, even as a redeemer sent to avenge the insults and injustices, real and imagined, heaped on his co-religionists down the centuries.”

The BBC documentary has difficult questions and thus, according to the regime, does not deserve to be aired in Modi’s India.

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