

Why freedom of speech is only one of India's worries

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LSE's **Shakuntala Banaji** analyses the mediated campaign that followed the cancellation of a keynote address by Narendra Modi at an American university, and argues that 'freedom of speech' rhetoric is a form of propaganda.

In March 2003, Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi was struggling to untarnish his image. His administration had presided over a highly photographed, documented and graphic anti-Muslim pogrom in which over 2,000 Gujarati citizens, mainly Muslim men, women and children, were killed. This followed a gruesome train fire that caused the deaths of 58 right-wing Hindutva activists and their children. This tragic fire, which followed an argument at a train station, was blamed with [little evidence](#) on a Muslim [conspiracy](#). Since these events, Modi has been accused of [complicity](#) by various senior officials, and ministers appointed by him have been sentenced to life imprisonment for their [role in the massacre](#).



In March 2013, just over a decade later, Modi was invited by some pro-business, pro-industry students at an American university to give a keynote address via video conference. Several members of staff and other students [petitioned against](#) the keynote, and the talk was cancelled amidst much recrimination about freedom of speech, the pride of India and western hypocrisy. This post analyses the significance of these events for democratic practices in India and elsewhere.

A mediated campaign constructing the cancellation of a keynote address at an American university as a threat to the freedom of speech of an Indian politician is not in itself astounding. However, when that politician has been accused repeatedly of complicity in the murder of several thousand of his state's citizens ("[We Have No Orders To Save You](#)", Human Rights Watch, 2002 report on Gujarat communal violence), and human rights organisations have documented [state-sponsored discrimination](#) against hundreds of thousands more in the decade that followed, a campaign bemoaning the said politician's freedom of speech and championing his economic successes takes on more sinister overtones. Let me explain why.

Modi, the politician in question, has access and the power to censor much of his own state's media, and uses both old and new media as platforms to build his [personality cult](#), and as tools to exculpate him of blame for the mass killings that have been laid at his door by the [testimony of his own one-time accomplices](#). Given this phenomenal

power over media and communication, and the ways in which it has paid off electorally – with a third term as chief minister – the claim that there is a threat to Modi’s freedom of speech can thus be seen as a rhetorical device that serves a propagandist function. In the eyes of his supporters and those wavering politically, it emphasises that Modi is more sinned against than sinning, and identifies him with ‘the nation’ of India. In the minds of those who do not know him, it is the beginning of a new story.

Further, the casting of this politician as a respectable and saintly victim ignores history and [discounts facts](#). In doing so, it disrespects the real victims, who are now dead or for the most part [silenced](#). Worse still, it would not be happening if Modi were a lone maverick with little support—instead, he has a huge and growing base amongst well-to-do Hindu nationalists in Gujarat and further afield. The championing of this politician thus signifies the willing participation of hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of Indians at home and in diaspora in an authoritarian and discriminatory ideology and a set of lies about the past that could lead India – ironically through the overtly democratic channels of media, election campaigning and voting – to undermine its remaining democratic ethos.

There is now, in 2013, a massive and concerted campaign to project Modi (shunned as too divisive even by some of his fellow Hindu nationalist party members) as a credible candidate for leader of the BJP and potentially the next prime minister of India. Voters I went to school with – educated adults – casually refer to his “wonderful record on business” and “how he is leading Gujarat from strength to strength”. “If he did what he did, it is in the past,” they say.

Such voters do not seem swayed by arguments that this development and modernisation-at-any-cost-approach has not worked elsewhere and does [not seem to be working for a majority of the poor](#) in Gujarat itself. They do not seem to know or to care that even the crude development that has taken place is based around deals with industrialists that [increase the wealth of a minority of citizens while impoverishing the many](#), or that it may soon lead to the creation of an [environmental disaster](#).

Strangely, the slogan that Modi is ‘good for business’, repeated enough times, has taken on such a ring of success and plausibility – and fits so neatly with the contemporary anti-poor, apparently pro-business politics in Western countries – that even strong suspicions of complicity in mass murder cannot halt the politicians lining up to befriend Modi.

The stung pride of the wealthy, pro-Modi non-resident Indians horrified that their hero is being shunned in a few notable institutions should no longer strike anyone as absurd. Their expressions of outrage are just part of the authoritarian populist narrative pushed by dozens of [websites](#). It is part of a narrative that originates in Modi’s enormously well-funded, orchestrated and mediated publicity machine. This constantly communicated narrative about Modi’s strength currently sits alongside and undermines the democratic and tolerant practices of so many Indians in other states, in Gujarat itself and around the world. But this is only the beginning.

If Modi comes to power, either as leader of the opposition or as leader of India, we may well see much of what we know and hold dear in Indian democracy swept away. I suspect that writing this will not change the minds of those who are committed already to that narrative. But perhaps it might give pause to those journalists, academics and politicians who have not yet convinced themselves that the lives of a few thousand people and the quality of life of many millions more should be set as nought in the balance against claims about economic growth.

Suggested further reading

Bhatt, C. (2004) ‘Democracy and Hindu nationalism’, *Democratization*, Special Issue: Religion, Democracy and Democratization, Vol 11, No. 4, August 2004, pp. 133-154

Ohm, B. (2007) ‘[Narratives of the Underbelly of Democracy](#)’, *Economic & Political Weekly*, December 2007, pp. 26-31

Ohm, B. (2010) “[Forgetting to Remember: The Privatisation of the Public, the Economisation of Hindutva and the Medialisation of Genocide](#)”, *South Asian Media Cultures: Audiences, Representations, Contexts*, Ed. S. Banaji

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Sarkar, T. (2002) 'The Semiotics of Terror: Muslim Women and Children in Hindu Rashtra', EPW Commentary, 13 July 2002

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