

# Modi's OBC Claim Is About Identity, While Caste Census Is for Social Justice

The four prongs of Modi's messaging and oratory are emotions, hyperbole, sarcasm and personal attacks on opponents. His modus operandi ensures that even emotional outbursts are planned, calibrated and targeted. But calls for a caste census are a huge challenge.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Photo: X/@narendramodi

It took everyone by surprise when Narendra Modi, who never spares a trick to 'elevate' his standing, decided to deliberately 'downgrade' his social status and assert forcefully and unambiguously that he belongs to a socio-economically backward caste. After years of studied

silence on his caste status, Modi decided to claim the OBC mantle and attacked the Congress mercilessly for “hating” him for it. He must have been prompted by the Bihar caste census that confirmed just then that a whopping 63% of the people (read voters) belonged to OBCs and its extreme segment (EBCs). Though Modi decries the caste census and has consistently refused to include ‘caste-wise count’ in his much-postponed national census, he could read the writing on the wall. After all, a prime Hindi-belt state’s caste composition just could not be ignored. He then had no option but to step off the upper-caste, upper-class luxury bus that he was so comfortable in, and flash his ‘backward’ caste card.

This obsession with self is only one essential component of ‘brand Modi’. He and his factotums put in all that they had to transform him from a leader to a trademark. His marketing campaign, run business-like by proficient agencies, ensured his name and face as ‘top of the mind recall’.

Brand Modi consists not only of changing one’s dress three times a single day but also of presenting hundreds of different faces throughout the last nine-and-a-quarter years. The shape and the grooming of his beard and hairstyle combine with thousand-odd costumes (this word is more apt than ‘clothes’ or ‘dresses’) that he has adorned over the past 112 months. No one knows who pays for this splurge on the extravagant wardrobe, but what is more relevant is that the visage we accost is a carefully cultivated one – the one that the prime minister desires to project. It is obvious that a ‘candid camera’ or a naturally dishevelled look is totally taboo. Photographers and the media know the consequences of publishing shots that reveal anything beyond the ‘authorised’ image. His fondness for the Jawahar coat of every possible hue, despite the odious associations with its very name, has surely triggered several fashions, though his love for every

conceivable headgear and *angavastram* has not met with similar success. His colleagues in the RSS mention that he would press his clothes every day, or have them ironed, for he would never be seen in any crushed apparel.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Jagdalpur. Photo: X/@narendramodi

During four long decades as a bureaucrat, one has handled several ‘VVIP visits’ but never has one come across such obsessive control over the camera. Everything is choreographed to give the best or the desired results, but this manipulation itself reveals certain painful inherent inadequacies that it seeks to hide, by projecting visuals that are basically ‘constructs’.

Where Modi is concerned, every facet of his presentation of himself is constructed. Every bit of the ‘accepted’ or ‘official’ biography is neatly arranged to bolster the desired version of reality. Even so, the impudent keep asking embarrassing questions like in which school did he complete his secondary education or the name of the college of his graduation. Audacious ones even ask for his postgraduate degree in ‘entire political science’. Come to

think of it, it is really odd that not a single high school, college or university teacher has come forward to say she or he taught Narendrabhai somewhere, nor do we have any person who claims to have studied in his class. Be that as it may, the point is that it is the calculated projection of Modi's academic competence that is more important and real. He had the option of claiming that poverty and duty prevented his pursuit of studies beyond a point, but he was too enamoured of the 'learned leader' projection.

In a land of a billion poor, Modi has never hidden his humble origins — despite his penchant for Bvlgari glasses, Movado watches, Mont Blancs and Maybachs, which he has, in fact, flaunted. He insisted that he was so poor a child that he had to sell tea at Vadnagar railway station, though the knowledgeable insist that it was only a pass-through station during the entire period of Modi's childhood and adolescence. The poor tea seller is, however, engraved into his self-representation and he repeated it at the United Nations as well. Modi revels in this story as the only soft sentimental streak in a rock-hard, domineering image.

We have to understand the boundless ambition of a man whose sheer ruthlessness overshadows apparent handicaps in his baggage. Early in his years in the RSS, he must have realised that he would find it impossible to reach the top seat of this incredibly powerful organisation. Brahmans had monopolised the post for 92 of its 98 years and a Rajput for the other six. Modi was neither. So, he moved on (or was deputed) to the BJP, where his real rise took place after the bloodbath in Gujarat in 2002. Even so, if he was to rule India with overwhelming numbers, he needed the Hindi belt that had the largest chunk — some 40% — of parliament seats. But he was not born in its zone. This is when the 'outlier's obstinacy' set in. Greece's greatest conqueror, Alexander, was not a Greek. He came from an adjacent but backward country, Macedonia. France's

mightiest emperor, Napoleon, was not from the mainland but from the wretched far-off, half-Italian island of Corsica. Hitler screamed about Germany's Third Reich – but he was an Austrian, not even a mainstream German. Yet, sheer grit and megalomania drove them to dizzy heights. Hence, Gujarat's Modi targeted and worked in the Hindi belt for decades, acquiring mastery over language, accent, idiom and diction. Then when the big bell rang, the outlier struck his flag quite decisively at its very vortex of the mainstream, at Varanasi.

Now, he just cannot let the opposition trample all over his carefully cultivated garden, by utilising the largest caste-group, the OBCs. Modi's sudden realisation that cannot let the OBC vote bank slip out of his hands just because he did not use this identity till now comes quite late in the day. It may backfire as well. What, pray, did he do for the OBCs during his long reign? He even conjured a 10% for less-fortunate castes 'above' the OBCs, and claimed to have fought for those 'below' the OBCs as well. The problem is that Brand Modi did not have any space for his OBC face, and may now find it extremely difficult to sway the large chunk of OBC votes simply because he finds it convenient to highlight this identity once again, a few months before the polls.

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