

Trump goes to India to find himself

Pankaj Mishra

OPINION

"I love Hindu," Donald Trump proclaimed during his presidential campaign in 2016. That adoration of India's majority population, and America's richest and most obviously pro-Trump minority, may have just gotten deeper.

On his first visit to India this week, Mr. Trump claims, he has been promised a welcoming crowd of "10 million" by the country's Hindu-supremacist prime minister, Narendra Modi.

(Never mind that the total population of the city where Mr. Modi and Mr. Trump plan to hold a joint rally is a little over eight million.)

Last September at a rock-concert-like rally at a Houston football stadium, Mr. Modi and Mr. Trump walked hand-in-hand, the two stocky strongmen looking like brothers-in-arms. Certainly, nowhere in the world can Mr.

Under Prime Minister Modi, the country is the U.S. president's spiritual home: an inferno of systemic cruelty.

Trump encounter a profounder fraternal spirit than among India's present rulers. India under them fulfills, to a startling degree, the American president's irascible fantasy of what the United States should be: a country cravenly sur-

rendering its traditions of law and decency before a perpetually inflamed and ham-handed autocrat.

Mr. Trump has controversially pardoned some white-collar criminals, including Michael Milken, and might extend clemency to Roger Stone. He can only envy the culture of impunity in India. Charges of murder and kidnapping have long pursued Amit Shah, Mr. Modi's closest confidant and India's home minister, but the judge in his case mysteriously died soon after Mr. Modi became prime minister in 2014 and the next judge swiftly acquitted Mr. Shah.

Mr. Trump has been forced to bypass Congress to push his measures against immigrants and Muslims. Denouncing Muslim immigrants as "termites," Mr. Shah has pushed comprehensive laws against Muslim immigrants through the Indian Parliament and, with equal chutzpah, broken up the only Muslim-majority state in India.

Much outrage in America has correctly focused on the Trump administration's cruel separation of children from their parents at detention centers. It has been barely noticed in India that Mr. Modi's government has illegally detained numerous children in

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the valley of Kashmir, now in the midst of an endless crackdown.

Mr. Trump can expect some pushback from even his regular muse, Fox News. Mr. Modi can rely on uninterrupted sycophancy from almost all of India's major television channels and newspapers; "Modi toadies" (Salman Rushdie's term) broadcast uncritically, among other things, the falsehood that Indian fighter jets bombed and killed major terrorists in Pakistan. Whereas Mr. Trump can claim few real fans in Hollywood, Bollywood's stars jostle to fit their extra-wide grins into Mr. Modi's selfies.

India today with its groveling political and cultural elite is Mr. Trump's deepest fantasy, flawlessly realized. A democracy once identified with great names such as Mohandas Gandhi has degenerated into Trumpland — an inferno of systemic brutishness, imbecility and mendacity.

To understand how this catastrophe occurred, one would have to examine how the broader culture of insatiable greed and competitive vanity that Trump embodies took hold in India.

President Trump and Trumpism are manifestly a culmination of some of the worst tendencies in American society and culture in the 1980s and '90s — the feverish worship of power, success and fame. It is not often recognized that Mr. Modi and Hindu supremacism are the upshot in the same era of a ruthless pursuit of wealth and power — and a widespread rejection of values long central to Indian society.

The leaders of India's anti-imperialist struggle, most prominently Gandhi, had a famously low opinion of the profit-seekers and private-wealth creators who had come to dominate and degrade much of the world's population. Accordingly, he proclaimed, if not always observed, ethos of postcolonial India was of self-restraint, frugality and collective welfare.

One sign of this high-mindedness was that popular cinema as well as political speeches and programs on state television attended closely to the fate of the rural poor — a majority of India's population — and the tiny minority of the rich tactfully kept their lifestyles out of sight.

After visiting the United States in the 1960s, the Indian novelist R.K. Narayan wrote in highly idealized but not wholly inaccurate terms of the fundamentally opposed Indian and American conceptions of the good life: contentment in "austerity" versus "limitless pursuit of prosperity."

By the 1990s, however, ideas and

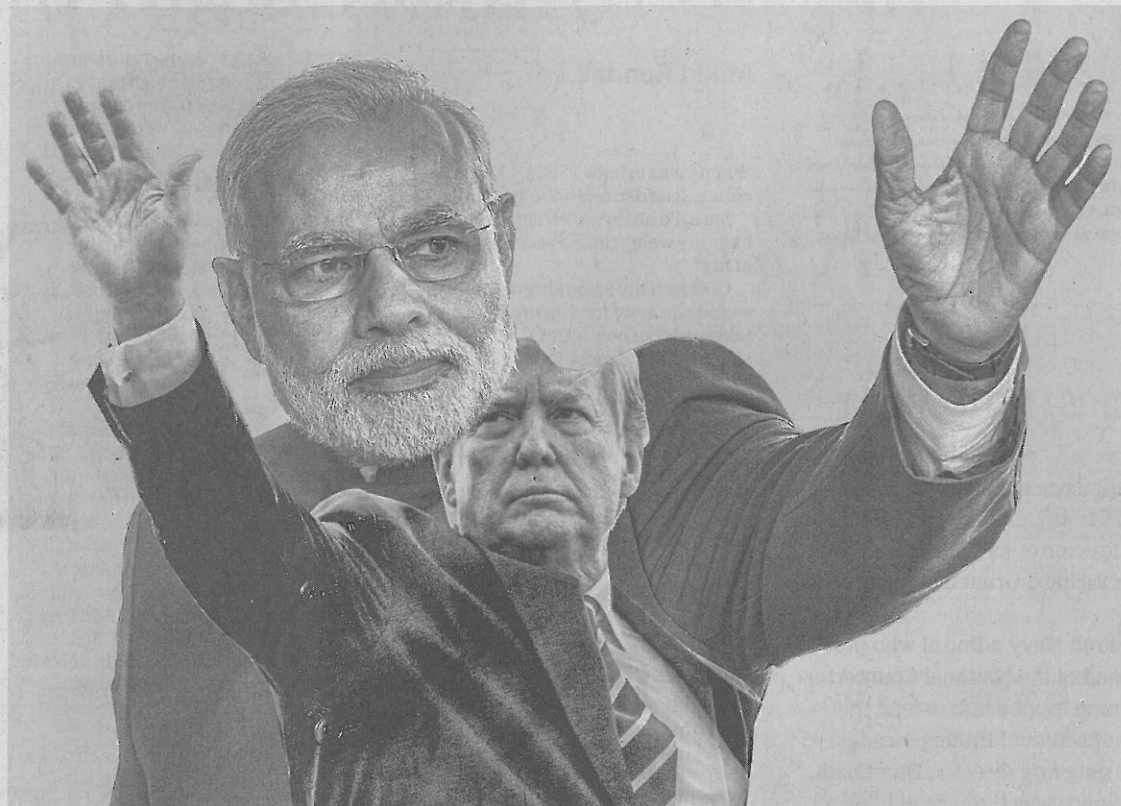


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worldviews from elsewhere, especially the get-rich-quick mentality personified by Michael Milken and Donald Trump, were radically altering the private and public cultures of India. I remember that the most popular way then to describe differences between successful America and striving India was to lament that Indians lack a "killer instinct" as well as a "strong leader"

India also appeared to many to have become a "soft state," crippled by the philosophical baggage of its founders, unable to keep minorities in their place and to embrace the bonanza of the free market, and incapable, too, of the amoral hardheadedness needed to realize its destiny as a great power — one that is as feared and respected as the United States.

Traveling across India for a book on small towns, three years after India's economic liberalization started in 1991, I was astonished by how quickly self-perceptions were changing among many middle-class and upper-caste Indians.

Most Indians were still struggling then, as they are now, for basic goods

such as food, clean drinking water, toilets, jobs and livable homes. But the largely upper-caste beneficiaries of liberalization proclaimed their distance from such "losers"; their New India was premised on the assumption that super-achieving and high-consuming Hindus under a strong leader will forge a country that knows how to defend its borders, to vanquish internal and external enemies, and to liquidate termites.

Mr. Modi presides over a grotesquely unequal and unjust society.

worldview was emerging, in which society appeared a mere sum of self-aggrandizing individuals locked in fiercely zero-sum competition with one another, with winners as well as losers racked by fear, distrust and envy.

The Hindu supremacists had already unleashed a stunningly successful politics of hatred. In 1992, after having promised to wage a peaceful campaign,

they demolished a 16th-century mosque and then, after decades of marginality in Indian politics, rapidly rose to power in Delhi by the end of the decade on the back of anti-Muslim violence. Their arriviste politics was matched, and boosted, by the social and cultural ambition of many rising Indians. It would be decades before a Trump Tower was built in Mumbai, but in India's small towns, recently moneyed but culturally insecure Indians were already raising megalomaniacal monuments to themselves. Today, India's richest person, who owns much of the fanatically pro-Modi media and monopolizes the country's internet services, lives in a 27-story home in Mumbai — a more eloquent symbol, in a city of slums, of Trumpian excess than any Trump tower in America. If ostentatious architecture was one sign of India's Trumpification, Bollywood was another. For decades, its films were known for their often sanctimonious insistence on ethical conduct. But by the late 1990s, some of Bollywood's most successful films were showcasing gaudy, Trump-style consumerism, leavened by a hypermasculine Hindu-

ism, in which women always knew their place. The new privately owned media further opened up possibilities of a principle-free existence by lavishly detailing the lifestyles of the rich, famous and obviously corrupt.

The eventual beneficiary of this revolution, as much moral and cultural as political, were Hindu supremacists. They conducted nuclear tests in 1998 and then threatened Pakistan with all-out war in December 2001, after a terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament that some have suggested could have been a false-flag operation by India's security agencies.

The following year, Mr. Modi set a new benchmark for the killer instinct by presiding over, as chief minister of the state of Gujarat, a pogrom that killed hundreds of Muslims and rendered homeless countless more. Condemnations, including from the United States, which denied him a visa, were soon followed by full-throated endorsements by India's biggest businessmen of Mr. Modi as a leader who gets things done — for the biggest businessmen, at least.

It is clearer today that India's quest for the killer instinct has climaxed with actual killers in high office. It is also plain that a structurally flawed and now swiftly failing economy cannot create the millions of jobs needed annually for India's overwhelmingly youthful population and can only further concentrate financial and cultural capital on top of a 27-story private residence in Mumbai.

Presiding over a grotesquely unequal and unjust society, Mr. Modi and his toadies work harder to channel India's enormous reserves of anger and frustration against the weak and their "liberal" and "leftist" defenders. In the process, they betray themselves as Mr. Trump's true soul mates.

Much guff will be broadcast in the coming days about the "shared values" of the world's largest democracies. But the most significant values that India and the United States share today are those of Mr. Trump and Mr. Modi — charlatans who succeed, initially, but then, failing abjectly at everything, retreat into resentful lies and bellicose bluster. The New India, much more than the United States, is now Mr. Trump's spiritual home, and the president would, for once, attest to a genuine emotion when, imagining himself cheered by 10 million Hindus, he tells himself that he really loves Hindu.

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