



***SUPERFAST PRIMETIME
ULTIMATE NATION***

The Relentless Invention of Modern India

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Preface

THE WISDOM OF PARROTS

GOVIND PURI, IN SOUTH DELHI, IS HOME TO THE MODESTLY aspirational. People move through its alleys with a sense of purpose. Young men press by on motorbikes; screechy horns announce their arrival. Acrid fumes linger. Uniformed children bustle past. Houses are neat but ramshackle, their ceilings low. In the tiny, single-roomed home of Bhim Joshi, one's eyes need a moment to adjust after the bright sunshine outside. It contains one bed, one chair, and one low-energy bulb dangling from a cord. A fan blows hot dust onto blue walls.

Mr. Joshi, in a pressed white shirt and trousers, has been a fortune teller for thirty of his forty-five years. It is the family trade. He gestures to two cages each containing a parrot, explaining that "only one is effective," then places a green bird on his bed. I pass him a bundle of rupees as Indrani, my assistant and translator, immediately points out I have overpaid, as ever. The bird's work is disappointing and brief. In a blur it pecks at something among twenty playing cards spread on the bed.

“What does he say about India’s future?” I ask. Unhappily, the bird has picked a scrap of paper, not a card. Worse, Mr. Joshi explains, Saturn is stubbornly unhelpful. He foresees “a little trouble, but India will get support. The economy is in difficulties but will revive.” He cheers up: “Then India’s place in the world will be number one.” He switches from Hindi to English, repeating himself with a smile: “Number One!”

Mr. Joshi says the stars ordain that India will become the greatest power on Earth. In national affairs, a drama is looming: the death of an elderly leader, the assassination of another, and the marriage of an important dynastic figure. Then India will emerge stronger, with sporting triumph and great riches. One of the birds begins to sing boldly. I ask about individual political leaders. Will Narendra Modi—at the time an ambitious regional politician—grow more powerful? Mr. Joshi takes out a tatty almanac, with columns of dates, squiggles, and details of planetary comings and goings. He furrows his brow, purses his lips, and pretends to make a series of difficult calculations. Then a smile spreads. “He can become prime minister,” he assures me, spinning a yarn about Modi’s family business and great wealth. An hour later, wondering how different a reading by the defective bird might have been, we zigzag back through alleys, passing a stall with a griddle of sizzling meat.

Could Mr. Joshi and his feathered assistant foresee the future by drawing on ancient wisdom, Vedic history, a spiritual understanding, and knowledge of the stars? Were their premonitions of fate divined from something rich and powerful, an astrological force that can be tapped in the sub-continent but lies beyond the reach of closed Western minds? Not at all. They were jovial entertainers who scratched a living by spinning plausible stories. Mr. Joshi was a benign con-artist and charlatan, as likely to be right as anyone else, or as the flip of a coin.

Those who claim to intuit the future from reading the stars nonetheless get a respectful hearing in South Asia (and far beyond), including from the most powerful leaders. I once spent an entertaining morning in Galle, Sri Lanka, in a mansion with white marble floors whose

owner was chief astrologer to Sri Lanka's president. We munched on a breakfast of treacle pudding, the astrologer's plate balanced on a bulging potbelly, and he foretold for me the president's lucky numbers. He also guaranteed the president a smashing victory in an election a few weeks away. It was a virtuoso performance in every respect but one: the president lost.

Looking back at Mr. Joshi's predictions, I find that most of them proved comically wrong. Perhaps he'd used the defective parrot. His promise that India, whose national football team was ranked 162nd in the world (behind tiny Barbados), would win the soccer World Cup turned out to be somewhat ambitious. India has never yet even attended the World Cup finals. He was wrong, too, to say that Mitt Romney would become America's president. But the art of reading the future is to make many specific predictions, hope one turns out to be correct, and then celebrate it. Mr. Joshi was spot on, for example, to say Modi would become prime minister. And his prediction that India would be big and powerful, "Number One," was not entirely fanciful. By the 2020s it will indeed be the most populous country on Earth. It has long been the largest democracy, and it is also gaining as an economic and military power. What would it take for India to prove Mr. Joshi right? What is keeping his prophesy from coming true?

I want India to succeed—not least because of the fun I have had, and the genuine welcome from Indians, during my several years as *The Economist's* bureau chief in the country. Once I wrote a column for the *Times of India*, admitting that as a foreign writer in India I had the "best job in journalism," with freedom to explore a stimulating, thrilling, warm—if sometimes exasperating—country, to throw myself into conversation with bright, friendly, and demanding people, and to witness a giant beginning to shake off at least some of its worst problems. I even relished joining television debate programs, usually with Karan Thapar, a master of current affairs discussion, or hosting and speaking at conferences, and admired how most Indians tolerate a foreigner

who shares in discussions about their future. It felt—and it feels—as if India is moving through a period historians will judge as a time of substantial progress, on most scores, however frustrating it is that many problems linger. The thrill I have had from traveling, reporting, reading about, and discussing India is immense. The challenge of progressing faster and improving millions of lives is just as big.

Introduction

SUPERFAST PRIMETIME ULTIMATE NATION

UNDERSTATEMENT GETS YOU NOWHERE IN CROWDED, NOISY, easily distracted India. Even overstatement often falls short. In India, a land of bombastic claims, you must be bold. It is not enough, for example, to promise to build a shiny new electricity plant. Instead you should brag about your forthcoming “Ultra Mega Power Project.” Want to advertise a hospital? Then call it a “Max clinic” or “Max Super Speciality” and slap up the name in neon lights. If your daughter is to marry, then spend a fortune on a lavish week-long party for thousands, including strangers, so you can brag about your grand status. And if you ride a long-distance train, take a Shatabdi Superfast Express—or, better still, wait for India’s super-duper bullet train, which is due to run on a Diamond Quadrilateral route.

On television, even on the dullest day, channels—“India’s Best! India’s Favourite! The Super Primetime Show!”—offer a guaranteed stream of Breaking News in flashing red-and-white block letters. More Latest Breaking News is scheduled for after the commercial break. It

might concern “India’s First 24x7 Primetime Prime Minister,” or a Supercop, a Superduper Hit Hindi song, perhaps gossip about a Bollywood Megastar and her SuperHit film. News will break in a MegaCity about a Mega Factory or a politician’s Mega Rally. A journalist who has chatted to someone interesting will naturally brag of her World Exclusive. And as private universities blossom, outfits vie for attention with superlative names. My favorite: “The Lovely Professional University” in Punjab, India’s “Largest Best Private University,” offers those who enroll a “mammoth ultra-modern high-tech campus sprawling over high-tech gigantic campus on the National Highway No. 1.” No self-respecting student would settle for less.

India similarly sells itself as an “Incredible” tourist destination. Individual states brag, too. Bihar calls itself “Blissful,” Gujarat is “Vibrant,” and Kerala lays claim to being “God’s own country.” A hard sell is not always worse than a soft one: a mineral-rich but mostly poor state in central India for a time tried luring outsiders with the underwhelming slogan of “Credible Chhattisgarh.” Others failed to follow its modest example, though I yearned to find more states playing safe, dreaming up “Average Assam,” “OK Odisha,” or “Less-Backward-than-Before Bengal.” But such caution is rare: bold and boastful are more often India’s style.

The problem, inevitably, is when reality fails to match the boasts. Those superfast trains plod at fifty miles an hour, not bullet speed. The news turns out to have broken long before. Super primetime television debate really means a gaggle of angry, middle-aged men with bushy mustaches shouting past each other—just as they did the night before. And along with politicians the world over, India’s rulers struggle to live up to their showman promises. Talk of “good times” for all, a hundred new “smart cities,” a manufacturing renaissance, and this becoming “India’s century” can seem painfully misjudged amid desperate poverty or joblessness. Hot air rises. Sometimes the grandest swaggering belies a lack of confidence. Talk about politics, economics, and business and you’ll hear a lot of belligerent claims, posturing, or bristling com-

mentators. During social media or television debates, the open-minded are often crowded out by prickly nationalists who offer lectures on the greatness of their civilization and history, implying that a splendid future is India's by right. Many of the grandest claims, therefore, are best taken with a pinch of masala. But because India is growing, outsiders and Indians alike have to try to discern how bright its improving prospects really will be.

India can flourish. Its story, in the next few decades, should be the most cheerful period in its modern history. Demography—its size and youthfulness—gives it whopping potential advantages. The Indian economy can grow much faster than before and can grow more quickly than any other big economy in the next couple of decades. Villagers are moving into town and getting healthier, better educated, and less poor. Incomes are slowly rising, and consumer habits are changing. Bright people can find it easier than ever to inform themselves about the world. More are forming new companies, using new technology. More will—I hope—demand to live in a humane, liberal, and open society. These threads, woven together, can produce better lives and a stronger country—a rising, Asian, democratic giant. But first India has a lot of simple catching up to do: it must travel far simply to match basic standards already found elsewhere in Asia. The choices and policies the country's leaders should take are not too difficult to imagine. The uncertainty lies in whether they get around to taking and implementing them.

The crop of leaders who came to power in 2014 represented a decisive break from previous decades. Narendra Modi and those under him vowed to reshape the material prospects of roughly one-fifth of the planet's population. Potential gains were tremendous, an immense opportunity to be grabbed. Yet India's golden chance could also be lost, as previous chances had been. In the late twentieth century, economies in East Asia raced to be global manufacturing hubs, drawing hundreds of millions of people off fields and away from peasant work, creating a massive, new, Asian middle class. Those other countries invested early

in schools and hospitals, improved conditions for women, lowered economic barriers, put their businesses and labor force into global supply chains, and so raised incomes fast. India, inward-looking and proud, kept aloof in not-so-splendid isolation, shunning trade and foreigners. As a result it remained mostly poor and rural. That began to change only when the country was forced, by an economic crisis, to begin opening to foreign trade, investment, and competition in the early 1990s.

To flourish in the twenty-first century, India needs its leaders to get four broad things right—the four broad themes and the sections of this book: Superfast, Primetime, Ultimate, and Nation. First, and the basis of almost everything, India needs to get conditions right for the economy to grow fast and for a long time. This means, especially, fostering better-functioning markets and generating tens of millions of jobs. If you traveled around India in the mid-2010s, ranging from its most backward, pre-industrial corners in the northeast to its booming megacities, you found a lopsided giant. The country was changing but remained divided, with big barriers between states, typified by long lines of parked lorries waiting at every state border so officials could shake down drivers for bribes or paperwork. Enormous patches of territory looked almost medieval, yet they were only a short distance from cities where life was modern and relatively comfortable.

In some states, such as Gujarat, Maharashtra, or Tamil Nadu, India flexed growing industrial muscle and demonstrated modernity—like reliable power and smooth roads—that cheered corporate leaders. Some Indian companies, operating at home and abroad, were bulking up. Especially in the south, where schools and hospitals were better, and increasingly along its coastal states, India developed human capital—healthy and bright workers, entrepreneurs, teachers—essential for widespread prosperity. In some states, the services industry boomed. But India in all had a desperately long way to go to turn its economy—over \$2 trillion strong in 2016 but still with a modest share of the world economy—into a big global actor. Becoming Superfast, meaning a growing country with a powerful economy, will underpin almost everything else

as India tries to improve its prospects. Getting less poor, as quickly as possible, is the basis for other progress such as building a welfare system, funding a greater military force, and strengthening foreign policy.

The world's biggest democracy also needs political parties, parliament, courts, and other actors to deliver better outcomes for people. By the late 2010s more educated, better-informed voters are impatient in the face of misrule, and fewer tolerate corruption and failure by their politicians. As a result, protests and public anger will be likely to get harder to manage. Those elected will have to do more than promise to help favored caste, religious, or other groups and learn how to deliver jobs and good economic times that will bring wider gains.

In the first seven decades or so of Indian democracy, that barely happened. Instead many politicians were rewarded for other reasons. The near-feudal powers of some big families—dynasties—let them dominate large populations of voters and also areas of business. But dynasts will not remain so powerful forever, even if they will not disappear entirely. By 2014, a more mobile, informed, and demanding electorate had the ability to make Indian democracy work better and politicians more responsive. Voters, especially those in town, were also getting more impatient, nationalist, furious over inequality, and perhaps more prone to bullying minorities. Today, two enormous domestic political issues loom. Indian rulers and voters have to manage and encourage a changing role of women in society. They will also have to respond to growing—potentially catastrophic—threats to India's environment, exemplified by the choking and poisonous smog that hangs over Delhi for much of the year. Demographic, economic, and other trends will give Indian politicians a rare opportunity to exploit: a young, large population getting wealthier and more urban, but also more demanding. If done right, in the political realm, India will enter its Primetime period, the second theme of the book.

The third broad area concerns India's growing role abroad. From being a bit player globally, India is sure to grow in the twenty-first century to be a more influential actor, shaping more events beyond its

immediate region. A massive diaspora, a growing economy, increasing military and diplomatic might, a big and growing budget as a donor, nuclear weapons, and forms of soft power will all make India count in ways it has not before. (And as a democracy, unlike China, it is better placed to build supportive networks internationally and win sympathy from others.) Few people within India, even as late as the 2010s, took a strong interest in international affairs, beyond obsessing over Pakistan. This will change.

Three big relationships will probably dominate foreign affairs in the coming decades. Most pressing, and nearest to home, India needs to settle (where it can) old animosities with Pakistan. It can try to do that first by developing its economic strength as fast as possible and getting its internal politics to function much better—for example, in Kashmir. It needs, too, to tame the excessively nationalist posturing of its television broadcasters. But it will also have to engage Pakistan's civilian leaders and encourage moderates within its neighbors' armed forces. Perhaps even more importantly, India will have to find ways to better manage its relationship with China. Again, India first needs greater capacity at home—economic, infrastructure, diplomatic, military—and stronger relationships with more friends in the world. Finally, India's already improving relations with America will be a key to help with other relationships and could help to unlock faster economic growth. Cultural ties, especially given the 3 million or so people of Indian descent in America, could be especially significant. This third theme of foreign affairs, the "Ultimate" section of the book, has typically been neglected by most Indian politicians and voters. India's ultimate ambition, abroad, should be to gain much more influence and present itself as a rising great power. For that, an appetite inside India, to understand the outside world, will also grow.

The fourth and final broad area to get right—in this book summed up as "Nation"—concerns internal stability and the domestic, social aspects of the country. India's immense achievement in the seventy years after independence has been to remain stable and mostly peaceful. Much

of Asia, the Middle East, and Africa escaped colonial rule at roughly the same time, only to fall into prolonged bouts of dictatorship, civil war, religious or ethnic massacres, proxy conflict as a part of the Cold War, and repression conducted by the state. Although South Asia suffered enormously at Partition in 1947, India afterward escaped the worst instability suffered elsewhere. India's democratic constitution, the religious moderation of its people, its political restraint, and the constant promotion of secular values are treasures to defend. But past success has been no guarantee of future performance. Indonesia aside, no other country has a larger Muslim population than India (Pakistan's Muslim population is roughly equal). Add in millions of Sikhs, Christians, Buddhists, and others inside India's borders, and the peaceful mixing of different religions with the majority Hindu population will always be a difficult process to get right.

How can India preserve this harmony in the face of rising Hindu nationalism, a form of Hindutva extremism asserting that India should be defined not by its secular tradition but explicitly by its majority Hindu culture and religion? Various politicians including Narendra Modi (as chief minister in Gujarat in 2002) have presided over, and later exploited for political gain, religious violence. Many liberals worry that intolerance is rising, especially after Modi's arrival to national office, warning that the space for secular, liberal debate and free speech is under threat. These fears could be overstated, but they also matter. Reasons to worry also exist when looking at hardening religious stances from others, especially the spread of Gulf-style, more fundamentalist, strains of Islam. A shift in behavior inside India threatens to produce more division between (and within) religious groups, less freedom for frank debate and discussion, and greater chances of violent confrontation. Again, such fears should not be exaggerated, but they are real.

The central figure to shape India's prospects, at least in the late 2010s and possibly for longer, is Narendra Modi, a prime example of a muscular, self-promoting figure with a nationalist-populist character. His profile fits a pattern of nationalist politicians who have risen to power in

many countries at roughly the same time, in the years following a global financial crisis that began in 2008. Unbothered by any suggestion of being politically incorrect, a figure who champions himself as opposed to the elite or the establishment, Modi was happy to be counted as a voice of those with lower-to-middle incomes.

Modi is typical of a generation of leaders in several countries ready to whip up national grievances to strengthen their domestic control and popularity. In Japan Shinzo Abe promised voters economic revival and greater nationalist clout (after years of national pacifism and economic stagnation), just as in China Xi Jinping, its president, emerged as the most authoritarian leader of that country since Mao Zedong. Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, came to epitomize the idea of a strongman in international affairs. In Europe the rise of populist-nationalists was obvious in the mid-2010s, from Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey to the far-right governments in Hungary and Poland, as well as movements that flared up within western European democracies—for example, as far-right parties reacted to inflows of migrants, or as British voters decided to withdraw from the European Union. In America, the president-elect, Donald Trump—cheered on from afar, by Hindu nationalists from India—also invoked nationalist slogans, lashed out against Muslims and other minorities, and promised to act tough against foreigners while offering vapid promises of future greatness.

The rise of muscular and majoritarian Modi in India can be seen as part of a global trend, as politicians of similar mold, such as Trump, Erdogan, Abe, Xi, and others, have come up. Yet India is exceptional. With a democracy and a fragile society where violence between members of different religious groups simmers, where old efforts have to be sustained to preserve calm between members of different religions, leaders must show that they can reduce tensions, not make them stronger.

Given these four themes, what are the chances that India will become a Superfast, Primetime, Ultimate Nation in the coming decades? Other countries, like China, are far more developed economically, but India has a political advantage as a democracy and is beginning to get its

economic house, if slowly, into better order. Immense problems remain, and new ones erupt. Previous failures in India give skeptics plenty of reasons to doubt that it can really project itself successfully abroad. Yet even the most doubtful observers of India, those who worry that “neoliberal” policies are somehow the cause of more poverty, make no suggestion of taking India back to its most isolated and poverty-stricken days of earlier generations. India will improve in many ways in the coming decades, and anyone who has relished the chance to visit or live there will wish it well. How far and fast it now moves is the basic question of the book that follows.

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