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ESSAY

Mr. Modi's 100 Days: A Reality Check

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi won a decisive mandate in the 16th General Elections promising good governance and development.

*Much of the adulatory media coverage of the performance of the Modi Government in its first 100 days overlooked significant gaps between intent and action, points out **Vidya Subrahmaniam**.*

One hundred days of Modi Sarkar and the feedback from much of the thinking class has been gushing. Nothing extraordinary here because governments have traditionally been allowed a grace period when they are not judged. And there is bound to be more than the usual euphoria when the government in question comes in with a full majority, interpreted as a clear mandate to break free from the past.

The pro-Narendra Modi mood today is reminiscent of 1984-'85, when adoring fans and equally many critics of the Congress, transformed into cheerleaders for Rajiv Gandhi, who had become the metaphor for a new, dynamic and modern India. Rajiv arrived like a breath of fresh air; he was of the First Family and yet without its Machiavellian

traits or trademark arrogance. In the public perception, he was charming and sincere, which together with his passion for cutting-edge technology, made him the natural leader of an aspirationally rising India.

Rajiv's 1985 speech, made in Bombay [now Mumbai] to mark the centenary celebrations of the Indian National Congress (INC), tugged at the hearts of the young and the old alike: "India is an old country but a young nation; and like the young everywhere, we are impatient. I am young and I too have a dream. I dream of an India, strong, independent, self-reliant and in the forefront of the front ranks of the nations of the world..."

Rajiv's honest admission that only 25 paise of every Rupee spent on welfare reached the intended beneficiaries added to his charisma and appeal, and there was possibly almost none left who had not been won over. Even the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) claimed to have been inspired by his speech.

But the biggest surprise was Ramnath Goenka, proprietor of the *Indian Express* group and a towering figure in the media world. Goenka, who had been a bitter critic of the Congress and Indira Gandhi, was so taken with the youthful Prime Minister that he said he could die in peace, knowing the country was in Rajiv Gandhi's hands. Goenka's incredible *volte-face* was captured for posterity by syndicated journalist Jack Anderson in his 1985 documentary, "Rajiv's India".

It is a different matter that post the Bofors revelations, the media baron, who was aligned with the right wing, focussed all his energies on bringing down Rajiv, playing a big part in his defeat in the 1989 General Election. By the end of his term, the rest of the media too had trained their guns on the Gandhi-Nehru scion.

So the intelligentsia are doing the expected thing in uninhibitedly applauding Mr. Modi, as he unveils his blueprint for the country, and embarks on steps that they hail as visionary and unprecedented.

But are opinion-makers prevented by the grace period from even minimally fact-checking the claims of a new Prime Minister and his government? Assuming the answer to this is in the affirmative, it would simply mean that interrogation of any kind would ritually take a holiday each time there is a regime change. Can any exigency justify a moratorium on critical analysis? The absurdity of the question ought to be self-evident, and more so in the Information Age, when the explosion in the digital and informal media has made thought-control a redundant idea. The social media is criticised for fostering collective worship but it is also the place where an ordinary individual with no clout can voice her dissent.

Contesting the popular narrative



Indeed, today, a gamut of options is available outside the traditional media that provide real-time assessment of governance under Mr. Modi – if for no reason other than to be saleable products in an increasingly competitive and crowded field. And these, including the smaller business papers and a variety of digital and online media, have provided the critical voices necessary to balance the adulatory coverage of the new government in the majority of the mainstream media. Even within the mainstream media, there are exceptions and trenchant essays have found space, most notably in the opinion sections of dailies such as *The Hindu* and *The Telegraph*. Among the business newspapers, *Business Standard* has stood out for boldly and consistently contesting the popular narrative and painstakingly fact-checking official rhetoric.

The Narendra Modi Government has made it clear the decision on how, when and how much to communicate will rest with it, and the media will not have the kind of unfettered access they have been habituated to. In this situation, the two indicators of the Prime Minister's mind have been his own twitter communications and his speeches.

The twitter messages are in the nature of daily bulletins, indicating the business at hand. But it is the speeches that have given multiple insights into the man, his mind and his technique. Of the several speeches Mr. Modi has made in India and abroad, the most awaited as well as the most impactful one was his Independence Day address [August 15], and for the obvious reason that it was his first direct communication with the nation as Prime Minister. The second speech to attract attention, if controversially so, was the one he made to schoolchildren on Teachers' Day [September 5].

Both events had some things in common. In both he came across as very different from the combative political leader who aggressively campaigned for the BJP, stoking divisive emotions and polarising the polity on one hand

and promising new opportunities for aspirational mobility on the other. His vocabulary on the stump was colourful and piercing – insinuating a Pakistani connection in the case of Arvind Kejriwal (references to AK 49), and coining scathing nicknames such as ‘Shezada’ [Urdu for prince, referring to the Congress Vice President, Rahul Gandhi] and ‘Maunmohan’ [referring to the then Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh], for his principal rivals.

By contrast, the Prime Minister who addressed the nation and later the nation’s children was the picture of equanimity, reasonableness and moderation. On I-Day, in a departure from the past, he shunned the bullet-proof casing, and spoke directly in preference to reading from a prepared text. Both gestures connected instantly and deeply with the audiences.

And with the children, many of whom themselves were overly conscious of the occasion and his stature, he was relaxed and cool, joking with them and telling them not to be inhibited but to speak their minds freely. Mr. Modi did not throw attitude at the children but took care to position himself as a friend who came from a similar, ordinary background. Admittedly the direct interaction was limited to a select few – children invited to be present in the auditorium and another dozen or so connected *via* video conferencing – and there would have been many non-Hindi speaking children around the country to whom the conversations would have been largely inaccessible.

And yet, unfamiliarity with Hindi could not have been a barrier to understanding the Prime Minister’s body language. Overnight as if, the reviled, authoritarian figure of 2002, and the angry, argumentative leader of the 2014 campaign, had transformed into a caring, non-fussy, avuncular figure whom the children were bound to love, respect and emulate. A participant schoolgirl remarked in delight that she had imagined him to be bossy and headmaster-like when in reality he was friendly and approachable.

The marketing of a Prime Minister

Both of Mr. Modi’s performances looked effortlessly easy. However, anyone familiar with how public images are built and nurtured will know that nothing that seems spontaneous or effortless is ever so. Mr. Modi’s two speeches, his Q&A with the school children as well as his new, affable image, are all part of a package that has been carefully put together. The rabble-rousing Modi of 2002 was needed to build the core Hindutva constituency. The Modi of Election 2014 combined hardline Hindutvaspeak with a more inclusive call for change and aspirational mobility. Prime Minister Modi is cast as a statesman, a man above greed and ambition, and with a burning passion for just one thing: to uplift India and Indians by changing how India and Indians think.

The makeover would appear to be a success considering the grudging admiration even from critics. The general consensus after the I-Day speech was that he was a brilliant orator whose words carried a seductive appeal. Mr. Modi impressed not by making a lofty speech from the pulpit but by altogether avoiding that route. Indeed, the most attractive part of the speech was that he touched on everyday themes, such as hygiene, cleanliness and gender equality. Two things he said became talking points at homes and in work places: his stress on toilets, especially toilets for girls, and his angst at parents not sensitising their male children to gender equality.

Unsurprisingly, the media reaction to the I-Day speech bordered on euphoric. NDTV editor Barkha Dutt tweeted: “Forceful, powerful, moving & refreshingly different speech from @narendramodi. Broke rigid formality of past, restored interest.”

Bhupendra Chaubey of CNN-IBN said: “Big message so far from @PMOIndia. Shun violence, communalism, extremism. Give all these up for 10 years. @narendramodi bid for 2 terms.”

Shekhar Gupta of *India Today*: “Pleasant surprise, omission of hostile talk, messages to rough neighbours, only invitation to jointly fight poverty, an I-Day first in yrs.”

Mr. Modi's scheduled interaction with schoolchildren had got off to a wrong start. In the end, the event went the way of the I-Day speech with the general twitterati and the media rating it as powerful, innovative and trend-setting. The interaction had been preceded by unease over the compulsion implicit in making young children stay back after school hours to listen to the Prime Minister. The Modi Government clarified that participation in the event was voluntary, and yet schools typically seemed eager to comply, with the Principals of some schools in Delhi announcing that students will be tested on what they had picked up from Mr. Modi's speech and the subsequent interaction.

Interaction over, the misgivings vanished. News agency IANS put out a bunch of favourable tweets, among them one by Kavyashree: "Sir, your speech was awesome, motivating and worth it. We are really very proud and privileged to have you as PM." Barkha Dutt did an encore: "Full marks for innovation to @PMOIndia for interacting directly with school kids. The entire controversy around it seemed terribly forced."

As performances go, both were flawless. But were they entirely above criticism? Any objective consumer of the I-Day speech could have picked on the gaps between intent and action. The interaction on Teachers' Day was troubling for the mind games that were being played with young, impressionable children. Students recited memorised speeches, parts of which were devoted to praising the leader. The questions too were designed to flatter him. When a student asked how he himself could become Prime Minister, Mr. Modi's reply was that he could start preparing for the 2024 election as he, Mr. Modi, intended to be in power till then.

Superficially the answer was funny but in fact not so because the child was being taught to accept Mr. Modi beyond the five years that he has been elected for. It can be Mr. Modi's ambition to rule for a decade but to say that to a child, even as an aside, is to treat him as a political constituency. Whether or not such interactions motivate children to do better, they are certain to make a cult figure of Mr. Modi. The Prime Minister wants children to develop a spirit of inquiry. The question needs to be asked if this can happen in an environment where children are judged on how well they have imbibed the Prime Minister's homilies.

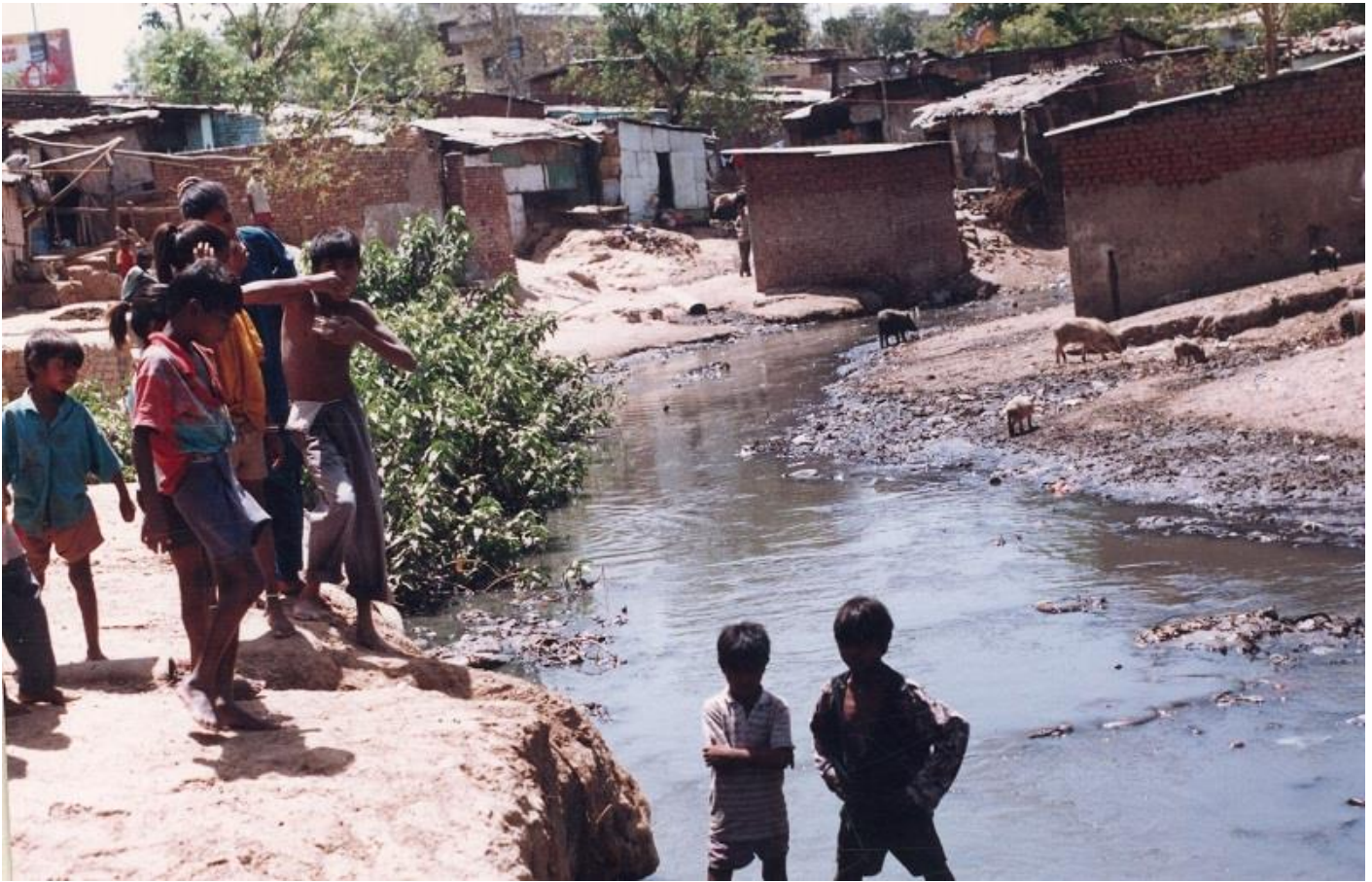
Now for the key points that have emerged from his two speeches.

- 1) Call to domestic producers to make "zero-defect" products ensuring "zero-effect" on the environment
- 2) Call to global manufacturers to Make-in-India and sell anywhere
- 3) Bank accounts for all through the Prime Minister's Jan-Dhan Yojana.
- 4) Warning against declining sex ratio and call to parents and doctors not to kill female fetuses.
- 5) Advice to parents to question their sons in the same manner as they question their daughters. After all, every rapist was somebody's son whom the parents had never questioned.
- 6) Toilets in all schools with provision for separate toilets for girls
- 7) Appeal to citizens to fight against filth and pollution and to take a pledge to keep their surroundings clean
- 8) Appeal to citizens to observe a ten-year moratorium on communal, caste and regional violence.
- 9) Promise to make government an organic whole

In his interaction with the schoolchildren, the Prime Minister covered by and large the same areas, except the emphasis this time was on character building, education of the girl-child and cleanliness.

The pronouncements can be applauded for their noble intent. Or they can be critically examined using two yardsticks. One, Mr. Modi's record in Gujarat where he was Chief Minister between 2001 and 2014. Two, by looking at how his party and government have responded to the larger message in his speeches.

Gaps between intent and action



Do the key points stand up to scrutiny by these measures? Not really. In an article, dated August 18, 2014, Nitin Sethi of *Business Standard* dismissed the zero-defect, zero effect exhortation as “hogwash.”¹ He argued that industrial activity necessarily produced waste and pollution and gobbled up resources. Further, while an overhaul of the resource regulatory regime was required, it could not begin by “the Prime Minister spinning myths about industrial activity that has zero impact on the environment.” He pointed out that the Modi Government had lifted the prohibition on building new factories in Vapi in Gujarat, an industrial complex which has consistently topped the country-wide pollution chart.

In an article dated April 4, 2014, written for *India at LSE*, Gautam Appa, Professor Emeritus at the London School of Economics, noted that Gujarat had earned two dubious firsts in 2010: it was the most polluted State containing the most polluted industrial site of Vapi.² In September 2013, the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) re-imposed a ban it had briefly lifted in 2011 against building new factories in Vapi. The ministry’s notification said: “Even after two-and-a-half years of implementation of action plan there is no improvement in the environmental quality of Vapi.” It is this ban that the current MoEF has lifted.

In an earlier article, dated August 7, 2014, Nitin Sethi had drawn attention to a series of notifications issued by the MoEF, easing rules for mining, roads, power and irrigation projects and other industrial sectors.³

The Modi Government has also given environmental clearance to the controversial Special Economic Zone in Mudra in the Gulf of Kutch. In January this year, the Gujarat High Court declared the Guatam Adani project illegal and ordered the companies that had set up factories in the zone to stop work because the SEZ had been built without prior environmental clearance.

Another example, also from Gujarat, is of the much-celebrated Sabarmati Riverfront Project. The Prime Minister has been keen to have this model replicated for the Yamuna in Delhi. However, the consensus among scientists is that the outwardly glitzy project is deeply flawed. First, the Sabarmati is among the most polluted rivers in the country. Second, the river front – which is all of 10.5 km – is nothing but an artificially created lake into which the waters of the Narmada are diverted to give the impression of a full, clean water body. In actuality, the effect of the riverfront has been to push the pollution and untreated waste downstream.

The missing women

The Prime Minister's worries on account of imbalances in sex-ratio and his call to parents and doctors not kill female foetuses would have carried credibility had Gujarat's own record been exemplary. According to the Census 2011, among 35 States, Gujarat ranks 24th in adult sex ratio and 27th in child sex ratio. The trend of decline has been over the long term and between 2001 and 2011 the adult sex ratio dropped from 921 to 919 while the child sex ratio marginally improved from 883 to 890. In 1991, Gujarat's child sex ratio was 38 points higher, at 928.

In July 2013, *Business Standard* quoted from a report of UNICEF on Gujarat: "Almost every second child in Gujarat under the age of five [years] is undernourished and three out of four are anaemic. Infant and maternal mortality rates have reduced very slowly in the last decade. Also, the preliminary results of Census 2011 show that while there has been a slight improvement in the child sex ratio (0-6 years) from 883 in 2001 to 886 (corrected to 890 in the final Census figures), the overall sex ratio in the State has declined from 920 to 918."⁴

Mr. Modi won lavish praise for flagging the issue of gender sensitivity in his I-Day speech, and in particular for questioning the different standards adopted by parents in raising girls and boys. He wondered why parents did not ask their sons pointed questions on their social conduct as they did with their daughters. The implication was that gender sensitivity was the key to solving the problem of crimes against women.

The matter has been hushed up now, but in November 2013, Mr. Modi found himself in trouble over accusations that the Gujarat Government had, in 2009, illegally deployed official machinery to monitor the movements of an Ahmedabad-based young woman. The illegal surveillance included tapping the woman's phone, tailing her family and minutely tracking her daily movements, including where she travelled and with whom. 'Snoopgate', as the incident came to be known, gained public notice following disclosure by two websites (Cobrapost.com and Gulail.com) of several taped conversations allegedly between a senior Gujarat police officer and Amit Shah, then Home Minister of Gujarat and Mr. Modi's right-hand man. In the purported conversations, Mr. Shah can be heard directing the policeman to keep constant tabs on the girl.

The Gujarat Government did not deny the conversations, but justified the surveillance on the ground that the request for it had come from the woman's father. Later the woman herself said she had consented to the surveillance. The hurried closure to the episode left several questions unanswered. Why would any woman want to be placed under state surveillance? There is not the slightest evidence in the conversations put out by the websites that the woman was willingly tailed. Far from it, Mr. Shah can be heard instructing the officer to ensure that she does not escape their watch.

L'affaire 'Snoopgate' is nothing if not gross insensitivity shown to a young woman whose privacy was invaded at will over several months by a government consciously misusing its machinery and power.

Mr. Modi's advocacy of gender equality is also at odds with how the BJP and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) understand women and their place in society. The *parivar* places the woman on a pedestal instead of treating her as the man's equal. During an interaction with university students on his recent visit to Japan, the Prime Minister

spoke at some length on the Indian ethos, which, according to him, included 'treating women as goddesses'. The notion of 'female purity' this entails is problematic, as was evident during the Parliament debate on the December 16, 2012 rape of a young woman from South Delhi. Sushma Swaraj, the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, said victims of rape could be counted neither among the living nor the dead. She described the girl, then still alive, indeed fighting to be alive, as a "*zinda laash*" (a living corpse), thereby causing immense affront to her dignity, self-respect and her right not to feel violated by the rape.

The pristine status accorded to women is, in reality, regressive and counterproductive because from this springs the understanding that the man must act as the 'woman's provider and protector'. Speaking at an event in Indore in January 2013, in the aftermath of the South Delhi rape, RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat, commented that any married couple is bound by a contract under which the woman looks after the household and satisfies the man while the man earns for her and protects her.

A cacophony of Hindutva voices



Mr. Modi's appeal for a moratorium on communal violence is stunningly duplicitous in view of his own party's undeniable involvement in instigating and promoting communal violence. During the general election, the BJP and the Samajwadi Party (SP) competed to stoke passions in Uttar Pradesh resulting in one of the largest displacements of the Muslim population in Indian history. The BJP's then campaign manager, Amit Shah, and the SP's Azam Khan, both earned bans from the Election Commission of India for their inflammatory election speeches. The ban on Mr. Shah was lifted only after he committed in writing not to use "abusive or derogatory" language.

The first thing Mr. Modi did upon being elected Prime Minister was to appoint Mr. Shah as party president. The recent upsurge in provocative speeches by sundry BJP MPs (Members of Parliament) and MLAs (Members of the Legislative Assembly) must be seen in the context of Mr. Shah's appointment and the signal it sent to the cadre. Days after Mr. Modi's appeal, the BJP chose another hothead, Yogi Adityanath, to oversee the campaign for a set of by-elections in U.P. The Yogi has made one provocative speech after another targeting Muslims, and has not been restrained even by an order of the Election Commission of India.

The BJP has allowed partymen to go on the rampage on 'love jihad', a curious coinage for marriage between Muslim boys and Hindu girls. The term is a violation of the Constitutional vision of religious freedom and inclusion, and yet it has been used to whip up hatred against Muslims coinciding with a set of by-elections in UP.

As Prime Minister, Mr. Modi has been careful not to speak the language of division and Hindutva but there is enough and more evidence already that his government is headed in that direction. Unmindful of the Prime Minister's appeal for moderation, the RSS chief declared that India is a Hindu state. Since then the message has been amplified many times over by BJP functionaries, among them UP State chief Laxmikant Bajpai, who asked if Muslim men had been given the freedom to rape girls who belonged to a certain community. None of this can be construed as either keeping communal peace or treating women with sensitivity – the points on which Mr. Modi earned applause.

As Zoya Hasan argued in an article in *The Hindu*: "The hiatus between the rhetoric of Modi and the reality on the ground is palpable. The plethora of communal statements indicates a concerted attempt to impose a majoritarian concept of nationhood – one that clearly militates against constitutional democracy and common citizenship."⁵

Mr. Modi's promise to make India into a clean country with toilets for girls in every school is unexceptional and deserves full support. But where the objective runs into trouble is in treating lack of hygiene and cleanliness as individual failings. Hygiene and cleanliness are not entirely personal choices. It is well documented that municipal services discriminate against the poorer and minority neighbourhoods which are plagued by errant garbage collection and inadequate water supply. India will not become clean merely by individuals inculcating clean habits. It will become clean when the administration aids citizens in this effort by providing fair, equitable and impartial services. The fact that 66 per cent of rural households in Gujarat use open fields to defecate speaks more about the quality of administration than individual preference for open defecation.

The Modi government's war-like effort to open bank accounts towards greater financial inclusion, the *Pradhan Mantri Dhan Jan Yojana*, would have earned genuine praise had the Prime Minister acknowledged the role of the United Progressive Alliance Government in conceptualising and acting on the programme.

Finally, Mr. Modi's pledge to make government into an organic whole. This appears to be more a shorthand for concentrating power and authority in the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) than creating synergy among government departments. On September 10, 2014, *Business Standard* ran a report that said decision-making had virtually halted because of the emergence of the PMO as a centralised clearance point, even for routine issues.⁶ The Prime Minister had hinted this was coming at an interaction with secretaries of departments soon after taking office. He

told them to meet him directly over the heads of their ministers. For his part, Mr. Modi has been meeting the secretaries without keeping the ministers in the loop.

The media has been wowed by Mr. Modi's image change from aggressor to pacifier. They would help themselves and the Modi Government by acting as watchdogs too.

Footnotes (Last accessed on September 12, 2014)

1. Nitin Sethi, "[Narendra Modi's zero-impact manufacturing plan is hogwash](#)", *Business Standard*, September 12, 2014
2. Gautam Appa, "[Gujarat's troubling environmental record](#)", *India at LSE*, April 4, 2014
3. Nitin Sethi and Somesh Jha, "[Govt eases environment rules to attract investments](#)", *Business Standard*, August 7, 2014
4. "[UNICEF says Gujarat social indicators not keeping pace with economic development](#)", *Business Standard*, July 8, 2013
5. Zoya Hasan, "[Politics without the Minorities](#)", *The Hindu*, September 5, 2014
6. Nivedita Mookerji, Jyoti Mukul & Sanjeeb Mukherjee, "[Modi's PMO overloaded as ministries go slow on decisions](#)", *Business Standard*, September 12, 2014

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