

A ‘Monumental’ Shaping of Political Legacy in India

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Summary

The recent launch of the world’s tallest statue in India by Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been touted as a waste of resources and an election strategy by the Bharatiya Janata Party. This paper argues that there is a longer-term strategy at play of appropriating the legacy of India’s founding leaders.

Monumental Effort

On 31 October 2018, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi unveiled the world’s largest statue in Gujarat – the 182-metre long Statue of Unity of independent India’s first Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel on the occasion of his 143rd birth anniversary. Critics have accused the Modi government of squandering some US\$430 million (S\$590 million) on the monument instead of employing it for much-needed socio-economic development.

Modi has argued that the statue will help [boost tourism in the area and economically benefit](#) the rural communities. It is quite unlikely that economic benefits would have been Modi’s sole motivation behind the statue. Even if one takes the best case scenario of 75,000 people who visited the monument over five days during the Diwali period, and tickets remaining at ₹350 (S\$6.60) per person, it will take about 20 years for the project to break even assuming that visitor interest levels do not dip.

Analysts though believe that the timing of the statue – just months before the country goes into polls – reflects Modi’s and the Bharatiya Janata Party’s (BJP) attempt to swing additional votes at the ballot box. Could this be true? Sardar Patel has been largely ignored in much of modern India’s historical narrative as compared to the cult-like status given to his independence colleagues Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. This is despite his heroic efforts to unify modern India as he convinced 550 out of the 565 princely states to join India after partition in 1947. Even though Patel had served as President of the Indian National Congress, the party preferred to instead herald the contributions of Gandhi and Nehru to India, which gave the latter’s descendants political legitimacy as leaders of the Congress and the country.

However, that Patel was largely a forgotten element of India’s modern history supposes that erecting his statue and legacy is not going to mean much to the Indian electoral base – more than half of whom are aged 28 and below, [including 130 million new voters](#), who have indicated through polls that jobs and unemployment are their main concerns. Perhaps the statue will attract voters in Gujarat – Patel’s birth state and Modi’s strong base – or the Patel community in other parts of the country.

It is also plausible that, on a personal level, Modi wants to build a political legacy for himself that will entrench him into the country's consciousness for a long time. What better way to do so than to be the man responsible for the world's tallest monument, who shares the same Gujarati heritage as Modi? After all, at the unveiling of the statue, [Modi himself declared](#), "This is a historic event for all Indians...No Indian will forget this day."

Appropriating India's Nationalist Legacy

However, there appears to be a deeper strategy underpinning the idea of the statue – that Modi's effort to resurrect Patel's legacy is part of a wider effort to appropriate India's independence legacy from the Congress party and the Gandhi scions. Take the example of the architect of India's constitution and its first law and justice minister B R Ambedkar – another of independent India's leading figures whose history and contributions the Congress party allowed to take a backseat to Gandhi and Nehru. In May 2017, Modi launched the national digital payment interface (BHIM) after Ambedkar's first name, Bhim, and, in April 2018, declared that no other government in India has given as much respect to Ambedkar and his legacy as his has done.

That is not all. Modi has also been courting the legacy of another independence leader, Subhas Chandra Bose, the former Congress President whose differences with Gandhi over the use of violence saw him leave the party and form the Indian National Army. In a break from the tradition of the Prime Minister hoisting the flag annually only on Independence Day, Modi did it twice in 2018 as he commemorated the 75th anniversary of the Azad Hind government formed by Bose in Singapore. Dressed in Bose's signature beret cap, Modi, in one swoop, not only appropriated Bose's legacy, but also [took a dig](#) at the Congress, "In an effort to highlight the role of one family, efforts were made to deliberately ignore and forget contributions made by others in the independence struggle and later in creating a new India...But our government is changing all that."

Make no mistake that the Patel statue, the recognition of Ambedkar's contributions and efforts to embrace Bose's ambivalent contributions to independence reflect a concerted effort by Modi and the BJP to identify themselves closer to India's independence movement – a mantle that the Congress has long held claim over – and also to dilute the proprietorship of Gandhi and Nehru over Indian nationalism that the Congress has built deliberately over the years. In doing so, the BJP aims to gain legitimacy and a foothold in shaping the historical narrative of India in the future and beat the Congress at its own game.

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