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Modi prioritises factories and toilets in Independence Day speech

By Victor Mallet in New Delhi



Art of rhetoric:Mr Modi barely consulted his notes during his lively appeal to the people of India

Narendra Modi, Indian prime minister, has launched a drive to modernise and clean up the world's largest democracy with the building of factories, bank networks and toilets and the abolition of the Planning Commission that has guided the economy for more than 60 years.

India needed manufacturing investment and the training of its workforce, Mr Modi said.

"I want to tell the world, 'come, make in India'," he said from the walls of the 17th-century Red Fort in Delhi in his first Independence Day speech. "We have the skills, we have the strength, we have the people."

Indian policymakers, including Mr Modi, have long looked enviously eastward at China's rise as a manufacturing power, blaming poor infrastructure and education for India's underperformance.

Mr Modi, the country's first prime minister to be born after independence from Britain in 1947, has portrayed himself as an economic moderniser and played down his reputation among liberals as a Hindu fundamentalist. He and his Bharatiya Janata party crushed the left-leaning Congress party to win the general election in May.

Mr Modi's speech was in sharp contrast to those read out by Manmohan Singh, his softly spoken Congress predecessor. Unprotected by a screen of bulletproof glass and sporting a turban of red, green and gold, Mr Modi made a lively appeal to the country's 1.3bn people and barely consulted his notes.

He lamented female foeticide, violence against women in India's traditional societies and the unsanitary practice of defecating in the open in a country where fewer than half of the inhabitants use toilets, and said the government was targeting sanitation for all in 10 years.

"I don't know if people will appreciate my talking about dirt and toilets from the Red Fort but I come from a poor family. I have seen poverty and the attempt to give dignity to the poor starts from there," he said.

Mr Modi also spoke of a scheme to bring bank accounts to all Indians, and announced another to teach people technical and

entrepreneurial skills so that they could find jobs and help build the country.

He said the Planning Commission, which used to publish five-year plans for the economy, would be replaced by a new institution that gave more weight to India's 29 states.

He paid tribute to former governments and their leaders and described himself as the country's "prime servant" rather than its "prime minister". A former chief minister of the state of Gujarat, he emulated US politicians who distance themselves from the politics of Washington by calling himself "an outsider in Delhi . . . far removed from the elite class of this city".

Indian political commentators described Mr Modi's first Independence Day speech as "inclusive", "statesmanlike" and the words of "a moderniser".

But some business leaders and economists are starting to worry that Mr Modi and the BJP are not using their election mandate to introduce the radical, liberalising reforms that they think the country needs to double the rate of growth from recent levels below 5 per cent a year.

"Mr Modi's speech was uplifting and hit the right notes," said Eswar Prasad, a professor of trade policy at Cornell University, "but fell short of a bold and clearly articulated reform agenda necessary to transform his decisive electoral mandate into a credible and concerted plan of action to revive high growth."

Shekhar Gupta, editor in chief of India Today, said Mr Modi had focused on modern, quality-of-life concerns such as manufacturing, gender equality and toilets. "The challenge for him is to live up to his words, because he is promising a lot."

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