

# Social media is a key battleground in India's elections — and Modi is currently king

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**By Joyojeet Pal**  
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In March, a month before massive general elections were to begin, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi adopted a new title on Twitter and Instagram. He became “Chowkidar Narendra Modi.” The title, which roughly translates to “watchman,” was [adopted](#) overnight by members of his Bharatiya Janata Party and supporters affirming their loyalty. Ironically, the same term had previously been [used](#) by the opposition in its corruption-centric campaign against Modi, “Chowkidar Chor Hai,” which means “watchman is the thief.”

By aggressively owning the watchman role, Modi was not simply dismissing the relevance of corruption or seeking attention for his campaign. He was also signaling his candidacy's focus on defense. Buoyed by a border skirmish with Pakistan, Modi has framed himself as a barrel-chested hawk who stands up to threats, internal and external. After several years of talking about development and clean governance, his preelection branding has turned distinctly muscular — and nowhere is this political braggadocio more visible than on social media.

Modi is arguably the only world leader who offers as much of a case study as President Trump. But in contrast to Trump's bombastic style, Modi's social media presence — which spans a wide array of platforms and apps — is curated and toned to perfection.

He runs selfie campaigns, has a Pinterest [board](#), maintains a resume on [LinkedIn](#) and offers yoga poses for [back problems](#) on Parliament's video channel, while his own YouTube channel has more than [120 playlists](#). He has a web [archive](#) of his events and speeches, an [app](#) that comes bundled with some [mobile carriers](#), and even his own television broadcast channel, [NaMo TV](#). The trailer of a hagiographic film about his life [trended](#) on YouTube and almost made it to theaters before [India's election commission](#) blocked it on grounds of being a potential biasing factor.

Rather than just facilitating national mainstreaming as a political leader, social media has enabled Modi to emerge as a guru for all seasons — one whose professional credentials and [management advice](#) on LinkedIn are as instructive as his philosophical treatises on stress management in his [online radio archives](#).

As a result, he has been able to develop a cult following among young, middle-class Indians. In contrast, Modi's main rival, Rahul Gandhi — the scion of the powerful Nehru-Gandhi political dynasty from the

opposition Congress party — has been infantilized and branded by BJP supporters as “[pappu](#),” which means “little boy.” In a country where public figures — whether politicians, athletes or movie stars — are often deified among their followers, Gandhi was effectively outmaneuvered at the outset and turned into an object of memes, jokes and cleverly edited videos. Little of this would be possible without social media, where Gandhi has long been the object of aggressive trolling.

But Modi’s social media strategy has implications that extend beyond electoral politics. By allowing his ideas to permeate many aspects of Indians’ daily lives, his feed helps normalize his aggressive nationalistic message. While his and his party’s 2014 messaging centered on development and anti-corruption, it is now dominated by two distinct but equally important narratives. First, it has routinely suggested that it is [patriotic to support](#) Modi, be hawkish on Pakistan and rail against “[appeasing](#)” [minorities](#). Second, it has sent the message that Modi is the [only viable leader](#) — and that all other options are incompetent or opportunistic. Because Modi holds few [news conferences](#), neither of these arguments would be feasible without social media — but now, they are considered the new normal.

Of course, social media is no magic bullet. Modi’s chowkidar campaign and other nationalistic appeals might have found success among the urban upper and middle classes, but the Indian electorate is a complex amalgam of caste, class, regional and religious factors that will be decisive. The rural poor still hold the key to [electoral outcomes](#).

Yet this does not bode better for the opposition: The ruling party is also dominant on the ground with a well-oiled machinery of [organized cadres](#) and has an enormous financial edge after announcing a controversial electoral bonds scheme that seems to have worked in its [favor](#).

Still, unlike in 2014, when the Internet was the domain of a small sliver of wealthy voters, social media now reaches [more than 300 million Indian citizens](#) — and that number will only keep growing. That means that its influence on electoral outcomes will probably continue to expand. It is difficult to predict how this will play out in the future, but the ongoing Indian elections have made one thing clear: Despite the romantic notion that social media is a means for the small voice to speak truth to power, it is much more of a space for organized political activity. And in this space, Modi is currently king.