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PUBLIC OPINION OF INDIA'S LEADERS,
STATE OF THE ECONOMY, AND FOREIGN POLICY

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PROCEEDINGS

Mr. Jai Shankar: Good morning everyone. Welcome to Brookings India. My name is Dhruva Jai Shankar. I am fellow for foreign policy here and it's my pleasure to be introducing a good friend and a former colleague, we used to work together actually, Bruce Strokes who is at the Pew Research Center, who just like last year...we did event an event like this last year, he is here to present the findings of their annual India poll.

I just want to stress before handing over the mic to Bruce to go over this year's survey results, just highlight in some ways as to why this is so important. You know it's quite common sitting here in Delhi when something like demonetisation happens or GST comes into force for people to pronounce what this means for the common man and yet quite often we don't bother to stop and ask the common man himself or herself, what they are thinking.

Similarly, on forum policy, we sometimes hear people pronounce things...India thinks this. Indians don't like Pakistan, Indians do like Russia. Again, we don't often know. That is certainly reflective sometimes of an elite opinion in the capital particularly. But we don't

always know for sure. And finally, we don't always get a good sense of the popularity of our leaders except on election day.

Even recently I saw an article in the news that compared Rahul Gandhi's popularity with Narendra Modi's based on how many re-tweets their tweets got, which is not a particularly scientific or effective way of measuring public opinion, if for no other reason than the very fact that a very small fraction of Indians are actually on Twitter.

So, for all of these reasons, whether it is domestic politics, whether it is state of the economy, whether it is foreign policy, we don't often have a good sense of what average Indians are thinking.

There are a lot of polls, you see these in the news that are conducted by Indian polling agencies, but many of them are quite limited. Many of them are only done in urban centers. Many of them are only done online and so I think one of the things that really distinguishes the Pew surveys...all of the Pew surveys from others is that there are face to face interviews, they have done across the country and I think Bruce will speak a little bit about the methodology used. But as a result, they are able to get

much more of an accurate sense of Indian public opinion and amongst other things I think in 2014 prior to the last general election, it was actually the Pew survey that confidently predicted and it turned out to be accurate, the degree to which the BJP won that election. I think many people were quite confident that BJP would win that election but not the degree.

So, in any case with that overview and I think why this survey is important, let me turn it over to Bruce.

Mr Stokes: Dhruva, thank you very much. It is truly a pleasure and a privilege to be here and I really want to thank Brookings India for this kind invitation. I really enjoyed our conversation last year. So, I am looking forward to your comments and questions and even suggesting questions for what we should be asking next year because as Dhruva said this is an annual survey we do in India as part of the global surveys that we do and we are always trying to improve them and trying to be as useful in terms of contributing to the public dialogue in India and around the world about India through our surveys.

Briefly, just to explain what the Pew Research scenario is - we are based in Washington, we are non-

profit, non-partisan, non-advocacy.... I always like to joke, I can tell you, we discovered one plus one plus one, but I can't tell you it equals three...you have to make that conclusion for yourself.

But more importantly, we firmly believe that good public policy flows from good information and I know that's a fairly quaint idea these days in the era of fake news. But we actually do believe that we need to listen to the publics and try to understand where they are coming from, as a way to informing public policy debates.

We are funded by the Pew chair or trust which one of those wonderful all-American foundations that is committed to listening to the people. We do a range of topics, everything from Hispanics in America to religion around the world, to work on science and technology, extensive public opinion and polling survey in the United States. We do a survey of about 40 countries in a year around the world and have done so since 2002 so there's a raft of information on our website. It's free. Most importantly it is searchable. So that if you are at all doing any research and anything from India to other countries, and wonder if anybody has ever asked them about

particular topic, I highly recommend the website because there is lot of good data on there.

The survey we did in India was done in February-March of this year. I say that because obviously the context is important. But I would also warn you not to overestimate the context. We did this after demonetization but before the GST and before the slight slowdown in the Indian economy. You'll see from the results that demonetization did not seem to have much of an impact on public opinion and I know that some of you may think that the GST did have lot of effect on public opinion. You know, maybe it did or maybe it didn't. We don't know. But again, just as we shouldn't overestimate the impact of these things, we don't under underestimate them either; we'll wait and see next year what the survey shows us.

We do this face to face in India. We do it in 16 or 18 most populous states. There is couple of states we don't survey in because of security reasons. We stand by our results. *The Economist* calls us the gold standard in global public opinion survey research and we take that very seriously. But I would be the first to admit to you as a polster...you are only as good as your last survey. So we'll

see whether the results of the survey stand up and hopefully the next one will to.

The key takeaways are, one, the favourability of the prime minister is extraordinarily high. Nearly 9 in 10 Indians have a favourable view of the prime minister. This is buoyed by the fact that people have growing sense of confidence in the economy and an even more rapidly growing sense that the direction of the country...the country is growing in the right direction.

We ask people about do they trust the government. Overwhelmingly, people trust the government and overwhelmingly they like Indian democracy, I can tell you these findings are both correlated to how people feel about the direction of the economy and the direction of the country. So, they reflect each other.

We also ask in India and all over the world every year about attitude towards the United States and attitude towards confidence in the US president. As you can see confidence in the US president has gone down, believe that is, if my math is correct, 18 percentage points in the last year between confidence in Obama and confidence in Trump. Now 18 percentage points sounds like a lot. It is a lot. But I would tell you that the drop-in confidence in

the US president in India is dwarfed by the drop in confidence in other countries. The drop in confidence in the US president in Sweden is 83 percentage points in one year. The drop in confidence in Germany is 75 percentage points in one year. In both Japan and UK it's 50 plus percentage points in one year. So, the 18 percentage point drop in India, which is not insignificant as I say, needs to be seen in context.

Similarly, there is a drop in favourability of the US, but again it is not nearly as steep as the drop in favourability of the US in parts of Europe and other places. In fact, just an aside, the only place we have seen a dramatic improvement in the favourability of the US and in confidence in US president is guess where? Russia. Anyway, moving on.

We ask people in India and all over the world, "is life better for people like you today than it was 50 years ago". Overwhelmingly by a 4-1 basically people in India say yes, life is better than it was in 1967, basically. Now frankly, if people had said otherwise it would have been a surprise. In fact I am not quite sure what the 17% who say things are worse are thinking, we should do focus groups with them to figure out why they

find it worst. But we see this all of these emerging markets in the world that basically people say look things are better than they were 50 years ago and I think indisputably they are. I would notice in a sight we had asked this question in United States way before 2016 election and Trump voters said things were worse and Clinton voters said that things were better. So it's not universal that people believe that, and at the end the findings have political consequences.

We, as I said, ask the people about India's direction how things are going on in country today. As you can see this has been steady and very sharp rise, more than doubling in support for the direction of the country since 2013.

There is absolutely no disagreement among various demographic groups about India's economic situation. Overwhelmingly, all groups believe that the economy is doing well, including three quarters of Congress party supporters who acknowledge that the economy is doing well.

When you ask people "are your children likely to be better off than you are"? Again you see no significance departures between demographic groups. I can

tell you again as an interesting aside, one of the interesting findings of our global survey is that people in Europe, Japan and the United States do not believe that their children are going to be better off than they are. We don't have long-term data on this question so I can't tell you when that changed but certainly the literature suggests that people in the West have always believed that their kids are going to be better off than they are and you'd like to work to make to that happen. We don't know what the effect is going to be in societies where if in fact it becomes permanent that people believe the golden age is behind us not ahead of us. What that means particularly in India and other emerging markets people believe the golden age is still ahead. So that you would think would affect people's savings and investments patterns in the present as it has in the past in the West.

We asked people, it's not that the Indians don't believe their problems they are facing in the Indian society, far from it. In fact we gave people a list and asked if they could tell us whether they find these domestic problems were a "very big problem", "somewhat of a problem" or "no problem at all". It was interesting in survey work that when we asked people a question and gave

them three options. They tended to gravitate to the middle option. They said they were quite sure so they grabbed it. When you ask people about their problems they tend to gravitate to the very big problem... It is almost as if you ask people, you give the people a chance to vent and they will vent. Everything is a problem, a very big problem. So this is only a very big response because literally if we ask people, if we combine the very big and somewhat big you get over 90% for one of these things. So this shows the certain degree of intensity. In other words how bad do you think these problems are? People are most worried about crime. They are second-most worried about terrorism and corruption. What is interesting is the lack of availability of cash for daily transactions, the demonetization effect. 45% says that it's a very big problem and it's not significant. But relative to the other concerns the public has, it's actually a very low concern. I think we need to see demonetization in some kind of context.

It is interesting that BJP supporters seem to be more worried about corruption than Congress supporters. I can't tell you why. When you look at the demographics and responses that's what you would find.

We ask in Indians as we do often in other countries about various institutions in the society in part to understand institutional alienation which we certainly see in places like the United States. The most popular institution in Indian society is the military. 62% of the public say the military is a very good influence on the country. I can tell you the most popular institution in United States is military as well.

What is interesting is that 54% of Indians say that national government is a good influence on the country that is up from 29% in 2014. You can make your own guesses to why that's changed so dramatically. But obviously something has happened between 2014 and today. You have a new government and you have a very popular leader of that government.

It's also interesting that there is a huge partisan gap on the national government's influence between the BJP supporters much more likely to say that it has a very good influence than Congress supporters saying.

Support for the media is actually down from 55% in 2015 to 39% today. As a former member of media myself I don't find that encouraging but you can make your own judgements.

We asked people beyond the question about how they thought about Indian democracy which remember they thought very good about Indian democracy. We then asked people in India and in also in 38 countries we surveyed this year, we asked them about various forms of governance and you could support all of these forms - it wasn't an either/or. And as you can see three quarters of Indians said they thought representative democracy was a good way to govern a country. But 3/4th of Indians also supported having the public rather than elected officials vote directly on major issues facing the country. Bear in mind India has never had a national referendum. But I can tell you that you are not alone. A median of 70% of Europe want more direct votes on major issues. They want more referendum basically. 2/3rd of Japanese want more referendum. They never had referendum either in the history of the country. We don't know how long-standing this faith in direct democracy is in India and other places because we never asked this question before. But I do think it's something to ponder there seems to be such an interest and support in direct democracy. Not only in the country it will keep you feel good about the leadership but in countries where they don't feel good about the leadership.

I can kind of analyse when if they don't feel good about current leadership maybe you want to take control of democracy by yourself. But in India people want more direct democracy even though they feel good about the leadership. The implications that we don't know but it's certainly something I think to pay attention to because it certainly would be a new departure for democracy, modern democracy.

We also though asked people about non-democratic forums of governance. And here is where the results in India stand out compared to rest of the world. We asked people about rule by experts, should experts rather than by elected officials make major decisions affecting the country - I can confess to you we actually thought of asking this fall of asking this because we knew that in America and in parts of Europe experts were degraded and not respected anymore and to see what people thought about that. That is the case in United States and in parts of Europe and it's not in the case in emerging markets. In emerging markets and in developing countries all over the world there is still a reverence for expertise including in India where 65% of the public say rule by experts is not a bad idea. India is one of only seven countries however where more than 60% of the population

supports rule by experts. So that's a very high percentage of Indians compared to rest of the world who say this.

We asked about rule by a strong leader and I would point out to you that the question is not a strong leader who speaks the mind and gives the good speech, we thought we actually in the question say a leader who rules without interference by the parliament or by the courts. And 55% of the Indians said that sound like a good way to run the government. That's the highest percentage of any of the 38 countries where we asked this question. So there's more support for a strong leader, I dare say, an authoritarian leader in India than in any other country where we surveyed.

And finally we asked people about rule by the military, how if you feel if the military would rule the country. 53% of Indians said that sounds like a good way to run the country. That's only one of 4 countries in our survey where a majority of population said that it's a good idea.

I would point out to you as an aside 17% of Americans think that rule by military is a good idea and 22% of Americans think that rule by a strong leader is a good idea. Just to give you some context there.

This is the breakdown by partisanship in terms of these various forms of governments. In each case BJP supporters are more supportive of each one of these options than are Congress supporters but notice there's a 22 percentage point difference between how BJP supporters feel about rule by experts and how Congress supporters feel about rule by experts. There is 20 percentage point difference between how BJP supporters feel about rule by a strong leader compare to the way Congress people feel about rule by a strong leader.

To the back where we started to break down some of the views on prime minister Modi and some of his rivals. Modi's popularity is 88% in survey, it's up from 81% in 2016, down to 87% from 2015. So it had dipped a little and then went back up. When you have support of 8 in 10 people I am not sure if you call that a dip. Rahul Gandhi's favourability was 63% in 2016 and it's now 58%. That's really about the marginal affair so I wouldn't make a great deal about that shift.

What is interesting is that in 2015 Arvind Kejriwal's support was 60% and bear in mind this was a nationwide survey. We do this survey in rural and urban areas. We do it all over India. We do it in eight

languages. So he was a quite popular person as recently in 2015, only 39% have a favourable view of him today. And so his decline is actually paralleled by the decline and support for the AAP. Whereas there has been that much change in support of Congress or the BJP.

If you look at the favourability of Modi across demographic groups there's really not much difference. There is a partisan difference, but even 65% of Congress supporters express their favourable view of the Prime Minister. What is interesting is that not only to 89% of 18-29 years olds have a favourable view on Modi but 72% of that 89% have a very favourable view of Modi. So the intensity of his support amongst young people is actually quite strong.

Not surprisingly there is a partisan difference on Modi. 97% of BJP people have a favourable view of the Prime Minister and only 65% of Congress party supporters have a favourable view.

And when you ask people about how the Prime Minister is handling various problems, domestic problems facing the country, for example, 72% approve of the way he is handling unemployment but that is 81% of BJP supporters wherein 46% of Congress supporters. So there is some huge

and probably not unexpected partisan judgments on how he is handling things.

Again there is just the demographic break down of this. There are some differences but overwhelmingly they tend to be not that great. We asked Indians about how they thought the Prime Minister was handling various aspects of international affairs, in this case, how is he handling relations with other major countries. The first thing I think we have to remember, and looking at public opinion in India about international issues, is you consistently get very high 'don't knows'. Bear in mind we are going out to rural Rajasthan. We are asking farmers in middle of nowhere "how do you think the prime minister is dealing with Japan"? Now he may not even have heard of Japan. He may not know what you are talking about. So you tend to get 40 to 50% 'don't knows' in responses to question about international affairs. So we have to take some issues with a grain of salt. That very same farmers have very strong opinions about the Prime Minister himself, or have very strong opinions about rising prices or about the direction of the country. It's just that international affairs are not necessarily part of his can. And I think we just have to remember that.

Nevertheless it's interesting to know that among those people I have an opinion how did they feel. Basically, a majority believe he is handling relations with US well. Now it's down from 66% last year who said he was handling things well. I would ask you to not necessarily to be too much into that because bear in mind again a dirty little secret of public opinion research is that you need to read the question. The question is "how the Prime Minister is handling relations with United States" and you have to put yourself in your mind of the respondent. Now what is the respondent responding to - the Prime Minister's name or the United States? We know the Prime Minister is very popular. We know there is a decline in popularity of the United States. So how the Prime Minister is handling the United States, the response may impart the reflect more a judgement on the United States as it does to the Prime Minister. Even though the question is very straight forward but again you just have to realize that it's important to read the question to try and understand maybe how the person heard of the question, if you can. By the way the attitude of Russia or China or Pakistan have not changed much in any significant way.

We asked Indians more broadly about how they view the world. We asked them what they consider to be the top of global threats facing India. We do this every year. Basically, Indians believe that the terrorist group ISIS poses the biggest threat to India. More significantly, that concern is up 14 percentage points in the last year. So this is very much on people's minds, at least it was when we asked the question.

About half the Indian public is concerned about the climate change, that is something we found consistently over the time. Just as an anecdote, a couple of years ago before the Paris climate change conference I was briefing the French ambassador and her team who were actually running the conference and I pointed out to them that a majority of Indians wanted progress in the Paris conference on climate change. And she looked up to me and she said that's not what the Indian government is telling me. So there is some value in public opinion research to act as a check on maybe some of the assertions of government.

It is interesting that only 19% of the Indians believe that US power and influence is a threat to India. 19% also say that it's not a threat at all. That's very low. 62% of Japanese say US power and influence is a threat

to Japan. Again, one of the limitations of survey and research you don't know what the respondent was thinking when you ask them a question. I can't imagine the Japanese think that we're about to invade Japan. They might be thinking that these guys are going to get us into a war. Maybe that's what they are thinking. We don't know. But Indians in our survey are much more worried about the power and influence of China than they are about the power and influence of the United States. And they equally are not that concerned about Russia's power and influence.

We asked people about their views of various countries. Again, the view on US has gone down but other countries haven't changed.

As part of our survey that we do every year we often ask about the attributes of the US president. We're trying to get at why people have confidence and don't have confidence in the US president. As you can see the 'don't knows' are very high. I mean basically most Indians haven't thought much about the personality of the US president. But among those attributes that we asked basically 4 in 10 Indians think that he is a strong leader and is qualified to be the president. Only 28% say he is dangerous. I say only 28% because the median in other 37 countries is 62%.

Only 26% say president Trump is arrogant. The median around the world is 75% who say he is arrogant. And 17% say president Trump is intolerant. The median around the world is 65%. So relative to other public views of the US president, Indians are more positively disposed than many other publics, including frankly, some of the Americans we surveyed.

When you compare attitudes towards the US to China, Indians feel better about US in all measures. So I think that is interesting. Although the percentage of Indians who say the US is the world's economic power is down 9 percentage point in the last year. Now I warn you that no around the world tends to jump up and down based on, not based on underlying economic issues. I mean you can't explain it by just GDP growth or whatever. But it tends to be one of the more volatile indicators that we have and India was pretty volatile this year, down 9 percentage point.

We ask people about Chinese military power and economic power, it's growing, if they feel bad about that. Basically Indians think that both of those things are bad for India.

There has been an uptake in unfavourable opinion towards Pakistan in India. 72% have now unfavourable view including 64% who have a very unfavourable view.

And finally we ask people "do you think Indian government should use more or less of force, military force, than it does now in Kashmir". Basically 63% of the public supports more military force. I regret the fact that we never asked this question before. So I don't know whether this 63% is up or down from the past. It's just there seems to be a strong support for more military force in Kashmir.

So thank you very much. I look forward for your comments and questions. Let's open this up.

Mr. Jai Shankar: Before I open it up to questions I have few comments based on the results I am just looking at, compared to last year's results. The thing with surveys is particularly when the methodology is consistent, the most interesting thing about it is the trend lines rather than the overall figures.

I suspect the two things to get the most attention and I actually haven't had a chance to scan the

media today and I believe that there is a lot of media coverage on this poll this morning. One of course is the prime minister's popularity rating and two as I suspect is very positive views on the direction of the economy, the direction of the country particularly the fact that this poll is conducted a few months after demonetization.

But barring that I think there are five things that stand out as slightly surprising to me or at least interesting results to me. One is actually if you look at what issues Indians identified as problematic. Four of those issues have actually seen a bit of decline in the last year and I guess I am a bit intrigued by that. One is lack of unemployment opportunities. Last year 81% said that this is a very big problem. This year 73% said. So that's an 8% drop. Not an insignificant but still. 2, corrupt officials. Last year 80% said it's a big problem and this year 74% said. So there is a 6% drop. the third surprisingly is air pollution. Last year 68% said it was a very big problem and this year 54%. And maybe if the poll is done today it would be different. And finally communal relations. Last year 54% said this was a very big problem and this year 37%. So there is 17% drop. So whatever reason, and I am not sure I can explain it, we have seen a

drop perhaps it has to do with the direction, the overall direction of the country, I am not sure. But that I think is a sort of interesting result of this year's survey.

Secondly there are some intriguing differences between BJP and Congress supporters. One was their views of the economy were slightly off although as Bruce mentioned Congress supporters still seems to be largely positive on the economy. But I think also interestingly the strong ruler and particularly attitudes towards the military. I know the way question was framed was as military rule but I wonder whether overall attitudes towards military was different among the supporters of the two parties.

Three, I think while the overall political trends were not surprising and I think the biggest highlight was the drop it seems the overall national popularity of Arvind Kejriwal and the Congress holding study, BJP still being quite high. But I think the youth vote was actually very interesting. The next general election 2019 we will have voters for the first time who were born after the year 2000, which is kind of mind-boggling for me. And these are not just the millennial voters and they are almost post-millennial voters. And the very high intensity of the lower end of that demographic,

the 18-29, suggests that the new voters coming who will be first time voters in 2019 may very well be quite positively disposed towards the BJP.

On a less heartening note, I mean it seems there will also be youth voters who were more in favour of more a hard-line posture on Kashmir. That is the use of military force. That's interesting about the youth and the use of force, there are some interesting takeaways there possibly.

Four, the issues on democracy. You know, a lot of polls showed interesting contradiction amongst voters. We did a survey, we were part of a survey that was launched in May-June this year and it showed some very interesting contradictions. On the one hand Indians overwhelmingly believe that India was a great power. Overwhelmingly. I mean more than people in another countries believed that India is a great power. At the same time when asked the question do you believe it is in India's interest to interfere in the internal affairs of another country, a very high number of Indians said no. Again more than most of the countries, more than Japan for example. And so there is this interesting contradiction. It seems in India's political opinion in one hand you want all the benefits of

being a great power but you don't want any of the rest of the costs associated with it.

Similarly I think that the view on democracy. I had known that Indians had a very high view of military rule and a strong leader rule. That itself is not surprising. But I think it was somewhat encouraging that at the same time overwhelmingly Indians have faith in democracy of some variety. This actually tracks with the poll that we did in which we asked people to rank how important democracy was to them personally on a scale of 1 to 10 and the average was 8.1 I believe. And that average was very consistent across the age groups. So the youth had the same view as the older people, which is again not true with the poll we did in six countries. It was not true in any of the other countries. There was very sharp age differentials in responses to the question.

Finally, while most of the opinions of international affairs, the changes in terms of the handling of relations with US, China, Russia are consistent with last year's and all within the margin of error, I wouldn't read any change. What is interesting is that negatives on prime minister's handling of relations with Pakistan is down 6 points. The positives haven't changed. But the

negatives are down quite a bit. This is interesting because this is the first survey done after the surgical strikes. So while it's interesting that while it does not seem to have an effect on positive views of the Indian government's handling the Pakistan, it possibly may have the correlation with a slight depreciation in the negative views on the handling of Pakistan. So I just want to highlight those who were some of the things that stood out to me.
