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INDIA MODI-FIED: HOPE, CHANGE, AND SOUTH ASIA'S FUTURE

By David J. Danelo



David J. Danelo, the Foreign Policy Research Institute's director of field research, traveled to Varanasi, Pune, and Mumbai, India, during the final two weeks of the 2014 elections.

On May 16, as official election results swept across India, broadcasts featured caricatures of the country's senior political figures corresponding to their party. Instead of political icons (elephant; donkey) or color-coded result maps, viewers watched .gifs striking comic postures next to parliamentary tallies. Rahul Gandhi's avatar bawled like a baby after the Indian National Congress was swept from power, and Arvind Kejriwal's shrugged with exaggerated confusion, distraught that his anti-corruption Aam Adami Party could not attract more supporters. Meanwhile, Narendra Modi's icon smiled from a Hulk Hogan pose, exulting in the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) victory as headlines proclaimed "India

Modi-fied" under new leadership.

Although geography, history, and culture impose constraints on every global power, Prime Minister Modi's dramatic popular mandate—the BJP's 282 seat victory ensure the party will dominate the *Lok Sabha* or Indian Parliament, for the next five years—gives India's new government a rare opportunity. Most political leaders, whether corrupt or competent, are unable to translate ephemeral hope into practical change (Barack Obama's presidency illustrates this at many levels.) And India's geopolitical limitations may not be transcended, but Modi at least possesses the character and capacity to dramatically shift India's course.

Why is this? How does Modi have the potential to transform the world's largest democracy (and what will become in a decade, if projections are accurate, the world's largest country)? Is it because Modi rose from poverty as a *chaiwala* in a small Gujarat town to the country's highest office? Is it because of the game-changing power that social media and mobile technology provide to populist politicians? Is it Modi's disciplined austerity and devout celibacy? Is it because he is a workaholic who sleeps three hours a night and has not vacationed in fourteen years? Is it morning yoga?

THE *CHAIWALA* ASCENDS

In some respects, it is all of these things that grant Modi his exceptional mandate. In other ways, it is none of them. Like many things, the simplest explanation is often the best: Modi's extraordinary ascension happened because he is an extraordinary politician. Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, Modi worked as a *pracharak* (representative and advocate) for the *Rahtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS), a Hindu nationalist cultural and quasi-political organization. True to his *chaiwala* roots, Modi regularly prepared tea, breakfast, and evening snacks for his seniors, also assuming responsibility for cleaning and sweeping the 10-room headquarters building in Ahmedabad. The core pillar of Modi's political leadership philosophy—no task is too menial for anyone to accomplish—seems to have begun during these two decades.

Modi evolved from this base starting in 1987, when he formally joined the BJP and rose, in less than a year, to becoming general secretary of the Gujarat unit. Now a BJP *pracharak*, Modi traveled Gujarat in a two-wheeled motor scooter, building the party vote by vote. His disciplined, determined, practical grassroots approach resulted in achieving the goal: BJP candidates were elected throughout the state. Modi quickly became a professional community organizer, and a very good one at that.

Modi rose quietly through the BJP party ranks during the 1990s, first as the BJP's national secretary, and then as the party's General Secretary. Modi studied political science at Gujarat University, learned how to organize meetings and rallies from BJP veterans, designed strategy with party leadership, and catalogued detailed, encyclopedic knowledge about India's political and campaign landscape.

Why is this important? In October 2001, when Modi was appointed chief minister of Gujarat, he took power as a BJP party functionary, not as an elected official. Gujarat's previous chief minister, Keshubhai Patel, had resigned under an intense backlash following the January 2001 Gujarat earthquake. Patel's administration faced statewide accusations of corruption and poor administration following the disaster, which killed 20,000; injured 167,000; and destroyed 400,000 homes. Modi was among Patel's critics, and declined an offer from BJP leaders to serve as Patel's deputy, saying he was "going to be fully responsible for Gujarat or not at all."

And so it was, in October 2001, that Modi first assumed political office. As the Americans surged into neighboring Afghanistan on the hunt for Osama bin Laden, the BJP party machinery assigned Modi as chief minister of a state (which bordered Pakistan) under a political, not popular, mandate. Indian media were surprised at his appointment, proclaiming sarcastically "A *pracharak* as Chief Minister."¹ Modi was inexperienced, and BJP leaders thought it quite unlikely that the former *chaiwala* from the low caste would be difficult to control. "He was a puppy back then," a longtime Indian political observer told me, discussing how colleagues once thought of Modi. "Nobody expected him to be anything more than an interim chief minister."

AND THEN THE RIOTS

On February 27, 2002, just four and a half months after Modi took office, the Sabarmati Express train caught fire in Godhra, in eastern Gujarat. Fifty-eight Hindus returning from a pilgrimage to Ayodhya—an ancient Uttar Pradesh city believed to be Ram's birthplace—burned to death in fires started by a Muslim mob angered by what was believed to have been a dispute about tea sales.² Suddenly, Gujarat became a ghastly killing field. Armed with clubs, kerosene, and electoral rolls, Hindu mobs seized, raped, beat, and burned Muslims (who fought back, doing far less damage.) The police did not intervene for three days.

It is the last sentence which polarizes opinions on Modi the most; the singular fact which led to multiple investigations and eventually a Supreme Court hearing. *The police did not intervene for three days.* Westerners who read Modi's story—the business success in Gujarat; the fierce attention to detail—struggle to accept that the dynamic, charismatic Modi could not have been in control of Gujarat's police forces during the riots.

Following the Gujarat riots, Haren Pandya, then a member of Modi's cabinet (and a strong Keshubhai Patel supporter), said that Modi met with all the top state officials on the evening of February 27, instructing them to, in Pandya's words, "not let the Hindu anger be curtailed." According to Pandya, Modi theorized in the meeting that Pakistani forces had colluded with local Muslims in a deliberate "act of international terrorism" that needed to be avenged. Publicly, Modi announced that "every action has an opposite reaction," which seemed to suggest Hindus must take revenge and the state should sit back. In March 2003, Haren Pandya was murdered, allegedly by a Muslim assassin. Pandya's wife and late father, on the other hand, claim he was a political casualty.

In April 2012, after investigations that lasted a decade, a Supreme Court special investigation team absolved Modi of responsibility. A closer look at the timing and incidents involving Modi's rise to power suggests logic in this ruling. "In Gujarat, and even New Delhi, BJP leadership were concerned about Modi's independence," said a man who claimed to have been privy to BJP conversations in 2002. "Modi was not playing by the old rules: the corruption and

¹ V. Venkatesan, "A *pracharak* as Chief Minister," *Frontline: India's National Magazine*, Oct 13-26, 2001.

² Commission of Inquiry Report of Justice G.T. Nanavati & Justice Akshay H. Mehta, Government of Gujarat, September 18, 2008.

paybacks and black money. They wanted him gone and used the riots to target him.”

There is, finally, another view: that Modi turned a blind eye to the riots as a deliberate election tactic, deploying Hindu nationalist rhetoric while also resigning from government. This theory suggests Modi knew his actions would trigger a political investigation, but such an event would enhance his standing and bolster his then-fragile position within the BJP. This was, of course, exactly what happened—and if Modi did, in fact, calculate his fortunes so deliberately, it would illustrate gutsy, brilliant and ruthless political instincts.

MA GANGA CALLS

Whatever conspiracy theory is closest to the truth, Modi has succeeded in rising above the event and even turning it into an asset. The prevailing views on the 2002 riots appear to be that Modi had become victimized by a political system he was trying to reform, and that despite the misfortune, he still led his state to greater economic prosperity.

But Modi is more than just a possible Indian version of Ronald Reagan or Margaret Thatcher. He is also a Hindu Pope of sorts, weaving powerful spiritual symbolism into his personal and political narrative. During the 2014 elections, Modi chose to run for his parliamentary seat from Varanasi—the holy, mystical city on the Ganges River—as a demonstration of his patriotism and religious devotion. Lord Shiva claimed Varanasi as his home in Hindu tradition, and Varanasi, which is also called Banaras and Kashi, has been continuously inhabited for 4,000 years. Imagine a U.S. presidential candidate centering their campaign in a city that was not their hometown, but rather a U.S. version of Jamestown, Virginia; Vatican City; and Sumeria combined. “Ma Ganga has called me,” said Modi.

To critics, Modi can celebrate this Hindu nationalism as authenticating an Indian identity, pointing not only to Hindu votes, but also to the increased Muslim vote for BJP in 2014, up 6% from the 2009 Lok Sabha elections according to exit polls. And to Muslims in both India and Pakistan, Modi may represent the devil they know; a leader whose economic success and reputation for leadership provides stability and confidence. In April 2014, senior Pakistani diplomats expressed preference for Modi for Prime Minister, saying he “could provide the strong leadership necessary for peace talks.” Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif backed up the statement, accepting Modi’s invitation to attend his inauguration ceremony alongside India’s other neighboring leaders. More importantly, the votes combined with Modi’s Indian nationalism suggest Muslims who supported the BJP see themselves as Indians first and Muslims second.

“HE IS OUR OBAMA”

The nationalist sentiment Modi tapped into stands in stark contrast to Mahatma Gandhi, whom Indians honor as the nation’s father and many Westerners see as India’s central figure. Although Gandhi’s 1948 assassination inspired national mourning, it was sponsored by the Hindu Mahasabha, a forerunner of sorts to both the RSS and the BJP. In the Hindu nationalist view, although Gandhi led a powerful nonviolent resistance, he also gave away Pakistan, put India on a dangerous economic course, and promoted the country’s cultural division into 22 official languages.

Although Gandhi had few good options for evicting the British and uniting India, Hindu nationalists believe his nonviolence and socialism were fine for spirituality but had no place in statecraft. Modi’s election marks a repudiation of Gandhi’s legacy and, ironically, makes Modi the Mahatma’s antithesis and populist successor. Like Gandhi, Modi’s charismatic patriotism, austere lifestyle and meticulous leadership have won India’s trust. But unlike Gandhi, Modi’s conservative policies affirm the vote as a clear mandate for change. “He is our Obama,” several Modi voters told me, paralleling the campaign arc, if perhaps not the policies or effectiveness.

And Modi’s foreign policy choices have been intriguing indeed. He appointed a famously successful Indian spy, Ajit Doval, as his national security advisor and tapped Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, India’s current U.S. ambassador, as his foreign policy advisor (Jaishankar has since declined). “A shallow brook babbles loudly,” says a Sanskrit parable, “but deep waters run silent.” Although Modi has not made a dramatic foreign policy speech since taking office, his choices suggest a desire to reconcile key relationships while also outwitting potential competitors.

These signals extend to other Asian powers as well. China Foreign Minister Wang Yi has reached out, seeking to settle the Arunachal Pradesh and Aksai Chin border disputes; bilateral relations could benefit both countries should a geopolitical rapprochement endure. But Japan Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has invested years in Modi's personal friendship, and Modi will go to Tokyo in July on one of his first state visits. Even if India reached a *détente* with China on boundaries—and on economic issues, where China could benefit from India's growing consumer market—the world's two most populous countries will not likely become an alliance.

A *détente* is also what Modi seeks with Pakistan, and many on both sides of the strife-ridden partition line have taken hope from recent personal gestures. When the two prime ministers met at Modi's inauguration, Modi gave Sharif a *shawl* as a present for his mother, which Sharif's daughter personally delivered, following with a cordial tweet. The Pakistani leader soon reciprocated, sending a white *sari* as a gift for Modi's mother, and drawing an equally genial dispatch from the Indian Prime Minister's Twitter feed. Such affability may not seem uncommon between bordering nations, but for India and Pakistan, it approaches historic.

India is hopeful that Modi will turn powerful rhetoric into action, and he has already said his government should be prepared to work. "I will be the worker-in-chief," he said during his victory address, and he has suggested the bureaucracy may shift to a six-day work week. He has reached out to former opponents and toned down inflammatory comments. If Modi's reserves run as deep as Ma Ganga, and if this calling is as strong as he believes, it is possible—and, for India, hopeful—that his legacy could approach the sacred river's endurance.

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