

Narendra Modi

A man of some of the people

A populist with a nasty past and a decent economic record wants to run India

Dec 14th 2013 | AHMEDABAD AND DELHI | From the print edition

ON DECEMBER 8th the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), India's main opposition party, handsomely won state elections in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, with a combined population of well over 100m. It also won, a bit more narrowly, in Chhattisgarh, and it got the largest share of the vote in Delhi (see [article](#)



(<http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21591652-stunning-debut-left-leaning-anti-graft-party-sweeping-up>)).

Narendra Modi, chief minister of Gujarat and the party's national leader, claims much of the credit. He is a forceful campaigner, hugely popular with his party's Hindu-nationalist core and increasingly accepted beyond it. His chances of becoming India's prime minister in next year's general elections, which must be held by May, were already good before the weekend. Now they look better than ever.

Indians, especially those in towns, in the north and in the middle class, are fed up with the ruling Congress party. Stubbornly high inflation, chronic joblessness and growth of less than 5% make the economic outlook gloomy. Manmohan Singh, the prime minister, is ineffectual; Rahul Gandhi, who is emerging as Congress's new leader, is uninspiring. At rallies Mr Modi, who looks like a barrel-chested cross between Father Christmas and a professional wrestler, mocks his rival—son, grandson and great-grandson of earlier prime ministers—as a prince. His audiences bellow their scorn. Opinion polls (which Congress wants to ban) show Mr Modi as easily the most popular national figure. “Everyone now assumes it's Modi,” says a columnist in Delhi. Mr Modi reportedly talks of an *aandhi*, a “storm blowing in our favour”.

In a culture that favours insiders who govern as centrist coalition-builders, Mr Modi stands out as an outsider with a long history of extremism. His origins are humble. His father ran a tea stall

at a railway station in northern Gujarat and his caste puts him in the category referred to as “other backward classes”. At the age of eight he volunteered for the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a movement whose purpose is to see India remade as a Hindu state. Forswearing marriage in his devotion to the cause, and receiving relatively little schooling, he rose through the ranks of the RSS despite not being of high caste. In late 2001 the BJP put him in charge of Gujarat, where he subsequently won three elections.

Running a state is not normally a springboard to becoming prime minister, but Mr Modi has found three ways to make it one. He established himself as the strongest voice for Hindu nationalists on the national stage. He presided over a period of strong growth in Gujarat which broadened his appeal, developing a pro-business reputation which even brought him support from a small number of wealthier Muslims. The people he impressed this way see him as decisive, efficient and able to make civil servants do what he tells them. And he successfully marketed his state and himself. Helped by a PR firm, he has promoted himself as a green-energy champion. Every two years he hosts a big summit for investors, “Vibrant Gujarat”, which earns him lots of attention and praise.

In the 2009 general-election campaign he was an active campaigner nationwide, though his big rallies did not translate into electoral success. From then on he assiduously built up his public profile both in old media and on social networks; he has almost 3m followers on Twitter, far more than any other Indian politician. Restored to the good graces of the RSS, with which he had had a falling out, this summer he toppled 86-year-old L.K. Advani as the BJP’s leader. Mr Advani fought a rearguard action, attempting to promote Shivraj Singh Chouhan, the moderate chief minister of Madhya Pradesh, as the party’s prime ministerial candidate. But the RSS and the party faithful were not having it.

The shadow of 2002

Mr Modi has for the most part used his reign over Gujarat cannily. But what took place just after he came to office still casts a long shadow. On February 27th 2002, Muslims in the Gujarati town of Godhra set fire to a train carrying Hindu pilgrims back from Ayodhya, a town in Uttar Pradesh where, a decade before, the destruction of a mosque triggered nationwide riots that killed 2,000. Fifty-nine men, women and children died on the train; nine years later 31 people were convicted of a “planned conspiracy” to burn it.

After the attack on the train Hindu groups in Gujarat immediately called a *bandh*—a strike-cum-protest. Days of bloodshed, rape and torture followed, with weeks of further sporadic attacks on Muslims. Over 1,000 died, some 18,000 homes were destroyed and around 200,000 Muslims displaced. On February 28th an attack on the home of Ehsan Jafri, a former Congress MP, killed Mr Jafri and 68 others. On the same day at least 96 were killed in Naroda Patiya, a

Muslim part of Ahmedabad, Gujarat's largest city. In many places the police either did nothing to protect the victims or, according to Human Rights Watch, an American advocacy group, "actively supported" the massacres. Where the police did their jobs, in southern Gujarati towns like Surat, no one died.

Mr Modi could have forbidden the *bandh*; he could have quickly ordered a curfew; he could have compelled the police to act. He did none of those things. Nor did he call in the national police force or the army soon enough. India's human-rights commission described the response by the state government as a "comprehensive failure". The BJP's leader wanted to sack him (it was Mr Advani, ironically, who saved his skin). In 2005 America revoked Mr Modi's visa, on the basis that "he was responsible for the performance of state institutions" in the riots. Some say he was more directly culpable, alleging that he deliberately stood down the police.

Critics
say that
attempts
to



A comprehensive failure, and then some

apportion blame by India's courts were obstructed by the authorities in Gujarat, with charges badly filed, minutes of crucial government meetings either missing or never kept, and evidence destroyed. With the state's courts doing a suspiciously wretched job, the national Supreme Court stepped in. So far a variety of courts have jailed 198 people. Last August 32 were convicted over the killings in Naroda Patiya; Maya Kodnani, a local BJP legislator who had urged on killers and used a pistol, was jailed for 28 years.

Mr Modi himself always denied wrongdoing and has been found guilty of nothing. (One relatively insignificant case in which he is indirectly involved is still ongoing.) A special-investigations team of the Supreme Court last year cleared him of 30 allegations made by Mr Jafri's widow and others. It rejected testimony that he had told police not to confront Hindu mobs, ruling one witness, Sanjiv Bhatt, who worked in police intelligence, unreliable after others contradicted him. Other claims along the same lines were ruled out as hearsay. Over tea in his Ahmedabad home, an armed guard outside, Mr Bhatt still insists he told the truth. But as one senior journalist in Delhi puts it, "If it's purely about the process of law, [Mr Modi] is okay. Even Congress does not argue that the judicial process has not been done."

After the fire

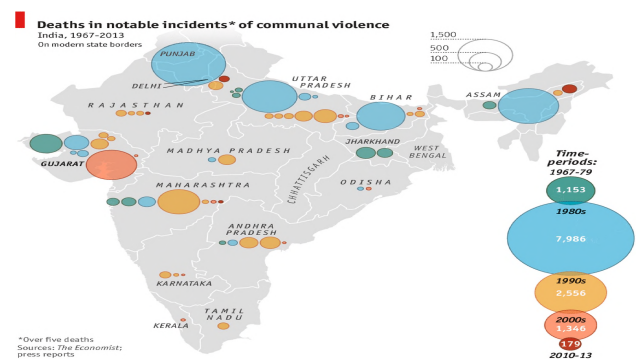
A clean legal slate, however, does not mean Mr Modi was not, at best, fatally incompetent. Shankersinh Vaghela is not somebody anyone would go to for a dispassionate assessment; he and Mr Modi were rivals in the RSS and, having defected to Congress, Mr Vaghela now heads the opposition in Gujarat. But when he says, on the basis of his time as the state's chief minister in the 1990s, that Mr Modi could undoubtedly have stopped the massacres, it is hard not to think he has a point. As he says, "If you are chief minister, with all kinds of powers...you own the state, the machinery, the police department."

If there are doubts about what Mr Modi did at the time, there are also grounds for concern over what he has done since. He was happy to have the gun-toting Ms Kodnani serve as one of his ministers up to her arrest in 2009. He shows no real willingness to shoulder responsibility for the inaction that led the Supreme Court to compare him and his officials to "modern day Neros", or to express regret for it. Asked this year to show contrition, the best he could manage was to speak of a general capacity to feel sorrow, as one does when one sees a puppy run over. He argued to *The Economist* that subsequent electoral successes somehow absolved him, saying: "I have completed this examination and with distinction marks." There is a darker reading of those successes, though. "What worries me", says a young Muslim in Ahmedabad, "is that nobody here thinks Modi is innocent. They know what he did and they are okay with that."

The communal violence that stains India's recent history (see map) has been connived in by other politicians. Mr Modi's defenders rightly condemn Rajiv Gandhi, Rahul Gandhi's father, for failing to stop the 1984 massacre of some 8,000 Sikhs across the country during which police also stood by. But there is a difference: Congress leaders are not drawn from a movement hostile to Sikhs or other minorities (Mr Singh is a Sikh). The RSS in which Mr Modi grew up is definitely hostile to Muslims. The BJP can win an election without any support from India's 180m Muslims (it got 3.7% of their votes in 2009) and thus has no electoral imperative to speak to their concerns. In these circumstances its candidate's record matters a lot.

Mr Modi has hardly been a model of reconciliation. The BJP fielded no Muslim candidates in the state's regional elections last year, though it has done elsewhere. At a rally in November he allowed the celebration of two BJP politicians who had been arrested over recent anti-Muslim violence in Uttar Pradesh. But his rhetoric has softened. He does not style himself a

"Hindu nationalist", though he agrees that he is both those things. Today he insists leaders must be secular and emphasises that economic development trumps religious factionalism. At a rally in October he said "I want to ask poor Muslim brothers whether they want to quarrel with poor



Hindus or fight against poverty. I want to ask poor Hindus whether their concern is disputes with poor Muslims or the fight against poverty...Let's defeat poverty together."

Putting economic development and poverty alleviation at the centre of the debate serves Mr Modi well. Gujarat's economy has nearly tripled in size during his time in office; its GDP has grown by 10% a year, faster than India as a whole and roughly on a par with China. With 5% of India's population, Gujarat now accounts for 16% of its manufacturing and about a quarter of total exports.

This tide has floated all boats. Two decades ago 43% of Gujarat's Muslims were poor, a bit better than the national average of 51%, according to a study by Arvind Panagariya and Vishal More, of Columbia University, using a definition of poverty similar to that of the World Bank. Now only 11% of them are, compared with a national average of 25%. Central-government welfare programmes have played a part in this, but only a part.

State of success

Christophe Jaffrelot of Sciences Po in Paris argues that Gujarati Muslims—about a tenth of the population—remain much worse off than other Gujaratis. Wage rates for casual urban workers, who are mostly Muslims, are among India's lowest despite the state's prosperity. But then Gujaratis do less well on various social indicators than Indians in some other states. Amartya Sen, an economist, notes that its infant-mortality rate is more than three times that of Kerala, and overall life expectancy ten years lower. Jagdish Bhagwati, another economist, retorts that rapid growth under Mr Modi is bringing sharp social gains in its wake, and that Gujarat will catch up with the best before too long.

It is certainly true that economic growth has coincided with a period of communal violence much lower than that at the end of the 20th century. A Muslim car dealer in Ahmedabad, Zafar Sareshwala, recalls how "for 25 years, Ahmedabad was plagued by riots, then curfews of 200 days at a stretch. In the 11 years [since 2002], not a single curfew." He puts this down to an "iron fist", and many Muslims in Ahmedabad complain of police excesses, as well as of being forced into ghettos where the city won't recognise title deeds or provide public services. But Mr Sareshwala also rattles off examples of progress: dozens of new schools and hospitals built for or by Muslims; wealthy Gujarati Muslims who, he says, pay much of India's *zakat*—religious tax—to fund *madrassas*; more people making pilgrimages to Mecca.

Unforthcoming on 2002, Mr Modi is happy to talk about how he has successfully tackled economic problems in Gujarat that beleaguer other states. Take three: supplying electricity; attracting investment; and cleaning up the bureaucracy.

Mr Modi boasts that “24-by-7, 365-days-uninterrupted three-phase power is available to each and every village in the state”. This success came in part from letting the market work. In 2003 he broke up a deeply indebted power company and split supplies for farmers (who get power for eight hours a day) from those for other consumers (who pay a market price but get electricity all day). He made clamping down on illegal access to the grid a police priority.

A reliable grid with profitable electricity supply companies is not the only infrastructural success. Gujarat has good gas supplies, too, and Mr Modi says there is broadband access in every village; its roads and ports are in good repair. Mr Modi has managed to increase capital spending even as he has reduced government debt as a proportion of GDP. This helps to attract investors, both from abroad and elsewhere in India: Gujarat drew more investment than any other state, or any other state bar one, in six of the past ten years.

As for keeping government clean and effective, Mr Modi likes to boast that with no family to favour he must be honest. He prevents corruption in others, he says, through a mixture of leadership—“Unless and until you inspire the people, you will not get results”—and close monitoring. His unwillingness to let political colleagues take charge of state-run companies, thus preventing them from being milked for political or private gain, was one of the things that drove a wedge between him and the RSS during his early years in power.

None of these achievements is flawless. The 2011 census found over a million Gujarati households still without electricity. Mr Modi’s methods of luring investors may be focused too much on big companies; generous grants of land and tax holidays may be unsustainable. A new World Bank study ranks Ahmedabad as an easier place to do business than 12 other big Indian cities, but it rates four other cities as better still, reflecting difficulties enforcing contracts, paying tax and dealing with courts that could slow investment.

Time to talk

His management style and general caginess lead even some of Mr Modi’s supporters to worry that he is a secretive loner who refuses to delegate. There are also allegations of the abuse of state power during his time in office, often involving Amit Shah, his closest political confidant. Mr Shah was forced to resign as a minister in 2010, after being charged with extortion and murder over a series of police killings (the case has yet to come to trial). He is still close to Mr Modi, working as his campaign manager in Uttar Pradesh. A recent scandal centres on accusations that Mr Shah used intelligence officers to spy on a woman with whom Mr Modi was apparently besotted. A close supporter airily says such “snooping for private ends is a very common thing to do”. But it remains both illegal and disturbing.

Mr Modi would face more constraints, and enjoy fewer direct powers, as prime minister of India

than he does as chief minister of Gujarat. It is unclear whether he would be good at holding together a coalition (which any BJP-led government would surely be), delegating to others, negotiating on legislation or responding to crises as they arise. But the record from Gujarat suggests he thinks hard about policy, has clear ideas of how he would promote higher economic growth and social development and would prefer to bolster overall wealth creation than promote social welfare schemes.

If economics alone mattered, Mr Modi's achievements in Gujarat suggest he is the man best placed to get India moving again. The problem is that political leaders are responsible for more. For all his crowds of supporters, his failures in 2002, and his refusal since to atone for them, or even address them, leave him a badly compromised candidate with much left to do.

From the print edition: Briefing