

# Narendra Modi's government and the RSS

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## Summary

On 26<sup>th</sup> May 2014, Narendra Modi became Prime Minister of India. As a member of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) activists, it is clear that his involvement with this group has been immensely influential shown by his commitment to learning the *Hindutva* (Hindu comes first.) doctrines at an early stage in his career. This suggests therefore a level of personal prejudice towards Muslims.

However, in his tenure as Chief Minister in Gujarat he has succeeded in bringing over Muslim votes and, as Prime Minister of India, Modi has proclaimed in Bhutan, Nepal and Japan that India will respect democracy and follow a peace process without inciting conflict between Hindus and Muslims.

Despite Modi's alleged hostility towards Muslims, nonetheless, he has never hesitated to draw them to his side in the public arena. Furthermore, PM Modi has assured that his BJP-led government will not be directly influenced by his involvement with the RSS. .

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## Abbreviations

BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BJS	Bharatiya Jana Sangh (Jan Sangh)
CM	Chief Minister
INC	Indian National Congress
PM	Prime Minister
RSS	Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh
SIT	Special Investigation Team
VHP	Vishwa Hindu Parishad

## Narendra Modi's Government and the RSS<sup>1)</sup>

Narendra Modi became Prime Minister of India after the massive victory of the 16<sup>th</sup> General Elections held in April and May 2014. The results were announced on 16<sup>th</sup> May with the BJP winning 282 seats (+166) and the INC gaining only 44 seats (-162). The victory of the BJP was predicted before the elections, but the result of 282 vs. 44 was beyond imagining.

Modi was considered as an expert at winning election campaigns and was looked upon as a hero who lifted up the economic condition of Gujarat during his tenure as CM. However, there was concern that as CM, Modi had not taken sufficient measures to manage the Godhra riots of 2002. Although he was elected as CM, he received some

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1) The official name is Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. It is the biggest Hindu Religious group founded in 1925.

Cf. Takeshi Nakajima, *Nationalism and Religion*, Shunpusha, Yokohama, 2005, pp.145-149.

criticism from certain media groups that his way of administration was not democratic, but rather followed an authoritarian or dictatorial system which was heavily influenced by his involvement with the RSS.

In this brief paper we will examine the relationship between Modi's government and the RSS. Is Modi's system of governance too heavily influenced by his involvement with the RSS? What kind of relationship does Modi's BJP government have with the RSS? How was it possible for Modi to escape from the investigation of the SIT? What are Modi's true intentions towards Muslim groups and how are these feelings revealed? The following sections attempt to address the issues raised by these questions.

## **1 What are Modi's ideas and attitudes towards Muslims?**

Modi was born in 1950 to a family of grocers belonging to the humble Ghanchi-Teli<sup>2)</sup> community. He was brought up till the age of 17 at Vadnagar in Mehsana district of North Gujarat. While Modi was working at the tea stall, he encountered the RSS at local *shakhas*<sup>3)</sup> and through this, he met a Guru, Lakshmanrao Inamdar, who would become his mentor in politics. Modi's eldest brother reportedly said that Modi was particularly attracted to the authority and discipline of the RSS methods<sup>4)</sup>

Owing to his family background as a member of one of the lowest born caste groups, Modi would have likely had many opportunities in his daily life to have contact with people of the Muslim faith. However, as Modi was drawn to the teachings of the RSS, especially *Hindutva* which preaches anti-Islamic sentiments, this fired his support for Hindu Nationalism.

L. K. Advani was another of the BJP founders. He was brought up in Karachi

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2) Caste of oil-presser.

3) Branches of the RSS. In 2000 there were 45000 shakhas all over India. A.G.Noorani, *The RSS and the BJP*, New Delhi, 2000, p.13.

4) Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay, *Narendra Modi: The Man, the Times*, New Delhi, 2013, p.57.

where he lived at the time of the Partition when Hindus were expelled in great numbers from the newly formed Pakistan. Though Advani joined the RSS before the Partition, it is likely that this turbulent time strengthened his commitment to the teachings of *Hindutva*.

Aside from this experience, however, there is no record that he, like Modi, had any particular physical clashes or bitter personal encounters with Muslims in his life. However, we can elicit from his speeches and actions the nature of his true feelings towards Muslims.

As we will examine in detail in Section 2, Modi was accused following the riots of 2002 of not taking sufficient action as CM of Gujarat to protect the Muslim population. Moreover, he was even suspected of initiating and condoning the violence himself. In 2007 a TV broadcaster, Karan Thapar, interviewed Modi and asked many candid questions. Modi never showed regret. The content of the interviews included the following comments:

- Interviewer: “Why can’t you say that you regret the killings that happened? Why can’t you say maybe the government should have done more to protect Muslims?”
- Modi: “What I had to say I have said at that time, and you can find this out by looking at my statements.”<sup>5)</sup>

Although it was suspected that Modi did not care for the heavy casualties of Muslim citizens, in fact his actions suggest that he had tried to do his best in his capacity as CM. Although he may have felt personal resentment towards the incident in which Muslims killed Hindu pilgrims on a train, as CM however, he had proclaimed a curfew, made visits to each of the victims’ families, and subsequently arrested the offenders regardless of whether they were Hindu or Muslim.

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5) Mukhopadhyay, *op.cit.*, p.14.

It may also be noted that after 2002, there has not since been serious riots in Gujarat for over a decade. Following this event, the Vice Chancellor of the Islamic Deoband Seminary said in 2011 that it was time for Muslims to “move on” from 2002 and made a few other remarks which were perceived to be in praise of Modi.<sup>6)</sup>

However, CM Modi did not openly express his concurrence with the statements made by Advani in Pakistan in 2005. Advani commented that:

“I would also like all the people of Pakistan to know that neither the BJP nor for that matter, any section of India's polity wishes ill towards Pakistan. Let there be no place for anti-Indianism in Pakistan, and no place for anti-Pakistanism in India.”<sup>7)</sup>

At that time Advani believed himself to be a PM candidate, therefore he felt that it was necessary for him to show a tolerant attitude towards Muslims. As Modi personally struggled to accept Advani's attitude towards Muslims, it can be observed that Modi kept himself at a distance from Advani for some time.

In Modi's thinking, as long as Muslims are supportive of Indian governments, they should be treated with justice and full security. When Modi visited Bhutan, Nepal, and Japan in 2014 as PM, Modi never criticised Muslims in his speeches. Instead wherever he went, he stressed the integration of all Indians. Even in the speech delivered at the end of September at the General Assembly of the United Nations, Modi did not exhibit hostility towards Pakistan.

These actions provided a sharp contrast to the speech delivered at the General Assembly by Pakistan PM Nawaz Sharif. In his speech PM Sharif criticised the Indian government's attitudes towards Jammu and Kashmir.

In his role as CM, it can be observed that Modi was successful in winning over Muslims within his own country. However, there is evidence that he did not achieve the same relationship with Muslims in the foreign countries. Therefore, it is important to look at Modi's actions when influenced by political motives within his government

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6) *Ibid.*, p.322.

7) *Ibid.*, *op.cit.*, pp.155-156.

and to consider how they relate to the spiritual source of his feelings, the RSS.

## 2 The 2002 Gujarat riots and CM Modi

On 27<sup>th</sup> of February 2002, the Sabarmati Express was stopped near Godhra Station and attacked. The 4 coaches of the train caught on fire resulting in the deaths of 59 people. The victims were Hindu pilgrims and religious workers returning from Ayodhya which was the site of the demolished Babri Masjid.<sup>8)</sup> Believing that the attacks were planned by Muslims, riots subsequently took place for 3 days, which specifically targeted Muslim houses and killed many people. Following the turmoil at Godhra, there were further outbreaks of violence in Ahmedabad and other places for 3 weeks.

The Union Home Minister L. K. Advani visited Gujarat at the end of April and received the report which stated that there had been 790 and 254 deaths of Muslim and Hindu residents respectively, with another further 223 missing people.<sup>9)</sup> Advani admitted that there must be more victims than officially reported.

CM Modi was accused of insufficient action to protect Muslim citizens and he was even suspected of initiating and condoning the violence. From that time up until the spring of 2014, Modi was subject to an investigation into these accusations.

Some observers used extreme words to express the riots like “pogrom”, “genocide”, and “ethnic cleansing.” Martha Nussband said, “there is by now a broad consensus that the Gujarat violence was a form of ethnic cleansing that in many ways it was premeditated, and that it was carried out with the complicity of the state government and officers of the law.”<sup>10)</sup>

Unfortunately, according to Modi, PM Vajpayee could not tolerate the killings that

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8) On 6 December 1992 when the BJP was in power in UP, the Babri Masjid was demolished to the ground by the Hindu activists. Cf. Kingshuk Nag, *The Saffron Tide*, New Delhi, 2014, p.14.

9) L.K. Advani, *My Country My Life*, New Delhi, 2008, p.752.

10) From Wikipedia Narendra Modi. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narendra\\_Modi](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narendra_Modi)

had happened at the Gulberg Society and other places in Ahmedabad following the Godhya incident. Visiting the relief camp of around 8000 Muslims at the beginning of April, Vajpayee apologised to them and assured that the central government would provide shelter for them. He demanded Modi's resignation as CM.<sup>11)</sup>

In 2004 the BJP lost the general elections and the INC gained power. Vajpayee believed that the violence in Gujarat had been one of the important reasons for the defeat and that to have not removed Modi immediately after the riots was a mistake.

However, another top leader of the BJP, Advani, supported Modi's position, saying "I cannot but say that both Godhra and post-Godhra violence is condemnable and shameful. --- Whether the victim is a Hindu or a Muslim, there can be no place for revenge in a civilized society." To Advani, Modi did his best to keep order in Gujarat at a time of emergency.<sup>12)</sup>

The accusations against Modi did not stop there. In 2009 the Supreme Court of India appointed the SIT, which was headed by a former chief of the CBI. The investigation continued until 2012. That same year, however, the SIT cleared Modi of complicity in the violence and rejected the claim that the state government had not done enough to prevent the riots. Furthermore, in April 2014 the Supreme Court accepted the report of 9 cases related to the violent riots in Gujarat made by the SIT.

Modi's activities had not been obstructed by the Godhra riots. After 2002 CM Modi succeeded in developing infrastructure, such as increasing checks on dams and assuring the delivery of electricity. In Gujarat agricultural industries grew significantly achieving around 11% growth per year. In addition to this, there was no further riots or serious community incidents for a decade. Modi was trying to assure the Muslim population that Gujarat was the most comfortable state and safest place to live.

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11) Advani, *op.cit.*, p.754.

12) O. P. Gupta, *Rise and Fall of Vajpayee Government*, pp.290-291.

The results of the 2007 State Assembly elections were 122 seats out of 182. It was a perfect victory. In fact Modi won again 115 of the 182 seats at the elections in 2012. Without the votes of Muslim residents it would have been difficult for the BJP to achieve as many seats at the Gujarat Assembly. By 2012, therefore, Modi was determined to retain strong support from Muslim voters.

### **3 Modi's BJP government and the RSS**

The BJP was established in April 1980. It was preceded by the Jan Sangh which was formed as a political wing of the RSS in 1951 and merged into the Janata Dal in 1977 when Indira Gandhi lost power and the Janata Dal was forming the central government. In February 1980, the Janata Dal was defeated by Indira Gandhi badly and fell into the inner party struggle, which resulted in the expulsion of the Jan Sangh group from the Janata Dal. The Jan Sangh activists therefore formed a new separate party.

It is to be remembered that although the BJP was established as an offshoot of the Jan Sangh, the group also involved other people without an RSS background like Shanti Bhushan, who was the Law Minister in the Janata Dal government, Ram Jethmalani, a prominent lawyer, and J. D. Sethi, a famous Gandhian economist.<sup>13)</sup> It can be said therefore that the Jan Sangh was a wing of the RSS, and then the RSS became part of the BJP.

The RSS is a religious group in which the top leaders do not change so often. Since 1973 till 2014 there have been only 4 top leaders<sup>14)</sup> each of whom was nominated by their predecessors. The top leaders of the RSS never move into the leadership positions of the political party, but the senior leaders of the BJP have always been the

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13) Advani, *op.cit.*, p.313.

14) Top leader is called *Sarasanghcharaks*, they are K.B.Hedgewar (1925–1930;1931–1940), Laxman Vaman Paranjpe (1930–1931), M.S.Golwalkar (1940–1973), Madhkar Dattatraya deoras (1973–1993), Rajendra Singh (1993–2000), K.S.Sudarshan (2000–2009), Mohan Bhagwat (2009–incumbent)



main activists of the RSS.

When Advani became the second President of the BJP in 1986, he decided to bring in fresh young members to the party. Politicians like Jaswat Singh, who lacked an RSS background, was invited to join the administration<sup>15)</sup>, and among those young politicians, Narendra Modi and K. N. Govindacharya, who were *Pracharaks*<sup>16)</sup> of the RSS, were also included.

In Gujarat Modi became the representative of the RSS, and became one of the main leaders of the BJP in his state. This stirred hostile feelings from senior leaders especially Kashram Rana who was president of the BJP unit in Gujarat in 1985–87 and 93–96. In 1996 Rana refused to re-nominate Modi as party general secretary, but he was forced to do so by the nation-wide president of the BJP, Advani. Rana therefore subsequently left the party.<sup>17)</sup>

In 1988 Modi was appointed as the Organising Secretary of the Gujarat unit of the BJP. This meant that if the BJP got enough votes, he would be the first-ever *Pracharak* of the RSS to become the chief minister of a state. From the 1990s onwards the results of the elections in Gujarat, both Lok Sabha and Assembly, have been the BJP's massive victories as shown below.

**Table 1 (Lok Sabha: 25–26 seats)**

	1991	1996	1998	2004	2009	2014
BJP	20	16	19	14	15	26
INC	5	10	7	12	11	0

(by the author using various data)

15) Advani, *op.cit.*, pp.124–125.

16) *Pracharaks* are “full-time volunteers of the RSS.” They are basically prohibited from marriage and supposed to lead humble lives. Cf. Mukhopadhyay, *op.cit.*, p.148.

17) *Ibid.*, p.197.

Table 2 (Assembly: 182 seats)

Assembly	1990	1995	1998	2002	2007	2012
BJP	67	121	117	127	117	119
INC	33	45	53	51	59	57

(by the author using various data)

In 1991, Advani was considered a BJP hero. He tried to move the public opinion by undertaking the *Swarna Jayanti Rath Yatra* (A Patriotic Pilgrimage)<sup>18)</sup> In the style of *Rath Yatra*, he addressed Indian Muslims as follows:

“After independence, influential sections of Muslim leadership, encouraged by the pseudo-secular practice of the Congress and other parties, have continued to obstruct the community’s all-sided integration with national life.-----The BJP believes in genuine secularism, which means justice and security for all, but appeasement of none.”<sup>19)</sup>

Whilst Advani assured the security of Muslims, he nonetheless never forgot to say that a multi-religious society should be united at its core by *Hindutva*.

As one of the leading candidates in the election campaign, Modi was gaining popularity and respect not only in Gujarat but also in all India. He seemed to realise that preaching the way of *Hindutva* would not work for winning votes.

The RSS’s first priority was still *Hindutva*, but Modi introduced the new concept of “development” to replace *Hindutva* and actually tried to develop Gujarat economically a decade after he was inaugurated as Gujarat CM in October 2001.

In 2009 he was already the primary candidate for the BJP’s election campaign. The INC maintained its position in the central government but since 1996 in Gujarat, as at all elections for both the Lok Sabha and the Assembly, it was the BJP who took a big

18) Advani marched almost all states on foot, remembering Mahatma Gandhi’s Salt *Satyagraha*. Advani, *op. cit.*, pp.490-525.

19) Advani, *op.cit.*, pp.524-525.

lead over the INC. Then the 2014 General Election came.

In Gujarat, two thirds of the seats were won by the BJP in the Assembly, and for the Lok Sabha all 26 seats were occupied by BJP candidates.

Regarding Modi's strategy, some observers pointed out as below:

“As a shrewd politician committed to *Hindutva* politics, Modi might have realised the constraints of the CM's office to integrate *Hindutva* ideology with the democratic system. *Hindutva* rhetoric of the 1990s had diminishing popularity and power. The methods of RSS, Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), Barjang Dal could be effective in raising an emotional pitch but less useful to sustain people's support. To nurture *Hindutva* therefore “development” had to be embraced.”<sup>20)</sup>

It is very clear that Modi was deeply influenced by his training at *shakhas* and his life as a *Pracharak* of the RSS. At the *shakhas* he likely acquired his notions of discipline and concepts of morality, and from his experience as a *Pracharak* he must have derived a strong sense of his ‘mission.’

In spite of all these facts, however, it seems that PM Modi's governance would never be compromised by his beliefs in the RSS or *Hindutva* ideology. It can be observed for instance that the RSS functionary Ram Madhav said, “Sangh would have no role in government and in the council of Ministers. It would be decided by the party and its leaders.”<sup>21)</sup>

Of course RSS activists and volunteers perform well through their door-to-door campaign. However, as can be seen by Modi's example, even if Indian politicians are influenced by strong religious groups, as long as those in top leadership roles do not abuse their position and power, the development of India will continue its trajectory for some time yet.

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20) Ed.by Paul Wallace and Ramashray Roy, *India's 2009 Elections: Coalition Politics, Party Competition, and Congress Continuity*, New Delhi, 2011, p.170.

21) *The Hindu*, 2014. 5. 16.