

FORUM

Never-ending Modi

Hindutva and Gujarati neoliberalism as prelude to all-India premiership?

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Abstract: This article proposes a non conventional analysis of the most significant phenomenon that has marked Indian political life in the past decade. The electoral competition for the 2014 general election is played around two main elements, namely, the selection of convincing prime ministerial candidates and the definition of electoral coalitions. In this perspective, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the main party of the right-wing coalition (National Democratic Alliance, NDA), has taken a decisive step by selecting Narendra Modi as its front man for the electoral campaign, and thus the “natural” candidate for the post of prime minister in case of success. A highly controversial figure, Modi polarized the public debate for over a decade: he is either considered a fascist politician or he is praised for the high economic growth rates achieved by the state under his government. This article proposes to move beyond such a dichotomy to highlight Modi’s complexity and success in promoting a political culture that merged religious traditionalism and neoliberal economic arguments. Whether his coalition will win the election or not, and whether he will become the next prime minister or not, is greatly significant to the future of India and to the possibility of the many contradictions and diversities that underpin the Indian democracy being conciliated.

Keywords: general elections 2014, Narendra Modi, Hindu nationalism, development

Like many other megalopolises in Asia, Ahmedabad, the largest city of Gujarat and the state’s main financial center, is a city in rapid transformation, with new infrastructure, commercial buildings, shopping malls, and gated communities rising all around. A prominent position in this transforming landscape is reserved for the new Riverfront Development Project, the renovation of the banks of River Sabarmati, which crosses the center of Ahmedabad from north to south. The implementation of this project re-

claimed the land along the riverbanks from thousands of slum dwellers with the aim of “enhancing Ahmedabad’s value as a destination for new employers, institutions, investment, education opportunities, and tourism” (Sabarmati Riverfront Development Corporation 2011).

This new mega infrastructure well represents the aspirations of the city and the state of Gujarat to become a recognized actor in the global economy, a hub of financial investment and industrial activity. Yet, as a symbol of global aspi-



rations, the riverfront project also encompasses all the contradictions and “side effects” of neoliberal development politics. On the website of the project, one can read that “around the world, major cities have created significant public value by developing waterfronts for leisure, recreation, and as gathering spaces that drastically improve the quality of life for citizens” (Sabarmati Riverfront Development Corporation 2011). True as this statement may be, it appears in strident contrast with the unending row of sleeping bodies of all ages, which lie on the pavements of the bridges that cross the river, linking the old city to the newer neighborhoods. Every night, hundreds of people, who do not even have a hut in one of the expanding city slums, or whose slums have been cleared to make way to the new project, squat on the pavement of what is expected to become “the vibrant and vital focus of the city” (Sabarmati Riverfront Development Corporation 2011). Wherever the city renovates, it seems that poor people come out to remind us that development means further marginalization for increasingly larger sectors of society.¹

Many authors have investigated the ways in which globalization and neoliberal development are entwined with segregation and religious discrimination in India (Appadurai 2000; Mahadevia 2002a, 2002b; Shaw 2007; Sud 2012). In this frame, the state of Gujarat represents a paradigmatic example of the intermingling of neoliberalism and the politics of exclusion. From the 1990s, Gujarat has been one of the states of India that has applied neoliberal reforms in their extreme version, with a severe deregulation of the labor market and an attack on “hard-won rights” (Ahmad 2004; Hirway 2000; Kundu 2000; Shinoda 2000). Parallel to this, two decades of intense anti-Muslim propaganda and episodic clashes prepared the ground for what is considered one of the worst riots in the history of independent India, certainly the one in which violence was perpetrated in its most brutal forms, in February and March 2002 (Citizens for Justice and Peace 2002; International Initiative for Justice 2003).

But Gujarat has become an exemplary case also because the two forces of neoliberal devel-

opment and violent discriminatory politics are embodied by a single person, a traditionalist politician with a background as a cadre in the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS, or National Volunteer Organization), the “mother” of all Hindu fundamentalist associations. Narendra Modi built his success by standing as the representative of a so-called typically Gujarati culture combining religious bigotry, intolerance, and a marked aspiration toward an ideal of modernization pinned on Western symbols of consumerism. He is nowadays the most polarizing and controversial public figure in India. After his rise to chief minister of Gujarat in 2001, and after the anti-Muslim pogroms, Modi won three consecutive elections in 2002, 2007, and 2012, consolidating his political power in the state and becoming a symbol of good politics and successful development at the national level as well. However, the 2002 anti-Muslim pogroms—in which his cabinet was directly involved—and his highly authoritarian behavior also made him a symbol of a fascist, antidemocratic, and potentially dangerous way of conducting politics.

This article proposes a key to reading the last twelve years of Narendra Modi’s career (his period as chief minister of Gujarat) in order to disentangle the many contradictions that marked his political propaganda. In particular, an analysis of the political phenomenon called Modi becomes an opportunity to reflect on the socio-cultural dynamics that shaped the state in the past three decades. A necessary condition to interpret the success of Modi’s political rhetoric is to look at the context that allowed a personality like him to emerge and stand out as a leader. The pervasiveness of a certain kind of propaganda in the state’s everyday life has had the effect of normalizing and “routinizing” forms of intolerance and discrimination against the weaker sectors of society. An expert analyst of the situation in Gujarat, Gandhian scholar Tridip Suhrud, has argued that Modi is the product of a specifically Gujarati public culture that has always been fascinated by authoritarian figures such as Sardar Patel, Morarji Desai, and later Chimanbhai Patel. It would thus be correct to

affirm that it is such a culture that produced Modi, and not the opposite, namely, that Modi created an extremist, intolerant culture in the state.² This article is an attempt to show a more nuanced reality. While Modi's grasp on the local electorate is certainly partly to be considered as the outcome of a well-consolidated political tradition, the rhetoric on which he relied did exacerbate elements of intolerance and aggressiveness that became part of the public culture of the state for the first time. Hence, discussing Modi becomes a way to reinterpret the rise of such a culture in the wake of Gujarat's "global aspirations" and neoliberal reforms.

Changing paradigms in the public debate

The story of Narendra Modi begins in 2002, with the massive wave of anti-Muslim pogroms that put the whole state of Gujarat under siege, claiming some 2,000 victims and producing a population of internal refugees of about 150,000.³ Narendra Modi had assumed office at the end of the previous year, in October 2001, replacing his senior party fellow, Keshubhai Patel and assuming the difficult task of reviving the fortune of their party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which was losing consensus among the electorate. All things considered, he not only achieved his goal, but went far beyond expectations: he is still, eleven years and three elections later, the chief minister of the state and has become one of the strongest personalities within his party at the national level. For large portions of the public opinion, Modi now has the reputation of a strong, incorruptible politician, one who can bring about decisive reforms against the well-known stillness of the Indian administration and, more importantly, one who wins elections.

Again, the story begins with a massacre (the 2002 pogroms) and ends—for the moment—with a success (in the 2012 Gujarat elections). These two points can be seen as landmarks that allow us to understand the double face of Narendra Modi as a public figure, the Hindu extremist and the capable administrator.⁴ How

can a religious extremist, a culturally conservative leader, also be a staunch supporter and promoter of neoliberal economic policies? In fact, religious extremism and a "modernist" approach to economic development represent two aspects of the same dynamic that has reshaped Indian politics and culture in the past two decades. Along with the country's opening to a liberalized economy in 1991, the enthusiastic welcoming of consumerism somehow betrayed the aspiration for a "westernization" of the mores and the culture of the middle classes (and the popular aspiration of becoming part of the middle-class milieu).⁵ At the same time, the widespread consolidation of a Hindu extremist culture and political affiliation, in particular in urban areas, has been read as a striving to constantly assert a specificity that distinguishes Indian society from the West, in a "quest for equality through difference" arising from the very same desire to be integrated into the globalized world (Hansen 1999: 232). While Hansen labeled such ambivalence an "unease with modernity" (Hansen 1999: 235), the rise of Narendra Modi tells a slightly different story. As this article argues, in the way he managed the dynamics of a free-market economy while playing with identity politics and collective insecurities, Modi proved himself a very modern politician, one who managed to present himself as the symbol of an Indian-style pattern of development by successfully mixing three ingredients: religion, nationalism (often defined in regional terms), and "modernity". The propaganda on which Modi built his success does not place traditions and modernity in an antagonistic position. Rather, it is a combination of the two that underpins the path toward development and growth. Modi himself carved out his public figure in order to embody the reconciliation of traditionalism and modernization. With ease he played the role of the traditionalist Hindu leader who knows his way in the globalized world. His record as an activist of the RSS leaves no doubts as to his adherence to Hindu religious orthodoxy, and yet he skillfully plays by the rules of the global market to attract investment and private initiative to Gujarat.

The brilliant show that Modi's government puts on every two years in the Vibrant Gujarat summit is the quintessence of his public image and success. The Vibrant Gujarat Global Investor's Summit was first staged in 2003 as a gathering to encourage the encounter between local government and private investors, present all the facilities that the state provided to local and foreign firms that chose to invest in the state, sign Memoranda of Understanding (MoU), and promote Gujarat as an attractive location for entrepreneurs from all over the world. Over the years, the summit has become the occasion not only to showcase the great opportunities that Gujarat offers to investors from all over the world, but also to highlight Modi's favorite role, that of the deeply rooted Hindu Gujarati leader who is well at ease in managing a global event. It has been noted that "Modi turned the act of investing in what has long been one of India's most business-friendly and industrialised states into a high-profile spectacle" (Jose 2012). In fact, the summit has an ambivalent meaning. Externally, toward the rest of India and the rest of the world, the great exhibition of Vibrant Gujarat serves to launch the state into the competition for private capital, opened among Indian states since the 1991 liberalization (Hirway 2000). Internally, toward the people of Gujarat, who are his electorate, Modi uses this occasion to reassert his image as a truly Gujarati leader, one who embodies all the main features of a so-called Gujarati culture and ethos, while resorting to them as an engine to promote development programs (Bobbio 2012).

Through the lens of development policies, Modi represents the successful face of India's rising aggressive capitalism. The clever way in which he has managed his public image leads us to focus on another fundamental aspect, namely Modi's obsessive attention toward the media, from television to social networks (N. Mehta 2006; Ayyub 2013). Part of his electoral success is certainly to be ascribed to the way Modi and his spin doctors communicate through various media, transforming almost every action into news. Such overexposure, however, also contributed to exacerbating controversies around

his person, and news involving Modi is usually followed by a stream of comments and counter-comments to prove his rightness or wrongness. The next section discusses the two elements that make his figure so controversial and attractive for large sectors of urban society in Gujarat: religious fanaticism and good governance. Around these two extremes a whole set of narrations have been constructed, describing Modi either in enthusiastically positive terms or in a totally dark light.

Gujarati *asmita* and the 2002 pogroms

The press, and more generally public opinion, is neatly divided in judging Modi along two diverging lines: either he is a religious fundamentalist or a modernist developer. Articles attacking Modi on the grounds of his religious extremism invariably resort to quote an anecdote involving renowned Indian intellectual Ashis Nandy. Nandy interviewed Modi back in the 1990s when he was not yet chief minister and, after the meeting, defined him as a "textbook case of a fascist and a prospective killer" (Nandy 2002). Nandy's authority, and the fact that such a statement was made well before the outburst of violence in 2002, are implicitly held as proof of the unquestionable validity of the statement itself. Within this common narrative frame, a political leader who is recognized as a "textbook case of a fascist" is of course unfit to govern in a democratic system and automatically loses all his legitimacy to hold the post of chief minister, let alone aspire to become the next prime minister. On the contrary, Modi's supporters all refer to another fixed set of arguments, highlighting the supposed primacy of Gujarat in terms of economic indicators and in combination with a sort of inborn "Gujarati spirit of entrepreneurship".⁶

It is not the aim of this article to ascertain whether Modi is a "textbook case of a fascist" or not. However, the example of Ashis Nandy's statement about Modi is significant for showing how the public image of the chief minister is crystallized around two conflicting narratives,

which make use of easily recognizable and codified language (Modi equals fascism, or Modi equals development cum subnational pride). These narratives have become common sense in Gujarat as well as in the rest of India. But, at least in the case of religious extremism and the issue of Modi's responsibility in the 2002 pogroms, the label "fascist" has often worked to strengthen his appeal among the electorate. A closer look at the processes that led to the construction of such a narrative would show how Modi intentionally capitalized on the accusation of having been involved in the orchestration of the 2002 pogroms.

The electoral campaigns for state elections in 2002 and 2007 were almost entirely fought around the issue of Modi's direct or indirect responsibility in freely allowing mobs to kill and torture Muslim people around the state. In October 2007, Congress president Sonia Gandhi went so far as to publicly call Modi a "merchant of death" (*maut ka saudagar*), giving voice to all those sectors of public opinion, civil associations, and opposition parties that considered Modi directly responsible for the pogroms and for the lack of any real attempt to find and punish the orchestrators of the riots. The sound and plain defeat suffered by the Congress in that election (117 seats for the BJP versus 59 for the Congress, out of 181) proved Mrs. Gandhi's strategy a failure, but, more importantly, highlighted how the Gujarati electorate was highly sensitive to any attack on its leader on the grounds of his religious extremism, and reacted consequently (Tejpal 2008). Herein lies one of the great successes of Narendra Modi as a truly populist leader: he has managed to stand before the electorate as the representative of the whole population of Gujarat. Thus, criticisms aimed at him become a burden for all the people and, at the same time, his personal crusade to prove himself free of any responsibility for the riots was transformed into a public affair involving all Gujaratis.

From the beginning of the riots up to the December 2002 election, Modi shaped his public rhetoric such that attacks against him were turned into accusations to the whole of the Gu-

jarati population (N. Mehta 2006; Sharma 2003). During his electoral tour in 2002, Modi inflamed his rallies by repeating that

[Congressmen say that] Gujaratis are violent people. They say that here people stab passers-by with knives. You must have heard all this. The Congress says that Gujaratis keep petrol bombs with them in their pockets. And then they use them to burn people alive in the streets! They [Congressmen] have played with Gujarati pride. (Sharma 2003: 51 '32')

This act of inversion, through which his responsibilities became those of all the people, proved a very successful strategy that Modi still resorts to whenever the issue of his involvement during the riots arises. In this way, he depicted himself as the sole defender of the pride (*gaurav*) and self-consciousness (*asmitya*) of his "five-and-a-half crore Gujarati brothers" (*The Indian Express* 26 October 2007; see also Suhrud 2008; Bobbio 2012). However, more than the high payoff in terms of votes, it is important to highlight that this strategy provided a political gateway to a feeling, common among many Gujaratis, that equates the idea of a Gujarati identity with the Hindu community of the state.⁷

Gujarat has often been described as a laboratory of *Hindutva*, the ideological platform of Hindu fundamentalist associations that seeks to identify the Indian nation with a revivalist interpretation of the Hindu community (Nandy et al. 1995; Jaffrelot 1996; Hansen 1999). From the mid-1980s onward, Hindu extremist associations experimented with forms of mass mobilization among the working classes, who were left behind by the massive collapse of the textile industrial sector, especially in Ahmedabad (Shah 2002a, 2002b; Shani 2007; Yagnik and Sheth 2005, 2011; Spodek 2010, 2011; Patel 2002). In anticipation of a trend that would be confirmed at a national scale in the 1990s, the BJP capitalized on the success of Hindu extremist ideas to build up a strong consensus among urban lower and middle classes. Emphasizing exterior symbols of religious affiliation, such as

participation in processions and religious festivals or daily visits to temples, has become a new form to demonstrate not only one's religious creed, but also one's inclusion in a larger and exclusive idea of community that encompasses religion, politics, and a declared adherence to daily life practices like vegetarianism.

When he came to power, Modi sought to reinvigorate that idea of community before the electorate. He did so by conforming to an idea of Gujarati ethos that became the quintessential argument of his political rhetoric, merging religious affiliation, globalizing aspirations, and a subtle form of religious sectarianism (Jose 2012). From this point of view, the 2002 pogroms do not represent the beginning of an era of discrimination against the Muslims of Gujarat; rather, they can be seen as the end point of a process that reshaped the terms of cultural recognition in the state, and carved Modi's own image as the representative of such a culture. Moreover, the 2002 pogroms marked a turning point in the history of communal violence in India, mainly because of the massive scale of popular participation in the riots. For the first time, people from all social classes and castes took part in the looting of private houses and shops, and in burning the properties of Muslim families, in an unprecedented form of collective frenzy. The extraordinary involvement of masses of ordinary people in the looting and violence still raises important questions, which cannot be filed away simply in the frame of a spontaneous reaction of the Hindu population. Nor does the unquestionable evidence of the orchestration of the riots and of the involvement of well-organized mobs of Hindu extremists erase the problem of the collective participation in the pogroms.⁸

Both elements have a degree of truth: spontaneity and planning intermingled and created an atmosphere of terror and complete suspension of the rule of law. While masses comprised of several thousands took to the streets and joined the armed mobs organized by the RSS and its fellow associations, one cannot help but notice that the terrain for such mass violence was fertile, that it did not happen in Gujarat by

chance (Berenshcot 2011). The 2002 pogroms were the result of years of cultural groundwork aimed at depicting Muslims as aliens, or enemies (Jaffrelot 1996), and at expelling them from mainstream society at different levels: physically, by pushing them into segregated neighborhoods at the peripheries of the main urban centers (Mahadevia 2007); economically, by progressively reducing their opportunities to access development policies (Sachar 2006: 149–150; Sud 2007: 137); and culturally, by excluding them from the possibility of sharing the Gujarati ethos.

In the years following the riots, there have been many attempts by civil associations and human rights activists to bring Modi to trial for his responsibilities in letting the riots happen, and a huge debate in the press followed these attempts, contributing to further polarizing his public image. So far, no formal charges have been made against Modi, but a first important verdict came in August 2012: Maya Kodnani, a BJP member of the legislative assembly of Gujarat and former minister for Women and Child Development in Modi's cabinet (2007–2009), and Babu Bajrangji, a leader of the Gujarat wing of the Bajrang Dal (an extremist outfit of the RSS), were judged guilty of rioting and killing (Khetan 2012).

As time passes, it seems unlikely that Modi will ever sit before a court. However, "historians and judges traditionally have had widely divergent aims" (Ginzburg 1991), and Modi's role and responsibilities are clear within the process that led to the emergence of an intolerant, aggressively discriminatory culture in twenty-first-century Gujarat, and not only as confined to the days in which violence engulfed the state. Capitalizing on the emotional wave following the riots, Modi won the 2002 election with a huge majority and, from that moment onward, progressively abandoned an openly anti-Muslim rhetoric to tune his propaganda to the decisive adoption of neoliberal arguments. As we will see, this second stage in his political propaganda conceals, but does not at all disavow, religious extremism. And, again, the idea of a Gujarati ethos provides a useful frame to carve

his new image as a modernist, efficient leader, or the “CEO Chief Minister” (Chaudhury et al. 2012).

Bringing efficiency to the service of all

As the previous section highlighted, since 2002 Modi has been fully engaged in the twin efforts of renovating his own public image and that of Gujarat. The two have become interdependent, as they are pinned on the same arguments. Partly to dismiss the accusations against him in relation to the pogroms, and partly to consolidate his electoral base among the urban middle classes, he has shifted the focus of his political agenda to issues of development, modernization, and economic growth. Interestingly enough, the rhetoric about economic development became part of a discourse aimed at glorifying an ideal Gujarati middle class, and it was shaped in such a way as to highlight an almost natural propensity toward business among the Gujarati population. It is in such a construction that one can see what has been defined as a “re-imagination of the state” under the banner of *Hindutva* identity politics (Prakash 2003).

The peculiarity of *Hindutva* politics in Gujarat is that Hindu revivalism and neoliberal arguments have become part of the same ideological framework in the invention of a Gujarati identity and ethos. Such a cultural construction borrows typical elements of a so-called Gujarati tradition, specifically from an upper-caste Brahmin and Bania fold, mixing them with the stereotypical features of a globalized society. The Gujarati population is then depicted as more predisposed than others to enter the global economic market and to do business in a “modern”, technologically advanced economy.⁹ The success of this narrative lays in its intrinsic ambiguity. Economic arguments are presented as the final step toward egalitarianism, as “every community is reaping the fruits of development” (*Time* 2012: 4). Even secularism is now mainly understood in the frame of economic development, as Shiv Vishwanathan points out: “Secular-speak is always in the lan-

guage of economic rationality. Investment can be calculated, so it is rational. Anything outside this is subjective, ethnic and irrational” (quoted in Yadav 2011). Inclusive as it may appear, such rhetoric is in fact highly exclusive, defining an idea of Gujaratiness according to higher-caste, Hindu and Jain values and marking subtle boundaries of cultural distinction.

From this point of view, the widely praised “middle-class revolution” that revived the economy of Gujarat in the last two decades at the same time marked the consolidation of a conservative and intolerant culture. Modi projected himself as the leading figure of this revolution, the “chief minister CEO,” the truly Gujarati politician with managerial skills that would lead Gujarat, and possibly the whole country, into a new phase of sustainable development, inclusion, and progress (Modi 2013). His ability to embody the two extremes of such a dichotomous propaganda founded the base of the party’s increasing electoral success in state elections. Moreover, by rebuilding his image as a man of progress and a capable administrator, Modi also sought to wash away the final obstacles that might hinder his ambitions to become a national leader.

After the 2002 pogroms, Modi had in fact become a persona non grata within the international community. The United States denied him a visa in 2005 and European diplomats avoided meeting with him on public occasions. However, the past year marked a definite turn in the way Western countries looked both at him and at Gujarat. During 2012, Indian economic indicators registered a slowdown, presumably the combined effect of the global recession and lack of reforms on the part of the national government (*The Economist*, 17 January 2013; Jha 2012). In this context, and with foreign investors often complaining of the slow and unreliable Indian bureaucracy, Modi’s approach to business, his readiness to take down all hurdles in order to favor potential investors, fascinated global elites (*Time* 2012). In particular, the use of public private-partnership (PPP) in infrastructure building was widely advertised to entice investors from across the world (Modi

2011b). The program of the 2011 summit highlighted the importance of PPPs not only for infrastructure, but also for other strategic sectors such as education and industry (Destination Gujarat 2011: 20–24).

The Vibrant Gujarat summit has thus attracted increasing foreign participation over the years, and it has served to progressively legitimize Modi before the international community. This process peaked at the latest summit, in January 2013. As *The Economist* reported, “Ron Somers, the president of the US-India Business Council, said Mr Modi had set a new benchmark and proved that ‘progress trumps politics.’ Sir James Bevan, the British high commissioner, declared himself a ‘son of Gujarat’—on the grounds that he was born in Leicester, which has the largest expatriate population of Gujaratis” (*The Economist*, 17 January 2013). After two electoral successes (2007 and 2012), when even US-Modi relations were showing moderate signs of thaw, little doubt remains that playing the role of the manager-politician proved a successful strategy. Arguably, such signs of relaxation can be read as evidence that sections of the international community are increasingly preparing for the possibility of Narendra Modi’s ascent to prime minister.

Of course, neoliberal economic policies, in Gujarat as in the rest of the country, are producing ambivalent effects. Arvind Sivaramakrishnan has convincingly argued against the benefits of a managerial approach to public policy, labeling it an “almost universal disaster” that in most situations ends up exacerbating inequalities rather than reducing them (Sivaramakrishnan 2012: 33).¹⁰ Moreover, in order to favor investors and boost the industrial sector in the state, the government of Gujarat agreed to sell land to large industrial groups at incredibly low prices, a decision that damaged a large portion of the rural poor and opened the door for speculative practices (*Tehelka* 24 March 2012: 3). And, for the first time during Modi’s rule, Gujarat saw protests over land and natural resources erupt last year, although in a softer version than in other states.

The image of efficiency, transparency, and modernization that Modi so carefully built around himself, however, continues to embody the aspirations of large sectors of society to be part of a successful story in the mainframe of the so-called globalizing world. According to this perspective, development and economic growth are the only real modernizing forces, the only elements that can guarantee the welfare and peace of society at large. When he launched his 2011 campaign, the Sadbhavana Mission, Modi distanced himself from the legacies of the RSS and *Hindutva* ideology and affirmed that his aim was “to further strengthen Gujarat’s environment of peace, unity and harmony” (Modi 2011a). In this way, the efficient CEO showed his compassion for the poor and his concern for the cohesion of the social fabric of the state. Behind the rhetoric of unity and harmony in the path toward modernity, urban societies have, however, grown intolerant and discriminatory toward groups that apparently do not conform to the terms of modernity (Patel 2002). As in the case of the Sabarmati riverfront renovation, the people squatting on the pavements come to be seen as an antimodernizing force.

Conclusion, or the triumph of disharmony

The consistent slowdown in the growth pattern of India in the last year forced many analysts, within and outside the government, to revise the country’s ambition to play a leading role in the world economy. In this scenario, Modi is seen by many as the person who could put the country back on the right track, as he did in Gujarat during his decade-long tenure as chief minister. Hence, a lot of attention has been paid during the past two years to whether he could succeed in becoming the prime ministerial candidate for the BJP in 2014. For most of the foreign press that now looks at him as a valuable solution to revive India’s economy, the story of Narendra Modi begins in 2002. Foreign commentators and, as we have seen, entrepreneurs

and diplomats look at him with increasing interest and curiosity (*Time* 2012). Although Modi's image is still stained by the claims for justice rising from thousands of victims and refugees of the 2002 pogroms, it seems true that at this point the call for economic growth trumps concerns for justice. At least, that is what happened in Gujarat, where the electorate granted Modi yet another mandate as chief minister last December. Whether Modi's image as a superhero, a man who delivers development and gets things done, will have the same appeal for the rest of Indian society remains to be seen. Modi and the BJP built their success in Gujarat on years of steady grassroots work among the working classes, as well as the middle classes. Hence the combination of Hindu extremism, regionalism, and development arguments became a dominant discourse in the public culture of urban Gujarat. And the rhetoric about modernization went apace with an increasing intolerance toward the display of poverty and "otherness".

On the one hand, such kinds of discourses have drastically diminished the space for political and cultural dissent, as criticism of the government becomes labeled as "anti-Gujarat". On the other, there is a progressive normalization of intolerance and communal hatred among the lower-middle and middle classes in the state, and apparently there is no shame, or guiltiness, or even a display of interest toward both the memory of the 2002 pogroms—and their consequences—and the sheer poverty in which thousands of urban poor continue to live. In urban areas of Gujarat, where Modi enjoys almost unanimous political support, there is a palpable tension between the will to appear "global" and the reality on the ground.¹¹ Modi underpinned his success on this dichotomy. As a consequence, the public debate in the state on issues around development, religion, secularism, and social inclusion now almost completely conforms to his propaganda discourse. The next months will show if the rest of the country is ready, or willing, to welcome his political style and idea of development.

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Notes

1. Although it is difficult to quantify the number of the extremely poor in the city, it must be noted that, from the 1900s, a progressive deregulation of the labor market determined a steep increase in the number of casual laborers, with a decrease in job security and wages among the lower sectors of society. For instance, in Ahmedabad the number of slum dwellers in the city doubled in the period 1991–2001, from 430,955 (14.5 percent of the total population) in 1991 to 907,662 (25.7 percent) in 2001 (Census of India 2001: 344ff.).
2. Private conversation with the author, Ahmedabad, 9 April 2013.
3. The anti-Muslim pogrom started on the evening of 27 February 2002. That morning, one coach of the Sabarmati Express train, full of Hindu activists returning from a demonstration at the disputed site of Ayodhya (Uttar Pradesh), had been set on fire, causing the death of 58 people. This episode acted as a trigger for the subsequent violence, which put the state under siege for an entire week, with the silent complicity of the state apparatuses. For a detailed analy-

sis of the riots, see the three volumes of the *Concerned Citizens Tribunal*, by an independent fact finding committee that investigated the facts in the immediate aftermath of the riots (Citizens for Justice and Peace 2002); see also Varadarajan (2002).

4. Wherever not specified, the accounts of political events leading up to the 2012 Gujarat elections and relating to Modi's aspiration to become the prime ministerial candidate for the BJP are taken from the newspapers *The Hindu* and *The Times of India*, and from the weekly magazine *Tehelka*.
5. As with the "poor", it is difficult to categorize and quantify the "middle" and "lower-middle class". Here the expression middle class points to a milieu of people, in particular in urban areas, who recognize themselves as part of the consumerist class, or strive to be considered as such, and share what has been defined as "identity-mania," ideals of modernity, consumerism, and economic development (Daechsel 2006: 9).
6. For instance, a pamphlet that circulated widely in Ahmedabad in 2008, titled *Proud to Be a Gujju*, listed all the outstanding records of the state's economy, and its businessmen, during Modi's regime. Part of the pamphlet can be found online at http://finance.groups.yahoo.com/group/rohanmehta_99/message/1259 (accessed March 2013).
7. Ornit Shani (2007) and Mona Mehta (2010) demonstrated how this equation became rooted in the Gujarati society during the 1980s when, for the first time, religious, caste, and regional identities became central arguments in the political debate.
8. For a discussion of the role of masses in episodes of communal violence see, for instance, Brass (2003), Varshney (2002), and Kakar (1996).
9. "[Vibrant Gujarat] is an attempt to provide an international exposure to some of our hidden strengths such as vegetarianism, Ayurved, naturopathy, yoga, khadi, and village industry, and make the people acclimatized with the latest in technology, and modern ways of doing business. I want people to think global! I want Gujarat to become global" (Modi 2008).
10. In his analysis of the various wrongdoings brought about by managerialism, Arvind Sivaramakrishnan takes into account also the form of public-private partnership, with many exam-

ples of infrastructure building in India. Here also the judgment is quite harsh, as "we, the public, the citizens, pay the price, not only financially but in the very quality of the lives we lead every day" (Sivaramakrishnan, 2012: 60).

11. In the 2012 election Modi won all but two constituencies in Ahmedabad, all but one in Rajkot, and all constituencies in Surat and Bhavnagar. (Election Commission of India, 2013).

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