



NARENDRA Modi

The Man. The Times

NILANJAN
MUKHOPADHYAY

NARENDRA
Modi

PRAISE FOR *THE DEMOLITION: INDIA AT THE CROSSROADS*

“Although centred around the Ayodhya episode, it deals with facts and controversies not only connected with the story of the disputed structure that was but also about the birth and rise of Hindu fundamentalism and militancy during the decade or more thus providing some striking insights into the complicated nexus between religion and politics.”

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“He introduces his subject in a couple of words, constructs a hypothesis, goes in for evidences in its favour or against it and establishes or rejects it thus giving birth to a theory, all within the confines of merely two lines of a couplet or four lines of a quatrain.”

– *Hindustan Times*

NARENDRA Modi: *The Man, The Times*

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MUKHOPADHYAY



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To Varsha.
For making me believe that I still had it in me.

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However much I wish to keep these “thank you” lines brief and not gush out with words written or spoken more as a form of PR exercise, there are some which I must.

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On the issue of images, Sanjay Sharma took the trouble to shoot my cover photograph for the book and I must thank him for having allowed a decades-old friendship to be exploited. Thanks are also due to *Outlook* magazine and its Editor-in-Chief, Krishna Prasad, for providing access to their photo archives. Vital assistance was provided by R Balashankar, editor of *Organiser* who was always available for long interactions, enabling me to look at the picture from the other side. It was grave risk for him to believe my words — that, I would be critical when

I was convinced, but would not shy from being appreciative of Modi, if I believed that some facets of his personality or accomplishments needed to be lauded.

Daily conversations at the end of each day with Gyan Varma, enabled me to have a false sense of still being a reporter and I remained aware of macro-and micro-level developments within the Sangh Parivar with virtually no effort on my part.

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INTRODUCTION

I have met Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton, and both Bushes. At close range, Modi beats them all in charisma.

– Robert D Kaplan, *The Atlantic*, April 2009

Without a doubt, it was probably the most important interview in almost three decades of my career. It was important because the interview was not the end to an assignment, rather it was to be among the first steps of a long haul. I had gathered that the *in-time* of my entry into the residence of the chief minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi, had been set, but he had given no *out-time* to his staff. For a man who had been for more than a decade, probably the most reviled political leader of India, this information was a tad surprising. After all, I had never been an insider and most of my writings on post-2002 riots in Gujarat, had been extremely critical of Modi. Was he signalling that he was open for cross-examination on issues that he has avoided talking about? Or was he indicating that he wanted to utilize the time to convey his viewpoint?

After weighing various possibilities, I concluded that it was more likely he wished to use the opportunity to talk without being provoked: he was not looking to get into the headlines with the interview. Through the night and in the morning before the interview, I repeatedly went over the script I had prepared in my mind — what to ask and what not to; what I wanted this interview to yield and what it should not end up in. In a country where cinema influences life, politics and may be much more, I took the support of Shah Rukh Khan without being much of an admirer.

I replayed his *sattar minute* (seventy minutes) dialogue from the 2007 Hindi film, *Chak De! India*. Playing the role of the coach of the Indian women's hockey team, in this scene Khan gives a pep talk to his wards before the climactic match. It is probably among the most evocative of dialogues that the actor has delivered in his career. I knew that there would be more than seventy minutes at my disposal. But I

recalled those motivating lines to psyche myself up. By the time I stepped into Modi's residence on the fourth Saturday in May 2012, I was clear about what I wanted. It was not a story that I was in search of — something that would get published one day and later get cast away in the lot of *raddi* (waste paper) or remain tucked away as an URL on the internet. Instead, I wanted to understand Modi, the man and get an insight into his mind. I also wanted to correlate his evolution from a small town boy from a lower middle class family with the times that he lived in. I wanted to understand how he changed over the years as Indian politics evolved and transformed in the years since his birth.

But I was full of apprehensions. Before I embarked on writing this book, I had not even spoken to Modi in more than a decade after he became chief minister. My professional path had not put me in any situation since the middle of 2001 where I could have met him. He had agreed to grant me time but I was not sure about how he would react to me, to my questions.

Several weeks before this Saturday, I first threw up the idea of wanting to do a biography of Modi, over the morning cup of tea. Varsha, my wife had raised her eyebrows. But I wasn't sure what crossed her mind as I continued. Would Modi meet me? I had self-doubts: would he even remember me? Eleven years is a long time in a person's life — more so when these eleven have been as situation-transforming as the last decade in Modi's life. Varsha allowed me to speak.

I said I knew that writing a biography of someone living had its own pitfalls specially when it was not an authorized hagiography. If one did not get access to the person, then the chances of the end product just scratching at the surface of the persona is fairly high. Gaining an opportunity to interact and quiz the subject — either in an unhindered manner or in restricted doses — however did not guarantee the success of the endeavour. But it surely makes the exercise more credible and insightful. The pitfalls multiply when the biography is of someone active in public life, who keeps adding several pages to her or his life every day; someone who plays out a different game every other day and someone who remains an evolving personality — in terms of personal choices, constantly shifting short-and long-term goals, evolving social outlook, political beliefs and strategy.

The hazards of attempting a biography of a political leader like Narendra Modi who has consistently been dogged by controversy and evokes intense emotions — both hate and affection — gets further accentuated because of the knowledge that a middle path in the scrutiny of the leader is nonexistent. Despite the best attempts at remaining neutral, it would leave both camps dissatisfied: professional baiters would find the effort too sympathetic while camp followers would label it as another effort

in the hate campaign. Common logic also suggested that the chances of the biographer getting access to the leader also recedes if the writer has been known to have been critical of the leader's persona or his (or her) politics. None of the previously mentioned observations are path breaking and basic understanding would guide anyone — especially a potential biographer — to these conclusions.

When I began considering the idea of writing Narendra Modi's biography — some days before that chat with Varsha, I was acutely aware of each of these contentions. For some reason that I have not been able to fathom, when I broached the idea she was absolutely certain that Modi would not only remember me, but also grant me time even though we were definite that it would be an unauthorized biography. I finally made up my mind to write the biography a couple of weeks after the Indian weekly newsmagazine, *Outlook*, asked me to write an opinion piece for their issue dated 5 March 2002 that put the 10th anniversary of the 2002 Gujarat riots on the cover page. I had begun writing that piece fairly late in the night and by the time I finished writing, there was stillness all around. Everybody in the house was fast asleep and the stray dogs in the colony had also wound up their nightly duty. In that lonesome moment I was embarrassed as tears flowed while I played out the words of John Lennon's "Imagine" — in my mind — the last lines of my article, and I shut my door lest anyone got to see me in that state. And seeing me for being such a sentimental fool — not that anyone in the family had any doubts about that. The next morning, I took another look at the article and mailed it. 'Super piece, is the verdict of a colleague,' wrote back Krishna Prasad, the Editor-in-Chief of *Outlook*.

When I decided to write this book I was aware that this unnamed "colleague" whose verdict was relayed to me and whose opinion greatly buoyed my spirits at that time was surely on the list of countless people labelled frequently as pseudo-secular ever since Lal Krishna Advani popularized the word in early 1990s. It was hardly the quarter from which a certificate would enable me to secure an audience with Modi. I was also aware that as far as the Sangh Parivar's assessment went, the article in *Outlook* was in total opposition to their viewpoint. I got a confirmation of this — not that it was really needed — when I spoke to R Balashankar, the editor of the official organ of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), *Organiser*, and an old friend with whom I had rubbed shoulders while being on the Sangh Parivar beat as a reporter.

He was frank in his opinion and said without mincing words that the views in the article were linear and did not reflect the broader opinion — that I had not looked at the issue from the other side — meaning the side of Hindus in Gujarat.

There was no rancour in his voice — it was a simple statement that simultaneously underscored a beauty of Indian democracy: two differently thinking people could engage in a rational discussion on a topic despite disagreeing with one another. What was not said was evident: that I had not looked at the last decade in the life of Gujarat from Modi's perspective, that I had painted him in a single hue. In one stroke I had argued that he had become a peddler of growth and development because Modi wanted to present a "growth-promoting dictatorship as a better option than a messy democracy which affects quality of governance and social stability."

This was not the first time that I had written something which criticized Modi for the events in February-March 2002. Even after making up my mind that I would write his biography irrespective of whether Modi granted me time or not, I was sure that the article in *Outlook* would not be the last one to take a critical look at the events in Gujarat in 2002. I was determined that I would continue to write against the idea of communalism — as I understood the word. I was clear that I would remain an unequivocal critic of the propagation of religion as the main basis of social identity. But I hoped that Modi would agree to meet me because of the time in the 1990s when I interacted with him on a fairly regular basis. At that time, he was a national office bearer of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). But that was a different political era — both in the life of Modi and in the political and social history of Gujarat. From the time when he was one of the many party apparatchiks in New Delhi, to the summer of 2012 when he was chief minister was not just a period of more than a decade, it was also a huge political distance that had been traversed by Modi.

The best way of approaching any political leader for an interview — if one has not been in regular contact in recent times — is through intermediaries whose credentials as well-wishers of both parties is undisputed. So that was the way the efforts for an interview with Modi began on a certain Sunday afternoon. It took a few weeks before the connections clicked — the delay mainly because of the scorching pace of Modi's programmes and travels in Gujarat and outside. But once I got the signal that he was agreeable to the biography, it was a matter of speaking to him formally and seek an interview. Coincidentally, it was again a Sunday when I called the official residence of the Gujarat chief minister and left my name and number with the person who picked up the phone. I was politely told that Modi

was out and the moment he returned, he would be intimated that I had called. Within an hour someone telephoned from his residence and I was informed that Modi was on the line.

After the traditional exchange of greetings and pleasantries in the course of which he was warm and effusive, it was all business. I placed my request — for the biography I wanted a long interview with him to start off; then maybe additional sessions as the research progressed. On my first visit to Gujarat in more than a decade — I told him — I also intended to travel through some parts of the state though I made it evident to Modi that “riot-tourism” was not on my mind. I did not tell Modi that in my assessment, visits to any of the areas badly affected by the riots of 2002 and meeting families who had undergone trauma would not yield anything new that had not been already documented by my peers in the profession and by several commissions of inquiry. Instead, I decided to use the opportunity to travel beneath the skin of Gujarat and gauge the change in the social fabric since my last visit in 1997-98. Back then, I had spent almost two months in various regions of the state while studying multiculturalism in Gujarat. Modi acquiesced to my proposal including the places where I wanted to travel. I informed him because, I was certain, he would in any case come to know about my travels and who I would meet. He was particularly pleased that I wished to visit Kutch because this was the district that in a way led to his deputation to Gujarat as chief minister in the first place. I requested that he depute someone from his office to coordinate with me regarding dates of my interview. The phone call ended on his promise that someone will contact me.

That call came within minutes. It was a senior officer of the Gujarat government — an officer of the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) holding charge as the Information Commissioner of the state government. The conversation was polite — he informed that he had been asked by the chief minister to coordinate my interview and visit. He heard out my request for research material related to policies of the state government during Modi’s tenure and asked me to mail him the list of material that I required. When I wanted to discuss the dates for my proposed visit — and interview, he said that matters related to Modi’s appointments were handled by one of the Officers on Special Duty or OSD attached to the Chief Minister’s Office (called CMO in the state — just like the Prime Minister’s Office or PMO in New Delhi). The commissioner said that he would speak with the concerned Officer on Special Duty (at that point I did not know there were several of them) to contact me.

That call also came within minutes. The OSD by then knew the entire

background and asked me when I wished to interview Modi. I suggested a particular Saturday in May 2012 and also mentioned that the duration of the interview would be long. The OSD said that the suggested date would not be a problem as Modi did not have any engagements that day. He however said that the exact time of the interview would be communicated to me later. Therefore on that Sunday, the date for my travel to Ahmedabad was agreed and the OSD gave me the go ahead to draw up my plans. We also agreed that on the day after the interview, when Modi travelled to Surat to attend a couple of official functions and address one public rally, I would also travel to the city of diamonds to see at close quarters how Modi worked his charm and magic with the people.

The appointment with Modi was fixed for just a day after the BJP's National Executive meeting in Mumbai was to end in May 2012 — the same meeting that grabbed headlines later for Modi's triumphant attendance after the exit of his *bête noire*, Sanjay Joshi, from the elite decision-making body of the party. The promptness and the manner in which my interview with Modi was fixed suggested two things: his openness to the biography albeit from someone known for strong views against the political ideology of his fraternity and the efficiency of his administrative set up.

While preparing for the interview, I first and foremost re-jigged the files pertaining to Modi in my mind and on my computer. I was aware that though the entire biography would not hinge on the interview — or on possible subsequent meetings or telephonic conversations with him — a productive interview would give the right impetus — so essential while working on a tight deadline. In the days that I had on my hand, I poured through my old clippings and files in which I had made a mention of Modi. I zeroed in on three articles written over a span of thirteen years with Modi as the centrepiece. The first was in *Sunday*, the now-defunct weekly magazine of the Ananda Bazar Patrika Group. It was written in 1999 when the BJP was in the midst of the electoral campaign after the thirteen-month-long government headed by Atal Bihari Vajpayee had been felled by a solitary vote in Lok Sabha. This article was a profile of Modi and was written because he had just been elevated as the “main spokesman to explain away the internal contradictions within the RSS fold”. The second article that I dug up was written for *The Pioneer* when Chandan Mitra, its promoter-editor was yet to formally join the BJP. This article was written in April 2002 in the wake of the events precipitated by the Godhra carnage. The third article that I decided to use as a marker in the evolution of Modi's political life, was the one referred to earlier — the one published in *Outlook*. The three articles were chosen because of the

narrative that — more than other phases of Modi's life — needed to be traced and analyzed in the biography.

In 1999, Narendra Modi was a man on the ascendance. His stars were on the upswing a year after he was — in 1998 — elevated as general secretary of the BJP by the then president, Khushabhau Thakre. The profile in *Sunday* was standard journalese — a bit of personal details like a mention of the legends surrounding his village, Vadnagar and a quick recap of the political milestones crossed by him till then. However, the conclusions were important: 'It is evident that this is one man who shall provide the organisational steel in the years to come,' and that Modi knew that '...the party needs people with his talents and is willing to wait for a more pronounced role in future. Already, Modi is looking well beyond his immediate tenure.' Written three years before Modi's elevation as chief minister of Gujarat, these words in hindsight appeared a bit prophetic.

In April 2002, the wounds of Gujarat were too raw and Indians were polarized in two camps — one that considered Modi to be the perfect — and morally correct — practitioner of statecraft and the other who felt that he had deliberately allowed the mayhem that followed the Godhra carnage. My article in *The Pioneer* cast Modi and Ariel Sharon, then the Prime Minister of Israel, in the same mould for some similarities of approach. It was argued with anger that while Sharon had '...the tag of having a "blood tainted past" the Chief Minister is in the process of picking up a similar label.' The damnation of Modi concluded by contending that the two leaders were similar: 'Though distanced from each other and presiding over different forms of regimes, the duo are two sides of the same coin — representatives of the tribe of political leaders who find democracy a burden and preferring a more regimented order.' Ten years after these words were written; they either appeared justified or grossly unfair depending on which way one looked at the situation. Even in 2002, there was no middle path — the only option to the extreme postures was silence — a luxury that only the higher practitioners of statecraft had. Journalists would not be scribes if they choose to maintain silence — especially in times like in 2002. Such was the impact of the events of 2002.

The article written for the *Outlook* to mark the 10th anniversary of the 2002 riots had to "move on" to use a phrase that has come to embody a certain emotion in Gujarat (more about this later). The article needed to understand what had changed in Gujarat and what had not. The article also needed to analyze how Modi had evolved in the ten years since the riots. Any analysis of Modi on the threshold of the 10th anniversary had to dwell on a vital aspect of his government — Modi's growth

and development mantra — and how this was encapsulated into the overall social divide on the basis of religious identity in the state. Though a space that can take just about eight hundred odd words is too limited for an in-depth analysis, the broad contours can be indicated. Scattered arguments can be strung together in simple sentences with the idea that at a later date, one can return to explore and expand the idea. One of these ideas stated: ‘By projecting development of Gujarat as his priority now, Modi is suggesting to his electorate what Francis Fukuyama recently argued that the Chinese government was doing: Presenting a “growth-promoting dictatorship” as a better option than a messy democracy which affects “quality of governance and social stability”.’

But this argument can be put on hold till it becomes clear how Modi uses the mandate of 2012 to shape Gujarat’s governance and maybe in the course of a larger role in India as a whole. The chances of the electorate continuing to give Modi this opportunity would primarily depend on the continued acceptability of the persona that he has projected in the constituency he has built and wooed and the support that he received from section of his political fraternity. The article in *Outlook* contended further:

There are few politicians in Independent India who have been as unwavering and unrelenting as Narendra Modi. In months he will lead the Bharatiya Janata Party to its third post-2002 assembly elections. His campaign plank will be unapologetic — altered for just a few add-ons like “development and growth”. There is no challenge to Modi within BJP in Gujarat and it is unlikely that he will face any from outside. Even if Modi is electorally grounded — bogged down in the legal quagmire — the idea that he has come to represent will be furthered.

Modi is viewed alternately either as a megalomaniac or as a dictatorial leader. In the media-driven search for catchphrases, Modi is projected as the “new idea” and the debate is whether it goes beyond Hindutva or is just the implementing strategy of the larger goal. Neither opinion dissects the man and the ideology that groomed him. The two views also fail to comprehend the complex relationship between the organisation, the leader and the original ideology.

Journalism has its pitfalls and often words that are written while chasing deadlines and in the rush to fill up space, come back to haunt the writer. Subsequent political events after the article in *Outlook* demonstrated that there was an element of opposition to Modi within his own political clan, just as there were supporters. But it is this opposition that gives rise to the need to look at Modi from other prisms

besides the one of the 2002 riots. It was important to understand the process of his initiation in politics, how he cut his teeth in national politics and came to be the ambassador of Brand Hindutva. It also became clear to me that I would have to put the journalist within me on the backseat and let the biographer take over: someone who was willing to understand how Modi had even reached the launch pad of 1999 in the first place. I also had to curb my basic instinct of trying to spot a story, a headline and create a sensation. This cast the interview with Modi in a completely different league and that is the reason why in the first place it became the most important one-on-one interaction with any political leader.

The days before the interview had me thinking deeply on the approach I should follow. There was no doubt that I needed to ask him about 2002 and about contentious political developments in recent years. But I also had to draw Modi out to talk about lesser known aspects of his life. There was danger that the “soft” part of the interview might get prolonged to such an extent that when the “hard” questions are posed, Modi may call it quits — citing constraints of time. However much expertise one had built over the years as an interviewer, this impending interview was a shade different and a notch higher in importance. While preparing for the interaction, I also watched the clips of Modi’s aborted interview with Karan Thapar, the well known TV journalist and analyst, in October 2007 — just two months before the assembly elections that ended in a second consecutive victory for Modi. It had grabbed headlines: “Quizzed on riots, Modi walks out”, one headline had proclaimed. Another had declared: “Modi Won’t Talk Godhra, Walks Out Of Interview By Karan Thapar”. Thapar’s “non-interview” had made news because it was presented as an instance of Modi not willing to talk about Gujarat riots of 2002. It had also been in the news because supporters of Modi in the cyberspace and elsewhere used the occasion to argue that the chief minister and others from the same ideological fraternity were frequently pilloried by the pseudo-secular media and commentators.

Besides watching the clip, I also read the transcript of what was actually recorded — which was promptly made available on the internet in 2007 by CNN-IBN, the TV channel that broadcasts Karan Thapar’s show titled: Devil’s Advocate. The channel also telecast that clip several times — it was of course a “juicy story” and remains freely available. To be fair to Thapar, his programme has a cock-a-snook approach as its USP and he is not apologetic about it. Modi should have been better prepared for the tone and tenor of the programme — he probably was — but maybe got unnerved when the big Q was put to him. It was also clear that Modi’s comfort level with English was not very good — especially when the question and

answer sessions bordered issues that Modi was a bit defensive about. It was evident that in interviews with journalists, Modi did not — or could not — use his skills in public oration. I made a mental note that all my interviews (if I got to meet him more than once in the course of writing the biography) with Modi would be conducted in Hindi.

Looking dispassionately, Thapar was obviously playing to the gallery of Modi-baiters when he asked a pungent question at the onset, making the line of questioning over the next half hour or so, fairly evident. In all fairness, the question would have put off most political leaders. The answer was a feeble attempt on Modi's part. But Thapar continued probing over the next couple of minutes. Modi attempted to explain his position and when he realized that he was being bested in the game, he called it quits. Excerpts from the transcript of the conversation^{*} are revealing:

Karan Thapar:	Mr Narendra Modi, let's start by talking about you. In the six years that you have been the CM of Gujarat, the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation has declared Gujarat to be the best administered state. <i>India Today</i> , on two separate occasions, declared that you are the most efficient chief minister. And despite that people still call you to your face a mass murderer and they accuse you of being prejudiced against Muslims? Do you have an image problem?
Narendra Modi:	I think it's not proper to say that (there are) people. There are two or three persons who talk in this terminology and I always say God bless them.
Karan Thapar:	You are saying this is the conspiracy of two or three persons only?
Narendra Modi:	I have not said so.
Karan Thapar:	But you are saying it's only two or three people.
Narendra Modi:	This is the information I have. It's the people's voice.

There was one point at which Thapar appeared to have faltered when he said:

Karan Thapar:	Can I point out to you that in September 2003, the Supreme Court said that they had lost faith in the Gujarat government? In April 2004, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court said that you were
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like a modern day Nero who looks the other side when helpless children and innocent women were being burnt. The Supreme Court seems to have a problem with you.

What followed this question resulted in a deadlock leaving Modi with probably no other choice than calling it quits.

Narendra Modi: I have a small request to make. Please go through the SC judgement. If there is anything in writing, I'll be happy to know everything.

Karan Thapar: There was nothing in writing, you are right. It was an observation.

Narendra Modi: If it is in (the) judgement, then I'll be happy to give you the answer.

Karan Thapar: But do you mean a criticism by the Chief Justice in court doesn't matter?

Narendra Modi: It's a simple request. Please go through the court judgement. Hand out the sentence you are quoting and let the people know it.

Karan Thapar: OK. It wasn't just an open comment made by the Chief Justice. In August 2004, the Supreme Court reopened some 2,100 cases out of a total of around 4,600 — almost 40 per cent — and they did so because they believed that justice hadn't happened in Gujarat.

Narendra Modi: I'll be happy. Ultimately, the court of law will take the judgement.

Karan Thapar: But isn't this the reason that despite the fact (that) *India Today* called you the best chief minister, (and) the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation says Gujarat is the best administered state, tens of millions say Modi is prejudiced against the Muslims. This is why I ask you, do you have an image problem?

To the last question, Modi gave a perfect politician's answer:

Narendra Modi: I never spent a single minute for my image.

But Thapar, the pugnacious interviewer was unrelenting. Hereafter, the manner in which the conversation proceeded, it could have ended in only one way: Modi yanking his microphone off.

Karan Thapar: I'll tell you what the problem is, even five years after the Gujarat killings of 2002; the ghost of Godhra still haunts you. Why have you not done more to allay that ghost?

Narendra Modi: This I give it to media persons like Karan Thapar. Let them enjoy.

Karan Thapar: Can I suggest something to you?

Narendra Modi: I have no problem.

Karan Thapar: 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?

Narendra Modi: What I had to say I have said at that time, and you can find out my statements.

Karan Thapar: Just say it again.

Narendra Modi: Not necessary I have to talk about in 2007 everything you want to talk about.

Karan Thapar: But by not saying it again, by not letting people hear the message repeatedly, you are allowing an image contrary to the interest of Gujarat to continue. It's in your hands to change it.

Narendra Modi: (Takes the microphone off.) I'll have to rest. I need some water.

Karan Thapar: *Paani* (Water).

Narendra Modi: *Dosti bani rahe. Bas* (I hope we can continue to remain friends. I'll be happy.) You came here. I am happy and thankful to you. I can't do this interview. It's OK your things are. *Apne ideas hain, aap bolte rahiye, aap karte rahiye* (You have your ideas, you keep reiterating that, keep on doing what you wish to.) Three-four questions I've already enjoyed. *Nahin*, please (No, please).

Karan Thapar: But Modi saab...

Narendra Modi: *Nahin*, please, Karan.

Karan Thapar: But Modi saab...

Narendra Modi: Karan, *dekho main dostana sambhand rakhna chahta hoon, aap uski koshish kariye...* (Look Karan, I want to keep friendly ties, you try for that...)

Karan Thapar: *Mujhe ek cheez samjhaiye* (Please explain one thing to me), Sir. I am not talking about doing

anything wrong. I am saying why can't you correct your image?

Narendra Modi: This is not the time. *Uske liye aap mujhe 2002 mein mile hote, 2003 mein mile hote, main sab kar leta* (For that you should have met me in 2002, in 2003, I would have spoken.)

At the end of the interview it was clear from the expression on Thapar's face that he was not actually prepared for Modi walking off. Thapar probably had believed that once Modi was wired up, he would not be able to wriggle out and would have to answer the barrage of his questions. It was also evident that Modi was not going to shed the proverbial crocodile tears over the events of 2002. In Modi's assessment, the events of 2002 were distant history — something that had happened for which he owed no explanation to anyone. What was apparent was that journalists — or anyone else who wishes to interview Modi — should be circumspect and not jump to the “R” word. The chances of a measured response to these issues from Modi, lay only in sneaking the question at a convenient point in the course of the interview, surely not at the outset.

As I mentioned earlier, Thapar's interview with Modi was extremely instructive while preparing for my first meeting with him. Besides giving an insight into what riled Modi, Thapar's interview also gave an opportunity to reassess what I wanted out of my interview and why I was keen to secure a long conversation with him.

The Thapar interview made me think deeply and I decided to delink this interview from some of my angry articles critical of Modi in the wake of the events in Gujarat in 2002. While in journalism the middle path did not exist in 2002; in 2012 I had to construct this path for the proposed biography.

My journey would be to understand what led to the transformation of Modi from the man I had interacted with in the 1990s. I had to find if his past had any traces of his later traits. I decided to interview him with an open mind and meet him carrying the benefit of the doubt — on his role during the events of 2002 — in an extremely pronounced way. I definitely was neither going to call him a mass murderer nor ask him why people had given him that label.

It augured well when on landing in Ahmedabad I learnt that there was an air of expectancy about the interview. The fact that Modi had fixed no *out-time* indicated that the duration of the interview would greatly depend on my ability to “hold him”

and also keeping him in the “comfort zone”. Everything was seamless as we were escorted to the chief minister’s residence. We waited in the anteroom adjacent to what was clearly a conference hall. Sounds of an audio visual presentation wafted out even as the liveried staff rolled out the wares. A few minutes after the appointed time, the ones making the presentation to Modi came out and were escorted out.

Within moments, we were ushered into the office room of Narendra Modi. It would be unfair not to mention the warmth in his greetings. As I walked into his office, he made me forget that I had come to meet the chief minister of a significant state and that he was a political leader of considerable eminence. In an era when political leaders cohabit with journalists and cultivate them for the power they wield, Modi’s warmth towards me had a personal touch. Not being regularly associated with any big media house for more than a decade meant that I could hardly do any significant damage. He thus would not be able to secure anything by just being nice. But his choice of words, expressions on his face and the overall body language touched a personal chord in me. It reminded me of the rapport that I — or several of my peers — have been able to establish with different political leaders despite having held adversarial positions and having written articles critical of them. Despite the astute media management that Modi has come to be known for in recent years, at that moment, he appeared like an old-guard leader who believed in maintaining personal ties with journalists irrespective of their opinions and what they wrote.

After the pleasantries were over, the interview began. Modi was at his eloquent best when talking about his childhood, his early political mentors, the initiation into party politics, his varied roles in the Sangh Parivar and his understanding of various political events. The minutes rolled on and soon it was close to an hour. At one point, one of his office assistants came in and handed him a slip of paper — the name of a visitor. A few moments after this, Modi apologetically sought my assent in breaking for some time.

‘I had forgotten that I had set up another meeting,’ he explained.

The interview resumed after a few minutes. By sheer coincidence, by the time the first session had ended, I had completed asking him the first chain of basic questions pertaining to his life and politics in the years before he became chief minister. I could not help but resume the interview with a question pertaining to the events in 2002. He immediately clammed up on hearing this. He said that whatever he had to say on events and situations in 2002, he had already stated to the Supreme Court appointed Special Investigation Team (SIT^{**}) and the

Nanavati-Shah Commission^{***}. Modi said that I could refer to these documents and use them appropriately. I found Modi to be evasive but understood that this reticence was due to the legal maze that surrounded the issues relating to the riots in 2002.

I asked a few other probing questions but Modi still remained cagey on most, sticking to banalities. This had been partially anticipated before the interview but the extent of his discomfort at these questions became evident only during the course of the second session. In the months before the interview and while researching and interviewing people for this biography, I had come across a viewpoint that the riots in 2002 had been sparked off as a retaliation to the incident in Godhra by Modi's critics within his own political fraternity with the aim to discredit him, leading to either his dismissal or resignation. But the shrewd and wily Modi, the argument continued, had converted this ploy of his adversaries to his benefit.

Attempts to ask a question on this turned out to be a strict no-no — given his acute sense of discomfort to queries pertaining to his political choices, strategies and viewpoints on the most significant decade of his life. It was evident that this is one decade Modi wishes to remain noncommittal about. In his assessment, journalists, researchers and writers would still form their own opinion and no purpose would be served by providing them with anything empirical to drive home their contention. Also, given the fact that Modi's game plan for the sweepstakes was an evolving one, in which the adversary of the moment could become an ally in the future and vice-versa, any utterance that revealed his political preference could turn out to be counter-productive. We soon reached a point in the course of the interview when it became clear that Modi had erected a barrier in his mind and this could not be breached. It was also at this point that I realized it was time to wind up this session with Modi and hoped that at the later date the promised next session would materialize.

On that Saturday afternoon, I came out of Modi's residence somewhat satisfied with as long a first interview I could have hoped. However, while walking past the security barricades, I was definitely shaken. I had gone to meet Modi willing to give him the benefit of the doubt for what eventually happened in 2002. On coming out, I was reasonably certain that I had experienced a facet, or a dimension of Modi that I had deliberately believed before the interview, as nonexistent. When I sat in the car, I felt I had reason to no longer give him the benefit of that doubt.

CHILDHOOD LESSONS

A man is great by deeds, not by birth.

– Chanakya

My first step into Narendra Modi's past does not begin on a happy note. At a small and sparse old age home on the outskirts of the hamlet of Vadnagar in Mehsana district, almost eighty kilometres north of Ahmedabad, I learn that Somabhai Modi, his elder brother who runs the facility, is not in town. We have apparently missed each other as he had hopped across to Kapadvanj, further north-east of Ahmedabad. We speak on the phone and he politely explained that he had a pressing chore to attend to and that is why he had to come away suddenly. He invited me on my return journey and said that if nothing works out, then the '...phone is always there.'

This is the second time in two days that I am missing out on meeting a family member of Modi. One of his younger brothers — Pankaj — who works in Gandhinagar in the Gujarat Information Department and lives separately in a two-room-kitchen government residence with their nonagenarian mother, Hiraba, was initially to accompany me on this visit to Vadnagar. He however dropped out on its eve and I was told that he was not feeling up to making the visit. If Pankaj's dropping out was happenstance, then Somabhai not being in station was a coincidence. I was not sure at that time whether anything should be read — or a motive found — into the inability to meet the two brothers of Modi who could have shed personal insights into his persona as a child.

On this journey into Modi's past, I had lined up multiple lines of contact — a standard tact in our profession — so all the eggs are not in one basket and I move on without much disappointment from Somabhai's old age home. I have the contact of a person who runs an all-seasons shop selling everything from a hot tea to daily provisions and I try to find out his whereabouts. At one point we are outside a

government building and I am requested by a local contact who is also trying to be of use, to step inside and meet “Sahab”. That gentleman is a local officer and is keener on satisfying his curiosity than being of any help. He wishes to know my identity, the purpose which brings me to Vadnagar and what my travel plans are. His general demeanour is unfriendly and he makes it clear that he would rather prefer that I take the first turn out of the town. I wonder if he could be duplicating as a local intelligence unit personnel — but then my visit to Modi’s village is hardly the best kept secret within government circles.

The iron curtain that I faced in the summer of 2012 was completely in contrast to the red carpet rolled out for the media during the election campaign of 2012. In December, campaign managers either facilitated or escorted groups of TV and print journalists — both Indian and foreign — to Vadnagar. Modi’s elder brother and a few others who were motivated to speak prepared lines were available for quotes and bytes. The coverage of Modi’s childhood arena was indicative of the efficacy of his media management and was at variance with the tactics adopted previously for loose cannons like me when only a basic administrative assistance was provided, at least as far as the visit to Vadnagar was concerned.

It is not every day that a journalist from the Indian capital comes visiting and that too after having spent a long time interviewing the chief minister. Moreover, I do not presume that there would be anything remotely sensitive about a biographer wanting to visit the overgrown village where Modi was born and spent his early childhood. I also was not expecting any startling information on him — at least, nothing that was already not known and available in the public domain. My visit is solely aimed at trying to understand the mental makeup of the young Modi and put some flesh on the bare skeletons of his background which I feel hasn’t been explored so far. I also wanted to get a *feel of his childhood* — and possibly search for any clues behind the rise of an ordinary boy from a lower middle class family to becoming chief minister of a major Indian state and in the process emerging simultaneously as one of the most admired and reviled politicians of contemporary India.

The district where Narendra Modi was born, spent his childhood and where he lived as a teenager, is the prosperous part of north Gujarat which is less developed compared to most other regions of the state. According to official data, the district of Mehsana has the highest population density among districts in north Gujarat. The district has an average literacy rate of 84.26 per cent, which is higher than the

national average. Male literacy in the district is 91.88 per cent, and female literacy, 76.12 per cent. In Mehsana, 9.4 per cent of the population is under six years of age — but unfortunately the district — at 762 — has the lowest child sex ratio among the urban centres in India. The district has witnessed substantial industrial development over the past few years, primarily due to its strategic location and this has contributed to its high population density. There are some distinguishing features of the district in economic, industrial and agricultural terms. For instance, Asia's second largest dairy, Dudhsagar Milk Cooperative Dairy that processes an average of 1.42 million litres of milk per day, and the largest market yard, Unjha is located in Mehsana.

Several petroleum companies are located in Mehsana district as well — Oil and Natural Gas Corporation Limited (ONGC) has a huge establishment and the oil division of Essar Group also has a presence in the district. Gujarat's major chemical player — Nirma Industries has set up its manufacturing unit in the district to produce a range of products like synthetic detergents, soap bars, sulphuric acid, shampoo and toothpaste. In recent years, the wholly-owned subsidiary of Canadian frozen food major — McCain Foods, has set up a potato processing unit in Mehsana at a cost of USD 16.1 million. Mehsana is the largest producer of lemon in Gujarat — it contributes almost a quarter of the total production and is also the third largest producer of tomatoes. The district is also known for being the largest producer of fennel seed and contributes almost forty per cent of the total spices produced in the state.

Just one taluka of Mehsana district — Vijapur — produces twenty-nine per cent of the total China clay in the state; the district contributes ninety-seven per cent of granite in Gujarat; and the major industrial players are primarily located in the southern part of the district and spread over the talukas of Kadi, Becharji, Vijapur, Visnagar and Mehsana. The town of Visnagar is a short distance north of Mehsana and a further eighteen kilometres north is Vadnagar — the one-time medieval city that is on its way to becoming a small township spreading beyond its medieval core. Narendra Modi was born, spent his early years and studied up to the high school level in this small municipality.

I had first heard of Vadnagar in the early months of 1999 when I was writing the short profile on Modi that I mentioned in the Introduction of this book. In the run up to the Lok Sabha elections in September-October that year, he had just been appointed the party spokesperson — indicating that among general secretaries he was on his way to becoming first among equals. Modi had spoken very lovingly about Vadnagar (he called it his “village”) and how it was home to Tana-Riri, the

two legendary sisters who — popular lore has it — sang raag Malhar to provide relief to one of Emperor Akbar's jewels — Mian Tansen — because he was feeling unbearable heat after a rendition of raag Deepak for the Emperor.

Modi told me the story about how Tansen had reached Vadnagar while searching for succour and found respite on the banks of lake Sharmishtha. There the two sisters took pity on Tansen's plight and sang Malhar invoking the Rain Gods and ensuring that Tansen was drenched by the rains. At that time, the story had appeared a bit incredulous and I had accepted Modi's claim with a pinch of salt that Vadnagar still had a memorial for the two sisters but that it was not properly maintained. The story sounded to me then as being steeped in folklore and devoid of concrete historical authenticity. Modi also told me in 1999 that if life gave him an opportunity, he would do something for his village. I had — in all my journalistic naughtiness — queried with a smile on my face why he did not request the then chief minister, Keshubhai Patel, to do so — despite being well aware that the two were not the best of friends. Modi had burst out laughing — and became quiet the moment one of his assistants walked in. It was almost as if he did not wish anyone in the party to see that dimension of his personality.

A few months after Modi became chief minister, he redeemed his pledge when he formed a special committee to oversee the development of Vadnagar on 3 December 2001. Within a decade of Modi becoming chief minister, Vadnagar had also become an important itinerary on the cultural calendar of the state. Before he shifted back to Gujarat, an annual music festival used to be held locally. But it was strapped for resources, had few visitors from outside the region and did not draw any big names. The festival was primarily the initiative — and resulting responsibility — of the local Nagar community (Brahmins by caste) to which the two legendary sisters were believed to have belonged. But after having set up the committee for Vadnagar's development, Modi catalyzed the annual Tana-Riri Mahotsav from 2002. It is now held every year on the ninth day after Diwali, the day when the two sisters are supposed to have committed suicide to avoid being captured by Akbar's troops. As per popular belief, the sisters committed suicide because the Mughal Emperor sent his troops to take them to his court and make them perform there. Since that was against the local custom, they preferred to give up their lives. Since 2010 — the year when Gujarat also celebrated its golden jubilee — the state government also instituted the Tana-Riri Award.

When Modi first expressed — in 1999 — his desire to do something for Vadnagar it was indicative of a politician in search of a constituency — a political home, a place where he could retreat to and regroup his forces whenever he was

vanquished by political adversaries. Modi's wish to be instrumental in catalyzing a significant development programme in his hometown also stemmed from his need to "reclaim" the medieval city as his own. The reason: Modi had virtually abandoned Vadnagar in his teens. While he had chalked out his political path in the 1970s and beyond, he had little interaction either with the town or his family and circle of friends and acquaintances.

The path of political growth that Modi opted for was also not based on mutual loyalties with a town, city or electoral constituency. He chose to become a Pracharak (propagandist) in the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh in the early 1970s and after he was deputed to the Bharatiya Janata Party in 1987, his specific brief was to strengthen the organizational spine and ensure that the party ran seamlessly. Demagoguery and mass politics were the tasks of vote-catchers and despite his desire to enter the electoral arena and eventually become chief minister — expressed to at least two people that I interacted with while writing this book besides also being reported in the media — Modi did not get an opportunity to build a constituency or a loyal group of voters.

In the decade after becoming chief minister, Modi further developed his symbiotic relationship with Vadnagar and worked towards making various programmes a success. In 2010 when he instituted the Tana-Riri Award, Modi ensured that it went to Lata Mangeshkar — and that she would accept it. India's nightingale however could not make it to the function and expressed regret at not being able to receive the award in person. But, in a recorded video message in Hindi, she greeted the people of Gujarat as "Brothers and Sisters of Gujarat" and described Modi as a "great leader" adding that she held him in the same esteem and respect as a sister has for her brother.

In 2011, the renowned octogenarian vocalist and Thumri exponent, Girija Devi was given this award. Often described as the "Last Queen of Thumri", Girija Devi in her acceptance statement said that her joy 'knew no bounds when I was told about the festival. I am also grateful to the Chief Minister of Gujarat Narendra Modi for his commendable work to help elevate classical music.' She further added that she had spoken to Modi on telephone, who thanked her 'for keeping the Thumri form of singing alive and for taking it beyond the barriers of borders.' The annual music festival draws audiences from outside besides several "star artists" — it has also had Shubha Mudgal performing in 2010 — and is an indication of the "arrival" of Vadnagar — a process to which Modi has contributed significantly.

There is further sign of Vadnagar's new found prosperity at the restaurant aptly named Nutan — meaning new. Opposite the railway station, we sit in air-

conditioned comfort and in the true style of Indian hosts, the president of the local unit of the Bharatiya Janata Party, Sunil Mehta, refuses to eat unless the *atithi* (guest) does. Over a lavish Gujarati thali we — by now there is a small group of people accompanying me — go over the stories that have accumulated over the past couple of hours. At a certain point I slip out and chat up with the owner of the restaurant. By now he also knows the purpose of my visit and asks if I had been on the other side of the railway station to see the tea stall from where Modi's story — in a way — began.

My answer in the affirmative falls on deaf ears and he takes off to tell me that though the shack remains locked up, several decades ago a young Modi used to help his father — Damodardas — to run a tea shop. The tasks were divided — father would make tea and the son would take it in a kettle to sell it whenever a train came. Vadnagar was not on the trunk route, so rail traffic was limited but whatever the young Modi could sell to passengers, added to the returns from local sales. This early training in running a tea stall came handy to Modi later in life when he embarked on a political career. But that story will have to wait for now.

It was the third Sunday on 17 September 1950 when Narendra was born to Damodardas and Hiraba as their third child. The family was from the caste of Ganchis — listed among the Other Backward Castes (OBCs) — and were traditional traders in the business of extracting and selling oil. Three other siblings were born after him — two brothers and one sister. Narendra's eldest brother — Somabhai who I could not meet — was born in 1944 and remained a father-like figure in the formative years of Narendra's life. Of the three other brothers, the second one — Amrit, remains a kind of pariah and besides his lathe machine unit has time for little else — especially for his illustrious brother. The other two — Prahlad and Pankaj, in order of age — also stay in the twin cities of Ahmedabad-Gandhinagar but remained indifferent to my attempts to get in touch.

In January 2012, Prahlad put his elder brother in a spot of bother by providing fodder to the press resulting in headlines like “Modi vs Modi: ‘Bar’ code to Deewar mode”. The fact of the matter was somewhat like this: Prahlad was president of Gujarat Fair Price Shops and Kerosene License Holders Association and had called for a state-wide strike of Public Distribution Shops from 1 February on the issue of bar-coded ration cards. The state government, headed by the elder brother reacted and issued a circular directing all district collectors to ensure that the supply chain was not disrupted. Matters reached a flashpoint and the media had a field day till the association called off the strike following assurances from senior BJP leaders including state BJP General Secretary, Vijay Rupani, Rajkot city President

Dhansukh Bhanderi and Junagadh MLA Mahendra Mashru. The youngest brother, Pankaj, as mentioned earlier, works in the Gujarat Information Department and stays with the mother. Vasanti was born two years after Narendra, is elder to Prahlad and Pankaj and is married.

A short distance from the railway station in Vadnagar, the paved road gradually starts winding up a small hillock. The old medieval city is located on this hillock and was fortified in the twelfth century. From the side of the railway station, entry to the township is past the Hatteshwar temple and through the Amtol Gate. The temple is built in classical style and the gate is one of the six that were originally there. The town is located atop a typical archaeological mound where two major expeditions were conducted — the first in 1952 and the second one after more than five decades in 2005.

Archaeological excavations revealed the presence of human settlement and mention that Vadnagar was in ancient times known by different names: Chamatkarpur, Anandpur, Skandpur and also Vriddhnagar. The town's growth was due to the fact that it was located 'at the meeting point of two major trades one from Ujjain to Sindh and the other from the Bharuch and Saurashtra coast to north India.' The report presented after the excavation by the Archaeology Department of Gujarat State in 2005 stated that 'Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsang (seventh century AD) records that there were more than 1000 monks of the Sammatiya School or Little Vehicle in 10 monasteries at Vadnagar. At the time of Hiuen Tsang's visit there was no chief ruler in the town.' Armed with this little sense of history, we move further into the town in search of Modi's family history.

This is one aspect of the heritage of Vadnagar which Modi is extremely proud of. In his interview to me I ask him if he had any Buddhist influences in his persona like the impact of Swami Vivekananda on his life. He told me, 'I am extremely fortunate that the village where I was born in had Buddhist influences. Hiuen Tsang had visited my village — and wrote that there was a hostel for 10,000 Buddhist monks in my village. I have a dream to make a very big temple of Buddha in Gujarat.'

Banaskantha is the third largest district of contemporary Gujarat. It touches the districts of Marwad and Sirohi in Rajasthan on the north and in the other directions is ringed by the districts of Patan, Mehsana and Sabarkantha on the west, south and east respectively. Sometime towards the later years of the nineteenth century a person from the intermediate caste of Ghanchis and a grocer by profession and trade — Maganlal Ranchoddas — migrated from the nondescript Navdotra village in Banaskantha district and started a grocery store in Vadnagar. The shop was small

but sufficient to make ends meet and Maganlal's son — Mulchand — and later his grandson — Damodardas — took over the shop. According to locals, Damodardas was born in 1915 and his first child — a son — was born in 1944. The second child of Damodardas and Hiraba or Hiraben, was also a son as was the third who was given the name Narendra and was destined to break free from the lower middle class trappings of the Modi family.

The house where young Narendra was born and spent his childhood is located deep inside the narrow streets of cobblestones. The family no longer owns that property — one of the brothers sold it off at some point to another resident. In the summer of 2012 it looked a well-kept small tenement with a touch of bright orange on the balcony in the first floor. Narendra's childhood friend — Sudhir Joshi — proudly took me on a conducted tour of Vadnagar, and said that the house was a basic mud and bricks structure when he was growing up along with the man whose destiny is the *raison d'être* for us to go around from one lane to another.

Unfortunately, the family that has bought the property have locked up the house and do not stay in Vadnagar except during holidays when they return to their roots. But Joshi tells me that the house still has the three rooms on the ground floor (the first floor was added some years later) where young Narendra jostled for space with his five siblings and parents. He further provides information — by way of details — that the house is twelve feet wide and forty feet long.

Modi's childhood home is a typical "railway compartment" type of a house where you enter through the first room located upfront and then move to the other rooms in the same sequence. The house was poorly ventilated and had little natural light. When Narendra was growing up, the concept of electricity in towns and hamlets like Vadnagar was not even a distant dream. The kerosene lamp that was lit virtually the whole day, added to smoke and grime inside the house and cow-dung cakes and wood was used for cooking in the middle room. Joshi remembered that next to the corner where the limited utensils were kept in a heap, was the little niche where the gods were kept.

The traumatic and often dark childhood has obviously weighed on Modi's mind. He confided in me about his childhood and said: 'I had a lot of pain because I grew up in a village where there was no electricity and in my childhood we used to face a lot of hardships because of this.' He elaborated that this trauma had been behind his insistence on launching the Jyotigram Yojana that became a success because of Modi 'giving directions to separate the agricultural feeder and domestic feeder,' as a result of which it came to be touted as one of the major successes of Modi's regime.

Young Narendra was a devout Hindu and liked going to temples in Vadnagar

where he chanted the mantras loudly. According to the accounts given by Joshi and Modi's uncle (father's younger brother) — Jayantibhai — from a young age, Narendra was drawn to religion and took the lead in fasting on festivals and other days considered auspicious by Hindus.

More than five decades after Modi's first forays into temples and adherence to Hindu rituals, I broached the topic of his religiosity and personal belief at a meeting subsequent to my first in the course of writing this book. I specifically queried him on how religious he was. Modi replied: 'One is being religious and other is being spiritual. We often mix up these in India. In a way I am not religious but I am definitely spiritual.'

I followed this up with a question probing his belief in rituals, especially whether he fasted. Modi told me that he fasted twice a year: 'I fast during Navratras (observed twice a year, once during the Hindu month of Ashwin before Dussehra and the other one during the Hindu month of Chaitra) and for the nine days I live only on water. I have been doing this for the past 40 years. I do not eat anything and live only on water.' When I further probed this facet of Modi's persona and asked why he fasted and if such rigorous fasting had ever caused health problems, he replied in the negative: 'No, it does not cause any problems. It is a part of the process of my internal purification. I enjoy doing this. If anyone wishes to look at this as a ritual then they are welcome but for me it is not a ritual. I have fixed these periods (in the year) and I do it at this time only and I like this.' Modi fasted in 2012 also though the Navratri period before Dussehra began well after he hit the campaign trail.

I was curious about Modi's religious practise because of the strong element of the use of religion as a political tool in the course of his political career. I asked whether he still goes to temples regularly like he did as a child. Modi explained: 'Because I am a lover of nature, I have been to every place associated with Lord Shiva — Kailash Mansarover, Amarnath... I am fascinated because of His presence in places where there is nature. I do *upasana* of Shakti (pray to the Mother Goddess) because I fast during Navratras. I do puja every day — and yet, I maintain that I am not stuck to either religion or *karamkand* (beliefdriven practices).'

The first few years of Narendra's life were unremarkable. A dutiful son — like the others — he went to school when his sister, Vasanti, was barely a toddler and the younger brothers were yet to be born. The first exposure to the world outside his home, his family — came to Narendra when as a six year old he would go across to his father's tea stall outside the Vadnagar railway station.

Rasikbhai Dave, a Brahmin by caste, was a contemporary of Narendra's father

and a local leader of the Congress party. Dave's office was close to Damodardas' tea shop. When Narendra was six years old, the Maha Gujarat agitation was gathering ground after the Union government began weighing the recommendations of the States Reorganisation Commission that the city of Bombay should remain the capital of a bilingual state. Dave was soon disillusioned with the Congress party for refusing to grant statehood to Gujarat and was drawn to the veteran leader Indulal Yagnik — who came out of retirement — to become the face of the agitation in Gujarat. Dave became the local coordinator of the Maha Gujarat Janata Parishad in Vadnagar and soon his office became a hub of political activity and agitation for separate statehood for Gujarat.

Amongst others who would regularly troop into Dave's office was the six year old Narendra. He was particularly interested in the badges proclaiming support for the state of Gujarat. He would collect them and then go around town and the railway station distributing them. Modi himself has vivid memories of his first foray into public life though he was hardly aware of what he was participating in and that this street would eventually become his "own" in less than two decades when he would formally become part of the political process.

'All children have a hobby of collecting badges — I at times used to be the leader of my gang of children. Rasikbhai was very elderly — almost my father's age. He used to like it that I used to come — did not waste the badges and instead distributed them... so he did not give the badges to any other child — he was very clear that if he wanted to distribute any badges then it was to me and he told this to others in the agitation.'

I asked Modi what he did besides collecting and distributing the badges. He continued: 'Rasikbhai used to teach us how to shout slogans and I learnt that art very early in my life. At that time I understood that there was something politically significant happening and as a child I got a sense of participation. But there was no deep political understanding. I did not even know at that time the concept of Gujarat. I was a child and what did a child want — some drama, some kind of game...' he trailed off.

But at a later point in his life when he recalled his first tryst with public life, did he think that this involvement with the Maha Gujarat Janata Parishad left any lasting impression on his young mind. If I had read his response, I would have considered it to be a pre-scripted reply but it did not sound like one when I heard him because it was spontaneous: 'There is one thing that I remember since then — the strong hatred towards the Congress which was prevalent at that time — became part of me. I think it impacted even the mind of the child that I was at that time.'

People had a tremendous dislike for the Congress at that time. People used to campaign, burn effigies and as a child I did try to understand why people were so angry. So I asked the elders why they were burning the effigies and they said that the Congress had done something wrong — had done harm to us. It definitely left several question marks in my mind.’

If life made young Narendra hate the Congress party with a vengeance, it also gave him a chance to lead a life like any other child. Sudhir Joshi, who now practices medicine in Vadnagar, shared the same school bench with Narendra. The two played together as children along with another close friend, Harish Patel. The group liked playing kho kho in the beginning and when they grew older, cricket and volleyball were added to the list of favourite games. At a later point in their childhood, the group of boys also enrolled for the National Cadet Corps (NCC). Initially, Narendra went to the Primary School No 1 in Vadnagar and later shifted to Bhagvatacharya Narayanacharya High School (B N High School) for studying up to the tenth standard. It was a co-educational Gujarati-medium institution. Subsequent to this, Modi went to Visnagar for his Intermediate and thereafter life took a dramatic turn — both in terms of formal education and also his personal growth.

But even while Narendra was still studying in the primary school, certain defining traits of his character started becoming visible. His uncle, Jayantibhai, says that though sartorial choices were few because of limited resources available to the family, Narendra was conscious of what he wore. ‘He liked to dress properly and took care of his clothes — did not allow them to get frayed and ruffled like other children. He spent a lot of time in grooming,’ the uncle reminisces. Given the fact that by the time he was six or seven years old, Narendra was lending a helping hand to his father at the tea stall, he developed an early taste for the sweetened broth though he did not develop a sweet tooth. Modi’s uncle says the young child rarely ate sweets in any form and instead had a fondness for raw mangoes which he often plucked along with his friends from several orchards in Vadnagar, an act that often earned the ire of owners or chowkidars. This preference appears odd given his liking as an adult, for the sweetish Gujarati cuisine. From a young age, Narendra also displayed certain rigidity and stubbornness to this character that became more pronounced when he shifted to the high school in Visnagar, the bigger town close by to study for the Intermediate level before he could become eligible for enrolment in college.

What Narendra lacked from early on in terms of grasp over subjects taught in school, he compensated by a strong leadership quality even as a child. This was the

quality that Dave had spotted while getting him to distribute the badges. It was the same quality that saw the young Narendra leading his schoolmates in celebrations when the separate state of Gujarat was carved out on 1 May 1960. Joshi recollected: 'We did not know what happened but Narendrabhai took the lead in shouting slogans and distributing sweets.' Clearly, even before he had turned ten, there were portends of what he would eventually become. At that time, only his mother was reasonably certain that her third-born would go on to become someone important, added the childhood pal.

DISUNITED COLOURS OF INDIA

To all the minorities in India we give the assurance that they will receive fair and just treatment and there will be no discrimination in any form against them. Their religion, their culture and their language are safe and they will enjoy all the rights and privileges of citizenship, and will be expected in their turn to render loyalty to the country in which they live and to its Constitution. To all we give the assurance that it will be our endeavour to end poverty and squalor and its companions, hunger and disease; to abolish distinction and exploitation and to ensure decent conditions of living.

– Dr Rajendra Prasad, President Constituent Assembly of India, 14-15 August 1947

The cornerstone of the political fraternity which spawned Narendra Modi, believed that social and political fundamentals pursued in India since it became independent, were intrinsically wrong. The concept of Akhand Bharat (United India), stretching from Burma (now Myanmar) on the east, to Afghanistan to the west, was never abandoned by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and its affiliates. Therefore reintegration with Pakistan and Bangladesh was considered the first step in the formation of a Hindu Rashtra (Hindu Nation). With scant regard — at least at the theoretical level—for constitutional norms, members of the Bharatiya Janata Party holding positions in government — Centre or in states — after swearing allegiance to laws of the land, has been dichotomous.

Since the mid-1990s, BJP has repeatedly been in a quandary over the emphasis it should pay to its “core issues”: construction of Ram Temple at Ayodhya; immediate abrogation of Article 370 that gave special status to Kashmir and immediate legislation of the Uniform Civil Code. I asked Narendra Modi about this in the

course of one of my conversations with him. He said: 'People often confuse ideology with programmes. The programme is not ideology, and ideology is not a programme,' in the context of my question if his party would revert to aggressive espousal of the three issues. I asked him to elaborate and what he said was an affirmation of the ultimate goal: 'Our ideology is simple — India first. Rest are all projects, programmes. How can we reach the goal now, without a two-thirds majority, how can we abrogate Article 370? So we have to first find ways of getting two-thirds majority.'

So how do you do this?

'(By using) ways laid out in our democratic processes. Now if you do not have two-thirds majority, then what can you achieve by taking up any particular agenda? Programmes are made at particular moments depending on the situation prevailing at that time.'

Programmes are drawn up for strategic considerations to secure political power and ideology can be made dominant only by exercising such power. Modi stated unabashedly that ideology cannot be the "driver" of the programmes till the party secures a brute majority of its own. Fellow travellers remain props on the way to gaining hegemony over other viewpoints and different political belief systems.

It is an ironical conjunction in history that on 17 September 1950, when the Indian Constitution was barely nine months old, the man who has been among the most consistent critics of it in recent years, was born. The Constitution of the new Republic replaced the Government of India Act, 1935 as the governing document of India. The Constitution had been framed by the Constituent Assembly that met for the first time in New Delhi on 9 December 1946 and had taken two years, eleven months and seventeen days to complete drafting the Constitution. The document was adopted on 26 November 1949; signed on 24 January 1950 and came into force on 26 January 1950 — a day that has since been celebrated as India's Republic Day.

After the Constitution of free India was adopted, the Constituent Assembly became the Provisional Parliament. It remained in place till the first elected Lower House of Parliament was duly constituted. The period till its constitution in May 1952 was very crucial because this was when India actually made a transition from a country governed by a colonial legislative institution, to a rule mandated by a sovereign Parliament of independent India.

Exactly eighteen minutes after ten on the morning of 26 January 1950 a solemn ceremony began in New Delhi — at the end of which India was declared a Sovereign Democratic Republic. It was a Thursday. Six minutes into the ceremony,

Dr Rajendra Prasad was sworn in as India's first president. Earlier, he had been elected unopposed on 24 January 1950 by the Constituent Assembly when it met for its last session — before it became the Provisional Parliament. Dr Rajendra Prasad had previously been elected president of the Constituent Assembly when it began the process of drafting independent India's Constitution.

That Dr Rajendra Prasad would become the Republic's first Head of State was never in doubt. On that Thursday morning, he took over the position of the titular head from retiring Governor-General C Rajagopalachari. The scene in the Indian capital — though not as boisterous and jubilant as the one witnessed less than five years ago on 14-15 August 1947 — was described by the reporter of *Fauji Akhbar*, later renamed *Sainik Samachar*, as 'unforgettable scenes of enthusiasm and rejoicing.'

On that morning, inside the 'brilliantly lit and high domes of Durbar Hall' of what was still called Government House on top of the Raisina Hill complex, India was first declared a Sovereign Democratic Republic after which Dr Prasad was administered the oath of office and secrecy. Thirty-one guns boomed thereafter to announce to the world and its people the arrival of the latest Republic. People milled around the forecourt of Government House and lined up on the road that is now called Rajpath, in anticipation of the ceremonial drive of the new president to what was in 1950 called Irwin Stadium but later renamed as National Stadium. Hundreds of thousands waited patiently in the winter sun till 2.30 pm when, as the reporter of *Fauji Akhbar* described in the 4 February 1950 issue, a 'thirty-five year old coach specially renovated for the occasion bearing the new emblem of Asoka's capital and drawn by six sturdy Australian horses carried the President and drove out of Government House at a slow trot, escorted by the President's bodyguard.'

The five kilometre drive took more than an hour after which Dr Rajendra Prasad led a 15,000-strong crowd to witness one of the grandest military parades in Indian history. Thus began the tradition of celebrating the Republic Day with a display of India's military might and cultural diversity. For the first few years, the parades were held in various locations in New Delhi — Kingsway, Red Fort included, after which it was shifted to its present venue on Rajpath. On that balmy Thursday afternoon, India's new leaders led the country into forgetting for a few hours the trauma of Partition.

When the Indian Tricolour went up inside the Irwin Stadium, all that mattered was that it symbolized the final phase of Indians taking their destiny in their own hands. The immediate challenge ahead — that of holding the country's first general election in a country that had a literacy rate of just 18.33 per cent according to the

1951 census — also did not worry the leaders. This was primarily because in 1950 it was clear that a verdict in favour of the Indian National Congress was a foregone conclusion and all that remained to be done was to establish an administrative mechanism to conduct such a mammoth task.

A day before Indian national leaders formally bequeathed the longest written Constitution to the people of India, the Election Commission (EC) of India was constituted. Another two months elapsed before India — on 21 March 1950 — got its first Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) — Sukumar Sen. The Election Commission was given the task of conducting elections for the President, Vice President, the two Houses of Parliament and the state legislative bodies. But much before the constitution of the Election Commission, Indian leaders had begun the process of holding elections by initiating the process of preparing electoral rolls.

As early as 8 January 1949, the Constituent Assembly adopted a motion directing the issue of instructions for the preparation of electoral rolls and for taking all necessary steps so that ‘elections to the Legislatures under the new Constitution may be held as early as possible in the year 1950.’ This was followed by a slightly lesser known fact: that the provisions of the Constitution relating to citizenship — Articles 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9 and Article 324 regarding establishing the Election Commission were brought into force on 26 November 1949 itself while the rest of the Constitution came into force on 26 January 1950.

However within a short period after its constitution, the Election Commission concluded — as Sukumar Sen noted in the *Report on the First General Elections in India*¹ — that the time frame could not be adhered to because of several reasons but mainly on account of the fact that the ‘electoral law was yet to be passed by Parliament’ and also because ‘the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes had not till then been specified by an Order of the President as required by Articles 341 and 342 of the Constitution.’

Subsequent to the government accepting the contention of the Commission, Nehru made a statement to the Provisional Parliament on 19 April 1950 ‘expressing his hope that elections would be held in the spring of 1951.’ But there were further delays due to changes in the Representation of People Act, 1950 and the Representation of People Act, 1951 that was eventually enacted on 17 July 1951. The entire electoral machinery could be finally set up only after the enactments of these laws. In its report, the Election Commission noted: ‘In view of all this unavoidable delay, the prospects of holding the elections in the spring of 1951, as originally hoped for, gradually receded.’ Subsequent to this, there was a further delay because the process of delimitation of constituencies was not yet complete.

When it became ‘clear that the delimitation orders could not possibly be finalised by Parliament until the middle of November, 1950,’ it was amply evident the second deadline of spring 1951 would also be missed. Finally, India’s election machinery took its first step on 10 September 1951 when the first notifications under Sections 15 and 17 of Representation of People Act, 1951 were issued in respect to Himachal Pradesh where two assembly constituencies — Chini and Pangi — went to polls before they became snow-bound. 25 October 1951 remains an important date in Indian democracy and electoral history because people in these two assembly constituencies high up in the hills cast their lot to elect members of the legislative assembly of what was then called a ‘Part “C” State’. They simultaneously also voted for Lok Sabha — till that time called House of People — candidates of their choice.

The process of the first general election of India continued for seven months and ended only in the summer next year by when the election to the West Bengal Legislative Council was completed on 4 June 1952. But before that, Jawaharlal Nehru was sworn in as India’s first elected prime minister on 13 May 1952 and the first Lok Sabha had been constituted and also begun its first session on the same day. On the same day, Dr Rajendra Prasad and Dr S Radhakrishnan were also sworn in as India’s first elected president and vice president respectively.

India’s first general elections however, were unfortunately not witnessed by the man who was among those greatly instrumental in ensuring that it was held at the earliest after independence: Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. In December 1950, while India was still recovering from Mahatma Gandhi’s assassination, another tragedy struck India when Sardar Patel died due to natural causes at the age of seventy-five. Popularly known as the Iron Man, he was perceived to have been at loggerheads with Nehru on several issues — mainly over Patel’s harder nationalist line. But after Patel’s death, Nehru became aware of his loneliness and Patel’s usefulness as a strong adversary within his ranks to ward off enemies from outside. While speaking about the deceased Home minister, Nehru said: ‘His name will live forever in history. He is the Architect of Modern India. He was a wise counselor in the hour of trial, a trustworthy friend and a mine of courage and inspiration.’ Ramachandra Guha has mentioned in *India After Gandhi: The History of The World’s Largest Democracy*² that ‘it fell to the prime minister to draft the cabinet resolution mourning Patel’s passing.’

Sardar Patel was born in Nadiad town of Kheda district less than a hundred kilometers south of Ahmedabad. Almost 130 kilometres north of Nadiad — in Mehsana district, Narendra Modi was born in the one-time medieval township of

Vadnagar barely three months before the Sardar died. In more than sixty years since Patel's death, almost every male political leader from the state who has aspired to look beyond Gujarat has either personally projected himself or has allowed his supporters to project him as the modern day avatar of the Sardar. They have wanted to achieve what Patel could not — the pivotal political position in the country, the king and not just the proverbial kingmaker. Modi is no different.

By 1 May 1960 India had — to a great extent — been able to find a solution to one of the most difficult questions it faced after independence: how to reorganize the administrative boundaries within the frontiers left behind by the British after Partition. Colonialism had interfered with the process of the evolution of medieval states and kingdoms into modern administrative units or Nation States. The geographic boundaries of the country — that came to be known as India — were not determined by the new rulers and the people, as contradictions and antagonism prevailed. In the run-up to independence, the biggest question was what would be the geographical boundaries of India — or rather what parts would constitute India.

The issue was not just over the impending Partition of the Indian sub-continent into India and Pakistan. An equally vexing issue — though not such an emotionally charged one — was where the princely states would be relocated: would they be transferred to either of the new states — India and Pakistan, or would they become independent countries with full autonomy or even be granted partial freedom depending on their relationship with the colonial system. The issue was particularly important because forty per cent of territory under colonial India comprised princely states that were directly not under the British administration but were administered under a system of indirect rule based on the principles of suzerainty and paramountcy. But people being people, in these princely states, the support for the national movement was no less. Feudal rulers did enjoy the primordial loyalty of the people but it was clear that beyond a point they would not be able to secure their support to peacefully govern independent countries.

Leaders of the Indian national movement were firm in their resolve that princely states would have to be part of the new states of India and Pakistan though assertions were made to the contrary by the author of the creation of the idea of Pakistan — Mohammed Ali Jinnah — and British Prime Minister, Labour leader, Clement Attlee. Jinnah and Attlee were in favour of the princely states having a third option: becoming independent nations. On 20 February 1947, Attlee — he

had earlier been a member of the multiparty Simon Commission in the late 1920s — made a key announcement in British Parliament and appointed a new Viceroy — Lord Louis Mountbatten in place of Lord Archibald Wavell. He also set a deadline of 30 June 1948 for the British to withdraw from India. He also fuelled speculation of the eventual political and geographic shape of the sub-continent by categorically stating: ‘His Majesty’s Government do not intend to hand over their powers to *any* (sic) government of British India.’ Although Attlee’s announcement on withdrawal acknowledged British acceptance of the decline of the government’s authority, it also indicated that neither he nor anybody else in the British government was clear about the future course to be adopted. Attlee further told the House of Commons: ‘It is with great regret that His Majesty’s government find that there are still differences among Indian parties which are preventing the Constituent Assembly from functioning as it was intended that it should.’

After arriving in India on 22 March 1947, Lord Mountbatten worked at a feverish pace. He was more or less clear that the two warring parties — Indian National Congress and Muslim League would not be able to reach an agreement for a single and united State. On 3 June he announced what has since been known as the Mountbatten Plan which decided to partition British India. On 4 June, Lord Mountbatten met Mahatma Gandhi — who was observing a day of silence — because his assent was crucial. But Gandhiji wrote on backs of envelopes about his day of silence. ‘I am sorry I can’t speak. When I took the decision about the Monday silence I did reserve two exceptions — but I know you don’t want me to break my silence ...’

Silence was however not Jinnah’s virtue and on 18 June 1947 he said: ‘The States (Princely) would be independent sovereign States on the termination of paramountcy,’ and that they would be free to ‘remain independent if they so desired.’ The British government introduced the Indian Independence Bill in Parliament on 4 July 1947 and when it came up for debate, Attlee somewhat tried to repair the damage caused by his previous statement. He now asserted: ‘It is the hope of His Majesty’s Government that all the States will in due course find their appropriate place with one or the other Dominion within the British Commonwealth.’ The Bill that became an Act of Parliament and received royal assent on 18 July 1947 specified that nothing in the prior mentioned clauses — that created two Dominions from British India and its geographic entities — ‘shall be construed as preventing the accession of Indian States to either of the new Dominions.’ On Thursday, 14 August 1947 members of the Indian Constituent Assembly assembled in the Central Hall of Parliament at 11 pm with President Dr

Rajendra Prasad in chair. The proceedings began with the singing of *Vande Mataram* by Sucheta Kripalani. One of the greatest political and emotionally charged speeches of the twentieth century was delivered by Jawaharlal Nehru immediately after Dr Prasad had completed his own. Nehru began his speech saying:

Long years ago we had made a tryst with destiny itself. We had taken a pledge, a vow. Now the time has come to redeem it. But perhaps the pledge has not yet been redeemed fully though stages have been reached in that direction. We have almost attained independence. At such a moment, it is only appropriate that we take a new pledge, a new vow to serve India and her people. After a few moments, the Assembly will assume the status of a fully free and independent body and it will represent an independent and free country. Therefore great responsibilities are to devolve upon it. If we do not realise the importance of our responsibilities, then we shall not be able to discharge our duties fully...

...a large portion of our task remains to be done, and we shall try to accomplish it. Big problems confront us and at their sight sometimes our heart quivers, but, then again, the thought that in the past we have faced many a big problem and we shall do so again, gives us courage...

...we should remember that India does not belong to any one party or group of people or caste. It does not belong to the followers of any particular religion. It is the country of all, of every religion and creed.

Almost at the end of Nehru's speech before he read out the pledge that members of the Constituent Assembly took, came the lines that have gone to become almost legendary:

...Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge, not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially. At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom. A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance.

In his speech, the big problems that Nehru referred to included the resolution of the three *problematic* States of Junagadh, Jammu and Kashmir and Hyderabad. The fact that when at 10 am on 15 August 1947, the Constituent Assembly of India met in New Delhi and Lord Mountbatten — endorsed as independent India's first Governor-General the previous night by the Constituent Assembly — gave the signal for hoisting the Indian Tricolour for the first time over Indian Parliament, all

but three of 565 princely states (apart from a few states clearly destined to join Pakistan) had signed the Instrument of Accession with India because of the policy of coercive persuasion of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. This was a tactic that he deployed with the astute support of Vapal Pangunni Menon — the Constitutional Adviser to the last three Viceroys and Sardar Patel's secretary in the States' Department that was set up on 27 June 1947. Even this was over by the end of 1948 but then a trickier problem arose — an issue that would continue to dog India for more than six decades: how to politically and administratively redraw the territories that comprised India. On what basis could *lines* be drawn within India!

In 1920 when India was in the midst of the first mass movement against colonialism — the twin Non-Cooperation and Khilafat movements, the Indian National Congress took a significant decision: to recognize the linguistic diversity of India and make language the basis of regional units of the party. Language thus became the basis for drawing fuzzy — often overlapping — lines within the Congress and in 1921 it amended its Constitution so as to reorganize its regional units on linguistic basis. Regional units were formed in Bihar, Sind and Orissa and after the Nagpur Session in 1920 it not only drew its regional units on the basis of language but also criticized British government for its arbitrary and irrational boundaries. From 1921, regional units existed in what later became Andhra, Kerala and Karnataka besides of course in various administrative entities that ceased to exist as regional units after India's post-independence reorganization — Ajmer and Bombay.

Congress leaders remained committed to states on the basis of language in the run-up to independence. Bipan Chandra, Aditya Mukherjee and Mridula Mukherjee in *India Since Independence*³ have pointed that in the aftermath of Partition and riots that followed, Nehru took the position that 'first things should come first' and when India was trying to cope — and manage — with the trauma of Partition riots. He said on 27 November 1947 that India's first challenge was to retain its security and stability. Nehru clearly gave the issue of *redrawing* of India low priority because he first wanted to ensure that there *should* be an India to reconfigure. But the Congress remained committed to its earlier stance on the basis of regional divisions. Less than a week before his assassination, on 25 January 1948, Gandhiji reaffirmed: 'Congress had decided some 20 years ago that there should be as many provinces in the country as there are major languages.'

Five months after Gandhiji's assassination, the threads of redrawing India on linguistic lines were picked up when the Constituent Assembly of India through a notification on 17 June 1948 constituted a Linguistic Provinces Commission with

Justice S K Dar as its chairman. It consisted of two other members — J N Lal — an eminent lawyer and Panna Lall, a retired civil servant. The Dar Committee though swift in its recommendation, concluded that any move to divide India on linguistic basis was inappropriate at that stage. Predictably there was a howl of protests in the Constituent Assembly and the government formed another committee — this time, a political one comprising political giants. Popularly called the JVP committee (after Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabhbhai Patel and Dr Pattabhi Sitaramayya) this panel also ruled out creation of states on linguistic basis. It in fact went a step forward — or rather backwards — by seemingly reversing the Congress' policy on linguistic basis for regional units by saying that 'language was not only a binding force but also a separating one.' Despite temporarily ruling out linguistic states, the issue however did not die down.

The new government did not follow the set pattern of first being elected by the people of independent India and then confronting internal dissensions. Part of the problem stemmed from the fact that when the Indian National Congress in the 1920s decided to amend its Constitution and form regional units on the basis of language, it did not realize the long term implications of the decision. In India, study of languages of different groups of people and recording of their mother tongues began in 1881 with the Indian census. In 1903, George Grierson, who headed the newly-formed Linguistic Survey of India, began publishing his nineteen volume detailed account of Indian languages. His findings were startling and should have had a profound impact on the decision of the Congress: according to Grierson there were 179 languages and 544 dialects in India. This number went up to 845 languages or dialects in the 1951 census — the first one after independence — and to 1652 "mother tongues" — classifying them under 193 languages — in the 1961 census. Quite clearly there were *core languages* that were taken into consideration by the political leadership for reorganizing territory and political units and *fringe languages* that were accounted for census operations. By accepting the principle of linguistic plurality as the basis of regional — and sub-regional — territories, the Congress opened a Pandora's Box. As a result the party had to cope — and this process continues — with political turmoil on account of this duplicity.

In 1950 the Congress was faced with protests from Teluguspeaking people who wanted the state of Andhra Pradesh to be carved out of Madras Presidency; they were among the largest linguistic groups after the Hindi-speaking population. But their demand was turned down by the JVP Committee leading to one of the first *desertions* from the Congress party — former chief minister of Madras, T Prakasam. The demand for Andhra Pradesh gathered storm through 1951 and in October

1952 a freedom fighter, Potti Sreeramulu began a fast unto death in Madras. A bit of a maverick, Sreeramulu had in 1946 fasted to demand the entry of Harijans into Hindu temples. But Nehru's government was not particularly concerned — or rather failed to anticipate the galvanizing effect the fast would have on the demand for Andhra Pradesh. That Nehru did not realize the impending crisis was evident in a note to C Rajagopalachari who was then chief minister of Madras, on 3 December 1952: 'Some kind of fast is going on...I propose to ignore it completely.'

This is something Nehru could not do because on 15 December 1952 Sreeramulu died and this led to total mayhem in Teluguspeaking areas. Within two days, Nehru had to pledge the formation of Andhra Pradesh and it finally came into existence in October 1953 after the delineation of two new states — Andhra and Tamil Nadu — was done. Rightfully, Nehru realized that a hornet's nest had been stirred with the decision and to pre-empt agitations by other linguistic groups, on 22 December 1953 he said in Parliament that a commission would be appointed to examine the reorganization of the states of the Indian Union. Within exactly a week — on 29 December — Nehru's statement was followed by the appointment of a commission headed by Justice Fazal Ali with K M Panikkar and Hridaynath Kunzru as members. That was the States Reorganisation Commission or SRC.

Forming a commission was just one stage of the problem, the other — and more complicated one — was its implementation. The SRC submitted its report in October 1955 giving due consideration to administrative and economic factors but also recommended redrawing of state boundaries on linguistic basis. The SRC further suggested the formation of sixteen states and three centrally administered areas for the Indian Union and on 18 April 1956 the States Reorganisation Bill was introduced in Lok Sabha after which — as a part of standard parliamentary procedure, it was referred to the Joint Select Committee of Parliament. The report was tabled in Lok Sabha on 16 July 1956 after the Select Committee suggested some amendments in the Bill. The Bill was enacted in the Monsoon Session of that year and the States Reorganisation Act received President's assent on 31 August 1956. As a result, new states were created on 1 November 1956 and they were no longer categorized as Part A, B & C States as had been done since independence. The territories of India at that stage comprised fourteen States and six Union Territories as specified in the States Reorganisation Act. It was among the most important legislations passed by the first Lok Sabha. But as events showed over the next almost six decades, it did not resolve a very contentious political issue.

In the two years that the SRC took to finalize its report, and as Ramachandra Guha mentions in his book, *India After Gandhi*⁴, it travelled across India visiting

more than a 100 towns and cities and interviewed more than 9000 people. It also received more than 1.5 lakh written submissions. The most contentious of them pertained to the land mass that predominantly was home not only for the Marathi-speaking people, but also those who spoke Gujarati: the island metropolis of Bombay. The conflicting claims and demands could not be politically managed and the government finally sought a way out by forming a mega Bombay State which consisted of all the three territories. From 1953 onwards, Marathi-speaking people — and their representatives — demanded that Bombay be part of Maharashtra while the Gujarati-speaking people also wanted the same! On their part, the Bombay Citizen's Committee that was headed by cotton king, Sir Purushottamdas Thakurdas and had J R D Tata in its ranks, claimed that Bombay needed to have a distinct entity. They argued that Marathi speakers were a minority in the city — forty-three per cent. The government proposed to divide Bombay state into Maharashtra and Gujarat while making the island city of Bombay a separate, centrally administered Union Territory.

The proposal was not acceptable to any of the three camps and finally, a bilingual Bombay State was created under the States Reorganisation Act. The decision was however taken to tide over an immediate emergency and the matter was far from resolved. The region witnessed agitations not only preceding the creation of a bilingual Bombay State but also later. Meanwhile, the SRC had ruled out the formation of separate states of Maharashtra and Gujarat because of the critical question of Bombay. Maharashtrians were the largest group in the city that was dominated by Gujarati (including Parsi) wealth. Bombay was not the only state that was not reorganized on linguistic lines — Punjab was the other one. But while Bombay had to be reorganized in less than five years, Punjab was redrawn much later when Haryana was carved out on 1 November 1966. That the reorganization of Bombay State had to be done much earlier was due to agitations that swept through India's western regions.

Immediately after the SRC had been constituted in December 1953, the first salvo was fired by the well-heeled — and predominantly Gujarati — class of people of Bombay who petitioned SRC that Bombay be spared being part of any state. The fear of the wealthy Gujaratis of Bombay was that they would lose their political clout in the event of Bombay being allotted to Maharashtra after the state of Gujarat was carved out. Throughout 1954 and 1955 — till the SRC submitted its report, the issue remained alive with postures also getting hardened by the fact that a Gujarati — Morarji Desai — was chief minister of Bombay State. Ironically, at a time when large parts of India's western coast and its hinterland were on the boil on

the issue of linguistic reorganization, two leaders on opposite ends of the political firmament agreed on the issue of toning down the issue of language as the basis of making new states.

Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar (popularly known as Guruji in the Sangh Parivar) was a Marathi-speaking Chitpavan Brahmin and the titular head of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. It had been banned a month after the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi in February 1948 and the ban remained in force till July 1949. Golwalkar had also been arrested on 10 December 1948 and put in Nagpur jail. There was little love lost between the bulk of the Congress and Golwalkar though there is evidence that the staunch anti-RSS views of Pandit Nehru were not shared by all his colleagues in both the party and government.

But on this occasion, Nehru found an ally in Golwalkar, an instance that Ramachandra Guha described in *India After Gandhi*⁵ as ‘a rare meeting of minds between the prime minister and M S Golwalkar,’ while describing the chain of events. As early as November 1951, Golwalkar said that the creation of states on linguistic basis would lead to bitterness and give rise to divisive forces. In May 1954 when the SRC was already touring the country, he addressed a gathering in Bombay at the invitation of Anti-Provincial Conference and stated bluntly: ‘Multiplicity breeds strife.’ By the time the SRC report was submitted and the government was deliberating on its next moves, there was a latent groundswell of support in almost all political parties with an all-India vision that the formation of new states on linguistic lines was after all, not a very good idea and would let the genie out of the bottle.

The SRC recommendation of Bombay being designated the capital of the bilingual state came up for discussions in Parliament in November 1955 and as political consensus appeared to be developing on the proposal, widespread rioting began in Bombay in January 1956, leading to the death of almost eighty people. Even when the Joint Select Committee of Parliament continued evaluating the SRC Bill, the government decided to split Bombay State into two, on linguistic lines while giving Bombay city an independent status. Protests ensued — this time from the Marathi-speaking people — and Nehru backtracked once more in favour of a bilingual state. In the ensuing agitation, the movements for separate states of Gujarat and Maharashtra gained ground. The Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti and Maha Gujarat Janata Parishad were formed in the two regions of the bilingual state. The Maha Gujarat Janata Parishad was also active in Saurashtra and Kutch that were given the status of Part B & Part C states in the first round of reorganization in 1948. At that time 222 princely states in the Kathiawad region — including the

contentious Junagadh State — were merged into Saurashtra.

In 1956 however, Indulal Yagnik — who came out of retirement — became the face of the agitation in Gujarat. Once an active member of the Congress party, after not being nominated to contest the election for the first Lok Sabha, Yagnik contested as an independent candidate and lost. His labours for the new state of Gujarat bore fruits in 1962, 1967 and 1971 when he was elected to the Lok Sabha from the Ahmedabad constituency. The agitation spearheaded by the Maha Gujarat Janata Parishad was supported by all Opposition parties and also people cutting across caste distinctions. The territories that comprised the princely states in Kathiawad and Kutch were also to be part of the expanded bilingual state and support for the Maha Gujarat Janata Parishad poured even from these areas. Even children joined the movement by accompanying either elders in the family or those who were known to them. On most occasions, the participation of youngsters was devoid of political significance except possibly remaining etched in their minds even after they grew up.

As mentioned in an earlier chapter, a six-year-old Narendra Modi one day turned up at the office of Rasikbhai Dave, the local coordinator of the Maha Gujarat Janata Parishad in Vadnagar and asked for badges so that he could go around distributing them. This was the first exposure to the life beyond his home and school for the young lad.

On 1 November 1956, the new states came into being but the movement for separate states did not die down. The popularity of the Congress dipped in the 1957 Lok Sabha election in Bombay state and the party was defeated in twenty-eight of the sixty-six seats. Seeing the decline in the support for the party as a result of indecisiveness for several years on the issue of linguistic states of Maharashtra and Gujarat, the Congress party finally decided to bite the bullet and influence the government.

Forty-two year old Indira Gandhi became Congress President in February 1959 and over the next year and a half convinced her father and his colleagues to bifurcate Bombay State into Maharashtra and Gujarat with Bombay and Ahmedabad as their capitals. Despite opposition in the party and the government, Nehru had his way and on 1 May 1960 at midnight he switched on a neon-sign map in Bombay to proclaim from the Raj Bhavan the birth of Maharashtra. *The Hindu* reported: ‘Church and temple bells rang, sirens of factories sounded, and whistles of railway engines and ships blew as joyous crowds in the streets of Bombay, the capital of the new State, welcomed its ushering in. Simultaneously, Gujarat State came into being at midnight amidst scenes of jubilation and

programmes of mass entertainment and gaiety in Ahmedabad.’

But Ahmedabad was not to be the capital of Gujarat for long. On 2 August 1965 the foundation stone of the new capital — Gandhinagar — less than twenty-five kilometres from Ahmedabad, was laid. Gujarat got a new capital in 1971 — around the same time that Narendra Modi embarked on a political career after coming to Ahmedabad and making the city his political home. Gandhinagar is also Modi’s territorial home as this is the only city where he owns a residential property — whose value he declared in 2012 as two crores.

A TIME OF DIFFERENCE

I live in that solitude which is painful in youth, but delicious in the years of maturity.

– Albert Einstein

Narendra Modi was four and a half months away from turning ten when the modern state of Gujarat was carved out of the Bombay State. Modi's was not a very normal childhood; he was the only one in his group of friends whose father ran a tea shop where the young lad lent a helping hand. However, in all my conversations with Modi, either in the course of writing this book or while interacting with him previously, I never found him romanticizing about his less privileged social and economic background. True he told me, as I mentioned in a previous chapter, that as a child he found it difficult to live without electricity, but Modi never projected his childhood struggles as a *certificate* to justify his presence in public life. His childhood, if one can call it so, was essentially existential: he derived lessons from the experience of existence.

But Modi's childhood is one phase of his life that he would not disagree to relive and then possibly redo. In a conversation with him, I asked a hypothetical question — that by a miraculous intervention, if he got an opportunity to relive any phase of his life, or reverse any decision he took, which one would that be? He heard half of my question, understood what I was getting at and interrupted with great emphasis: 'By and large everyone likes their childhood and I am also like that.' When I probed further if there was any particular dimension of his childhood which he would want to relive, Modi added: 'It is very difficult to say, because childhood is not planned; then it would cease to be one! What is childhood if not unbridled actions and activities? When there is no agenda, no thought, that is what is childhood.'

But in the childhood and adolescence that Modi had, there appears to be an element of natural progression if not planning. As a child Modi was enrolled in the

local primary school because his parents believed that education was a necessity for the children in the family. When six, he got his first exposure to public life because Modi's father ran a tea stall close to the office of a political activist. While still a child and with no understanding of politics, Modi also became part of the Sangh Parivar because he began attending its Shakha every evening. Run by the local unit of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, Modi opted to enlist in the daily Shakha because this was the only extra-curricular activity open for him outside his peer group. It gave the child a certain distinct identity which he was in search of right from the young age.

It can be said without any trace of doubt that integral to the political career of Narendra Modi — that began effectively from the early 1970s was his relationship with the RSS. The organization gave him a sense of “belonging” during his childhood and again after he chose to break free from the physical bondage of home and family. This phase in Modi's life when he left home and lived virtually like an ascetic was a decisive chapter in his life during the formative years of his life and shall be detailed at length in due course. The RSS in a way also provided him with a set of answers to questions that germinated in his mind in the years when he experimented with life to chalk out a course for himself. It was once again instrumental in giving his life a new direction in the late 1980s when he was deputed to the Bharatiya Janata Party. It was under the tutelage of the RSS that Modi got to hone his skills in managing people and setting up organizational systems between the early 1980s and 1990s. During this period, Modi was given the responsibility of managing units of the RSS, first at the district level and later at zonal levels. It was because of his success in the initial years that RSS leaders gave their assent instantly when the BJP leaders thought of roping in Modi — despite his junior functionary role in the state unit — in two successive, prestigious and high-stake programmes of the BJP: L K Advani's Rath Yatra in 1990 and Dr Murli Manohar Joshi's Ekta Yatra in 1991-92. Both were significant political strategies and played an important role in catapulting the BJP to the centre stage. The two yatras also put Modi in the foreground of national politics — within and outside the party.

The RSS again played a brokering role when Modi was embroiled in controversies in the mid-1990s after the BJP got its first shot at governance in Gujarat and Modi was accused of interfering in government functioning without being a part of it and also for promoting factionalism in the party. At that time, the RSS ensured that though he beat a hasty retreat from Gujarat politics, he was not cast away. After a few years when the BJP — and its government — was

floundering in Gujarat despite a massive majority, the RSS supported Modi and his machinations to stage a comeback in the state — this time at the helm of the government.

However, in the decade after Modi became chief minister, his ties with the RSS plummeted. As Modi grew from strength to strength in Gujarat, the relationship with his one-time patron-organization appeared to be heading to a point of no return. The details of this period of estrangement will be taken up as this book progresses. But because of this frostiness in Modi's ties with the local RSS leaders, a time came when political insiders joked that the stamp of Modi was visible in every sphere of Gujarat except in Ahmedabad's Hedgewar Bhawan (the RSS office in the city) where as a twenty-year-old he had spent days and nights as an odd-job functionary in the early 1970s. The assembly election in 2007, that saw Modi leading the BJP into winning 117 out of 182 seats, was held when the RSS was openly disenchanted with Modi and his political style. The campaign in 2012 saw little change in this relationship.

Even in the early months of 2012, relations between Modi and the Sangh Parivar appeared like the situation similar to the Cold War or the post-1971 détente between the erstwhile USSR and the USA — depending on how one tended to analyze the situation. But then political relationships are solely dependant on conveniences and easily take on the complexion of the stronger entity. As was evident, in the weeks following the meeting of the BJP's National Executive at Mumbai in May 2012, Narendra Modi and the RSS were once again warming up to each other and for the sake of political necessity. The RSS was willing to court Modi because — in their assessment — he appeared to be the most dependable person to galvanize the cadre and make electoral dents outside the traditional support base. On the other hand, Modi was once again inching closer to Nagpur — and was accommodating — because he also needed a platform for his grandstanding beyond Gujarat. In the summer of 2012 the issue of whether Modi was being endorsed as the prime ministerial choice by the RSS or not, was secondary. The time for such a consideration would come later. The moot point in 2012 was that the RSS happily acquiesced to a pre-condition of Modi — sidelining of his *bête noire*, Sanjay Joshi, in the BJP — because in the assessment of the RSS, a significant victory of the BJP led by Modi in the assembly elections in Gujarat due in end-2012, was imperative for the RSS to stage a political comeback from the setback it received in 2004 when the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) was defeated. But more on the Modi-RSS equation during the campaign of 2012 later.

Despite Modi's distance from the RSS in one of the most important phases of his political life, what one cannot ignore is that it was in this organization that young Narendra cut his teeth and evolved as a seasoned political animal. It therefore became important for me to trace the relationship between the man and the organization. I had to find details about the time when Modi became part of the Sangh Parivar — when he started attending Shakhas — the daily and mandatory ritual comprising physical fitness and ideological grit for any member of the RSS. It is the daily attendance of these Shakhas that indicate a person's entry into a hallowed group of men and this has traditionally evoked extreme emotions of awe and anger, reverence and rejection. I also had to go back and look for reasons behind the choices that Modi made as a youngster.

For me, the answer to these questions once again lay to a great extent in the cobblestoned streets of Vadnagar and with people who walked these lanes with Modi when he was young and in the process of deciding if the RSS could be a vehicle for his “escape” from lower middle class moorings. The answer to this question also obviously lay within the inner recesses of Modi's mind.

The RSS was formed in 1925 in Nagpur and for more than a decade remained primarily restricted to Maharashtra with little support beyond upper caste Hindus—mainly Brahmins. It was after the death of its founder and first Sarsanghchalak (or head), Keshav Baliram Hedgewar — in June 1940 — and the subsequent appointment of M S Golwalkar as the next chief that the RSS began to make its presence felt in Gujarat. The RSS began its activity in Vadnagar with a Shakha in 1942 — it was established by a Pracharak, a schoolteacher named Babubhai Nayak — and grew at a moderate pace in terms of attracting people — especially the youth — to its fold. But with the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi and the resulting ban on the RSS in 1948, the organization operated on a low key for several years. Though the ban on the organization was for barely seventeen months and lifted in July 1949, the RSS had to wait for a while before resuming its activities in Vadnagar with the same gusto in the years preceding the ban. This was because the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi was an extremely sentimental issue in Gujarat and any link to the killing was viewed as blasphemous.

However it was not easy for the RSS to regain lost ground post the ban. Though Gujarat had a history of communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims — traced elsewhere in the book — the fact is that unlike several other states, Gujarat did not witness Partition riots and this prevented the RSS from widening its constituency and support base. In many other parts of the country, the RSS had taken the lead in managing relief camps set up for the refugees who came in

hundreds of thousands after the Partition. This enabled them to earn some goodwill of the people but the absence of such events in Gujarat made it difficult for the RSS to stage a comeback. Moreover, by the time the ban on the RSS had been lifted, India had politically moved to newer preoccupations. The impending declaration of India as a Republic and subsequent to that, the task of nation-building, the emerging policies of the government, followed by the calendar of the first general election of independent India, ensured that the RSS didn't stage a political return.

Meanwhile by the mid-1950s, the Congress party was floundering — in the part of the country that in later years were divided into the states of Maharashtra and Gujarat. It was then that the RSS got an opportunity to regain lost ground over the demand for a separate linguistic state of Gujarat. This was the same time when a young Narendra Modi was also whetting his curiosity outside his home and beyond his father's tea shop. From distributing badges for the Maha Gujarat Janata Parishad in Vadnagar, in 1956, to attending the RSS Shakha was therefore, just a natural progression for Modi.

When I asked Modi about when his participation in the Shakhas began, his answer was on the lines of what he said regarding his involvement with the agitation for a separate state of Gujarat: an avenue for a child's curiosity and desire to be part of a larger world beyond home, family and friends.

'I went to the Sangh from childhood. Shakhas used to be held in our village from 1942 onwards — I do not remember exactly when I started going. But as a child, it was just a playground. Going there, playing and after that — they had some style of calling (or addressing with a specific honorific) people and organizing them, getting them to do things in a disciplined manner. Inculcating a sense of responsibility, making people understand what it means to be responsible, what is an organization's set up and how to work within it — all these things I learnt as a child. They would give work to me — go and give this particular message to five people. I liked it — they would teach patriotic songs and I liked all that.'

Modi's childhood friend with whom he studied from the primary classes till high school, Sudhir Joshi, also remembers the young Narendra's forays into the Shakha: 'We started going to the Shakha every evening when we were still young. We would go there after our games to this ground outside a temple (called Vishnupuri temple) and we were called Bal Swayamsevak.' Somabhai, the eldest of the Modi brothers also said that Narendra wanted to be in the RSS from his childhood because, 'He liked their discipline and the line of authority — in the early days every time he returned from the Shakha, he appeared to be a more mature person — like something had left a deep impression on his mind. He was always greatly

impressed by the fact that only one person gave all the orders in the Shakha and everyone followed the command.’ At that time, Narendra was barely eleven or twelve years old, says Somabhai without being able to recall the exact year.

But early influences became permanent characteristics of Modi. This was most evident during my travels through Gujarat. There was one observation routinely made by almost everyone I interviewed while researching for the book — that Modi did not like to listen to any other viewpoint besides his own, that he was authoritarian and did not allow any of his peers to acquire a distinct identity and thereby even remotely pose any threat to him. Most people said that this also reflected a basic insecurity in his personality — a major flaw — and that he was using power to demand — and secure — subservience from those around him. On this matter, most people that I interacted with felt that Modi was among the least democratic leaders. But there was none who was willing to be quoted on this — except of course those who had always been his political adversaries or had crossed the Rubicon in recent years to join the significant numbers of Modi-baiters. One journalist said candidly: ‘Modi can get extremely vindictive if you write reports that are critical of him. All lines of information get blocked so the choice is to either stop any critical reporting or just skim the surface making a few discomforting points here and there but never writing anything that does substantial damage.’ Vinod K Jose of *The Caravan* magazine, in his profile of Modi in March 2012 mentioned that despite efforts, he failed to get any access to Modi because — and he quotes a local journalist: ‘If you’re planning to write about Modi, you just go to him, and you write what he wants you to write.’

Gordhanbhai Zadaphia, his Minister of State for Home Affairs during the all-controversial 2002 riots who quit the BJP and formed his own party — Maha Gujarat Janata Party in 2008, says that he never ‘...liked the functioning of Narendrabhai — I consider — that he thinks of himself as above the organization, whether it is the Parivar or the BJP — he has a very autocratic style of functioning. Narendrabhai always tried to remove his opponents.’

But given Modi’s fascination — obvious endorsement — as a child, of the power structure in the RSS, his natural progression to being the sole arbitrator was expected. Traditionally the RSS’ ideology never gave any room for supporting or encouraging a system of democratic decision making and incorporated a very loosely worded concept called *charcha* (discussion — though the word has connotations running much deeper than the English word) into its decision making process. In actual practise it boils down to the senior most leader of the unit consulting his colleagues but finally ending up doing essentially what he (there is

rarely a she within the Sangh Parivar) had set out to do and merely presents others with a *fait accompli* and a belief that their opinions were taken into account before reaching the crucial decision. For reasons that are not difficult to understand, Modi has in the decade after taking charge as chief minister become Janus-faced: on one side is the chief minister-cum-administrator's face and on the other is the politician's. The chief ministerial face of this personality listens to his officers and bureaucrats and in the words of a very senior officer, has this '...great ability to make someone else's knowledge his own.' But as far as political decisions are concerned, Modi considers his to be the final word. Apart from the RSS factor, the other reason behind this behaviour is not difficult to comprehend either. Administration is a new terrain — on which Modi began traversing fairly recently since October 2001, but the political terrain is familiar and his own — a jungle of which he is the master and lord.

In the summer of 2012 it was precisely this trait of his and the basic organizational characteristic of the RSS which gave indications of a future point of clash within the Sangh Parivar with Modi at the epicentre. When the Sarsanghchalak of RSS, Mohan Bhagwat, signalled a thaw in the strained relationship with Modi in May 2012 by getting the BJP to accept a pre-condition of Modi — to remove his *bête noire*, Sanjay Joshi, from the BJP National Executive, it raised the spectre of an "acrimonious debate" on any future decision effecting Modi. Would such a decision be taken by Bhagwat alone or by Modi singlehandedly — or would a decision be arrived at after a *charcha* between the two, in which case the moot point was whose opinion would finally prevail?

Given the centrality of the Sangh Parivar's role in the development of Modi's political DNA, I asked him if he could 'put a date on which he became politically aware of the Sangh and what it stood for?' He replied in the negative: 'I do not think it is possible to arrive at a certain date — I do not think you can divide it into such definite compartments. That is — till this date I was such and such and after that I came under such an influence. It was a kind of progressive unfolding. I kept growing, kept speaking, kept understanding more and more, kept on asking new questions every day. It is like no woman can answer the question of when exactly did she learn how to cook. She would have started by cutting and chopping vegetables, at some point she would have helped the mother in doing some other chore, sometime she may have fetched the *atta* (wheat flour), another time she might have just turned the chapattis and on other occasions she would have lit the *chulah* (stove). The process of the Sangh is something very similar — at least it was so in my case.'

On 19 June 2012 at 9.12 pm the “Twitter account of Narendra Modi, Chief Minister, Gujarat, India” tweeted: ‘Every morning I share an inspiring quote of Swami Vivekananda on his 150th anniversary. I request media friends not to misquote it for TRPs.’ The tweet had come because the media — especially news television channels — had given a political spin to the Swami Vivekananda quote of the morning on the twitter account. The tweet that was interpreted contentiously was: “Will is caused by character, and character by Karma. As is Karma, so is the manifestation of the will.” Television channels interpreted this quote as a reply to the statement made a few days prior to this, by his Bihar counterpart, Nitish Kumar saying that NDA’s prime ministerial candidate should have ‘secular credentials and should be acceptable to all sections of the society.’ The statement was obviously interpreted as yet another “scene” in the “Modi as the PM candidate for 2014” drama that gripped Indian politics and media since September 2011 when the Gujarat chief minister embarked on his own campaign programme — Sadbhavana Yatra — virtually scuttling senior party leader, Lal Krishna Advani’s Jan Chetna Yatra. The tweet with the Vivekananda quote was fodder for TV channels but the episode highlighted the fact that in the year when the celebrations for the 150th birth anniversary celebrations of the seer had begun, Modi had authorized a daily quote of Vivekananda. Since Modi’s Twitter handle — @narendramodi is not “official property” of the state government like the website, www.narendramodi.in, it did not cease to function during the election campaign in 2012, like other twitter accounts or publicity websites which had to adhere to the Election Commission’s Code of Conduct. As a result, Vivekananda quotes were tweeted daily. This episode underscored yet another fact besides the obvious one that social media had become a very important component in Modi’s propaganda and publicity machinery. The incident also indicated in the direction that has been projected by his publicists — that there is a spiritual dimension to his life and these influences developed early.

In the course of the interview the subject does come up and Modi says that as a child, he did go to listen to sermons by sages, mendicants and gurus whenever they came to Vadnagar: ‘I remember one incident at that time — there was a gentleman called Pandurang Shastri Athavale — he is no more. He ran a movement called Swadhyay Parivar which was running for some years before he came (to Vadnagar). Through the teachings of the Gita he tried to do “*jan-parivartan, man-parivartan*” (bring about a change of heart in the people). I used to go to listen to his lectures whenever he came to our village. I still remember his style of speaking — the way he used to speak — I had a receptive mind at that age.’

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, when Modi — as a child — probably had his

first exposure to Athavale, the saintly man was barely in his late thirties. Athavale went on to become one of independent India's first spiritual gurus and also came to be known as Dadaji and founded the Swadhyay Movement and the Swadhyay Parivar organization in 1954 as a self-knowledge movement based on the Bhagavad Gita. In 1996 he was awarded the Ramon Magsaysay Award for Community Leadership and in 1999, the National Democratic Alliance government headed by Atal Bihari Vajpayee awarded him the Padma Vibhushan. In October 2003, Athavale passed away at his residence in Mumbai. The last rites of the eighty-four-year-old spiritual leader was attended by several political bigwigs including the then Lok Sabha Speaker, Manohar Joshi, ex-Maharashtra Chief Minister and now Union Home Minister Sushilkumar Shinde, the then Maharashtra assembly Speaker, Arun Gujrathi and Narendra Modi. Before his death, Athavale had anointed his niece and adopted daughter, Jayashree Talwalkar as the head of the Swadhyay Movement and Parivar and his spiritual successor in 1997. Whispers regarding misuse of funds had started doing the rounds towards the tail end of Athavale's life.

Matters took a violent turn in June 2006 when a fresh controversy gripped the Swadhyay Movement and Parivar. A murder was reported near Ahmedabad's Ellisbridge Gymkhana. In the incident, an NRI, Pankaj Trivedi, fifty-two, was allegedly clubbed to death with a baseball bat on 15 June 2006. The murder was apparently committed by four men who were part of a larger conspiracy and the media reported that two years before his death, Trivedi had written to Chief Minister Narendra Modi that he feared for his life at the hands of the Swadhyay Movement and Parivar members. In his letter to Modi, Trivedi had spoken of the Parivar's mismanagement of funds, including those collected for earthquake relief. In his report dated 10 July 2006, Uday Mahurkar of *India Today* wrote:

Politics of succession, especially when it concerns a Rs 1,000-crore empire, can prove fatal. For Pankaj Trivedi, 52, an NRI who questioned the use of funds by the Swadhyay Parivar—a sect devoted to spreading Lord Krishna's teachings—it resulted in his being beaten to death as he emerged from the Ellisbridge Gymkhana Club in Ahmedabad on June 15. His killers used a baseball bat and sticks. The manner and the timing of the gruesome murder suggest that it was the act of a section of Swadhyay Parivar workers loyal to Jayashree Talwalkar alias Didi, 49.

The campaign against the Swadhyay Parivar was kept alive in the media even after five years — this time in cyberspace. On 15 June 2011, a webpost was started by Vijay Mehta, a doctor by profession, a blogger and a person who used the internet extensively to campaign against the Swadhyay Parivar's alleged role in the murder.

He kept up the pressure on the state government for distancing itself from the controversial organization despite Modi's known fondness for the deceased founder.

The post said: 'Five years ago nearly a dozen Swadhyayees planned and executed the murder of a long time ardent supporter of Swadhyay — Pankajbhai Trivedi. May be they thought they can get away with murder. May be they thought this will be a stern lesson to anyone else trying to leave the Parivar and question the authority of Didi. May be they thought time heals everything and blind followers will move on and get busy with Bhavpheri and Bhaktipheri (rituals followed by the members of the Swadhyay Parivar.) After all it had worked before. But that is not what happened. The media covered this murder like no other in the history of Gujarat. Didi has not stepped a foot in Gujarat in 60 months. Didi is currently in the USA and is holding private meetings with a select few rather than massive rally of the past. People are noticing that things are not same.'

Trivedi was not the first one to raise disconcerting noises about the embezzlement of funds by the Swadhyay Movement. Vinoo Sachania, a British citizen, while on a visit to India questioned and criticized the alleged mismanagement of the Swadhyay Parivar. It was alleged that on 12 January 2003 he was attacked by some men, blindfolded and taken to a remote place where he was beaten causing fracture to both his legs and arms for which he had to undergo seven hours of emergency surgery. Sachania had also faxed the chief minister raising fears that Trivedi was also at risk of a similar fate. Trial in the Trivedi murder case began in July 2009 and in June 2011 the local media in Ahmedabad reported that the Gujarat government finally decided to take back Ahmedabad's thirty-four-acre Bhavnirjar land from Swadhyay Parivar that was first allotted to it on a fifteen-year-long lease in 1971 and extended in 1986. A decision on this was kept on hold by Modi due to pressure for annulment of the lease — the land was valued in 2006 at around three hundred to four hundred crore rupees. But finally owing to public pressure and an onslaught of negative reports following Trivedi's death, Modi quietly took a decision denying such a privilege to the spiritual organization.

The episode related to the murder of Pankaj Trivedi underscores the risk all political leaders face if they choose to either promote religious organizations or allow spiritual leaders and groups to claim proximity to them and use that closeness for circumventing the law. Though he distanced from the Swadhyay Parivar after the murder and allowed the judicial process to take its own course, Modi needlessly got embroiled in a controversy of his own making. Leaders of the Sangh Parivar — Modi included — and other political leaders, including their adversaries, who have used religion for political purposes, run the risk of cohabiting with people or groups

of suspect intentions. With religious leaders, yoga gurus and godmen playing an increasing role in Indian politics, the danger for political leaders like Modi will only become graver unless they insulate themselves from such non-political public figures.

However, in the early 1960s interaction with sagely persons was not exactly making a saint out of Modi. Sudhir Joshi used the word “stubborn” to describe one of the early traits of his childhood friend. His teacher, Prahladbhai G Patel, in the B N High School remembered Modi as an extremely argumentative child who would often defy teachers. He said that he had once ‘asked Narendra to show his homework to one of the class monitors and he refused — he said that if he has to show it to anyone for evaluation, it must be the teacher himself or no one.’ The reasons behind Patel’s decision to ask Modi to get his homework scrutinized by a peer was simple: he was not a “very bright student” and was commonplace in studies. In a class of fifty students, while Modi could not be called a poor student, Patel was clear in saying that he was ‘ranked medium and at best could have been called a mediocre student.’

Whatever deficiencies Modi had as a student in the classroom, he made up for that outside. On the banks of lake Sharmishtha, groups of people collect to narrate tales about how Modi was an ace swimmer as a child. At the centre of the lake was a small rocky island — it has now been developed as a tourist destination— where an idol had been installed and locals say it was customary to change the flag atop this idol on an auspicious day every year. There was a particular year when it had rained heavily and the lake was brimming to the surface and since there were crocodiles in its waters, no one was willing to swim to the rock and change the flag. Modi however, braved the conditions along with two other friends and swam to the rock and changed the flag. The story is recalled with fervour on the banks of the lake the moment people get to know of my interest in Modi. In fact the story is *jazzed up* to add to the larger than life image of Modi. At least a couple of people pick up strands of the narrative from one another to say that not only did Modi dare to swim through the crocodile-infested lake, but when he came back he had in his captivity a baby crocodile with its mouth firmly clenched by him. Other present during the re-telling looked on in awe for perhaps the umpteenth time because it was evident that this lore wasn’t “manufactured” for my consumption but must have been narrated ad nauseum previously to other visitors also.

Such oral tales aside, Prahladbhai G Patel does recollect that his illustrious pupil was ‘very active in “external activity”.’ Sudhir Joshi also recollects that Modi was often at the forefront of articulating concerns of his class fellows and despite having

a very strict disciplinarian in the school principal, would go to him to convey the viewpoint of students. 'From an early age, Narendrabhai displayed leadership qualities,' and adds a fact that is a shade at variance with what Modi told me in the course of my interview with him: that Modi contested elections for being class representative. 'There was one aspect of his personality that we used to talk among friends — that something had to enter his mind once and then he would not rest till it was accomplished — he was very determined.'

The young Modi also liked being in the limelight. He was regular on stage in school functions. He liked larger than life characters and acting came naturally to him; a talent he uses well to further his image as an "effective" politician. Not just Patel and Joshi, but others also — even those who were not born at the time when Modi was in school — recount tales that have been passed on from one generation to another. These stories mention how the actor in Modi became very popular when he portrayed the character of Jogidas Khuman — the legendary Robin Hood type character popular in Gujarati folklore. Patel says that the reason why Modi was able to get into the skin of the character was because he identified very strongly with the rebel in Khuman's character. 'Narendra thought that he himself was Jogidas Khuman in some aspects of his life — his rebellious streak came to him because of portraying that character on stage,' says the teacher of his one-time pupil. Joshi adds that Modi did not wait for any formal occasion to act in a play. Quite often, he would grab any opportunity and embark on a solo show. M V Kamath and Kalindi Randeri in their book, *Narendra Modi: The Architect of a Modern State*,¹ mention an instance when Modi once wrote, directed and even acted in a play — *Piloo Phool*, in school on the theme of untouchability. The play had as its central character a Harijan woman, and how after her child falls ill, she goes from door to door asking for money for treatment and succour. At one place she is advised to offer a yellow flower at a temple so that her child gets well. But the woman is refused entry inside the temple. She returns home empty-handed and finds her child dead.

What the writing of the play shows is as a young man, Narendra Modi naturally gravitated towards strong social issues. He also had a very high level of motivation, recalls Sudhir Joshi about his friend. Prahladbhai G Patel also recollects that Modi as a child held very strong views. Patel says that the last two periods in school on every Thursday was a general debate in class on various issues. Modi was a regular participant in those and '...most often he was most articulate. When we used to discuss among us — the teachers — we would often say that this boy is going to enter politics some day or the other.'

One of the debates on Thursdays that he participated in his school when he was in his early teens was on “Man-Woman Relations In the Modern World”. Coincidentally, at that time Modi was grappling with the same issue in his personal life as well. The profile of Modi in March 2012, in *The Caravan*, mentions the reasons behind Modi’s troubled mind at the time:

For a young man in search of “something more”, as his brother (Somabhai) put it, the RSS gave Modi a sense of purpose and direction. But he remained unsure of his calling: whether to pursue the priestly life or volunteer himself towards the advancement of Hindutva. His parents had arranged him a marriage in keeping with the traditions of the Ghanchi caste in Vadnagar, which involved a three-step process that began with an engagement at age three or four, a religious ceremony (shaadi) by the age of 13, and cohabitation (gauna) around the age of 18 or 20, when the parents felt the time had come. Modi was engaged to a girl three years younger than him, Jashodaben Chimanlal, from the neighbouring town of Brahmanwada. They had completed shaadi when Modi was only 13...

I asked Prahaldbhai G Patel if, when Modi participated in this debate, either he or any other teacher or friend knew about Modi’s marriage. He said that no one had any clue about this.

Modi’s marriage has been kept well guarded in the fraternity for a long time. A very senior leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party who at one point had been a colleague of Modi’s in party’s central leadership in the 1990s confessed that he got to know about the fact that Modi had been married very late — ‘...many years after first meeting him.’ The information about Jashodaben Chimanlal Modi by all accounts came out in the public domain in the early 1990s shortly after Modi had shepherded Murli Manohar Joshi’s Ekta Yatra and journalists started digging up his past. Bharghav Parekh who in the summer of 2012, was working for the television channel, Zee News, said that he and a colleague — Surat-based Vikram Vakil, had written their first report in 1993 about Modi’s unconsummated marriage for a Gujarati weekly, *Abhiyan*. But at that time Modi was neither a powerful nor a significant political leader so the story did not create a splash at the national level. This was because the BJP was not in power in the state and Modi though an important state leader, had made his presence on the national stage for the first time as the manager of Ekta Yatra, the not so successful campaign of the then party President, Murli Manohar Joshi.

Although uncorroborated what one had heard from several sources who may not have had access to the complete truth, apparently, Modi after going through the

second stage of the marriage in the mid-1960s, never went through the final stage with the woman who was betrothed to him when they were toddlers. There are various accounts, and most of them hearsay, which say that Modi's mother was keen to set him up with his wife shortly after he completed schooling but he left home at that point. A couple of years later when he returned to the family fold for a short duration, there was yet another attempt to make him lead a normal married life but at that point, Modi once again left home. Parekh told me he did the story when he and his colleague picked up a chattering at the local courts in Mehsana that a woman had filed — or was considering to do so — for maintenance allowance from Modi. Though the story was written, the case was never filed and Modi did not pay much attention to Parekh's report and has never held that against him. However, Parekh said that after a while he stopped keeping track of the story and Modi's wife.

But not all journalists who tried to get to the bottom of "Modi's marriage" story faced such benevolence from Modi. The case of Darshan Desai, a journalist based in Ahmedabad in the years immediately after the 2002 riots, is fairly interesting. In May 2002 when anything sensational regarding Modi guaranteed prominence in newspapers, magazines and television, Desai — then working for the *Indian Express* in Gandhinagar — located the chief minister's wife in her village — Brahmanwada near Vadnagar. He had been assigned the story after two colleagues who were initially asked to follow up the leads, failed to come up with a write-up. In the summer of 2002, Desai went to the village one morning and was able to locate the house of Jashodaben and meet her relatives and acquaintances. Desai learnt that she was teaching in a government primary school but no one was willing to disclose where she worked. While Desai was making enquiries and doing the rounds of Brahmanwada, he spotted some toughies collecting and sensing trouble made a getaway but not before being able to get the name of the village where Jashodaben worked. Desai managed to secure this information from a young girl who appeared to be the weakest link in the crowd of people who had gathered on seeing an outsider.

The village where Modi's wife worked was called Rajosana and was smaller than Brahmanwada. Desai met Jashodaben and learnt that she was staying in a small tenement paying a monthly rent of one hundred rupees. Her house did not have a toilet and she — like all women in the village — had to get up very early, around 4 am for her daily ablutions. The irony of this was not missed on Desai because she 'was not an ordinary woman but was still legally wedded to the chief minister of the state.' Desai also learnt that Jashodaben had been trying to secure a transfer to her

village so that life would smoothen out, but had failed. At that time, the State Education Minister was Anandiben Patel, a long time political associate and confidante of Modi.

Desai says that after an eventful day — which was also a shade nerve-racking — he reached home late evening and shortly thereafter received a phone call from Modi. ‘He said — “Namaskar, so what is the agenda?”’ Desai went on to elaborate that ‘Modi subsequently added: “You have written against me. Your newspaper even started Modi Meter,” referring to a column my paper ran during the riots. I just kept quiet, and he said, “I’m aware what you’ve been up to today. What you’ve done today goes much beyond. That’s why I want to know what your agenda is?” I wasn’t scared, but I remember being a little nervous, and I said, “I have no agenda. You can contact my editor.” He just said, “Okay. Think it over,” and hung up.’

Desai narrates this incident to me after more than a decade and recalls that at one point he argued with Modi that ‘all these things keep coming up if one is in public life’ but Modi cut him short and stated that he did not need anyone’s assistance to understand the perils of being in public life. Desai’s relationship with Modi remained frosty thereafter. After Modi’s remarkable victory in the assembly elections in December 2002, he hosted a formal lunch for journalists at which Desai was also invited. Desai remembers that by coincidence he was wearing a shirt whose colour was very close to saffron. Modi did not let go of this opportunity and said snidely: ‘Saffron does not suit you — green would be better,’ and laughed at this own joke. Desai also recalled that Modi asked him sarcastically about the reason behind Desai’s decision to ‘shave off my French beard. He said it looked nice and natural on me.’ What Modi was implying was not lost on anyone at that meeting. It was also not lost on me when Desai narrated this incident. In the years since 2002, Desai eventually moved out of Gujarat and worked in other Indian cities — Lucknow, Delhi and Chandigarh before he returned to Gujarat in the autumn of 2012 but the relationship which soured has not warmed up beyond the point of forced cordiality.

By the time Modi became a *political superstar* in Gujarat in the middle of 2003, it was well known that he had a wife with whom he had never lived and she remained tucked away from public glare. As Modi’s power grew, it became more difficult for reporters to gain access to Jashodaben. Moreover, after a certain point there was little interest in the matter because there were no new developments. In the run up to the assembly elections in December 2007, the matter once again came into public scrutiny when a poorly produced video clip started doing the rounds of select newspapers, magazines and TV channels. The clip was also uploaded on YouTube.

In a report on 8 December 2007, *DNA* reported:

Heating up the Gujarat poll campaign is a video clip claiming to feature a statement from none other than Jashodaben Modi, the estranged wife of chief minister Narendra Modi...The video says, "I Jashodaben Modi, am the wife of Narendra Kumar Modi, the son of Damodar Mulchanddas Modi, a resident of Kalavasudev Chachar, Vadnagar. I am working in Rajosana primary school. We were married in 1968. I am still keeping the book gifted by him, *Sangharsh Ma Gujarat*, and also have a picture of his. He was 22 to 25 years old when that picture was taken. By possessing that book I feel that my husband is still with me even if he is far away. He tore away all the pictures of our marriage because he never wanted even a single photo to remain with me."

'The report in *DNA* however also gave the disclaimer: 'While the identity of the people appearing in the clip and the authenticity of the facts that they relate could not be verified, the slides and audio in the clip claims that the woman is Modi's wife.'

I did not anticipate anything as hostile as Desai's experience when I went to interview Modi in the summer of 2012 for the first time. But I decided against asking him any question on his marriage and the reasons why he never stayed with Jashodaben and if he ever felt any remorse at his decision. I also wondered if Jashodaben at any point felt that she would have done better for herself if she had filed for a divorce citing cruelty and abandonment as reasons.

But the issue of Modi's marriage to Jashodaben and his subsequent decision of not cohabiting with her, while simultaneously attempting to keep the marriage under wraps — a secret from both the public and within the Sangh Parivar, brings to the fore at least two significant issues — the first one at the level of societal practices and the second one related to the personal choices and style of Modi. In the 1950s and 1960s when Modi was growing up, the practise of child marriages was fairly prevalent in large parts of India. In all fairness to Modi it must be stated that by the time he grew up and discovered that he had been betrothed, he would have realized that he actually had been presented with a *fait accompli*. Going by his accounts to me about the time he grew up, he was not willing to settle down in the mould that Vadnagar's society had for youngsters of the likes of Modi. He initially wanted to wander around the country to find his calling and by the time he found it in the RSS, his eyes were set on becoming a Pracharak. In the early 1970s, Pracharaks — barring from Uttar Pradesh, were not permitted to marry and if they did, they ceased to be one and were transferred to an affiliate. Modi obviously did not wish to meet such a fate and therefore kept the matter of his marriage a secret

hoping it would stay unknown. Had Modi been from Uttar Pradesh, things could have rolled out differently for him. It was a practise from the past owing to the fact that unlike in other states, in UP, most Pracharaks came from agrarian families where marriage was as much an economic compulsion as a personal necessity and social obligation.

But Modi was neither from an agrarian community nor from UP. A senior leader of the RSS with whom Modi once rubbed shoulders in both the RSS and the BJP said — on the promise that he would not be identified on a matter as private as this: ‘His decision of not disclosing his marriage within the Sangh — and to the people — is symbolic of the inherent dichotomy of his personality. What he is actually — he does not want that to be seen in public and what he is seen to be in public — he is actually not that person in his private world.’ So was the decision to shift him to BJP in 1987 because the RSS leadership got wind of his marriage, of his Janus-faced personality? No one that I spoke to on the matter gave any indication that they had any inkling of Modi’s marriage before it was first reported in the media — but by then he was no longer a Pracharak and had become an office bearer in the state unit of the BJP.

The question of women and relationships with them have troubled both the Sangh Parivar and Modi. More often than not, the issue has been approached from the perspective of patriarchy and misogyny has driven many leaders of the political clan. Women have often been considered anything beyond commodities or as props in the political arena. Modi’s reference to Sunanda Pushkar, the wife of Minister of State for Human Resource Development Shashi Tharoor, in crude financial terms during the election campaign in 2012 almost suggested that two crores was “too high” a price for a woman and that a “lower price” would have sufficed. In any case, Narendra Modi has been mired in controversies on account of his relationships with women colleagues. But more of that later.

In the early 1970s when Modi had decided to make a career within the Sangh Parivar, he had two options before him. This ranged from disclosing the truth to his mentor, Laxmanrao Inamdar, popularly known as Vakil Sahab — or to enter into negotiations with Jashodaben’s family and secure a formal divorce. For exercising either option Modi didn’t have to bother about his family because he paid little heed to their wishes at that time — or else he would not have branched out from the family fold. But Modi at that stage perhaps hoped that time would obliterate this uncomfortable past of his life. The senior Sangh Parivar leader adds: ‘By neither accepting his wife nor formally liberating her to make further choices in her personal life, Modi displayed his poor regard for women. He was not true to the

woman who waited for him.’

Women and amorous or conjugal relationships with them have for long been a particularly disconcerting matter within the Sangh Parivar. Ever since the death of RSS founder, K B Hedgewar, relationships of various leaders of various affiliates have been a subject of hushed discussions in the media and political circles. At times the existence of such a relationship has been written about openly — with a little endorsement from the principal characters — and at times it has only been alluded to in a roundabout manner. On occasions, there have also been suggestions — from affected public figures — that the media should steer clear of any such report. In the case of Darshan Desai at least, he claims that Modi used a combination of veiled threats and coercion, but without much success because the times were hostile to Modi outside Gujarat and no editor in Delhi would have then been willing to get influenced by the chief minister or his representatives. In the years after 2007, the media partially lost interest and may also have been *influenced* that the “Modi marriage” had run its course. After Modi’s faux pas when he referred to Sunanda Pushkar in a derogatory manner, Congress General Secretary Digvijay Singh, attempted to revive the controversy of Modi’s wife, but without any success. However, Modi had not been able to insulate himself from hushed gossip in political and media circles. At times this gossip — when regarding Modi’s fine sartorial taste — gets written about, but when it comes to interpersonal relationships, they stayed in a realm of gossip.

It is not that Modi has been highly sensitive only about journalists probing his unconsummated marriage to Jashodaben. A reporter based in Ahmedabad first extracts a promise that he would not be identified (a standard practise by now I discover and accept) and then goes on to narrate the incident when Modi got upset with reporters for having dug up his past involvement with theatre in school. ‘He took offence and got upset because some of the reporters mentioned that acting came to him naturally and that he had perfected this art even as a child.’

Though he entered politics in the formal sense of the word only in his Twenties, Modi’s inculcation into politics began even before he became a teenager. When just twelve, and barely two years after Gujarat became a state, India went to war with China in 1962. Movement of troops was common in those times and it did not take much cajoling for Modi to drop his daily activities and head to Mehsana to join RSS workers involved in voluntary work. Somabhai recalls that even he would be part of the group — though the drive to go to Mehsana ‘was primarily Narendra’s.’ So what did they do in the district headquarters? Modi is expansive when talking about this: ‘At that time what was the biggest need — clothes for the

soldiers in the army so we used to collect them. Now I can't understand why we did — after all they did not need those clothes when going to fight the war. But people were collecting — so as a child I also took the lead — it was like participating in a group activity. When a blackout was declared, I also used to get active to ensure that it was being observed properly in our village. The soldiers used to go for war from Mehsana and used to go in trains. So I would go to give them tea and snacks — there was some kind of enthusiasm among the people to inspire the jawans — I used to enjoy (doing this). I used to spend nights in the Mehsana railway station and stay there for days. It was a junction even then and trains used to go to Delhi from there; from my village trains did not go to Delhi. I do not remember who the leaders of that activity were — I do not even remember the faces — but I used to do what children could do — run and fetch something, serve tea, biscuits, and sweets.'

If the 1962 Indo-China war gave the young Modi a feeling of participating in a larger activity and secure a sense of satisfaction at being part of an act of patriotism, the war between India and Pakistan in 1965 gave an opportunity for political indoctrination.

It has to be recollected that even after Partition and the settlement of the Boundary issue between India and Pakistan, conflicts between the two nations continued after 1947 and Pakistani intrusions were reported frequently in the 1950s. A key area of conflict between the two was in Gujarat — over the Rann of Kutch that covers 23,310 sq km and is normally flooded by saline sea water between June-October while during other seasons it's known as the White Desert. In 1964, Pakistani intrusions became more frequent and in February 1965, border police chiefs of both countries met to resolve the dispute. Skirmishes between India and Pakistan in the Rann of Kutch continued in April-May 1965 as a result of continued offensives from across India's border. A ceasefire was however signed on 30 June 1965 that agreed to restore status quo as on 1 January 1965 — the two countries also agreed to refer the disputes to the International Tribunal and decided that the Tribunal would consist of three persons, 'none of whom would be a national of either India or Pakistan. One member shall be nominated by each Government and the third member, who will be the Chairman, shall be jointly selected by the two Governments. In the event of the two Governments failing to agree on the selection of the Chairman within three months of the ceasefire, they shall request the Secretary-General of the United Nations to nominate the Chairman.'

Despite the Agreement of June 1965 — tensions continued and on 19

September — barely two days after Modi turned fifteen, the then Gujarat Chief Minister, Balwantrao Mehta, along with his wife Sarojben, went in a small plane to inspect the Gujarat-Pakistan border over the Rann and the plane was shot down by the Pakistani Air Force resulting in the death of the couple. This incident had been preceded by Pakistan launching an operation on 5 August 1965 when soldiers and guerrillas, disguised as locals, entered Jammu and Kashmir from the Pakistan side of the border with the intention of fomenting insurgency. During the time of Mehta's plane being shot down — in fact on 22 September, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) unanimously passed a resolution calling for unconditional ceasefire which was agreed to on the next day.

Modi says that this period played a significant part in his political indoctrination as patriotism was the most articulated emotion and was in sync with the dominant public mood in Gujarat at the time — that India needed a strong leader. Jawaharlal Nehru had died in 1964 and Lal Bahadur Shastri, despite his best of intentions was not able to fire the inspirations of a large number of people — especially in Gujarat. Modi says of his sentiments at that time: 'Gujarat and its people had a love for Sardar Patel. And there was a feeling that he did not get his due. Even as children we felt that way — Sardar Patel — why didn't he become prime minister? That was a common sentiment. There was no anti-Pakistan sentiment in me despite the events in 1965. But yes if there was war then it definitely got us worried because next to us was Pakistan.'

By the time he was fifteen years old, Narendra Modi had — in a sense — participated in two wars, been part of a political agitation, had a regular association with the RSS, frequently interacted with visiting religious and spiritual gurus, was at the forefront of extra-curricular activities in school and assisted his father in running the little tea shop outside the Vadnagar railway station. Among the people from outside Vadnagar that he met — and who would continue to play a major influencing role in Modi's life — was a gentleman by the name of Laxmanrao Inamdar alias Vakil Sahab who as Modi says, was given the nickname because 'When RSS was banned, he moved to Gujarat from Maharashtra when everyone in RSS who evaded arrest went underground and changed their names — so he got the name, Vakil Sahab — and it stayed as a nickname. He was trained as a lawyer but he did not practise law because he worked for the society.' Inamdar in fact was crucial to the growth of the RSS in Gujarat as it was under his stewardship that the organization was able to overcome the setback of 1948-49. Around the time that Vakil Sahab — or Inamdar — became a decisive influence on Modi's political career, he was also assisting the rise of yet another leader of the then Bharatiya Jana

Sangh (later BJP) and who would later go on to become first an ally and then one of the bitterest critics of Modi — Shankersinh Vaghela. In his official website — almost every leader with political ambition, followed Modi on the cyberspace — Vaghela makes a mention that after the death of veteran Jana Sangh and RSS leader, Vasant Gajendra Gadkar (popularly called Vasantbhai) in Gujarat in 1976 — at the height of the Emergency when a large part of the Indian Opposition was either in judicial custody or underground — the Jana Sangh felt an acute sense of void. Vaghela claims in his website that Sunder Singh Bhandari, the veteran leader (who also later became Governor of Gujarat when Atal Bihari Vajpayee was prime minister), wrote to him condoling the death of Vasantbhai. In that letter, Vaghela states, Bhandari suggested that he ‘take over the mantle of Vasantbhai.’ According to Vaghela, at this point Inamdar also suggested him to ‘fill in the vacuum’ because he was ‘impressed’ with Shankersinh’s ‘dynamism and was amazed with the wide range of personal contacts he had built.’ The pivotal role played by Inamdar is further evident in Modi’s profile written by Vinod K Jose in *The Caravan* magazine. He writes: ‘Inamdar established a diffuse network of Shakhas (branches) across the state, patiently building an army of volunteers from the ground up. One of these volunteers, who joined a Shakha in the small but mythically significant town of Vadnagar as an eight-year-old boy, was Narendra Modi.’

Despite criticism, unrelenting attacks and constant decoding of his politics, Modi appeared very comfortable talking about his early initiation into the RSS. He is proud to talk about his past in the Sangh Parivar — it almost appears to be his trump card, something that he can use to upstage rivals from within the political fraternity. In fact, barring the first eight years of his life, Modi has had some form of association or the other with the RSS and its affiliated organizations.

‘Vakil Sahab once came to my village during Diwali. I was a Bal Swayamsevak and he was addressing a meeting. I was also called. Before meeting him, I noticed the way Pracharaks looked generally— slim, kind of emaciated and their faces also didn’t display any dynamism. Because they struggled a lot, the creases were visible on their faces, on their bodies — they kind of lived within the limitations of their body and mind. In contrast, Vakil Sahab was a towering personality — I was very impressed by him, he touched a chord in my heart. I asked him why is it that you have such a smiling and pleasant face and such a personality and why is it that our local Pracharak does not? I then asked him very innocently — does our Pracharak not get enough to eat? I was frank and I am sure he would also have felt that I was an unusual boy to be asking such questions. He would have wondered that at that young age, I was concerned about the well being of elders. Later on he asked me

about my interests, which games I played etc. Then after Vakil Sahab left, the local Pracharak kept coming to our home repeatedly — he must have been told by Vakil Sahab to increase the interaction with me. That was my first meeting. Later on while still young I kept meeting him at various functions or meetings and I would remind him who I was and where I had met him the first time. But formally, I got associated with him in 1971.’ The extent of Modi’s reverence for Vakil Sahab is evident in his involvement on establishing a school in his memory on the outskirts of Ahmedabad. More on that later.

Modi normally speaks very fondly about people who he knew in the past and played an influencing role in his political career. He however does not do so regarding people who may have disagreed with him or with whom he may have crossed swords at some stage or the other later in his political career. This is true about the generation that preceded Modi in the Sangh Parivar — Vaghela, Keshubhai Patel and Kashiram Rana and even about those who were either his peers or somewhat junior like Sanjay Joshi and the infamous Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) venom-spewer, Dr PravinTogadia.

The fondness for people who may have in some way contributed to his development and did not rub him the wrong way thereafter is also articulated by Prahladbhai G Patel who recollects the function Modi had organized in 2005 to felicitate his teachers. ‘It was a public function,’ the teacher reminiscences, to which Modi invited twenty-eight teachers from Vadnagar all the way to Ahmedabad and they were to be honoured by the state governor in the grounds of the Gujarat Arts and Science College. On 27 November 2005, Jumana Shah, the reporter of the *Daily News and Analysis* newspaper filed the following report:

On Sunday evening at the Gujarat College ground, it was praises all the way for chief minister Narendra Modi. The event was the release of *Kelve te Kelavani*, a 96-page book of quotable quotes on education compiled from official speeches of the chief minister. Interestingly, veteran Congressman-turned-Gujarat Governor Naval Kishore Sharma showered praises on Modi saying, “There are three types of great people. One, who are genetically great — born in an affluent family; two, those who become great by chance and opportunity; but the third category is the most revered one — people who achieve greatness by their deeds and actions. Narendra Modi, in my opinion falls in the last category.” Showing humility, Modi felicitated his school teachers from Vadnagar at what he dubbed as his “first function as Narendra Modi and not as chief minister Modi”.

The report brings to light the clever strategy used by Modi — of using an official

function to further a personal agenda. Given the fact that if the function had been held solely to felicitate teachers from the schools where he studied as a child, it may have drawn criticism from his adversaries, he decided to club the two together. But a chief minister officially releasing — or at least being present at the function — compilations of his own speeches or writings is part of the self-eulogizing tradition that is common to most Indian political leaders. However, there is no gainsaying that Narendra Modi has not spared even a single occasion to project himself as a person who pays the greatest respect to his teachers, mentors and elders in the family.

The first time Modi made use of such an opportunity was way back in 1999 when he had just been partially rehabilitated in the BJP and made organizational secretary and spokesperson. At that time, the Golden Jubilee celebrations of his school — B N High School — was being held and he had been invited to attend it by a former schoolmate, Narendra Shastri, then the principal of the school. On 12 October 2001 — a few days after Modi was sworn in as chief minister — *The Times of India* reported that Modi had trouble juggling his dates for that visit because he had made a commitment to his childhood friend; he ‘rushed here (to Vadnagar) from Wagah border where he had to leave an important national programme.’

Once in Vadnagar, Modi displayed his fantastic oratory skills that he had smartly picked up over the years. It almost appeared as if Modi was waiting for a cue to embark on a speech that would be recollected with a certain amount of poignancy even in the summer of 2012 when I visited that medieval town. Prahladbhai G Patel recalls that during the Golden Jubilee function, there were seven or eight teachers who had taught Modi at some point or the other. One of them in his introduction of Modi said that he needed to be excused if by mistake he referred to Modi as *tu* — the familiar way of addressing a younger person in Hindi as well as Gujarati—but in the context of the chief minister, improper.

Modi cut his teacher short and took the stage, saying that Vadnagar was the ‘only place in the entire world where some people can refer to him as *tu*.’ Thereafter, it was Modi’s show all the way; he refused to accept garlands from his teachers. Patel says: ‘Narendra said I should be the one who should be garlanding all the teachers, and then he went about garlanding all of us. In my speech I told people that there was no thermometer to measure the love Narendra and I have for Vadnagar.’

Back in October 2001, *The Times of India* report had made a bitter observation in its report:

Life in the time-ravaged structures in the dirty, narrow and undulating streets of the ancient village of North Gujarat (Vadnagar) moves on as usual. The

vegetable or fruit vendors or the ordinary men and women buying things in the congested market do not seem particularly enthusiastic about one of their own folk becoming *Gujarat no naath* (the ruler of Gujarat). Most of the small shopkeepers and commoners whom the (reporter) spoke to in the streets of Vadnagar though felt happy about Narendra Modi becoming chief minister, but were not sure if this would improve their lot or change the landscape of Vadnagar. “*Anand ni vat to chhe pan Vadnagar ke amne sheon pher padvano*” (Of course, we are happy, but what difference it will make for us or Vadnagar!) was the refrain.

The situation had completely altered in the eleven years since that report was filed. The Modi-stamp of development is palpable everywhere and now people take pride in living in the hometown of the chief minister. What makes the people most proud of their village is that it is now on the tourist map and many accomplished artists like Shubha Mudgal have performed in front of them. Modi has a fan club in Vadnagar that comprises almost the entire population. The cynicism of 2001 has been replaced by enthusiasm and endorsement for Modi. Sunil Mehta, the local BJP unit president said that he was not alone in his wish to “see Modi as prime minister”.

But back in October 2001, there were reasons behind the scepticism. It was virtually Modi’s first visit to his hometown in thirty-two years. Barring a visit for a few hours when his father died in 1989, Modi had not come home since 1967 when he decisively broke away from his family and his village. Why he did so, is however a different story and Modi is not willing to discuss much of that. When I asked him why he does not wish to say anything much about this phase of his life, Modi said the time was not appropriate and that at some point in his life he would write about it. But he did offer several vignettes about the period which have been mentioned later in this book. But without a doubt, by 1967, the lanky Modi had reached a very significant stage of his life — when he would eventually identify the avenue that made him what he eventually became.

RIOTS UNLIMITED

Intolerance betrays want of faith in one's cause.

– Mahatma Gandhi

In the months following the Godhra carnage and the riots in Gujarat in February-March 2002, the state was — and has since been — often described as a Hindutva laboratory. It has often been implied that Gujarat was a state where the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and its affiliates in the Sangh Parivar first experimented with the idea of Hindutva in the early-and mid-1990s and later perfected its use for political purpose.

One recurring theme since then has been that Gujarat is one of the most communally polarized states in the country — that intolerance among its people on the basis of religious identity is most stark. This assessment, however oft-repeated, primarily stemmed from the fact that despite the worst communal riots in post-independent India, the Bharatiya Janata Party won two successive state elections in 2002 and 2007 when it won 127 and 117 seats respectively out of a possible 182. It also maintained a respectable lead over the Congress party in the two parliamentary elections — normally not greatly influenced by local factors — in 2004 and 2009 when it won 14 and 15 seats respectively. The conclusion is simple: the riots of 2002 violated all accepted norms of governance and politics. But if despite this the BJP secured nearly fifty per cent or more of the vote share in Gujarat, it obviously meant that a very significant section of the social mosaic of the state had turned inherently communal. Was it always like this?

There is agreement across the ideological spectrum that the idea of Gujarat and pride in the Gujarati identity — a concept converted into an electoral plank by Narendra Modi during various elections held in the state after the 2002 riots — is pre-modern. Through the centuries in the medieval years, Gujarat was an amalgamation of three religious communities — Hindus, Muslims and Zoroastrians

— referred to as Parsis in the sub-continent. Four of the biggest Indian national leaders in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were Gujaratis. Dadabhai Naoroji, a Parsi, was a stalwart and amongst the earliest nationalist leaders; twentieth century saw the emergence of Mahatma Gandhi and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel — both Hindus. Quite ironically, the founder of Pakistan, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, though born in Karachi — and who began his political career in the Congress — had Gujarati roots. By the last decade of the nineteenth century however, the composite culture of Gujarat started coming under increasing strain. When India became independent, the pride in the Gujarati identity had to a great extent been rendered secondary to religious identity which became the primary basis of social identity in most parts of contemporary Gujarat. This was on account of more than half a century of progressive communalization of Gujarat beginning with the clash at Somnath, a process that continued despite two stalwarts of the Indian national movement being from Gujarat: Mahatma Gandhi and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel.

One time BJP ideologue and now a virtual Sangh Parivar castaway, K N Govindacharya, whose utterances ironically still creates ripples within the political fraternity that we are talking about, had an interesting observation about the pluralistic background of Gujarat which started veering towards sectarianism. In an interview with me he said: ‘The western coast is more prone to exposure from countries on the west of India. That is why the events in Gulf countries, in Iran, Iraq and in all other countries in this region have a greater impact on Gujarat — on Muslims of Gujarat. For three and a half thousand years Gujarat has had exposure to world trade and then there have been instances of clashes due to smuggling — either in Bombay or in Gujarat. This effect is not visible as one goes down on the coastline — but here in Gujarat that is one reason for the violence to break out and once it happens it is like a purgative effect. This is undesirable but yet is a reality. If we accept it then it would become easier to tackle.’

One of the earliest communal conflicts that erupted in modern era Gujarat was in 1893 when the Hindus and Muslims clashed on the one hand and the local administration of Junagadh State crossed swords with a group of local Muslims on the other. The clash took place in the township of Prabhas Patan which is also often referred as Somnath Patan because the well-known Somnath temple is situated here. When the clash erupted, the temple town was part of the Junagadh State. It is essential to keep the religious identity of the ruler — Mohammad Rasul Khanji — of Junagadh State in mind — Muslim and descendent of the Nawabs of Babi dynasty (or Gujarati Pathans) — to understand that the State did not play any role in fostering the communal clash: though the rulers were Muslims, they did not side

with the lawbreaking sections of the Muslim population.

The genesis of the conflict lay in the decision of a group of Muslims to take a *tazia* (models made from wood, bamboo or silver paper that are carried by mourners during the Moharram procession) for burial at a place very close to a peepal tree that was considered holy and worshipped by Hindus. It must be noted that though the administration of the Nawab forbade the procession, a group of Muslims violated prohibitory orders and in the ensuing violence several people were killed. A Hindu temple was also desecrated and burnt while some Muslims got injured.

The incidents in Junagadh had impact far and wide. The reaction of this fissure in Bombay, where Gujarati Hindu traders and businessmen began a boycott of the Muslim community, underscored the emergence of pan-Indian religious identity in late nineteenth century. What also gave a fillip to the emergence of this anguish — despite Bombay and Somnath being governed by different administrations and the huge distance between the two cities — was the fact that a large number of Gujarati Hindus in Bombay had their roots either in Somnath or in other states of the Kathiawad region.

The British media also took note of the events in Somnath and viewed it within the narrative of the temple town's long history of destruction and desecration. These reports however glossed over the fact that the 1893 clash had nothing to do with the destruction of Somnath temple. For over three years the issue remained alive with the Nawab of Junagadh along with the British administration making efforts to diffuse the situation. But in all the commissions and tribunals that were established — and in the social discourse that took place alongside — no effort was made to delineate the past from the present.

The history of destruction of Somnath temple became synonymous with the aggression shown by the group of Muslims who violated prohibitory orders. Soon, a handful of marauders and trouble makers among Muslims came to be identified with the entire Muslim community and despite being closely connected due to day-to-day economic activity, Hindus became increasingly suspicious of Muslims — people with whom making bread was possible but sharing it with them even occasionally was an improbability. Social cohabitation was ruled out, economic partnership was acceptable.

By 1896 an uneasy truce was worked out but this was more like a modern-day *detente* and not a lasting solution to a dispute that was fast taking roots. The Somnath incident also demonstrated that despite Junagadh and other Kathiawadi kingdoms being separate *nations*, as far as the people were concerned — they had common interests and the separateness was a misnomer. Achyut Yagnik and

Suchitra Sheth in *The Shaping of Modern Gujarat: Plurality, Hindutva and Beyond*¹ have highlighted a distressing fact: ‘Despite the rapprochement, the chain of events at Prabhas Patan left a deep mark on the newspaper-reading Hindu middle class of Gujarat. Earlier a few arms-bearing Muslim groups like Arabs and Pathans were perceived as killers but now the entire Muslim community was looked upon as slayers of sadhus, Brahmins and cows.’

The people thought no differently either in Junagadh, Jamnagar, Surat, Bombay or in any other city or province under British control. Even though large parts of India, and Gujarat in this case, remained outside the direct control of colonial administrators, the people did not think of themselves as any different from one another regardless of whether they were governed by colonial administration or by rulers of princely states. It was this sentiment among the people that the rulers were well aware of when India became independent and when the question of the accession of these territories came up. That is why when Sardar Patel cracked the whip, barring a handful of princely states, others signed the Instrument of Accession before 15 August 1947.

In the wake of the emergence of Indian nationalism from the last decades of the nineteenth century, the colonial administration began working on the communal fault lines in Indian society. The partition of Bengal and the Indian Councils Act of 1909 — commonly known as Morley-Minto Reforms — that created a separate electorate for Muslims were among the major decisions that sought to widen the schism between Hindus and Muslims. But while the people of Bengal rose up in a united manner against the partition of the region on religious lines, separate electorate — and seats for Muslims — continued right up to independence of India. As far as Gujarat was concerned, by early 1920s separate Muslim and non-Muslim constituencies were established in most cities that were British administered. This naturally led to Muslim contestants championing causes that they knew would find support among Muslims. Similarly, Hindu candidates — a large number of them were from the Congress — also used idioms that they knew would find acceptance among Hindus. By this time Mahatma Gandhi had begun to ensure that the Congress did not become a representative organization of Hindus. Amid opposition from within the Congress, he had supported the Khilafat Movement and this along with its twin agitation, the Non-Cooperation Movement became the first mass agitation against the colonial regime. However, one man’s wish and his vision may have been able to greatly influence the Congress, but as far as society at large was concerned, the impact was naturally far lesser especially as the idea of a two-nation theory began to gain ground.

In Gujarat the widening communal divide between Hindus and Muslims cannot be attributed to Muslims and their leaders alone. From the 1860s onwards, a form of Hindu revivalism has been noted. This found support from the emerging middle class that was mostly drawn from the Brahmin-Baniya castes and they looked at their past not just in *Hindu* terms but also by fostering on themselves the identity of *Aryans*. Literature, folklore and popular culture worked on the emerging animosity of large sections of Hindus towards Muslims. The process was also assisted by large religious congregations organized by new Hindu sub-groups or sub-sects like the Swaminarayan Sect. Believing in a form of Vaishnavism, the sect emerged in early nineteenth century and began attracting large number of followers, mainly from Gujarat. The sect runs the Akshardham temple in Gandhinagar that was subject to a terrorist strike in September 2002, a few months after the Gujarat riots which left almost thirty devotees dead; as also the one in Delhi also called Akshardham temple, for which land was allotted by the government during the tenure of the BJP-led coalition government in January 2000. The Gujarat that Mahatma Gandhi left for South Africa as a young man in his early-Twenties and the one he returned to, when he was close to his mid-Forties, had changed dramatically. The people from Hindu community that he may have known earlier had also changed irreversibly having gone through a process of communalization beginning with the conflict in Prabhas Patan in 1893.

After the First World War, when a campaign was launched against the British Empire to protect the Ottoman Empire, significant sections of Indian Muslims extended support to it and launched the Khilafat Movement. But while Mohammad Ali Jinnah dismissed the Khilafat Movement as “religious frenzy”, Mahatma Gandhi saw the campaign as a window to secure greater support among Muslims and also forge political unity among Hindus and Muslims by linking the Khilafat Movement with the Non-Cooperation Movement that was clearly Gandhiji’s first attempt at mass anti-colonial mobilization. But there was great scepticism among Hindus in Gujarat.

Indulal Yagnik, who later came to be regarded as the Father of the modern state of Gujarat — having headed the Maha Gujarat agitation — has been quoted by Achyut Yagnik and Suchitra Sheth² as having written in his mammoth three-volume autobiography in Gujarati that ‘religious life and political life revolve around two separate premises. The combination of the Khilafat Committee’s demands and those of Gandhiji appeared odd to me.’ The support to the Khilafat-Non-Cooperation Movement gathered ground only after Mahatma Gandhi linked this issue with the protests over the massacre at Jallianwala Bagh in April 1919. At

the height of the Non-Cooperation Movement in Gujarat although there was considerable common cause between Hindus and Muslims, the interests were sectional. Muslims tended to be more vocal in supporting the Khilafat Movement and Hindus drew parallels between epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata and the Non-cooperation Movement.

The uneasy alliance got easily fractured immediately after the suspension of the Non-Cooperation Movement post the Chauri Chaura incident in February 1922. In the course of the Indian national movement, the Chauri Chaura incident was the first among several other episodes where the intransigence of Gandhi came in for scrutiny and criticism even from within the Congress. In this particular incident, in Uttar Pradesh's Gorakhpur district, twenty-two policemen were done to death in a gruesome manner by a group of Congress members who had taken out a Khilafat procession and got irked by the behaviour of the policemen. Horrified at hearing about the incident, Gandhi announced the withdrawal of the Non-Cooperation Movement which also took the steam out of the Khilafat Movement and therefore eventually shattered the fragile Hindu-Muslim unity that the twin agitations had pieced together. After 1922, Gujarat witnessed a prolonged period of communalism. Prior to this in 1921, there had been riots in Bombay in the wake of the Moplah rebellion. These riots cast a shadow on Gujarat just like the conflict in Somnath in 1893 had impacted life and inter-community relations in Bombay about two and a half decades ago. The 1920s saw worsening of relations between the two communities as Hindu revivalism and ritual observances like Ganesh Chaturthi and Shivaji Jayanti had an impact and there were Hindu-Muslim riots in 1927-28 in Surat and Godhra. At that time, Morarji Desai, India's first non-Congress prime minister worked as a Deputy Collector in Godhra.

He was accused by the government of helping Hindus in the riots in Godhra. Desai finally resigned as Deputy Collector of Godhra in May 1930 after being found guilty of going soft on Hindus during the riots. Earlier, Desai had been served a notice from the commissioner. In his reply Desai said that his superior had stated that, 'the collector of Panchmahal had asked for an inquiry into my part in the riots. The burden of the issue framed by the commissioner was that I was a communalist and that I supported the Hindus against the Muslims.' Desai was found guilty of acting in a partisan manner — which he disputed arguing that 'no reasons were given for this conclusion.' Meanwhile although the British government did not recommend any action against Morarji, it degraded his position by four places in the seniority list. Desai wrote in his autobiography that though worried about his future, he decided to resign.

In the 1930s and 1940s there was status quo and relations were, as before, strained between Hindus and Muslims in Gujarat. When India gained independence, the issue of Junagadh's accession was not resolved in India's favour and it remained independent. In September 1947, the Nawab — Mohammad Mahabat Khanji III, ignored Lord Louis Mountbatten's advice and chose to accede to Pakistan. The people protested and so did India. On 20 February 1948, after a fairly lengthy process that involved diplomatic negotiations and military movements, a plebiscite was held in Junagadh and five of its erstwhile feudatories. Out of an electorate of 2,01,457 as many as 1,90,870 cast their votes. Only a meagre 91 voted in favour of acceding to Pakistan. Of the 31,434 votes cast in the five sub-state areas, only 39 cast their lot with Pakistan.

More importantly however, by February 1948 the stage had been set for the Gujarati identity to either get completely swamped by religious identity or get completely subsumed in the Hindu identity in the state. By this time, a Muslim identity in Gujarat was considered distinct from the *mainstream* Gujarati identity. In urban centres, there were clear Muslim spaces where Hindus would not live and Hindu spaces where Muslims would not be allowed to live. The rebuilding of Somnath temple further settled the idea of Muslims being invaders and marauders. Though Mahatma Gandhi stepped in and ensured that government money was not spent on rebuilding the Somnath temple, he could not reverse the dominant sentiment in society. Gujarat did not need any further riots during Partition to accentuate the already tense inter-community relations. Unlike most other frontier states, Gujarat did not witness Partition riots. After independence the same trend continued with riots breaking out only rarely. However, there was a difference because when riots occurred in Gujarat, the severity of those remained unparalleled in independent India.

In a country where communalism has been a recurring theme since at least the last quarter of the nineteenth century and where communal riots have frequently brought every other issue to a standstill, it is exasperating for many to discover that there is a complete absence of authentic and consistent data on riots. Till as late as 16 July 2002, the central government stoically informed Parliament of its inability to “monitor situation in regard to communal violence”. The then Minister of State of Home Affairs, I D Swami informed the Lok Sabha: “Public Order” and “Police” are State subjects as per the Constitution of India. Therefore, prevention, detection, registration, investigation and prosecution of crimes as well as maintenance of data in this regard are the primary concerns of the State Governments.’

Data on communal riots — regardless of where they are culled out from: annual

reports of National Commission for Minorities, reports of inquiry committees or commissions, reports in the Indian media or even from academic studies — suffer from a common deficiency. Since all sources have one primary source — police records — which in itself is either faulty or suspect, it is very difficult to be absolutely definitive when analyzing trends. The concern with police records stems from the fact that what constitutes a crime due to a *communal* cause is a matter of subjective interpretation. There is also a blurring of lines between — what is spelt out in police or other governmental data — communal *incident* and communal *riots*. When does an *incident* become a *riot* and till what threshold limit does an *incident* remain so? These questions have no answers and the lack of answers is the reason for the absence of empirical data on a type of violence that has been a significant feature in India at least for the past one hundred and fifty years. The reverse is also true: the absence of data is also on account of the failure to report, record and classify crime records with the aim of analyzing riot trends and those of communal incidents.

But when this has been painstakingly done by scholars like Ashutosh Varshney, it shows that at an all-India level there is no clear trend of period wise analysis of riots. In the four and a half decades since India became a Republic, the level of violence dropped after 1950. This drop in the rate of communal violence was only for a few years and communal flashpoints became more regular — and severe in intensity — from the 1960s. The highpoints in this trend till 1995 were in 1969 and 1992. But these studies do not consider or classify the anti-Sikh violence in the wake of the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984 as communal violence and ergo that data does not get factored in any of the deliberations on the trend of communal incidents. An all-India trend that gets discussed — and accepted — is the virtual absence of communal incidents leading to either loss of property or death, in rural areas. Communalism is inherently an urban phenomenon, though there have been communal conflicts in rural areas, like in the wake of the Ram Temple agitation led by the Sangh Parivar from the mid-1980s till its flashpoint in 1992, when the Babri Mosque was demolished on 6 December 1992. During the riots in Gujarat in 2002, there were also instances of communal violence spreading to either semi-urban or rural areas including in areas dominated by tribal people.

When one looks at how various states have fared on the communal front, Gujarat has the highest per capita rate of deaths in communal riots. This fact, highlighted by Varshney in *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India*³ may come as a surprise to those who are aware of the growth of communalism in the framework of the rise in *acceptability* of the two-nation theory in the twentieth

century and would thus assume that the highest per capita death rates should be from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Assam or even West Bengal. But if the data is framed in the context of how the composite character of the Gujarati identity got replaced by the religious identity when it began gaining precedence and the collapse of social relationships between the Hindus and Muslims, the data does not come as a surprise. In the period 1950-95, the per capita rate of deaths in communal riots in Gujarat is followed by Bihar, Maharashtra, Assam and only then by Uttar Pradesh. The per capita rate of deaths in communal riots in West Bengal — which witnessed the horrors of Direct Action Day and Noakhali in 1946 — has a ranking below Jammu and Kashmir, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Andhra Pradesh. But Gujarat's high per capita rate of deaths in communal riots however does not mean that the state has consistently witnessed high levels of communal incidents.

A feature peculiar to Gujarat — when compared to other states that also have significantly high levels of communal violence and deaths — is that communal violence and even low grade communal incidents do not occur regularly in the state. There are long periods of tranquillity but when this gets breached, the intensity is severe. Despite inheriting a socially fractured society from colonial India, the modern state of Gujarat did not witness any large scale communal rioting till 1969. This was again followed by almost a decade and a half long period of dormancy before communal incidents and deaths became somewhat more regular or consistent through the mid-and late-1980s before reaching high points in 1992 and again a decade later in 2002. This period beginning 1985, coincided with the emergence of the BJP in the wake of the so-called success of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad's campaign for the Ayodhya agitation. This period also saw the electoral erosion of the Congress in the state owing to both an all-India anti-Congress sentiment sparked off by charges of corruption in high places against the government led by Rajiv Gandhi and also due to the inability of the Congress in the state to strategize against the emergence of the BJP.

The worst chapter of communal violence and riots in Gujarat was also India's first "televised rioting" in 2002 and was sparked off by the incident in Godhra on 27 February when a compartment of VHP activists returning from Ayodhya was torched leading to the death of fifty-nine people. Various reasons have been attributed for the mayhem witnessed in the state for several days following the incident — including the administration's complicity — but the subsequent social justification and continued electoral support for the BJP can be somewhat fathomed after revisiting the communal chapter of 1969.

From the early years of the twentieth century, Gujarat witnessed considerable

migration from rural areas leading to a slow transformation of its social geography on account of growing urbanization. This process was galvanized by land reforms initiated by the government of the united state of Bombay in the 1950s. The holding pattern of land in rural areas changed — passing mainly from Rajput hands to that of Patidars or Patels. Moreover, the nature of crops changed with a shift to cash crops like groundnuts and cotton even while erstwhile tillers shifted to other professions — especially “modern” ones. By 1951, almost twenty-seven per cent of people from Gujarat lived in urban areas and of them one-third had made the six cities of Ahmedabad, Surat, Baroda (now Vadodara), Rajkot, Jamnagar and Bhavnagar their homes. In 1951, these cities — the last two of them being in Saurashtra, had populations of more than one lakh each. The process of urbanization continued unabated and by 1991 every third Gujarati lived in the cities. More than half of them were based in twenty-one cities that had populations of more than one lakh. The numbers continue to swell as according to the 2011 census, the urban population of Gujarat rose from thirty-seven per cent in 2001 to forty-three per cent.

From the beginning, cities in Gujarat developed as polarized units. Ahmedabad for instance had clearly demarcated old localities in the two sub-cities — the walled city and the part around textile mills — that were *marked* for a particular community — Muslims, Dalits and upper caste Hindus. Those arguing against the overwhelming impact of the cross-religious Gujarati identity using religion as the main basis for it, have at times argued that such urban delineation have historically evolved and have more to do with convenience and social ethos and not with political behaviour and mutually shared and articulated animosity. However, in cities like Ahmedabad, new colonies — especially like that part located across the Sabarmati river — developed where upwardly mobile residents of older localities and the new, well-heeled professionally accomplished people migrated. The new localities — mainly cooperative housing societies — had an unwritten membership code: commonality of caste. Just a few well-to-do Muslim housing societies where non-Muslims would not live; slightly larger number of societies of Dalit communities (once again no non-Dalit lived there) and societies for various upper caste Hindus is what divides modern urban Ahmedabad into watertight small compartments. While earlier there were stray instances when Muslims would be rented out flats in non-Muslim societies, after 2002 this practise has virtually ended. As recently as May 2012, the Twitter was abuzz with how a senior bank official had been allotted a leased flat in Ahmedabad but when the office bearers of the society came to know that he was a Muslim, they chose to cancel the lease. Enquiries with

the aim of meeting the person predictably reached a dead end because this is a *crime* that no one is officially complaining against. After the post-Godhra violence there was a massive influx of Muslims into Juhapura, a ghetto colony on the outskirts of Ahmedabad. Almost half a million Muslims live here, comfortable in the thought that they will face no threat during riots. The ghetto houses Muslims of all economic strata — from the poorest daily wage earners to wealthy businessmen.

The delineated urban spaces in Gujarat were what kept the idea of distinct religious identity alive in the two decades after independence without any serious breach. This however was shattered in September 1969 when a major communal riot broke out in Ahmedabad and subsequently spread to other districts of the state. This riot saw the emergence, as Yagnik and Sheth have argued, of two very important features that became the cornerstone of riots of the future: the partisan role of the State and the nexus between criminals and politicians. There are conflicting figures for the number of people who died in this horrifying chain of events. Some accounts mention the death of 1100 people while others mention a figure of 630. Whatever be the final death toll, the point is that the 1969 riots in Gujarat were the most serious in India after Partition, until the Bhagalpur riots in 1989 which was the result of a confrontation following the Vishwa Hindu Parishad's programme to carry specially consecrated bricks with Jai Shri Ram inscribed on them as part of the campaign to build a Ram Temple after demolishing the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya.

The 1969 riots also had a few other firsts to its credit. This episode was Gujarat's first major bout of communal violence involving massacre, arson and large-scale looting. This was also the first communal eruption with party politics as its backdrop. There were two chains of events that can be traced. The first was pertaining to the riot *per se*. The narrative of this has 18 September 1969 as the key date when the riot was sparked off in Ahmedabad due to an incident during the Urs of Bukhari Saheb's Chilla near the Jagannath temple when cows belonging to the temple ran helter skelter in panic while returning home and excited some of the Muslim members in the Urs procession leading to an altercation in which "sadhus" were attacked causing them injuries. This was followed by stone pelting. The seriousness of the 1969 episode in the history of communal incidents in Gujarat can be assessed from the following figures: in the years between 1961-71, sixteen districts in Gujarat were rocked by communal violence, recording 685 incidents in urban and 114 in rural areas. Of the 685 incidents in urban Gujarat, 578 occurred in 1969 alone. The riots began in Ahmedabad, the worst affected city, and violence soon spread to several other places including Vadodara, Nadiad, Kheda and Anand

in the south and Mehsana, Sabarkantha and Banaskantha in the north of the state capital. Riots also spread to Surat, Jamnagar and Rajkot in the west. The severity of the riots in Ahmedabad has even been acknowledged by the BJP leader Lal Krishna Advani who has represented the adjoining Gandhinagar constituency in Lok Sabha on several occasions from 1991. He retold in his memoirs that the: ‘city remained under curfew for nearly two months.’ The army was pressed into service on 21 September in Ahmedabad in limited areas (three police stations only) and later extended to the entire city the next day. A 2007 report by the Working Group of National Integration Council, which studied reports by Commissions of Inquiry on communal riots, made a damning comment about the state administration. It stated: ‘The police failed in these riots to give effective protection to the citizens. There was lack of firmness on the part of the police in the initial stages when incidents were happening. Police lost the initiative and once the situation got out of control at the very commencement of the riots they were overwhelmed by the situation which confronted them and were unable to effectively control the situation and hoped out of a misplaced view of their ability, to deal with it.’

The complicity of the police was palpable in several cities of Gujarat such as Vadodara where reports stated that “planned riots” took place for the first time and where shops of Muslims were marked out in advance for easy identification and systemic destruction which suggested pre-planning and organization. It needs to be recollected that when violence broke out on 18 September, it was “spontaneous” and low scale. The situation could have been controlled and its spread stemmed with firm handling. Rampaging mobs targeted shrines and congregations of the other community when violence erupted the next afternoon. By late evening Muslims were systematically targeted and by the next afternoon they had begun leaving their homes for safe shelters. Many also took trains to escape from Ahmedabad but trains were stopped and attacked. On 13 October 1969, the Justice P Jaganmohan Reddy Commission of Inquiry was instituted in the wake of the violence. While Justice Reddy was a judge at the Supreme Court from August 1969, the other two members — Justices Nusserwanji Vakil and Akbar Sarela — were judges of the Gujarat High Court. In his autobiography — *The Judiciary I Served*⁴ — Justice Reddy wrote that in the course of the inquiry the state government had advised him to hold the commission’s meetings in private. Since that was not acceptable to Justice Reddy, the State government had no option but to withdraw the order. In the autobiography, Justice Reddy further adds: ‘The intensity of the riots and the speed with which they swept across the State and the consequent human carnage and destruction of property was unparalleled not only in

Ahmedabad city but in the whole State⁵.' In its report the Reddy Commission concluded: '...crowds were being directed by persons who were leading them and they had lists of Muslim houses in their hands.' The Reddy Commission also concluded that it was 'Hindu crowds which started a career of violence,' and that 'Hindu communal elements were on the aggressive and the Muslim violence was a reaction.'

Why did the riots of 1969 occur and spread so swiftly through Gujarat? The Reddy Commission did not answer this question because of the 'limited scope of terms of our reference' as a result of which it did not 'delve deep into the political, religious, politico-religious, politico-economic and psychological reasons for the communal discord and riots...' But the Reddy Commission did put on record what many said were reasons behind the riots. While summarizing various theories, the Judge wrote that some people 'attributed the riots to the activities of organisations like the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, the RSS, the Hindu Mahasabha, the two communist parties, Majlis Mushawarat, Jamiat-ul-Ulema-e-Hind and Jamaat-e-Islami.' Justice Reddy also said that others attributed the riots to inflammatory speeches made through 1968 and 1969 by the Jamiat-ul-Ulema-e-Hind (March 1969), RSS (December 1968) and the Hindu Dharma Raksha Samiti. The Reddy Commission made a special mention of the role played by Jana Sangh leader Balraj Madhok who campaigned vigorously in Gujarat against the protest mounted by a section of the Muslim leadership opposing the attack on the Al Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem in early 1969. This incident in which a fire broke out in August 1969 in the mosque — one of the holiest sites of Islam, became a contentious issue in the Middle East as Jordan requested an urgent meeting of the United Nations Security Council to discuss the incident. Jordan had held Israel responsible for the incident as the fire occurred under Israeli military occupation. Eventually an Australian tourist, a member of the evangelical Christian sect known as Worldwide Church of God, who hoped that by burning down the mosque he would hasten the Second Coming of Jesus was found to be responsible for the act of arson. He was later declared mentally ill and died in a psychiatric facility in 1985. While the role of communal organizations claiming to represent political interests of both Hindus and Muslims was greatly responsible for fanning communal hostility in the build up to the riots and during the violence, as documented by the Reddy Commission, what it did not take note of is the larger political backdrop in the state and in the country as a whole.

On 11 January 1966 Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri died in Tashkent and Indira Gandhi who was Information and Broadcasting minister in the government was elected leader of the Congress Parliamentary Party after defeating Morarji Desai

by 355 votes to 169 in a bitter contest. Indira Gandhi became Prime Minister of India for the first time on 24 January 1966. However in the general elections in February 1967, the electoral fortunes of the Congress dipped and it was barely able to secure a majority in the Lok Sabha. The Congress also lost power in eight states including Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal. However, in Gujarat, Chief Minister Hitendra Kanaiyalal Desai led the party to another victory in the second assembly elections in 1967 and became the chief minister for another term. Desai's elevation as chief minister had come in circumstances that further widened the communal divide.

As mentioned earlier, in September 1965, the then chief minister of Gujarat Balwantraji Mehta along with his wife Sarojben, went in a small plane to inspect the Gujarat-Pakistan border and his plane was shot down by the Pakistani Air Force resulting in the death of the couple. It was one of the major watersheds in the course of the 1965 Indo-Pak war and added to the animosity of Gujarati Hindus towards what was by then routinely described as Pakistani enclaves in Ahmedabad and other cities — indicating Muslim localities. In such a backdrop fast paced developments also took place at the Centre and specifically within the Congress. Indira Gandhi decided not to be the *Dumb Doll* the Congress Syndicate or the old timers in the party had expected and instead decided to seize control of the government and party.

On 19 July 1969 Indira Gandhi nationalized fourteen major Indian Scheduled Commercial Banks just three days after Morarji Desai was relieved of the Finance portfolio. Two months prior to this, the then President Zakir Hussain died and became the first president to die in harness and this led to a mid-term presidential poll. Just a day before Desai was axed by Gandhi, the Congress Parliamentary Party chose Lok Sabha Speaker, Neelam Sanjiva Reddy as the presidential candidate but within days, Vice President V V Giri also joined the fray and was supported by Indira Gandhi. On 13 August, 250 Congress MPs out of 438 called for *free or conscience vote* and Indira Gandhi supported this call in presidential poll. On Independence Day, in her speech at the Red Fort, Gandhi pledged to work for the common man and the next day India's fifth presidential election was held. When the votes were counted on 20 August, the "official" candidate of the Congress lost in India's bitterest presidential poll and V V Giri was declared President.

As a result of these developments, a vertical split in the Congress became inevitable and finally on 13 November, Indira Gandhi was expelled from the party on grounds of indiscipline. She struck back by forming the Congress-R, the alphabet 'R' standing for Requisitionists or Ruling. As far as Gujarat was concerned,

Chief Minister Hitendra Desai was the only one who did not extend support to Gandhi and instead ultimately chose to cast his lot with Morarji Desai and others who went on to form the Congress (O) — the alphabet “O” standing for Organisation. When the riots in Gujarat began, the chief minister did not have a *long stake* in governance because of lack of clarity regarding the longevity of the state government. Political preoccupations — both at the Centre and in the state — ensured that the riots continued unabated. In the process, the communal divide in the state was further widened. It must be remembered that while Hitendra Desai was the main political player in Gujarat on behalf of the State, there were several non-State players who played a role in the build up of the communal tempo for almost a year before the riots erupted.

It must be understood that in 1969 there was hardly any significant element in the political spectrum in Gujarat that was either opposed to the riots or took an active interest in trying to prevent its spread. This narrative has been a recurring element in Gujarat’s narrative — most recently in 2002. But back in 1969, the shooting down of Chief Minister Balwantrai Mehta’s plane played a significant role in generating anti-Pakistan and anti-Muslim rhetoric. But no less important were issues like the anti-cow slaughter movement in 1967-68 which was infused with jingoistic nationalism coupled with anti-Pakistan rhetoric in Gujarat and the RSS campaign which resulted in the formation of the Hindu Dharma Raksha Samiti, a process which was directly facilitated by the Jana Sangh.

On other fronts, in Ahmedabad more than one lakh mill workers were retrenched creating further anxiety amongst the working class and in the absence of a traditional and strong working class movement, this rebellious mood of the common people often found articulation in saffronized slogans and actions.

Just as Gujarat tore out of its *secular* tranquillity on the afternoon of 18 September 1969, a young man in Mehsana moved into adulthood. A day before the riots erupted in the state capital, he turned nineteen and entered the twentieth year of his life. The young man was Narendra Modi. What he did at that point and later over the next couple of years is a different tale altogether.

THE INITIATION

Start as close to the end as possible.

– From Kurt Vonnegut's *Rules for the Short Story*

If there is any phase of Narendra Modi's life about which there are no definitive accounts it is from teenage to adulthood. The existing literature on Modi's life — which has been endorsed or authorized by him — have glaring contradictions; personal accounts of childhood friends, teachers, the immediate kin and acquaintances have different stories. The years from 1967 to 1971 in Modi's life are somewhat “mysterious” and despite my pointed questions, he chose not to shed any light on it — save one, a confirmation that the *out point* in his life had been 1967 and the *return point* was in 1971.

Modi told me: ‘A lot of people ask me but I do not want to say anything about that period because at some point in my life, I would like to write about this period — what I did, where all did I go....But it started in 1967 and there were variations about the periods when I was away (from home) — at times I was away for about fifteen months, then I stayed away for 6 months and then even lesser — and I came back. I kept coming and going. I started feeling that I was not for this regular kind of existence or world. I had made up my mind — I had a different bent of mind. I kept trying to understand myself.’

From what can be pieced together from various sources and after sifting through the obvious contradictions and anomalies is that Modi finished his high school — clearing the tenth standard examination conducted by the Gujarat Secondary and Higher Secondary Education Board — in the summer of 1967. Since there was no further avenue of studying beyond class ten in Vadnagar, Modi went and enrolled in a school (also called college) in Visnagar — the small town almost midway between Mehsana and his hometown. It was in this college that Modi completed two more years of school — also called Intermediate in most parts of India at that

time. Only after clearing this level of school exams could one become eligible for admission to any graduation course — regular or vocational. From what Modi says, it appears that this is the time from when he “comes and goes” from the family fold. In his interview with me he says categorically that he left formal education after school education which means that he completed this level in Visnagar. This is also the time when Modi apparently spent some time collecting funds for flood victims in Surat. The details of all this is diffused and even Modi told me that he did ‘not remember now when exactly it was — but it was in the late 1960s. I was quite active at that time in social work. When I say social work, I do not mean in the manner it is understood now — this NGO business — I did not fit into that mould.’

This is actually a very defining period in Modi’s life because he was unable to make up his mind about the future course of his life. In the words of Vinod K Jose in *The Caravan* magazine, Modi at this stage of his life was unsure of ‘...his calling: whether to pursue the priestly life or volunteer himself towards the advancement of Hindutva.’ Till the time the world gets to read what Modi chooses to write about this phase, a reasonable guess would be that after he reached Visnagar, the physical distance from his family gave him the courage to experiment and travel through other parts of India. The years 1967-68 were also the years when he would have realized that the marriage ceremony he had undergone first as a child and then as a pre-pubescent boy of thirteen was not a *game* that many children in India play, but an impending reality. Both the families — his and Jashodaben’s — in late 1967 and early 1968 were preparing for the cohabitation stage of the three-staged marriage. This was corroborated by Jashodaben in the poorly shot video that has been previously mentioned in this book.

To be fair to Modi, it appears that in the late 1960s, he would have bemoaned that a life — scripted by his parents and social customs — chalked out a path for which he was both ill-prepared and was disinterested in — that it was something whose occurrence would prevent his flight from his middle class trappings. He thus did what any other youngster does at that age — Modi bolted from the stable. In the words of Jose, ‘...at age 18, with a higher call beckoning him, Modi decided to set off and wander in the Himalayas, leaving his wife and two uncertain families.’

There of course are different accounts of the cohabitation stage of Modi’s marriage: the man in the CD that was in circulation in December 2007 and claimed to be Modi’s brother-in-law asserted that the couple stayed together for three years. His statement was quoted in the *DNA* newspaper’s report: ‘He (Modi) lived in Kalavasudev Chachar Vadnagar after he married. They stayed together for

three years, but one night he suddenly left home.’

It is true that attempts to track down either Jashodaben or her family have been hazardous for journalists — and would have been for me also. There is also the issue of dwindling returns. When I began researching on Modi, I reached a decision early — that a meeting with Jashodaben would not yield anything significant for a book than what was already known and available in the public domain. All that needed to be done was to track accounts of people like Bharghav Parekh — the journalist, who claimed to have been among the first reporters to do the story on Modi’s wife and Darshan Desai, yet another scribe. I also had access to the “unnamed” Sangh Parivar leader to understand Modi’s psyche. When I made some field trips for researching on this book, I concluded that whatever headline value had existed on this episode in Modi’s life, had been exhausted fully and barring a few unsubstantiated claims by people with questionable credentials, the efforts would not generate startling information. Moreover, a biography of this nature would lose its purpose if it was allowed to degenerate into personal muckraking. My purpose was not to probe the relationships that Modi may have had or did not have. What matters more is not what the woman concerned has to say (Modi in any case would not say anything and it would be only a foolish interviewer who waved the proverbial red flag in front of him), but what analogies can one draw about Modi’s character. Even if one looks at the marriage as an unfortunate event heaped on him — and of course Jashodaben also — due to social customs and family obligations, it would not be wrong to say that he displayed a certain amount of insensitivity to a woman whose fate was linked to him. Instead of waiting for almost two decades before the matter came out in the public domain because of some curious reporters, he could have moved in the direction of an honourable closure of the chapter. At the least it can be said that it was unfortunate that Jasodaben’s desire for a marital home was sacrificed by Modi at the altar of political pragmatism. And if one wishes to be harsh, one can conclude what the unnamed RSS functionary ended his contention with: ‘The episode shows that Modi has no respect for women — they are only stepping stones for him to reach his political goal.’

In the four years that Modi was away from home, no one used such harsh words for him because his departure had been with the blessings of the family — it is a different matter that he also presented his family with a *fait accompli* the way they had done when he was still a child. M V Kamath and Kalindi Randeri in their book, *Narendra Modi: An Architect of a Modern State*¹ have quoted his mother, Hiraba: ‘Narendra was happily engaged in spiritual activities and associated with sadhu-sants. We noticed that it was growing with every passing day. We were

constantly afraid that one day Narendra would run away, leaving behind home, town and *sansar* (worldly activities). Narendra indeed seemed to be disinterested in *grihasthashram* (role of householder). As soon as he finished school, he left home with a resolute mind and went to the Himalayas.' It is interesting to note that the authorized biography makes no mention of Modi's marriage — either on its own accord or through quotes of his family members. This is indicative of the extent to which Modi has tried to insulate the fact from public knowledge.

Prior to his departure from his home and hometown, Modi had come under the influence of Swami Vivekananda's teachings as also his guru's — Ramakrishna Paramahansa. Kamath and Randeri² have claimed that the influence of Swami Vivekananda on Modi's life was so great that he 'read almost everything that he had written....Narendra was deeply impressed with Vivekananda's views about patriotism and would read extensively about his political philosophy.' They have added that fairly early in his life he started saving money to buy books and was able to build a small amateur library — for which some degree of contribution came from a gentleman by the name of Vasanthbhai Parikh about whom not much is known.

Despite the absence of any confirmation from Modi, it can be presumed that his final departure from home — for a longer duration than during the months immediately after he moved from Vadnagar to Visnagar, came on the eve of the third stage of his marriage with Jashodaben — *gauna*. At some point in this four-year period, Modi came back to clear his twelfth class exams. This is corroborated by his interview with me when he stated that he had to take up college education by correspondence because he had dropped out after completing school education. The moot point however is where did Modi travel to and what kind of activities was he involved in? The closest that he came to telling me was that at times, he would '...go to Rama Krishna Mission and at times I went to the Vivekananda Ashram in Almora. I loitered a lot in the Himalayas. I had some influences of spiritualism at that time along with the sentiment of patriotism — it was all mixed. It is not possible to delineate the two ideas — I was also unclear at that stage about what I wanted to do. I however knew that I had to do something different. I tried to think — you cannot call that a stage of confusion but you may call it was a search — a search for something in a very determined manner.'

In all fairness I must accept that when Modi stated that he was not prepared to talk about this phase of his life, a thought had surely crossed my mind that probably there were certain political incidents — some episodes — in which he had then participated and now either regretted that decision or did not wish it to become

public knowledge. In the course of researching this book, I spent considerable time trying to look for straws in the wind that could point to a political reason behind Modi's decision to keep this chapter of his life under wraps. I even asked some blunt questions to some people — including to a few of his political adversaries. However, at no point could one come across any evidence of any political or any other non-personal reason behind Modi's decision to stay incognito for such a long period of time with no contact with his family. In that period, his family said, that Modi would disappear completely for several months at a stretch.

These experiences remained a part of his life even after his return to the *material world*. Modi told me that he continued with an annual ritual that he termed “meet myself programme”. When I asked him what he meant by this, he said that he spent time only with himself and went away to remote places without informing anyone about his whereabouts. ‘I used to go away during Diwali. When people celebrated, I would be somewhere away in a remote place, faraway from any person — all by myself. I went alone and only went to places where I would not find another human being — places like a jungle or some barren or abandoned place. I carried only a little to eat — some snacks to last for three to five days—I just chose a place where I could get water to drink. I carried only a little food—only bare necessities — so that I did not feel that I had not eaten anything.’ I asked Modi about the kind of places he used for his getaways: ‘Any kind — completely unknown places that I did not know. I never decided my address and did not tell anyone where I was going.’ Naturally, I was curious because this was a potential headline grabbing story — *Modi disappears, aides clueless, but assure supporters of his safety*. I asked him when was the last time he went to meet *himself* and where was the venue? ‘That was in 1995-96, I was still in Gujarat (meaning he had not yet been shunted out from the state unit.) I went to the Gir Forest and stayed where there were no humans. I went around and found an old temple where I could sleep, where no one could disturb me. No one came.’ Perplexing though, it was getting interesting and I could not resist myself. What did he do? ‘I did nothing. That is what I did — nothing. Just think.’ And then came my final question — what about now? ‘Now it is not in my destiny (*naseeb nahi raha*.) I do not know why people debate loneliness so much — I actually enjoy loneliness. People debate outside a lot — that Modi is a loner — I am not a loner in any way. But yes, I do not enjoy much crowd.’

From whatever little that he has spoken, it appears that Modi spent some time in Calcutta (now Kolkata) and its suburbs — especially in Belur Math, the headquarters of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission. However, after staying here for some time, Modi ran into problems because the Belur Math only

allowed graduates to stay on the campus for longer durations and since he had just completed his school education, Modi was ineligible to stay there on a long term basis. His wanderings thereafter took him to the Himalayas — where exactly it is not known though at some point he went and stayed in Almora. There are some indications that in a way Modi tried to tread on the same path as Vivekananda had nearly eight decades ago.

It is still an enigma why Modi left home to be almost like a wandering minstrel for at least two years — if not more. Frankly, unlike great men of erudition, Modi, wasn't a child prodigy given to extraordinary brilliance in any field of knowledge. Modi was at best dogged in his attempt from childhood to break free from the shackles of his small world. Modi had also displayed from childhood certain leadership qualities and a desire to be something more than the ordinary folks of Vadnagar. Perhaps a young Modi considered the world to be his audience and Vadnagar, he must have realized, would not suffice as his proscenium. But then he was trapped in his family moorings. He was bound to his parents, siblings and above all to a girl who was to be his wife. In the young Modi's mind the only way to escape all this was a physical flight — actually going away from all that which he disliked. It was a sentiment similar to that of any child of that age who wishes to do something different, on his own, without any support of family — yet is not clear what he or she wants to do. In Modi's case, there was an added reason for him to take that proverbial furlough — there was a wife with whom by all accounts — he could not relate to.

It is quite possible Modi realized that his wanderings were not taking him closer to this goal of making a niche for himself in the real and practical world. Sometime in early 1971, Modi decided to come back. But his return to Vadnagar was for just one night — as if only to announce that his period of renunciation was over, but the future would be independent of the family. Modi's childhood friend, Sudhir Joshi and Prahaladbhai G Patel, his one-time teacher say that after the final visit in early 1971, Modi did not return to Vadnagar for eighteen years except once and that too for just a few hours when his father was on his death bed! At that time — in 1989 — he had partially achieved his objective by becoming *somebody* — he was General Secretary, Organization of the Bharatiya Janata Party in Gujarat. It was a matter of coincidence that Modi had just returned from a pilgrimage to Kailash Mansarovar when he heard the news about his father. He told S Prasannarajan of the *India Today* in 2002 that 'his father was dying. I gave him the sacred water from Mansarovar.' On his pilgrimage *per se*, Modi described it as a 'blissful pilgrimage, and the high point of my spiritual experience.'

Modi's mother is on record saying that when Modi returned suddenly after his meanderings in 1971, only she and her daughter, Vasanti, were at home. Naturally, the mother that Hiraba was, she turned emotional and immediately busied herself in tossing up an elaborate meal for feeding the prodigal son — but Modi did not want any goodies like *sev* (a sweet dish) and instead said he would be happy with simple *rotla* and vegetable curry. At home, he told his amazed mother and sister that he had been to the Himalayas and after he finished eating went to the village — may be in search of old friends or to have a dip in the Sharmishtha lake. The time was utilized by a prying mother to check out what his small shoulder bag contained: 'I just found one pair of clothes, shorts and a half sleeve *pehran* (an upper garment similar to a shirt but without a collar). Also, one *bhagwa* coloured shawl and my photograph. I had no idea where he got that from,' Hirabai told Kamath and Randeri in their book, *Narendra Modi: The Architect of a Modern State*.³

The next morning, Modi again packed his bag and left home — this time for good — only to return once very briefly for a few hours when his father died, then again in 1999 for the golden jubilee celebrations of his school by when he had become a power-centre of sorts within the BJP having become national general secretary of the party. After he became chief minister in October 2001, Modi paid special attention to Vadnagar's development and focussed on the town even though it is not his political constituency. But a visit to Vadnagar makes it evident that the people now take pride in "one of their own" being chief minister of Gujarat. But on that morning in early 1971, Modi didn't know how the script of his life would unfold. At that point he had a short term goal and the destination was not very far off. Ahmedabad was Modi's next port of calling and the destination was a small canteen or a tea-and-snacks shop owned by his uncle, Babubhai, at the State Transport office. He worked in the canteen and stayed with his uncle and soon decided to revive ties with the RSS.

In his interview with me, Modi was willing to talk about his return and how he got involved with the RSS in a much more engaged manner than when he was a child. I asked him when did he return to the material world after his wanderings and he said: 'Actually, even now I have not completely returned to the material world. But at a later point (of his wanderings) I felt that if I have to do something then I have to become part of some system, some structure. So that is when I met Vakil Sahab in 1971. I consulted him and told him what I had done. I told him that I now felt that the time had come for me to tie myself down to something — do something from one place — in one position and I requested him to guide me.' The time when Modi made this request to his political mentor, was also a turning

point in the life of Indira Gandhi, one of India's most important political leaders of that time. The changes that took place in the life of that leader and the country changed the history of the entire landmass of South Asia — more specifically the Indian sub-continent. Modi's early political indoctrination took place in this background and predictably shaped his worldview considerably.

India in early 1971 was a country in political ferment. On 27 December 1970, Indira Gandhi had dissolved the fourth Lok Sabha and called for India's first ever midterm election. This development had been preceded by a dramatic nineteen-month period starting with the untimely death of President Zakir Hussain. The death of the president catalyzed the process of Indira Gandhi parting ways with the old guard in the Congress party, an event which was cemented by the formal split in the party in November 1969. Indira prepared for a midterm poll throughout 1970 and when she finally dissolved Parliament, it was set for February-March 1971. When the verdict came, it was overwhelmingly in favour of the Congress faction led by Gandhi and thereafter there never remained any doubt about which one of the two factions was the actual party and which one the pretender. Out of the 518 seats of Lok Sabha, the Congress faction led by Indira Gandhi won 352 seats.

The verdict coincided with tumultuous developments in what was then East Pakistan and after December 1971 came to be known as Bangladesh. At the time when the people of India voted Indira Gandhi into office with a huge majority, the freedom struggle of Bangladesh was acquiring epic proportions. On 7 March 1971 just days before the last day of polling in India, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman addressed the people of his country and said that the Pakistani military junta must respect the will of the majority and asked the people of Bangladesh to be ready for a protracted freedom struggle. He was arrested within a fortnight. At that time, India also set up a direct coordination committee at the highest level to monitor the developments on a daily basis. Indira was India and India was Indira at that time — much before the Congress leader D K Barooah made that infamous statement during the Emergency.

The 1971 Lok Sabha elections was different from the previous ones after independence because this was the first time when state assembly elections were not held simultaneously with parliamentary polls. The political turbulence and the emergence of coalition governments after the 1967 general election was the prime reason for this coupled with the fact that Indira Gandhi also opted to seek

premature parliamentary elections. The political canvas altered significantly for both the Treasury Benches and the Opposition if one compared the verdicts of 1967 and 1971. In 1967, the Congress party won 283 out of 520 Lok Sabha seats — a clear majority but not the sort that the party had secured in previous polls in 1952, 1957 and 1962. In 1967, the Opposition parties also did well — especially the Right Wing ones; the Swatantra Party which epitomized Indian political and economic conservatism in the 1950s and 1960s won a record number of 44 seats while the Bharatiya Jana Sangh — the forerunner of the Bharatiya Janata Party won 35 seats. The two rival socialist parties (Samyukta Socialist Party or SSP and Praja Socialist Party or PSP) — between them — won 36 seats. By 1971 there had been significant changes in the equations among Opposition parties. The Congress party had split and the breakaway group was called the Indian National Congress (Organisation) — or Congress (O) in common parlance. But the performance of Opposition parties was not impressive. The seats won by Swatantra Party came down to 8 while the Congress (O) won 16 and the Jana Sangh managed to win just 22. The two socialist parties could barely register their presence with 3 seats for SSP and 2 for PSP.

The victory at the hustings coupled with the liberation of Bangladesh meant that Indira Gandhi was perceived to be capable of no wrongdoing. While the groundswell of jingoism was suitable for the RSS, the organization found Indira Gandhi's tilt towards the Soviet Union disquieting. She had taken such a decision — to ink the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation in New Delhi on 9 August 1971 — due to a fast changing regional security scenario precipitated by US Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger's mission to Peking in July 1971. Despite its abhorrence for the Congress party under Indira Gandhi and her new found Leftist stance and the pro-Soviet tilt, the RSS could do little to prevent the upsurge of support building within its ranks for the government's stance and initiatives on Bangladesh. On the one hand was the Indira Gandhi-led brand of patriotic-jingoism where the unspoken agenda was the vivisection of Pakistan and thereby hitting at the foundations of the two-nation theory of Pakistan's creator — Mohammed Ali Jinnah and on the other hand was the political and electoral benefit of the entire campaign. Such a development would further marginalize the Opposition in which the three largest parties were the Communist Party of India (Marxist), Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and the Bharatiya Jana Sangh. The three parties had strengths of 25, 23 and 22 in Lok Sabha respectively and their performance had demolished the concept of a grand alliance that was forged by the parties — including Jana Sangh — to contest the 1971 parliamentary elections

along with each other. From its inception the RSS — and its affiliates — had ideologically contested and politically campaigned against the idea of Pakistan on the basis of religion. Leaders of the RSS — and its offshoots, including the Jana Sangh — had argued since 1947 that the Congress leaders had been blinded by pursuit of power and in a hurry to get a share of it, accepted the Mountbatten Plan of June 1947 that put in place the final steps for the Partition of India. A breakup of Pakistan would hit at the foundation of the idea of Muslims being a nationality and thereby retrospectively endorse what the RSS clan had always argued. However, the catch was that the political and electoral benefit of this would accrue to the Congress party. But this was a bitter pill that the RSS clan could not avoid and on the issue of the liberation of Bangladesh, the leaders of the Jana Sangh swam with the tide and Atal Bihari Vajpayee delivered some of his most stirring and memorable speeches — both inside Parliament and outside it. One particular speech — quoted by Chandrika Prasad Sharma in *Poet Politician*⁴, a biography of the former prime minister — summed up the support of the RSS clan for India's "Bangladesh strategy". Delivering his speech after President V V Giri proclaimed National Emergency under Article 352 of the Constitution following the attack on India on 3 December 1971 when Pakistan bombed several airfields on the western front, Vajpayee said:

Today we find ourselves under the shadow of a crisis. Pakistan has mounted a war on us. We are having a baptism of fire. There is no reason why we should not emerge glorious from this ordeal which has been imposed on us. There is no reason why we should not be able to guard our frontiers. We shall teach the rulers of Pakistan a lesson that will put their teeth on the edge. Today, I am not speaking on behalf of my party. Now our whole country is one party. Sinking our political differences, ignoring party issues, we shall march forward, shoulder to shoulder towards victory. We shall not shirk any sacrifice our country may ask for.

L K Advani, however has a slightly different version. In his memoirs — *My Country, My Life*⁵, Advani writes on this issue:

It is widely believed, even today, that Atalji (Vajpayee) described Indira Gandhi as "Durga" after her triumphant leadership of the 1971 war. However, to the best of my recollections, he never used that word. What actually happened was that at the national session of the Jana Sangh, held in Ghaziabad in 1971 (before the war), V G Deshpande, a member of the Working Committee and a great admirer of Indira Gandhi, remarked in his speech:

“Indiraji, lead the nation with courage. We are all with you. If you help Bangladesh to become free, posterity will remember you as Durga.”

Deshpande was no ordinary member. He was former president of the Hindu Mahasabha and was a member of the first Lok Sabha. Even if Deshpande had not been a leader of such significance, the fact that a member of the Jana Sangh’s national leadership expressed admiration for Indira Gandhi — and this was not challenged in the party — was indicative of the mood and the predicament of not just Jana Sangh but the entire Opposition as India was on the cusp of playing a significant role that finally led to the division of Pakistan.

After the war ended in triumph, the dilemma of Jana Sangh increased as it had no option but to praise Indira Gandhi. L K Advani has written elsewhere in the book referred earlier:

After the war was over, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi received well-deserved praise for her firm and courageous leadership. Since we in the Jana Sangh were trained never to see national issues, especially issues concerning national security, from a narrow political perspective, we had wholeheartedly supported the government through all the developments of 1971. Now, in the hour of national glory, the party did not lag behind in complimenting the Prime Minister. At a special session of Parliament, held in Central Hall, the most lavish words of praise for Indira Gandhi came from Atalji.

And it is not as if the Jana Sangh — and the rest of RSS clan — paid only lip service in the build up to the war. The parent organization along with its affiliates helped create a public mood of participation to bolster both national sentiment and also the morale of the soldiers. Advani wrote about how his party also played a role in converting the sentiment in support for the idea of Bangladesh in India into a mass movement of sorts: ‘Around this time (in the early months of 1971), I once led an angry demonstration of Jana Sangh workers in front of the US Embassy in Chanakyapuri, New Delhi, to protest the American arms aid to Pakistan. At this crucial juncture, the Jana Sangh was in the forefront of the Indian people’s solidarity with the struggle of the Bangladeshis for national liberation. Atalji delivered, during this period, some of the most electrifying and thought-provoking speeches ever heard in Indian Parliament.’

The Sangh Parivar was not only mounting protest marches outside American embassies and consulates but was also at the forefront of staging peaceful sit-in demonstrations — or Satyagrahas — at public places — especially in New Delhi where their cadre and supporters demanded from government that they be enlisted in the Indian army and since this was disallowed, at various places the workers and

activists courted arrest. This was the only way in which the Sangh Parivar was able to drive home its political identity as being distinct from that of the Congress party.

One such young man who was yet to turn twenty-one and thereby secure voting rights, attended these meetings — including the ones addressed by Advani — and courted arrest. He was a worker in a small canteen in Ahmedabad: Narendra Modi and in the summer of 2012 he recalled his first real brush with national politics: ‘By that time (when he revived contact with Vakil Sahab to seek political guidance) the 1971 war was going on. I would come to New Delhi during those times — there was a Satyagraha going on for some time — and I also went and joined the Satyagraha to go and join the war there. But instead of sending us to the warfront the government arrested us and sent us to Tihar Jail. The Satyagraha was not being held under a political banner but all patriotic forces were part of it. If I remember correctly, besides Jana Sangh and RSS leaders and workers even people like George Fernandes were part of the agitation, Madhu Limayeji was also involved. Then after this was over, with Vakil Sahab’s guidance I started staying in the Hedgewar Bhawan in Ahmedabad and began doing the work of the Sangh that was given to me. I was assigned some responsibilities.’ What responsibilities were these?

Although menial and routine, the responsibilities given to Modi perhaps steeled him for the various roles he was later asked to play. The role knocked off whatever hubris he might have collected — or allowed to develop — in his life till that time. But as childhood friends narrated in Vadnagar, his traits were so strong, that he must have retained his pride even while doing the least important of tasks — simply because he must have considered it to be a stepping stone into a more powerful and meaningful future. The unnamed senior Sangh Parivar functionary who has been quoted previously said that if a person ‘truly becomes humble because of life experiences, it shows all the way. But if humbling experiences are used only for self-gain and self-promotion then it means that it is only strategic usage and does not make any changes to the inner personality.’

But before the responsibilities were given, Modi had to take a decision of moving further away from his family fold and committing himself for a life with the RSS. The political awareness due to participation in the Satyagraha to extend support to the liberation movement of Bangladesh and the opportunity of having rubbed shoulders with stalwarts and several emerging political giants of India resulted in Modi making up his mind that politics was his true calling. But instead of treading into unknown territory, he opted to be part of the Sangh Parivar and a few weeks after the celebrations of the victory of the 1971 war, Modi quietly joined the RSS formally as a Pracharak. With that he also moved bag and baggage to the Hedgewar

Bhawan and ceased working with his uncle in the canteen he ran at the State Transport Department office. With this final step, his last link with his family was virtually severed — and remained so for many years.

About his early days in the RSS and in Hedgewar Bhawan, Modi is candid about what he was asked to do initially: ‘My first responsibility was cleaning the office. When they were confident that I could do that work, then I was given the responsibility of making tea. Then after some more confidence — I started making breakfast and some evening snacks (*nashtha*). Then slowly, I started looking at the mail that came in and then writing the replies. My work kept on increasing slowly.’

Modi has talked at length on his early days in the RSS. From those it can be pieced together that after Vakil Sahab invited Modi to be part of the Sangh Parivar, his days were spent with twelve to fifteen functionaries. The daily routine began at five in the morning and he would first go to fetch milk and after waking up everyone would join the daily ritualistic *pratah smaran* (morning congregation) at the RSS headquarters after which he had the responsibility to make tea and serve it to everyone. A long series of chores followed thereafter and this included cleaning utensils, making breakfast (after some time as Modi disclosed to me), sweeping and cleaning the entire building which at that time consisted of eight to ten rooms. Modi would also wash his own clothes besides that of Vakil Sahab — though Modi has said, initially the elder leader did not allow him to wash his clothes but Modi insisted on doing so. Lunch for the group that stayed in the RSS office however was in the houses of various Swayamsevaks and they were invited to them by rotation. Evenings it was back to the Hedgewar Bhawan and the same drill of making tea and participation in community rituals and individual and study circles followed. For all his labours at that time, Modi first got acquainted and then became fairly close to two very important functionaries of the RSS who visited often: Dattopant Thengadi and Eknath Ranade. Thengadi was also a Rajya Sabha member of the Jana Sangh at that time and had been elected from Uttar Pradesh.

Born in 1920, Thengadi was a trade union leader who singlehandedly built the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh — the labour wing of the Sangh Parivar that was founded in 1955 when it was evolving beyond being a single organization unit with Jana Sangh as its political wing. In 1991, Thengadi founded the Swadeshi Jagran Manch (SJM) which played a crucial role as an internal pressure group when the BJP-led NDA government was in power between 1998 and 2004; he also was amongst the founders of the Bharatiya Kisan Sangh in 1979 when the Jana Sangh was beginning to plan a political role for itself beyond the Janata Party whose disintegration had appeared imminent. Thengadi had also been instrumental in the

formation of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) in 1949. He figures very prominently on the list of iconic leaders of the Sangh Parivar and passed away in October 2004, a few months after the defeat of the BJP-led NDA. Eknath Ranade, born in 1914 was from Maharashtra and played a crucial role in establishing the Vivekananda Rock Memorial and later the Vivekananda Kendra in Kanyakumari in 1972. By the time Modi came in contact with Ranade, the latter was an accepted authority on Swami Vivekananda and his teachings and Modi — given his fascination for the philosopher — was naturally drawn towards him during Ranade's visit to Ahmedabad. Modi often spoke very fondly about both. When the BJP-led NDA government had just formed a government in 1998, and I was working on a story on what comprised the Sangh Parivar, Modi had mentioned the name of Ranade and then disclosed that at some point in the early 1970s, Ranade expressed the wish that Modi join him in his work at the Vivekananda Kendra, but the RSS and Modi decided that it was better if he stayed on as a Pracharak.

This proved to be fortuitous because it gave Modi a chance to be part of an event that prepared him for the tasks that eventually came his way after he was deputed to the BJP in 1987. Almost a decade prior to the time when Modi was interacting with Thengadi and Ranade on a regular basis and living under the watchful eye of Vakil Sahab, S S Apte alias Dadasaheb, a senior RSS leader, had under the direction of the then RSS Sarsanghchalak — M S Golwalkar organized the first ever conference of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad in 1964. In a letter to invitees on 29-30 August 1964 Apte wrote:

It is proposed to call a convention of representatives of all sects, faiths and religions that have arisen in this sacred land. The invitees were representatives from: Jains, Buddhists, Sikhs, Vaishnavas, Veer Shaivas — Lingayats and all denominations falling under the generic term Hindus. The main objective behind the convention was:....to build up a Hindu solidarity and encourage the Hindus in other parts of the world to make an indelible impression on the environments amid which they live; and to enrich the culture of the countries of their adoption.

The two-day meeting was chaired by K M Munshi, veteran nationalist leader and one-time member of the Congress party and attended by several stalwarts like Golwalkar from the Sangh Parivar and Master Tara Singh and Giani Bhupinder Singh from the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD). Several other key members of the RSS attended the convention which among other decisions also 'proposed World Hindu Convention be held on the auspicious occasion of Kumbh Mela (Hindu religious

congregation held on specific days once in twelve years; in this case 21 January 1966 at Prayag or Allahabad). Among those in attendance was Dr V A Vanikar who went on to become one of the key members of the VHP and after whom the Gujarat headquarters of the organization is named — Vanikar Bhawan — in Ahmedabad. Shortly after the RSS told Ranade that Modi would continue being a Pracharak and would not be deputed to the Vivekananda Kendra, he was assigned a key role of organizing the first major VHP Sammelan in Gujarat in 1973. This conference was organized under the guidance of Dr Vanikar and was held in Sidhpur, Patan district, adjoining Mehsana and not very far from Vadnagar. But by now Modi had firmly distanced himself from his family and there are no accounts of him visiting his hometown during the key VHP meeting.

Senior journalist Inder Malhotra once while replying to a query of mine in a TV programme had remarked that in December 1971 Indira Gandhi was at the peak of her popularity and that after one reaches the peak there is only one way a person can go — down. And down she went!

It did not take long after the euphoria of the victory in war to yield to domestic trading of charges. The fifth general elections to the legislative assemblies of sixteen states and two Union Territories were held during the first quarter of 1972. The states which went to the polls were: Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Gujarat, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Mysore, Punjab, Rajasthan, West Bengal, Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Manipur, and Tripura besides the Union Territories of Goa, Daman and Diu and Delhi. A total of 2,727 seats went to the polls in the first fortnight of March 1972. The verdict was by and large in sync with the one in March 1971 when Indira Gandhi had secured a fairly comfortable majority in Parliament in the first ever midterm parliamentary election held in India.

In Gujarat the Congress swept the polls with a two-thirds majority and Ghanshyam Oza, a senior leader of the party was appointed chief minister. Oza was one of the best known Gandhians in the state Congress and was very close to Indira Gandhi. Predictably, Oza was her first choice — the first chief minister from her political stable after the Congress split and was carefully chosen from among four other contenders — Ratubhai Adani, Kantilal Ghia, Jaswant Mehta and Chimanbhai Patel. Chimanbhai, who continued nursing political ambitions even after Oza's elevation, rebelled and ensured the latter's ouster in July 1973. Indira Gandhi was forced to appoint Chimanbhai Patel as chief minister. However, the times were not very conducive for Patel to assume complete political control: Gujarat was reeling under severe food shortages, dramatic rises in food prices and

public rage at the manoeuvres of Chimanbhai to replace Oza as chief minister. Gujarat was like a tinderbox which needed a small flame to spark off a raging fire. This happened when students of two engineering colleges went on a rampage over rising food costs and destroyed public property. Even as the State Reserve police intervened brutally, anger erupted all over Gujarat. Food shops were raided in several areas of Ahmedabad, and demonstrations reported from both urban and rural areas.

In the first two and a half months of 1974, Gujarat faced an anarchic situation. Unrelenting riots and agitations swept through large parts of the cities and towns of the state. It caused more than an estimated one hundred deaths, serious injuries to many more people, large number of arrests and massive destruction of public and private property. The agitation was called the Navnirman movement and reached unmanageable proportions by the end of January 1974.

A Navnirman Yuvak Samiti (NYS) was set up on 10 January 1974 to lead the agitation but most of the uprisings were spontaneous. Housewives, university teachers, journalists, lawyers, doctors and neighbourhood organizations came together in a major show of middle class-driven political solidarity and demanded the resignation of the government and the dissolution of assembly. Neera Chandhoke in an article in *The Hindu* on 23 June 2000 recounted that all professional activity virtually came to a standstill as processions with people carrying symbols of food deprivation, “people’s curfews”, silent marches, bus hijacks, relay fasts, effigy burning, mock courts and mock funerals of Chimanbhai Patel and Indira Gandhi were held on a daily basis. Several MLAs were also publicly humiliated. This led to an unprecedented confrontation between the police and students resulting in heavy loss of life and property. Atul Kohli, the David K E Bruce Professor of International Affairs and Professor of Politics and International Affairs at Princeton University, in his book, *Democracy and Discontent: India’s Growing Crisis of Governability*⁶ cited figures pieced together by John R Wood estimating that ‘...seventy-three days of agitation left 103 dead mostly in police firing and 310 injured, and 8,237 persons were arrested. It later sparked off a nationwide agitation against the Congress.’ Indira Gandhi now had no option and asked Patel to quit, recommended President’s Rule and then on 15 March 1974 ordered the dissolution of the state assembly. The state remained under Central rule till June 1975 by when the Navnirman agitation had sparked off similar agitations in other parts of the country but in a more organized manner. The agitation succeeded in focussing on two major aspects: Indira Gandhi’s authoritarian streak and corruption at both the Centre and state. By June 1975 however, the Sangh

Parivar had come to play a central role in the agitation against the Centre and when Internal Emergency was imposed on 25 June 1975, it had a significant role in Gujarat politics.

It is said that truth has different dimensions. Akira Kurosawa's 1950 cult film, *Rashomon* is one of the best pointers towards the elusive nature of truth. The Vedic saying — *Ekam sat, vipraha bahuda vadanti* (Truth is one, wise men describe it variously) in many ways reflects the same sentiment. In India's post-independence political history, Emergency is one of the most important sub-texts to understand the political complexion of the nation. Within this Emergency phase, both Navnirman and Sampurna Kranti (Total Revolution — the name given to the movement spearheaded by Jayaprakash Narayan which resulted in Indira Gandhi imposing Emergency in panic) remain most significant episodes. It is thus no surprise that generations that survived the ordeal and were significant players in politics would give a *Rashomon effect* while recapitulating their role during that period. It is therefore somewhat "logical" that there is a controversy over Modi's exact role in the Navnirman movement.

In its Ahmedabad edition of June 2004, *The Times of India* carried a report headlined: "Modi caught in Web lie". The report stated that the Gujarat government's:

official website claims that... In 1974, as a youth, he spearheaded the "Nava Nirman Andolan" against the corruption. His leadership qualities caught the eyes of several leaders including Shri Jayaprakash Narayan who carried this Andolan against corruption to every nook and corner of the country. However, the real heroes of the movement are furious. Almost all the people who actually spearheaded the movement unanimously rubbish the claim... Experts say of the few books which talks about the agitation, not one mentions Modi. Vishnu Pandya, who was the editor of RSS magazine *Sadhana*, wrote two books — *Gujarat Ni Rajkiya Ardh Shatabdi* and *Chutani Ni Shatranj* — which have chapters on Nav Nirman. And none of them has Modi in it.

In the summer of 2012, the URL link, given by the newspaper led people to Modi's personal website which Hiren Joshi, his OSD (IT) told me is maintained by "supporters and fans". This profile of Modi that was available at the point of writing (www.narendramodi.in) had been modified. Instead of the categorical assertion as claimed by *The Times of India* in its report of 2004, the website had a toned down version: 'During his tenure with the RSS, Shri Narendra Modi played several important roles on various occasions including the 1974 Navnirman anti-corruption agitation and the harrowing 19-month (June 1975 to January 1977)

long “emergency” when the fundamental rights of Indian citizens were strangled. Modi kept the spirit of democracy alive by going underground for the entire period and fighting a spirited battle against the fascist ways of the then central government.’

But to be fair to Modi, at no point did he in the course of interviews to me claim to have played a major role in the Navnirman movement. In early 1974, Modi was yet to be assigned a major role in the Sangh Parivar. The RSS clan was also yet to devise a comprehensive strategy on regaining the lost political initiative that was seized by Indira Gandhi following the 1971 war. When the Navnirman movement began spontaneously, it did not have any active political support and was instead a *movement from below* where no decision was taken by political parties to launch the movement but they were instead forced to co-opt the demands of the agitation in its agenda. But by the middle of 1975, most non-Congress political parties — definitely the RSS leadership and its affiliates — knew that the moment they had waited since December 1971 had arrived. Converting a local agitation into a campaign against the central government on a multitude of issues no longer seemed a Herculean task.

Meanwhile in 1974 Chimanbhai Patel realized that the Opposition to the Congress party was disunited and disjointed. The Congress (O) was yet to recover from the setbacks of 1971 and 1972. It won only 16 seats in the 1972 assembly elections as compared to 140 secured by Congress and was the largest Opposition political party. The Jana Sangh had won only 3 seats, the Communist Party of India — one and eight Independent candidates had been victorious making it a total of 168, the permissible strength of the state assembly at that time. Chimanbhai Patel sensed the void in the anti-Congress sentiment and floated his own political outfit. He called it Kisan Mazdoor Lok Paksha and in the assembly elections that were held while India stood on the precipice of Emergency, Patel was instrumental in cobbling together a coalition government with the Congress (O) leader, Babubhai Patel at its helm with support from Jana Sangh and socialist parties. In the election held in May-June 1975, the Congress tally was down to 75, the Congress (O) was up to 56 while the Jana Sangh climbed up to 18. Chimanbhai Patel’s own outfit won just 12 seats but he played the kingmaker in the new alignment in the state. The government, which was called a Janata Morcha government, was dismissed in March 1976 at the peak of Emergency but that did not lead to any widespread protests since fundamental rights had been placed under suspension and most of the Opposition leaders had either been put behind bars or were underground.

By this time however, the Sangh Parivar had been able to gain a considerable

toehold in the anti-Emergency struggle. In Bihar and elsewhere, Jayaprakash Narayan's movement for Total Revolution had been significantly *penetrated* by the RSS cadre and leaders. A large number of leaders of the Sangh Parivar played crucial roles in keeping the agitation against Emergency alive despite the arrest of top leaders. In Bihar, K N Govindacharya, a Tamil Brahmin who grew up in Varanasi, played a crucial role in the agitation. Several high profile Jana Sangh leaders were also arrested in the nationwide swoop that had begun with the proverbial midnight knock on the doors of many leaders in New Delhi including Jayaprakash Narayan and Morarji Desai. On 25 June 1975, L K Advani and A B Vajpayee were in Bangalore to attend a meeting of the Joint Parliamentary Committee to discuss the proposed law against political defections. On 26 June the Bangalore police came in the morning to the Legislators' Home near the state legislative assembly and arrested Vajpayee and Advani. By this time they had already come to know about the events and in the words of Advani in his memoirs, when he heard Indira Gandhi's unscheduled broadcast to the nation on All India Radio (AIR), Advani '...could not believe my ears when she said that country needed to be saved from a massive conspiracy by the Opposition.' The Jana Sangh duo had been able to prepare a press release (Advani was then president of Jana Sangh) which was issued on their arrest and while denouncing the Emergency, they said that the event would 'have the same historic significance in the history of Independent India' as the Quit India Day — 9 August 1942. The socialist leader, Madhu Dandavate and the Congress (O) veteran, Shyam Nandan Mishra who were also in Bangalore were arrested as well and the four of them were taken to Bangalore Central Jail.

However, even prior to the imposition of Emergency, the Jana Sangh's improved performance in the assembly polls heralded the political coming of age of the Sangh Parivar in Gujarat through a series of events beginning with the riots of 1969. The 1975 election and the events immediately preceding and following it can actually be the time when the Jana Sangh — and later the BJP — began to acquire the space of the Opposition from other non-Congress parties. This process was essential in the path of the BJP's eventual emergence as the principal party of governance from 1995 onward.

When Emergency was imposed in India, Gujarat was among the only two major states — the other being Tamil Nadu — where anti-Congress governments were in power. Even these two governments were dismissed by Indira Gandhi — Tamil Nadu in January 1976 and Gujarat in March 1976 — by constitutional and extra-constitutional means like forcing splits in the ruling combine. But being in government in Gujarat — though for just a week before the imposition of

Emergency — meant that the Sangh Parivar and the Jana Sangh had an active network of activists that was yet to return to its usual business from its state of *high alert* during the hectic campaigning. As a result, the RSS which immediately formed the Gujarat Lok Sangharsh Samiti (GLSS) after the arrest of its top brass, was able to generate good support and functioned through a wide network of Pracharaks and activists. The GLSS met for the first time in the first week of July 1975 under the chairmanship of one of Modi's mentors, Laxmanrao Inamdar — and it was decided that the first task would be to ensure that those functionaries who had not been arrested as yet, remain underground and evade being detained by police. Since *safe* residences had to be located for this, a list of functionaries who were openly identified as being RSS sympathizers was sourced and lists drawn up of such people in various towns and cities in Gujarat.

Modi was among those who had gone underground and he had received instructions to evade arrest as a specific role was being considered for him by Vakil Sahab and other key RSS leaders. Towards the end of July he was given instructions to visit one of the *safe* houses in Ahmedabad and there Modi met George Fernandes — this time from a closer quarter and had a one-on-one interaction with him at a time when he was almost a legendary leader given his role in the all-India railway strike in 1974. The two exchanged notes and Modi also assisted Fernandes with his travel plans as aiding people coming from outside Gujarat was one of the briefs that Modi carried in those months. He also developed his new found skill in writing and collating material. For an international conference of parliamentary representatives from Commonwealth countries that was organized by Indira Gandhi in New Delhi, Modi prepared, printed and despatched to the Indian capital several booklets that were titled provocatively — given the time when they were prepared: “Indian Press Gagged”, “Facts vs Indira's Lies”, “Twenty Lies of Indira Gandhi”, “When Disobedience to Law is a Duty” and “A Decade of Economic Chaos”. These were collected by RSS activists in Delhi and distributed to foreign delegates.

One of the reasons why Modi was considered wise and competent to handle this responsibility was that Vakil Sahab had finally goaded Modi — some months prior to the imposition of Emergency — into resuming his formal education. In my interview I asked Modi about what happened to his education after he moved out of home: ‘I had left after my school education. Then I enrolled as an external candidate. Actually, Vakil Sahab was very much keen — he kept saying that if God has given me the ability, then why did I not study? I told him I did not want to take up a job. But he argued that education was needed for me to understand the world better — to become a better human being. I asked him what should I do and he

advised me to take interest in subjects like Sanskrit, History etc. So he went and found out that Delhi University had a correspondence course. So that is what I did from DU. I did my BA (Honours) in Political Science. I also had History as a subject. I did this during the Emergency.'

Studying for his graduation and coming to New Delhi for his exams also provided a convenient cover for Modi and the Sangh Parivar to send a human courier with information and material. Few would suspect a young man coming to take college examinations capable of leading a parallel life underground in Gujarat and carrying sensitive information and material to be passed on to organizational colleagues in the Indian capital. This often also gave rise to humorous incidents which kept the morale of people underground high as these stories were often passed on orally from one to another. Modi narrated one such incident with an obvious delight on his face: 'Once I had gone to New Delhi to take the exams and I stayed in the house of a RSS worker who lived below the house of Subhadra Joshi (the Congress leader and a very significant anti-RSS person). I was told that the enemy lived upstairs...' and Modi burst out laughing still finding the story amusing after almost thirty-six years.

But for the GLSS it was not always smooth sailing. Nanaji Deshmukh, the secretary of the organization was arrested during the Emergency and it was feared that the address book he possessed at the time would fall into the hands of the police. But this somehow did not happen — the reasons behind which are difficult to fathom after so many years. Nonetheless, by then Modi had been asked to prepare a list of alternate addresses and he apparently was able to create a parallel list of *safe havens*. Modi played a crucial role in various anti-Emergency agitations and often travelled in disguise. Once on a train he was travelling incognito and had grown a thick beard when he noticed that one of his co-travellers was his teacher in primary school — Prahaladbhai G Patel. When I was in Vadnagar, Patel recollected this meeting but clarified that he had failed to recognize Modi. The pupil however had not only identified himself but also spoken to his teacher and paid obeisance before disappearing into the quiet of the night. There is another account which says that Modi had gone in disguise to Bhavnagar jail to meet Shankersinh Vaghela but this has never been corroborated by either of them. However, there is no denying that throughout Emergency, Modi played an important role within the Sangh Parivar and he was a vital component in the anti-Emergency machinery that the RSS was able to run efficiently despite a major crackdown from the government. But the period was also crucial in Modi's further evolution and political grooming. He recollects how he gained from his Emergency experience: 'During Emergency I

was in Ahmedabad. I came in contact with two people from whom I learnt a lot. The first person was the dean in Political Science in the university — Professor K D Desai — he was later also active in the civil liberties movement (was in PUCL). The other person was P M Seth — he had written books which are still available — both are dead. They wanted me to write a book on my experiences during the Emergency. So at their behest I wrote my first book (*Apatkalme Gujarat* — Gujarat During the Emergency) and it came out just after Emergency — I was only 25-26 when I had started writing the book. Then they said that I must study further after my graduation was over. They said that I did not have to do anything — they even got the forms for me and asked me sign on that. It was a form for admission in MA and they kept arguing that you must become a post-graduate. I was reluctant but they said they wanted me to even do a PhD because if an activist has a doctorate then he can contribute better. I had very good ties with them — we had excellent academic discussions — and they were my intellectual sounding boards. At their behest I completed MA as an external student from Gujarat University. I basically had to go only to take the examinations — I completed it in 1983, the professors helped me a lot by giving me books and guiding me.’

Thanks to the books he wrote and the interaction with the two university dons, from whom he picked up a bit of their scholarship and of course with the constant support from Vakil Sahab, Modi was given his first task at the national level — to assist another of his onetime mentors — Dattopant Thengadi. The assignment brought him to Delhi and by now Narendra Modi was clear what he wanted.

The task given to Modi by the RSS a few months after he turned twenty-eight, took him through the length and breadth of India, and gave him a chance to meet some of the stalwarts of not just the RSS but also that of other political parties opposed to the Congress led by Indira Gandhi. The assignment was also to give Modi an opportunity to stay in the RSS headquarters in New Delhi and get a ringside view of the Indian political scenario. As Modi said, he was able to ‘meet and interact at very close quarters with those who fought for democracy in all states.’

But before talking about the details of the assignment that pitch-forked a rank political outsider into the world of political intrigue then unfolding in the Indian capital, a few words about the bizarre sequence of events that were beginning to unfold in Indian politics. By the first quarter of 1979 when the lanky Modi landed in New Delhi with a small bag carrying a few set of clothes and some stray personal belongings, the much-acclaimed first non-Congress government at the Centre was reaching crumbling point ostensibly due to the issue of certain key members of the

ruling Janata Party simultaneously continuing to be members of the RSS. This technical issue was given the name of dual-membership within the Janata Party. However, behind the façade of a principled dispute over this primordial loyalty to the RSS was the ugly truth of clashing political ambitions of top leaders. When Modi arrived in New Delhi in January 1979, Indira Gandhi had already begun her political comeback, having been elected in a by-election from Chikmagalur, Karnataka, several months ago.

Because of the multi-levelled involvement in anti-Emergency programmes of the RSS, Modi, despite being a state level leader at that time, had close personal ties with several senior leaders. This included Bapurao Moghe, the All India Baudhik Pramukh (chief of the intellectual cell) of the RSS and Dattopant Thengadi. Moghe and Thengadi along with Madhav Rao Mule, Moropant Pingale, Bhaurao Deoras, Brahmadeo and Rajendra Singh constituted the RSS high command which masterminded all the operations during Emergency and cooperated with the Gujarat Lok Sangharsh Samiti in the underground movement. Without being part of the all-powerful group, Modi had their confidence. As a source disclosed, at that time several RSS leaders in the all-powerful group looked for someone who was a *lambi race ka ghoda* (commonly used Hindustani phrase to describe a person who had the potential to go a long way in his career.)

It was this confidence that led Modi to being assigned the role of the key researcher for a resource book on the Emergency that was being anchored by Thengadi. Modi was given this task by Moghe and the selection was also somewhat prompted by the fact that Modi had written a book in Gujarati on the anti-Emergency movement. The book elevated Modi's status from being just a Pracharak and an able organizer to that of a writer and thinker within the RSS circles. Among the emerging leaders of the RSS, Modi clearly displayed the correct combination of organizational skills backed by an analytical mind and the ability to write, albeit in his own mother tongue.

When Modi arrived in New Delhi, the political durbar resembled a medieval court of intrigue: Charan Singh was back in government as Home minister and deputy prime minister but this hardly signalled a truce between him and his principal rival, Morarji Desai. For all practical purposes, the Janata Party edifice continued to slip into a morass. This however was of little concern as Modi went about his task in a huge basement at Keshav Kunj, the well-known landmark in that part of New Delhi which connects the citadel of Lutyens' Delhi to its western outgrowth. The compound houses the RSS headquarters in the capital and after its Reshmi Bagh compound in Nagpur, is strategically its most important campus.

Among those who assisted Modi — or rather was also deputed to the task — was R Balashankar, a young man from Kerala who had arrived in the capital with the dream of becoming a journalist. The aspiring journalist had grown up within RSS-fold from childhood and went on to work in various mainstream publications before becoming editor of *Organiser* in 2004. But back in 1979, Modi and this aspiring scribe developed a bonding, natural for any two persons from the same ideological school and working together on a project. They would often talk when the elder one would provide the other with his periscope and share his dreams; the two would be joined by several others who wanted to know about the progress of the project they were working on and the stories about the Emergency days.

The exercise on hand was two-pronged: on the one hand there was huge amount of research material and various publications on RSS activities during Emergency lying in heaps and bundles in the basement and on the other, there was a surfeit of oral resource available with various RSS leaders who had gone underground during the period. The printed material had to be sorted out and classified in various categories while the oral histories had to be documented. Modi says about the more exciting part of the project — that of travelling and meeting key members of the RSS network: ‘I had to tour the entire country and meet everyone and take interviews on the basis of their experiences during the Emergency. I collected pamphlets and photographs of that period. This helped me to meet and interact at very close quarters with those who fought for democracy in all states — whichever party they were from. Everyone spared a few hours to talk and for discussions. There were some former chief ministers and there were those who were in power even at that time. N G Gore, George Fernandes and Harekrushna Mahatab were among them. My job was basically to try to put together how the anti-Emergency struggle was waged in the country. I would interview them, take literature from them, research more literature, go through the papers of that time — take out their clippings — and I would bring everything and come to Delhi.’

The people who interacted with Modi at that time remember him as a very hardworking Pracharak who got up at the stroke of 4 am and after going through the morning rigours of the RSS routine would be on his job by 8.30 or 9 in the morning. This is corroborated by some of Modi’s peers who though did not work with him on that project, are in the know of the events of that time. Among the papers that Modi directed sorting, were letters written by Atal Bihari Vajpayee to Balasaheb Deoras, Sarsanghchalak of the RSS at that time. Like most Pracharaks, Modi wore a kurta-pyjama and according to accounts did not sport his trademark beard. He was well-dressed for a Pracharak and never appeared in public looking

shabby. Modi was also very focused in his work and clear about his goals and objectives. He never lost for a minute the basic purpose of his deputation and though he had time for discussions on other issues, he never allowed this to interfere with his objective.

Whenever Thengadi visited the campus, he always earmarked time for one of his favourite wards and took interest in the progress of the project. On the other hand, whenever Modi was in the capital in the middle of his travels, he often drew a small group of people who were riveted by his tales of the days during Emergency. Almost everyone who interacted with Modi at that time — either directly or indirectly — remember him as a person who had a lot of fire in his belly. They also say that he was very prophetic. Among the various prophesies that Modi made then was that the RSS would someday play a key role in governance in Gujarat and that he would personally have a significant role to play in this process. Short of saying that he would be numero uno in Gujarat one day, Modi spelt out everything that eventually came true.

But when asked about this, Modi laughed it off saying that he does not know ‘how that conclusion was reached. Even today it is not in me to become somebody important — to grab a post, such desires are not part of me.’

The project for which Modi was deputed to New Delhi, was over in a few months and he returned to Gujarat to the tasks laid out in front of him by a demanding organization. But the few glimpses of his personality and traits that he had displayed in the Indian capital were hard to forget for the people who interacted with him. Not even thirty, Modi had already displayed signs of what he was destined to become.

CHANGING GEARS

Most of us find our own voices only after we've sounded like a lot of other people.

– Neil Gaiman

The 1980s was an extremely important decade for the two entities that are central to this book: India and Narendra Modi. We have seen so far that how from the time Modi was born into an ordinary lower middle class family in a nondescript town in the western Indian state of Gujarat, he was particularly sensitive to the social and political developments around him. Even at the tender age of six, in 1956, Modi tried to participate in the world beyond his social milieu and distributed badges to popularize the movement for the separate state of Gujarat; on the threshold of his teen years in 1962, he supplied tea to Indian soldiers moving to the war front. Later, his political initiation as a young man was in the course of the agitation against Indira Gandhi's authoritarianism during the 1970s. The 1980s was also the last decade in his life when India played a greater role in influencing Modi than the other way around. In subsequent decades, the process got somewhat reversed and Modi's actions and decisions started having an influence — at times an overbearing one — on the nature of politics, society — and later on the economy — of India.

Modi mentioned to me in the course of an interview that as a child he developed a 'strong hatred towards the Congress' and that the anti-Congress sentiment in Gujarat in the mid-Fifties 'impacted even the mind of the child that I was at that time.' Involvement in the anti-Emergency agitation gave a *participatory edge* to this sentiment. The new windows which opened in Modi's mind — and tactics which he honed over the years — were turned-around by him from 1990s onward when he seized the opportunity to play a significant role in shaping the politics and programmes of his political party, his political fraternity, the state of Gujarat and to

some extent India as a whole.

However owing to the nature of the party he belonged to, even in the 1990s, Modi's influence in shaping India's political agenda was somewhat limited and secondary in nature — when compared to how senior leaders of the BJP determined the Indian political direction. This however, became starkly pronounced from the time Modi became chief minister of Gujarat in October 2001. During the decade following this — mainly due to the controversy accrued to him by the outbreak and his handling of the Gujarat riots in February-March 2002 — Modi emerged as one of the most discussed, divisive and “watched” politicians in India. In the years since 2002, Modi greatly added to the pre-existing social polarization in Gujarat and time and again stoked the “never-ending” debate over what constitutes secularism and communalism in India.

The interest in Modi has been not just within India but even outside. In an analysis titled “India's Most Admired and Most Feared Politician: Narendra Modi”, William Antholis, Managing Director of the Brookings Institution wrote, however debatable, as follows:

I came away thinking that this was a man America needed to know better. He may never be able to move past his role in the 2002 riots. But he is a talented and effective political leader, and will continue pushing New Delhi and not following. He has successfully tackled some of India's toughest problems, but also has touched its most sensitive nerves. He is wrestling with major global challenges, with all the complexities that implies for a man with strong nationalist convictions. One thing is certain— he will continue to be a force in Indian politics.

In sharp contrast to the later period of his career, Modi remained a shadowy figure throughout 1980s playing second fiddle to leaders who grabbed headlines. This is also the decade when Modi impressed his political elders, forged the politically correct — and advantageous relationships — and honed organizational skills.

The 1970s started on a turbulent note for Modi with a desire to break free from his lower middle class moorings and a wife who he did not know. The decade ended with Modi emerging as one of the many pivots of the RSS in the unfolding political scenario in Gujarat. The lack of clarity in Modi's mind in the early 1970s had gradually been replaced by political understanding and a definite strategy about realizing his goal of becoming a political leader of significance — at least in Gujarat. From conversations I have had with leaders and functionaries within the Sangh Parivar, till that time Modi had kept his child marriage a complete secret. Because if this was known, Modi couldn't have been a Pracharak.

As mentioned earlier, after formally having joined the RSS as a Pracharak in 1972, he was slowly given more responsibilities beyond the first charge of cleaning rooms and making tea and snacks. A few years before Emergency was imposed in June 1975, Modi was deputed by the RSS to assist in organizing the first major Sammelan of the VHP in 1972 in Gujarat and this enabled Modi to develop contacts in an affiliated organization which came in handy later. The Sammelan was a success and even if Modi wasn't overtly feted by his seniors, it was indeed a job well done.

By early 1980s, Modi had risen within the RSS hierarchy — and was made Vibhaag Pracharak (Pracharak for a sub-region or division). He was initially given charge of the predominantly rural vibhaag comprising the districts of Vadodara, Panchmahal, Dahod, Anand and Kheda. Shortly after this, Modi was given greater territorial responsibility when the vibhaag of Surat was added to his charge and he was elevated as Sambhaag Pracharak (meaning he was given charge of two vibhaags.) Simultaneously, Laxmanrao Inamdar or Vakil Sahab also ensured that Modi not only kept in touch with Ahmedabad, but also with his mentors.

The opportunity of being able to regularly interact with his seniors more regularly came in the form of Modi being given charge of Sah Vyawastha Pramukh (assistant organizational head) for Gujarat which meant that he was now a Prant Padadhikari (zonal office bearer). In between all this, while pursuing his Master's degree, Modi was also sent to New Delhi to assist in the project that Dattopant Thengadi wished to work on. By the time Modi returned from New Delhi in the summer of 1979, he displayed signs of being clear about his goals and brimmed with a new found confidence.

At that time, India was witnessing a high voltage campaign for the seventh Lok Sabha and was dominated by two main slogans — both coined by the Congress party. The first one: *Chuniye unhe jo sarkar chala sakein* (Vote for those who can govern the country) was aimed at promising stability at the Centre. The second slogan: *Na jaat par, na paat par, Indiraji ki baat pat, mohur lagegi haat par* (Your vote should not be for caste considerations but only for the symbol of the Hand; on the promise of Indira Gandhi) had two purposes — the first to project adversaries of the Congress parties as casteist and also to popularize the new election symbol of the party from the previous one of the “cow and calf”.

The election was necessitated within three years because of a peculiar issue called dual-membership. The Janata Party government headed by Morarji Desai which had two Bharatiya Jana Sangh stalwarts in Atal Bihari Vajpayee and L K Advani as cabinet ministers was reduced to a minority and had to resign. It was replaced by a

breakaway faction from the Janata Party headed by Charan Singh who headed the only government in India that did not face Parliament for even a single day. The reason behind this was simple: when the Morarji Desai government lost majority, the Congress party led by Indira Gandhi offered to support Charan Singh but within days of government formation, withdrew the support.

As a result of Indira Gandhi's cunning move, India did not have a Parliament. The situation was precipitated because a section of the pre-split Janata Party demanded that Jana Sangh members sever ties with the RSS. This demand spearheaded by socialist leaders like Madhu Limaye put Atal Bihari Vajpayee, L K Advani and other former Jana Sangh colleagues in a bind because of decades-old ties with RSS and adhering to the belief that "once a Swayamsevak, always a Swayamsevak."

The issue — that was given the tag of dual-membership, also caused consternation in the entire rank and file of the Sangh Parivar as RSS cadre like Modi had worked to strengthen Janata Party. Even earlier, the RSS cadre and leaders considered that though the movement against the Emergency may have had Jayaprakash Narayan at the helm of its leadership, the spine of the agitation comprised the RSS cadre. The RSS leaders believed that the participation of its functionaries — Pracharaks and Swayamsevaks — had been instrumental for converting the public sentiment against Indira Gandhi's government into a mass agitation. However the RSS found a way out of the dual-membership imbroglio by excusing former Jana Sangh members from attending meetings of the Samanvay Samitis (coordination committees), formed after the Emergency by the then RSS Sarsanghchalak — Balasaheb Deoras — to improve coordination among the RSS and its affiliates.

The verdict of the elections set the tone for the 1980s. The 1980 election once again cemented the position of the Congress party as the fulcrum around which Indian electoral politics was leveraged. Despite the excesses of the Emergency, the Indian electorate showed its preference for a single-individual dominated, unitary political party — the Congress (I), over the two confusing coalitions that made little ideological or practical sense. It showed that Indira Gandhi's call to the people to "vote for those who can govern a country" had worked and her party won 353 seats out of 529. The two Janata parties were almost decimated with the outfit led by Jagjivan Ram winning 31 seats — compared to 203 that the faction had when Desai resigned — and the group led by Charan Singh winning 41 seats. In Modi's karmabhoomi, (land where one works), Gujarat, the Janata Party won just one seat — ironically Mehsana — but polled a significant 36.89 per cent of the votes cast.

This was significant as this anti-Congress vote was the base which was used by the BJP for further growth in the 1990s.

The 1980 elections also marked the point from which religion and religious identity began having a greater impact on Indian politics. The emergence of this trend was in contrast to earlier situations where despite the prevalence of communal riots in several parts of India even after 1947, religion played a marginal role in electoral politics except in the creation of perceived vote banks by political parties. But emerging militancy and terrorism in Punjab and several political developments in Jammu and Kashmir in the early 1980s, along with communalization in several parts of north India, resulted in religion slowly becoming the main basis of social identity. By the end of the decade, the BJP which won just two seats in the election for the Lower House in 1984 won 85 seats in the decade-closing election for the ninth Lok Sabha in November 1989. This happened greatly due to its articulation of the “Hindu cause” which was later neatly incorporated into the new anti-Congress conglomeration’s agenda that coalesced in the late 1980s.

Previously, the electoral debacle of the Janata Party precipitated the blame game within the party. On 25 February 1980 Jagjivan Ram wrote to Chandra Shekhar, the party president, demanding a discussion on the dual-membership issue. L K Advani in his book, *My Country, My Life* writes¹ that, ‘an attempt was made to blame the defeat entirely on the “obduracy” of those who had earlier belonged to the Jana Sangh and had refused to sever their association with the RSS.’ In their well-noted book, *The Brotherhood in Saffron*,² Walter K Anderson and Sridhar D Damle while quoting a *Times of India* report of 8 March 1980 wrote that Jagjivan Ram ‘for his part blamed the party’s poor showing on the “hostile activities of the RSS”, even charging that a “secret agreement” existed between the RSS and Mrs Gandhi’s Congress Party.’ Acrimony and bitterness became a matter of routine in the Janata Party from 1978 especially after the electoral rout in 1980 and non-Jana Sangh sections looked for ways to jettison the RSS affiliate. Political necessity had forced the two antagonistic groups to break bread for the polls in the hope of a reasonable performance but after the debacle, the knives were once again out. The defeat of the Janata Party was undoubtedly on account of the changed public mood but this was further factored by what Anderson and Damle further wrote: ‘It is likely that the RSS cadre was lukewarm towards many of the Janata’s non-Jana Sangh candidates. Reporters covering the March 1980 meeting of the central assembly of the RSS wrote that some delegates asserted that RSS workers did not support the Janata candidates.’

Clearly, pressure was mounting on senior leaders of the Jana Sangh group to break away from the Janata Party. By early April 1980 matters came to a head: on the one hand the Janata Party convened a crucial meet on 4 April to take a decision on the dual-membership issue and on the other, the Jana Sangh group summoned a national level convention. The Janata Party National Executive rejected a compromise formula (worked out by Morarji Desai) to retain the Jana Sangh group within the party and instead resolved to expel the Jana Sangh members from the party. The National Convention that the Jana Sangh group convened actually became the occasion for the launch of a new party. Atal Bihari Vajpayee was made its president and Advani along with Sikandar Bakht and Suraj Bhan were made general secretaries. Advani wrote³ that the expulsion actually ‘came as a big relief,’ because it gave an opportunity to move beyond a party that appeared to have got caught in a quagmire of personal ambitions of regional chieftains.

Advani further wrote in his memoirs⁴ that there was ‘considerable speculation in political sections about whether the new party would mark the revival of the Jana Sangh.’ However, what the Jana Sangh group wanted to do at that stage was spelt out by Vajpayee: ‘No, we shall not go back. We do not want to project that we want to revive the Jana Sangh in any way. We will make use of our experience in the Janata Party. We are proud to have been associated with it. And although we are out of it, we do not in any way want to disown this past. Our stress from the beginning was not on harking back to our Jana Sangh past, but on making a new beginning.’

The new beginning was also in the name — Bharatiya Janata Party — which according to Advani⁵ ‘while affirming our proud links with both the Bharatiya Jana Sangh and the Janata Party, connected that we were now a new party with a new identity. We were determined to start a new course, while at the same time, retaining the old. By including the word *Janata*, we made it clear to the people of India that we considered ourselves to be the true inheritors of the legacy of the Janata Party.’

The RSS had also taken a crucial decision by now and decided to broad base its narrow ideological paradigm by welcoming non-Hindus to become members, and widened its work in diverse sections of society like tribal communities and Scheduled Castes, amongst peasants and workers and gave a fillip to its affiliates active in the areas of student politics and religious canvassing.

The BJP also opened its doors for those who were outside the political fraternity of the Sangh Parivar and this included significant Muslim leaders like Sikander

Bakht — he was made general secretary in the inaugural team, and Arif Beg. The BJP did not openly embrace the RSS but it also did not shun association with it in any manner. The political resolution said: ‘The party reiterates that it welcomes in its fold all members of any organisation that is engaged in the social and cultural upliftment of the national and its people ...and till the time these people believe in the policies of the BJP, their membership with such organisations shall not be considered to be violative of any party discipline.’

The BJP listed five points as its main agenda: nationalism and national integration; commitment to democracy; Gandhian Socialism; value-based politics; and genuine secularism. A closer perusal of the five points demonstrates an adherence to Jana Sangh’s core programme— especially when it pertained to the most important ideas of secularism and matters related to national integration and nationalism — the two issues on which the RSS had earlier maintained an uncompromising stance.

The term Gandhian Socialism was a deviation from the concept of Integral Humanism that had been propounded by Deendayal Upadhyay, the Jana Sangh ideologue. Though a very nebulous ideological formulation, Gandhian Socialism raised heckles within sections of the Jana Sangh group. It also raised fears within the RSS cadre that the new party was deviating from the ideological line of the Sangh Parivar. The main “problem” was with the word “Socialism” as the word was synonymous with “Communism”.

On the issue of “genuine” secularism there was little conflict with the Jana Sangh group as the term clearly referred to a form of secularism distinct from that professed by other parties. The BJP’s projection of the ideas of communalism and secularism was similar to that of the rest of the Sangh Parivar. The party said that genuine secularism meant that there should be *integration* between various religions and people professing them. There was no further elaboration on what constituted genuine secularism and how the BJP would work towards propagating that.

The experiment of forming the Janata Party and the Jana Sangh group’s decision to merge with disparate political parties in 1977 to form an all-encompassing non-Communist, anti-Congress party however resulted in a certain amount of cynicism among some sections of the RSS cadre. This was visible among both senior as well as junior level cadre. The most significant RSS leader who decided to withdraw from active party and electoral politics was Nanaji Deshmukh. He was a veteran RSS leader, active in the Bhoodan Movement in the 1950s and a member of the sixth Lok Sabha from 1977 till its dissolution in late 1979. The Bhoodan Movement was independent India’s first mass-action movement wherein its leaders

campaigns among large land owners to donate surplus land. The nature of the movement lent a moral halo to its leading lights and Nanaji Deshmukh was seen as a cut above his peers. He distanced himself from the BJP and remained politically aloof, spending the rest of his life in Chitrakoot, UP, and it was only after considerable persuasion that the Vajpayee-led National Democratic Alliance government was able to convince him to accept the nomination to the membership of Rajya Sabha in November 1999.

The Nanaji Deshmukh episode underscored a major contradiction in the Sangh Parivar and had a strong resemblance to the debate in the organization in the late 1930s. At that time, the founder of RSS, K B Hedgewar advocated that the organization should not take to active politics and instead remain a philosophical guide for different political outfits. Hedgewar argued that the RSS would confine its activities to character-building and canvassing for the idea of nationalism. This view judged party politics as essentially immoral, or amoral at best.

After the death of its first Sarsanghchalak in June 1940, the RSS was steered by M S Golwalkar and he slowly gave the organization a more pronounced political character. It was during his tenure, that continued till his death in June 1973, that the concept of Sangh Parivar evolved as the RSS encouraged the formation of affiliates including the Jana Sangh. The RSS was not organizationally involved in party and electoral politics but was indirectly connected. The connection was not just owing to its “symbiotic links” but also because of regular “deputation of Pracharaks” to the Jana Sangh. Added to this were frequent meetings of Samanvay Samitis between members of the RSS and Swayamsevakas in the Jana Sangh. These meetings were held not just at the national level but also at state, district and blocks levels and demonstrated that the RSS was indeed the “Big Brother”.

The issue of who the boss was came back to haunt Narendra Modi more than two decades later when he returned to Gujarat as chief minister. At that time in 2001, RSS leaders in Gujarat expected that though chief minister, Modi would remain subservient to the organization like in any other Stalinist outfit. But he felt otherwise and was clear that he won't be “subservient” but adhere to policies and programmes of the RSS. In specific terms it meant that the senior leaders of RSS expected Modi to consult them before taking crucial decisions. However, Modi did not do this and this led to bad blood between the RSS and him. The Prant Pracharak at that time was Manmohan Vaidya who was a few years younger to Modi and had joined the RSS some years after him. But since Modi had held a comparatively junior office at the point of his deputation to BJP, he was thought to be “junior” to the state RSS leadership. Modi's thinking was that after having

moved to another organization, he had to adhere to its hierarchy and not the RSS — excepting when it came to the national leadership. The clash of viewpoints eventually led to ties turning sour.

In 1980 when Indira Gandhi was voted back to power, she dissolved the state assemblies of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, Orissa, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Gujarat. Of these nine states, Gujarat in any case was due for polls as the five-year term of the House was ending in June 1980. When the state assembly in Gujarat was dissolved, the ruling Janata Party had 106 members in the House while the Congress had 54. However by the time the election was held in Gujarat, the Janata Party split further and the BJP had been formed. The Congress swept the polls in Gujarat — like in other states — and won a massive 141 seats in the House of 182. The Janata Party's tally was 21 while the BJP made its presence felt with 9 seats. In Gujarat, Madhavsinh Solanki became chief minister on 8 June 1980. Within a day or two, all the states where assembly elections were held saw Congress chief ministers being sworn into office except in Tamil Nadu where Congress' ally — the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam or AIADMK secured a comfortable majority with its ally. But tragedy was to overtake Indira Gandhi in her moment of triumph as her younger son, Sanjay Gandhi died in a plane crash in New Delhi on 23 June 1980.

For the BJP and the Sangh Parivar this was not a particularly happy period as it was being pulled in two contrasting directions. The ideological confusion within the BJP persisted. While recovering from her personal trauma, Indira Gandhi changed her tack towards the RSS and stopped considering the organization an anathema. The RSS maintained a distance from the BJP and this was a relief for those who were not part of the Jana Sangh flock. The detachment of the RSS was publicly established by discontinuing with the practise of deputing Pracharaks to the party. This practise was not restarted till 1987 when the first set of Pracharaks were deputed to the BJP. Among that first lot of RSS wholetimers who were initiated in the hurly-burly world of party politics was Narendra Modi.

But several years before this happened, Modi was given greater responsibility in the RSS in March 1981. This happened because one of his early mentors in the RSS, Keshavrao Deshmukh, passed away on 2 March. Deshmukh was Prant Pracharak of the RSS in Gujarat and Modi had picked up the ropes of underground political activity from him during the Emergency when he toured the length and

breadth of Gujarat with Deshmukh. Modi learnt the art of political networking while evading arrest. The duo was well-known in RSS circles for having a penchant to suddenly pay an unannounced visit donning some strange garb while driving around the state in a motorcycle. Deshmukh was among the significant influences on Modi and this was not forgotten by him when he penned a slim volume in 2008 on “unsung heroes” of the Sangh Parivar. Modi wrote on each of his mentors and seniors who influenced him early on and they included Deshmukh and Laxmanrao Inamdar.

Deshmukh’s death created a void in the RSS at a time when the organization was attempting to stage a political recovery from the setback of the events stemming from the collapse of the Janata Party government. The main task that was assigned to Modi at this stage was coordination with other affiliates of the RSS. This included the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, Bharatiya Kisan Sangh and most importantly the VHP. Modi was also given charge of the publications wing of the Sangh Parivar in Gujarat — Sadhana Prakashan. The quick rise of Modi within the organization and his working style is still talked about in hushed tones. For reasons that are obvious, no active leader within the Sangh Parivar is willing to come on record while talking about the reasons behind Modi’s dramatic rise. But his one-time associate-turned-foe, Gordan Zadaphia was forthcoming as he had “nothing to lose”. Our conversation on record was a quick exchange of questions and answers on this particular issue. What he said gives an indication of how Modi dealt with critics and rivals: ‘I first came in touch with Narendrabhai in 1982-83 when I got a transfer in my job to Ahmedabad. I was working in a private firm but was a Swayamsevak while he was a Pracharak. We met during RSS programmes but not very regularly as I was working in the VHP as city secretary... Initially I felt he was a committed worker but later realized he did not lead a simple life. His working style even then was just like now (the interview with Zadaphia was conducted in June 2012) — he never liked anyone to disagree but only listen to his commands. Even then he always tried to remove his opponents.’

A defence of Modi has been offered by M V Kamath and Kalindi Randeri in their book, *Narendra Modi: The Architect of a Modern State*⁶: ‘The reason for giving such vast responsibility to a young man of thirty one was the fact that Narendra had proved his mettle. People in the Sangh were very pleased with Narendra’s dedication and efficiency. Whatever task he undertook, he completed with vigour and zeal.’

Modi in 1981 was courting controversy both by his rapid rise and by his visible stylish persona: always turning out impeccably attired and not presenting the

hallmark dishevelled look of his other colleagues. By the early 1980s Modi was known for his sartorial style. One RSS veteran said that initially ‘...we thought that since the standard of living in Gujarat was better than in other states, Pracharaks from there would also have a more affluent lifestyle. But later when I met other Pracharaks from Gujarat I understood that austerity was missing from his life.’

It becomes evident after talking to a cross-section of RSS functionaries across generations that though Modi was hard working, bright and knowledgeable, he was also equally adept at picking his mentors and making use of them for furthering his career in the RSS. Several insiders remember how Modi forged close relationships with several leaders and mention a very important leader, Nathalal Jhagda, who had been organizing secretary of the Jana Sangh — almost like “Pramod Dasgupta of BJP” (the West Bengal leader of the CPI (M) was credited with virtually establishing the party’s organizational base and was a legend in his lifetime). In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Modi personally tended to Jhagda’s needs. A source said: ‘He would go to the railway station whenever Nathalalji had to travel out or would go to the station to receive him. He would even carry Jhagda’s luggage.’ This was however, not all subservience but also had an element of reverence. Modi on his part has never hidden his close relations with the most significant leaders of that time. He also spoke to me without any hesitation about his close ties with Jhagda. But such close interactions with leaders in influential positions were of assistance to Modi and enabled him to rise quicker than many peers.

Barely a month before Modi shifted gears of his political career, an event in distant Tamil Nadu occurred which shook India and gave the Sangh Parivar a window of opportunity to stage a political recovery. In February 1981, controversy erupted in the southern state when almost one hundred and fifty Dalit families converted to Islam in Meenakshipuram, a village in Tirunelveli district. Initially the incident did not find much space in newspapers except the *Indian Express* (and its Sunday edition — the *Sunday Standard*) and previously in *Rahnuma-e-Deccan*, an Urdu newspaper published from Hyderabad. Describing this incident, which in many ways can be considered the starting point of an aggressive Hindutva campaign by the RSS and its affiliates, I had written in my previous book, *The Demolition: India at the Crossroads*⁷:

The incident led to a massive uproar which had echoes for several years... The conversions were cited by the VHP as an instance of “danger to Hinduism”. Allegations were levelled that the conversions had been engineered by Islamic fundamentalists who wished to slowly change the “demographic character of India”. There were also allegations that the Gulf countries had channelled

funds to organise this mass conversion and that the Harijans of Meenakshipuram had been offered monetary benefits in return for converting to Islam. While the conversions evoked considerable interest in India, it also gave the VHP a chance to face the bitter fact that it could not bring about Hindu solidarity, unless the fissures within Hindu society were cemented. This is the time that the VHP and the RSS leaders realised that it could not bring about Hindu consolidation without drawing religious leaders to its fold.

If Meenakshipuram had not happened then the RSS and its affiliates may not have been able to generate “politically-gainful” Hindu unity. If the conversions had not riveted the attention of the country and political players it is quite possible that Modi may not been given such significant responsibilities. Virtually every plan that was drawn up in the Sangh Parivar in the early 1980s stemmed from the Meenakshipuram conversions. By the time the conversions happened, Gujarat was — in the words of A R Desai and Wilfred D’Costa in their book titled, *State and Repressive Culture*⁸ — coming out of “some sort of vacation” for communalism. Communal riots rocked Godhra, then a town with a population of barely 85,000. This was followed by riots in Vadodara in 1981-82. There were several other riots through the early-and mid-1980s with the severest one being in 1985 when the riots resulting from the anti-reservation agitation got converted into a communal conflict and lasted for almost half a year (February to July 1985) resulting in the death of 275 people, injuring thousands and rendering tens of thousands jobless.

Ashutosh Varshney, who has tracked communal violence and riots in India over a forty-five-year period from 1950 to 1995, has recorded a *spike* in the numbers of deaths in communal incidents from the early 1980s after a relative lull period of the 1970s. Satish Saberwal and Mushirul Hasan in their article, “Moradabad Riots, 1980: Causes and Meanings”, in the book *Communal Riots in Post-Independence India*,⁹ have mentioned that between mid-August and November 1980, ‘Muslims in Moradabad experienced the most bloody orgy of violence.’ This riot was a precursor to a series of communal riots in several parts of India through the 1980s. Several other works have also recorded the growing impact of communal riots in party politics. They suggest that by mid-1981, India was on the precipice of a major political upheaval with religion, or religious identity, being the centre of contention.

Besides the outbreak of Hindu-Muslim conflict in several parts of northern and western India, the issue of militancy in Punjab was coming to the fore. In September 1981 the assassination of Lala Jagat Narain, the editor and owner of the Hindi Samachar group of publications in Punjab was an important watershed in the

eventual rise of separatist forces in the state. As a result of this, several sections among Hindus were restive and sensing the opportunity to secure their support. Dr Karan Singh, senior member of the Congress party and now member of the Rajya Sabha, who wore many political hats including being a one-time loyalist of Indira Gandhi, besides being the erstwhile scion of Jammu and Kashmir, founded the Virat Hindu Samaj. Singh claimed that his organization was not to be confused with VHP, but had — according to A G Noorani's review of Singh's correspondence — *Kashmir and Beyond: Select Correspondence between Indira Gandhi and Karan Singh*,¹⁰ 'RSS and BJP men as its leading figures — Lala Hansraj Gupta and O P Tyagi were vice-presidents, Vishnu Hari Dalmia was treasurer and Ashok Singhal, the general-secretary.' All four of them were stalwarts of the VHP and later played a key role in the Ram Janmabhoomi agitation.

For his part, what Karan Singh told Christophe Jaffrelot for his book, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics*¹¹ is revealing: 'The real, proximate cause (of formation of Virat Hindu Samaj) was the conversions of Meenakshipuram...The Hindu opinion was divided even before independence into two streams, one is the RSS *Parivar*, the other may be called the Congress *Parivar*. The latter never call themselves Hindus but they are as good as anybody else. In a way the Virat Hindu Samaj was an attempt to bridge. I, having been in the Congress all my life, felt that there were people who may be turned off, who may not go to the RSS *Parivar* but would come here.'

By 1981 there was a nascent Hindu constituency for the taking and there was a tussle between — what Karan Singh said — the RSS *Parivar* and the Congress *Parivar*. The RSS had already been energizing the VHP and in March 1981 formed its Kendriya Margdarshak Mandal to overcome a legal shortcoming since VHP had been established in 1964 as a Trust and could not be a membership-organization. The new body gave space to the Hindu clergy to get directly involved in the programmes of the Sangh Parivar. This decision was followed in 1982 by forming an even bigger body — Dharma Sansad, a kind of open house that did not have decision-making power but could only make recommendations to the Kendriya Margdarshak Mandal which in turn would forward the resolution to the VHP office bearers.

Meanwhile Karan Singh presided over a Virat Hindu Sammelan in New Delhi in October 1981 and this was followed up by similar sammelans in Mathura, Jodhpur and Patna — often with the involvement of local Congress leaders. Both VHP and Karan Singh wooed each other but individually pursued independent paths. Of

these, the most crucial and situation-transforming programme was the Ekatmata Yagna that the VHP launched in 1983 in which large processions or yatras were taken out throughout India with giant urns filled with water from the Ganga. The VHP claimed that more than sixty million people participated in these yatras and that 85,000 kms were traversed. *India Today* reported in its issue dated 30 November 1983, that '1.5 million 50 cc plastic bottles of Ganga water were sold by the VHP.' There were three main yatras and as many as ninety smaller marches. The three main were from Kathmandu in Nepal to Rameshwaram in Tamil Nadu, from Haridwar in Uttar Pradesh to Kanya Kumari at the tip of India in Tamil Nadu and from Gangasagar in the east to Somnath on the western tip in Gujarat and as was expected, Modi played a crucial role in coordinating the logistics of the yatra on his home turf. This role also had a great significance because Modi still held the dual charge as the Prant Vyawastha Pramukh — a job that entailed not only looking after the nuts and bolts of the organization and each of its programmes but also the difficult task of raising and managing the finances.

The success of Ekatmata Yagna encouraged the VHP to launch another similar campaign, this time under the aegis of the newly-formed Ram Janmabhoomi Mukti Yagna Samiti. By this time, Modi had been given additional responsibility in the RSS and as he told me, he was looking after the affairs of large parts of Gujarat except Kutch. The experience Modi had gained in 1972 by organizing the VHP's Sammelan in Gujarat also came in handy as did the personal relations that he developed and nurtured with leaders from that period.

The Ram Janmabhoomi Mukti Yagna Samiti used popular and kitschy motifs and symbols associated with the legend of Lord Ram. Called the Shri Ram Janaki Rath Yatra, it began rolling from Sitamarhi in Bihar, popularly believed to be the birthplace of Sita, the wife of Lord Ram. The yatra started in September 1984 and reached its destination, New Delhi on 30 October and a show of strength was planned for the next day at the capital's Boat Club^{*}. However, Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her bodyguards the next day on 31 October 1984 leading to the sudden dispersal of the assembled crowds as riots broke out in different parts of north India. For the Sangh Parivar, this was another setback and all functionaries took a step backwards hoping that another opportunity would come their way soon.

For Modi this came sooner than expected and mainly because of political mismanagement on part of the Congress party leadership in Gujarat. In the parliamentary election held after Indira Gandhi's assassination, the Congress won 24 out of 26 seats. The BJP won just one — Dr Ashok Patel from Mehsana winning it for his party, while the other seat was won by Janata Party's H M Patel,

the one-time Finance minister in the Morarji Desai government. The Congress party also secured 53.24 per cent of the votes cast indicating the complete sway over the entire state. The BJP contested 11 seats in Gujarat in alliance with the Janata Party and Lok Dal but its vote share was the highest among allies at 18.64 per cent, indicative that the BJP was slowly beginning to acquire the primary space among non-Congress political parties. Lok Sabha elections were held in December 1984 and by 31 December 1984 the Congress party led by Rajiv Gandhi won an unprecedented 404 seats. The new government was constituted in January 1985 and India appeared to have overcome the emotional setback after the assassination of Indira Gandhi.

The tenure of the state assembly election of Gujarat was due to end in June 1985 along with that of several other states. The Election Commission decided to conduct elections in these states in March 1985. From the early 1980s, the Congress party in Gujarat had chiselled a social coalition that was intended to serve as the party's vote bank. It was given the acronym of KHAM, after the first alphabets of the communities that were sought to be consolidated in this coalition: Kshatriya, Harijan, Adivasi and Muslim. Writing about this strategy of the Congress party, Achyut Yagnik and Suchitra Sheth wrote in *The Shaping of Modern Gujarat: Plurality, Hindutva and Beyond*¹² that it 'changed the entire spectrum of political and social equations,' in the state. The four communities accounted for fifty-six per cent of the total population and it appeared for a while that the combination was unstoppable as this strategy 'was able to project the image of a pro-poor and pro-backward-class party' and this 'virtually eliminated the Brahmins, Vaniyas and Patidars from the core positions of the party in the post-Emergency period.'

Just as the state was preparing for polls, in January 1985, the Congress Chief Minister Madhavsinh Solanki announced his government's decision to increase the reserved quotas for backward caste Hindus in educational institutions and government jobs from ten to twenty-eight per cent. This sparked off a students' agitation resulting in the death of a passenger who was burnt alive when a group of protesting students set fire to a State Transport bus in Ahmedabad. The incident also led to violence in which several top policemen were injured. Meanwhile students of Lalbhai Dalpatbhai College of Engineering, Ahmedabad decided to boycott the preliminary examinations scheduled from 18 February and within a few days formed an All-Gujarat Educational Reform Action Committee (AGERAC) along with a central student anti-reservation body, Akhil Gujarat Navrachna Samiti. In what was a throwback to the pre-Emergency Navnirman movement, the ABVP

was at the forefront of this agitation though the Sangh Parivar as a whole remained somewhat muted on its opposition to the reservation policy *per se*.

Modi it may be recalled was a “kind of guardian” to the ABVP in the 1970s and this association continued till much later. He was also still coordinating between various RSS affiliates and ABVP remained under his charge. It cannot be construed that Modi was the puppeteer of the anti-reservation stir of 1985, but given the penchant of the man to be in the thick of things, it is difficult to envisage that he was disconnected with such a major upheaval — and that too months after a massive setback that the Sangh Parivar had suffered in the parliamentary polls. It is also safer to draw inferences on the basis of conjectures than drawing conclusions on the basis of oral assertions which are difficult to take at face value.

The anti-reservation stir however resulted in polarizing the electorate to such an extent that the Congress party swept the election like never before winning 149 seats out of 182 and securing a vote share of 55.55 per cent. But the massive victory did not enable Madhavsingh Solanki to restore normalcy in the state. The anti-reservation stir continued for almost half a year till July 1985 and had by then assumed communal overtones with riots breaking out in Ahmedabad and Vadodara. The events of 1985 provide a window to study in depth the phenomenon of how caste conflict can get morphed into communal violence by a calculated political strategy. This has been studied by scholars like Ornit Shani, Director of the Modern India Programme in the Department of Asian Studies at Haifa University in Israel. In her book, *Communalism, Caste and Hindu Nationalism: The Violence in Gujarat*¹³, she argued that in Gujarat ‘caste and communal conflicts, despite the potential contradiction between them, stem from similar social processes, and that caste is inextricably linked to the rise of communalism since the 1980s.’

Ornit Shani specifically focussed on the Sangh Parivar’s expertise with coining provocative slogans that became its hallmark in the course of the Ayodhya agitation. The success with imaginative slogans that could whip up hysteria was first evident during clashes which took place in 1985 during the annual Rath Yatra celebrations. The main slogan raised by Hindu participants in the yatra while passing through communally sensitive areas in Ahmedabad was actually a routine slogan that was deliberately twisted to make it provocative. Thus, *Jai ranchor makhan chor* (Hail! Lord Krishna; one who steals butter), was changed to *Jai ranchor mia chor* (Hail! Lord Krishna; Muslims are thieves). Another extremely provocative slogan was *Musalmaan ka ek hee sthan, Pakistan ya kabristan* (Muslims have just one place, either Pakistan or the graveyard.)

The Dave Commission of Inquiry into the riots of 1985 established that from

the very early stages the ABVP had taken command of the agitation. The commission also pointed that the Congress government was opportunistic while implementing the contentious policy of reservations. The commission's report concluded with an opinion: 'Motives of the agitation...(were) opposing the reservation policy but courses of events show that once the planning came in the hands of ABVP supported by BJP and VHP, further joined by Congress dissidents, and some other persons...the motive for continuance of the agitation and spreading the communal disturbances became the ouster of Shri Madhavsingh Solanki.'

By the middle of 1985, the situation was firmly out of hand and the Congress party was forced to begin serious damage control exercises. This was done by replacing Solanki with Amarsingh Chaudhary, a tribal leader. The change of guard was made by the Congress party on 6 August 1985 but this was too soon after such a massive victory and eroded the credibility of the state government.

The resultant political setback to the Congress party and the altered socio-political landscape of Gujarat after the riots of 1985 resulted in the BJP's rise to power in the 1986 elections to the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation. The man who organized the campaign from behind the scenes was none other than Modi. In his interview with me he disclosed: 'I was asked to look after the campaign. Everyone was surprised — there had been a debacle in the country (in the 1984 Lok Sabha election) but we won the corporation elections. Even though we had only 17 councillors earlier we won a two-thirds majority. Throughout the country we developed some kind of a confidence— that we can win again.'

Modi played a significant role in bolstering the confidence of a weather-beaten party. Around this time a major change had also taken place in the BJP: Atal Bihari Vajpayee had been replaced by L K Advani as president; the concept of Gandhian Socialism was virtually abandoned by the party; and religion was firmly on its way to becoming a major leitmotif in Indian politics. The advent of religion as a major factor in politics was due to the decision of the court in Faizabad to order opening of the disputed shrine in Ayodhya to Hindu devotees and the resulting conflict it generated. Within the BJP, the advent of Advani at its helm heralded closer working relations between the BJP and the RSS. It led to the revival of the practise that existed during the pre-Janata Party days, that of the RSS deputing Pracharaks to the political affiliate. Modi was among the first two Pracharaks who began working for the BJP on a full time basis — the other was K N Govindacharya who preceded Modi into the BJP by a few months. While the former was deputed to the national office and made political secretary to the party president, Modi began work in the state unit in Gujarat. This deputation took place in 1987-88 over a period of

several months because as Modi said, in the Sangh Parivar ‘these procedures are often done informally and there is no office order as such,’ when asked if there was any specific date on which he made his shift to the BJP. However, in 1988, he was made the Organizing Secretary of the Gujarat unit of BJP.

Modi narrated the sequence of events that led to his induction in the BJP: ‘It happened over several months. At that time the Organizing Secretary of BJP was Nathalal Jhagda. I used to stay with him in Hedgewar Bhawan. He used to go around in a scooter and at times I would also accompany him on the scooter once or twice a week. That is why I had good relations with him. He fell ill and was worried who would do the work of the party. He was keen that some youngster should come in and do his work. He must have told Atalji and Advaniji — that there is a young Pracharak with us and if he is deputed then he can do something. In the beginning I was told that no official decision is being taken — but you have to go to the BJP meetings when you are called. I was instructed that I must go and observe things without saying anything. I was told to learn what was happening. For about a year or more I did like this — just attended meetings. Even in public meetings, I would go and sit in the back as a student to try to understand how meetings were held and how they were addressed.’

At thirty-eight, Narendra Modi stepped into a different realm, a territory from where he decided to realize his dream, articulated in 1979 in the RSS headquarters in New Delhi and to Gordan Zadaphia very early in his political career, of leading the BJP to power one day. As subsequent events proved, that day was not very far — and in a span of thirteen years he became the first-ever Pracharak of the BJP to become the chief minister of a state. But back in 1988, Modi was no high flying apparatchik. He was, as Bharghav Parikh, the journalist working in the summer of 2012 for, Zee News, recalled: ‘A simple, emerging leader travelling all around the city in an ash-coloured Bajaj Chetak scooter.’ Very soon however, neither would the leader remain simple, nor would his world remain unchanged.

PYRRHIC VICTORIES

In order to have faith in our own path, we don't need to prove that someone else's path is wrong.

– Paulo Coelho

Narendra Modi's rise in the hierarchy of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and its affiliated organizations had been slow and steady in the one and a half decades since 1971, when he enrolled as a young man. But, after the significant victory of the BJP in the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation in 1986, Modi's rise within the Sangh Parivar became meteoric. With that trophy in the bag, it was sooner rather than later, that Modi had more significant assignments coming his way. The year 1986 was also the time when despite massive and unprecedented majority in Parliament, Rajiv Gandhi's political edifice started showing cracks.

Despite more than 400 members in the Lok Sabha, the government headed by Rajiv Gandhi entered choppy waters by the end of 1985 primarily because of pandering to “competitive” communalism. Two contentious issues had been rankling the polity from the middle of 1985. First, on 23 April 1985 the Supreme Court delivered its judgement on what has since come to be known as the Shah Bano case. The fact of the matter was simple: a Muslim woman married to a lawyer (she was also the mother of his five children) since 1932 had been driven out of her matrimonial home in 1975. She filed a case — seeking maintenance allowance of five hundred rupees per month — after three years of consideration in April 1978. The husband retaliated by announcing an irrevocable talaq or divorce on 6 November 1978. But Shah Bano pursued despite her plea for maintenance allowance being dismissed by the Madhya Pradesh High Court. She came knocking on the doors of the apex court and finally secured a favourable verdict in April 1985.

The Supreme Court's judgement resulted in a political storm as the clergy and a

new Muslim leadership protested contending that the verdict interfered in the *personal* matters of the Muslims. Although the verdict found great support from civil society, protests got increasingly raucous and by the end of 1985, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi began exploring legislative measures to quash the verdict. He even began informally sounding out his political adversaries. In his memoirs, *My Country, My Life*¹, L K Advani gives a revealing account:

One day, in early 1986, he (Rajiv Gandhi) came to see me at my Pandara Park residence to offer condolences over the passing away of my father... After he had inquired about my family, Rajiv said, “Advaniji, what do you think should be done in the case of the Supreme Court’s judgement in the Shah Bano matter?” I was taken aback by the question and quickly realised that he had made up his mind to backtrack on the issue and was probably seeking my party’s support for the move.

What Advani quoted, established that Rajiv Gandhi was considering a change in tack on the issue and was soliciting political support. In a matter of couple of months after this conversation, Rajiv Gandhi acceded to Muslim orthodoxy and moved a bill in Parliament. In a rare — and ironic — development, the BJP found itself on the same side as secularists in opposing the government move. The retrograde bill was nonetheless passed with a huge majority in Parliament in May 1986 and remains a major watershed in the communalization of Indian politics.

The Sangh Parivar did not waste the opportunity to campaign that Rajiv Gandhi had made concessions to Muslim fundamentalists. Advani, in his memoirs, while recapitulating the developments and his party’s position on the issue argued that the development, ‘far from strengthening India’s secular fabric’ had ‘greatly weakened secularism and national integration.’ In his interview with me, Modi also said that the Shah Bano issue greatly benefitted the BJP and became a sort of kernel to further the agenda of the Sangh Parivar. Even as the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act was enacted, the country witnessed a sharp rise in communal tensions in several parts since February 1986 due to another reason. This was the Ayodhya issue that came to the fore after a local court in Faizabad, Uttar Pradesh (the district headquarters of which Ayodhya was a part) ordered that Hindu devotees be provided regular access to the disputed shrine, called Babri Masjid by Muslims and Ram Janmabhoomi Temple by Hindus. The shrine, out-of-bounds for devotees of both communities since 1949, was unlocked as part of the Congress regime’s decision to pander to fundamentalists of all hues.

The VHP had been campaigning for the “liberation of Ram Janmabhoomi” for several years in a low-key manner but this was revived in the aftermath of the Shah

Bano judgement. By the end of 1985, inept as it proved to take a firm decision on the issue, the Rajiv Gandhi government opted for, as mentioned earlier, a policy of “competitive” communalism: on the one hand it initiated legislative measures to dilute the apex court’s Shah Bano judgement and on the other it considered making concessions to the VHP by opening the Ayodhya shrine. By May 1986, the Congress secured both its objectives, but as later events demonstrated, it did not politically benefit the party. Arun Nehru, the one-time *handler* of the Ayodhya issue for the Rajiv Gandhi government but who had fallen foul and crossed over to the Opposition, said something “volatile” to a small group of journalists in August 1989. I was fortunate to be in the group when Nehru said that the ‘Muslim Women’s Bill was passed to play the Muslim card; and then came the decision on Ayodhya to play the Hindu card. It was supposed to be a package deal.’

While the government’s decision to enact the Muslim Women’s Bill and the manoeuvres over throwing open the disputed shrine in Ayodhya to Hindu devotees provided the backdrop to the impending meteoric rise of Right Wing parties and also to one of its brightest members, Narendra Modi, the third development — on 9 May 1986 — provided a more direct reason. This was the elevation of L K Advani as BJP president on a quiet Friday afternoon in New Delhi’s Indraprastha Stadium. In the speech after his formal election, Advani dealt extensively with the Shah Bano issue and the “government’s somersault”. He also spelt out what would thereafter be the prominent issues on the BJP’s agenda: ban on cow slaughter, Uniform Civil Code and abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution — all issues which had been on the top of the Jana Sangh’s drawer but had been tucked away during Vajpayee’s era in the BJP.

The party also introspected a great deal and after much debate and discussion by a specially constituted review committee, decided that the BJP should marry the past with the new. In effect it meant that the BJP would continue broad basing support by drawing leaders from outside the fold of the Sangh Parivar but would pay greater attention to the organizational structure. On the ideological level, BJP jettisoned the me-too concept of Gandhian Socialism, evolved during Vajpayee’s tenure, and instead revived the spirit of Deendayal Upadhyay’s Integral Humanism — a doctrine that gave the veneer of the middle path to the hardline RSS position on cultural nationalism. Immediately after becoming party president, Advani also decided that strengthening the organization was the key and decided to attract fresh blood into the party leadership. Several young activists — some from BJP and others from RSS — were included in the team and they later went on to become prominent leaders in their own right: Pramod Mahajan, Sushma Swaraj, M

Venkaiah Naidu, Arun Jaitley, Narendra Modi, Rajnath Singh and K N Govindacharya were among the new faces in BJP's decision making bodies. Of the new faces, Modi and Govindacharya were RSS Pracharaks and their induction meant the revival of Samanvay Samitis abandoned during Vajpayee's time. Advani also decided, in conjunction with leaders of the RSS, to revive the post of organizing secretary in the state units of the BJP — a position manned in Jana Sangh by RSS Pracharaks. It was just a matter of time hereafter that Modi was elevated to this pivotal position in the Gujarat unit of the party. From the beginning it was evident that Modi was Advani's personal choice and he was keen to strengthen the unit in Gujarat because the state was identified as a potential citadel in the future.

From the time of Modi's emergence on the national political scene, his relationship with Advani has come in for scrutiny. After being selected as a member of his team in 1987-88, Modi came into national spotlight for the first time when he helped organize Advani's Rath Yatra in September-October 1990. This was to drum up support for the VHP agitation for the Ram Temple at Ayodhya and began in September 1990 at Somnath, the site of the temple rebuilt after independence. Modi coordinated the arrangements during the Gujarat leg and travelled up to Mumbai and it was a huge success in Gujarat — both in terms of seamless arrangements and public support — and had the quintessential Modi stamp on it. By the time the minority Chandra Shekhar government resigned in March 1991 necessitating mid-term polls, Modi had emerged as one of the stalwarts in the BJP organization in Gujarat.

At this time L K Advani was also looking for a *safe* Lok Sabha seat and he once again relied on Modi to play a crucial role in “giving” him a new political home, Gandhinagar in Gujarat. Advani's decision to move to Gujarat was because the Congress in 1991 sprang a surprise by nominating the popular film actor, the late Rajesh Khanna, to contest against Advani from New Delhi which had traditionally been a *tricky seat* owing to the comparatively less number of voters (just 4.5 lakhs) and a low turnout (in 1991 it was 47.86 per cent). In any case, Advani contested from both New Delhi and Gandhinagar and this proved to be providential as the BJP strongman barely scraped through in the national capital by less than 1600 votes. Subsequently, Advani quit the New Delhi seat and thereafter contested from Gandhinagar in every Lok Sabha election (till 2009) except in 1996 when he opted out of an electoral contest because of charges of money laundering in the Hawala scam.

Writing about the role Modi played in securing Advani's new political terrain,

journalists Ajay Umat and Harit Mehta later wrote in *The Times of India* on 25 September 2011, that ‘it was Modi who suggested to Advani that he should contest for Lok Sabha from Gandhinagar...that was until then represented by Modi’s peer-turned-foe Shankersinh Vaghela (he won in 1989). It was a masterstroke as BJP cadres got charged up in the state and Vaghela was relegated to the fringes. The relationship grew with Advani frequently visiting Gujarat after becoming an MP from the state.’

They further wrote that later on, it was with ‘Advani’s blessings that Modi emerged as a “super CM” even as he ran the government from the back seat,’ in the mid-1990s. Throughout the 1990s and even after Modi became chief minister, Advani’s special fondness for Modi has been well known by both party insiders and observers. In 2002 when Modi was under attack for the role of the state administration in Gujarat riots, it was due to Advani’s *protection* that the BJP leadership gave him a fresh lease of life. Earlier, Advani played a crucial role in the making of Modi as chief minister replacing Keshubhai Patel in October 2001. This relationship however entered a turbulent phase from the time Advani visited Pakistan in June 2005 when Advani wrote a politically contentious message in the Visitors’ Book at the Jinnah Mausoleum, much to the consternation of his political fraternity. Advani had written:

There are many people who leave an inerasable stamp on history. But there are very few who actually create history. Quaid-e-Azam Mohammed Ali Jinnah was one such rare individual... In his early years, Sarojini Naidu, a leading luminary of India’s freedom struggle, described Mr. Jinnah as an *Ambassador of Hindu-Muslim Unity*. His address to the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan on August 11, 1947 is a classic, a forceful espousal of a Secular State in which every citizen would be free to practise his own religion but the State shall make no distinction between one citizen and another on the grounds of faith. My respectful homage to this great man.

Advani previously unleashed a storm within his party and other Sangh Parivar affiliates when at a function organized by South Asian Free Media Association (SAFMA) in Lahore on 2 June, he made another statement that created a huge furore in the Sangh Parivar:

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...I would like all the people of Pakistan to know that the emergence of India and Pakistan as two separate, sovereign and independent

nations is an unalterable reality of history. I am stating this only because I find that there are still some misconceptions and false propaganda about what the BJP thinks of Pakistan.

For Modi these were very difficult views to endorse and he felt that this would totally be rejected by his support base, which he had built after a lot of effort. But while Modi did not go the ridiculous way that VHP leader Pravin Togadia did by demanding Advani's head, he nonetheless began to distance himself from Advani. One BJP insider said to me in an interview after extracting a promise of anonymity: 'Advaniji trying to make himself acceptable to Indian secularists was a political liability for the entire Sangh Parivar — and especially for Modi as a time when assembly polls were due in less than thirty months.' In any case Advani had to pay a price and quit as party president in late 2005. The original poster boy of Hindutva ceased to be and yielded space to the much younger Modi as the mascot of the aggressive Hindu face. At times it appeared that the guru-shishya relationship of yore had been replaced by intense rivalry.

But by the summer of 2012, there appeared to be a thaw in the relationship when Modi, while on a visit to the Indian capital to meet the Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission, Montek Singh Ahluwalia, to discuss the plan outlay for Gujarat, chose to pay a surprise visit to Advani. Barely a month after this, Advani wrote in his blog entry: 'I have often felt that in India's political history no political leader has been as systematically and viciously maligned as Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Bhai Modi.'

This was not the first instance of Advani's "ode to Modi"; in 2007 after Modi had led BJP to another spectacular victory in the assembly elections, Advani had commented: 'I cannot think of any other leader in Indian politics in the past sixty years who was as viciously, consistently and persistently maligned, both nationally and internationally, as Modi had been since 2002. Sonia Gandhi even went to the extent of calling him *maut ka saudagar* (merchant of death).' The way the Advani-Modi relationship unravelled through 2012 is staple diet for scriptwriters of Indian TV soaps: a fresh twist every other day. Throughout the period, a key character was BJP President Nitin Gadkari, whose continuance in office became vital for RSS to reign in Modi. In this struggle, Advani was not with the RSS top brass but he also did not become a Modi acolyte. In the debate over whether Modi will lead the BJP or not, the most crucial decision eventually will have to be Advani's. Will he yield space to Modi? A plausible scenario could also be that till the veteran is active, Modi will perform the role of the second-in-command.

In an informal conversation with Advani in the course of writing this book and a

few days after the entry was made, I asked him about his role in inducting Modi in the first place in the late 1980s. He looked directly into my eyes, and said without any trace of emotion: 'The same role that you would expect a party president to play.' That one sentence once again said a lot without Advani actually elaborating.

Around the time that Advani, after first becoming party president, reconstituted the team of BJP office bearers at the national and state levels, Indian politics underwent a major change of gears and the Congress party was riddled with a series of woes. If one has to zero in on any period when the decline in Rajiv Gandhi's fortunes and the rise in BJP's fortunes began, it has to the summer of 1987. The Bofors scandal, the political dispute with President Giani Zail Singh, the split in the Congress, a series of communal riots and assembly elections in Haryana, the northern state contiguous to the Indian capital, were among the most significant factors that heralded this shift in Indian politics. This is also the time when Modi's political graph starts rising.

So what exactly was Narendra Modi up to when the Centre was on the verge of a death rattle? He significantly contributed to the pulverization of the Congress from all sides. Emboldened by the success of the BJP in the 1986 Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation election, Modi was given the charge to conceive a protest campaign on the issue of inadequate relief for the drought affected in Gujarat. He came up with the blueprint of the Nyay Yatra in the autumn of 1987 which was accepted by the BJP state leadership. M V Kamath and Kalindi Randeri in their book, *Narendra Modi: The Architect of a Modern State*² have said it was, 'Narendra's own brainchild and he conducted it with his usual elan.' The duo added:

Four leaders were chosen, each to head one yatra from different parts of the state. These yatras went around the famine-affected areas ...covering 115 talukas and approximately 15,000 villages. Nothing of this kind, on this scale, had ever been organised before. Nobody had had the nerve to inquire into how relief was being distributed. But here were the yatris doing their rounds, asking questions, seeking information, but essentially showing the famine-stricken people that somebody — in this instance the BJP — cared...On the strength of the information gathered at the grassroots level, an extensive report was prepared and submitted to the Governor of the state on 18 January, 1988. For Narendra, who organised the entire operation, it was a coup of a kind. What made the difference was that he had taken the party to the people.

India Today reported on the Nyay Yatra and mentioned the symbolism used by N T Rama Rao for the first time in the agitation against the Congress in 1983 — motorised vehicles designed as mythological chariots. The popular star from the

Telugu film industry launched the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) and introduced the concept of “Rath Yatra” in Indian politics for the first time with his Chaitanya Ratham in 1983 and with this introduced the fusion of religion and politics. The report said: ‘The Nyay Yatra (Journey for Justice) consists of jeeps sometimes disguised as chariots and drawn by partymen.’ The report quoted Modi: ‘Lakhs of rupees are being siphoned off daily by officials in the name of scarcity. The BJP is committed to unearthing this.’ The report established the emergence of Modi as the voice of the agitation and the clever use of symbols in political campaigning. This strategy remained the cornerstone of the Sangh Parivar’s agitations for years to come and had first been used in the Ekatmata Yagna in 1983 when waters from the country’s holiest of rivers were taken around in a procession.

In a state where the Congress won an unprecedented number of 149 assembly seats out of a total of 182 and secured 55.55 per cent of the vote cast in 1985, the support generated for the Nyay Yatra was astounding. After political turbulence hit the Congress party due to the anti-reservation stir which turned into a full-blown communal conflict in Gujarat and as mentioned in the last chapter, the party was able to usher in some stability with a tribal chief minister, Amarsinh Chaudhary at the helm. But slowly the tide began to turn against the Congress from 1986 as evidenced in the Ahmedabad Municipal Council election.

Modi had an explanation for this. He told me ‘...if there was any state that was among the earliest that started moving away from the Congress, it was Gujarat.’ Modi argued that after independence Gujarat was always at the forefront of anti-Congress agitations: ‘The year 1974 was a turning point. Because of the Navnirman movement, the Congress lost out. Then came the Emergency — the Congress came back after some time but remained in decline. They might have been able to grab power but could never get the mass support of the people.’ Modi suggested that from 1987 onwards the masses began to cozy up to the BJP because it was able to move into the political space of the earlier anti-Congress parties — Swatantra Party and Congress (O).

When Modi’s political career was on the ascendance, the BJP was gripped with an internal debate: should it merge into the new anti-Congress party being formed with V P Singh as its pivot or should it retain its distinct identity and forge a political alliance with Singh?

Finally, the BJP leaders decided against a merger and retained the party’s distinct identity. But the party forged electoral alliances and joined coalitions, like they did in Haryana in 1987 with Devi Lal and his political clan. The year between the formation of the Jan Morcha and the emergence of the Janata Dal witnessed two

significant developments at the national level. It also saw a major shift in gears in the political career of Modi: he became Organizing Secretary of the state unit of the BJP. He however, continued staying at Hedgewar Bhawan to demonstrate that he essentially remained a Pracharak at heart despite being moved to the political wing of the Sangh Parivar.

The formation of the Janata Dal in October 1988 was preceded by several opposition political parties coming together in August 1988 to form the National Front which eventually formed the government after the Lok Sabha election in 1989. The Front comprised the TDP, Assam Gana Parishad or AGP, DMK, Congress (S), Janata Party, the two factions of the Lok Dal and of course the Jan Morcha which was the undoubted jewel in the crown because of the presence of V P Singh. The Left Front and the BJP did not join the National Front but lent political support. By this time, Advani had been re-elected as party president for another two-year term. In the Gujarat unit of the BJP many leaders had argued in favour of a merger with Janata Dal but Modi had been among those who vehemently opposed this. Unlike other leaders — even those who were senior to him — Modi was not unduly impressed with the track record of Chimanbhai Patel. Modi contended that Chimanbhai Patel had the public image of being a rank opportunist and a merger was against the long term political interest of the Sangh Parivar. Modi argued even at that time that the BJP's future lay in striking a different posture and ploughing the lonely furrow. His physical presence in the RSS headquarters and continued proximity with senior Sangh Parivar leaders helped in neutralizing those who viewed the emerging political scenario differently.

The Sangh Parivar by 1988-89 succeeded in consolidating its agitation for the Ram Temple in Ayodhya by beginning to make it a mass-based movement. The BJP's strategic alliances with all anti-Congress parties helped blunt criticism and opposition to the VHP-led campaign as BJP's new-found allies feared losing its support if their opposition to the Ayodhya agitation moved beyond the realm of resolutions and press statements. Moreover, most leaders displayed the proverbial ostrich mentality and argued in private with journalists (this includes several conversations I had with leaders in the Left parties and the Janata Dal through the summer of 1988 and 1989) that there was no real threat to the secular fabric of India because "Indians were inherently secular".

The lacuna in the tackling of communalism by Indian secularists was that the *problem* was posed in degrees: it was always presupposed that majority communalism was *more dangerous* than minority communalism. Since independence there had been a political practise among secular parties and groups

to be more strident in criticizing majority fundamentalism when compared to minority fundamentalism. It was argued that concessions could be made to minority communalism — or rather there was greater need to understand the reasons behind the articulation of minority fundamentalist postures — because the minority suffered from an inherent handicap. This calibration of danger from different shades of communalism gave the Sangh Parivar the window to argue that secularism for them did not mean “appeasement of anyone”.

The sharpening of the communal or secular “knife” of the BJP was done in the course of the campaign for the Ram Temple at Ayodhya with L K Advani as the lead debater. He locked horns with Muslim leaders like Syed Shahabuddin who emerged as a significant voice in the community after a successful career as an Indian Foreign Service (IFS) officer. The BJP leader also campaigned against the government’s decision on the Shah Bano judgement. Besides the Ayodhya agitation, the RSS and its affiliates also built a campaign to celebrate the birth centenary of its founder, K B Hedgewar which was decided over a year long period. Several slogans that were coined in the course of the Ayodhya campaign were outright derogatory towards Muslims — *Babur ke aulad* (progeny of Babur), was a common way to refer to them. Slogans were also sexist — *Mein Babur ka damaad hoon* (I am the son-in-law of Babur). Besides Uttar Pradesh and other states of the Hindi heartland, the Ayodhya agitation found increasing support in Gujarat and Maharashtra. As Organizing Secretary of the BJP in the state, Modi played a crucial role in popularizing the agitation. There is no gainsaying the fact that Modi sharpened his claws during the Ayodhya dispute which finally enabled him to cement his place in the political pantheon of Gujarat and transform the state into a laboratory of Hindutva. In the early years after Modi’s shift to the BJP, a crucial role in his development was played by Advani.

It was Advani who mentored Modi when he virtually handpicked him into his team of state apparatchiks after recommendations from a few trusted peers in the late 1980s. Advani also gave Modi early lessons in how to convert the mosque-temple dispute into one of national identity and political blackmail. Advani was probably the most articulate ideologue of the Ayodhya agitation and it was his single-minded pursuit which pitchforked the BJP from being one of the peripheral political parties with just two members in the Lower House of Parliament into becoming one of the two main political parties. Once again in 2002, it was Advani who acted as the buffer between Modi and a section of the party which was baying for his blood as a symbolic act of atonement for the 2002 riots. But more than the role of any single individual, it was the issue of Ayodhya which enabled Modi to

burst onto the national political stage. But before he got involved in managing programmes that propelled the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, there were some more important things to complete at the state level.

In 1988, Narendra Modi concentrated on securing complete control of the party organization. This is the time when he acquired within the Sangh Parivar, the reputation of being a master planner and an expert in ensuring meticulous groundwork for any major agitation or programme. In 1988, Modi also began working with a person who later went on to become his *bête noire* — Sanjay Joshi. Also a Pracharak, the RSS shifted this Maharashtrian Brahmin from his state of origin to work in Gujarat since the state was emerging as one of the most significant ones for the BJP and thereby the Sangh Parivar. For the Ayodhya agitation a lot of “workforce” was required and much of this was expected from Gujarat and since Sanjay Joshi was considered extremely talented, he was deputed to the state unit of the BJP. Joshi became a state unit secretary and worked under Modi who was then the Organizing Secretary of the Gujarat unit. The two worked very closely as a well-knit team till well into the mid-1990s when there were other dramatic developments in this relationship, of which later.

Meanwhile in 1988, the duo worked at a frenetic pace and decided to focus on what had become a sure shot success formula in furthering the brand of political parties in India: a rath yatra. In the last weeks of December 1988, the state unit of the BJP decided to launch the Lok Shakti Rath Yatra which carried twin messages: first, to project the BJP as a significant non-Congress political alternative in the state and second, projecting Keshubhai Patel as the main mascot in Gujarat. Keshubhai at that time was a sitting MLA from Kalawad in Rajkot and an important member of the powerful landowning Patidar community. He joined the RSS as a Swayamsevak in his youth and by 1965 had risen to become the president of the Gujarat unit of Jana Sangh. An extremely influential member of the party from the days of the Jana Sangh, Keshubhai first contested the assembly elections in 1972 and lost from Wankaner, in Rajkot. In 1975, Patel was shifted to Rajkot-I by his party and won with a fairly comfortable margin. In 1980, Keshubhai again moved to another assembly segment in Rajkot — Gondal, and was once more victorious, this time amongst a list of nine successful BJP candidates. The three-time legislator later became the agriculture minister in the Janata-Morcha government headed by Babubhai Patel in 1975.

For more than a decade, Keshubhai had been locked in an inner-party rivalry with Shankersinh Vaghela who in 1988 — when the Lok Shakti Rath Yatra was planned, was a member of the Rajya Sabha. He had become a member of the Lok

Sabha from Kapadvanj in 1977 after the Emergency but had lost in 1980. His nomination to the Upper House of Parliament in April 1984 — prior to the assassination of Indira Gandhi — indicated that the BJP leadership was building Vaghela for a role in national or parliamentary politics while Keshubhai had been earmarked for state politics. The Lok Shakti Rath Yatra rolled out on 31 January 1989 from Ambaji, the town in Banaskantha district in north Gujarat which is also well known for the eponymous temple that attracts Hindu devotees in hundreds of thousands every year. The yatra was planned in five phases and traversed different parts of Gujarat. Keshubhai's political career and mass following till then had primarily been restricted to the Saurashtra region, but was now well into its way of acquiring a state-wide traction. Modi not only skilfully used various motifs and successful techniques from previous yatras, he also utilized the opportunity to personally interact with BJP workers in district headquarters and small towns. This was perhaps the beginning of Narendra Modi's fantastic PR abilities in developing a band of party workers fiercely loyal to him. Political observers in Gujarat say that prior to this, no state level political leader in the Sangh Parivar had ever interacted so closely with party workers — even during the days of the Jana Sangh — at the grassroot level. Those who knew Modi at that time say that he remembered the names of party functionaries in almost every district and major town. During the party programme, Keshubhai was also weighed in coins and funds were collected for the BJP — a skill which Modi had previously acquired as the Sah Vyawastha Pramukh of the RSS in the late 1980s when he also had to manage the finances.

Modi put his heart and soul into making the Lok Shakti Rath Yatra a resounding success and in this way ingratiated himself with Keshubhai. The two distinct paths of political development chalked out for Keshubhai and Vaghela is what eventually led to the upheaval within the BJP and in Modi's political career in the mid-1990s. This remained a factor even in the summer of 2012 and later during the assembly polls held in December.

The Lok Shakti Rath Yatra concluded in May 1989 by when elections became the prime focus of political developments. The backdrop to the unfolding scenario was provided by three major political narratives. The first one pertained to Ayodhya, the second with the overall issue of corruption and specifically Bofors and the third was the emerging opposition unity.

The year 1989 began with the VHP summoning a Dharma Sansad at Allahabad during the Kumbh Mela. The year was also historically significant for the Sangh Parivar as it was the Birth Centenary year of the RSS founder, K B Hedgewar, besides being the Silver Jubilee year of the VHP. Since 1988 when the RSS decided

to celebrate the Hedgewar centenary in a big way, the Sangh Parivar, among other programmes, had laid great emphasis on graffiti as that was one effective tool to get the message across to a large number of people. As a result there was hardly any major town where streets were not painted with a simple slogan: *garv se kaho hum Hindu hain* (say with pride that we are Hindus).

In February 1989 the VHP announced a series of programmes from the venue of the Dharma Sansad. This included a Shilanyas ceremony at Ayodhya on 9 November when the construction of a Ram Temple in place of the Babri Masjid was to symbolically begin. The day was chosen on the occasion of the annual festival of Devuthan Ekadashi (mythologically believed to be the day when the Gods are supposed to have risen) when a large number of Hindu devotees traditionally visited Ayodhya. The second programme launched by the VHP was the unique Shila Puja campaign. Under this programme, specially designed bricks — euphemistically called Ramshila — were taken in procession to Ayodhya.

The VHP conceived this keeping in mind the reverence most devout Hindus had for Lord Ram and hoped that the programme would secure the support of even the “uninitiated” ones. At the time there were few who understood the potential of the campaign. In February 1989 I met Syed Shahabuddin early one morning for a story for the now defunct *Sunday Mail*, that I worked for at that time. Despite his virulence and my regular criticism of his postures, he was always open to sharing information. That morning his face was ashen — something was clearly amiss. As we got talking on the latest VHP plans, he said: ‘With this programme (Shila Puja) the VHP has ensured that it shall never have to look backwards on their road to Ayodhya.’

The second narrative was on the Bofors issue and as the election drew near there was political furore when the Joint Parliamentary Committee submitted — what was perceived to be — a partisan report. It was this sentiment that was used as a political strategy by the Janata Dal and its emerging allies — the BJP and the Left parties to gun for the Congress in the run up to elections.

The last narrative that provided probably the most decisive backdrop to the polls was on the issue of tactical electoral seat adjustments between various anti-Congress parties and this wasn’t easy as the basic reason behind the initial hurdles was that the Janata Dal and BJP had overlapping political presence in several states in north India. Eventually this was done between the Janata Dal and other members of the National Front with the BJP on the one hand and with the Left parties on the other. This electoral arrangement was the prime reason behind the huge defeat of the Congress: its tally in the Lok Sabha dipped to 197 from the mark of 404 in

1984 and the Janata Dal won 143 seats out of the 244 it contested; the BJP was victorious in 85 out of 225 and the four Left parties won 52 seats out of 128 seats.

But within the BJP there were murmurs that some leaders in Gujarat were not happy with the manner in which negotiations were conducted. Foremost among them was Modi. In his interview with me, he explained at length the reasons behind his disquiet. The backdrop to what he said was provided by the fact that after having traversed through a wide range of political parties and holding several positions in his political career, including that of the chief minister for a seven-month period in 1973-74, Chimanbhai Patel was leader of the Janata Dal. But the BJP by this time wanted to project — thanks to Modi's concerted efforts in making a huge success of the Lok Shakti Rath Yatra — Keshubhai Patel as an all-Gujarat political leader. After the Janata Dal and the BJP were able to hammer out a basic agreement on the need for forging an electoral adjustment, the moot question in Gujarat was which of the two parties would be the dominant one — or who would be the leader of the front and be projected as the chief ministerial candidate. Though this issue was not relevant in the immediate context of the Lok Sabha polls it was of significance given the fact that assembly elections were in any case due in the state in early 1990.

This is the reason why in the context of Gujarat, Modi had a different view from the majority of his party's state and national leaders. Talking about this significant chapter in the evolution of his political career, he said: 'We had an alliance with Chimanbhai Patel but in the BJP, I had a (different) opinion — that we should contest the election alone without alliance. But I was new and knew that the chances of others (my seniors especially) agreeing with me was remote — but I still presented my case. However, no one agreed and they felt that we must contest in alliance with Chimanbhai. During the talks with him, I had no role but I would still go. I would just sit and take notes. I would come back and tell all my people about all these programmes that had been done — like Shila Pujan in 1989 — the atmosphere and mood that it had created in Gujarat. I tried to argue that we could encash on this to our benefit in Gujarat. But I could not convince the people in the BJP. I failed to convince my people but I was sure that we would emerge as the number one party and this would happen very soon.'

Modi argued with his party leaders that contesting the parliamentary elections alone would benefit the BJP because this would enable the party to bargain with the Janata Dal from a position of strength during the assembly polls. He in fact, elaborated on his views: '(I argued) that there would be assembly elections within a few months and at that point if we have a dialogue with Chimanbhai we will have

an upper hand — that was my logic.’ Modi’s contention, as he explained, ‘was that there would be change in Delhi and that the BJP would be the major beneficiary. I was sure that to defeat the Congress we did not have to work very hard — there was so much anger against them. But in order to gain we will have to work harder I argued. Congress is sure to loose — I thought — there was this anger against them throughout the country because of Bofors. The issue was that we needed to be bold to take advantage — but our people were scared — they said —“ Narendrabhai — no, you do not have the political experience.” So then we got into negotiations.’

There were two main reasons why Modi’s views were rejected: first, Advani’s declaration vis-a-vis the Janata Dal when he asserted: ‘if they come, *with* them; if they don’t, *without* them; and if they oppose us, *in spite* of them’ made a few months ago at the party’s National Executive meet in Bombay. Since the Janata Dal had by August-September 1989 veered around to the view of ultimately working out electoral adjustments with the BJP, the party could not walk out of the alliance in Gujarat. But more importantly, as a senior RSS functionary explained, the state BJP leadership barring Modi, had “self doubts” at the time. This was due to the fact that the bulk of the leadership comprised the old guard from Jana Sangh days and they had traditionally yielded the space of pre-eminent anti-Congress party to the Swatantra Party in the 1960s and then to the Congress (O) in the 1970s before the formation of the Janata Party. Most leaders felt that Modi represented the brash, young, over-ambitious elements of the party who falsely believed that the support which the VHP had been able to generate would get converted into electoral dividends. Culturally, the Jana Sangh leaders were comfortable seeing leaders from other parties as chieftains of the anti-Congress forces. They thought of themselves as crowd-managers, not crowd-pullers. But as events turned out, Modi was not wrong in his claims as the electoral results proved.

But before analyzing the verdict of the Lok Sabha elections from Gujarat, it is interesting to recapitulate what Modi told me during the writing of this book: ‘Even at that time (during negotiations) I argued that the 26 seats should be divided into 13 for us and 13 for Chimanbhai. But he said no, I should have more — so the deal was 14 for Chimanbhai and 12 for BJP. Now when the results came — we won 12 out of 12 and Chimanbhai won only 11 out of 14. So we became the number one party — we got the upper hand.’

In fact the BJP was *number one* not just in terms of seats but also in terms of the vote share as it got 30.47 per cent as against the Janata Dal which polled 27.8 per cent. The Congress which won 3 seats (2 of them were from the reserved category for the Scheduled Tribes) had a vote share of 37.16 per cent which demonstrated

that it still remained the largest political force in the state but lost because the anti-Congress vote did not get divided. The scramble for the position of the main challenger to the Congress continued between the BJP and Janata Dal and though the BJP performed better in the Lok Sabha elections, Janata Dal remained the *leader* of the alliance when talks began between them for the assembly elections that was scheduled for February 1990. This was primarily because Chimanbhai Patel was more charismatic than those in the BJP stable — both Keshubhai Patel and Shankersinh Vaghela could not match him in popular appeal. But by then an important development had taken place within the Gujarat unit of BJP: Modi had risen in prestige due to his prophesy about the Lok Sabha polls. As a result, he now had a very important role in the negotiations with the Janata Dal for the assembly elections.

What Modi said about the manner in which the alliance was eventually negotiated was revealing: ‘At that time they (Janata Dal leaders) either did not want an alliance or if they wanted then they wanted to dominate us. At that time we had just a few MLAs so they were not willing to allot many seats to us and we were arguing in favour of 50-50. Till the last date there was no alliance and then both parties filed their nominations also. But at the last minute pressure came on Chimanbhai and also on us to have an understanding. So the alliance was sealed on the night before the withdrawal. We had to pass on this information to our people before 3 pm — we had to give directions for withdrawals. As a result of this, we contested about 80 seats. I played an important role in this period of negotiations. But we were betrayed. We honestly withdrew our candidates but they did not get their candidates to withdraw from selected constituencies. I called a press conference within 12 hours where I stated that they had betrayed our trust — they finally contested 30 seats more than us.’

However, Modi glosses over the fact that even if the BJP gave instructions to several of its candidates to withdraw from the fray, they either did not do so or failed to withdraw due to delayed communications (India was five years away from the advent of mobile telephony at that time and dependent on fairly archaic Straight Trunk Dialling telephony from one city to another). In any case, the BJP ended up putting up candidates in 143 seats (and not 80 as Modi claimed) while the Janata Dal had its nominees in 147 seats. Be that as may be, what was most significant was Modi’s gradual coming of age as he was made the spokesperson of the party from being a backroom Organizing Secretary and addressed the media very ably during the assembly elections.

When the results were announced, the Janata Dal won 70 seats while the BJP

won 67. The former also marginally polled more votes: 36.25 per cent compared to BJP's 33.86 per cent. The Congress had a vote share of 30.9 per cent but won just 33 seats. There were also several places where the BJP and Janata Dal ended up as the first two parties. This indicated that the change in the political landscape which Modi talked about when arguing with his leaders, had already started becoming visible.

Modi honestly confessed that he had entered the negotiations and struck his public postures for the assembly elections with an intention of bettering Chimanbhai Patel in his own game. In the final analysis, in the battle of nerves it was the veteran who began cracking. Modi said that after he mounted the attack on Patel through the media, the veteran came to meet him one day. 'He asked me why I was saying so (that Chimanbhai had betrayed the BJP). I told him it was because that is what had happened. I told him you have ruined the spirit of partnership. He said look, I will not be able to form the government on my own and you also won't be able to, so why have you become so offensive? I just told him that I had become like that because he had forced me to! I told Chimanbhai that I will never attack him personally and that I will always keep a door open so that at a later date we can work together. It was a one-on-one conversation. I was very junior in politics at that time — no one knew me but Chimanbhai knew me, understood what the role of the Organizing Secretary was — he knew why it was important to talk to me.' Clearly, recognition was coming Modi's way, if not completely from within his party, then at least from his adversaries which is even better in the game of politics.

Even after the polls, Narendra Modi tried to press on the accelerator to secure the position of deputy chief minister for Keshubhai Patel. But on this issue, Chimanbhai Patel did not want to concede, especially to a member from the same Patidar community to which he belonged. Modi says that 'there was talk of making a deputy CM but he (Chimanbhai) did not agree to that also but agreed to a formal number two and accepted Keshubhai in that position.'

In India's political history, the parliamentary poll of 1989 is a major watershed because this heralded the advent of the coalition era. After India became independent, the Congress party made a neat transition from being the prime driver of the national movement to the principal party of governance. For two decades the party faced no serious challenge and it was only in the general election of 1967 and 1977, post the Emergency that saw the Congress tasting a bitter defeat. However the Congress party's defeat in 1989 was different because it was not just due to anti-Congressism but was also primarily because the BJP had succeeded in redefining itself. And unlike other times it was not just about the numbers—the BJP increased

its strength in Lok Sabha from 2 to 85 — it was the manner in which the BJP bounced back to its erstwhile Right-of-Centre Jana Sangh roots, the single-minded pursuit of the Ayodhya agitation and its firm resolve to stay away from any fresh merger between non-Congress political parties. For the first time ever, the BJP was able to secure the acceptance of its political agenda on crucial issues like cultural nationalism and its own definition of secularism; finally, it was basking in the glory of witnessing an endorsement of its position on religious minorities by a greater number of Indians than ever before.

In 1989 though the government was formed by the Janata Dal-led National Front, it was the party that appeared least stable and least likely to last for a long time. In contrast to the BJP and the Left Front parties, the Janata Dal remained a hastily cobbled conglomeration of disparate leaders, often vying with each other for the same social base from the same regions. There was little to bind them together except political ambition and blind anti-Congressism. In contrast the BJP had now found ideological cohesion after spending the first six years in ideological confusion. The BJP looked at the verdict of 1989 as a stepping stone in its road to future growth and drew up its strategies accordingly.

At the BJP's National Executive held in April 1990, L K Advani in his presidential speech stressed on how it was extremely important that 'grassroot activity by the party aimed at expanding the party's base geographically and socially must continue unabated; a conscious effort must be made to move eastwards and southwards.'

This meant that the BJP needed to convince its RSS affiliate — the VHP — that there was a need to *go slow* on the Ayodhya front. This was because if the agitation on the Ram Janmabhoomi issue continued with the same momentum, then governance would greatly suffer in the BJP-ruled states of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh and in states where BJP and JD were coalition partners. Because of being implicitly part of the central government, the BJP had to somewhat share the burden of governance and not be seen as an irresponsible party.

But though the BJP was getting used to the idea of governance, other affiliates of the Sangh Parivar were gearing up to resume the Ayodhya agitation. Meanwhile, conflicts within the Janata Dal surfaced and the disquiet within the party which existed from the time of its formation heightened gradually with one leader outwitting the other and thus turning the "multi-party" experiment into a bizarre arena of power play. Some of the lead actors during the time were stalwarts in their own right: Devi Lal, Chandra Shekhar and of course V P Singh who as prime minister was proving to be a master slayer. But during this time the one thing which

shook the fabric of the nation and gave political parties yet another chance to correct, develop or renege on their ideologies was caste-based reservation of jobs. In August 1999, V P Singh announced his government's decision to implement the contentious Mandal Commission recommendations that meant reserving twenty-seven per cent of jobs in government and Public Sector Undertakings (PSUs) in addition to the constitutional regulation of 22.5 per cent for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Within weeks, several parts of north India erupted in protests. The anger spilled on to the streets mainly in urban centres and the protestors were mainly upper caste students and job aspirants who felt angered at the increase in *quota jobs*.

With V P Singh's announcement and the subsequent protests, the BJP felt a huge door shutting on its efforts to forge Hindu solidarity across caste lines. The cornerstone of VHP's Ayodhya agitation was that it brought together different Hindu castes on a common religiopolitical platform. After all, the Shilanyas ceremony in November 1989 had been performed by Kameshwar Chaupal, a member of the Scheduled Caste. With the Mandal Commission award of V P Singh prising open caste tensions among Hindus, the Sangh Parivar felt that it needed to take pre-emptive action before it got too late and the gains since 1986 were completely eroded by V P Singh's offensive. This was because from being partners in an agitation, they were now clashing against each other. A very succinct remark was made in the course of a conversation I had with the late J P Mathur, a very senior BJP leader of that period. Towards the end of August 1990, he said: 'We suddenly realized what a dangerous man V P Singh was. While we are supporting the government, he was very neatly trying to cut grass from below our feet (sic).' Mathur used a typically Hindustani phrase that conveyed the sentiment of backstabbing, to convey the sense of dismay, dislike and despair within the BJP. The general refrain in political quarters and even within the media was simple: V P Singh "had finished the Mandir with Mandal".

The heady developments over the Mandal award of V P Singh overtook the announcements made by the VHP to resume its temple agitation. Made public in June in Haridwar at the conclusion of a conclave of the Hindu clergy owing allegiance to the VHP, it included mass mobilization programmes in villages, colonies, towns and cities and these nationwide programmes were to culminate in the start of construction in Ayodhya on 30 October 1990. This programme however was given the name of Kar Seva — a concept from the Sikh religious idiom which had been popularized as an anti-establishment concept in the aftermath of Operation Bluestar in 1984. In the Hindu idiom, there was nothing parallel to Kar

Seva except for the concept of shramdaan (voluntary labour for public cause) but this extended beyond religious service whereas, Kar Seva was essentially voluntary involvement in community action at a Gurudwara or a Sikh place of worship. But despite the VHP's desperate attempt to broaden the appeal of the Ayodhya agitation, by early September 1990 it was evident that Mandal was taking its toll on the Mandir. This became apparent as the VHP struggled to mobilize Hindus on a matter of building the Ram Temple at a time when they were clashing with each other on the matter of job reservations.

Out of that corner of desperation that the BJP found itself in, it pulled out a programme that scripted a new political life for the BJP, for L K Advani and probably more importantly, for Narendra Modi. Advani writes about it in his memoirs³: 'In early September, when Kamala (his wife) and I were spending a quiet evening in our Pandara Park home, Pramod Mahajan, one of the four General Secretaries of the BJP dropped in. Although it was a casual visit, it was obvious that Ayodhya was uppermost on his mind too... "I am thinking of undertaking a *padyatra* (journey on foot) from Somnath to reach Ayodhya on 30th October," I told Pramod and Kamala...Pramod a meticulous organiser of political campaign, quickly began a mental exercise...After a pause, he remarked, "A *padyatra* is a good idea but not very useful for the purpose you have in mind. You'll at the most be able to cover a small part of Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi and half of UP"...I asked him for an alternative...'

The Rath Yatra announcement was made in New Delhi in September 1990 by Advani at a press conference and the route and other logistical details of the programme were announced by Pramod Mahajan — who was also appointed the national coordinator of the programme. This programme pitchforked Advani into international prominence, and ensured the end of the tenure of V P Singh in less than one year after he assumed office. By this time the mood in the RSS and its affiliates had transformed dramatically: from despondency in the weeks after the announcement by V P Singh, there was a buzz of excitement at the idea of Advani undertaking a yatra. It was to start from Somnath, the site of perennial historical communal clashes and the town where the temple, if readers will recall, was rebuilt after independence with the active endorsement of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and India's first President, Dr Rajendra Prasad. The First Citizen in fact, attended the opening ceremony of the rebuilt temple despite advice to the contrary by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Advani's official website, explains the decision behind choosing Somnath and Ayodhya as the starting and concluding points of his yatra:

It was at Somnath that the assault on Hindu temples and shrines, the living symbols of an ancient nation, by Islamic invaders began... The temple was rebuilt, only to be put to sword again, and again, and yet again.... the destroyed temple was rebuilt at the initiative of Sardar Patel as a symbol of resurgent Indian nationhood. Shri Advani chose Somnath as the starting point of his yatra because the reconstruction of the shrine on the rubble of loot and plunder was the first chapter in a journey to “preserve the old symbols of unity, communal amity and cultural oneness”. The Yatra was scheduled to conclude at Ayodhya because the liberation of Ram Janmabhumi would be the second.

In terms of a political agitation, the scale of the Rath Yatra was truly epic — a yatra was literally a pilgrimage but in Advani’s case, this was with a political purpose. In just five weeks, Advani intended to travel 10,000 kilometres through Gujarat, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Haryana, Delhi, Bihar and eventually Uttar Pradesh. The rath drew heavily on Hindu symbolism — designed like a classic chariot based on images drawn from the battle of Kurukshetra in the epic tale of Mahabharata. Onto this, the BJP superimposed its election symbol — the lotus, making it evident that the Rath Yatra was a tool to further the electoral prospects of the party.

The Rath Yatra was Modi’s first major national-level assignment as he was given not only the charge of coordinating the Gujarat leg but was also asked to travel up to Bombay with the procession. The experience as Modi told me, gave him ‘an opportunity to develop my organizing capacity.’ Modi was on top of his job from the word go. On 13 September 1990, as General Secretary (Organization) of the Gujarat unit, Narendra Modi addressed the media formally as he announced the route of the yatra and its associated programmes and made a “political” statement to the people outside his party. Modi was no longer one of the men in the background while other leaders addressed the media. Rather, he had become the *lead* character in the theatre enacted for the media in Ahmedabad.

Modi wasted no time and fired a missive at the critics of the Ayodhya agitation. He held forth on his idea of cultural nationalism and explained why the replacement of the existing shrine in Ayodhya with a grand Hindu temple that deified Lord Ram was essential for India’s national identity. Modi also issued a stern warning to the Central and Uttar Pradesh governments that if the Rath Yatra was stopped and if the VHP programme halted, the BJP would not think twice before withdrawing support from the V P Singh government. Modi’s key associate at the time, Pravin Togadia, the oncologist-turned-politician, who had a lower public

profile than Modi even at that time and was general secretary of the Gujarat unit of the VHP, also addressed a press conference in the state capital and said that 101 Ram Jyoti Yatras and 15,000 Vijay Dashami Vijay Yatras (various programmes that the VHP had announced to generate support for the Kar Seva from 30 October) would cover the entire state. He also declared that 100,000 volunteers from Gujarat would head for Ayodhya and they would include 50,000 trident-wielding Bajrang Dal activists and 100 tribal members of the VHP.

In 1990 both Modi and Togadia were virtually unknown outside Gujarat but in later years became virtual household names as votaries of hardline Hindutva. Although both espoused similar ideologies there was a stark difference in the sense that Togadia perhaps played out to the front benchers whereas Modi was looking for a niche audience from the beginning. Modi was clearly using his rabid posture to acquire political power whereas Togadia had short-term goals in his sight. Modi was always looking for linking his present to a much wider framework whereas Togadia was looking for the saturation point of his immediate context. Nalin Mehta in his essay “Ashis Nandy vs. The state of Gujarat” in the book, *Gujarat Beyond Gandhi: Identity, Conflict and Society*⁴ edited by him and Mona G Mehta, puts it rather succinctly. The essay says that in 1990, Modi used contrasting tactics: on the one hand he warned that the BJP was even prepared for a Jallianwalla Bagh type action by the Centre and Uttar Pradesh government in Ayodhya on 30 October. Simultaneously, Modi when asked a specific question about the possibility of riots occurring during the course of the Rath Yatra discounted the chances but added that “communal tension was interwoven into the life of Gujarat.”

This was the early Modi whose utterances evoked contrasting emotions of dismay, frenzy and unrest. Even in 1990, it was evident that Modi believed that securing the “mainstream” intelligentsia on his side was a waste of time — that it would not yield any electoral dividends. While others in his party — ranging from Advani to K N Govindacharya picked a leaf or two from Indira Gandhi’s book of political strategies by wooing the so-called opinion makers, Modi was clear and felt that the people would force the intelligentsia to change their views if they had to remain relevant and couch the majority view in the veneer of social theory to give it intellectual respectability. Togadia went one level below to the lowest common denominator.

Modi’s style right from the beginning was therefore cleverly strident and quite like what journalist Swapan Dasgupta later wrote in *The Times of India* in December 2007 about his public performances, ‘rock concerts marked by spectacular exhibitions of mass frenzy.’ From the early accounts of Modi’s public

utterances, private interactions that he had with people I met in the course of researching this book, my own interactions with him — first in a cursory manner during the Rath Yatra — and later in greater doses during Ekta Yatra and again from the mid-1990s till his return to Gujarat as chief minister, it was evident that he was always playacting — staging a performance. There was an element of grandstanding in every thing he said — either to the media (collectively or individually). Taking the cue from Dasgupta, I often felt that Modi's "concerts" were trying to convey the message that is best summed, albeit in a different context, by Leonard Cohen: *They sentenced me to twenty years of boredom... For trying to change the system from within... I'm coming now, I'm coming to reward them... First we take Manhattan, then we take Berlin.*

The fact that his performances were crafted was noticed by several journalists in the months after he became chief minister. In the short period that they had before getting swamped with reportage on post-Godhra violence, many of them earned Modi's ire by digging up his involvement with theatre as a child and that he had excelled as an actor — a trait that was in evidence during public meetings.

A contentious opinion on Modi was expressed in the May 2002 issue of the monthly journal *Seminar* by Ashis Nandy in his essay "Obituary of a Culture". He wrote about his interview (along with Achyut Yagnik) with Modi when he was 'a nobody, a small-time RSS pracharak trying to make it as a small-time BJP functionary.' Nandy was particularly pungent when he wrote:

It was a long, rambling interview, but it left me in no doubt that here was a classic, clinical case of a fascist. I never use the term "fascist" as a term of abuse; to me it is a diagnostic category comprising not only one's ideological posture but also the personality traits and motivational patterns contextualising the ideology.

Modi, it gives me no pleasure to tell the readers, met virtually all the criteria that psychiatrists, psycho-analysts and psychologists had set up after years of empirical work on the authoritarian personality. He had the same mix of puritanical rigidity, narrowing of emotional life, massive use of the ego defence of projection, denial and fear of his own passions combined with fantasies of violence — all set within the matrix of clear paranoid and obsessive personality traits. I still remember the cool, measured tone in which he elaborated a theory of cosmic conspiracy against India that painted every Muslim as a suspected traitor and a potential terrorist. I came out of the interview shaken and told Yagnik that, for the first time, I had met a textbook case of a fascist and a prospective killer, perhaps even a future mass murderer.

In any case Modi remained at that time, what Nandy disparagingly wrote “a nobody” at least as far as the world outside the Sangh Parivar was concerned. But Modi’s time was nearing — if not to become a helmsman immediately but at least to become a principal charioteer. By the time this opportunity came to Modi in the autumn of 1991, the country’s political landscape had altered greatly. India had by this time completed another parliamentary election after the fall of two successive governments — one with V P Singh and the other with Chandra Shekhar as prime ministers. In the course of the parliamentary election, Rajiv Gandhi had been assassinated and this largely led to the Congress party securing more seats owing to the *sympathy factor*. As a result of this the party got another shot at governance, this time under the leadership of P V Narasimha Rao who was pulled out of political retirement.

For the BJP it had been a remarkable run starting with the 1989 parliamentary election and extending to the verdict of 1991. There was near unanimity within the media that the “victor came second” (Advani added a spin to this phrase by adding that the BJP had become the *government in waiting*) because the BJP increased its tally to 120 from 85 and its vote share jumped from 11.36 per cent to 20.04 per cent. More importantly, these seats had been won by the party without forging alliances with any other party and this made the BJP the “real gainer”. Added to this was the proverbial *icing on the cake*: the BJP won 4 seats in Karnataka — thereby making inroads in the south of India for the first time ever.

The BJP also secured a clear majority in Uttar Pradesh where the party leader, Kalyan Singh, became chief minister in June 1991. The villain of October 1990, *Maulana Mulayam* as the Yadav chief minister was called in the aftermath of the events in Ayodhya had been worsted in his own game and the Janata Dal, already in a shambles was divided into two clear factions and heading for another formal split. The BJP also had the satisfaction of settling the political agenda from the time Advani embarked on the Rath Yatra, more so from 23 October when he was arrested in Samstipur, Bihar — a decision to which the party retaliated by withdrawing support to the V P Singh government.

As far as Gujarat was concerned, the BJP won 20 out of the 26 seats and secured a vote share of 50.2 per cent. The BJP also established a lead in 119 assembly seat segments while the Congress and its ally JD (Gujarat) in comparison could only manage 45. The BJP landslide in Gujarat was more significant because polling was held after Rajiv Gandhi’s assassination, a tragedy that ironically benefitted his party in all states barring Gujarat. In 1991, Modi also made a significant breakthrough — he was made a member of the BJP’s All India Election Committee in recognition

for his fantastic organizing capacity, keen political insight and eye for detail. For him it naturally became a matter of pride.

A short while after the election, Modi was given the charge of being the *saarathi* (charioteer) to another BJP leader: Dr Murli Manohar Joshi. The one-time Professor of Physics in Allahabad university who also had two former prime ministers, V P Singh and Chandra Shekhar among his students, he had become party president in February 1991 after having bypassed seven vice presidents and a number of general secretaries. He expectedly desired to etch his place permanently in India's political history and what better way to do than what had become a time tested formula by now: a rath yatra. Dr Joshi called it the Ekta Yatra and it was to run from Kanyakumari on the southern tip of India to Srinagar, the heart of the militancy affected Valley in the state of Jammu and Kashmir.

Modi was handpicked by Joshi to be his charioteer — or rather play the role that Pramod Mahajan had done for L K Advani — because by now Narendra had impressed senior leaders in New Delhi with his multidimensional skills and espousal of the ideological framework of the Sangh Parivar on the Ayodhya issue to the satisfaction of all. Moreover, as member of the All India Election Committee, Modi had made a mark with his inputs and intimate knowledge of various parts of the country and the details of the strengths of the RSS and its affiliates in various regions.

I asked Modi about his experience in the Ekta Yatra and he said: 'After the struggle against Emergency in which I got a chance to participate and which gave me a great opportunity to interact and get exposure to democratic forces, this was the next period of my political education. The Ekta Yatra gave me a chance to understand the geography of the country, its people, its culture — various political angles in different parts and a chance to understand the temperament of people and leaders. I drew all the plans for the yatra based on what I learnt. I got to understand that if I have to do one event in Kerala, then how should I do it. If I have to take the yatra through Kerala, then how should I do it and how it will have to be different in Tamil Nadu, if it is Bihar then how, and what will have to be different in Assam. All these things gave me a great opportunity and since I was basically an organizational man, it helped me to develop my skills.'

Prior to the launch of the forty-seven-day-long yatra in December 1991 from Kanyakumari, Modi did a reconnaissance of the entire route after drawing a roadmap on paper. There were a few places where he made minor changes — especially when he found inadequate facilities at the towns and cities planned for night halts. Modi paid very close attention to two aspects: the safety of the route

and availability of telephone lines. Modi was particularly concerned about security threats and spoke at length to party functionaries about it — this was of grave concern after the yatra entered north India, especially beyond New Delhi through Haryana, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir. Modi also interacted at several of these places with police officials and as a party functionary told me at that time, he ‘paid great attention to what they said about threat perception.’ In an attempt to create a halo around Modi — and to drive home his *cock-a-snook* approach towards a certain type of adversary, M V Kamath and Kalindi Randeri have — if I may use this word — gushed in their book, *Narendra Modi: The Architect of a Modern State*⁵: ‘Narendra hit the road without any security around him and even refused to wear a bullet-proof jacket.’

As always Modi paid special attention to media coverage. Given the fact that television journalism was in its infancy — and state controlled — in the early 1990s, the entire focus was on print media. Computers were virtually non-existent and the few newspapers and magazines which used them, had no external network and computer connectivity. Most journalists working for Indian papers and periodicals were also not computer-literate at that time and were dependent on typewriters for filing reports. Technology however by then had made old-style Telex machines almost redundant and even when Advani previously embarked on his Rath Yatra, most accompanying journalists used typewriters and faxed their reports to the headquarters where data-entry operators would key-in the reports. Only a handful of reporters carried personal portable typewriters and as a result most would scurry to the nearest post office during tours in search of typewriters.

Modi was aware that he needed the media to be on his side to make the Ekta Yatra a success — it was after all also a passport for him to greater glory. This was a trait he picked up very early on in his political career and as subsequent events demonstrated, he has often been several steps ahead of his peers and rivals when it involves media management. Back in 1991, Modi instructed the small band of loyalists, who were deputed to him to carry several fax machines and coordinate with the party units in the towns and cities designated as “media halts” to ensure that small media centres were set up for the purpose. The centres were to have adequate typewriters and telephones with STD facilities. In most cases, the cost of making calls and faxing reports was borne by the local party units.

Modi also commissioned two separately designed raths — both mounted on Light Commercial Vehicles (LCVs) — for Joshi. The first one — on which Joshi travelled was white in colour and had a comfortable platform behind the driver’s cabin; the other was saffron, had a slightly smaller platform and was designed like a

south Indian temple. This was the stand-by vehicle to be used in case of any exigency. It also carried urns containing waters from rivers considered holy by Hindus. After Modi was through with the preparations for the Ekta Yatra, he came to New Delhi towards the end of November 1991. I asked him how the Ekta Yatra was different from Advani's Rath Yatra since he was involved with both. His reply was spontaneous: 'Rath Yatra was a war-time manoeuvre but this (Ekta Yatra) is a peace-time exercise.'

But when I caught up with the Ekta Yatra in Nagpur in December 1991 after it traversed through southern states for close to a fortnight, there was little talk of peace. To me it seemed like an exercise in futility with no clear agenda. The Joshi cavalcade in which we travelled at breakneck speed consisted of scores of vehicles — mostly Maruti vans. Most of these vehicles were of local party functionaries who travelled till the group from the next town on the route caught up. They were the local escorts. But the core yatris had almost a dozen vehicles at their disposal and though Modi travelled mainly with Joshi, he constantly interacted with everyone in the group. Modi also paid particular attention to reporters and personally enquired if they had faced any difficulties in transmitting their reports. Joshi as the lead yatri, was busy packing his public meetings with vitriol against the Centre and its inability to tackle militancy and terrorism in Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir. On the surface, it appeared a seamless programme with great bonhomie among the members.

Also what belied the "peace exercise" that Modi was espousing was a difference of opinion between the charioteer and the leader. Vinod K Jose mentions an episode in *The Caravan* in a profile of Modi that demonstrates how Modi often earned the ire of Joshi because of 'his inability or unwillingness to follow orders,' a trait that Modi was perhaps born with. Jose quotes an unnamed party leader and writes: 'Modi often diverged from Joshi's instructions,' the party leader said, and related one anecdote: 'Joshi had requested that all those who travelled with the yatra, from the biggest national leaders to the smallest local volunteers, should eat their meals together. But Modi often disappeared and went off on his own. When the Yatra reached Bangalore, Modi went missing with Ananth Kumar, another leader from Bangalore,' the party leader said. 'Joshi was furious when he did not find Modi eating with us. The next morning, Joshi scolded Modi in front of us, saying he should behave himself, and discipline is sacrosanct, even if he organised the Yatra.'

On the positive side however, Modi's contribution to the yatra was significant as he deftly created a customized band of activists for the event. Some of them were to accompany Joshi for the entire length of the yatra while others were to join for

shorter durations. This group was given the name of kesariya vahini (saffron brigade) and were assigned to lend muscle and vocal power to the Ekta Yatra. A majority of them were drawn from ABVP, Bajrang Dal and VHP. Modi was instrumental in another innovation: these volunteers were enlisted only after they signed a *pledge form* in which a volunteer had to promise to “sacrifice everything” for the cause of Bharat Mata. The plan naturally drew criticism from critics of the BJP who argued that the party wanted to precipitate matters and force a confrontation with militants in Kashmir.

For several reasons including those that can be attributed to meticulous planning, the Ekta Yatra drew more than expected crowds and people turned out to hear the BJP’s policy on nationalism and what Joshi suggested should be the correct strategy to tackle militancy in Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir. Meanwhile Narasimha Rao’s government was under tremendous pressure to act by the time the yatra reached New Delhi in early January 1992. Matters got out of hand when militants in Punjab opened fire on the yatriis sending out a clear message that despite the administration’s support, terror could be wreaked by those wielding the gun. By the time the Ekta Yatra reached Jammu and Kashmir, the situation was virtually out of control as thousands of kesariya vahini volunteers were aiming to march into Srinagar — an event that the government could ill afford.



Vadnagar Railway Station. Photo credit: Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay



Narendra Modi's home in Vadnagar. Photo credit: Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay



A young Modi on the banks of a Himalayan river. Photo credit: courtesy, www.narendramodi.in



Modi with his mentor, Laxmanrao Inamdar alias Vakil Sahab in the late 1980s.
Photo credit: courtesy, Sanskardham



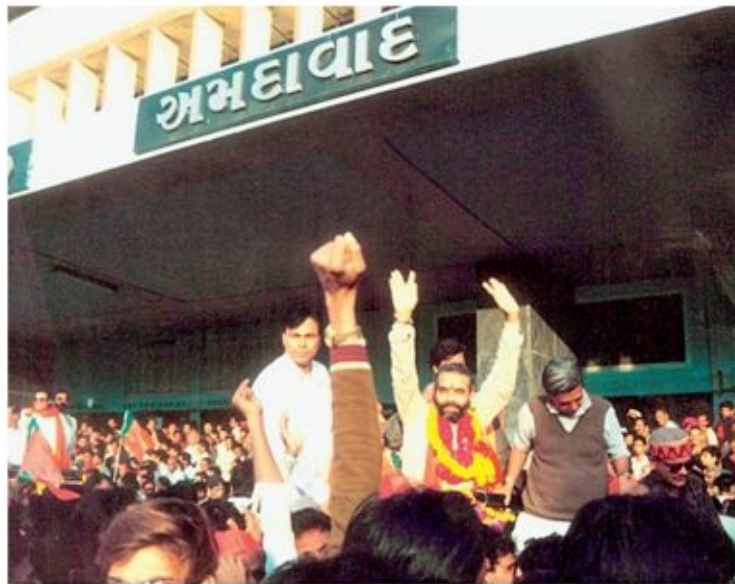
The Navnirman Movement, 1974. Photo credit: courtesy, www.narendramodi.in



Modi standing fourth from right, just after the Emergency in 1977 with other RSS Pracharaks. Vakil Sahab, in a vest, seated extreme right. Photo credit: courtesy, Sanskardham



Modi overseeing Ekta Yatra arrangements, 1992.
Photo credit: courtesy, www.narendramodi.in



Modi returns to a hero's welcome after Ekta Yatra, 1993.
Photo credit: courtesy, www.narendramodi.in



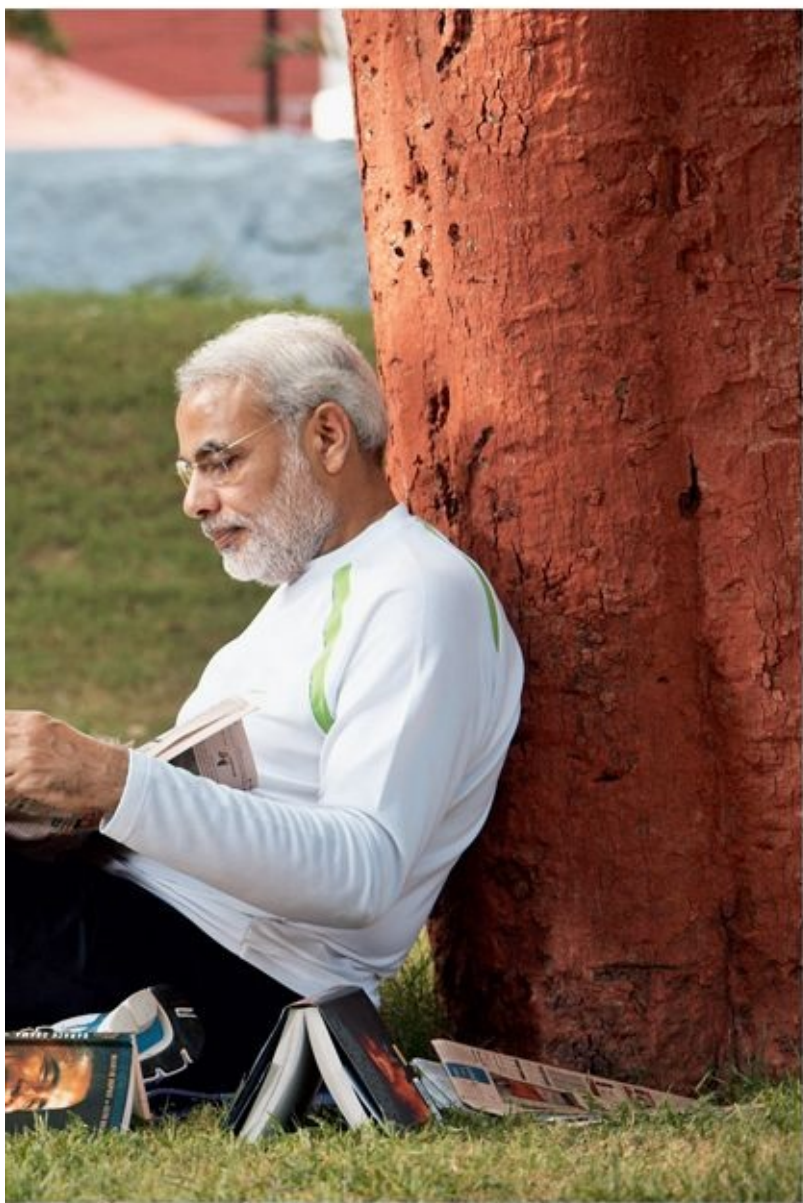
Modi, standing extreme right, during the Swarna Jayanti Yatra, 1997 with K I. Sharma, extreme left, M L Khurana, second from left and L K Advani, third from left.
Photo credit: courtesy, Sanjay Sharma



Modi, sitting extreme right with former PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee, seated in the middle and the late K S Sudarshan, former RSS Sarsanghchak, seated extreme left.
Photo: courtesy, Sanskardham



Modi on a quiet morning in Gandhinagar. Photo credit: courtesy, www.narendramodi.in





Pirana Dargah on the outskirts of Ahmedabad, 2012. Photo credit: Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay



With Gujarat's brand ambassador, Amitabh Bachchan.
Photo credit: courtesy, www.narendramodi.in



Modi with a "potential ally" J Jayalithaa, CM of Tamil Nadu, at the chief ministers' conference; Delhi CM Sheila Dixit seen in foreground. Photo credit: courtesy, Jitender Gupta, *Outlook*



Modi with Muslim women during the Sadbhavna Mission, 2011.
Photo credit: courtesy, Jitender Gupta, *Outlook*



With actor Ajay Devgn in Ahmedabad, May 2012. Photo credit: courtesy, www.narendramodi.in

However, the Ekta Yatra ended as a bit of a dampener as Joshi and his close associates slipped out of the cavalcade and were flown into Srinagar in a defence plane as they themselves realized the perils of taking a foolhardy decision.

A rather dispassionate analysis was done by Christophe Jaffrelot in *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics: 1925 to the 1990s*⁶:

The Ekta Yatra ended in anti-climax. The procession was halted at Jammu because of the risk of an attack by Kashmiri militants and a meagre contingent of 67 BJP workers was flown to Srinagar courtesy of the Indian Air Force. Joshi hoisted

the flag in a brief ceremony that was ridiculed by the press. Even RSS cadres expressed their disappointment at what turned out to be a fiasco. The Ekta Yatra had certainly not had an impact comparable to Advani's Rath Yatra.

Modi however disagreed with this thesis. More than two decades later, he told me: 'Ekta Yatra was not a failure. It was a success because of the awareness that was built and the mass movement that it generated — this was the first time that in India there was such a movement against terrorism — it sent the message that the country needed to be united while fighting terrorism. It also conveyed the message that terrorism could not be seen from the prism of Hindu-Muslim ties, that it is a war against the country and this has to be combated together. We were successful in conveying this message throughout the country. The entire purpose however got eclipsed on the issue of hoisting the Indian flag (on Republic Day) in Srinagar's Lal Chowk.' But at a later point in the interview, Modi contended that all agitations do not necessarily have to end in success: 'It is not necessary that all the time there will be so much anger against the government. But the process educates people — the process of political awareness building is a constant one and must continue. If you look at Mahatma Gandhi's life then you will find that each agitation led to increased awareness in a new area.'

But on the issue of how Joshi and his associates — including Modi — eventually flew away almost abandoning the entire entourage, he had a different version than what was reported in the media: 'Because of landslides we could not go.... so had to go by helicopters. But we went there and completed our work. Then on 24 January there was a very powerful bomb blast in Srinagar — right in the police headquarters... many officers were killed.' I asked Modi if in retrospect he agreed with Joshi who felt that the Ekta Yatra had been "sabotaged" by a section of party apparatchiks stationed in Delhi, Modi disagreed vehemently and said: 'I would like to put it on record that I as the person organizing the Yatra, did not face any obstacles or problems in any state. I never got a cold response from any leader. Everyone was supportive of the yatra and gave their best. What was published in the media at that time was a completely different matter. I do not think we can evaluate the Ekta Yatra on the basis of the media coverage. Even Advaniji's Rath Yatra — it never got much positive response from the media — on the contrary it has been painted negatively in the media.'

Modi's assessment of Ekta Yatra is on expected lines because belittling the programme would have undermined his political career — after all, his first foray in national politics ended in a damp squib. Modi had been a perfect event manager of an ill-timed programme started with the aim of securing a place in the Hindutva

pantheon for its protagonist — Murli Manohar Joshi. But in the world of politics, supervisors have limited shelf life and are not remembered in history. The *quod erat demonstrandum* of Ekta Yatra was that Joshi failed to reach the stature of the Vajpayee-Advani duo, a fact underpinned by the denial of a second term to Joshi as party president in 1993. As far as Modi was concerned, his hopes of Joshi emerging as an equal of Advani — and with that his emergence as a key aide, turned out to be a false one.

The Ekta Yatra was the first of the many internecine feuds within the BJP that Modi got embroiled in. Despite being a party apparatchik identified by Sangh Parivar elders for coordinating Ekta Yatra and part of no faction at the national level, Modi was identified with Joshi loyalists for several years though he was careful and did not get on the wrong side of either Vajpayee or Advani. Since the late 1980s, intrigue and oneupmanship was a prominent dimension in the intra-personal relationship between the big three in BJP of whom two were “bigger” than the third. Even after Vajpayee became prime minister, Joshi was snubbed and not given charge of the portfolio he wished: Finance. When Modi returned to Gujarat after Ekta Yatra, he knew that it had not done any wonders for the career of Joshi, and thereby his. Modi realized that it would be back to the grind once again. There would be no short cuts for him.

JANUS—THE MARCH BEGINS

The greatest fear that a human being faces is the fear of humiliation.

– Mother Teresa

Narendra Modi began greying heavily in 1992. He was of course at an age when most would — forty-two — but we are talking about a man who was fiercely abstemious and followed a regimen which some say can defy natural processes. One of the reasons for Modi's hair turning grey was of course the usual culprit: worries. He had just returned after the failure of the much-touted Ekta Yatra (led by one of the senior most leaders of the BJP, Dr Murli Manohar Joshi) which he had so passionately put together and was faced with an uncomfortable silence at home. Shankersinh Vaghela who had been appointed president of the Gujarat unit of the BJP once again, chose not to include Modi in his team. Ironically for Modi, the dip in his career graph began at a time when the agitation steered by the Sangh Parivar on the Ram Janmabhoomi issue had reached a cataclysmic denouement. Modi watched from the sidelines as the Parivar's definition of cultural nationalism — wherein people adhering to different faiths identified with a majoritarian religious-cultural ethos — found greater social and political acceptability through the Ayodhya campaign.

Over the next few years, Modi staged a recovery of sorts and in time emerged as a power centre within the Gujarat BJP, but just as the party consciously moved towards emerging as an alternative power centre to the Congress party, he found himself cast in a marginal role in the big opera.

By February 1992 when Modi returned to Ahmedabad from Srinagar, the political situation in Gujarat had undergone a significant change from the late 1980s when the BJP first emerged as a political party of significance in the state. Due to the BJP's decision in October 1990 to withdraw from the coalition government in Gujarat after the arrest of L K Advani in Samastipur, Bihar, the

government headed by Chimanbhai Patel became dependent on the support of the thirty-three-member Congress Legislature Party. After the Janata Dal split at the national level and Chandra Shekhar became prime minister in November 1990 by forming his own faction, Chimanbhai Patel also split the parent party. He however, formed his own regional outfit and called it Janata Dal (Gujarat or G).

As we have seen previously, the performance of the BJP in Gujarat in the 1991 Lok Sabha elections was outstanding and particularly so in the aftermath of Rajiv Gandhi's assassination when there was a surge of sympathy for the slain leader. The verdict resulted in the government of Gujarat losing all moral and political authority to continue though it was constitutionally entitled to remain in office and Chimanbhai Patel managed to stay on in power. But there was a growing consensus among political observers that the BJP was, to use a phrase of L K Advani, "a government in waiting" in Gujarat. The political scientist from M S University of Baroda, Priyavadhan M Patel has argued in his essay –" Gujarat: Hindutva Mobilization and Electoral Dominance of the BJP" written for the *Journal of Indian School of Political Economy*¹: 'The 1990s witnessed a sea change in Gujarat politics. The party system underwent a radical change... between 1989 and 1991, the party system changed from the one-party dominance of the Congress to a three-party contest and then suddenly to a two-party system.' In early 1992, Gujarat was still some time away from a neat bipolar polity that characterized the state since 1995. In 1992, Gujarat exhibited a three-way split of political loyalties though the BJP was beginning to emerge as the clear forerunner.

The three-cornered nature of politics in Gujarat reflected the basic character of the contest in the 1991 parliamentary poll. Held less than two years after the 1989 elections for the ninth Lok Sabha following the souring of relations between the minority Chandra Shekhar government and the Congress, the election witnessed triangular contests in most parts of the country after the BJP decided to go it alone. When the verdict came out, the two largest parties were the Congress with 244 seats and BJP that won 120 seats. The remaining 178 seats — almost one third of the Lok Sabha — were won by regional parties of whom only J Jayalalithaa's All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam was an ally of the Congress. In the years that followed the 1991 elections, the political character in some states became bipolar and this included Gujarat. But in the months after the Ekta Yatra, the BJP in Gujarat had to virtually contend with two adversaries: the Congress and the Janata Dal (G) because though the two parties had fought the 1991 election in conjunction, there was no certainty of the two of them politically uniting.

The BJP owed its success in the 1991 parliamentary election to the support of the

“political Hindu” born in the course of the Ayodhya agitation, specifically the Rath Yatra. In 1992, further growth of the party depended on the political Hindu becoming more articulate and aggressive. This could happen only by greater impetus to the Ramjanmabhoomi movement.

Shortly after the BJP secured a majority in Uttar Pradesh in the assembly elections held along with the 1991 Lok Sabha poll, the state government headed by Kalyan Singh initiated steps for the construction of the Ram Temple. The VHP in the autumn of 1991 moved to acquire a significant number of private properties around the disputed shrine by using a mix of appeasements and threats and was backed by the state government and succeeded in acquiring 2.77 acres of land in front of the shrine.

Even as the VHP and Kalyan Singh ran riot in Ayodhya by openly advancing towards the building of the temple, the Congress government at the Centre chose to remain a mute spectator to this build up. In retrospect it is often said that Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao, pursued soft-Hindutva and facilitated the Sangh Parivar’s eventual goal of demolishing the Babri Masjid.

For eighteen days in June 1992 the area around the disputed shrine in Ayodhya reverberated with disco-style bhajans and the cacophony from the churning of giant concrete mixers operated by Kar Sevaks who huddled together in tents erected on the acquired land (amenities to pilgrims as the UP government claimed when acquiring the land). The platform rose steadily as work continued round the clock and it was only after Rao’s personal intervention when he invited religious leaders for talks, that the VHP relented and asked supporters to return home. Like in previous instances of VHP programmes held in Ayodhya, a large number of assembled activists were from Gujarat, a fact that over the years was one of the factors behind the state being labelled by mainstream media as the laboratory of Hindutva.

But for Rao, this was a temporary reprieve from the marching battalions of Hindutva votaries. In a carefully calibrated move, the entire Sangh Parivar orchestrated the campaign to mobilize support for the VHP programme for another round of Kar Seva — this time from 6 December 1992. The programme was announced on 30 October 1992, after a two-day long meeting of the VHP’s Dharma Sansad and to make it a success the top brass of the BJP, the VHP and the Bajrang Dal flocked to Ayodhya. L K Advani and Murli Manohar Joshi embarked on mini-yatras from 3 December — the former from Varanasi and the latter from Mathura, cities with shrines that the Sangh Parivar wanted to *reclaim*.

L K Advani and Murli Manohar Joshi arrived in Ayodhya a night before i.e., 5

December. Advani recounts in his memoirs that there were more than one hundred thousand VHP stormtroopers raising rabid slogans. The next morning, by the time Advani, Joshi and other stalwarts of the Sangh Parivar assembled on the *viewing gallery* atop the roof of the Ram Katha Kunj — adjacent to the disputed shrine, the crowds had turned restive. The gathering on the rooftop, besides Advani and Joshi included senior RSS leader, H V Seshadri, the senior most woman leader in the entire Sangh Parivar at that time — Vijayaraje Scindia, VHP stalwart Ashok Singhal, Uma Bharati who at that time was among the *heroines* of the Ayodhya agitation and the late Pramod Mahajan. Advani personally directed Bharati and Mahajan to go to the site of the assembly and dissuade the agitators from climbing the domes and causing damage, but the efforts of the duo went in vain.

Eventually the Babri Masjid was demolished and by the time the dust settled down, riots had erupted in Ayodhya and thereafter in several other cities and towns in subsequent days.

On his part although Narendra Modi was perhaps looped into the entire tent pole plan of building a Ram Temple in Ayodhya, he didn't in anyway participate in the run up to the demolition of the Babri Masjid. He had of course been feted for the minute detailing of the Ekta Yatra barely eleven months ago, but his absence in Ayodhya and the preceding discourse over the Kar Seva programme was an indication that in 1992 he was marginalized within the state BJP. In contrast, a relatively junior, Pravin Togadia was making his presence felt as the virulent voice of Hindutva in Gujarat. Though yet to make his mark and get noticed at the national level, the media in Ahmedabad was aware of his relentless comments in the run up to the demolition of the Babri Masjid. One such report was filed for the Calcutta-based *Telegraph* by Nachiketa Desai in January 1992 and recalled the vituperative nature of Togadia's assertions. Desai wrote in the aftermath of the 2002 riots:

Togadia had boasted that the VHP had undertaken a census and land record survey to take stock of the real estate ownership pattern among Hindus and Muslims in over 18,000 villages, towns and cities of the state. The survey, he said, would provide the VHP leadership with the necessary data that would help formulate short-term and long-term strategies for “protecting” the interests of the Hindu community in “sensitive” areas. The survey, he said, would help the VHP draw up a “boundary” line in all the major towns and cities beyond which the Muslims would not be allowed to expand. “We will establish border check posts manned by Bajrang Dal volunteers to instil a sense of security among the Hindus,” he had disclosed in the interview (given in

January 1992).

While Togadia was making waves in Gujarat with his hawkish “Hindutva” posturing, Modi found solace in going back to his roots: this time getting involved in the setting up of a school that had been founded by his one-time mentor Laxmanrao Inamdar, who was popularly known as Vakil Sahab. Though the idea for the school had taken shape during the lifetime of Modi’s mentor, by the time it could get off ground in 1992, Vakil Sahab had passed away. Anyway, with little or no political activity to keep him engaged for long hours, a slightly restrained Modi spent considerable time setting up the school.

Called Sanskardham, the school campus is spread over 125 acres on the outskirts of Ahmedabad. Run by a board of trustees who are all part of the RSS fraternity, the school was set up to instil a “Hindu way of life” and inculcates values adhered by large sections of Hindus and follows the curriculum mandated by the Gujarat State Board. Sanskardham is a co-educational establishment which provides hostel facilities for boys while also being open to girl students as day scholars. Dr R K Shah, a reputed obstetrician and gynaecologist who runs a nursing home in Ahmedabad and is the chairman of Sanskardham was kind enough to meet me despite his hectic daily schedule. Well into his Seventies, he said that the basic goal of the school is to “create good nationalists” and that the values imparted are “against western style of living”.

Before meeting Dr Shah, the school functionaries took me around the campus. It was a coincidence that as I happened to be shepherded around, hostellers were assembled in the huge dining hall for lunch. In Sanskardham, the food is cooked by professional cooks but management of the dining hall and food distribution is done by senior students under the watchful eye of a lone warden. For a group of almost two hundred and fifty students, the entire procedure seemed remarkably orderly. After each child is served lunch and returned to designated places on the table, it was time for a *bhojan prarthna* (brief prayer before partaking of meals) after which all of them began eating quietly. While being taken around the campus, one of the functionaries also added that the children in the hostel attended Bal Shakhas of the RSS every morning. These are uncannily similar to the ones that Modi attended as a child in Vadnagar.

After a round of the school campus when we gathered in Dr Shah’s office, he said that when the school was taking shape, Modi had time to provide suggestions, an input which Dr Shah and other members of the school management missed since he became chief minister. The extent of Modi’s involvement in the initial days of Sanskardham has also been detailed by M V Kamath and Kalindi Randeri in

*Narendra Modi: The Architect of a Modern State*²: 'Narendra was available to the staff on any matter concerning the functioning of the school. He would give out the minutest of instructions on how to receive and entertain visitors, how to hold exhibitions, and how to see that chauffeurs of VIPs, who were visiting the school, were fed and not left to fend for themselves. No detail was too insignificant for him to attend to.'

Therefore while Modi cooled his heels politically, the leaders of VHP occupied centre stage in Gujarat while mobilizing support for the Kar Seva programmes in July and December 1992. The youth wing of the VHP, Bajrang Dal — also used this period to further widen its base among the Hindu youth in Gujarat by distributing trishuls which often contravened provisions of the Arms Act because of their size, and this became a ritualistic spectacle as radical Hindu youth argued that if the Sikhs were permitted to carry *kripans*, metallic tridents should also be allowed.

In September 1990 during Advani's Rath Yatra, Narendra Modi and Nalin Bhatt, who was then a minister in the Gujarat government as a nominee of the BJP took the lead in organizing the support of Bajrang Dal. The Rath Yatra had already been preceded by communal violence in Gujarat and Maharashtra during the Ganesh Puja immersion processions and the two states were in any case on the edge of a precipice. It is ironical that in the years after 2002, Modi and Bhatt fell out but in 1990, the latter was extremely proactive as a hardliner.

A G Noorani in his book, *The RSS and the BJP: A Division of Labour*³ has recorded that the militant youth wing of the VHP had a 'central role in Advani's Yatra' and that '...volunteers offered him a cup of their blood as proof of their commitment and kept him company throughout. The riots that followed were their handiwork. At Ujjain they presented him with weapons and as the scholar, Prof Richard H Davis of Yale, recorded, often welcomed him by applying a ritual mark (*tilak*) of blood on his forehead.' It was because of a galvanizing head start that Modi had secured for Advani's Rath Yatra that he was able to force the Ayodhya issue on the national agenda. Once the cavalcade of Advani crossed Gujarat and entered Maharashtra, the tempo had been set and there was no looking back. But in the second half of 1992, Modi had little role to play in the Ayodhya agitation.

In the course of researching this biography, I went back to several senior leaders of the Sangh Parivar with whom I regularly interacted in the course of the Ayodhya agitation. One of them contended that Modi had always been *disturbed by his absence* in any of the Ayodhya programmes in 1992 and wished to embellish his career graph with a special *Ayodhya moment*. This, the source contended, came to

Modi the moment the Sabarmati Express was torched in Godhra while returning from Ayodhya on 27 February 2002.

But back in 1992, communal riots in the wake of the demolition of the Babri Masjid continued till January 1993 with Maharashtra and Gujarat being among the worst affected. Scholars who have studied the nature and extent of communal violence in India report different figures but there is unanimity among them that Surat and Ahmedabad were among the worst affected cities in Gujarat. Surat itself accounted for half of the people who died in the violent incidents. Achyut Yagnik and Suchitra Sheth have commented in their book titled, *The Shaping of Modern Gujarat: Plurality, Hindutva and Beyond*⁴ that ‘More than the numbers, the nature and extent of violence were indicative of the collective degeneracy. In many areas a number of houses belonging to Muslims were torched and scores of people were roasted alive. Even children were not spared. Women were gang-raped, many in front of their family members. As many academics have reported, the city witnessed unprecedented brutality in the course of the riots.’ The two also quoted an unnamed Hindu businessman, cited by *India Today*: ‘Muslims will never dare to raise their heads in Surat now. They will have to learn to live in an inferior position as befits a minority.’

The spate of communalization that was witnessed in Gujarat from March 1990 when Chimanbhai Patel became chief minister was greatly aided by the presence of BJP in government. BJP leaders openly used official vehicles to accompany Advani’s chariot prompting reports in the media that it was a *government sponsored jamboree*.

Though Chimanbhai Patel promised a “riot-free administration” during the election campaign in February-March 1990, he had little option but to accept the actions of the BJP ministers in the government — like Nalin Bhatt for instance. Chimanbhai Patel’s failure to control communal riots in Gujarat after the demolition of the Babri Masjid further eroded his political credibility. He merged his party into the Congress but with little effect. The BJP demonstrated its political prowess in the state in local body polls that were finally held in January 1994 after being put off by Chimanbhai Patel on one pretext or another because he read the writing on the wall. In these elections, traditionally not fought on party-lines, the BJP won 625 of the 1803 municipality seats that were up for grabs. In contrast, the Congress secured 311 seats — and its vote share of 16 per cent was way below the BJP’s share that stood at 30 per cent. A month later, in February 1994 Patel died necessitating the speeding up of realignment of political forces among the anti-BJP political groups in Gujarat. Chhabildas Mehta donned Chimanbhai Patel’s mantle but he could not stem the swell of the BJP. By the time assembly elections became

due in early 1995, Gujarat had become neatly bipolar.

Advani was at the helm of affairs when Chimanbhai Patel died and with the assembly elections imminent in Gujarat, he did not waste any time in ensuring that the party geared up. This meant the political resurrection of Modi as General Secretary (Organization) despite opposition from other leaders in the state and also reviving Modi's partnership with Sanjay Joshi, also a RSS Pracharak. The two spent hours together in Ahmedabad's Pandit Deendayal Bhawan, the BJP headquarters in the state and Joshi would often ride pillion on Modi's ash-coloured Bajaj Chetak scooter.

Though Modi and Joshi were virtual comrades in arms from the time Joshi was deputed by the RSS to work in Gujarat in the late 1980s, there were also differences between the two. For starters, Modi was very particular about his appearance even then. Although he only wore white trousers and kurta, which wasn't really flamboyant, he would still take great care about the way he looked. In the late 1980s, Modi's sartorial tastes became more pronounced and he began to get his clothes stitched by Chauhan brothers — Jitendra and Bipin who primarily ran a small operation of customized shirts and trousers for a select few. The duo later went on to establish a leading men's fashion chain called Jade Blue.

In contrast to a well-turned-out Modi, was Sanjay Joshi, his organizational second-in-command, who wore a just-out-of-bed look comfortably, and never ironed his clothes. But most importantly, what was starkly different in the two young men even at that time was regarding their long-term goals: for Modi the organization was a tool to acquire control of government while Joshi wanted to remain the organizational boss. Modi had already given indication of this in Delhi while working on the project of creating a resource book on the anti-Emergency struggle. Besides this there are two accounts that point towards Modi's hankering after power at the time. A Surat-based journalist who kept a close watch on Modi from his early days in politics, Vikram Vakil, wrote in Rediff News in May 2012: 'Right from their early days, Modi nurtured big ambitions of playing a larger role nationally, of "capturing New Delh" so to speak. In stark contrast, Joshi was low-profile, more interested in growing the party at the grassroots and strengthening the Sangh Parivar.'

Besides Vakil, Gordhan Zadaphia, who was Home minister in Modi's government, also said that Narendra Modi had — as early as 1988 — told him that he wanted to be chief minister of Gujarat. He mentioned about this conversation with Modi at the time when the two interacted regularly because as Zadaphia said, 'I was under him as he was general secretary, Gujarat State and I was general

secretary, Ahmedabad city. We used to meet during the organizational work and I often travelled all across Gujarat with him.'

After Advani's re-election as party president in 1993, Modi and Joshi worked towards drawing up the party's electoral strategy. When asked what he did during this period he said: 'My entire role was to look into all those things which an organizing secretary is supposed to do — as is the BJP's working style, I looked after each of those aspects — that are normally supervised by anyone who stays behind the scenes.'

This however was a very crucial period because with impending elections, it was important to ensure that the morale of the party workers did not dip because of the electoral setbacks that the BJP had faced in Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh in late 1993. The BJP was also very conscious of keeping the Hindutva idea alive in Gujarat despite the fact that after the demolition of the Babri Masjid, there was little to do. But this period was used by the RSS to involve their cadre in a variety of exercises — the most important being to provide ways to counter the government's decision to ban the RSS and the Bajrang Dal after the demolition. *The Frontline* in a report in its issue dated 26 May-8 June 2001 wrote: 'In the five months and 25 days of the ban the RSS continued with its activities through its sister organisations such as the Janadhikar Samiti and the Durga Vahini for women and girls, the Rashtriya Sikh Sangat for Sikhs, the Samarasata Manch for Dalits, Yuvak Shaurya Shibir and Yuvathi Shaurya Shibir (training camps for young men and women) and several *keertan sammelans*.' A lot of these programmes were conducted in Gujarat and after the ban on the RSS and Bajrang Dal was declared illegal by the courts in May 1993, these activists were included in the programmes of BJP that were conceived almost single-handedly by Modi and executed with the assistance of Joshi. Among these programmes was a focussed drive to ensure the preparedness of the BJP apparatus in districts. M V Kamath and Kalindi Randeri wrote in their book⁵:

For acquiring a stronghold on the elections, the BJP had decided to train workers at every level. In a large-scale training programme, about 1.5 lakh workers, who had to handle about 28,000 polling booths, were given rigorous training on how to handle voters and other problems that might crop up at the time of elections. The programme turned out to be highly successful. "Organisation Centred Elections" also turned out to be a uniquely successful experiment. Most of it was Narendra's handiwork.

With the appointment of Modi as General Secretary (Organization) and the subsequent deputation of Joshi in the Gujarat unit of BJP in 1988, the ground was

also laid for multi-layered friction between key leaders. The first layer of this interpersonal disquiet had to do with the fact that the BJP since its formation in April 1980 had been somewhat insulated from the RSS. The party leadership thereby got used to a one-way traffic with the RSS — in the sense that the BJP leaders were free to go up to the RSS leadership with specific requests, but were disinclined to accepting even informal missives. Formal interaction in the form of Samanvay Samitis that existed during the days when the Jana Sangh existed, in any case had been discontinued after the formation of the BJP.

As we have seen previously, after Advani initially took over as BJP president from Vajpayee in June 1986, it had been decided to revive the position of the organizing secretary in the state units and also transfer RSS Pracharaks on deputation to the BJP. The decision created discord between the old leaders and as was witnessed, several senior BJP leaders like Keshubhai Patel, Shankersinh Vaghela and Kashiram Rana resented Modi's lateral entry into the BJP's top echelons without having moved up the ladder. Over time, Modi used the contradictions and rivalries among these leaders to his own benefit by using one against the other and in the process strengthened his position in the party.

It was a matter of coincidence that Rana was president of the Gujarat unit of the BJP in 1985-87 when Modi was inducted into the BJP and again in 1993-96 when Advani gave Modi key responsibilities. M V Kamath and Kalindi Randeri wrote⁶: 'When Kashiram Rana got elected as president of the Gujarat BJP, he refused to re-nominate Narendra as party general secretary, since he preferred Suresh Mehta. The RSS took it as an affront to its authority and compelled Rana to nominate Narendra. BJP's all-India president L K Advani also favoured Narendra.' Rana subsequently quit the party owing to continued differences with Modi and died in August 2012.

Although Kashiram Rana saw Narendra as a rival, Modi did not perceive Rana to be a threat. He simply did not like Rana! The reason may appear petty at some levels, but also underscores the deep-rooted personal prejudices that finally shaped Modi's political beliefs and orientation. In a profile of Modi, Saba Naqvi wrote in the *Outlook* magazine in 2007: 'He once told this correspondent that "*Maans khane wale logon ka vyavhar alag hota hai*," (Meat-eating people have a different temperament). And Modi wasn't even referring to Muslims but to his own party colleague from Gujarat, the non-vegetarian Kashiram Rana.'

The second layer of friction within the BJP — in the context of Gujarat — was restricted primarily among RSS Pracharaks. In 1988 when Sanjay Joshi was deputed to the BJP, he like Modi, was met with similar hostility from within the party and

when it came to tackling — or neutralizing — the common adversary, Modi and Joshi made common cause, closed ranks and worked as a team. However, besides the minor differences in their basic personality traits that led to innocuous clashes between the two, there was also one major issue because of which the two kept each other at a distance. This was purely in the arena of power play and stemmed from the fact that the two had common political pedigree and the BJP couldn't accommodate both of them at the top simultaneously. Joshi was not willing to remain an understudy for long and Modi was not willing — beyond a point — to have someone with the potential to snap at his heels. Moreover, given the fact that the principle of “party first” was essentially for the record, both Modi and Joshi nurtured political ambitions — albeit for different positions.

The two however realized that the assembly elections in 1995 was not the appropriate time in their careers to make their spat public. This is because it coincided with the beginning of a very decisive history in Indian electoral history. Starting November 1993 till March 1995, India witnessed assembly elections in as many as sixteen states. This period also coincided with the first wave of Islamic radicalization that reared its head in Jammu and Kashmir as a separatist movement and in the rest of India as a reaction to the demolition of Babri Masjid. By the time the first round of these elections were held in November 1993, Mumbai had been rocked by horrific serial blasts in March that year. “Islamic terror” was becoming part of India's political lexicon and the BJP was intent on making best use of it.

By mid-1994, it was evident that the Chhabildas Mehta regime in Gujarat was on its last legs and the BJP stood a good chance of emerging as the largest party in elections. The party began to look for an electoral mascot and ergo also a chief ministerial candidate. It may be recalled that in 1988 Keshubhai Patel was projected as the BJP's principal vote-puller. Since the mid-1980s, the BJP leadership had pushed Shankersinh Vaghela towards an important role in parliamentary or national politics; Keshubhai was identified as the state helmsman. But as state elections drew close, Vaghela indicated his desire to remain in the fray for the chief ministerial position in the event of BJP winning the election. With the BJP being in a position to have a chief minister of its own, Vaghela too wanted to take a shot at it.

Meanwhile Advani was single-mindedly focussing on both Gujarat and Maharashtra as they accounted for 74 Lok Sabha seats. The electoral strategy in Maharashtra was shepherded by Pramod Mahajan and he did swing a good deal

with BJP's ally, the Shiv Sena while in Gujarat, Modi as the main driver had a tough task on hand.

In Gujarat, though the Janata Dal (G) had merged with the Congress, but some leaders decided to retain their distinct identities. Since this group appeared to be heading for a political harakiri, Modi was saved of forging any outside electoral alliance. But he had to ensure a balance between factions headed by two stalwarts: Keshubhai and Vaghela. But Modi was clear that for some time now that it had to be Keshubhai Patel and the BJP endorsed his view. Work began on full swing and an innovative slogan was coined for the elections which promised the people a life devoid of *Bhay*, *Bhookh aur Bhrashtachar* (Fear, Hunger and Corruption). Fear in the context of Gujarat meant the threat from growing Muslim radicalization. Hunger was essentially a populist expression against the first wave of economic liberalization which the Sangh Parivar rejected and finally, corruption which was a recurring issue against the Congress party since the Bofors scam had bounced back in the public eye with the securities scam involving Big Bull, Harshad Mehta.

While the main issues had been identified in Gujarat and Maharashtra, Modi convinced the national leadership — mainly party President Advani, that those leaders who were already Members of Parliament should not be nominated to contest assembly elections. In the 1991 Lok Sabha polls, though Vaghela had vacated the Gandhinagar seat for Advani, he had been able to get elected from Godhra. In early 1995, the tenth Lok Sabha was still at least one year from dissolution and Modi argued that it made no sense for Vaghela to vacate his seat to contest the assembly election.

The decision to prevent Vaghela from contesting the assembly elections was presented as being consistent with the party's adherence since its formation to the one-man, one-post principle. As a result of this, Vaghela lost out and eventually when the BJP emerged victorious, Keshubhai Patel was elected the leader of the legislative party and became chief minister. Vaghela was a tough bargainer and negotiated hard with the party leadership to secure nominations for his loyalists. Eventually, out of the 182 party candidates, Vaghela had his say in the selection of almost half of them. It was this group that remained loyal to Vaghela and posed problems for the Keshubhai-Modi combine in the subsequent months.

What was said to be amply clear before the elections were held became a reality when the results were declared. Of the 182 seats in Gujarat, the BJP won a clear two-thirds majority winning 121 seats while the Congress tally slipped to 45 seats. Several factors were behind the BJP's rousing victory. One of the most significant of these was the record voter turnout: 64.39 per cent — greater than the highest ever

for Gujarat, 63.7 per cent in 1967. Significantly, the turnout was dramatically higher than in the 1991 Lok Sabha elections — 44.06 per cent. So why was the voter so enthusiastic in Gujarat? For starters, it was surely to do with the Sangh Parivar's Ram Temple campaign. But more specifically, polarization among the electorate contributed to the increased turnout. The events leading to the demolition of the Babri Masjid, the ensuing riots and aftershocks of the Mumbai blasts generated a greater desire to participate in the electoral process among BJP supporters and detractors. One group wanted to ensure the party's victory while the other its defeat.

Modi's success in ironing out differences between the two BJP factions was also evident in the fact that the party suffered to a lesser degree from the "rebel factor" that gripped the Congress also. Had the Congress, after its merger with JD (G), managed internal conflict as well as the BJP, the finish to the race would have been much tighter.

On Sunday, 19 March 1995, Keshubhai Patel assumed office at the head of a twenty-seven-member BJP government which had very few loyalists of Vaghela as ministers. But there was a word of caution — this one from Vajpayee at that time still in political wilderness. Despite his marginalization, Vajpayee was sent to attend the first meeting of the newly-elected party MLAs in Gandhinagar where he alerted legislators and other party leaders on the need to perform well and set an example of good governance because '...the attention of the entire nation will be focussed on the government in Gujarat.'

But whatever sobering effect Vajpayee may have had, soon evaporated as the BJP leaders got busy with government formation and to enjoy the benefits of an Opposition which was virtually decimated in the state assembly. In a few months the BJP scored another spectacular electoral victory — this time in the district and taluka panchayat elections, held in August 1995. The BJP swept these polls winning 18 out of 19 zila panchayats and 154 of the 183 taluka panchayats. Out of the total of 811 district panchayat seats, the BJP bagged 624 — almost eighty-two per cent. In contrast, Congress won only 166 seats. In the taluka elections, the BJP repeated the performance and of the 3785 seats that went to the polls, the party won 2567 seats while the Congress won 902 seats.

While the verdict in the local body polls added to the euphoria in the BJP and associates in the Sangh Parivar, it also added to some unexpected problems: that of nominating the right people to head these bodies. There were also other freebies on offer — including nominations to head various cash-rich state corporations. These appointments came with official perks and trappings of power and BJP leaders and

workers who had been in Opposition for decades, desired to partake in political power and be in a position to provide patronage. The *mai-baap* culture that dominated the Congress system after India attained independence had clearly not left the BJP untouched. One source told me this malaise affected almost the entire Sangh Parivar — for instance, a rank outsider as far as governance went — Pravin Togadia — had a “very obliging character”, and liked to be “disposer of largesse”. This trait continued and after Modi became chief minister, was one of the reasons for the ties between the two to turn sour. In selecting nominees for chairpersons of state corporations, Keshubhai Patel depended more on Modi than Kashiram Rana, who was still the Gujarat BJP president. Vaghela was obviously not consulted and this not only increased the schism between Keshubhai and Vaghela but also brought Rana and Vaghela closer. The chief minister finalized the list of nominees for the local body boards before heading to the United States — an absence that was used by Vaghela to engineer a rebellion against Keshubhai.

Within a couple of months of Keshubhai becoming chief minister, it had already become common knowledge in Gujarat that the government was being driven from the backseat by Modi. One retired bureaucrat who was in key positions in the mid-1990s reminisced how, ‘Prior to 1995 no one in the government knew Modi, but after Keshubhai became CM it became mandatory for every senior officer to know him.’ Modi’s larger than life role at that time was written about in the media also. V Venkatesan described the political processes at that time in the *Frontline* issue dated October 13-26 2001 after Modi became chief minister. He recalled that Modi’s position in 1995 ‘... soon after Keshubhai Patel assumed office as Chief Minister, smacked of his (Modi’s) quest for extra-constitutional authority. Unmindful of norms, Modi remained present at a meeting the Chief Minister had with his senior bureaucrats in Gandhinagar. It earned him the epithet of *super Chief Minister*.’

By 1995, Togadia also firmly established himself as a VHP stalwart in Gujarat and had played a key role in the assembly elections in the planning and execution of BJP’s campaign. Given his pivotal position in the spread of the Hindutva idea, although Togadia did not directly influence the state government but as a former bureaucrat explained, ‘He did not need any direct role given his proximity to Modi.’ Another significant player at that time was Dr Mayur Desai, the doctor son-in-law of Keshubhai. Given his personal proximity and access to the chief minister, he was often accessed by people who wished to influence business decisions in their favour. A significant BJP leader and a Member of Parliament who grew from within the ranks of the party and has been in the know of inter-personal relations among key leaders, said that Modi had been wary of Desai and “kept warning” Keshubhai

about the dangers of allowing his kin to become extra-constitutional players and become lobbyists for various business interests. But as Keshubhai ignored Modi's advice, he made peace with Desai and the two were outwardly friendly with each other.

It was evident within a couple of months that the BJP government couldn't live up to the expectations of the people who anticipated a transformation in the political culture and style of governance. To overcome this, the new government and the ruling party, as Priyavadhan M Patel contends in his paper, mentioned earlier,⁷ 'in order to create a quick image of a *model ruler*, of a *model state*, the party went on a blunder-spree.' Among these *blunders* were: attacks on the builders' lobby at the behest of other interest groups and thereby earning the wrath of the pre-existing group; targeting the Chairman of National Dairy Development Board (NDDB), the late Dr V Kurien, the architect and engineer of White Revolution in Gujarat; and locking horns with influential groups that ran private tuition classes. That Modi was instrumental in several of these decisions became evident in September 2012 when India's *doodhwallah* (milkman) passed away and despite his body lying for public view in Anand, Modi did not make a token visit to pay tribute though he was barely twenty kilometres away on that day. The state government also initiated several populist policies like a scheme of subsidized food grains (wheat mainly) at two rupees per kilogram and reducing bus fares of state transport vehicles by twenty per cent; providing subsidy for the marriage of girls from poor families; cycles for tribal girl-children and a scheme to improve the overall development quotient of villages. But as observers of that time say, beyond the announcements, these schemes made little headway as a result of which the image stuck that the BJP-run government was no different from the Congress regime.

On the political front, from the summer of 1995, trouble was looming for Keshubhai but he failed to recognize the impending rebellion and widen his alliances within the party and instead continued to be Modi-centric. In September 1995 Vaghela mounted a full-throated campaign against Keshubhai. While the chief minister was still in the United States, Vaghela managed to get the support of forty-nine MLAs and herded them away to Khajuraho in Madhya Pradesh. This started a bizarre chapter that gave rise to the twin words of *Hazooria* and *Khajuria* (the former word stemmed from the word *huzoor* meaning boss to imply the Keshubhai loyalists, and *Khajuria* was derived from Khajuraho). Legislators who remained loyal to Keshubhai were called *Hazoorias* while those who went to the erotic temple tourist resort were called *Khajurias*.

The central leadership of the BJP in order to save the government, worked out a

compromise which as Modi told me was that, 'Keshubhai would step down and I would leave Gujarat — go out. I accepted both.' I further asked why the situation had reached such a stage. Modi's reply was characteristic of an involved person: 'It was over ambition at one level. The first issue was that Shankersinh was of the opinion that he should be made chief minister. But all of us thought that Keshubhai would be better — he was the senior most, Shankersinh was younger and when time would come, he would also be given a chance — that is what we all felt. But this decision was not acceptable to Shankersinh — so from day one he had decided not to allow the government to run.'

The actual compromise formula was hammered out by Vajpayee who stepped in at the behest of Advani and other senior leaders. Under this, Keshubhai was to relinquish office, Modi move out of Gujarat but Vaghela was not anointed the chief minister. Instead, Suresh Mehta — then relatively a political lightweight leader, was selected to be chief minister and took oath on 21 October 1995 but any hope that the BJP had regarding the smooth functioning of the government were belied. Modi claims that the Suresh Mehta government was destabilized from the beginning by the Vaghela camp because the latter was still seething. He said: 'He (Vaghela) did not allow the Suresh Mehta government to run — this made it clear that his main goal was not just to remove Keshubhai but also to become chief minister.' Meanwhile Keshubhai's loyalists also didn't let go of a single opportunity to destabilize the Suresh Mehta regime.

While the theatre of the absurd continued in Gujarat, Modi was moved by the central leadership to New Delhi and then to Chandigarh where he was given charge of Haryana and Himachal Pradesh. Keshubhai had also been formally shifted to New Delhi as party vice president but for all purposes remained a resident of the state and influenced developments in Gujarat because he claimed the privileges of being a family man, an alibi that Modi did not have. Meanwhile the 1996 Lok Sabha elections were announced. By this time, Modi was firmly ensconced in Chandigarh and Advani had also vacated the position of the party's main electoral mascot for Vajpayee, an event that led to considerable reconfiguration on political alignments within the party. Though Modi was not stationed in Ahmedabad and held no charge in Gujarat, his influence in the state was more than evident in the run up to the elections.

In a bid to generate support for the BJP, Advani embarked on yet another yatra — called Swaraj to Suraj Yatra. The yatra started from Ernakulam, Kerala on 9 March and entered Gujarat to a very tepid response on 18 March because in Modi's absence, there was no one to execute the kind of organizational drumming which he

had so successfully done in 1990 for Advani's first yatra. What was startling was that even Chief Minister Suresh Mehta and Vaghela did not turn up for any of the meetings that Advani addressed in cities like Navsari, Valsad, Surat — all in south Gujarat.

On the wintry morning of 16 January 1996, an interesting albeit controversial sub-plot was unfolding in the party headquarters of the BJP on Ashoka Road in Delhi which would once again put the party in a tight spot. Sushma Swaraj came in unannounced into Advani's office with startling news that she had picked up from her lawyer-husband, Swaraj Kaushal. The Criminal Bureau of Investigation (CBI) had filed cases against BJP President L K Advani and several other leaders under the Prevention of Corruption Act. This case known in Indian political parlance as the Hawala scandal was based on diary entries maintained by two Bhopal-based businessmen — J K Jain and S K Jain. Advani was accused of accepting illegal gratification to the tune of sixty lakh rupees and also being involved in criminal conspiracy with the Jains.

Advani wrote in his memoirs how he immediately took two decisions: to resign from the Lok Sabha; and to declare his intention of not contesting any election till he was exonerated of the charges. This decision returned to haunt BJP from the middle of 2012 when corporate graft charges were levelled against party President, Nitin Gadkari, an episode in which Narendra Modi was a central character.

Meanwhile Advani's declaration also meant that the Gandhinagar Lok Sabha seat had fallen vacant. Represented by Advani since 1991 — it may be recalled that it had been Modi's idea to get Advani to contest from this seat that had been previously represented by Vaghela. With Advani's decision, Vaghela threw his hat in the ring indicating that he wished to return from Godhra, a constituency he represented in the tenth Lok Sabha. But in a clever move that was devised by anti-Vaghela groups, Vajpayee was nominated to contest from the seat with a perfect rationale that after Advani's absence, the presence of a senior leader in the fray from Gujarat would greatly boost the party's electoral prospects.

Part I of the anti-Vaghela group's plan had succeeded. Part II was put into action once the nominations were filed. Though BJP emerged as a single largest party in the eleventh Lok Sabha, its performance in Gujarat was not as good as in the 1991 parliamentary and 1995 assembly elections. The BJP won only 16 seats and Vaghela was among the ten candidates who lost the election and the reasons behind this were not difficult to figure: the *Hazooria* faction reportedly joined hands with the likes of Togadia to ensure the defeat of the *Khajuria* group and this evidently had the tacit support of Modi. In a public meeting in Godhra in the midst of

campaigning, Hindu religious leaders owing allegiance to the VHP summoned a Dharma Sabha and declared Vaghela a “Hindu traitor”. This contributed immensely to his defeat.

During this period, politics in Gujarat reached a new low-point in political behaviour. On 20 May 1996 Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee went to Gandhinagar to attend a rally where he was being felicitated for becoming prime minister. In the presence of the country’s prime minister, Atmaram Patel, who was a minister and part of the Vaghela faction, was stripped off his dhoti soon after Vajpayee addressed the gathering in Ahmedabad. Some journalists in Gujarat say they perceived a Modi-hand in the attack on Atmaram Patel though there are many who disagree arguing that he had not become so powerful so as to be able to orchestrate a spontaneous attack from such a distance.

Be that as may, this incident took the BJP in Gujarat a step closer to breaking point. Vaghela formed the Mahagujarat Asmita Manch as a platform to counter his adversaries. However, Vajpayee got Kashiram Rana to crack the whip and the two brokered another agreement under which three decisions were taken: Suresh Mehta would continue as chief minister; action was to be initiated against the people who stripped Atmaram Patel and finally Vaghela would put up a *closed* sign outside the Manch he established. Modi does not have any kind words to say about Vaghela. When I asked him about this chapter in his life and the political evolution of the BJP in Gujarat, he said: ‘If a man is drunk with power — trying to get it at whatever cost, it makes things very difficult. That he would go to such an extent — we had not been able to guess. Because he had politically matured in our midst, we had never imagined that he could go to such an extent — that he would go off to Khajuraho and plot. If he had a problem with either me or Keshubhai, he should have kept quiet because (after October 1995) both of us had moved away. But no — he wanted nothing short of the chief ministerial position.’

In June 1996, after Vajpayee’s second initiative at attempting a rapprochement between the warring factions, Rana bravely declared that ‘For acts of indiscipline, ministers will be dropped, party workers will be expelled. This is the spirit now.’ But acts of indiscipline began at the top in the Gujarat unit of the BJP and its government. There were also open declarations by key leaders that Vaghela would be eased out of the party and in order to assess the tumultuous situation, the national leadership deputed two senior leaders — Kishan Lal Sharma and Khushabhau Thakre to undertake a visit to Gujarat.

The majority in the national leadership of the party were of the view that Vaghela needed to be jettisoned sooner rather than later. But there were two factors behind

why the party did not bite the bullet and expel Vaghela: first, Vajpayee was still of the view that the Gujarat unit had not yet reached a break point and the other was because of the *fear factor* — the extent of damage that the Vaghela faction could do to the party and its spiralling impact. In June 1996, Vaghela was angry that his detractors within the party had ensured his defeat and besides Keshubhai he blamed Modi for it. He told reporters on several occasions in Ahmedabad that Modi had ‘...continued to meddle despite his removal from state affairs. Earlier he had behaved like a super chief minister and now he was getting his people to do at his bidding.’ Vaghela also didn’t spare Pravin Togadia for acting at the behest of Modi. But when Togadia was approached by journalists, the VHP leader said that the Sangh Parivar affiliates like VHP and Bajrang Dal could not be ‘accused of getting BJP candidates defeated. Some sadhus were angry with Vaghela because he spoke against them and that doesn’t indict the VHP and RSS....What you see now is the angry reaction of the electorate and party workers to the Khajuraho culture. Gujarat doesn’t tolerate Aya Rams Gaya Rams.’

In June while this drama was being enacted in Gujarat, Modi maintained a low profile and rarely visited New Delhi from Chandigarh where he was stationed. In one of those infrequent visits, a group of journalists — I was part of that lot — bumped into him in the party headquarters. On buttonholing Modi, we had asked about his reaction to Vaghela’s charges that he continued to interfere in the affairs of the party in Gujarat. Modi had posed a counter-question: ‘When I am either here or in Chandigarh how can I interfere with developments in Gandhinagar?’ But the manner in which he made that claim did not convince any of us though reports filed that evening either glossed over Modi’s claims or reported it verbatim.

In Gujarat however, the main focus was not on Modi and his role in the factional feud within the BJP. Rather, the main debate was on whether there would be a formal split in the party, who would be on which side and what would be the alternate government. Answers to these questions appeared in September 1996 when Vaghela formally split the BJP and in the ensuing constitutional melee precipitated by Chief Minister Suresh Mehta, President’s Rule was imposed in the state after the chief minister was charged of fraudulently securing a trust vote in the state assembly.

After a month of Central rule, Vaghela was made chief minister with legislative support from the Congress party. He formed a rag-tag party called the All India Rashtriya Janata Party and remained in office for exactly one year and in October 1997 Vaghela stepped down in favour of party colleague Dilip Parikh after he personally fell afoul of Congress President, Sitaram Kesri.

Although Vaghela was the senior most BJP leader to quit the party, his exit did not result in eroding the party's core social base. But the episode significantly dented BJP's image in Gujarat. The events after the 1995 election demonstrated that the BJP suffered from the same malaise as the Congress and displayed similar symptoms of intense factional feuds coupled with policy paralysis and corruption. In all its years in Opposition, BJP leaders had always claimed it was a *party with a difference* but as events underscored, the BJP in Gujarat appeared more as a party *with differences*.

The events between 1995 and 1997 left the BJP in Gujarat at crossroads. It also raised question marks about the political future of Keshubhai and Modi. Both had to formally make their exit from Gandhinagar by the end of 1995. While Modi was appointed national secretary of the party, Keshubhai was also “kicked upstairs” in November 1995 when he was appointed national vice president two months after his ouster. As far as Modi was concerned, this was the beginning of a dark, almost friendless phase. By the time Modi was virtually shunted out by the party, he was no longer the gangling apparatchik who had a solution for every poser of senior leaders. Instead, he had emerged as a leader of his own standing — capable of engaging in similar machinations like the seniors in his party. Modi remained very much the party's own man — its own creation. In the years that the BJP emerged from being a peripheral political party in Gujarat to one that wrested power on its own, it displayed both high and low points. Modi too demonstrated that he was as much Dr Jekyll as he was Mr Hyde.

The few months that the BJP had been in power and the years that preceded it, Modi's skills at political manipulation and power play became evident to observers of the party for the first time. Insiders say that from the beginning these signs had been apparent within the Sangh Parivar. A senior RSS leader said that the earliest impression he had of Modi was that ‘...the behavioural indoctrination that is essential for Pracharaks had not happened in his case.’ The source elaborated that Pracharaks are taught to make their *self* “subservient to the goal of the Sangathan” but in Modi's case there were evidences from the beginning that he often allowed his ambition to override the necessities of the organization.

This however was not a revelation because within his party most knew that Modi was fixated with finding his own feet and was therefore ruthlessly ambitious. But then it was also true that he didn't just mindlessly engage in intrigues and furtive strategies but used his skills and abilities to his advantage. When Vajpayee got the party to endorse the compromise package in 1995 that led to Modi being ejected from Gujarat, it was a tacit acceptance of the party that he had overplayed his hand.

In Modi's version, this was a humiliation of sorts because his adversaries wasted no time in contending during conversations with journalists that his posting outside the state was not a promotion but an action of being sidelined.

For the next eighteen months, Narendra Modi was lonely and virtually friendless. He was confronted with a grave political setback and public humiliation and this despite the relentless pace at which he had virtually devoted himself to his party, the BJP. He did what he is known to do best: wait for the best opportunity to strike back.

PASSWORD TO GUJARAT

We have to constantly work with all our power; to put our whole mind in the work, whatever it be, that we are doing.

– Swami Vivekananda

The fourth Thursday in September 1995 did not bring happy tidings for Narendra Modi. It was still three weeks before Keshubhai Patel stepped down as chief minister on 21 October in the compromise formula worked out by the party leadership at the initiative of Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Under this arrangement, Modi was to first move out of Gujarat after which Keshubhai would follow. However the saving grace in the formula for the Keshubhai-Modi duo was that the principal rebel — Shankersinh Vaghela — was not to be chief minister but the more neutral-sounding Suresh Mehta was appointed chief minister.

Last ditch efforts were made to enlist support for Modi to continue as general secretary of the Gujarat unit of the BJP but by the morning of 28 September 1995 it was clear that his difficult days had begun. Though it was not the proverbial fourteen-year long vanvaas of Lord Rama in the Ramayana, his marginalization in the party continued for a good twenty months after which he was finally able to stage a political comeback of sorts. Also in September 1995, Modi did not have the kind of all-India presence that he eventually acquired and his *banishment* did not make much news — at least not the kind of media hysteria over the so-called *milk miracle* did a week ago — when thousands spent an entire day in Delhi and even in some other parts of the country and abroad, *feeding* spoonfuls of milk to idols of the elephant-headed Hindu God, Ganesh.

A senior BJP leader and a member of the fifteenth Lok Sabha who was among the emerging faces of the BJP in the mid-1990s told me in the course of a conversation that in 1996-97, Modi looked every bit a ‘weather-beaten man, completely demoralized with defeat written on his face all the time. Even earlier

there were occasions when he received a setback or two, but he never looked as despondent as he looked at this time,' he added by way of reiteration.

During the most difficult days in his political career, Modi had no place in the Indian capital that he could call his own. There wasn't a designated room for him in the party headquarters in Delhi because he did not have any specific charge in the national office and at best was entitled to stay for a day or so in the guest room which was often already housing someone. At Keshav Kunj, the RSS headquarters in the capital, it was again awkward for him because although he wasn't barred from availing any of the facilities, he didn't feel welcome as the RSS leadership had decided to maintain a distance from him.

As was expected, Modi was completely ostracized with no supporters and very few friends. However Dileep Sanghani, member of Lok Sabha from Amreli in Saurashtra, was one of those rare ones who decided to stick by Narendra. Sanghani had become a parliamentarian for the first time in 1991 and remained one till he was defeated in 2004. Subsequently, Modi nominated Sanghani to contest the assembly elections in 2007 as a favour to a friend who had stood him in good stead but at another level, also wanted to promote someone from the Leuva Patel community to which Dileep belonged, after Modi's relationship with Keshubhai Patel turned sour. When I met Sanghani in August 2012, he was a key member of the Modi government and handled the all-important Law and Justice portfolio along with Legislative and Parliamentary Affairs and Fisheries — an area that Modi told me he would concentrate on if he continued to administer Gujarat. He however, lost the election in December 2012.

In 1996-97 when the BJP was in the process of regrouping politically after the gains and losses of mid-1990s, there were a few in the party — or in the Sangh Parivar — who extended support to Modi while he coped with new responsibilities in unfamiliar cities. The three were K N Govindacharya, S Gurumurthy, the maverick chartered accountant-cum-political manager and strategist for the Sangh Parivar and Arun Jaitley who was at that time emerging as an important leader of the BJP after a successful legal career and a stint as Additional Solicitor General during the V P Singh government at the Centre. Narendra Modi till date has kept up with Arun Jaitley; the other two were either forgotten or dropped.

Modi found safe refuge in Sanghani's house as the host had earmarked one room for Modi. It was sparsely furnished with one wooden bed, a thin mattress and a few chairs thrown in. A cranky, rickety water cooler — India's political elite was yet to acquire air conditioners — was hoisted on the window sill to provide a semblance of comfort during Delhi's harsh summer months. The room had a separate entrance

and hence Modi could come and go on his own without bothering Sanghani or his family. But the host made sure that Modi's basic necessities were taken care of. Sanghani recalled those days in August 2012 barely a few hours after his return from a hectic tour of the Saurashtra region. He acknowledged that the phase was indeed very challenging for Modi but adds he did not 'allow this to pull him down and still remained courageous.' His perception is slightly at variance with the other source I mentioned earlier and Sanghani contended that he never felt that Modi was down and out. 'He never lost his self-confidence,' added Sanghani.

Dileep Sanghani is a few years junior to Modi in the Sangh Parivar hierarchy and they met for the first time after the Emergency. Sanghani had previously been active in the ABVP and was jailed for political association with the Navnirman movement. While the two grew in different ways in their respective domains, they got to know each other better and worked together in 1991-92 when Sanghani, though a first-time member of Lok Sabha, was given the charge of being the *principal shepherd* for kesariya vahini volunteers from Gujarat that was raised at Modi's initiative to lend muscle to Dr Murli Manohar Joshi's Ekta Yatra — the key success in Modi's career so far.

Later when Sanghani was elected to the Lok Sabha for the fourth successive term in 1999, he was entitled to a bigger house and he opted to move into 97, Lodi Estate in early 2001 but since this house had to be renovated, Modi for the last six months of his stay in Delhi had to make do with one room in 9, Ashoka Road, adjacent to the BJP office and allotted to Arun Jaitley after he became member of the Rajya Sabha for the first time in April 2000. Jaitley did not use the official residence for personal use and instead handed it over to the party to house various functionaries and Modi was among the first residents. This house obviously proved extremely lucky for Modi because from there his next shift was to the chief minister's residence in Gandhinagar!

But back in September 1995 when Modi became a castaway, a major realignment of forces was taking place within the BJP. Since 1986 when Advani was anointed the president of the BJP, questions had been openly asked about the marginalization of Vajpayee in the party. What was a whisper for much of the late 1980s became much louder as the BJP formally incorporated the Ram Janmabhoomi agitation in its political agenda in June 1989 by adopting a resolution to such an effect at its National Executive meeting in Palampur, Himachal Pradesh. When Advani decided to embark on the Somnath to Ayodhya Rath Yatra in September 1990, there was no endorsement of the programme from Vajpayee. I had asked a hardliner in the Sangh Parivar in 1992 why there was no

space for Vajpayee in the BJP's top echelons. He had come up with a counter-question: '*Ek mayaan mein do talwar kaise rah saktee hain?*' (How can two swords be put in one case?)

But in the autumn of 1995 there were whispers that the proverbial sword in the BJP sheath would be changed. At the superficial level, this defied logic because Advani remained very much at the helm of the party, having become president again in June 1993. But the reporters' copy that came out at the end of the BJP's three-day long Maha Adhiveshan (mega conference) in November 1995 in Mumbai was one that none of them were prepared for. This was the party's largest ever gathering of activists and was attended by an estimated one lakh people.

By the time the BJP congregation was held, parliamentary elections were due in seven months. In the emergent political scenario there was a growing assessment within top echelons of the Sangh Parivar that the BJP's hard Hindutva stance would not enable the party to make any further electoral inroads into new areas and social bases or enable the party to draw electoral allies — either in pre-poll or post-poll scenarios.

Advani made a dramatic public announcement in the Mumbai Maha Adhiveshan stunning party workers when he declared during his presidential address that the BJP would 'fight the next election under the leadership of Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee and he will be our candidate for prime minister.' Advani then resurrected an old slogan, *Agli baari, Atal Bihari* (The next time, it shall be Vajpayee's turn). Despite prior indications, the declamation stunned the cadre nonetheless.

One of the reasons why the compromise formula in Gujarat was crafted by Vajpayee and under it the first *action* was Modi's sidelining, was because even before the formal announcement of Advani stepping aside, Vajpayee had begun to be tasked with sensitive issues that required tact. On 28 September 1995, Modi wrote his resignation letter to Kashiram Rana who was still the president of the Gujarat unit. In his letter Modi referred to the Judgement of Solomon. In this Biblical tale, King Solomon of Israel had to choose between two women, both of whom claimed to be the mother of a child. The wise king used a clever strategy to determine who the actual mother was and ordered the child be cut into two pieces and given to both. Modi wrote: 'At that (point) the "real mother" pleaded against the child being cut into two. Yes, on the same premise, I have come to this decision. To be the *bali* (sacrificial lamb) for the sake of the party means to resign from the post of the general secretary.'

After having resigned from his position in Gujarat and because Modi did not have any official charge in Delhi, he had little role in the Mumbai Maha

Adhiveshan or the deliberations prior to this. A week after the declaration of Vajpayee as BJP's prime ministerial candidate, Advani appointed Modi as national secretary and gave him the charge of looking after the party affairs in Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and Chandigarh. Modi told me: 'When I was shifted out of Gujarat — I came to Delhi only temporarily for 30-40 days. Later my headquarters was Chandigarh....'

The reason behind Modi continuing to remain in Chandigarh during the entire campaign period of the 1996 Lok Sabha election was because of two factors: with Advani himself on the back foot after the allegations of involvement in the Hawala scam, it was difficult for him to resurrect a one-time protégé who had fallen foul of a large number of people in the party. Secondly, with assembly elections due in Haryana along with the parliamentary polls, it was very difficult for Modi to justify being away from Chandigarh and expect rehabilitation before making a mark in his new terrain. He also had to *prove* himself all over again. There was also no way that Modi could go back to Gujarat, having virtually been declared persona non-grata by the party in the state. Sanghani said something which he thinks is important in the context of 1996: 'One trait of his which I noticed in the beginning, whatever he did, even if it was a very minor thing, he did with a lot of *nishtha* (dedication).'

Probably this characteristic of Modi contributed to the BJP being able to sew up an alliance for the parliamentary and assembly polls in Haryana with the Haryana Vikas Party (HVP) that was floated by one the three "Lals" who dominated politics of the state from the 1980s — Bansi Lal, Devi Lal and Bhajan Lal. In this case, Bansi Lal had quit the Congress and formed HVP along with his son, Surender Singh. Sensing that the people of Haryana were looking for a change from the Congress regime led by Bhajan Lal but were unwilling to cast their lot completely with the father-son duo of Devi Lal and Om Prakash Chautala, Bansi Lal launched his party and opened negotiations with the BJP for an alliance. When the alliance was sealed, the BJP and the HVP were able to cobble together a fairly satisfactory alliance under which of the ten parliamentary seats, the BJP was to contest six while the HVP was in the fray for four of them. In the elections for the state assembly, the HVP had the lion's share — 65 while the rest — 25 were allotted to the BJP.

Modi as one of the negotiators picked a leaf from the negotiating strategy of Pramod Mahajan who had driven a hard bargain a year ago for the assembly elections in Maharashtra when he sewed up the party's alliance with the Shiv Sena. Modi in fact learnt a lot from Mahajan. The two had worked together during Advani's Rath Yatra and later while organizing the Ekta Yatra led by Murli Manohar Joshi, Modi had once again turned to Pramod who was just eleven

months elder to Modi but had far greater experience in managing the affairs of the party and the world outside the Sangh Parivar. One of the most important attributes of Mahajan that Modi soon realized, if he was to rise in the party hierarchy, was the ability to make friends in other parties and have good personal relations with the corporate sector. Modi realized that he couldn't any more afford to be the proverbial frog in the well.

The BJP-HVP alliance worked as they won 7 of the 10 seats in the parliamentary elections with the BJP winning 4 and the HVP — 3. Although the alliance's tally added up to 44 in the assembly and, they were still short of a majority but with the support of some independent legislators, they formed a coalition government.

Despite a victory of some sorts in Haryana and winning the lone parliamentary seat in Chandigarh, Modi had little to do in the immediate aftermath of the parliamentary polls. In spite of the afterglow in the party following the BJP's thirteen-day stint in government, in Gujarat the party continued on its path of self-destruction. But Modi was fortunate at this time as he eventually got an opportunity to showcase his talent. There is a saying in several Indian languages that some people are fortunate and that their fate is always a step ahead of their existence. In Modi's case, this is what turned out in 1996. Elections for the newly-formed Chandigarh Municipal Corporation had been due since May 1994 when the President of India promulgated an Ordinance ordering the formation of the body, but nothing was done till December 1996 by when Modi was firmly in place in Chandigarh and naturally he played a crucial role including stitching an alliance with the Shiromani Akali Dal or SAD.

When the results came, the Congress won just one seat out of 20 while the remaining ones were won by the BJP-SAD alliance. Modi once again tasted glory. He was the centre of attraction even though the victors were nominees of his party. In the 22 December 1996 issue of the *Organiser*, he was described as the person "who was in charge of the election" and though he was quoted as saying that 'the poll verdict was against the policies of both the Central government of United Front and the State Government of the Congress,' which did not say much, but indicated that Modi had been recognized by the Sangh Parivar for his role in the BJP's success.

The victory in Chandigarh was followed by another one — this time in the February 1997 assembly election from Punjab for which the SAD stuck to its newly-developed alliance with the BJP instead of the Kanshi Ram-led Bahujan Samaj Party or BSP. The BJP-SAD alliance evolved from the latter's decision in May 1996 to support the BJP during its thirteen-day stint in government. The two

parties struck gold and when the verdict came out, the Congress was virtually cast away winning only 14 of the 117 seats while the BJP-SAD alliance was victorious in 93 of which the SAD won 75 while the BJP romped home in 18. The old Akali warhorse — Prakash Singh Badal became chief minister once again after 1980 and remained in office till 2002 when the Congress staged a comeback. The assembly election brought Modi closer to the Badals and elevated his stock with the central leaders of the BJP.

Given the manner in which Modi went about expanding the list of BJP's friends, Advani gave Modi the responsibility of looking after the entire northern zone — Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir were added to his pre-existing brief. In February 1997, Advani also summoned a meeting of some of his select party colleagues and Modi was part of that exclusive group. The BJP president expressed a desire to start another yatra — this time with the dual purpose of marking the golden jubilee of India's independence and also increasing the footprint of the party which he said in his memoirs, *My Country, My Life*¹ had 'to rededicate itself to a loftier goal for being in politics, an ideal that went far beyond the immediate goal of pursuit of political power and linked itself to the task of freeing India from the yoke of hunger, fear and corruption.' While this was stated ostensibly, the truth of the matter is that in early 1997 it was evident that the United Front government would not last for long and that there would either be a split within the Congress with a section opting to back Vajpayee, or mid-term polls would become inevitable. Such an assessment only got strengthened on 30 March 1997 when the then Congress President Sitaram Kesri met President Shankar Dayal Sharma and handed over a letter withdrawing support from Deve Gowda government. This was followed by I K Gujral being sworn in as prime minister of the second United Front government on 21 April. But ties between the government and Kesri remained tenuous and on the pretext of the alleged involvement of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam in the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi as stated in the Jain Commission report, the Congress president pulled the plug from the Gujral government leading to the dissolution of the eleventh Lok Sabha in December 1997 and forcing elections in February 1998.

But by the time the Deve Gowda government had fallen by the wayside, Advani was once again on his way to hit the road. The Swarna Jayanti Yatra had been conceptualized in that February meeting and Advani wrote, his 'young party colleagues — Pramod Mahajan, M Venkaiah Naidu, Sushma Swaraj, K N Govindacharya, Narendra Modi and Sadhvi Uma Bharati — began preparations for the yatra.' Of this lot, three were veterans at planning and coordinating yatras — while the other three — Naidu, Swaraj and Bharati were being considered by

Advani as being among the leaders of the future in the party. As far as Modi was concerned, coming barely seventeen months after being moved out of Gujarat, this indicated an increased role and probably a higher profile than even what he had in Gujarat.

The yatra per se, was to be undertaken in four phases and began on 18 May 1997 from Mumbai and ended on 15 July in New Delhi. It was natural that there were comparisons between this yatra and the *mother of all Advani yatras* — the Somnath to Ayodhya sojourn. There were no riots like in 1990 primarily on account of reduced communal temperature in the country. Though the BJP did not fan any animosity, the message that was delivered to the Muslims was clearly spelt out when the yatra reached Bhopal. An appeal issued on behalf of Advani stated: ‘BJP urges the Indian Muslims to understand Cultural Nationalism and forge heart-unity with their Hindu brethren.’ At one level, there was little in this appeal to disagree with except in the definition of “cultural nationalism” which Advani wished the Muslims in India to understand. It was defined: ‘This (cultural nationalism) does not erase the identity of Islam. For my party not only respects but celebrates the multireligious, multilingual and multiethnic diversity of Indian society, which is united at its core by Hindutva.’ Clearly the postulation that Hindutva is the core of India’s multireligiosity, will find few takers outside the Sangh Parivar. But while writing about Modi, there is little purpose to be served by opening an ideological debate on the issue. It is best to let the matters rest where they do — in the state of being unreconcilable.

However, by the time Advani’s yatra was over, Modi was biding his time for a greater role. He did not have to wait for long as the other Pracharak in the core team of Advani was virtually shot in the mouth by a sensational disclosure in a Hindi daily — *Punjab Kesri* — published from New Delhi. The now deceased Bhanu Pratap Shukla’s report of 6 October 1997 claimed that Govindacharya — he was party general secretary at that time — in a meeting with three British diplomats had called Vajpayee the party’s *mukhauta* (mask) while the real leader was the party President, L K Advani. The most damaging verbatim quote attributed to Govindacharya was: ‘As for Atal Bihari Vajpayee, he is not a power within the organisation, he is only the mask for the party. And his importance in the organisational affairs of the BJP and its internal politics is akin to that of a mask in a play. Advani is the real power in the BJP. Whomsoever be the president of the party, the BJP will be run by him and his decision will be final. I am the sole representative of the RSS in the BJP.’

Taking serious objection to these alleged remarks of the Pracharak, Vajpayee

reportedly wrote to Advani politely asking him to look into the issue. On his part Govindacharya denied making any remarks against Vajpayee and said that on the contrary he considered Vajpayee to be the party's *mukut* (coronet) and *pagri* (turban). But at the time there were few who believed Govindacharya's claim for his known propensity to put his foot in the mouth.

As far as Govindacharya was concerned, the "mask" comment was another footnote in an already well-annotated career. There had been an earlier instance in early 1992 when he had been sidelined for more than eighteen months because of his relationship with Uma Bharati and the perception of Murli Manohar Joshi that Govindacharya had played a role in a few negative news reports in the Indian media on the Ekta Yatra. While previously, Govindacharya's sidelining did not benefit anyone; in 1997, Modi stood to gain as he was the next man waiting: a Pracharak who had made his mark both as a "doer" and a "thinker".

The Modi versus Govindacharya story was the sub-text in the *mukhauta* episode. This stemmed from the additional charge of looking after party affairs in Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh being given to Modi after the successes in Himachal Pradesh, Chandigarh, Punjab and Haryana. Being given the responsibility in Madhya Pradesh introduced an element of direct antagonism in the ties between Modi and Govindacharya because of the presence of the latter's protégé — Uma Bharati — in the state. Because Modi was from the OBC, he was locked in a direct tussle with her as she was also from the same Backward community. Modi knew that if Govindacharya had to choose an OBC mascot in the party, it would not be he. The task in Karnataka however gave him the opportunity of reviving ties with Ananth Kumar — readers would remember the getaways of the duo during Ekta Yatra — and also simultaneously develop proximity with B S Yeddyurappa who eventually steered the BJP to political power in Karnataka before being caught in a maze of corruption charges and eventually quitting the BJP.

Years later, in an interview with Neerja Chowdhury for the weekly tabloid — *Current*, Govindacharya denied once again that he had even used the "M" word in reference to Vajpayee. He elaborated:

Three people from the British High Commission, two Europeans and one Indian, had come to see me at the party office and they asked me who could be the next party president. This was on September 16, 1997. Party elections were due at the time. They talked about ten names. Then I asked, why not Atalji? He is the most obvious choice. He has been our prime ministerial candidate in 1996 and will be there in 1998. He is the most popular and most accepted face of the party. That evening the Indian went to the home of

Bhanu Pratap Shukla, and gave his version of what had transpired at the meeting. Bhanuji used to think he was removed from the editorship of Panchjanya in 1993 because of me. Mukhauta appeared in Bhanuji's syndicated column...

The reason for the *mukhauta* incident becoming such a major controversy within the entire Sangh Parivar was because Vajpayee was particularly incensed and despite Govindacharya's denials, relations between the two never improved thereafter. This was probably because in some way the charge against Vajpayee had an element of truth: in the course of the Ayodhya campaign, Vajpayee had in select circles expressed his reservations but never spelt it out in public. He was often called the right man in the wrong party and at times even being termed a Nehruvian among Hindutva votaries. Regardless of whether Govindacharya actually ascribed a dual identity to Vajpayee or not, there was a perception that the veteran had for long allowed himself to be used as some sort of Trojan Horse among the anti-Congress groups to lure an unsuspecting people into the fold of the Sangh Parivar. In late 1997, parliamentary elections were imminent after the disclosure of the report of the Jain Commission regarding alleged links of the DMK in Rajiv Gandhi's assassination. In that situation, Advani brokered a truce between Vajpayee and Govindacharya but as Yubaraj Ghimire reported in the issue of *Outlook* dated 10 November 1997 'the problems for him and the BJP are far from over.'

If the events in September 1997 enabled Modi to move closer to the centre stage of the BJP, further developments in October ensured this occurrence. Angana Parekh reported in the *Indian Express* on 23 November 1997: 'A series of media reports — excerpts from an old diary of Govindacharya and an e-mail communication of the British High Commission with reports of the party's plans to ensure that Advani and not Vajpayee would be the BJP's prime minister — further vitiated the atmosphere.'

Before getting into the contents of this diary, it is interesting to recall how these diaries came into the public domain. In February 1992, when Govindacharya was relieved of his duties and despatched to Madras (as it was called then), his room was hastily cleared after he left before close aides could come and take away his personal belongings which he did not carry with him to his next port of halt. Among the belongings of Govindacharya that were seized by the party functionaries, then under the control of Murli Manohar Joshi, was his diary in which he used to make random notes and jottings. This diary remained in the *safe custody* of unknown people for more than five years before it appeared in the media. By and large the jottings were stray thoughts of Govindacharya at the end of a day and included

undecipherable comments that featured several leaders of significance in the BJP including Joshi, Sunder Singh Bhandari, J P Mathur, Sikandar Bakht and Vijayaraje Scindia. The jottings purportedly had references to relationships of several important leaders with women and other personal observations about others. The entries at times were not comprehensible in regard to what Govindacharya was implying including one particular jotting pertaining to a news story done by me. It was known that the diary entries were made prior to his removal from New Delhi, but there was no way of knowing when exactly they were made as Govindacharya had not recorded the date. All in all, the episode further made things difficult for Govindacharya and paved the way for Modi to make a grander entry into the centre stage.

While the political scenario in New Delhi indicated an early demise of the eleventh Lok Sabha, in Gujarat the BJP was in the process of staging a political recovery as the Vaghela-led government was floundering. In a by-election for the assembly seat of Sarkhej on 8 February 1997, the BJP candidate — Amit Shah who later earned notoriety when he was arrested for his role in the Sohrabuddin fake encounter case while being a Home minister in the state government — won comfortably. Shah was controversially fielded in 2012 — and he won the poll — after having spent several months outside Gujarat when he was judicially debarred from entering the state.

Moreover throughout 1997, Vaghela had frequent run-ins with the Congress President Sitaram Kesri. Eventually Vaghela resigned to save his party's government and installed his nominee, Dilip Parikh who was Industry minister in his cabinet, as chief minister on 28 October 1997. The Dilip Parikh government was in power for barely four months. It faced a crisis virtually from the first day in the form of dissensions within the party and sensing the possibility of being reduced to the minority, the state cabinet recommended the dissolution of the House and ordered assembly elections simultaneously with the 1998 Lok Sabha polls. Dilip Parikh however requested the governor to allow his government to remain in office till the election, which he did.

With polls having been announced and despite the fact that Advani's tenure as party president had technically got over in July 1997, the party decided to extend his term. Advani took full charge of the party's campaign and decided to use the capabilities of Modi in Gujarat. When I asked Modi about his role in the state after being banished for more than two years, he was surprisingly staid and did not drum the point that this marked a victorious return to his karmabhoomi. He told me: 'I was sent to Gujarat for the campaign of 1998 though I was in Delhi and looking

after northern states. I wanted to ensure the victory of Keshubhai once again and we swept the polls — got two-thirds majority.’

In the simultaneous polls in February 1998, the BJP swept Gujarat like it had in the 1995 assembly polls winning 117 seats while the Congress won 53 and Vaghela’s All India Rashtriya Janata Party or AIRJP only 4. In the parliamentary polls, the BJP improved its tally from 16 in 1996 to 19 while the Congress won 7 seats — down from 10. After this what became more than evident is that despite the year-long presence of the AIRJP at the head of governance in Gujarat, the state still remained bipolar — a fact that was accepted by Vaghela in July 1999 when he decided to merge his party into the Congress. The BJP also succeeded in heading a coalition government at the Centre after emerging as the singlemost largest party in the parliamentary polls.

In the meantime, Modi stopped being a political pariah in Gujarat after the 1998 election. After his departure in September 1995, his one-time associate, Sanjay Joshi had stepped into Modi’s shoes as General Secretary (Organization) and had played a key role in the 1998 campaign with some inputs from Modi. There are however different versions about the extent of Modi’s role in the BJP’s success in 1998.

I had met Sanjay Joshi for the first time in early December 1997 outside the BJP office in Ahmedabad where he was soaking in some of the warm winter’s sun. My first impression of the man was that he was extremely reticent and not effusive like the person he replaced although he appeared confident of shepherding the party for the impending elections. He also looked like someone who liked to mark his territory and did not brook any interference. I did not ask him if he would allow Modi an active role once again in the state unit — probably because the issue was not part of the larger national picture and Modi was not what he eventually became. As far as Modi was concerned, he remained non-committal; V Gangadhar asked him for Rediff news: ‘So, Gujarat’s “Strong Man” is back where he belongs!’ Modi’s reply was characteristic of him — ‘It is all the creation of the media. I am just a humble party worker. Nothing more than that.’

Meanwhile, Sanjay Joshi developed his own coterie and gained proximity to Keshubhai who had by then become wary of Modi and seen through, what a journalist who does not wish to be named says, ‘Modi’s game of pitching Keshubhai and Vaghela against each other in 1995.’ Vinod K Jose in his profile of Modi in *The Caravan* wrote that after Keshubhai returned as chief minister he was, ‘...surrounded by a new circle of younger BJP leaders like Sanjay Joshi, Haren Pandya and Gordhan Zadaphia — while Modi, still in Delhi, was out of the picture.’ Zadaphia also told me that he worked closely with Sanjay Joshi after the

exit of Modi from Gujarat.

However although Modi may have been out of the picture in Gujarat, he figured more prominently than before on the national canvas. His new journey in fact began from Parivartan Nagar: the name given to the venue chosen by the BJP for its National Council meeting in Gandhinagar on 3-4 May 1998. The meeting had been preceded by a National Executive meeting a day earlier which formalized an announcement made by the party in New Delhi on 15 April 1998 — that Khushabhau Thakre was to finally take over from Advani as party president. The Gandhinagar meeting was a mere formality though it was a big moment for the party because this was the first such gathering after it became the leading partner of the ruling coalition and had its members as prime minister and in key portfolios including Home and Finance. For two days the venue bustled with security personnel as India's prime minister and the Home minister — both of whom required the heaviest security cover — were in attendance. Though Modi had little role in organizing the conclave — it being primarily under the charge of Sanjay Joshi, he was one of the stars around whom state party functionaries collated. By that time the media had already reported that Modi would be promoted in the party as general secretary, at par with Govindacharya and M Venkaiah Naidu.

Modi's name was in fact personally cleared by the RSS leader K S Sudarshan, he was Sarkaryavah (general secretary at that time) and the fact that Modi's name was cleared from the highest quarters of the RSS indicated that he had overcome the setback of 1995 and regained the confidence of the Sangh Parivar.

But before the formal announcement was made, on 11 May 1998 there was excitement in Vajpayee's residence as he was joined in his living room by six other senior party leaders — Advani, Defence Minister George Fernandes, Finance Minister Yashwant Sinha, Deputy Chairman Planning Commission Jaswant Singh, Vajpayee's Political Advisor Pramod Mahajan and Principal Secretary, Brajesh Mishra. A short while before 4 pm, a specially installed highly secure telephone, buzzed. The prime minister spoke to the person on the other end of the line and after putting it down, informed his colleagues the reason for which they had gathered: India had successfully conducted three simultaneous nuclear explosions at Pokhran. Two days later, India conducted two more tests and the BJP trumpeted the achievement and hailed Vajpayee for having become the first prime minister after Indira Gandhi who bit the nuclear bullet. As a result when on 19 May 1998, Modi was elevated as general secretary, it was a quiet declaration.

In the weeks after the installation of the government, the mood among the BJP cadre in Gujarat was at odds with those primarily tending to the central secretariat

of the party. The central leaders realized the compulsions of coalition politics, that with the BJP heading the National Democratic Alliance, which included more than a dozen parties, it could not have its way on all issues. As a result several contentious core issues that had been traditionally part of the BJP campaign had to be kept on the backburner. Most of these issues were those that formed the kernel of the Hindutva idea or what BJP leaders mentioned as cultural nationalism. As a result, the aggressive wings of the Sangh Parivar — mainly the VHP and Bajrang Dal — were at loggerheads with the government from the first few days as they wanted the Centre to quickly announce plans to facilitate the construction of a Ram Temple at Ayodhya in place of the makeshift structure existing since December 1992. The Gujarat unit of the party was among those that were restive. But any further agitation would have jeopardized the coalition from the first day and would have gone against the grain of the decision to hoist Vajpayee atop the BJP pyramid in place of Advani in 1995.

It was however difficult to rein in the hardliners in Gujarat and the aggressive face of Hindutva was on full display. This first became visible within weeks of Keshubhai Patel becoming chief minister on 4 March 1998. Since October 1997, after the virtual collapse of governance in the state, sporadic attacks had continued against Christian and tribal communities by activists of the Hindu Jagran Manch (HJM) apparently a Sangh Parivar associate. Amid campaigning for the twin elections, the South Gujarat Tribal Christian Welfare Council, located in Ahwa, the headquarters of Dang District, made several representations to the local authorities in January 1998 seeking their intervention in restraining the HJM, VHP and Bajrang Dal from carrying on with hate campaigns. However, there was no let up in the attacks on Christians and from April 1998 they became more intense and occurred with greater frequency. The attacks were not restricted to tribal areas but also took place in Vadodara and Palanpur among other places. These attacks continued through 1998 and in December during Christmas there was a concerted attack in Ahwa. A report by V Venkatesan in the 16-29 January 1998 issue of *Frontline* is revealing:

The attacks began on December 25 following a rally held in Ahwa, by the Hindu Dharma Jagran Manch (HJM), an affiliate of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Bajrang Dal. The three organisations have in recent years carried on an aggressive campaign against Christian missionaries in the region, raising the bogey of ‘threats to the Hindu majority’ owing to ‘forcible conversions’ to Christianity by the missionaries...In December 1998, when the HJM made public its plan to organise a rally in Ahwa on Christmas day, the

(South Gujarat Tribal Christian Welfare) Council requested Dang District Collector Bharat Joshi on four occasions not to give permission for the rally. But the rally was held. On December 25, the rallyists, of whom there were about 4,000, raised slogans against Christians as the police watched. Later, at a meeting held at a school ground in a predominantly Christian neighbourhood, speeches abusive of Christian missionaries were made. According to sources, Joshi went on to the dais and was garlanded. Following the meeting, the attacks began — on Christian places of worship, schools run by missionaries, and shops owned by Christians. Attacks were reported from several villages in Dang district that night and over the next few days.

In the course of the social and political discourse on emergence of communalism and state-aided violence against religious minorities in Gujarat, attacks on Christians have drawn comparatively lesser attention because of being *submerged* by a bigger *horror*. The emergence of attacks on Christians towards the end of 1997 had appeared rather odd in the first instance. These incidents came after more than a decade-and-a-half long campaign of the Sangh Parivar on the Ram Janmabhoomi issue in the course of which the only *target* community had been Muslims. Why then the sudden change in tactics? Or was it simply over-enthusiasm on part of individual workers of the Sangh Parivar without any specific instruction to target Christians?

At one level, the attacks were indicative of diversification of the Hindutva campaign, a stratagem to make inroads into an area courtesy the momentum created by another offensive in a different direction. But unlike the anti-Muslim agenda, the causative factors and gains for the votaries of Hindutva in these attacks were different from the campaign so far. In the anti-Muslim campaign, besides the search for revenge due to assumed *historical humiliations*, the fears that were raised included the spectre of an enemy across the borders with links with their *agents* within the country who besides collaborating with their masters were also overturning the demographic picture of the country. The *enemy* in the anti-Muslim campaign was more visible than among Christians simply because they looked different and spoke a *different language*. So far the Christians were concerned, a perusal of their faith could only be done after a certain amount of scrutiny. Unlike a large number of Muslim men, Christian men did not wear skull caps and sport beards. Similarly, the burqa was a giveaway for Muslim women.

But the RSS clan had deep rooted fears from Christians because of the practise of conversions. Leaders of the Sangh Parivar have often stated in private that they get unsettled by the sustained campaign of proselytizing Hindus and tribal

communities by Christian missionaries. The biggest fear that they had was they were unsure of the extent of conversions that had already taken place among the Dalits. In private conversations they said that there was no way of knowing if someone had converted to Christianity but still maintained a Hindu identity for social reasons. Several years after the first attacks on Christians in Gujarat, Swami Aseemananda alias Jiten Chatterjee who was arrested for involvement in terror attacks on the Samjhauta Express in 2007 and the Malegaon blasts in 2006, spoke to Manini Chatterjee then working in the *Indian Express* in September 2005 and what he said was indicative of the *raison d'être* behind the attacks on Christians in the first instance (by this time he had been shifted by the RSS to the Dang district from Chhattisgarh): 'Hindu samaj faces two big challenges— Islamic jihad and Christian conversions. We need to confront both these threats on a global scale.'

Clearly in the understanding of the Sangh Parivar, one enemy waged an *open war* while the other was *silent* and often *less visible*. The comments of Aseemananda are important in the context of any narrative on Modi because after he became chief minister, his government facilitated the Swami in organizing the Shabari Kumbh Mela in early 2006 in Jarson village of Dang district. Aseemananda said that, 'While food and shelter would be "provided by us", the government would help in transport, medicine, water and electricity.' The congregation that was part of the Sangh Parivar outfit Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram's programme to *Hinduize* the tribal communities, was planned after Aseemananda learnt that the mythological character — Shabari — in the Ramayana was considered by tribals to have dwelled in the forests of Dang. A Shabari Mata Mandir was already inaugurated in October 2004 and the then RSS chief, K S Sudarshan and Modi were regular visitors to the temple.

While the Keshubhai-led government turned a blind eye to the attacks on Christians, it suddenly was gripped with a crisis that — as subsequent developments demonstrated — it was not equipped to handle. On 9 June 1998, a cyclone chalking up to 170 to 200 kmph velocity struck coastal regions of Gujarat, near the port of Kandla, in Kutch district. Media reports of the time said tidal waves as high as twenty-five feet struck the coastal belt and when the winds died down they left a trail of devastation. The cyclone killed an estimated 3,500 people; 20,000 families were affected; 2,00,000 houses were damaged resulting in total property damage estimated at more than twenty-five billion rupees. Besides Kutch, deaths were also reported from Jamnagar, Porbandar, Rajkot, Junagarh, Bhavnagar, Banaskantha, Surat, Bharuch, Valsad and Navsari.

The Kandla cyclone was the first in the series of natural disasters that struck

Gujarat over the next three years and crippled the Keshubhai government. Floods in Ahmedabad city in August 2000 were followed by the earthquake in January 2001. Questions were raised over the capabilities of Keshubhai to administer in a crisis situation and charges were also levelled that corruption was becoming rampant especially in relief and rehabilitation operations. Over and above everything else, Keshubhai made things more difficult for himself by relying on his son-in-law, Dr Mayur Desai, whose role and sincerity had previously come in for criticism in 1995. Keshubhai came under attack from even “insiders”. Swapan Dasgupta wrote in the first issue of *India Today* after the crippling earthquake in an article headlined: “Is Keshubhai Up To It?” He argued:

Keshubhai has earned for himself the sobriquet, the mahasankatdharak chief minister (it would loosely translate as Mr Disaster)....The problem isn't one of resources. The entire bill for the reconstruction of Gujarat is set to touch Rs 20,000 crore but at least half this amount is likely to be contributed by civil society.... The issue is one of leadership and credibility. On both these counts there is a question mark hanging over Keshubhai. Over the years, the man who started out as a relentless crusader against sloth and corruption has reinvented himself as a leader constantly willing to make compromises. After the earthquake, this image is fast turning out to be a political liability.

In hindsight, January 2001 was the time when whispers became louder that the BJP had to look beyond Keshubhai and Modi seized this opportunity to fulfil his ambition.

When Keshubhai began his terminal descent, Modi put his entire energies into his new role as general secretary of the party. One of the issues that Modi personally took care of immediately after his appointment was to work towards making the BJP government in Himachal Pradesh more stable. The involvement of Modi with this tiny hill state had in fact begun during his stay in Chandigarh when it was part of his charge and also because as he once told me how, ‘The hills beckoned him.’

Though the hill state was geographically very small and accounted for only 4 members of the Lok Sabha and had a state assembly whose strength was only 68, the state was politically significant for the BJP because the Jana Sangh had traditionally been the countervailing political pole to the Congress in what had for long been a traditional bipolar polity. Since the 1970s, the BJP had been dominated by Shanta Kumar who had been the chief minister for almost three years during the Janata Party period in the late 1970s. But by 1990s, there was a growing sentiment in sections of the state BJP and also shared by some in the national leadership — including Modi — that the state unit needed to be infused with new blood. Modi

got about this task and promoted Prem Kumar Dhumal, political pivot of the alternative groups to Shanta Kumar and his supporters. Dhumal had been a grassroots level worker and was elected to the Lok Sabha for two terms in 1989 and 1991.

Though elder to Modi by more than a decade and a half, the two shared a bonding and this greatly enabled the two to regain political power in Himachal Pradesh after the BJP's rout in the assembly elections in 1993 held after the demolition of the Babri Masjid. In early 1997, when Modi began his *project Dhumal*, he had just been defeated in the 1996 parliamentary poll. In 1997 when the Congress chief minister in Himachal Pradesh, Virbhadra Singh (currently chief minister), dissolved the state assembly and called for elections several months before they were due, Modi divided his time between the hill state and other states in his charge as the Lok Sabha elections were also on the anvil.

The results yielded a split verdict. While the BJP won 3 of the 4 parliamentary seats, the assembly seats were divided between the BJP and the Congress with each winning 31 each. Virbhadra Singh continued to remain in office. He was sworn in again as chief minister on 9 March though the Congress did not have a majority on its own in the Vidhan Sabha. This was possible because he secured the support of an independent legislator — Ramesh Chand from Jwalamukhi — who was actually a BJP rebel, a Shanta Kumar loyalist.

In the 1998 elections in Himachal Pradesh, Modi's involvement in the backroom parleys was more than palpable. The way he had promoted Dhumal and ensured that Shanta Kumar was not allowed by the party leadership to contest the assembly election and instead be in fray for the parliamentary polls — was a tact very similar to the one used by Modi in 1995 to ensure Vaghela's stake for the chief ministerial post was denied. In the aftermath of the elections, Shanta Kumar's isolation was so complete that he was not made a central minister throughout the Vajpayee government's first tenure and could only wrangle a ministry after the BJP-led coalition returned to power in October 1999 and even then was initially given charge of a not so important portfolio — Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution.

But back in 1998, Shanta Kumar was cut up with Modi and his projection of Dhumal and as a result, few of his loyalists contested as independent candidates and one of them won the polls. The elections had another spin to the narrative as Sukh Ram who had been Telecom minister in the Narasimha Rao government and was accused of graft, quit the party and formed a regional outfit — Himachal Vikas Congress (HVC). The BJP sharply criticized Sukh Ram during the campaign but

when the new outfit won 5 seats, the BJP initiated negotiations with him.

As part of its necessity for building a coalition, the BJP had already compromised with graft at the central level. Vajpayee had inducted in his team at least two members who faced accusations of corruption against them: Sedapatti R Muthiah of the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and Buta Singh, the one-time Congress leader who quit the party and got elected as an independent candidate from Jalore in Rajasthan. The BJP thereby had little qualms about entering into a quid pro quo with Sukh Ram's HVC. On the one hand, the BJP began talks with Sukh Ram on a power sharing arrangement and on the other hand, the central leadership intervened and got Shanta Kumar to ensure his loyalist's return to the flock. As a result of these moves, the balance of numbers tilted in favour of the BJP and on 24 March — barely a fortnight after the Congress government assumed office again, Dhumal was sworn in as chief minister with Sukh Ram the *de facto* deputy chief minister with the portfolios of Public Works and Power.

The numbers for the new ruling party improved significantly later when the BJP won all 3 seats in the snow-bound areas that went to polls in June 1998. Later, the BJP was able to secure a comfortable majority with the support of the HVC and by winning two seats vacated by the Congress. There was also a split in the HVC and two of its members left the party to form the Himachal Kranti Morcha that later merged with the BJP. But before the Dhumal-led government was able to secure an absolute majority, the BJP had to *shed* Sukh Ram because President K R Narayanan on 28 April granted permission for prosecuting him in the telecom scam case. Following this the BJP was left with little option but to secure Sukh Ram's resignation.

The task of *persuading* Sukh Ram to put in his papers was largely given to Modi. On 7 May the besieged former central Communications minister stepped down from office and sent his resignation to the chief minister who forwarded it to the Governor. Sukh Ram had however resisted the demand for his resignation till the end and he finally claimed that he quit because Vajpayee advised him to do so and intimated that even he had dropped central ministers facing corruption charges. S K Pande in a report in the 9-22 May 1998 issue of *Frontline* said that, 'BJP president Kushabhau Thakre and the party's national secretary Narendra Modi were largely instrumental in persuading him to resign.' But there were question marks on the survival of the government after the resignation of Sukh Ram. There were many at that time who predicted the collapse of the Dhumal regime but Modi proved correct when he told an *Indian Express* reporter on 1 May — several days before the formal resignation — that 'the development will not affect the BJP-led government

in the State.’ Modi’s claims turned out to be prophetic as the Dhumal government remained in office till 6 March 2003 when the BJP lost the polls to the Congress and Virbhadra Singh returned to office.

There were two sub-plots in the narrative of events in Himachal Pradesh in the spring and summer of 1998. This first pertained to the decision of the BJP to bring about a change of guard; the second plot had intrigue at its core and a major string puller in this was Modi with the experience he gained in Gujarat in 1994-95 coming handy. T R Sharma, then a Political Science professor in Punjab University wrote in the journal of Pune’s Indian School of Political Economy: ‘The decision of the BJP leadership to project Prem Kumar Dhumal as its chief ministerial candidate instead of Shanta Kumar, proved quite productive...Unlike Shanta Kumar, he faced no hostility from any segment of the electorate. The fact that he belonged to the new area as against the Congress chief ministerial candidate who belonged to the old area (Shimla district) became an important election issue in the new areas, particularly in Hamirpur district where the BJP’s vote share swelled to 56 per cent, 17 per cent higher than the state average.’

By the time the government in Himachal Pradesh settled down to governance after resolving survival questions, it was time for the BJP to start setting its house in order in another state that was also under the charge of Modi: Haryana. The concern stemmed from the fact that the 1998 Lok Sabha elections had yielded poor dividends for the BJP in Haryana. Earlier in this chapter Modi’s partial role in evolving the party’s alliance with HVP in 1996 was recounted. This tie-up was continued in 1998 but it resulted in a significant dip in returns — the BJP and HVP won only a seat each and the father-son duo of Devi Lal and Chautala emerged as the front runners with 4 seats while the Congress won 3. Even though the alliance was becoming tenuous, the BJP continued with it for almost a year before the party withdrew support from the Bansi Lal government on 22 June 1999 and pulled out its ministers from the government. On this day, eleven legislators of the BJP met Governor Mahabir Prasad to convey the party’s decision and they were accompanied by BJP Vice President K L Sharma. In an interaction with journalists he informed that the decision had been taken by the party’s parliamentary board earlier but they had given Vajpayee the privilege of announcing it due to its possible repercussions on the Centre. Subsequently, Chautala formed the government engineering defections from the HVP.

In any case, the BJP had already sewed up an understanding with Haryana Lok Dal (Rashtriya) as Devi Lal and Chautala called their party at that point of time. As a result of interacting frequently, Modi and Chautala were able to establish a

personal rapport that continued even after Modi became chief minister. For the parliamentary election in 1999, the BJP and Indian National Lok Dal (as HLD (R) was renamed) forged an alliance with the two parties contesting 5 seats each — and registering a complete sweep. In mid-term elections that were called by Chautala in February 2000, the alliance continued and INLD won 47 of the 90 seats — a clear majority on its own — though the BJP did not do very well and managed to win only 6 of the 29 seats it contested — about half the number of seats it won in the 1996 assembly elections it contested as an ally of HVP. Part of the reason behind the BJP's poor performance in the assembly elections immediately after the parliamentary polls was due to Chautala backtracking on an initial promise made during the time when the BJP allowed him to dissolve the assembly almost fifteen months before its term was scheduled to end. A report in the Chandigarh-based newspaper, *The Tribune* is revealing:

It seems that Mr Chautala, who was keen on making the BJP agreeable to the dissolution of the Assembly (a nod from the Centre was essential for the president to agree), in some weaker moments agreed to give 35 seats to the BJP before the party general secretary in charge of Haryana, Mr Narendra Modi. Had the negotiations been held with the state leaders, the BJP high command might not have given much weight to their version. But it is not easy to ignore what Mr Modi says. According to one of the BJP leaders, who were present at the Chautala-Modi meeting, initially the BJP negotiators sought to contest 45 seats after the dissolution of the House. To this demand Mr Chautala's response was a big no. His argument was that the sharing of the Lok Sabha seats on a 50:50 basis was an exception which could not be made a guiding formula for the Assembly elections.

It was evident that by the end of 1999 Modi's skills in managing an organization, strategizing for elections and negotiating with potential allies had been established. He was being privately labelled as the *next* Pramod Mahajan who had earned the sobriquet from the media of "Mr Fixer". But Modi did not want to be known for his skills in the use of cloak-and-dagger tactics and skulduggery. He wanted an identity — a label that would stick to no one but him.

After a reading of Modi's mind on the basis of his actions and interactions, it is evident that in 1998-99 after being elevated as general secretary he wanted to indeed evolve a distinct identity among his peers. Modi's main rivals and associates at that time were Pramod Mahajan, Govindacharya, Venkaiah Naidu, Arun Jaitley, Kalyan Singh, Uma Bharati and Sushma Swaraj. By and large this group comprised what was being bandied about in the summer of 1999 as Generation Next in the

BJP. Pramod Mahajan was being mentioned in hushed tones about a possible leadership position in the government-oriented wing of the party in the future while Govindacharya was clearly being seen as a future organizational head. Of the others, each had their defined skills — Jaitley was the suave urbane face of reason, Uma Bharati and Kalyan Singh were Hindutva champions and representatives of the Other Backward Castes, Sushma Swaraj was the urban middle class woman leader who could swing a parliamentary debate to the party's advantage and also be a good draw with voters and Venkaiah Naidu was the leading face of the party in southern India. But what about Modi?

Within the party hierarchy among the general secretaries, I had written in the now defunct *Sunday* magazine in 1999: 'It was evident from the beginning that Modi was, the virtual number two to Govindacharya. But, though clearly junior to Govindacharya, many saw the elevation of Modi giving rise to a rivalry between the two who were once considered to be very close to each other. In fact, there was a time when it was felt that Govindacharya was the main factor behind Modi's rapid rise in the party hierarchy. However, since the elevation of Modi to the national leadership, he has steadfastly steered clear of controversies of Govindacharya's making giving many to feel that the two are probably not as close as they once were.'

Given the fact that in the immediate run, there would be no vacancy at the top in the party, Modi found a niche missing. He remained the quintessential poor man's Pramod Mahajan — a tag that he wanted to outgrow.

Modi worked towards being made the official spokesman of the party and his efforts bore fruit by the middle of 1999 when he was designated so for the party in the run up to the parliamentary polls that became necessary after the Vajpayee government fell on 17 April 1999 by a solitary vote during voting on a confidence motion moved by the prime minister. The reason why Modi was given this charge was because he had established his credentials as a person who could articulate both the language of compromise as well as that which was applauded within the Sangh Parivar. This was best reflected by his statements on Pakistan — firstly in the immediate aftermath of Vajpayee's Lahore bus journey and thereafter in the midst of the Kargil war.

Shortly after Vajpayee announced that he would travel to Pakistan on 20 February 1999 by bus, the Congress criticized its timing — barely nine months after the two neighbours conducted nuclear tests and raised questions about Pakistan's intent. Though some sections within the Sangh Parivar also felt that the prime minister had little to hope for except a possible shot at the Nobel Peace Prize,

BJP leaders had little option but to support the initiative. The task to write in defence of the Lahore initiative was given to Modi for an issue of the party organ — *BJP Today*. Modi contended that ‘the Lahore Declaration is today the benchmark by which Governments across the world are judging the intrusion by Pakistan in Kargil.’ Later, he argued that Congress was wrong in criticizing the move because it was plausible that Islamabad would not adhere to the framework of the Lahore Agreement and wrote: ‘Pakistan has repeatedly violated the Shimla Agreement — Does it mean that signing of Shimla Agreement was foolish or the said Agreement has collapsed?’

While this was the voice of reason — a veritable peacenik speaking, Modi’s tack changed during the Kargil war. Vinod K Jose wrote in *The Caravan*: ‘During the 1999 Kargil War and the subsequent failed peace talks between Vajpayee and General Pervez Musharraf, Modi held frequent press conferences and often appeared on television, demonstrating the jingoistic fervour that would become his signature. Asked during one TV debate about how to respond to provocations from Pakistan, his answer was: “*Chicken biryani nahi, bullet ka jawab bomb se diya jayega*” — we won’t give them chicken biryani, we will respond to a bullet with a bomb.’

Even within party circles, Modi adopted a hardline stance. By the end of 1998 Vajpayee had begun breaking free from the stranglehold of RSS and was taking key decisions independent of its leaders. This was in contrast to March 1998, when Vajpayee constituted his ministry and K S Sudarshan paid a late night visit to communicate that Vajpayee was not to make Jaswant Singh and Pramod Mahajan ministers in his government because they lost in the parliamentary polls. In less than a year, RSS leaders were unhappy with the direction taken by the Vajpayee government and began strategizing to achieve its political objectives. Towards this, its leaders organized a five-day *chintan baithak* (introspection meet) in Nagpur between 8-13 December. It was attended by senior leaders of the RSS and its affiliates like BJP, VHP, the labour wing — Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh, ABVP, Swadeshi Jagran Manch and Bajrang Dal. At the end of the deliberations, K S Sudarshan emphatically stated that the RSS was unhappy with the functioning of the government. Venkitesh Ramakrishnan wrote in the 2-15 January 1999 issue of *Frontline*: ‘BJP president Khushabhau Thakre, the party’s spokesperson M Venkaiah Naidu and prominent leaders such as K N Govindacharya and Narendra Modi, apparently concur with this view.’

By the end of 1999 it was evident that Modi was giving shape to a distinguishing feature of his image and identity among his peers. The bulwark of this image was to be the core ideology of the Sangh Parivar with a strict adherence to the ideological

plank of cultural nationalism. There were also indications at this stage that he was keen to return to Gujarat to fulfil his dream of heading the government in the state. In order to work towards realizing his goal, Modi had begun stealthy moves aimed at eroding the credibility of the Keshubhai Patel government. This included off-the-record comments against Keshubhai to journalists personally known to him.

What prompted Modi's ire was also the fact that after he returned to power, Keshubhai chose not to keep him humoured and instead was guided more by Sanjay Joshi. He also deliberately took several decisions that resulted in widening the schism. As a result, it did not take long for Modi to get disenchanted with Keshubhai. V Venkatesan wrote in the *Frontline's* issue dated 26 September-9 October 1998: 'Keshubhai Patel, who was the Sangh Parivar's unanimous choice for Chief Minister, faces isolation in the party and the Parivar. The hardcore section within the State BJP, led by BJP national secretary Narendra Modi, worked hard during the Assembly election to bring Keshubhai Patel back to power. However, this section is now dismayed that Keshubhai Patel, after taking over as Chief Minister, has kept Narendra Modi and his group at a distance. Keshubhai Patel did not give Cabinet status to Modi's confidante, Anandiben Patel, who is now the Minister of State for Education.'

The process of undermining Keshubhai could not have been done without formidable allies and access to the right lobbies in the leadership of the BJP and the Sangh Parivar. In his youth Modi had been fairly close to Dattopant Thengadi and when he began to take active interest in the programmes of the Swadeshi Jagran Manch, Modi lent a helping hand in organizing events like the Swadeshi Mela — that showcased indigenous products — in Delhi's trade centre — Pragati Maidan. Modi also began subtly changing his loyalties within the party. Since he had first made his presence felt at the national level while coordinating Murli Manohar Joshi's Ekta Yatra, it was natural for Modi to be part of his camp. During the early days of the Vajpayee government, Joshi summoned regular meetings with his loyalists and initially Modi attended them. However, after a while, he dropped out without explanation and soon began rebuilding bridges with Advani that had become rusty after Khushabhau Thakre became party president and Modi was elevated as general secretary for which he apparently did not go and thank Advani.

Rivalries within the BJP in Gujarat did not however go against the party in the 1999 parliamentary polls and instead improved on the tally it secured in 1998: from 19 the BJP went on to win 20 seats. An analysis of this election done by New Delhi-based Centre for Studies in Developing Societies (CSDS) report was published by *Frontline* in its 27 November-10 December 1999 issue. It stated that

the BJP: 'survived the anti-incumbency factor in Gujarat.... There was some consolation for the Congress (I) because its vote share, relative to 1998, increased by nine percentage points. As the BJP too improved its vote share — by 4.2 percentage points — the Congress (I)'s gains did not translate into seats. The deciding factor was that the BJP had big margins to defend, which the Congress (I) did not have to do. Gujarat was one of the few States where the Congress (I) was on a stronger footing since 1998 because Shankarsinh Vaghela, who has a significant political base in the State, had joined its fold. This paid dividends in the north, where the Congress (I) captured three seats and increased its vote share by 16 percentage points.'

December 1999 once again presented Modi an opportunity to bare his aggressive Hindutva face. The hijacking of the Indian Airlines plane — IC 814 — brought back fears of the enemy across the border in Gujarat but the state government instead of being able to capitalise on this, began floundering at this time. Hampered by a series of natural disasters and setbacks and saddled with an administration that was beginning to look no different from the Congress government of yore, the Keshubhai government was earning little goodwill for the BJP. In September 2000 a series of electoral woes began for the BJP in Gujarat. The report of the Concerned Citizens Tribunal — *Gujarat 2002* that was formed in the aftermath of the riots, made an editorial detour from its core concern and made a mention of this decline:

In the panchayat, taluka and district elections that took place in 2000, two-thirds of the areas were won by Congress. That was the first major defeat BJP suffered after coming to power. In the elections to six municipal corporations, to 25 district panchayats and to the closer-to-the-ground taluka elections held simultaneously in December 2000, the BJP lost heavily. It lost control in almost all the district panchayats. It retained four of the six municipalities but its two losses were in the most prestigious municipalities of Ahmedabad and Rajkot, where the Sangh Parivar had its strongest foothold. The BJP had held the Ahmedabad corporation for the last 15 years and Rajkot for the last 25 years. The Congress party was the biggest beneficiary of the BJP's electoral reversals.

On 22 September 2001 the BJP suffered another major electoral reverse — this time in two by-elections — one for the Sabarkantha Lok Sabha seat and the other for the Sabarmati assembly segment. Of the two, the assembly seat was most prestigious because it was part of the Gandhinagar parliamentary seat represented by Advani and the BJP had not lost the seat since 1985. However, the BJP lost both, making the party leadership realize that all was not well in Gujarat. The state

government in any case was gripped with charges of mismanagement of relief and rehabilitation operations following the devastating earthquake of 26 January 2001. Assembly elections were still a long time away — they were not due before February 2003 — but a campaign began within the party that the BJP needed to stem the swelling tide against it in Gujarat. On 24 September 2001, Neena Vyas reported in *The Hindu* under the headline “Keshubhai may be replaced” and the body text reported:

Mr. Keshubhai Patel, may soon go the way of the former Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister, Mr. Ram Prakash Gupta. The defeat of the BJP in the recent by-elections in the State has not yet got the full attention of the party leadership because it is busy with the fallout of the terrorist attacks in the U.S. and the war looming on the horizon... Rumbblings of discontent have begun to be heard at the party office here, and perhaps one of the main reasons why Mr. Patel has not yet been replaced is the fact that he belongs to a powerful caste...A senior party leader today pointed out, almost in a jest, that Mr. Gupta had been called twice by the party high command here and given a piece of their mind. It was only when he was summoned here a third time that he was given his marching orders. Mr. Patel has been already admonished twice, next time he may not survive.

The source in the report was not divulged for obvious reasons and it would not be fair to speculate. But it can be safely stated that the main beneficiary of the campaign was Modi. Operation *topple Keshubhai* — if one can euphemistically term it, had begun in real earnest!

One of the reasons behind the emergence of Modi as the eventual choice to replace Keshubhai was the change in political equations in the Sangh Parivar after the NDA government came back to power in October 1999. In his third stint — including the thirteen-daylong government in 1996 — Vajpayee was more assertive within the political clan than before. With Khushabhau Thakre’s tenure as party president coming to an end in late August-early September 2000, as he did not wish to continue for more than one term due to falling health, all eyes were riveted on the tussle between Vajpayee and his rivals for the control of the party organization. The backdrop to this tussle was provided by what various BJP leaders had declared when the party first formed the government in 1998. At that time several of them stated that they were working on a new model of relationship between the government and the ruling party. It was argued that India had till then witnessed two models: Congress’ and CPM’s model. Party leaders contended that the Congress model had resulted in the prime minister making the organization

subservient to government while the CPM inversed this by making the government bowing to the diktats of the party. Modi had been among the vocal leaders campaigning for the alternate model. He had told me in the spring of 1998 ‘we do not think that every leader worth his salt should be inducted into the government as there is a lot of work to be done outside.’

But after October 1999 Vajpayee decided to politely ask *big brother* to step aside. He decided to assert his authority by getting Bangaru Laxman — a minister of state in his government, to take over as party president, a development indicative of Vajpayee’s growing clout in the party. What however made Laxman’s elevation more dramatic was that the team of office bearers did not have Govindacharya as general secretary any longer. He was dropped at the behest of Vajpayee for a series of what the prime minister considered — *misdeemeanours* — the latest one being in July 2000 when Govindacharya presided over an SJM meeting in Agra that called for a “a second freedom struggle” against the government’s economic policies. In any case hostilities between the two dated back to 1991 when Vajpayee took offence at Govindacharya frowning on the veteran’s plan to contest from two constituencies without seeking clearance from the party managers.

However, Vajpayee was not alone in his animosity towards Govindacharya. Ever since the RSS deputed him in 1988 as Advani’s political secretary, Govindacharya often disenchanted several seniors and peers because of various factors. To start with he was unconventional and had the ability to speak to people outside his political clan in the lingo they were comfortable with. In the late 1990s when the media and other sections of society were beginning to get interested in the fortunes of the BJP, Govindacharya often provided a key to understanding the matrix of the Sangh Parivar — undoubtedly presented from his perspective. Journalists flocked to his room after the *regular briefing* every day for the *actual briefing* — and this was resented by the others, specially the old guard. One of them, the deceased K R Malkani had even told me in anger in April 1992 that the BJP apparatchik was hand in glove with the Intelligence Bureau (IB) and instigated media reports against his party colleagues.

Contrary to expectations, Laxman also did not include Sushma Swaraj in his team though she was not yet a minister in government. The rejig in the party headquarters left Modi with only one rival in the organization — Venkaiah Naidu and this only benefitted him in the campaign against Keshubhai. The sidelining of Govindacharya began during Thakre’s tenure and a very conscious decision was taken not to project him in publicity material the BJP prepared and released. One source told me that since the middle of 1998 very consciously no posters with the

photograph of Govindacharya were printed while those with pictures of Pramod Mahajan, Venkaiah Naidu and Modi were routinely made available to party cadre.

In March 2001, there was another shakeup within the BJP when Laxman was caught accepting a wad of currency notes in a clandestine video recording made by a reporter of *Tehelka*. After that Laxman was replaced by another veteran leader — K Jana Krishnamurthy — who had little public support but was aided in his rise in the party hierarchy because of paucity of leaders from southern India. With the exit of Laxman, Modi had one less rival to contend with. Already on 6 January 2001, Govindacharya had vacated his room in the party headquarters in the Indian capital that he held for more than twelve years. His final exit was a fortnight after he was divested of the charge of the Jhinholi training centre in Haryana that the BJP established earlier and used as an orientation camp for legislators and parliamentarians.

After the setback in the Gujarat by-elections, national leaders summoned state leaders to discuss the political situation in the state and to ask them what they considered reasons behind the defeat of the BJP. A series of meetings were held from the morning of 26 September — initially at Advani's residence for three hours, later at Gujarat Bhawan in New Delhi and finally at the party headquarters. The state BJP President, Rajindersinh Rana, and Sanjay Joshi had been called and they interacted with Advani, senior RSS leader, Madan Das Devi who was the link between the RSS and the BJP, Krishnamurthy, Madan Lal Khurana, party vice president who held the charge of the state, and Modi. The meeting ended with the likelihood of a new chief minister but there was no formal proposal. Advani and other senior leaders of the Sangh Parivar thereafter began closed-door deliberations on the matter. In this process, Advani took the opinion of Vajpayee as well.

Just over a fortnight after the events of 9/11, Modi issued his last statement as BJP general secretary. It was both his swansong in Delhi and password to Gujarat. It read: 'The ban on Students Islamic Movement of India was overdue. It had been demanded by several states in view of its terrorist activities all over the country. It has frequently made anti-national statements, expressed itself against democracy, has been responsible for engineering communal riots and has come out in support of the terrorist activities of Osama bin Laden and his associates...' The statement probably was not uncalled for in the context it was made. But Modi was guided with future necessities.

A source in the BJP told me that by early 2001 Modi was certain that Keshubhai would eventually be asked to put in his papers and that he would be asked to become chief minister, because Modi "knew that besides him there was no one else

in Gujarat who could enable the BJP to recover lost ground”. However the inevitable change got delayed because of a sequence of events starting with the embarrassment to the party over the Laxman episode which was followed by the Agra Summit and then the terror attacks on September Eleven. It was ironical that even on the day when the party finally made its intention clear that Modi would be the next chief minister, there was a terrorist strike in Srinagar in which more than twenty people mostly civilians, were killed and sixty injured when a suicide bomber blew himself up outside the Jammu and Kashmir state assembly.

There are three main types of sources that are available of the events that finally led to the announcement of Modi as next chief minister. The first are accounts of people with insider information, the second category comprises media reports, my own notes and memory dating to that period, and finally there is Modi’s version as told to either me or others.

As one source told me that it was the defeat in the Sabarmati assembly segment which was the “wake up call” for Advani simply because it was part of his constituency and also because of its symbolic value—being named after the ashram where Mahatma Gandhi conducted large periods of the national movement. In the course of his campaign to oust Keshubhai and while discharging his duties as general secretary, Modi had walked the razor’s edge with aplomb. As a result he had been “radical enough” in the perception of leaders of the Sangh Parivar while being “sufficiently soft” in the view of the Vajpayee camp. As a result when Advani began discussing Modi’s name with a certain amount of finality, there was no one who opposed his name. Support came from Madandas Devi, Dattopant Thengadi and of course K S Sudarshan from the RSS and Vajpayee too acquiesced to the proposal. The only spoke in the wheel was Suresh Mehta who at that time was Keshubhai’s second-in-command in the cabinet and the Industries minister. He told journalists in Gandhinagar on 2 October that if Modi was made the helmsman, he would not join the government. On his part, Keshubhai resisted till the end. Kashiram Rana, Rajendrasinh Rana and Sanjay Joshi also had reservations about Modi and Joshi was able to lobby with the RSS leadership that saw his comfortable exit from Gujarat when Modi eventually took charge. Joshi virtually moved into Modi’s position in the national headquarters and for several years was an important player before getting embroiled in a private controversy.

On Wednesday, 3 October 2001 an early morning flight from Delhi heading to Ahmedabad carried Khushabhau Thakre and Madan Lal Khurana the vice president. The two had a short-term mission: to first try cajoling and if that failed, then either browbeat or coerce Keshubhai into submitting his resignation to the

governor. From the airport, they went straight to the chief minister's residence. The third man was Modi — he quickly slipped out and refused to answer any queries from the assembled media persons who had got wind of the developments. For every query, his stock answer was: 'All these matters will be decided by the party.'

Thakre and Khurana succeeded in their mission and Keshubhai tendered his resignation to Governor Sunder Singh Bhandari in the evening. After this, Modi was taken by Thakre and Khurana to "seek the former chief minister's blessings". The trio from New Delhi also went to Suresh Mehta and told him that the party leadership wished that he seconded the proposal to elect Modi as the leader of the BJP legislature party the next day. Mehta agreed. On 4 October, Modi was formally elected leader of the Gujarat BJP Legislature Party in the presence of Thakre and Khurana. On Sunday, 7 October, Modi was sworn in at what Rediff News stated as 'an extravagant function that was unparalleled for its scale and ostentation. Governor Sunder Singh Bhandari administered the oath of office to Modi and nine ministers amid cheering and waving of saffron flags by more than 50,000 Bharatiya Janata Party activists.' If anyone had any doubts at versions that Keshubhai had virtually been forced to resign, the press statement of Jana Krishnamurthy a day later on 4 October, was revealing: 'My thanks to Shri Keshubhai Patel for having promptly acceded to the request of Central leadership by relinquishing the Chief Minister's post thereby providing a shining example of how a karyakarta of BJP responds to the call of the organisation.'

The Congress party boycotted the oath-taking ceremony alleging that the government had spent several crore rupees on it. Advani, Jaitley, Farooq Abdullah, Rajnath Singh, Punjab Chief Minister Parkash Singh Badal, George Fernandes and Bangaru Laxman attended the ceremony that also had a fair sprinkling of celebrities. A small-time film actor, Mukesh Khanna added glamour to the whole "show" which was also webcast on Modi's personal website besides the government-owned www.gujaratindia.com. Sheela Bhatt reported for Rediff News that the media savvy Modi had 'left nothing to chance. He has even issued a press release about the web coverage.' The next day Modi began work in his new job. He directed diversion of Narmada waters to the dry Sabarmati river and held a video conference with his district collectors telling them he would brook no delays and wanted to prioritize e-governance. He also held his first media conference as chief minister but parried most questions.

M V Kamath and Kalindi Randori in their book, *Narendra Modi: The Architect of a Modern State*² have quoted Modi's version of how the job came to him. The backdrop to this was the plane crash in Mainpuri, Uttar Pradesh on 30 September

in which Congress leader and onetime Rajiv Gandhi associate, Madhavrao Scindia died along with seven others. Among those dead were four journalists, one of whom Gopal Bisht, cameraman with Aaj Tak news channel was known to Modi and he went for the last rites. 'At the cremation I received a call from Atalji's office. Atalji was on the line. He said, "Where are you?"...I told him... He asked me to see him later in the evening. When I met him, he said, "You have become fat eating all that Punjabi food. You must slim down. Go away from here. Vacate Delhi." I asked, "Go where?" "Go to Gujarat," he replied, "you have to work there." So I said, "Would I be in charge only of Gujarat or of some other state as well?"' Modi said that he did not know at that time that he was being asked to become chief minister.

I had asked Modi how he reacted when the proposal was thrown to him for the first time. 'Initially, I refused.' I probed, at which point he elaborated: 'Firstly, I had been out of Gujarat for six years and I was clueless about the ground situation in Gujarat at that time. And then in my nature there is a trait that when I am working somewhere, I get completely submerged in that — I do not look around and try to understand this and that. I had not kept any political contact with the people in Gujarat — it is not in my style. I did not even know most MLAs, did not even know the names of the ministers. Secondly, in my entire life till that time, I had never tried to understand what is government, what is administration, how do offices function. I did not know the real difference between various civil services — IAS, IPS, IRS — did not know all those in detail. I asked them that even if I go, what will I do? How can I save this sinking ship? I gave them the proposal that let Keshubhai stay chief minister and I will go there as Organizing Secretary and spend 10 days in a month there. I told them I will struggle once again and strengthen the party again and maybe I will be able to reverse this decline. But no one accepted my suggestion and they said that this was not a problem due to poor organization but was a matter of governance. If the government does not run properly then whatever you do to strengthen the party will come to naught.'

I then asked the obvious question — so what made him accept the offer finally?

'Normally Atalji's words are final for all of us. But I told him I had reservations and he replied that I must think and also asked me to meet Advaniji the next day and then meet him again. I met Advaniji and by that time the two had spoken to each other. Advaniji got angry with me and said why I was being reluctant. How can you refuse after everything has been decided by all of us? When you are given some work then you must fulfil your duties, he said. So that is how it was.'

The narrative that I earlier built suggested that Modi was not exactly a reluctant chief minister despite his protestations. Vinod K Jose also indicated this in his

profile: 'Modi's version of events is contradicted by several other senior BJP leaders, who said that Modi had lobbied hard for the job from the time he arrived in Delhi. "He knew the Gujarat BJP wouldn't have elected him as the CM," one BJP leader told me, "so it had to be an appointment from the centre, top-down, because the Gujarat leaders had realized how divisive and self-righteous Modi could be.'" In fact, Modi was known to have presented a few news editors in Delhi with suggestions for negative stories about Patel. Vinod Mehta, the former editor-in-chief of *Outlook*, recalls one such visit in his memoirs, *Lucknow Boy*³: 'When he was working at the party office in Delhi, Narendra Modi came to see me in the office. He brought along some documents which indicated the chief minister of Gujarat, Keshubhai Patel, was up to no good. The next thing I heard was that he had become the chief minister in place of Keshubhai.'

Modi did not have an easy task in front of him. Questions were raised about his ability to deliver even before he settled in his chair. Dionee Bunsha wrote in *Frontline*: 'Can Modi, a greenhorn in governance, come up with an effective salvage operation for the BJP? At a time when dissatisfaction with the BJP is mostly on account of government neglect and incompetence, it is unclear whether Modi, whose skills in statecraft are as yet untested, will be able to deliver the goods. Rather than put the government in order, it seems that the BJP is hoping that Modi will manipulate a victory at the polls. Known for his sharp organising skills, Modi is supposed to have played an important role as an election strategist.'

Even from within the Sangh Parivar ethical questions were raised. He was the first Pracharak to become chief minister. Before the first wave of RSS full-timers who were deputed to the BJP in the late 1980s, there were several others from previous generations who had been with the Jana Sangh — Sunder Singh Bhandari, J P Mathur and Khushabhau Thakre being among the prominent besides the old ideologue, Deendayal Upadhyay. But barring an odd case of Bhandari first becoming member of Rajya Sabha and later being elevated as governor, no one had gone on to become part of the government and instead remained devoted to organizational work. Modi had always stuck out due to his style quotient. Becoming chief minister was actually crossing the Rubicon for a large number of people in the political clan.

Modi's reign began on a difficult note: he found it tough to find a safe assembly seat from where he could seek election. Haren Pandya who had been part of the close group of Sanjay Joshi loyalists was unwilling to resign his Ellis Bridge seat within Ahmedabad. Eventually Vajubhai Vala, the Finance minister in the Keshubhai ministry vacated his seat from Rajkot and assembly by-polls were held

on 21 February 2002. This election was held along with two other assembly seats that were vacant in the state.

It was not exactly happy augury for Modi when the verdict came out on 24 February. Though he was himself elected by a comfortable margin, it had come down significantly from 1998. But more worrisome for the BJP was the fact that it lost the other by-polls — both to the Congress. This naturally raised questions if the decision to shift Modi had been a wise one. But less than seventy hours later the situation transformed dramatically as the embers from the burnt S-6 coach of the Sabarmati Express began to smoulder in other parts of Gujarat and the fire soon spread far and wide. Since 1998 when the process of his political rehabilitation started, Modi had been in search of a distinct identity that would set him apart from his peers. The attack on Sabarmati Express on 27 February 2002 and the ensuing riots in the state gave him that identity. It will probably stay with him till eternity — a label from which he is unlikely to find deliverance.

COACH S-6, SABARMATI EXPRESS

The past is never dead; it's not even past.

– William Faulkner

Halfway into my first interview with Narendra Modi, I gingerly approached the question which I feared may put an end to the writing of this book. I had played this scene in my mind's eye several times and owed it to myself to ask the most forbidden question in the context of the man; there were two clear chapters in his political career — pre-Godhra and post-Godhra. Did he agree? I asked him. He reacted predictably, by now set in his reactions whenever probed and insulating himself deftly, cut me short and informed me with more than a hint of gruffness: 'All this is available — you would be able to get the complete record. The SIT in its report has documented all this minute-to-minute — everything is available on the net... And since it is authentic and has been done under the supervision of the Supreme Court then you should go by that version only — why take my version? Then you may consult the Nanavati Commission report on Godhra.'

My hunch was right on both counts. First, in the way he skirted the issue and second, in his referring to what was already part of judicial records. Not one to give up I also asked around. Several sources corroborated my sense on this: Modi did not want to provide any fresh information which could be used against him in courts and also arm his detractors with more ammunition. The two voluminous reports that Modi mentioned have agreed with the claim of Modi and his political clan: that the attack on the Sabarmati Express on the morning of 27 February 2002 was not an accidental fire but a coordinated attack and that Modi was not guilty of any allegations levelled against him either by relatives of those who died in the post-Godhra violence or by groups of "concerned citizens". One person I spoke to, said Modi's stonewalling tactics was because he did not wish anyone a peep into his psyche at that time and also did not wish to add anything which may be used as

evidence against him and his associates in one of the several pending legal cases. For more than a decade since 2002, Modi's public image has been shaped by two contrasting viewpoints: one based on belief, hearsay statements and oral assertions of people claiming to be eyewitnesses to events.

The second, based on opinions and findings chiselled by inquiry committees and commissions that have reached conclusions after relatively underplaying information and affirmation not backed by direct evidence. Both opinions have backers who have first taken an ideologically driven position and then gone on to use facts while buttressing their opinion. While the first opinion has led to extreme assessments of Modi being likened to a fascist or a mass murderer; the other school considers that painting Modi's image in that hue is part of pseudo-secular propaganda and that he is actually a paragon of virtue and dedication.

If the Godhra incident had not occurred and if that had not been followed by the orgy of violence, Narendra Modi would not have been what he subsequently became — and in all probability there would have been no need to write this biography. Some events in lives of cultures, nations, communities and individuals never fade and become benchmarks almost forever. In twentieth century colonial India, the savagery of British-engaged troops in Jallianwala Bagh in April 1919 remains a reference point for state-sponsored suppression of peaceful assemblies. Mahatma Gandhi, for all successes and failures in later life, failed to recreate the electrifying magic of making salt at the end of a 380 km long march in Dandi on 5 April 1930. Jawaharlal Nehru's famous words at the stroke of midnight on 14-15 August 1947 about India's tryst with destiny resonate in minds of people whenever his image crosses the mind's eye. In post-independent India, every significant leader has distinctive labels — Indira Gandhi for being the *only man in her cabinet*, her son Rajiv for both his handling of the 1984 anti-Sikh riots and for ushering in modern technology, L K Advani as the triumphant Rath Yatri who shepherded BJP's emergence out of political obscurity, V P Singh for implementing caste-based reservations in government jobs and so on. Similarly, the events in February-March 2002 gave Narendra Modi his distinct identity — a label which he has displayed brazenly ever since.

Naturally, as Modi's biographer not writing about the interrelation between him and the 2002 riots in Gujarat, is like starting a traditional — and lavish — Bengali meal without sampling some bitters, or having the *mishti* at the end. Whenever you think of Modi you will invariably also think of countless images of gore and pleadings. But this is an issue that Modi is not comfortable to discuss. He uses it to address his political constituency but only as a monologue. It has always been a

performance from commanding heights and safety of a proscenium. In the Introduction to this book, I mentioned of being aware of Modi's dislike for the "R" word. Naturally, for strategic reasons I did not begin with my dose of bitters. In any case there are countless narratives and analyses of that putrefied slice of Indian history and in future there will be many more.

By the time the Godhra incident happened, three events spread over preceding five months ensured that with the slightest provocation, reaction to it would be swift, retaliatory and of unprecedented brutality. To further enable this to happen, there pre-existed in Gujarat a political network built assiduously from the mid-1980s and protected from 1995 by several symbiotically-linked regimes. The first incident that created such a backdrop was the terror strike on 11 September 2001 and the subsequent war on terror launched by the United States and its allies (coincidentally on the same day Modi was sworn in as chief minister). The second incident was the terrorist strike on Indian Parliament on 13 December the same year. The final development was the eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation between India and Pakistan that resulted in Operation Parakrama, undoubtedly the biggest military mobilization by India since 1971 which resulted in the Indian sub-continent being labelled as the *most dangerous place* in the world. The three episodes led to deepening of dividing lines in Gujarat and gave fresh wind to the latent communal sentiment. The three episodes kindled the sense of inferiority complex among certain sections of Hindus in the state. Public engagement with natural disasters that struck the state since 1998 receded to the background in the four months plus period between Modi becoming chief minister and the Godhra incident. The "M" word was back on the top of the list in the *hate dictionary* because it was deduced that as a group they were common denominators in all the three incidents. Even the death of almost fourteen thousand people in the earthquake of 26 January 2001 could not submerge the sense of hatred towards Muslims. There could not have been a better moment than the Godhra carnage in the laboratory of Hindutva for retaliatory attacks in other parts of the state.

Modi's first hurdle after he became chief minister was in finding a safe seat and become member of the state assembly within the mandatory six month period. But this was not easy for two reasons: Modi had never contested any election in his political career and secondly with the BJP traversing a rough terrain, finding a safe seat was difficult. As we have seen, Modi did not have a *political home*. He had been mostly Ahmedabad-based since joining the RSS in the early 1970s and ideally wanted to contest from a city-seat — where he would personally know party workers — vacated by a party colleague. But an easy entry to the state assembly

proved difficult for Modi because Haren Pandya, whose seat Modi wanted did not oblige. Pandya was eleven years Modi's junior and entered politics after being active in the RSS. Modi was already an "emerging star" in the party when Pandya was just a member of the Ahmedabad municipal corporation. When Modi as Organizing Secretary, stewarded the BJP campaign in 1995, Pandya was nominated to contest from the prestigious Ellis Bridge constituency. Modi secured a ministerial berth for Pandya in the first Keshubhai government and when he ran into political turbulence in 1995, Modi expected his one-time protégé to remain loyal when he was evicted from Gujarat. But Pandya shifted his loyalty to Sanjay Joshi and through him to Keshubhai. As a result, in 1998 Pandya was rewarded with a cabinet berth and handed the key Home portfolio. Predictably, Modi downgraded Pandya's portfolio to the Revenue department when he got a chance to settle scores. In retaliation, Pandya turned down the offer of a nomination to the Rajya Sabha in return for vacating the Ellis Bridge seat that he won with huge margins in 1995 and 1998. The constituency was traditionally anti-Congress and the party last won the seat in 1972. This was the seat that Modi wanted to contest from to be absolutely sure of his victory but Pandya did not oblige even after L K Advani made the request. Modi thereby moved to a seat in Rajkot and after Vajubhai Vala, the Finance minister who had represented the seat since 1985, stepped down.

If such provocation was not enough, Pandya courted further trouble in the aftermath of the 2002 riots when he appeared before the Concerned Citizens Tribunal headed by former Supreme Court judge, Justice Krishna Iyer in May 2002. The deposition was made on an understanding that he would not be named. However, Modi's intelligence wing which an unnamed source says, was fine-tuned after he became chief minister because Modi had been inspired by "Shivaji's spy network" and wanted to develop an intelligence web like that; kept track of Pandya's movements. Even his mobile phone was tapped — media reports claimed — as a result of which Modi got to know about Pandya's deposition in almost real-time in May 2002.

But Modi could initiate little action because even after ten days, the incident of Pandya turning out against his own chief minister remained in a realm of speculative gossip. Manu Joseph and S Anand wrote a detailed report on the deposition in the 3 June 2002 issue of *Outlook* without naming Pandya. The two however, gave a political spin to it by writing 'no one expected the minister to turn up before the tribunal. It is not a constitutional body and it is not binding on anybody it summons to appear before it.' Joseph however quoted Pandya in the report while establishing growing discontent within Modi's cabinet: 'No party is

just one man. History points that out. We had a meeting recently of top BJP leaders. Modi was not invited but there was a huge crowd. There was not a mention of Modi by the speakers but it was still a very successful BJP meet.'

But why did Pandya's appearance at an unofficial investigative collective of *pseudo-secularists* get Modi's goat? For starters, Pandya deposed before Justice Iyer and others what was gossip till that time but soon acquired some credence: that at a late night meeting on 27 February 2002 at his official residence, Modi directed 'senior police officials to allow "people to vent their frustration" over the torching of two coaches of the Sabarmati Express during the VHP bandh the following day.' This gave a free run to rioters and resulted in the bloodletting that eventually got the label of *Gujarat pogrom*. The Supreme Court appointed a Special Investigative Team, headed by R K Raghavan, former Director, Criminal Bureau of Investigation, and in their report they rejected the allegation that Modi had asked his officer to *go soft* on rampaging mobs if they came out in retaliation to the attack in Godhra.

Eventually Modi got his man and in early August 2001, Pandya quit the state government after being served with a disciplinary notice by Modi-loyalist and state party president Rajendrasinh Rana. The rebel was asked why he had deposed before the commission, a charge Pandya denied. He instead fired another salvo by accusing Rana of releasing the show-cause notice to the media at Modi's behest: 'I think that the person who pressured you to go to the media in seeking my explanation is working against the interests of the BJP...(Do not) become a victim of someone else's ego.'

Modi however was not satisfied at easing Pandya out of his government. In assembly elections held in November — December 2002, the friend-turned-foe was not nominated by the party even after the intervention of stalwarts such as Advani and Vajpayee. The media reported gleefully that in order to avoid being pressurized into nominating Pandya, Modi checked into a hospital and stopped taking phone calls from New Delhi. After this Pandya receded from limelight and lived a quiet life till 26 March 2003 when everything was over for him. On that dreadful morning, an unknown assassin's gun silenced Pandya when he was returning from a morning walk in the sprawling Law Garden, a public park in Ahmedabad. A day prior to this Pandya had been transferred by the party bosses to the Indian capital to become a party spokesman and member of the National Executive which was not to be. The Haren Pandya murder case became the first of the several high-profile non-2002-riots court cases in Gujarat that cast a shadow over Modi's regime. In police parlance, the Pandya murder case was termed a *cut-out murder* where the chain

from the conspirator or instigator to the eventual victim is impossible to establish. A police contact explained it like this: 'A wants to murder Z and instructs B to execute the order. B tells C who does not know that A is the instigator. Instructions are passed in this manner from C to D and then to E and it goes down all the way. The final contract killer does not know where the order originated from. If investigations turns nasty, then all A has to do is to make any of the people in the chain a *cut-out* — take him out by beginning another chain.' The source refused to speculate or indicate where the initial direction came from but on several occasions Pandya's father and wife alleged that there was a *political angle* to the murder. Although no charges were formally, or by way of allegations, levelled against Modi in the Pandya murder case, but allusions to it have been frequent. 'I'm not saying Modi got Haren Pandya killed. I have no evidence. But the fact remains—anyone who speaks against Modi from inside the BJP gets finished either physically or politically,' Gordhan Zadaphia told Vinod K Jose in the March 2012 issue of *The Caravan* magazine. Pandya's wife, Jagruti, sought to keep the issue alive but as her defeat in the 2012 election — she contested as a candidate of the party floated by Keshubhai Patel showed (she came a distance third), the issue of killing was never seen from the prism of Modi's detractors.

Modi was unapologetic about the post-Godhra riots in 2002 and maintained the same stance a decade later. But even at the time of the incident, there were very few in his political clan who could be as unabashed. Vajpayee visited the state capital on 4 April 2002 and was apologetic — among other issues — for not paying a visit earlier. He called the events a *blot* on India and made no secret of his displeasure at the Modi government's handling of the situation. The denouement came at the end of the day-long visit when he advised Modi to follow Raj Dharma (science or religion of governance) when the prime minister was specifically queried if he had any message for Modi. When I asked about the advise proffered by Vajpayee, Modi got into a tizzy.

Modi repeated the circumstances in which Vajpayee made the statement and told me that the video was easily available on the internet and 'even on YouTube'. He asked me to see it and asserted that, 'What is claimed and written about what he (Vajpayee) said is not what he actually said.' Modi then paraphrased what Vajpayee had said and concluded with his typical guffaw, 'Now such a simple thing is interpreted differently while there is no need for doing so. The media just keeps showing the clips...'

However much Modi tried to make light of the situation, even his supporters agree that Vajpayee's remarks were indeed snide shots at Modi: 'I have just one

message for the chief minister — follow Raj Dharma. This word is extremely meaningful. I also adhere to it. At least, I try to do so. For the king, (and) the ruler, cannot differentiate between people. This cannot be done on the basis of birth, not on caste lines and not on the basis of communities.’ The pauses in Vajpayee’s reply — so typical of his style — hung like the Damocles’ Sword over Modi’s head. Unable to bear the criticism any further while sitting beside him, in the video clip, Modi softly said: ‘Even I am doing so.’ Modi was all grins as he heard Vajpayee say that he believed Modi’s claim. I had been guided to the video of the Vajpayee statement with the hope that I would interpret it as the prime minister’s *clean chit*. After viewing it again it was evident that this was a classical backhanded compliment so characteristic of Vajpayee.

But why did Modi need an endorsement? Why is it that more than ten years after the events when I asked if Gujarat exhibited greater prevalence of the communal idea and if this has got cemented since 2002, Modi swiftly swatted the suggestion? His reply: ‘There is nothing like this in Gujarat. This image has been created by the people who are *Gujarat Virodhi*, opposed to Gujarat. Gujarat is one of those states where four hundred years ago, the world’s smallest micro-minority — the Parsis came. They came and settled on the coast of Gujarat and have flourished the most. Yes, Gujarat has the atmosphere and mood of nationalism and patriotism (which is not communalism) — this is where Gandhi and Sardar Patel are most loved and they have great influence just like the Buddha and Mahavir have influence.’

Later in the conversation when talking about the increased social acceptability of the Hindu nationalistic idea, I asked him about boundaries of existence his political clan has enforced on non-Hindus and the need for them to accept Hindu ideas and ideals as their own. Modi replied: ‘Yes that was the basic argument (in the course of the Ayodhya agitation that Muslims also must accept Lord Ram as the symbol of national identity), the main philosophy — that he also was a *Mahapurush* (Great Man) of this country. And that everyone in this country should believe in this — those who led this agitation campaigned for this.’ At this point of the interview it becomes evident that Modi strongly believes that if minorities wished to coexist and feel safe in the state governed by him, it was mandatory for them to abide by the beliefs and value systems of the majority community.

Meanwhile, I prodded along as Modi was opening up and this was my best chance to get to the core of Modi’s understanding of Hindutva and I asked him: ‘India has a composite culture. There is tremendous social diversity. How do you look at inter-community relationships and the relationship of different social and religious groups with the State?’

Modi did not answer my question explicitly but said: ‘People can have different forms of puja and rituals can also be different — but that does not mean that the country, the traditions of the land can become different. Look at it this way — who is a Hindu? Those who believe in God are called Hindus and even those who do not believe in God. People also consider those who believe in idol worship as Hindus and even those who campaign against idol worship. Those who deify nature are termed Hindus and those who do not do so are also called Hindus. The truth is that Hindus do not have any real concern with the manner and processes of paying obeisance to God. Hindus have no problems if someone performs the namaaz or goes to a church and reads the Bible to reach God. Hindus have no problem with this. We have no problems with the religious practices of people. We have no problems if anyone wants to retain religious identity — but the country, the traditions.’

But there are people from within the Sangh Parivar who disagree with both Modi and Vajpayee. I asked Govindacharya about his views on whether Gujarat had “become a laboratory of Hindutva”. His reply was polemical: ‘Gujarat was never a laboratory of Hindutva. Even Atalji’s government did not in any way become a laboratory of Hindutva. At the end of its tenure, its balance sheet was not different from that of any other government. The basic agenda of Hindutva was absent from governance at the Centre and since 2002 it got left out in Gujarat. Hindutva became a maligned phrase because only the confrontationist agenda came to the fore — accidentally or incidentally — either on December 6 or in post-Godhra situation. Unfortunately the multi-dimensioned facet of Hindutva, its positive dimension agenda — the egalitarian approach, simply did not come to the fore. One of the basic tenets of Hindutva is to respect all modes of worship. But if Atalji chants the mantra of Raj Dharma in the context of governance in Gujarat then it means that this postulate is demolished.’

This critical viewpoint from within is most disquieting for Modi. His actions in the aftermath of the Godhra incident were aggressive and provocative — representative of uni-dimensional Hindutva. But he personally did not take to vocal aggression immediately. Instead he allowed the *pressure cooker to simmer* which in later years added another facet to the accusation that he had not acted promptly after the Godhra incident. This was coupled with the charge that the Modi administration had turned a blind eye to the possibility of an attack on Sabarmati Express when it was returning with Kar Sevaks from Ayodhya even though he knew that skirmishes had been reported between VHP activists and local residents at Dahod station during the onward journey on 22 September. On the fateful day of

27 February, the attack on the S-6 coach of Sabarmati Express in Godhra occurred between 8.00 am and 8.20 am. Modi claimed in statements to the official inquiry and investigative bodies that it took almost an hour — 9 am to be precise — for the information to reach him. It took another hour and a half for Modi to convene a meeting of officials and select ministers. This meeting at Modi's residence was attended by Home Minister Gordhan Zadaphia, several senior police officials and bureaucrats.

The Godhra incident occurred more than half a decade ago after the advent of mobile telephony in India and Modi was among the earliest tech-savvy political leaders in the BJP. His critics find it hard to believe that Modi actually did not know about the incident for almost an hour or did not realize the enormity of the carnage to summon a meeting more swiftly. Critics also point out that the ministerial bungalows in Gandhinagar are located inside a secure campus built like a small garrison-style township and they are all virtually walking distance from the chief ministerial complex. Assessments of critics are based on subjective perceptions and the verdict on this can at best be a personal one for each individual. Certain issues are also best resolved in the political realm as even if itemized call records establish conversations between those in the know of the incident in Godhra — and present in the town — and a person on the other end of the telephone line inside the chief ministerial compound, the issue of establishing anything further would hit a legal dead end — both in regard to identity of the unknown person and the contents of the conversation. But criticism is also forthcoming from within the Sangh Parivar fraternity. When I asked Govindacharya if the state government's response to the situation was adequate or not, he said: 'There was definitely some amount of laxity in this and it was because of this that the intensity of the riots increased to such an extent.'

In the weeks after the riots, Modi was under attack from at least four different directions. The first of these was undoubtedly from the Opposition which literally bayed for his blood. Soon other political parties joined who though part of the ruling central coalition chose this ruse to either move out of the alliance or use this to establish their ideological distinctiveness and disagreement with the Sangh Parivar to ensure retaining support among religious minorities. The civil society and significant sections of media who were frequently natural allies since the post-Emergency days emerged as the second pressure group building opinion and campaigning against Modi. There was widespread international condemnation of the riots and in this campaign select governments like the UK joined institutions and organizations like the United States Commission on International Religious

Freedom, Amnesty International, Asia Watch and other human rights groups in this third line of attack on Modi. The fourth flank that took pot-shots at Modi was the most difficult to manage: this was from within the BJP and mainly comprised leaders who were not part of the Jana Sangh core of the party and instead joined it over the years after the BJP began adding new elements to its political concerns.

In contrast to these opponents, support for Modi came from only one section: voices from a communally polarized society which greatly agreed with the action of marauding mobs and believed that *it was actually time that "they" were taught a lesson*. However, very few of Modi's political detractors of that time had political roots in Gujarat since those active in the state did not risk alienation from the people, a large number of whom broadly felt that a *cleansing exercise* was the need of the hour. Those who did not hold such extreme views however chose silence as the path to political survival. These political leaders influenced national leaders of their parties to keep the attack focussed on Modi and not train their weaponry at the people and initiate *direct action*. This tactic was best exemplified in the killing of the former Congress member of Lok Sabha, Ehsan Jafri whose pleas with the party leadership did not yield definitive action to save him. National Congress leaders were strident in their criticism of Modi, but only in the aftermath of the post-Godhra violence. Similar stridency and interventionist tactics during rioting would have contained riots, albeit partially.

The extent of tacit endorsement of what happened after the Godhra carnage and the resultant change in social fabric can be appreciated by a sample of what political detractors of the chief minister said. For instance, the then state Congress chief, Arjun Modhwadia told me that he did not subscribe to the view that Gujarat was communally polarized since long and that the *ghettoization* that existed in Ahmedabad was only because riots were previously sparked off by the Sangh Parivar. He seemed to transfer the entire blame on to the RSS and claimed that people in other parts of the state lived in harmony sharing joys, sorrows and worked together. 'Even today in villages there is no distinction that this house belongs to a Hindu and the one in the other lane is owned by a Muslim.' Modhwadia obviously has a linear view of the reasons behind the schisms that existed in pre-Godhra urban-Gujarat. The communal divide was only because of 'riots that they (Sangh Parivar) would stage manage' and if this causative factor was taken away, the state would be peaceful. There was no deeper malaise, rather the RSS and its affiliates were solely responsible for fomenting communalism and if one banned the organization from the state, peace and tranquillity would return to Gujarat.

One-time Modi aide turned bitter foe, Gordhan Zadaphia also disagreed with the

view that religion has over the years emerged as the main basis of social identity in Gujarat. He endorsed Modhwadia's contention that *normalcy* had staged a comeback in Gujarat. It is a different matter that when one travels beneath the skin of Gujarat, the scars and schisms are still evident. Clearly, there is an element of consensus in the political class within the state that communalism in Gujarat is non-existent as a social trend but is essentially a law and order issue that can be managed by a more effective administration otherwise biases that exist in society are dismissed as personal opinions but they add up and are an integral part of a *collective belief system* which is at the root of communal hostility and distrust between Hindus and other religious minorities, mainly Muslims. Such extreme views surface at most unlikely places from the most improbable of people — from even within the mainstream media, academia and other sections of the intelligentsia who interact closely with the political class.

A senior journalist from a major media group claimed that Muslim boys “elope with Hindu girls in a planned manner”. When asked if there was any data, he said there was no need for it because ‘Everyone here knows about this — you can ask anyone,’ he said. In the same breath he also proceeded to claim that the state is devoid of any communal colour and how everybody lived in *bhaichara* (in consonance). It wasn't as if the scribe in question either worked for a publication known for its extreme editorial views aligned to any political group or was a rabble-rouser, on the contrary, his writings have been consistently followed by most in other parts of the country and noted for a certain amount of *balance* on several issues, except of course the issue of communalism. The disconcerting aspect of this *disclosure* was that it underscored the extent to which the idea of communalism is embedded in the thinking of an otherwise perfectly rational *thinking people* of Gujarat.

Modi also told me that he did not agree to the charge that there is a huge social divide and trust deficit in the minorities: ‘I am not willing to agree with this even for a moment. On the contrary, the situation in Gujarat is a bit better than in other parts of the country. There is no way that the situation here can be said to be worse in any manner when compared to other parts of the country. There is no alienation and there is no discrimination from the side of the government.’ Be it Suresh Mehta, Keshubhai or any political leader part of the mainstream political process in Gujarat, you will always hear the same refrain — ‘Everything is normal.’

It was Modi's misfortune that not everyone in the BJP thought that way in the summer of 2002. Most difficult for him was the way Vajpayee thought and he had become more assertive within the Sangh Parivar after his re-election as prime

minister in October 1999. Vajpayee's views had to be either *accommodated* or *addressed*. From the middle of March — once the flames in Gujarat had been somewhat doused, Vajpayee met a small crisis management team on at least six occasions. These meetings were attended by Advani, Modi's one-time party boss — Khushabhau Thakre, and Madandas Devi the *link-man* between the RSS and the BJP and one of the Sah Sarkaryavahs (general secretaries) of RSS at that time. Vajpayee wanted Modi's head because in his reasoning, it would do his image good besides keep the NDA flock together.

Initially Thakre and Devi were the strongest supporters of Modi as a result of which Advani was somewhat neutralized even though as Union Home Minister, he faced a lot of flak and felt that for tactical reasons, Modi could be eased out. But Thakre and Devi were unrelenting and even got the RSS top brass comprising Sarsanghchalak, Rajendra Singh alias Rajju Bhaiyya and H V Seshadri to speak individually to Vajpayee. Of them, the RSS chief had tremendous personal influence over Vajpayee but even his words failed to convince the prime minister and he arrived in Goa for the BJP National Executive meeting a week after his Gujarat visit when he delivered the Raj Dharma sermon to Modi. Before the meeting, Vajpayee had made it known that nothing short of a publicly demanded resignation with immediate response from Modi would assuage him. But a brilliant strategic move on part of the group supporting Modi saved the day for him. Modi was sagely advised that he should offer to resign even before any demand was made at the meeting by any speaker. Soon after the formal inauguration at the National Executive meeting, Modi got up and declared, 'I would prefer to sit here as a general executive member and not as the chief minister.' Within minutes of this, the then party president K Jana Krishnamurthy made this declaration public during a hastily summoned press interaction. The announcement made before the arrival of Vajpayee and Advani in Goa set the cat among the pigeons and a small group of middle-ranking BJP leaders began a campaign to prevent Modi's resignation. Pramod Mahajan, Venkaiah Naidu and Arun Jaitley besides the veteran J P Mathur were among the prominent supporters of Modi. The leaders in the BJP who wanted Modi to continue as chief minister also got the backing of other sections within the Sangh Parivar — most importantly the rabid sections within the VHP. Pravin Togadia who had been active at the *street level* during the riots and Ashok Singhal also of the VHP lent open support to the *Hindu-oriented* chief minister. They argued with veterans — Vajpayee and Advani — that Modi should at least be given a chance to explain his position and any decision on whether to accept the offer of resignation or not could be taken subsequently. They also argued that Modi's

resignation would dash hopes of the BJP winning the Gujarat assembly elections due in February-March 2003.

On a day of fluctuating fortunes, Modi's emotionally-charged speech, during a full house, tilted the balance in his favour with more than just a helping hand extended all the way from the RSS leadership in Nagpur. Finally the National Executive rejected Modi's offer, Vajpayee and Advani fell in line and a resolution was adopted which asked Modi to seek a fresh mandate — the argument being that if Modi had done anything wrong, he would be worsted in the hustings. On 13 April Neena Vyas reporting in *The Hindu* said that by doing so, the BJP '... tried to silence its critics among allies and in the Opposition as well as fully satisfy its Hindutva constituency and cadre.' Modi's victory was more than complete because demands for his resignation were given a convenient spin and portrayed as a handiwork of antinational forces. Jana Krishnamurthy, the party president in his speech said that India had to be 'saved from forces whose only aim seems to be to destabilise.' Therefore any attack on Modi willy-nilly became an attack on India — this was the tack at the end of the day that began with his resignation being a foregone conclusion. At the end of the resignation drama, Modi cleverly managed to reverse the tables by contending that all his actions had been determined by the idea of adhering to the RSS worldview. In the face of such an argument and with support from the entire Sangh Parivar even Vajpayee could do little and soon saw Advani acquiescing. Years later, in his memoirs, *My Country, My Life* ¹ Advani seemingly atoned for his initial viewpoint on Modi's resignation. He wrote: 'I cannot think of any other leader in Indian politics in the past sixty years who was as viciously, consistently and persistently maligned, both nationally and internationally, as Modi had been since 2002.'

To be fair to Modi and also to ensure that I did not stray from my path of being a non-partisan biographer, I asked him for his version on his offer to resign. What he said was probably for the record, but needs to be mentioned: 'Between the incidents and when Atalji came here (Ahmedabad) and the National Executive there was a big time gap and in this period lots of things were happening — there was also a storm in the media. There was a campaign — remove Modi — everyone said that. For days and nights only this matter was being raised in Parliament. The opposition did not allow the government to do any business. There was not a day when Narendra Modi did not figure in Parliament. But here in Gujarat this was not an issue and everything was very peaceful. So I felt what was the need for all this to happen needlessly — so I offered to quit.'

Modi returned from Goa a triumphant man. His victory was so sweet that in

New Delhi, less than a week later, Vajpayee almost sounded apologetic. His speech at a function to celebrate the 75th birth anniversary of former prime minister, Chandra Shekhar was paraphrased in a Press Trust of India (PTI) report. It said he was not ‘speaking in different voices at different places on the violence in Gujarat.’ The tenor of Vajpayee’s clarification nonetheless, underscored the dilemma and charge that Vajpayee had always faced — that he did not have the courage to take the final step: in all his conflicts with the RSS top brass Vajpayee blinked at the last moment because his survival was dependent on the steel fabric of the brotherhood, that he was the proverbial right man in the wrong party. Meanwhile, armed with the resolution directing him to seek fresh mandate, Modi moved in that direction. But there were two other offensives that Modi had to launch: project a more humane structure to probe the Godhra and post-Godhra episodes and get an electoral campaign going much before the polls were actually scheduled. The official procedure would be initiated only thereafter to enable him to secure a head start over rivals.

A week after the Godhra carnage when thousands were still sheltered in relief camps, the Modi administration appointed a one-member Judicial Commission comprising retired Gujarat High Court Judge, Justice K G Shah to probe the Godhra incident and “facts, circumstances and course of events of the subsequent incidents of violence in the State in the aftermath of the Godhra incident”. This however, was not to the satisfaction of other political parties including some in the ruling coalition at the Centre who wanted a retired Supreme Court judge to be part of a multi-member Commission. They also wanted the terms of reference for the Commission widened. Modi bowed to these demands in a piecemeal manner: in the third week of May he accepted the demand for including a former judge of the apex court in the panel — Justice G T Nanavati. In another ten days the terms of reference were extended to include “incidents of violence that had taken place in Gujarat till 30 March, 2002”.

In the middle of July 2002, the terms of reference were further widened to include the most contentious aspect of events that had not been probed till then: ‘Role and conduct of the then Chief Minister and/or any other Minister(s) in his council of Ministers, Police Officers, other individuals and organizations in both the events.’ Investigations into what Modi had done during the controversial period was included because of the charge that on 27 February, Modi had allegedly allowed bodies of the deceased to be taken to their homes by road in cavalcades, a decision which critics said inflamed passions.

Among other contentious actions attributed to Modi was his statement widely

quoted in the media that he reportedly made after visiting Godhra on the day of the carnage. Modi was claimed to have said that the attack was a “pre-planned act of terrorism”. Modi denied making such a comment when he was asked to record his statement by the SIT in March 2010 but is also not known to have issued any denials in the eight years since the first report was filed. Even before any investigation could be rolled out, such a conclusive statement was perceived to have precipitated the violent reaction. This added to the charge of *omissions* that Modi faced from the first day of the post-Godhra violence when he was accused of not having acted swiftly enough, a charge which was possibly kept in mind by Advani when he wrote that ‘both events (Godhra and post-Godhra) were *indefensible* and a *blot on my government*.’

There has been no occasion for Advani to specify if he considered Modi’s most controversial statement in the post-Godhra phase as *indefensible*. The statement was made in the course of an interview to the then Zee News correspondent, Sudhir Chaudhary, in which Modi said: ‘*Kriya pratikriya ki chain chal rahi hai. Hum chahate hain ki na kriya ho aur na pratikriya* (A chain of action and reaction is being witnessed now)... *Godhra mein jo parson hua, jahan par chalees mahilaon aur bacchon ko zinda jala diya, issey desh main aur videsh main sadma pahuchna swabhavik tha. Godhra ke is ilake ke logon ki criminal tendencies rahi hain. In logon ne pachele mahila teachers ka khoon kiya. Aur ab yeh jaghanya apraadh kiya hai jiski pratikriya ho rahi hai*’ (Day before yesterday in Godhra, the incident in which forty women and children were burnt alive had to naturally evoke a shocking response in the country and abroad. The people in this locality of Godhra have had criminal tendencies. They first killed the women teachers and now this horrifying crime the reaction to which is being witnessed.)

Modi was not the first to present the tit-for-tat justification for retaliatory attacks. He surely was not the last either. The entire edifice of the Ayodhya campaign that provided a *raison d’être* for Modi’s argument above was based on the argument of the need to *rectify historical injustice*. But the events of 2002 provided a veneer for sectarian views to be articulated in more unabashed ways. In February 2004, at a function in the BJP national headquarters in the Indian capital, noted writer V S Naipaul sounded almost like a Modi acolyte with his comments on Ayodhya. The demolition of the Babri Masjid was for him: ‘An act of historical balancing...Ayodhya was a sort of passion ... Any passion has to be encouraged. I always support actions coming out of passion as these reflect creativity.’

It wasn’t as if Modi was playing the role of a *lead instigator* in a planned retaliation. Levelling this charge would mean apportioning him a capacity which

was far greater than what he may have possessed on the night of 27 February. At that time he was just struggling to remain politically relevant and resurrect a party that appeared on a tail spin. Modi understood immediately that if he did not up the ante, he would be cast away. The tactic worked and the man who did not have Ayodhya in his resume till then, became a hero. Blatantly vulgar pamphlets were in circulation during the riots. They eulogized Modi and simultaneously gloated over savagery and sadism perpetrated on Muslims. The handouts were replete with justification of sexual barbarity witnessed in places like Naroda Patiya, Ahmedabad. Muslim men were sexually ridiculed in these pamphlets and Muslim women were projected as all women are by every marauding community in episodes of mass violence: as only “carriers” of a body to which predators have a “divine right” of entitlement. In most of these tracts, Modi was commended for being the “enabler” of such violence.

Two months after the post-Godhra violence and three weeks after BJP’s Goa meet, Modi was forced to accept former Director General of Police, Punjab — K P S Gill, as his security adviser. The decision was the Centre’s, taken to placate the Opposition and Modi expressed his resentment, the media reported, by not providing any official space to Gill for several days. But the two later struck a semblance of normalcy and Gill continued in his position till the middle of July. A veil remains over what Gill achieved and what prompted him to leave — was it a suggestion by Modi or had the situation genuinely improved, as he told a PTI reporter, two days after packing his bags from Gujarat? In hindsight, the timing of Gill’s departure suggests that his presence would have made it awkward for Modi to claim that the situation in the state was conducive for holding free and fair elections. The need to make such an assertion arose barely days after Gill quit because the state assembly was dissolved thereby initiating the electoral process.

Though the state assembly was dissolved in July, the Election Commission was in no hurry to rush into an election. Part of the “courage” for this defiance of political authority stemmed from the newly elected President, Dr A P J Abdul Kalam, who despite being elected at the initiative of the ruling coalition, chose to make Gujarat the first port of call after assuming office. In his memoirs of the presidency, *Turning Points: A Journey Through Challenges*,² the former President mentioned that ‘at the ministry and bureaucratic level, it was suggested that I should not venture into Gujarat at that point of time,’ and that even the prime minister had expressed his discomfort with the visit. But though the President gave no sermon to Modi like Vajpayee in April, the visit underscored that all was not yet well with Gujarat. A week before Kalam’s visit, Modi had taken an unusual step: writing to the president.

The move was essentially a ploy to ensure that Kalam deferred his visit, if not cancel it, but it did not yield the desired result and the president asked the Gujarat administration to expedite relief and rehabilitation measures after his visit. But barring the political upheaval at the Centre, Kalam's visit further enabled Modi to enlist the support of his core constituency.

If on the one hand was the issue of investigating the riots and bringing out the culpability of those responsible for the incidents, on the other was the huge humanitarian issue of providing relief and rehabilitation to riot victims. By July 2002 barring eight temporary tenements, all the other 121 relief camps were shut down before time because the state government wanted to demonstrate to the Election Commission that peace prevailed in the state and people had returned to their homes. But the commission on 16 August concluded that Gujarat had not returned to normalcy and thereby elections were being deferred. The Election Commission also pointed to the insufficient support being given by the state government to the camps and its inmates: 'The number of inmates has to be verified by State Government officers on a daily basis with the register maintained by the organisers and the entitlement is fixed on the basis of the report of the inspecting officers. It was a common complaint that the inspecting officers visited the camps around mid-day when most of the bread-earners had gone out to pursue their vocations thus resulting in deflated numbers of inmates. Usually such persons who went out returned in the evening to the safety of the camp but were not accounted for by the inspecting officers. As a result, the ration entitlements were much less than the actual requirement in the camp.' The Election Commission also found that many people displaced by the riots were 'staying either in the makeshift camps organised by some relief committees and NGOs or are staying somewhere else with their relatives and friends or in rented houses', thereby not getting into the official count of the riot-affected.

During the Gaurav Yatra at Becharji, north of Ahmedabad in a vitriolic speech on 9 September 2002 Modi derogatorily referred to these camps as "baby producing centres". It has often been seen in relief and rehabilitation initiatives that it is very difficult to ensure complete healing in riot situations as the victims of such tragedies take inordinate time to get back to normalcy and feel sufficiently satisfied. Deprivation also has a dehumanizing effect which often reflects in attempts to *grab* whatever is available through *official* channels. But in Gujarat, even if one took this factor into account while assessing the quality of relief and rehabilitation, most assessments — private and official — came back with the sense of inadequacy and the lack of urgency in the effort.

A telling comment was made by Krishna Bose, eminent writer and educationist who in July 2002 was a member of the All India Trinamool Congress and part of a delegation of women MPs to visit Gujarat in the aftermath of the riots. She asked: 'What is the relief and rehabilitation, particularly the rehabilitation? It does not mean that you give somebody a shelter and a bowl of gruel or a bowl of rice. This is not rehabilitation. Rehabilitation means bringing them back to normal life, to the mainstream and giving them the security which had been shattered for them.' Bose continued: 'While we met these people in the camps particularly women, with whom I could talk, (they) did not want to go back from the camps. Why? It is because of two reasons. One is the fear psychosis. They had seen terrible things there. It was a nightmare for them and they did not want to go back to that nightmare again. They were afraid that things like that might happen to them again. The other thing was that they had no place to go. Their houses had not been built.'

In journalism it is often said that every reporter must understand that for every claim that the door is half-closed, there is another viewpoint arguing that it is half-open. One has the choice to either decide on which side of the door one wishes to place oneself or conclude that the *truth* must lie somewhere in between. The *defence counsel* in this case is Modi and when I asked him about relief and rehabilitation, he painted a completely contrasting picture: 'The kind of package that has been given by my government is unprecedented. This kind of package has never been given by any other government in any communal violence in any state.' But I told him that I was not looking at rehabilitation as a *material package*: what about emotional hurt?

'There is one conspiratorial group which keeps this emotional hurt (*mansik chot*) business alive by digging up the wounds. When that group stops their *work*, the wounds will automatically get healed.'

'So have the wounds healed, or would they ever get healed?' I asked him.

'They have got healed but the ones who keep on digging these are still active and keep reopening the wounds.'

I let the matter rest at that point because it appeared we were reaching a point of no return and I was aware how Modi could be a Master in the Art of Obfuscation.

After having put in place a *more acceptable* Commission of Inquiry, Modi began moving towards accomplishing what he had been asked by his party's National Executive: go to the people and face an election. In the middle of June 2002 several BJP state leaders met in Ahmedabad and decided to take out another rath yatra this time with Modi as its "rider". Termed Gujarat Gaurav Yatra, the plan was that Modi would divide his time between this campaign and more pressing matters of

governance. No one was in doubt that the basic purpose of the yatra was to extract electoral benefit. Modi decided to spend three days a week for this Journey of Pride and was to be joined by almost all state BJP leaders including Keshubhai who though sulking had little option but to play along with the Modi game plan. The reason why Keshubhai was still being involved in party programmes was because Modi was yet to become the cult figure that he eventually became. As a result, Modi's domination over the Sangh Parivar in Gujarat was not complete and he had to accommodate its wishes — involving Keshubhai was one of them.

The party planned to launch the yatra in the first week of July and cover 125 of the 182 State Assembly constituencies in nine or ten phases culminating with a rally in Ahmedabad in the last week of August. Modi had decided to recommend dissolution of the assembly (to a pliable governor) within days of the yatra's launch. But Vajpayee had reservations about such a campaign which had the potential of gaining communal undertones. In mid-June Gujarat was far from normal — stray incidents of communal violence were still being reported — and the prime minister feared that India's image internationally would be further dented in the event of another major outbreak of violence which the campaign could spark off. I asked Modi about the opposition to Gaurav Yatra and his reply was typical Modispeak: 'It's like this — whatever Narendra Modi does — either then or even now, those who want to create a controversy generate one.... Controversy has become a business for some people.'

I asked Modi about the reservations that the National Minorities Commission and National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) had towards the Gaurav Yatra at the time. But Modi was predictably dismissive about the body: 'They had no role in that. I took out my Yatra in September and you will be surprised that on 27 February the Godhra incident took place and in the third week of March there were local body elections in Gujarat in 10,000 panchayats. Gujarat was very peaceful but no one was willing to accept this. Elections were held within four weeks of the Godhra incident! If there was no peace how could the elections be held? In September there was an attack on Akshardham (temple) — attacking a mandir was not a small incident — forty people were killed but in Gujarat there was no violence— not even the smallest incident. Now even then if people say that there is no peace then what can you do?'

The retaliatory attack on Akshardham temple in Gandhinagar on 24 September in the middle of the third phase of Modi's Journey of Pride, in which terrorists killed thirty-seven visitors to the iconic temple could have sparked off Gujarat 2002 — Part II. This did not happen because the Centre and state's handling of the post-

attack situation was poles apart from the response a few months earlier. L K Advani headed to Gandhinagar even while National Security Guard Commandos were engaging the terrorists. Within three hours he was at the site with Modi encouraging the commandos and was there to congratulate them when they killed the terrorists holed inside. Vajpayee cut short his visit to the Maldives and flew straight to Gandhinagar — in March he had visited Gujarat after thirty-five days of the Godhra carnage.

The VHP did call for a nationwide shutdown to protest the terrorist attack but the state government fearing that another outbreak of violence would result in imposition of President's Rule, ensured that barring stray incidents, the situation remained peaceful. Modi claimed that VHP bandh was peaceful because 'this time, pseudo-secularists behaved and did not make statements against the majority community.' But the assertion was more for public consumption — to absolve his administration from charges of negligence during the post-Godhra violence. The Akshardham attack nonetheless further polarized the state and strengthened Modi's electoral plank. This was greatly enabled by the renewed vigour with which Modi resumed Gaurav Yatra within days. He was also joined by the fiery Uma Bharati who claimed — to the endorsement from Modi — that "the Akshardham attack would not have happened if the assembly election was not postponed" by the Election Commission.

The logistics and the opposition to the yatra from political quarters apart, Gaurav Yatra was clearly Modi's attempt at broadening his image from being the *avenger of Godhra* to the *upholder of Gujarati identity and pride*. During the period when Gaurav Yatra remained the focal point of public discourse, Modi contended in his speeches that he was fighting for *Gujarati Asmita* (Gujarati Identity) that had taken a beating because of the slanderous campaign by *Gujarat Virodi* group of people, who were inimical towards the interest of the state! Modi reiterated that he had made the task of restoring the lost glory of Gujarat and its people his mission even as his supporters argued that Modi was not against any particular community but was fighting those who were ranged against Gujarat and its people. In this campaign, Modi reintroduced the image of the hyper-masculine hero, reminiscent of the way important Sangh Parivar leaders had been projected in the course of the Ram Janmabhoomi campaign; an extension of the old concept of projecting the nation (or State in this context) as *mother* who needed the protection of able-bodied brave sons. Modi's tactics found favour with Pravin Togadia who labelled Modi as 'the third hero of Hindutva after VHP international working president Ashok Singhal and Shiv Sena supremo, Bal Thackeray.' But, Modi's claim for being the

sole upholder of Gujarati Identity did not go unchallenged: Kamal Nath, senior Congress leader and now Minister of Urban Development, while intervening in a debate in Lok Sabha on 23 July asked, 'What kind of a man is Shri Modi? If anybody says anything against you, you say five crore Gujaratis are being insulted!' But such criticism only benefitted Modi and underscored the political tragedy being enacted in India — even a valid criticism benefited the intended target. Such was the level of communal polarization at that time.

Finally, A B Vajpayee had his way with the Gaurav Yatra that was to start in early July but was deferred and no date of the eventual launch was announced at that stage. Modi revived his yatra plans in the third week of August but the Congress jumped the gun and made a judgemental error of launching a campaign against the plan. Its national leadership created a big hype, projected the Gaurav Yatra which would take Gujarat to the edge once again and took a delegation to Vajpayee seeking his intervention to stop it. By this time Modi had dissolved the state assembly and the state and Central governments were locked in a conflict with the Election Commission over the timing of the polls.

When Modi began firming up dates of the Gaurav Yatra, the dispute with the EC over election dates in Gujarat had been referred to the Supreme Court but all political parties had begun their electoral campaigns. By wanting to deny Modi this privilege the Congress played into his hands as Modi was able to make the Congress party as one of the targets of his *Gujarati Asmita* campaign. When the yatra was finally launched on 8 September 2002, it was perceived by the people as the first victory for Modi. Between the first week of September and the end of November, Modi took out the Gaurav Yatra in ten phases and covered virtually the entire state and by the time it concluded, with elections barely ten days away, Modi had finally emerged as the victor which was subsequently reflected in the verdict on 15 December.

By now there was no doubt that Modi performed best under excruciating pressure and that was evidenced even when he was being hemmed in from all sides and most importantly by the prime minister of the country, A B Vajpayee during BJP's National Executive Meeting in Goa in the summer of 2002. Even as some of his colleagues were weaving a safety net for him, as mentioned earlier, Narendra had been quietly considering dissolving the assembly and call for polls before time as the electoral benefits of communal polarization induced by post-Godhra violence would accrue to him. What was actually projected by the party as a concession to Modi's critics — early polls — was actually a neatly crafted stratagem. Armed with the mandate from the party, Modi did the needful and got the pliant governor and one-

time party stalwart, Sunder Singh Bhandari, to dissolve the House on 19 July 2002 even as fresh communal violence erupted in Viramgram, a small town in rural Ahmedabad district. Eyebrows were naturally raised because there were doubts of free and fair polls in a communally charged atmosphere and something even Vajpayee had dreaded. When the assembly was finally dissolved, it appeared that a new legislature would have to be constituted by mid-October because the last sitting of the dissolved House was in mid-April 2002 and there was a convention of the gap between two legislative sessions not being more than six months. It was not exactly a matter of coincidence that both the chief minister and governor had been RSS Pracharaks and the Congress used this as a campaign point but it further strengthened Modi in his political constituency. The Congress was trapped in a no-win situation: if it criticized Modi, it further rallied his supporters among the Hindu electorate and if they chose to stay mute, it meant endorsing Modi's tactics.

Predictably, the issue reached Parliament, then in the midst of the Monsoon Session. A debate on the situation in Gujarat was concluded by Advani's lavish praise for Modi: 'What they (Modi and his government) have done is politically right. You abuse a Chief Minister (the) day in and day out, and then expect him not even to go to the people! You have forced him to go to the people. Let him go to the people....The Chief Minister does not need your certificate. The Chief Minister needs a certificate of the people of Gujarat which he is going to get.' Advani also said there was no breakdown of the constitutional machinery in the state and there was no need to impose President's Rule.

But holding elections was not a simple matter: after almost a monthlong assessment of the situation, the Election Commission ruled out early elections. The dispute with the Election Commission was a significant chapter in the evolution of Modi from an RSS Pracharak -turned-chief minister into a leader who has drawn comparison with Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew, Israel's Ariel Sharon and of course, the Fuehrer himself. By the time assembly elections were announced in the last week of October 2002, Modi was no longer just *Lord Protector* of groups of angry men and women seeking *notional revenge* for the Godhra incident and *avenging imagined injustices in history*. Instead, Modi had a far larger number of people under his protective umbrella. In the months since the Godhra carnage, Modi had showcased his entire repertoire of skills. The manner in which he blunted criticism from within the Sangh Parivar demonstrated his ability in political strategizing and manoeuvring; the series of official commissions of inquiry and commissions, use of the administrative machinery for political ends underscored that he was no longer the man who knew nothing about governance; and above all, demonstration of his

skills at demagoguery showed that he was no longer a “nuts and bolts” organizational expert — rather he had become “the” leader in the truest sense of the word — one who brooked no alternate viewpoint. A man who politically struggled barely ten months ago to first identify an assembly constituency and get elected was on way to becoming one of the most significant mass leaders in post-liberalization India.

THE MODI KURTA

He floats like a butterfly and stings like a bee.

– From the “Muhammad Ali” Theme Song

I entered the showroom to buy a “Modi kurta”. At one level, it was a ploy to understand the style quotient of one of the trendiest male politicians of India. But to be honest, at another level the decision to walk into Jade Blue on Ahmedabad’s C G Road also pandered to my desire — though not so rampant — to find something nice to wear for the *feel good factor*. Half an hour later, I left the sprawling multi-storied showroom of one of western India’s leading men’s costumes brands with a kurta in hand and an understanding in my mind: there are indeed several levels of narcissism. While many would be satisfied with an occasional indulgence, there are others who make “dressing up” a part of routine even when their profession or vocation was not solely dependent on how they looked or appeared. From what I had learnt while researching this book, Modi belonged to the latter category. I also left the showroom with the hope of being able to meet two men who matter in Jade Blue and through them understand the extent of Narendra Modi’s preoccupation with his sartorial exterior.

What is a kurta and why does the kind of kurta I went shopping for, have the name of the subject of this book as its prefix? I had quoted an RSS source earlier about Modi’s penchant for what were considered to be the “good things in life” despite having lived in a regimented order. His uncle, Jayantibhai told me in Vadnagar that even as a child Modi was always careful about what he wore and took great care to maintain his clothes. In the early 1990s when gizmos were beginning to permeate our personal lives than ever before, Modi was among the first ones to possess the latest model of a digital diary. Later, when mobiles made their advent, he kept track of the latest handsets and whenever possible acquired one. In the 1990s, this was not frowned upon by the leadership because L K Advani was

himself a great advocate of the use of technology. Then there was Pramod Mahajan whose seemingly unlimited access to resources — and his love for the latest gadgetry — was often spoken about in churlish tones within the party apparatchiks. Modi's fondness for good clothes was thereby perfectly understandable.

In India political leaders and statesmen have always had their distinctive dressing styles although they weren't always carefully "cultivated". Mahatma Gandhi's loincloth was demonstrative of what millions in the country wore, he had told a western journalist. A jacket is named after Jawaharlal Nehru. Further back in history, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, one of the leading figures of Bengal renaissance still has a chappal (slip-on footwear) named after him. Indira Gandhi had a thin streak of white hair whose breadth remained constant for years. A P J Abdul Kalam was famous for the "naughty-boy tousled-hair" look which gave him the image of being an outsider in the world of politics even when he became a *political* president. They were all fashion icons in one way or the other and therefore Modi having a distinctive style was neither a new phenomenon nor a habit that could be frowned upon.

What however raised eyebrows was that the political stable where he learnt to cut his teeth did not appreciate the tradition of leaders being particular about physical appearances. By and large, Pracharaks and full time Communists wore commonplace clothes and on clotheslines in bhawans or communes it is still difficult to identify which one is whose. Moreover, since its formation, the RSS was targeted mainly to attract the lower middle classes and among them, matters of appearance and attire were unimportant simply because of economic compulsions. From the days of the national movement, khadi kurta and pyjamas virtually became the uniform of politicians. After the ban was lifted on the RSS in July 1949, the organization continued to engage with its previous social base as a result of which demonstrative austerity remained an important element of the outfit. This led to contradictions between sections of the RSS and Modi. Uday Mahurkar, a senior journalist with the *India Today* group who tracked Modi since his earliest days in politics said, '...because Modi was well groomed and wore good clothes from the early days, a large number of people in the RSS shunned him.'

A day after my first visit to Jade Blue, I return but this time am escorted to the office of the Chauhan brothers — Bipin and Jitendra who like Modi had extremely humble beginnings but have gone on to build a small empire and are regarded as one of Modi's stylists. The first thing I learn while chatting with the two is that the most widely mentioned physical attribute of Modi — his chest size — is not correct. Fifty-six inches is actually a very cleverly crafted tool to develop Modi's

alpha male image — the first male among the Hindus. I learn of Modi's actual chest size, but this like his blood group, is of little relevance to a biography. What however is important is what Bipin Chauhan tells me: Modi put on a few kilograms through the summer of 2012 but '... he will be back to where he was by fasting during Navratras.'

The Modi kurta is actually a minor modification of the traditional long kurta designed by the man himself some time before he became chief minister. 'He wanted us to make a half-sleeved kurta for him and we were initially not sure how it would turn out,' Jitendra said before the other brother joined us. The other brother was entering the room while this information was being given and he informed me after the introductions were over that Modi always liked the length of his sleeve to be a shade longer than his upper arm — 'it should turn or fold a bit.' When I asked if Modi was so particular, the brothers nodded in the affirmative.

As far as Modi is concerned, he offers an explanation that appears incredulous. He is on record saying that he devised the half-sleeved kurta to "save space in his jhola" in the years when he was a political nomad. 'I had trouble washing my clothes so thought I would have to wash less if I cut the sleeves by half. I also thought that they would occupy less space in my small bag. So that is now the Modi kurta was originally made — I just took a pair of scissors and cut the sleeves.'

Does this explanation, which is obviously not corroborated by other accounts, demonstrate that in some nook of his mind, Modi feels diffident about his emphasis on style? Does Modi feel that he is losing political credibility by not projecting the *sarvahara* (proletarian) look of his RSS brethren? Above all, by projecting a carefully cultivated public profile, is Modi trying to address himself more to the urbane while simultaneously projecting an unattainable persona among the not so well-heeled? There cannot be any definite answers to any of these and many similar questions except in the inner recesses of Modi's mind. A possible explanation for Modi not projecting a proletarian look is reflected in the emphasis on glossy development programmes in his tenure. Mega projects like the tallest statue of Sardar Patel on the Sardar Sarovar and Gujarat's *Shanghai* — the GIFT City project, are aimed at projecting the state as more assertive and masculine, the same image that Modi has projected through his sartorial and theatrical style. Macho leader of an aggressive people who are far distanced from the Gujarati of yore!

But where do women fit in the projection of public persona in Modi's Gujarat? Essentially they remain mothers, sisters and wives of the men, playing a secondary role or at best a valued prop. On that count, Modi like most Indian political leaders across the political spectrum remains in the traditional patriarchal mode and the

women who have fared well in Modi's tenure as chief minister, for instance Anandiben Patel and Smriti Irani have been little beyond add-ons on the political platform. Gujarat has had strong women, capable of even leading most heinous crime operations — Santokben Jadeja and Maya Kodnani being prominent, but they have been exceptions and suggestive that the only way out of patriarchal control was by breaking the social and legal boundaries of society.

However by 2004, the Modi kurta became a brand — barely three years after he took oath wearing a grey, half-sleeved kurta in a public stadium in Gandhinagar. Modi's sartorial style became a subject of interest to the media and in one rare non-controversial report related to Modi, *The Times of India* reported in October 2004 that the half-sleeved long shirt had actually been first donned by a Jana Sangh leader from Patan in north Gujarat in the 1950s but it later had fallen out of favour of politicians. Initially there were few takers but from Navratri celebrations in 2004 people began asking for it in shops and responding to the growing demand, entrepreneurs with a keen eye on making a quick buck soon began selling these kurtas. Jade Blue apparently sells upward of 10,000 Modi kurtas every year. Jitendra said that they had taken 'permission from Narendrabhai' for giving the half-sleeved long kurtas the name of Modi kurta. Why has Modi allowed commercial use of his name? Obviously because the kurta no longer remains a merchandise but becomes a symbol of the man. The decision was a clever retake of the famous ad-line of paint maker, Jenson and Nicholson: Whenever you see colour, think of us. In the context of the subject of this book the catch line is simple: see a half-sleeved kurta and Modi comes to your mind.

At Modi's Google Plus Hangout with film actor Ajay Devgn in tow in August 2012 and almost eight years after the launch of a kurta line named after him, Modi was asked a question (which was chosen by him and his team from among the thousands that had been received in advance) on how he felt about lending his name to a popular garment (indicating that he obviously wanted to talk about the kurta named after him). What he said was indicative of his implicit joy at the transformation of a small-town boy into a fashion icon: 'I really do not know why this became such a fashionable thing — I had designed it myself. It is now available in the market...even in Europe and America it is known as the Modi kurta...I was told someone wanted to organize a programme in New Delhi and he managed to get a Modi kurta there. I really do not know — it was part of my simplicity and has become a fashion for the outside world today.'

But why did Modi come to the Chauhan brothers to get a half-sleeved kurta stitched after he decided to experiment? The reason is simple: Modi had been

getting his clothes stitched by the duo from the late 1980s. At that time Jade Blue was yet to be established and the brothers functioned from a small 250 square feet retail store named Supremo Menswear in the Ellis Bridge area of Ahmedabad. The brothers also ran a showroom of ready-to-wear shirts and trousers that they sold under the brand name of D'Peak Point. When Modi first walked into the Chauhans' showroom, they had no celebrity clients and Modi was also just an emerging leader moving around town on a scooter. He wore white trousers and half-sleeved short kurtas at that time. These have over the years metamorphosed into the long version he now wears. Even when Modi lived in banishment in the mid-1990s whenever he came visiting Ahmedabad, a visit to the Chauhans (or the other way often) was always a part of his itinerary and Modi would hand over interesting fabric he had picked up from different places. Over the years, the relationship between Modi and the Chauhans has developed into one of trust and perhaps one of the few abiding ones in the former's life. Jitendra says that in Indian culture a man is traditionally said to be close to his tailor and barber, just the way a woman is to the midwife who delivers her children. I ask jocularly if he was privy to Modi's secrets, in response to which he burst out laughing while gesturing me to drink the tea that was offered.

Narendra Modi is known to be extremely finicky about his preferences and has a fantastic eye for detail. There was an occasion when he had to go to London and wanted several outfits delivered virtually overnight. 'He was always very particular about buttonholes of kurtas and jackets. He never wanted them machine stitched and instead preferred the hand-tailored buttonholes. I asked him if we could do them for a change by machine but he put his foot down!' What about the fitting? The question assumes importance because the bulk of Modi's political draw comes from his performances on the stage. So the fitting is also to buttress the image of the macho "protector of the prosecuted majority": it is body hugging. But in the packed schedule which political leaders like Modi keep, when does he find time to attend to trivia like spending considerable time giving measurements? Bipin showed me a picture on his mobile phone of Modi giving his measurements and said that whenever asked, they go to his house late at night. I requested for the photograph, but he smiled and politely told to leave that — 'it's too personal.' But the exchange underscored Modi's faith in his designers and a conviction that a fine sartorial taste needn't clash with the hecticcy of the job on hand. It also demonstrated how Modi had evolved with the times and become less insecure: from the time when he was upset with reporters who cheekily linked his acting in plays as a child to his theatrics in the political arena; he was now at ease with the fact that his personal style is

discussed ad nauseum and cleverly uses it as yet another tool to further his image of an “unusual” politician. But there is no denying that Modi’s political theatrics has origins in the make-shift stages in Vadnagar, his village, when he faced audiences as a young child and as readers will recall, mesmerized the audiences there.

What about his choice of colours? When I asked this question I was reminded of the incident when Modi made a snide remark at a journalist saying that green would have suited him better than the saffron shirt he was wearing. In December 2002, when riding high after the electoral sweep, he had hosted a lunch for scribes and gently chided journalist Darshan Desai because he had written reports critical of Modi and green is the culturally identified colour of Muslims in contrast to saffron which though used by Hindu priests has been incorporated into the aggressive Hindutva kit. Bipin Chauhan said that Modi actually does not ever wear green and is very careful about the blacks also. He avoids anything that is “jet-black” but is comfortable wearing black stripes in the evenings. This may sound as the most predictable answer for an oft-repeated question but saffron is indeed Modi’s favourite colour but he does not wear it in loud or bright hues anymore and has instead shifted to “silent or more-earthly shades” of the colour. People who have tracked Modi closely over the years have also noticed his penchant for changing clothes during the day when going from one function to another. In May 2012, one of Gujarat’s most prosperous business tycoons, Gautam Adani’s son Karan got engaged to a Mumbai girl — Paridhi Shroff, daughter of the owner of one of the top legal firms in India. Modi was in attendance at this big fat engagement-bash in Ahmedabad. He had gone there from the inaugural function of the Ahmedabad Golf Club and people who were either at both places or saw pictures of Modi at the two functions noticed that he returned to his residence in Gandhinagar and changed to a different outfit — something that matched the celebratory mood at the Adani-Shroff engagement ceremony.

Besides the kurta and pyjama, Modi deftly mixes and matches for casual social occasions and his collection of scarves or stoles that he drapes on his shoulders are often in contrasting colours to his kurtas. He follows the same pattern when wearing jackets or high neck coats also called Jodhpuris. For his travels abroad, Modi is careful never to repeat his old wardrobe. For his visit to Japan in July 2012, Modi got an entire new range stitched by Jade Blue. Modi is equally comfortable in western attire and does not ever look like a fish out of water like several Indian political leaders who look distinctly uncomfortable when they don suits while travelling to cooler climes or when interacting with international communities. Even at home, Modi has been sighted wearing stylish Texan hats along with jeans

and Ts — and this even in Kutch during the Rann festival. The winter festival in the Great Rann of Kutch has been successfully packaged as a tourist mega-event in Modi's tenure. Its success is central to Modi's concerns because — as readers would recall, the destruction and poor rehabilitation in Gujarat's largest district after the 2001 earthquake enabled Modi to become chief minister. The choice of Amitabh Bachchan to promote Gujarat — specially Kutch and Modi's conscious decision to turn out differently for the winter festival can be understood if one recalls the punchline of the Bachchan advertisement: If you have not seen Kutch, you have not seen anything. If you have not noticed Modi's stylish coats hanging cheek by jowl to his more regularly worn clothes, then you have noted the other dimension of his style.

While Modi has experimented with the texture of his fabrics, his prime fondness for uneven and coarse material remains. He has often in the past worn clothes made from poly khadi and still wears pure khadi a lot but his favourite fabric is linen — the new craze among the well-heeled in India for its better capacity to absorb moisture. As Bipin Chauhan says 'Narendrabhai likes the fabric rough.'

Although Jade Blue do the bulk of Modi's costuming — including stitching large quantities of cloth that Modi gets as gifts through the year, he isn't the only celebrity client they have. Industrialists, corporate honchos and politicians of all shades also pick up their outfits from the showroom. The day I met former Gujarat Congress Pradesh Committee President, Arjun Modhwadia to interview him for this book, he was also wearing a kurta made in this shop (of course not a Modi kurta!) Ahmed Patel, Political Secretary to Sonia Gandhi, is also a diehard Jade Blue customer and gets his supplies flown into the Indian capital by a human courier — mostly one of the two brothers who arrive at night and return in the morning after delivering the order and taking measurements for fresh orders.

The BJP leader from Mumbai, Shaina N C, also well known as a designer in her own right has reportedly also turned out outfits for Modi. But despite such a vast repertoire of clothes, Modi who has a photographic memory and as mentioned earlier a keen eye for detail, remembers each and every outfit in his closet. It is not that Modi discards clothes after wearing them only a few times, but he ensures that no kurta, shirt, jacket or coat is repeated in quick succession. When he travels away from Ahmedabad, he picks out his wardrobe himself — though he may delegate the job of packing them into suitcases to one of his personal retainers. An associate who has known Modi for several decades says that Modi's effort is to 'always look distinct and stand out in a crowd.'

Bharghav Parekh, the journalist who has been referred to elsewhere in the book

made an insightful observation: ‘Modi is greatly influenced by Rajesh Khanna’s style and that is why he buttons up his kurtas tight till his neck. He stands erect — almost like Fidel Castro — to ensure that the chest comes out — the concept of *chauri chhati wala insaan* (man with a broad chest) — and his stance is wide open.’ There are the other oddities aimed at drawing the attention of the audience: he claps with his left hand — the right hand is at the bottom. Like any other vocal performer, Modi takes great care of his voice and never drinks cold water. Even the glass of water that was served in the course of the interview to me was tepid.

Yet another associate who requested anonymity said there were three things that Modi was very careful about : ‘*Dikhte kaise hain, dekhte kaise hain aur bolte kaise hain*’ (How he appears, how he sees and how he speaks) — meaning that he pays special attention to how he looks, takes adequate care of his eyes and his spectacles and maintains the health of his vocal chords so that it can withstand the demands for speaking long hours in a theatrical style.

As far as his looks are concerned, besides the stated fondness for stylish clothes — there is no “compromise” on this front — Modi is also particular about perfect and timely trimming of his facial hair and locks. Ajay Umat of *The Times of India* reported in May 2012 that as long as ‘his oldest aides can remember, chief minister Narendra Modi has always carried a comb in his pocket. He also carries a special shaving comb, which he brushes lightly on his beard to trim overgrowth.’ There was a time before the 2007 assembly elections when worried that unless he took remedial steps, he would soon have little use for the pocket comb, Modi decided to undergo a hair transplant. This enabled him to ‘reclaim part of his receding hairline and appear less bald for the December (2007) election campaign.’ Journalists who have reported on Modi’s public meetings and rallies for long, recall that he has frequently been seen caressing or stroking his hair while either listening to another speaker or waiting for his turn. In the summer of 2012 he decided to grow his hair for some months leading to speculations in the media if Modi was chiselling a new image. Was it due to any religious belief or to project a more saint-like image and may be even prepare for another transplant?

Modi also has a weakness for designer fountain pens — Montblanc in particular. The Pracharak-turned-chief minister also likes to wear premium designer watches and an Ahmedabad-based journalist told me that one of Modi’s favourite brand is Movado, the Swiss luxury watch company established in 1881 whose watches are available from select outlets in India at prices upwards of fifty thousand rupees. When the close associate said that Modi was also careful about his sight, he meant that he was choosy about his spectacle frames — designer, mainly Bvlgari.

For all his flashy exteriors, Modi has very simple gastronomical habits and is clearly not a foodie: '*Main unme se naheen hoon jo jeeb ke shaukeen hote hain*' (I am not among those who have a fondness for anything particular). In August 2012 during his Google Plus Hangout, Modi described himself as a *parivrajak* — a homeless wanderer that he actually was till he bought residential land measuring 326.22 square metres and built a house on Plot No 411, Sector 1, in Gandhinagar. While this gave him a *permanent address* probably for the first time after he left home, his status still remained somewhat like a wandering minstrel — giving him the ability to make do with whatever was made available.

Dileep Sanghani, one of Narendra Modi's close confidantes and a former minister in his cabinet, remembers that as far as food was concerned, Modi — a frequent visitor to his house from his days in New Delhi — never made a request for anything particular — 'he always ate whatever was offered to him.' The statement was made to me several days before Modi's Google Plus Hangout so he did not know what was said after the bit about him being a homeless wanderer: that he had to almost beg for food for four decades, 'Whenever I used to visit a house, I ate whatever they could offer.'

In fact, Modi told one of the questioners on the video chat session that anyone active in public life could not have a stomach for much because of constant travelling and being exposed to different foods and water. Modi however likes khichdi as it's light on the stomach and has a preference for non-spicy food. This would often create problems because before he became chief minister, he would drop in unannounced at homes of his acquaintances — like Sanghani — during meal times but would eat whatever was available. 'I never gave anyone an opportunity to cook something special for me,' Modi said. He added that since he never had a family and never lived in a *proper home* after his childhood, his food habits were very basic because he 'does not have any taste buds left.' Modi however finds the sweetish Gujarati cuisine more agreeable with his system and personally favours eating bottle gourd. But why such frugality, I wondered? The answer, in the course of his video chat, was typically pompous: 'I have never wanted that at any point my body, my health should become a burden on my country. I would not want anyone to spend any time or expend their energies on looking after me — that is the reason why I pledged to stay healthy.'

At the time of interviewing him, I asked Modi about his daily routine and he told me what I had heard previously — that he virtually does not sleep. 'I sleep very less — just three and a half or four hours. When I was in Sangh I had developed this habit of being a very early riser and that habit has stayed on,' he said by way of

explanation. I had asked if there was a definite auto-alarm that woke him up and he said that he was up every morning by 'about 4.30-4.45 am. If it gets late then 5 am at the latest. After which I do some yoga — I try to give an hour or so to it but at times it is not possible. Then I personally access my mails, surf, check the Google Alerts. And finally, by 7.30, I am ready to start my day.' I asked him which Google Alerts had he activated? Narendra Modi and Gujarat, came the reply and predictably so. Modi's habit of rising early has been useful during elections — he often is through with essentials of the campaign while his opponents are asleep. Harinder Baweja reported in the *Hindustan Times* on 11 December 2012 that Modi's 'war room functions 24x7,' and that he 'holds the first review at 5 am with members of the team that is in charge of social media.'

There is no gainsaying the fact that the use of technology and particularly the social media networking sites have greatly impacted some of the recent political movements across the globe. The Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia in December 2010 is one such example where public support and mobilization was activated solely through social media networking tools. Among the older lot, and excluding young politicians like Rahul Gandhi and Akhilesh Yadav, Narendra Modi is by far one of the few politicians who has learnt to use technology for furthering his political career. Gujarat was probably the first state and Modi the first chief minister in India to begin the use of social media. As someone with an astute business sense he understood early on in life that it costs little money and gives amazing gains with a great on-ground buzz and traction. On 1 February 2009, less than three years after the launch of Twitter, Modi began using the social networking platform using the @narendramodi handle. The first Tweet was a simple announcement of his visit next day to Dahod 'for Gujarat Swarnim Jayanti Yatra.' Less than a fortnight later, Modi launched the Gujarati version of his personal website — www.narendramodi.in. Initially the Tweets were not daily and did not have many followers but right from the beginning, the Tweets were not just announcements of his tours but made for engaging reading. Sample this: 'Women would play a crucial role in the development of Gujarat' — a Tweet would say and then give a link to the complete speech on the topic; 'Through water conservation movement, Kutch has an extraordinary ability to replicate Israel' — another speech of his. Early in his life as a Twitteratti, Modi also gave links to pure data which underscored development during his tenure — 'Gujarat posts 12.8% agriculture growth, highest in India.'

By the middle of 2012, Modi had a significant presence on cyberspace. Besides Twitter, Modi was also on Google Plus, Facebook and had a channel on YouTube.

There are professionals in his team who manage the entire exercise with an OSD on Information Technology coordinating the entire operation. Political advice has come from colleagues during the election campaign in 2012 but otherwise, it has been his small team. Young professionals were also engaged to bolster the information department of the state government and they work under the direction and guidance of senior officers who personally supervised operations. Modi on his own does not leave everything to his associates, rather he is what is often said about many others — a “hands on CEO”. In terms of Modi’s dexterity with gizmos, those who knew him before he became chief minister find one of his practices rather odd: he practically never uses mobile phones after he became chief minister. A source close to Modi explained that ‘in any case, he is never far from either a landline or from an aide who carried a mobile,’ The issue became contentious in 2002 when it was alleged that during the riots he had used personal mobile phones of several members of his secretarial staff. The issue dogged him for long and in his deposition to the Special Investigation Team in March 2010 he denied doing so and said that a phone was allotted to him in 2002 but he rarely used it.

While several government departments have been strengthened during Modi’s tenure, the Information department has undergone a near-complete overhaul because Modi realizes the power of information and the need for its dissemination more than any other politician in the country. The department has gone shopping for talent in management schools and picked up the best commensurate with competitive wages and is active on Twitter, Facebook, has revamped its website besides of course coming out with an English quarterly journal targeted at embassies. It also runs campaigns on social issues like “Save the Girl Child”, “World Environment Day”, and against “Trafficking of Women”. To stress the fact that Modi took care to ensure that he was not charged on violation of the electoral code of conduct, the Twitter handle of the Information department, [@InfoGujarat](#) suspended Tweets on 3 October to resume operations only after the results were officially announced. For Modi, the internet is another platform to publicize his ideas — another theatre for him to demonstrate his skills as a performer. It is not just public meetings that has the audiences for his standout performances — the internet brings them to the computers and now on mobile handsets.

For all his travails and a grinding schedule, Narendra Modi also has a “sensitive” side to his personality. He listens to music — Gujarati *ghazals* but does not always find time for it. He spends a lot of his time reading on the internet, and keeps track of virtually every word that is written about him and Gujarat with assistance from the Alerts that he has activated. But besides that he is a voracious reader — ‘reading

virtually on any subject' as an associate informs. Modi may not be an ideologue of the Sangh Parivar and is more in the *doer role*. But the amount of information that he packs in his mind is impressive. His associates say that Modi keeps 'testing his mind' and still finds time to write.

Modi told me that although he liked being on his own, it did not mean he had no friends. What about now, I had asked him. There was no remorse in his voice as he said: 'Now my work has become my friend. I enjoy this and I do this work with complete dedication.' But in the past there were occasions when his proximity with colleagues had generated controversies. During the 1990s, Mafatbhai Patel, the husband of Modi's ministerial colleague Anandiben Patel had 'complained to the BJP leadership that Modi's proximity to his wife had taken a heavy toll on their family life.' The issue resurfaced during assembly elections in 2002 and 2007 and even national mainstream papers and magazines like the *Hindustan Times* and *The Week* wrote about the allegations of Anandiben's estranged husband who soon started appearing in public with the dissidents in the BJP and campaigned against Modi. On her part, whenever journalists asked Anandiben about her reaction, she maintained that she did not wish to talk about private matters.

A hallmark of Modi's character has been his brutish style of dealing with adversaries and rebels. However, several journalists and one-time political associates who interacted with Modi for decades asserted the brusqueness was essentially to hide a deep sense of insecurity. But quite unlike most Indian politicians, Modi has rarely been willing to forget the past and has never forgiven those who dared disagree with his views or voice criticism. Probably the only instance where he made a distinction was in the case of Smriti Irani who began her career in the BJP as a harsh critic of Modi but was later nominated by him to the Rajya Sabha. Modi has on no occasion spoken about this concession to a one-time critic, but Irani, who withdrew her offensive comments and told the media that 'More than anybody else, let the people of Gujarat speak for Narendra Modi and not you and me. They elected him as Chief Minister and he did a brilliant job.'

Modi's is not an easy life. He is always under scrutiny for the position he holds as well as for his political stance. The lifestyle he has chosen is an easy target for critics. This is because of Modi's firm belief that in his personal planetary space, he is the Sun around whom everybody else has to move in predetermined orbits. In the course of writing this book, I was once asked who Modi considered most important for his political development? I thought for a while before answering convincingly: himself. Unlike several other leaders, Modi is not an enigma any more — everything about him is either known or believed. There is no aspect of Modi's life

on which people do not have an opinion — critical or adoring. From being a fashion icon and a frugal eater, to being a homeless wanderer even while being accused of being a home-breaker and destroyer of personal relationships, Modi no longer has any mystery surrounding his personality. He has been deciphered — driven by the ideological position of the assessor. It is nothing new for Narendra Modi. But whenever he has faced such a situation, he reinvented himself and added a spin or two.

IDENTITY MATTERS

Contemporary history is useless unless it allows emotion to be recollected in tranquillity.

– Eric Hobsbawm

The assembly election in Gujarat in December 2002 was separated by eighteen years with the other poll — the battle for India's Parliament in 1984 — where a wounded electorate played a decisive role. The difference lay in the nature of the wound, who it affected and the emotions it evoked — this determined the choice of the voter. In 1984, the voter was led by a sense of insecurity and fear of the unknown (though a suggestively portrayed questionable campaign by the Congress party gave an image to this *unknown*) and nearly half the voters who turned out, approved Rajiv Gandhi's accession. In 2002, almost the same percentage of voters were driven by hatred. It was an outrageous election and Narendra Modi was the lead performer of the act. Modi was what *India Today* described him in the 6 January 2003 issue as: "Master Divider". When the final result was declared in the afternoon of 15 December 2002 it was clear that Modi was the emperor of the wreckage that Gujarat still was. The verdict was not so much about giving Modi a mandate to govern the state for five years but was instead what he had sought: an endorsement of the post-Godhra violence.

In January 2002, much before the VHP decided to escalate confrontation with the Vajpayee government over the construction of a Ram Temple in Ayodhya, Modi began his first election campaign in the by-poll from Rajkot. Prior to this, he managed the nitty-gritty of several campaigns; playing a key role in selecting candidates, planning campaign meetings, scheduling visits of key leaders and assessing talking points to be raised by local leaders and candidates. The election in Rajkot was a different ball game — BJP had fared poorly in urban body elections in December 2000 and lost control of the municipality in this Saurashtra district. The

seat was also not Modi's first choice and was forced due to Haren Pandya's obstinacy. From being the proverbial ringmaster of the neighbourhood circus, Modi was on his way to becoming the lead trapeze artist.

In January 2002, assembly elections in the entire state were barely fifteen months away and two developments provided an indication of what would have been Modi's electoral plank and strategy if Godhra had not happened. The backdrop to the first episode was that it was less than four years since Sonia Gandhi had made her debut in politics and large sections of Indian people still had *problems* with her ancestry. Compared to 2012, far greater number of ordinary voters did not endorse the idea of a person of foreign origin running for any top office. Early into the campaign for the by-election the Congress erred by levelling accusations that Modi was an *outsider* and not Saurashtrian. Modi saw this as a potent opportunity and lashed out at his first election speech: 'What kind of people are these Congressmen? They can regard an Italian woman as their own but they find a son of the soil like me an outsider.' The continued targeting of Sonia Gandhi by the BJP culminated in the melodrama after the NDA's defeat in 2004 that ended only after her refusal to become prime minister.

The verdict of the by-poll was a foregone conclusion and the only question was over the victory margin. Given BJP's nose-diving electoral fortunes, the moot point was if Modi would be able to match Vajubhai Vala's margin in 1998 or not. Vala's margin in 1998 was more than 28,000 votes and he secured a vote share of more than sixty-one per cent. Eventually Modi was not able to match Vala's performance but it did not reflect on Modi's vote catching abilities as Vala had won a triangular contest while Modi's was a straight two-way fight — the margin would have thereby come down anyway because anti-BJP votes did not get divided like in 1998. Though Modi's vote share at fifty-seven per cent was less than Vala's, it was insignificant given the huge anti-incumbency sentiment against the state government. It however was worrisome for Modi that the BJP lost the other two by-elections — from Mahuva and Sayajiganj — which demonstrated that despite being in office for four months, Modi had not been able to reverse BJP's slide.

The second event in January that gave an indication of Modi's emerging political strategy was at a function to mark the first anniversary of 2001 earthquake. It was organized by the state government at Anjar in Kutch where almost four hundred children died when participating in the Republic Day parade. Modi's decision to become the first chief minister to spend Republic Day outside the state capital did not result in raised eyebrows — on the contrary it was endorsed as a wise decision taken with an element of sensitivity given the magnitude of the tragedy. More than

eleven years later, a visit to the street where hundreds of school children died underscored that there could not have been a more appropriate place than this for the chief minister to spend the first anniversary of the tragedy. The school children were parading through this narrow street with tall buildings on both sides when earthquake struck destroying most of the houses and burying the children in debris, at times almost fifteen feet high. This site was chosen by Modi's government for the official flag hoisting ceremony. Even critics of the chief minister and the Sangh Parivar could not be faulted with this. What Modi did thereafter however was not something that most people agreed with. Modi used religious motifs in the course of the ceremony, motifs that had been routinely used by the Sangh parivar in the course of the Ayodhya agitation.

A Rediff News report of that morning does not need qualification: 'More than 7,000 people were waiting to hear him speak and to participate in the *dharti puja* announced by the Gujarat government to *appease the spirit of the angry Kutch earth*. The *puja* began on a sombre note with pundits reading mantras and Modi performing the *aarti* before a painting of *Bharatmata*... It was an impressive scene, great for television. Clearly, Modi is definitely a master of the visual medium. Modi is also a great orator. He clearly knows how to reach out to the audience...'

Kutch was known for being the symbol of Gujarat's cultural pluralism. Prior to the advent of aggressive Hindutva, the district was noted for dual-religious identity among several communities. Modi's decision — taken after the 'state cabinet had spent almost three hours discussing *ideas* to commemorate the first anniversary of the deadly earthquake' had naturally upset both Muslims and Hindus not wedded to the ideals of the Sangh Parivar. By making the official function a Hindu religious function, the government led by Modi left Muslims with no option but to *stray* from their religious belief if they wished to partake in the commemoration ceremony: reason being Islam permits obeisance to only one form of God — Allah. The first anniversary of the earthquake was observed just three weeks after Operation Parakrama which was launched by India following the terrorist attack on Indian Parliament on 13 December 2001. Invocation of newly-devised Hindu religious rituals was aimed at forging all-encompassing Hindu solidarity and the *worshippers* were invoking gods for protection against enemies of the people and their nation this also included *nature* — almost suggesting that nature's wrath was also the handiwork of *enemies of the people*. In a bizarre implicit suggestion it was made out that Pakistan (and their agents, read Muslims) were behind not just terrorist strikes but also natural disasters. This was a devious — and dangerous — mixing of politics with mythology and ritualism, clearly aimed at *leaving out*

significant sections of Indians whose faith did not adhere to such beliefs and practices.

Gujarat under Modi was heading in the path of becoming a “Hindu state” and the Godhra incident provided an opportunity to make rapid inroads in this direction. Advancing elections was considered a way of *maximizing the gains* from the post-Godhra violence and was on Modi’s mind from virtually the first day. But, though the state assembly was dissolved on 19 July, the Election Commission did not oblige. Instead almost a month later in the middle of August, the Commission ruled that ‘the law and order situation in the state is still far from normal. The wounds of the communal divide following the riots have not yet healed. The slow progress in relief and rehabilitation work on the one hand and non-arrest and non-punishment of the guilty on the other have hampered the process of normalcy returning to the State, the victims carrying the fear and anxiety of another backlash.’ With this assessment as the backdrop, the Commission concluded that ‘it is presently not in a position to conduct a free and fair election in the State.’

Stung by the setback, the BJP acted at three levels: first, L K Advani embarked on an internal morale-boosting operation declaring that his party would win the election in Gujarat ‘whenever they are held.’ Arun Jaitley, now party spokesperson but still a close associate of Modi, challenged the decision saying the ‘EC order was against the Constitution.’ The most strident attack was mounted by Modi at a public meeting in Vadodara district in mid-August just days after the ruling of the Election Commission. What caught the ears of the people was not the criticism — what mattered was the way Modi addressed the Chief Election Commissioner: ‘By his full name — James Michael Lyngdoh,’ not once but four times as *The Times of India* reported the next day. There was further vitriol: Modi was quoted as saying ‘You can hire people to kill a few people here and burn a few shops there and James Michael Lyngdoh will then come down and say, *the situation is not fit for holding elections.*’

If there were any doubts that Modi was using the full name of Lyngdoh to establish among listeners that the CEC was Christian, they were dispelled by a VHP leader, Dilipbhai Trivedi, who spoke from the same podium. *The Times of India* report quoted him — ‘It seems that Lyngdoh, a Christian by faith, is being guided by another of his community — Sonia Gandhi.’ Madhusudan Mistry, the Congress member of Lok Sabha from Sabarkantha who had won the key by-poll and is now part of Rahul Gandhi’s crack team for steering the 2014 polls, a verdict that resulted in Modi’s appointment as chief minister, interpreted Modi’s line of attack on the CEC correctly: ‘It was a deliberate attempt to tell people that Lyngdoh is a

Christian and a member of the minority community.’ Identifying the religious identity of the CEC was not restricted to political rallies and meetings. An official statement of the state government at that time was headlined — “Shri James Michael Lyngdoh accused of having anti-Gujarat mentality”. The body text of the press release quoted Modi: ‘James Michael Lyngdoh’s anti-Gujarat tirade may have crossed all limits but the Congress will never be able to win the elections whenever they are held.’ This was an instance when the state machinery was utilized for furthering the political agenda of Modi. But since the election had not been announced, the model code of conduct was not applicable and Modi could not be accused of misusing his office for electoral benefit!

I asked Modi about his desire for fresh polls and how he viewed the dispute with the Election Commission retrospectively. He said: ‘I felt that since these people (his critics) were doing *ho-hallah* (protesting vociferously) — I realized that they were doing so because we were in the government. I thereby decided that it would be best if we gave the people an opportunity to decide who should remain in the government. I felt that was the best strategy — to go to the people — so that this daily criticism, the shouting every morning, stops once and for all. But the Election Commission refused to call for election and made us go through a legal imbroglio (*kanooni daun pench mein daal diya*) and whiled away six months.’

Armed with this delay that did not result in any model code of conduct binding him, Modi opted to give a definite anti-minority edge to his political campaign. The attack on Sonia Gandhi and Lyngdoh were due to two reasons — it gave the party an immediate campaign point but in the long run it was in sync with the Sangh Parivar’s campaign against Christianity and missionary activity. The double edged anti-minority sword of Modi was displayed at another public meeting on the second day of the Gaurav Yatra at Becharji, Mehsana in early September. A day after the combative Journey of Pride rolled from the 200-year-old Bhathiji Maharaj Temple in Phagwel village, Kheda district, Modi delivered one of the most contentious speeches of that time. The National Minorities Commission, though headed by a sympathetic associate of the BJP, sought clarifications on the speech. This speech remained controversial for long and he was asked about it during his deposition to the SIT in March 2010. Modi was queried if he had been shown a purported text of his speech he delivered in the Mehsana town and when he acquiesced he was probed further. The SIT report reproduced the contentious part of the speech: ‘My dear brothers, we built the (Sardar Sarovar) dam and so water is available. Let me ask a question to my Congress friends, if water is brought during Shravan month ... what is paining them? Since we are here, we brought water in

Sabarmati during the month of Shravan, when you are there, you can bring in the month of Ramadan. When we brought water in the month of Shravan, you feel bad. What brother, should we run relief camps? Should I start children-producing centres there? We want to achieve progress by pursuing the policy of family planning with determination. *Ame paanch, Amara pachhees!* (We are five and we have twenty-five!) Can't Gujarat implement family planning? Whose inhibitions are coming in our way? Which religious sect is coming in the way?

Thereafter the SIT asked a pointed question — 'Did these remarks refer to the Muslims?'

Modi's reply did not own up the intended meaning because that would have been counter-productive and boomeranged on him: 'This speech does not refer to any particular community or religion. This was a political speech, in which I tried to point out the increasing population of India in as much as I stated that "Can't Gujarat implement family planning?" My speech had been distorted by some elements who misinterpreted it to suit their designs. It may be mentioned that no riots, tension took place after my election speech.' The SIT did not probe further to seek clarification what had been *distorted* and which part had been *misinterpreted*. No questions were also asked on why Modi had called a speech delivered at a Gaurav Yatra rally an *election speech*. Barring the groups who already supported Modi, few others believed his claim — either in 2002 or in 2010. But then, Modi was not addressing this group in the first place.

Modi's animosity towards Lyngdoh survived a decade and in the summer of 2012 he told me that the CEC 'even took this unusual decision of allowing anyone who had gone from Gujarat to any part of India the right to vote, and they had spend crores of rupees in advertising this decision. They had to make arrangements for polling stations everywhere in India. And not a single voter turned out.' The claim was a classic example of Modispeak: a legitimate decision of a constitutional authority was questioned — and distorted — for political reasons. The fact of the matter was simple: during its visits in July and August 2002, the Commission found that electoral rolls had been routinely prepared without 'taking into account the large-scale movement and migration of the affected people from the riot-torn areas to safer havens.' Because the state government had 'no record of such displaced families, nor any clue as to their whereabouts' some of whom 'are even said to have moved out of the State of Gujarat to the neighbouring States,' the EC declared that the electoral rolls needed to be specially revised. It also announced that 'wide publicity shall have to be given to the Commission's directions for the special revision of electoral rolls, not only in the State of Gujarat but also in the States of

Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, etc., where these electors are stated to have migrated temporarily.’

Modi’s criticism of this decision was with the benefit of hindsight. But in 2002, given the extent of polarization in society, it was a tough call not to order updating of voters lists. The state government was frugal on providing information and in the wake of the veil of secrecy on its relief and rehabilitation measures, most believed that the number of displaced voters would be significantly higher than 1.76 lakh which the Election Commission eventually established. But then, the election of 2002 was communally the most charged assembly poll in Gujarat.

The irony of the dispute with the Election Commission over the timing of polls in Gujarat was that though eventually the Supreme Court ruled against the contentions of the Union and state governments that elections must be held within six months of the premature dissolution of the assembly, the verdict enabled Modi to further consolidate his vote bank. This was done by the use of questionable tactics during campaigning when it was claimed that the Election Commission stance was based on a pro-minority and thereby anti-Hindu position. The vote which Modi received and the number of seats to which he lead the BJP to victory was less than what the Congress secured in 1980 and 1985 — but the two verdicts were not based on communal polarization. In 1980 and 1985, the Congress tally was 141 and 149 respectively while Modi’s tally was 127. The Congress vote share in 1980 and 1985 was fifty-one and fifty-five per cent while Modi secured just a shade below fifty per cent. As the outcome of 2002 was virtually a referendum on Modi’s handling of post-Godhra violence, the fact that almost every second voter in Gujarat endorsed his policies had far-reaching implications. Modi connected the dots on his *minority canvas*: James Michael Lyngdoh, Sonia Gandhi, Muslims in Gujarat and finally Mian Musharraf who at times was accused of being hand-in-glove with the Taliban. The use of the honorific *Mian* for General Pervez Musharraf was a double entendre — it was also the most common way of addressing a Muslim acquaintance. Addressing the Pakistan President in such a manner suggested linking every Muslim as a product of Pakistan-based *hate* factory. Since Gujarat was the victim of pan-Islamism, Modi argued, geographical proximity of Gujarat to Pakistan enabled him and his associates in the VHP to ferment paranoia into hysteria and then into electoral choice.

To be fair to Modi what were the choices in front of him when he became chief minister? In October 2001, his was a losing battle and the task was cut out for him: somehow revive the fortunes of the BJP by strengthening administration, removing corruption and make the BJP battle-ready in a year’s time to ensure its victory in

polls scheduled for March 2003. But efficient and corruption-free administration does not necessarily win elections especially in a bipolar state where emotions had run high for well over a decade. Moreover, Modi could not insulate himself from developments like 9/11, the terrorist attack on Jammu and Kashmir state assembly in October 2001 and the attack on Indian Parliament. Modi had been politically indoctrinated in the RSS and it was natural that he would project the earthquake to be a curse of god and use religion to collect thousands to come and listen to him.

Most political leaders, barring the Mahatma, have their weaknesses — the proverbial turn-on, mostly for things which are seen to be wordly and in the ambit of material acquisitions. Modi, as we have seen, had a fondness for well-tailored clothes and accessories but there was a limit to his indulgence. His real goal was political power and he would choose any route provided he thought that the path would take him to the citadel. Even in pre-Godhra Gujarat, a mix of religion and politics was to be his vehicle as the religious invocation during the Kutch earthquake had shown. The debate would have been settled in his mind within minutes of learning of the dreadful train carnage on 27 February 2002. The only care which had to be taken was that no action of his should show him up to be personally culpable. I asked a source who has been campaigning against Modi for long if the arms of law could ever catch up with him. What he said was revealing though it is not necessary that subsequent events will not prove him wrong: 'He is surely guilty of dereliction of duty under Section 166 of the Indian Penal Code.' The punishment under this? 'Simple imprisonment for one year, or fine, or both—Non-cognizable—Bailable—Triable by Magistrate of the first class—Non-compoundable.'

The BJP-led NDA government campaigned in the post 9/11 world that danger from terrorism was finally being understood by global powers while earlier they had turned a blind eye to the threat to India's security from across the borders. Atal Bihari Vajpayee's enthusiasm about engaging with Pakistan — Lahore Bus journey and Agra Summit — evaporated after the launch of the War on Terror. By late 1990s there was evidence that the first wave of Islamization of India resulting from the demolition of the Babri Masjid had got integrated with the anti-Centre sentiment in Jammu and Kashmir and was beginning to spread outside the state with greater consistency. It also became evident that terrorist strikes in India had greater participation from within the country with logistical support and provocation from state and non-state players in Pakistan. Terrorism in India graduated from being underworld-driven retaliation like in March 1993 in Mumbai to homegrown terror groups striking on Gandhinagar's Akshardham temple in

September 2002. Despite evidence of various terrorist attacks having a significant presence of *home-bred terror groups* — at times also locally supported, the involvement of state-players from Pakistan like ISI was frequently alleged by Modi and officers under his deployment. From the time home grown terror networks began making their presence felt, the state's response — and regular scrutiny in public — of ordinary Muslim citizens conveyed to people that anyone with *Muslim looks* needed to be viewed with suspicion. The situation was similar to what Sikhs faced in the aftermath of Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984. A large numbers of Sikhs circumvented this by shaving off, but for Muslims the alterations would have to be greater — physical, sartorial and may be even culinary — at least in Gujarat.

A source in the security apparatus in the state drew my attention to the posting of a Central Intelligence Bureau officer of the rank of Joint Director, Rajendra Kumar, a few months after Modi became chief minister. The source pointed to a coincidence without being suggestive: this officer was also posted in Chandigarh in the mid-1990s when Modi was stationed there and he had reportedly been one of the many *sources* of the officer. This was corroborated by a report in *Mail Today* on 1 October 2009. One of Modi's bêtes noire, former Director General of Police, R B Sreekumar after deposing before the SIT had claimed that Rajendra Kumar, within hours of the attack on the Sabarmati Express had theorized that the attack was the handiwork of the ISI. *The Times of India* also reported on the matter on 3 February 2012: 'This theory was vigorously pursued by the state government by invoking POTA (Prevention of Terrorism Act) against the accused. Finally, the theory was demolished by judgments passed by various courts.' Sreekumar made another damning claim — this one is the "register for recording verbal instructions from higher officers, viz., DGP and above". On 18 April 2002, he noted the IB officer told him that some Congress leaders were behind the communal incidents but when asked for any evidence, he said he had none. Sreekumar thereafter wrote in the register: 'It appears that JD, SIB (Kumar) perhaps in pursuance of the CM's suggestion to involve Congress persons as persons responsible for the continuing riots wants to build up a case against Congress leaders by soliciting Intelligence reports.'

The key elements in Modi's campaign in 2002 were inter-linked: terrorism surfaced in India because of the fear of rising Hindu consciousness in the course of the Ram Janmabhoomi agitation. The emergence of Islamist thought and groups was aided by Pakistan with support from other "jehadi" groups. Global terror had risen because of years of encouragement by western powers and these groups forged linkages with those in India and were routinely targeting Hindu communities —

like in Godhra. When the issue had to be *resolved at the street level*, groups (Hindu) were doing so — as demonstrated during the post-Godhra violence and when the *need arose* people must take action through the ballot. It is fitting to recall a post-poll survey conducted by the Delhi-based Centre for Studies in Developing Societies. The survey established that the majority of Hindu respondents were supportive of the post-Godhra riots though they distanced themselves somewhat from their consequences. The majority, Yogendra Yadav wrote in the issue of *Frontline* in December 2002: ‘...agreed with the suggestion that the post-Godhra riots were *necessary to teach a lesson to anti-national elements* (read Muslims).’

But there were hiccups also that came in Modi’s way besides the hurdle of delayed elections. Keshubhai Patel who had clearly not wanted to relinquish power, became a pivot around whom Modi’s detractors in the party started coagulating. Differences also started cropping up between Modi and the local RSS leaders. A source in the RSS explained the reasons that led to the gradual distancing over the years between Modi and the organizational leaders. The bone of contention was a hierarchical matter: who was senior — Modi or the RSS’ top brass in the state? RSS leaders felt that since Modi had been a relatively junior functionary when he was deputed to the BJP, he should be *reporting* to them as in the RSS, seniority is determined by the last position held. Modi in contrast felt that after the RSS deputed a Pracharak to one of the affiliated organizations where they have to adhere to rules and a style of power-politics, it is wrong to expect daily briefings. The conflict between the RSS and Modi was similar to the one between Vajpayee and the Nagpur-based leadership. For four and a half decades, Vajpayee was the principle vote-catcher for the BJP and the entire period witnessed a constant tussle — sometimes bitter and at times low-grade, between him and the RSS on programmatic issues. In the period after the political emergence of Modi, the most significant issue on which Vajpayee differed with the Sangh Parivar was on the Ayodhya issue — to what extent was it to be incorporated in the BJP’s agenda? After Vajpayee became prime minister in 1998, the two disagreed on several issues, most significantly on economic matters. The relationship between an “individual” and the “organization” i.e., the RSS and between various affiliates has been one of the most perplexing relationships defying definition. I asked Modi about this complex web of ties. What he said explained how he viewed the entire matrix: ‘Whatever I am — is because of the basic foundation of the Sangh. Hard work, the idea that the nation is more important than the party — I got the ability to think this way due to the association. There are many such traits that I picked up from my early days and they stand me in good stead now.’

I probed him further if there was a method of a structured interaction with the RSS after he became chief minister. He almost cut me short: 'No, absolutely not. All these stories are spread because of attempts to damage the reputation of the Sangh. The Sangh is so busy in its own activities that it does not have the time to get involved in all these routine matters. It is something like this — if I am an Arya Samaji and I am a chief minister and if I so desire at some point, then I can go and spend time with them. It is different but there is no structured mechanism. Now in my case — since I am from the Sangh and came out from there, then all my friends and acquaintances are there — if I feel like going and spending time with them, I could very well do so. But there is no compulsion.' Others may have agreed that though there was no compulsion, the RSS would have preferred to be consulted more. But that would have been so un-Modi-like!

At that point I could not resist asking him: 'Do you think the people in the Sangh are at times unable to understand the compulsions of those who come from the Sangh and become part of party politics and this creates misunderstanding?'

Modi took a deep breath and replied: 'To say something like this would be wrong towards the Sangh. Nothing can be said about this as an institutional trend. It depends on person to person and human factors come in everywhere. No one is above basic human emotions and traits. You should not look at this as an organizational characteristic but as a human feature.' So has he faced any problem at a personal level from any leader? 'There are several senior leaders of the Sangh who are very fond of me. And there would be some who are less fond. We cannot have a weighing scale to measure the quantity of fondness — who is more and who is less fond.'

The element of human frailty was also hinted at by another RSS source who said that one of the reasons behind the conflict was that several leaders of the RSS were part of *families* — where one generation followed the preceding one into the RSS leadership. This section has traditionally had *problems* with people like Modi who were *first generation* entrants (into the RSS) and had no patrons except those who were developed in course of the career in the organization. In Modi's case differences also cropped up owing to his working style and his distaste for sharing glory and power. Not given to democratic accommodation of views, other leaders of the RSS began to feel like pygmies from the time Modi began charting his own course which coincided with the launch of the virulent electoral campaign in the autumn of 2002. But in the course of the campaign in 2002, Modi still had to play a secondary role to the national leadership owing to the fact that he was dependent on the Centre, Vajpayee and Advani. Things changed from 2004 after the defeat of

the NDA when Modi realized the time had come to begin planning the next move: a return to the Centre — this time at the helm of the party or the government. But even in 2004 Modi knew that this would be no easy process and definitely not quick. For his next move, Modi had to consolidate his hold on Gujarat beyond any doubt and this is what he concentrated on.

Modi had to contend with rivalry not just vis-à-vis the RSS but also with leaders of other affiliates and even within the BJP. In the immediate aftermath of the post-Godhra violence, Pravin Togadia of the VHP had earned notoriety by his highly provocative speeches. There was a time when it appeared that he would run away with the title of the *champion advocate* of Hindutva while Modi would remain the *administrative facilitator*. But Modi managed to retain his stranglehold on his support base by alluding to the foreign origins of Sonia Gandhi and Lyngdoh's religious identity with his infamous speech at Becharji. This ensured he remained the *dramatis personae* of the Hindutva brigade. The reasons for the distancing between the two that happened slowly over the years was due to the fact that in the Hindutva pantheon there was not enough space for both of them to co-exist because both had political ambitions and were youthful. Beyond a point, Modi couldn't allow Togadia to grow and the VHP leader would not have played second fiddle to Modi.

Kingshuk Nag wrote a revealing account on the relationship between the two in *The Times of India* in June 2005: 'In 2002...Togadia would be cagey when asked about his political ambitions. On much prompting, the VHP international secretary would give out a strictly off the record statement: "Narendrabhai is riding the horse, but the reins are in my hand." But these days, there is nothing private about Togadia's ambitions. "I was offered the chief ministership of Gujarat twice by the Sangh Parivar," he declares, revealing that plans are afoot to set up a political formation to take care of the interest of the Hindus. This because the BJP has become a "B-team of the Congress".'

Aditi Phadnis in her book, *Political Profiles: Of Cabals and Kings*,¹ offers another perspective: 'In Gujarat, historically, Hindu mass organisations have had a base that has deepened, especially after the decline of Ahmedabad's textile industry. Among them is the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh, the RSS and the VHP led by the Gujarati Praveen Togadia. Having been a Pracharak in the RSS, Modi is intimately acquainted with the politics, ambitions and goals of all the three. He also sees them as potential rivals. The greatest of them is Togadia, for his style of oratory matches Modi's. If Modi attacks Muslims and rabble-rouses Hindus, Togadia knows he can do it better. So the communally polarized Gujarat has a choice. That's where the

threat to Modi lies.’ This is also the dilemma Modi faces if he has to step outside Gujarat. The rest of India is not as communally polarized and his shrillness has to be tempered with reason. But if he adopts such a tactic, he may find the challengers snapping at his heels in Gujarat.

There were several similarities behind Modi’s clash with Sanjay Joshi who was moved out of Gujarat in 2001 after Modi became chief minister because he brooked no interference from an associate who had switched sides. When Modi was preoccupied with consolidating his hold in Gujarat after the 2002 election, Joshi made his presence felt as a utility man in the role of national General Secretary (Organization) in New Delhi. As a result, animosity between the two increased further. There are large sections in the Modi-Joshi conflict that stays within the realms of gossip and is best left to scurrilous sections of the media. But the dispute between the two resurfaced after Nitin Gadkari decided to resurrect Modi’s *bête noire* in August 2011. But Modi had his way and in May 2012 the Sangh Parivar leaders discreetly got Joshi to resign from the party post ensuring the attendance of Modi at the Mumbai National Executive meet of the BJP. Modi has in fact also had awkward relations with the other Pracharak in the BJP stable — Govindacharya who was the general secretary of the party till 2000. This trinity would have been a potent combine for the BJP but unfortunately ties soured and they fell out with each other.

I had asked Modi specifically about his differences with Togadia and Joshi but he refused to accept that there were any. ‘They are much junior and our work areas are different. Togadia works in the VHP and Joshi was not even from Gujarat — he is a man from the organization — came here when he was sent. There is no clash.’

Despite the stirring victory of the BJP in 2002, Modi faced dissidence. This was spearheaded by the Keshubhai-Suresh Mehta combine and they lobbied hard with central leaders of the party with more than token backing from the state RSS leaders including Prant Pracharak, Manmohan Vaidya. The campaign against Modi continued even though in 2004 Advani listed Modi among the next generation leaders who could become party president when Venkaiah Naidu resigned in October 2004. In July 2012, after quitting the BJP, Keshubhai claimed that in 2006 the party leadership including Advani and Venkaiah Naidu assured him of “removing Modi from power within two months”. He further contended that the promise had been made after he brought to their notice ‘many instances of corruption against Modi and his dictatorial style of functioning.’ However, despite a concerted campaign against Modi, party leaders decided against removing Modi. This was greatly due to the mood that emerged from a meeting in Jaipur that was

hosted by the then Rajasthan chief minister, Vasundhara Raje Scindia. The meeting was attended by senior RSS and BJP leaders including Advani and Modi. Though it was a closed-door meeting, details of what transpired can be put together now. Modi spoke at the meeting, naturally. But unlike his normal brash style, he turned hyper-emotional. He asked those attending the meeting if they could list even one issue on which he had deviated from the RSS agenda. Modi also displayed his anger and charged detractors of ‘making rounds of Keshav Kunj (the RSS headquarters in Delhi) feeding stories’ against him. He said he had no time to spread canards because he was implementing the Sangh Parivar’s mandate in Gujarat.

The meeting ended with Modi earning a respite but his detractors kept up the pressure. In 2007, several months before the assembly polls were eventually held in December, another serious “oust-Modi campaign” was mounted. This time the matter was taken up directly by the RSS leadership and they summoned an informal consultation with middle level functionaries connected with the media and some who the RSS considered broadly sympathetic. This, included several journalists and Members of Parliament — including Balbir Punj, Tarun Vijay and Chandan Mitra. The meeting was presided over by Mohan Bhagwat when he was not yet the top boss but functioned as Sarkaryavah. After hearing various opinions, the RSS decided that Modi needed to be supported, at least for the moment.

When Keshubhai mounted his campaign against Modi, efforts were also made in Gujarat by RSS well-wishers to end the bitterness. The lead in this effort was taken in 2005 by Dr R K Shah. The reputed obstetrician and gynaecologist of Ahmedabad is also the chairman of Sanskardham, the school set up in the memory of Modi’s mentor, Laxmanrao Inamdar. Shah led a small group of RSS members and sympathizers to Keshubhai with a request that he sit with Modi and resolve their differences. The group had gone to meet Keshubhai barely a few days after his birthday in July when Modi had gone to wish the former chief minister. But Shah says that Keshubhai did not respond positively to this that instead of ‘behaving like Bhishma Pitamah (the mythical non-partisan elder in the Mahabharata) he was acting like an involved party.’

Earlier, in the afterglow within the Sangh Parivar on the 2002 verdict it became evident that in this political grouping there were no soft-liners — all *accommodative postures* were for tactical reasons. Vajpayee’s assessment that Modi’s victory in Gujarat heralded the party’s *Vijay Parva* (Era of Triumph) was indicative that there was little to differentiate between the Gujarat chief minister and the rest. For Modi, pursuing a hardline in the course of the election campaign was a matter of political compulsion — just as it was for him to act in the manner he did in the aftermath of

the Godhra carnage. Similarly, others in the political clan had to act in accordance to the expectations of their primary political constituency.

The moot point after the 2002 verdict was how would the Muslims of Gujarat react to the result and to Modi? Praveen Swami, then working for *Frontline*, asked Modi this question in a course of a short interview. The reply was typical Modispeak: 'I have always spoken about the State's five crore people as one. This election result is a stinging answer to those who have sought to divide Gujarat's people along caste and religious lines. No matter who you work for, or what you believe in, you have no business to divide the people. *Bhagwan ke naam, Khuda ke naam* (in the name of God), stop doing this.'

In an interview with Modi, I asked him about the issue of reconciliation with Muslims. But he did not budge from his previously held positions: 'From the time I became chief minister in 2001 — you all would have heard me repeating one phrase all the time — and I have said this with complete conviction: I used to say earlier 5 crore Gujaratis; now I say — after the 2011 census — 6 crore Gujaratis. This has an answer for all your questions in this one sentence. I include everybody. No one can think otherwise. I even say that if one of your hands is perfect but the other one is weak (*durbal*) — then you cannot be considered healthy. There can be no discrimination. But this does not mean that there is any advantage in appeasement. The path of appeasement is damaging the nation and it has become a part of the politics of vote banks. I want to tell people to stop the policy of appeasement — put an end to the politics of vote banks. Gujarat has done this and demonstrated its possibility to the people of the country.'

In the decade after the post-Godhra violence, there have been five rounds of elections — three assembly and two parliamentary. In the three assembly elections the BJP secured two-thirds majority or was very close to it, but in the two parliamentary polls its performance did not match the assembly elections though the BJP vote share did not register a huge dip. In 2004, the BJP won 14 seats while in 2009, the party won 15 out of the 26. Two factors have been ranged against the BJP in the parliamentary polls — first, the Modi-led machinery was hampered by a dip in popularity of the BJP at a national level. The second factor stems from the fact that traditionally independent candidates get more votes during assembly elections than in parliamentary polls because state elections are guided more by local factors. The verdicts in 2004 and 2009 suggest that these votes shifted in greater numbers to the Congress than the BJP. This was because there were more Congress rebel candidates during assembly polls. The reason behind this is simple: the Congress in the state functions as a collective with a weak leadership whereas in the

BJP there is only one person who matters, he decides who is to contest and who is not be to given a party nomination. In 2012, both the BJP and Congress polled lesser vote and their vote shares dipped — the former's by slightly more than one point while the Congress lost slightly less than one point. This was due to the presence of Keshubhai Patel's Gujarat Parivartan Party in the fray. But it is premature to conclude that Gujarat's tryst with bipolar politics has ended.

In the five rounds of elections between 2002 and 2009, Modi undoubtedly gained by polarizing his constituents on religious lines. In the 2007 elections the biggest causative factor behind the buoying fortunes of Modi at a time when it appeared to be dipping, was Sonia Gandhi labelling Modi a *maut ka saudagar*. The issue snowballed into a major controversy and Modi was able to consolidate his supporters by use of familiar phrases — son of the soil, the fighter for *Gujarati Asmita* being *defiled* by a *foreigner*. I asked Arjun Modhwadia about this but even after five years he remained in a denial mode — not that he had the option of expressing a candid opinion if he wished to continue as state unit president of the Congress. He said: 'It is not true. One word cannot change the scenario of an election. Secondly, Mrs Gandhi did not name Modi. She just said that *maut ka saudagar* lives in Gandhinagar in a larger perspective. Yes, there was a controversy regarding that but it did not change the election scenario. At that time our organization was weak and the polarized sentiment of 2002 remained. We could not come up with a counter-campaign successfully against his propaganda.' As events showed in 2012, the Congress was still clueless on how to stop Modi's seemingly incessant reign. But more of this later.

Part of the reason behind Congress' failure to counter Modi in 2007 was because the BJP strongman secured a head start in the campaign and converted a handicap into advantage by sharpening the communal knife again. The backdrop was provided by the Gujarat government's admission in the Supreme Court that Kausar Bi, wife of Sohrabuddin Sheikh, was murdered a few days after he was killed in a fake encounter in November 2005. In July 2007 the Criminal Investigation Department under the state government, which was probing the fake encounter killing filed a charge sheet against thirteen police officials including IPS officers who had already been arrested but ruled out the role of politicians. Modi utilized the sharply divided public opinion on the incident to his advantage. Rana Ayub reported in *Tehelka* in July 2007: 'His first pitch would set the tone. "Sohrabuddin," Modi began, using the name as a sort of magic word. "What do you want me and my men to do with a man like Sohrabuddin?" he asked. The Ahmedabad crowd roared, "Kill him." Sohrabuddin. The name became a word and

stuck on, in a state polarised on religion. Sohrabuddin became Modi's trump card, a Muslim name.'

Though a critical appraisal of the man, Dionne Bunsha made a honest assessment in the *Frontline* after the verdict in December 2007: 'Modi is undoubtedly the most charismatic political leader in Gujarat today and he projects himself as a selfless and strong leader ready to take on any "threat to Gujarat" and whose only mission is "Gujarat's development"...He is unmatched when it comes to firing up a crowd by playing on Gujarati pride and a persecution complex...He is adept at turning every accusation against him into an "insult against five crore Gujaratis".'

However, beyond a point the politics of hate cannot be sustained. This was indicated even earlier in the CSDS post-poll survey in 2002. Yogendra Yadav wrote: 'Thankfully, there is little enthusiasm for any further intensification of the communal agenda. When asked to choose the priorities of the new government, voters opted for economic development as the top priority. There are of course the 22 per cent voters, more of them among BJP voters, who would like the new government to go after the terrorists. But they are outnumbered by those who would like the government to restore communal harmony and instil confidence among the minorities. Another 11 per cent would like the government to focus on improving the image of Gujarat both within and outside the country. The non-aggressive posture of Narendra Modi after his victory is perhaps the reaction of an astute politician who knows the ground he stands on.' It was probably this assessment that led Modi to embark on reinventing himself as Vikas Purush or Development Man who began singing the "vikas sutra".

Modi consciously worked towards an image makeover in the years following the 2002 assembly elections and more so after the 2007 verdict when the BJP won 117 seats with a vote share of more than forty-nine per cent. The BJP at the national level in the mid-1990s put its core issues like Ayodhya, demand for Uniform Civil Code and abrogation of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution on the back-burner, when donning new garbs. In contrast, Modi never for a moment discarded old issues that pitch-forked him from being a struggling chief minister to one of the most dominant political leaders of contemporary India. He cleverly mixed religion-based politics with an emphasis on economic development. Modi has been quite like a merchandiser who knows there are peak seasons and lean seasons — that different products move differently from the shelves during contrasting times. Sonia Gandhi was right in a way — he is an ace *saudagar* alright — who has the capacity to peddle *maut* or *vikas* (death or development), depending on what is appropriate for that moment.

THE ENEMY WITHIN

What isn't said is as important as what is said. In many classic short stories, the real action occurs in the silences.

– Colson Whitehead

From the label of “Master Divider” in *India Today* in January 2003 to the tag of “The Great Polariser” in the *Outlook* in July 2012 — Narendra Modi's image remained static: self-declared champion of one community of people. But the strain Gujarat faced in the course of his tenure has increased manifold. Wherever I travelled in Gujarat, there was a clear distinction between “us” and “them”. This difference was articulated by several Hindus every time the conversation veered in this direction. In contrast, counterparts among Muslims denied this. The disagreement with the hypothesis stemmed not from a belief and perception that they faced no discrimination but because of a “fear” that accepting such a viewpoint could be interpreted as levelling an allegation that they were being targeted — a risk no Muslim is willing to take after the post-Godhra violence.

The ever-widening gulf that exists amongst Hindus and Muslims at a social level was unmistakable in two places: first, in Bhuj, the headquarters of Kutch district and the epicentre of the 2001 earthquake that actually began the Modi-era in Gujarat's narrative. The second place where the tattered social fabric of Gujarat becomes evident is in an outgrown village nearly twenty-five kms away from the heart of Ahmedabad — the spiritual headquarters of a community of people who belong to the Pirana sect.

In Bhuj we are in the office of *Kutchmitra* — the largest selling Gujarati paper in the district. A reporter who requests anonymity, mentions that Muslims in cities and towns of Kutch no longer cook non-vegetarian food at home. Instead, they go to a few Muslim-run restaurants in colonies where only people from their community live. This was done because of social pressure from Hindus. Kutch

incidentally has the highest percentage of Muslims — twenty-one per cent — in the state. The reporter continued his narrative on changed social customs in Kutch in the past decade: whenever there is a marriage in a Muslim family and they wish to invite Hindu business associates (there are no friends across communities — *rishta sirf zaroorat ka hee hai* — the relationship is purely need-based) — they make a special announcement in the wedding card. There will be a *separate — and sanitised — dining hall for “Hindu guests”* at the wedding reception.

The gastronomical segregation that one came across in Kutch finds an echo in the *unique* iftar parties held in other parts of Gujarat during the Islamic month of Ramzan. Ajay Umat of the *The Times of India* reported on 12 August 2012 about a typical Gujarati way of hosting the ritualistic congregation when Muslims break the day-long fast ceremonially:

The blend between Jainism and Islam is not just limited to architecture in Gujarat, it manifests itself in the way of life here. When US consul general Peter D Haas hosted an iftar, the first ever outside Mumbai — to promote interfaith interactions, the menu provided some food for thought. The guests broke their fast with the traditional *sherbet-e-iftar* and dates, but the main course was not mutton *kababs* and chicken curry, it was potato and *paneer sabzi*. Despite being in Sadbhavana mode, the Narendra Modi government doesn't host iftars, but many former chief ministers like Madhavsinh Solanki, Amarsinh Chaudhary and Chimanbhai Patel — all non-BJP CMs — regularly played host during Ramzan. Each one of them kept in mind local sensitivities and stuck to a vegetarian course.... When BJP came to power in 1995, the then CM Keshubhai Patel was in two minds about hosting iftar lest he invite the ire of Sangh Parivar hardliners. But, former prime minister A B Vajpayee asserted that Keshubhai host iftar. He played host twice — but avoided non-vegetarian food. The Raj Bhavan, which has a tradition of hosting iftars, too sticks to a 100% veg menu.

Although it is not necessary for Muslims to break fasts only with non-vegetarian food, what this underscores is that personal beliefs, practices, customs and taboos have become part of the public spaces. The government under Modi does not host iftaar parties because they see it as a form of appeasement — though in August 2012 Modi did tweet a congratulatory message for Muslims on the occasion of Eid-ul-Fitr. However, the social consensus of disallowing Muslims to partake in their personal preferences in public spaces and gatherings further demonstrates that limits on display of their identity is imposed as a matter of regulation not exception. Not all of this is a post-Modi phenomenon. But the lines have become sharper and

suggest that existing fault lines were cleverly amplified from 2002.

The second place which testifies to the dramatic transformation of inter-community relationships in Gujarat in the aftermath of the post-Godhra violence is at the shrine in Pirana, on the outskirts of Ahmedabad, whose followers have ancestral roots in Kutch. This religious order was established almost five hundred years ago by Imam Shah, a *deviant* from Islam who has often been given the tag of a Sufi for want of another label. He set up the sect and initially drew followers from the community of Patels of Anjar Taluka in Kutch. The temporal head of Satyapanthis — as the followers were named — fused practices of Islam with Hindu traditions and evolved a code of his own. The Patels integrated with Muslim followers (Syeds) of Imam Shah who ran his religious order on democratic lines with a governing council taking all key decisions. The council consisted of ten people — seven Patels and three Syeds and the successors of Imam Shah (called Kaka) were selected by mutual consultation over the past five centuries.

Soon, the Satyapanthis — like several other communities emerged as a small little *third religious* group, distinct from Hindus and Muslims. The *outsider* status of Satyapanthis started coming under strain from the late 1980s due to several reasons: growing sentiment among Patel followers and the then Kaka to give a greater “Hindu-thrust” to the sect and convert each member into a “political Hindu” being the most significant one. Called a dargah till then, the shrine came to be frequently referred to as a temple — deifying Shri Nishkalanki Narayan Bhagwan. The tombs which lay scattered around the shrine were one-by-one adorned with Hindu motifs. Rituals inside the *sanctum sanctorum* — the tomb of Imam Shah — acquired Hindu characteristics. In 1997, when I visited the shrine as part of a study on inter-community relations in Kutch, I still found Syeds among the regular devotees.

This was not the case in 2012 and a lot other than this had also changed. To begin with, the main gate of the dargah had been shut — which was a typical medieval structure and had a distinct influence of Islamic architecture. The entry to the shrine was now through a huge ornate gate, typical of temples with ample resources. The gate led into the main building of what was initially an adjunct but has now become the principal shrine. Inside the old dargah, barring the graves everything has a “Hindu look”. In the past decade, the Satyapanthis witnessed their gods being taken away. The head of the governing council, the current Kaka got agitated with my probing questions — pertaining to the virtual disappearance of Syeds from the shrine and the reasons why the original main gate was closed. Syeds may have been virtually turned away from what used to be their shrine also till a decade ago, but their “presence” still causes *problems* — especially for Modi. In

September 2002, Modi launched a much-publicized officially-run campaign to promote social harmony. Called Sadbhavna Mission, the name was similar to programmes initiated by several Indian political leaders in the past with the intent of invoking secular-tokenism and have been accompanied by appropriate symbolism. But Modi did not make any gesture signalling public overtures to Muslims. The Sadbhavna Mission grabbed headlines after Modi's refusal to accept a skull cap associated with Muslims though he accepted the shawl. Media reports called the cleric a Sufi leader — Syed Imam Shahi Sayed. But, he is one of the *deposed* members of the governing council of Satyapanthis. Due to this deposition, Sayed now speaks more like a Muslim and less like a believer of a rebel-sect. He told journalists that 'Modi's refusal to accept the cap is not my insult but an insult to Islam.' The contention of Vijay Rupani, BJP spokesman was similar to what Modi told me in an interview: 'Narendra Modi has clearly said that his policy is not of appeasement of a section of society unlike other parties, but our approach is development for all and treating everyone as equal.'

In less than a decade and a half, Kutch has witnessed social stratification that will be difficult to undo. Similarly, the Pirana Dargah has lost its name, its spiritual pluralism and a large section of its followers who have tragically reverted back to the faith from where the founder branched out. Though the onset of these developments pre-dates the Modi era in Gujarat, it reached acute and probably irreversible levels of disconnect in his tenure coinciding with the period when the "us" and "they" have become more antagonistic. When I had begun working on this biography I was painfully aware that the nascent schisms which I had witnessed in Gujarat in 1997 would have been brutally prised wider. The crudeness with which the divisions in the state were amplified, I was sure, would yield multiple narratives. To ensure that I did not stray from the narrative I was in search of — my own "Modinama"— I consciously decided to restrict my visit to only Pirana Dargah (as I still insisted on calling the place) and Kutch instead of travelling to other places in Gujarat known for spiritual diversity which includes Hindu folk deities. I had a benchmark for both the places and in the summer of 2012, the change that was visible was distressing, to say the least. But casting emotion aside, I decided to understand the causes behind these changes.

But before going into the causes, it also needs to be underscored that it is not that the "last lap" was always run by the Modi regime. Many of the phenomena that highlights the social divide in Gujarat either began during Modi's tenure or assumed outrageous dimensions in the years after 2002. For instance, how does society respond to the simple call of emotion — when a young man and woman fall

in love, rebel against their families and decide to marry despite being born in different religious communities? In India, social hostility at inter-community marriages is nothing new and has spawned the jargon of “honour killings” in many places, especially Haryana. In Gujarat also, marriages are traditionally arranged by families within the same caste and inter-caste marriages have been discouraged and frowned upon by the Hindu community. But since caste barriers pose a natural hurdle in forging all-encompassing Hindu front, the Modi government encouraged inter-caste marriage by starting an Inter-caste Marriage Assistance Scheme in the memory of Savita Ambedkar (who was a Brahmin), the widow of Dr B R Ambedkar and under the scheme, inter-caste couples are given fifty thousand rupees as a financial grant to help them establish a household after marriage.

However, predictably no such effort has been initiated to encourage interreligious marriages. While it would be difficult to visualize any state government making this a policy initiative, the Sangh Parivar on the contrary has been particularly virulent in the propaganda that Muslim boys “lure” Hindu girls in a calculated manner. Babubhai Rajabhai Patel, better known to the world as Babu Bajrangi, the “killer of Naroda Patiya” who was handed out a death penalty for the mass murder in the Ahmedabad suburb, had fashioned a new role for himself in the years that he remained scot free after the largest massacre during the post-Godhra violence. His mission: to “rescue” Hindu girls from Muslim and Christian boys who married them and then forcibly “reconvert” them by making them undergo a “shuddhi” ceremony.

Bajrangi ran an NGO, Navchetan Sangathan, and in October 2006 claimed in a conversation with Prashant Jha of *Himal South Asian*, published by the not-for-profit The Southasia Trust, Lalitpur, Nepal, that in ‘every house today there is a bomb, and that bomb is the woman, who forms the basis of Hindu culture and tradition.’ His grouse? That ‘parents allow her to go to college, and they start having love affairs, often with Muslims. Women should just be kept at home to save them from the terrible fate of Hindu-Muslim marriages.’ Jha further wrote:

Bajrangi’s Navchetan works to prevent interreligious love marriages, and if such a wedding has already taken place, it works to break the union. When a marriage between a Hindu woman and Muslim man gets registered in a court, within a few days the marriage documents generally end up on Bajrangi’s desk, ferreted out by functionaries in the lower judiciary. The girl is subsequently kidnapped and sent back home; the boy is taught a lesson. “We beat him in a way that no Muslim will dare to look at Hindu women again. Only last week, we made a Muslim eat his own waste — thrice, in a spoon,” he reveals with

barely concealed pride. All this is illegal, Bajrangis concede, but it is moral. “And anyway, the government is ours”.

If reality was unpalatable for the likes of Bajrangis, so was fiction. Two feature films — both highly acclaimed — *Parzania* in 2007 and *Firaaq* in 2009 directed by Rahul Dholakia and Nandita Das — were de facto banned in Gujarat. There was no need to make the diktat *de jure* because the exhibitors of the films — the Multiplex Owners’ Association of Gujarat decided not to screen the two films either due to choice or due to coercion or even out of fear of attacks on the halls by the mobs led by Bajrangis and his ilk. Both films were based on the events of 2002 and had narratives that were at variance with what the Sangh Parivar believed to be the “right” one. A worse fate was in store for documentary filmmaker Rakesh Sharma’s *Final Solution*, the film that won kudos in several international film festivals. It was refused a censor certificate in India till a change of regime in 2004 and turned down at the Mumbai International Film Festival. Eventually, the film was shown to select groups in Gujarat, but remained in the realm of private activity and not public domain. The venomous criticism of the films and its directors typified the attack on civil society and non-political activists who chose to oppose events in Gujarat. In the scenario where there was little opposition from the entire political class, such discordant notes were particularly irksome for elements within the Sangh Parivar, more so to Modi and his immediate associates.

One of the most emotive reasons behind the pillorying of the “other” by Hindus in Gujarat has been the sustained campaign advocating that “they” are swamping “us” — it was also the underlying sentiment of Modi’s *Ame paanch, Amara pachhees* (we are five and we have twenty-five) speech — that echoed the old argument of rabid Hindu communalists that “Muslims breed more”. But this claim is not consistent with census data based on religion from the pre-independence period. Religious demography of Gujarat is also available in post-independent India through the various decadal census reports. According to this, the first census in 1951 pegged Gujarat’s Muslim population at 8.9 per cent. But in 1951, the state as we know was yet to be formed and a better representative figure would be 1961 which lowered the figure by half a point to 8.4 per cent. According to census data of 1971, 1981, 1991 and 2001 the percentage of Muslims in Gujarat remained more or less similar and touched 9.1 per cent in the latest headcount for which religion-wise data has been tabulated — an increase for sure but not dramatic or alarming by any yardsticks to merit propagation of myths regarding higher breeding rates among Muslims. The “breed more” theory also gets knocked off by data presented by the committee appointed by Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh, to study the “social,

economic and educational” status of Muslims in India. Called the Sachar Committee in popular parlance, it found that contraceptive prevalence rate among Muslim couples is almost equal to the overall state rate. Among Christians there has been an increase of only 0.2 percentage points between 1991 and 2001, but it could be argued that in absolute terms the number is fairly high because of small numbers of Christians in the state. From a total number of almost eighty thousand Christians in 1951 the numbers had increased to more than two lakh eighty-four thousand in 2001. In absolute numbers, the data has been used as a handy tool to spread the campaign of hate and distrust with an aim to heighten paranoia.

The propagandist approach with use of distorted demographic data has often been used as a justification for anti-conversion laws in different states. Gujarat too joined the list of such states in 2003 with the Gujarat Freedom of Religion Act. The most contentious part of the law was that permission has to be sought from the local administration by any person wishing to either convert personally to another faith or act as the “convertor” by virtue of being a priest, maulvi or pandit. After being notified in 2008, the law was challenged in the High Court in March 2009 but though a notice was sent to the state government, there has been little progress towards hearing the plea filed by Gujarat United Christian Forum for Human Rights and some other petitioners. The main basis on which the law has been challenged is that it violates Article 25 of the Indian Constitution which states that every citizen is ‘equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess, practise and propagate religion.’ The law virtually makes interreligious marriages effectively impossible unless it has the consent of both families. But if a couple risks bravery, then there are always some people who are forever ready with “corrective steps.”

Gujaratis account for almost five per cent of the Indian population which Modi now keeps reminding everyone, adds up to six crores. With a Muslim population close to nine per cent it almost seems that Modi has to contend with more than five million people, the majority of whom by and large feel alienated from his government. I asked Modi about this, arguing that whether we like it not, Muslims and the issue of their existence cannot be brushed aside. I contended that since there were a large numbers of Muslims in Gujarat it was necessary to include them in the state’s political evolution and growth. Or did he think they could be kept outside?

Modi of course said that he pursued an inclusive approach to politics but did not believe that there was need for any extra thrust for any group which according to him was “appeasement”. I asked him further if he felt that there was any need for him to invite people for dialogue if there was a sentiment of disgruntlement? His

reply can be interpreted in several ways and he said: 'I am always ready (for a dialogue). My doors were open... anyone can come, everyone is welcome, I am ready anytime, every time.'

But there are critics from within his fraternity who felt that Modi had not done enough to assuage the hurt of 2002. Govindacharya is one of them. I asked him about his assessment of the progression of social tension between 2002 and 2012. In reply, he said: 'The situation has not eased — instead is similar to a wound which is bandaged — no healing. On the contrary, I have noticed that whenever society cannot find any solution there is a danger of a section slipping into a phase of melancholy. This is the opposite of the violent phase. I very often find Gujarat to be going through this phase of melancholy.' I wanted him to be more specific, which section of the society did he mean? He was unambiguous: Muslims. 'This is the reason why they are not able to uplift themselves and are not able to contribute for the growth and development of Gujarat. Now I am not sure how this stagnancy will take a turn in the future — will it become a fodder or will it take a turn of assimilating tendency — there is a huge question mark on this. Unfortunately, I see no efforts being made to turn this into an assimilating tendency. All these Sadbhavna Yatras and other similar programmes are all varnishing efforts — they are not repair work.'

So what was his overall assessment of the role of the State under Modi? '*Satta, sampatti aur samman* (Power, prosperity and pride). A dialogue is needed in these three directions and the State must make efforts to address the problems. But, I think there is no attempt.'

One of the biggest debating points in regard to how the Muslims of Gujarat should view life in the Modi era was sparked off by the statement of Ghulam Ahmed Vastanvi, who was in the eye of a major storm in early 2011 after becoming Vice Chancellor of the Islamic Deoband seminary — Darul Uloom. He controversially said 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. Eventually he stepped down from the post but it brought into focus a significant fact: that all Muslims in Gujarat did not necessarily think the way their counterparts did in other parts of India.

The thrust of the argument was that Muslims should not seek redressal for past events. Instead they should make do with what was available and on offer for them. If political equality is not available, then the Muslims should learn to play second fiddle and maintain the supply lines for their hearths. The situation that led to the emergence of such blind and unfair acceptance disturbed most critics and even

neutral assessors of Modi. Surprisingly, it also disturbed several within the Sangh Parivar. A source said that after the initial retaliation there was a strong section which felt that it was time for *cooling-off but this did not happen and contributed to the emergence of home-grown terror*. I asked the source a specific question in regard to the controversy sparked off by the statement of Vastanvi and his assessment of the cleric's comments: 'It was a very apt suggestion — Vastanvi took a very bold and major step, risking his standing within the community. He should have been supported and praised — not just that — the statement should have been backed up by some effort from the administration. Just as this was an effort from his side, from the side of the Hindu religious leaders or from the Gujarat government's side — there should have been efforts to find out and remove the obstacles. On this, at a non-political level and at the level of non-partisan politics there should have been efforts — a social and socio-religious effort is needed but on this front there have been shortcomings. There was no follow up and the opportunity was lost.' This was the reason for Vastanvi eventually turning a critic of Modi in the run up the polls in 2012. However, the incident also brought to fore that even in a state like Gujarat where the threat perception among Muslims is higher since 2002 than other Indian states, Muslims are not a completely homogenous group. These distinctions were used by Modi to his advantage like in the July 2012 interview with Shahid Siddiqui, Chief Editor of *Nai Duniya* and an erstwhile Rajya Sabha member of the Samajwadi Party, where the basic *setting up* was done by Zafar Sareshwala, an Ahmedabad-based businessman close to Modi who was once his bitter critic. The interview was billed as an attempt on Modi's part to reach out to the Muslim community. He did this, but not with an olive branch — instead Modi had a stern tone: 'Hang me if I am guilty' (*Main gunehgaar hoon toh mujhe phaansi par latkaa do*). In further grandstanding Modi told Siddiqui: 'In 2004, I had given an interview in which I had said why should I apologize? If my government had done this, I should be hanged in public in such a way that for the next 100 years nobody dares to do it (such a crime).' Though Modi did not express remorse for the 2002 riots, he nonetheless was reaching out to sections of Muslims, a fact that demonstrated his necessity both in the short run and in the long term. Even after a decade, Modi has not changed. In 2003, during his visit to the United Kingdom, Modi had met a key London clergy — Maulana Essa Mansoori, along with Sareshwala. The two wanted Modi to express regret; he only said both communities had suffered.

An article by Brijesh Pandey in the *Tehelka* magazine in August 2012 however highlights that even Modi wanted support from "willing" Muslims and Sareshwala

has been one of them: 'Doing television debates on issues such as the denial of a US visa to Modi, to how Muslims should get over the 2002 riots, to backing Ghulam Vastanvi, a Bohra Muslim who was forced to quit as the Vice Chancellor of the Darul Uloom in Deoband because of his pro-Modi utterances, Zafar was a familiar face on TV, telling the world how things have changed for the better for Muslims in Gujarat.' On the eve of the polls in 2012, Modi enlisted journalist Ayesha Khan into the small group of Muslims extending support to him. From the above accounts it becomes clear that Modi is attempting to engage with the Muslims but neither does he adopt a participatory route to go to them directly for addressing their concerns nor does he work with or through, *client politicians* who Congress and other mainstream political parties — including the BJP — have traditionally used as conduits to reach out to the community. Instead, Modi is using an untried route of using representative Muslims who are not either interested in furthering their businesses or keen to lend a political edge to their personas. In return for this, Modi hopes that this section among the Muslims would be able to provide him with the platform to neutralize the negatives of 2002. These new public faces among the Muslims would then emerge over time as nominees of Modi in elections and form part of his government. Despite expectations, Modi eventually decided against such tokenism in the 2012 elections. No Muslim candidates were put up by the BJP owing to Modi's fear that it would anger his core supporters among Hindus. But if and when Muslims are fielded as candidates and given representation in government, they would have truly "moved-on". Modi in fact, had little qualms about facing an interview with a Muslim who has dwelled in the nether-regions of journalism and politics. But, Modi has not exhibited any desire for public demonstration of affection and acceptance by gestures like accepting a skull cap by a lowly placed cleric. His fear was that the moment he partook in such tokenism, the media would label him "Mian Modi" and this may not be acceptable to his primary electoral constituency.

But barring personal initiatives like the rare interview or encouragement to the likes of Sarehwala, as the head of the administrative establishment in Gujarat, Modi has never wanted to use any of the opportunities for public dialogue that came his way by way of Vastanvi's statement. In a way Modi remained trapped between what "can be done" and "what should be done". The latter is a dictum that should ideally be followed by any ruler or administrator who owes it to his office that there shall be no discrimination among subjects. In Modi's case, the components of the "what should be done" frame is also determined by the necessities for the road beyond Gujarat. Muslims and their social allies play a far

more significant role in several other parts of India as compared to Gujarat and it is imperative for Modi to at least neutralize their anger towards him. In the course of a conversation with me, the noted filmmaker, Mahesh Bhatt who took a firm position against the post-Godhra riots said that Modi would not be able to establish his credentials as a leader who is fair to all communities unless ‘He is able to convey the sentiment that he is willing to die for Muslims like Mahatma Gandhi did by stopping a bullet.’

Mahesh Bhatt in fact became relevant for my narrative on Modi because in the course of one of his interviews with me, Modi mentioned Bhatt’s name as an endorsement for his policies towards Muslims. The sequence of events is as follows: I had been questioning Modi on whether he felt he should reach out to the Muslims more demonstratively than what he had done thus far and if his government had been equal in its treatment of Muslims when a need arose. He replied: ‘Mahesh Bhatt had called me one day in 2004. There had been floods in Gujarat and he had come for that. He said he had called to congratulate me. He said that the people he had come to help — to provide them assistance, said that they had already got relief from Modiji. He said he came to Gujarat thinking that minorities would not have got any relief but said that he found the situation completely different. He (Bhatt) then said I must meet these people. I must have a dialogue with them. I told him that my doors were open — anyone can come, everyone is welcome, I am ready anytime, every time.’

It would not have been prudent for me to reproduce Modi’s claim without speaking to Bhatt. It became clear that Modi had mixed two separate incidents but Bhatt did not hold this against Modi saying such mistakes are inadvertent and routine. But what actually happened is revealing. In 2004, Bhatt says he participated in a public meeting of the Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind in Surat and was critical of Modi in his speech. A few days later Bhatt got a call from Modi’s office and soon Modi himself was on the line. ‘He said that he had heard I was very angry but said that his doors were open and invited me to bring any number of Muslims — five, fifty, 500, 5000. Modi said bring them to me and I will listen to their problems and solve them. I will personally intervene if I find their problems genuine,’ Bhatt told me while recapitulating the conversation with Modi. Bhatt informed Mehmood Madani of the Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind about Modi’s offer for a dialogue who said he would discuss it with his core committee members. Eventually the dialogue did not take place because as Madani told Bhatt, the core committee felt Modi was not serious and would turn the event into a public relations exercise to his benefit.

Modi mixed up this episode in his interaction with Bhatt with another one that came to him indirectly. A year later, Bhatt travelled with members of a Mumbai-based philanthropic organization for relief programmes after flash floods caused devastation in some parts of central Gujarat. Bhatt was surprised and appreciative of the state government's intervention for ensuring that relief reached the affected people without any bias towards their religious identity. He made a mention of this to a journalist known for his proximity to Modi and requested that a word of gratitude may be passed on to him for ensuring timely intervention. This however was presented to me by Modi virtually as a *certificate* of good behaviour from Bhatt. This surely was not the case.

When I spoke with Mahesh Bhatt he said that the three issues cannot be interlinked: the episode beginning with the Surat meeting and culminating in Madani's refusal to lead a Muslim delegation to Modi's doorstep. The second episode was Bhatt's "thank you" message to Modi and finally the views of the filmmaker on the post-Godhra violence, the role of the State and the refusal of Modi to be more accommodative towards Muslims. Towards the end of an engaging and emotionally charged exchange, Bhatt said, 'Modi must remember that he may expect a lot from others but can never *will* amnesia on the nation.'

I also asked Mahesh Bhatt what would have been his decision, if he had been in place of Madani. Before we talked further on this question, we also got talking about Bhatt's role in the Shahid Siddiqui interview with Modi in July 2012 that resulted in a temporary halt to Siddiqui's political career and as Bhatt said 'loss of professional credibility' for Siddiqui. Eventually we returned to the root question — should a representative Muslim delegation have gone to meet Modi after he extended an invite via Bhatt?

'I felt at that time that had it been my decision, I would have gone because it is only by keeping alive the tradition of dialogue and discussions can one resolve issues. But in hindsight, especially after the Shahid Siddiqui incident, I do not think it would have served any purpose — Modi would have converted the event into a PR exercise. If Modi actually wants to be the leader, he has to work towards removing the biases in the hearts of people towards others — the enemy is within and Modi has to remove that. Till he shows willingness to do so, there is no meaning of a dialogue.'

But can Modi show the willingness that Mahesh Bhatt wants him to exhibit? Can he do so while being wedded to the idea and ideals that the Sangh Parivar has believed in and propagates? The post-Godhra violence was in fact the extreme manifestation of a world view that is diametrically opposed to the political values

that emerged after independence and are loosely termed as Nehruvian ideals. From the time of the Ram Janmabhoomi agitation this political system has been sought to be turned upside down. While few would contest the validity of such attempts within the democratic framework, the two major episodes that led to a spurt in the idea's popularity and social acceptance were inherently anti-democratic. The demolition of the Babri Masjid and the violence from the morning of 28 February 2002 came at the end of a chain of events that have been recounted elsewhere in the book. In each of these, Modi played a significant role though his role was pivotal in 2002 while in the course of the Ayodhya agitation he was one of the secondary actors. Given the fact that what Mahesh Bhatt wishes Modi to demonstrate, is in complete contradiction to the political viewpoint and beliefs of Modi, it is difficult to envisage him actually reaching out to Muslims for reconciliation. But what are the core issues on which Modi bases his political orientation on the issue of status and rights of Muslims in Gujarat?

In all fairness to Modi, I decided to frame my question theoretically: 'It is often said that after the national movement that gave rise to the ideology of nationalism, the idea of Hindutva has been the only new ideology that has emerged in India. How do you define Hindutva?'

'In our country there are so many definitions of secularism and everyone has defined it differently. The meaning in the dictionary is one, the historical spirit is different, and today because of the kind of politics that is prevalent and practised, it is different. The politics of vote banks has taken the space of secularism. This is most unfortunate. Actually our society has believed in *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* (the whole world is but one family) from the time when there was no religion in the world. This is also the case with Hindutva — if you take the agenda of any country, any government in the world — the economic and political agenda and compare with what our society has believed in from the Vedic periods *Sarvepi sukhinah santu*, *Sarve santu niramayah*, *Sarve bhadrani pashyantu*, *Ma kaschit dukhamapnuyat* (May all be happy, May all be free from disease, May boons be showered on all, Let none meet miseries.) Forget the literal meaning — in essence it means well-being of all without any distinctions of sect, or of one geographical area. Now this is the philosophy some people term as Hindutva. This is what was spelt out by a lot of people, be it Swami Vivekananda, Dr S Radhakrishnan, or Dr Rajendra Prasad. And this is my understanding also.'

On one level, this postulation of Modi cannot be faulted. But the issue that becomes controversial is whether "everybody" or "all" who have an entitlement also means that those who are *dissimilar* from the majority have to shed their

distinctiveness to become part of the larger whole in order to come within the ambit of the universal sway of the defined principle. Modi's definition of Hindutva is contested from not just outside the Sangh Parivar but even by an *insider* theoretician like Govindacharya who contends that Gujarat has not been the ideal model of Hindutva which '...advocates eco-friendly techno-economic order because Hindutva claims that man is not conqueror of nature but part of nature. All the flora and fauna that exists by way of birth have equal rights. But what has happened — say for instance man-cattle ratio has kept on dwindling in Gujarat. *Zameen, jan, jungle aur janwar* (Land, people, forests and animals) — take in the context of all the four — Gujarat has not displayed any signs of behaving differently — so how can it be called a laboratory of Hindutva? In Gujarat fertility of soil has gone down and consumption of fertiliser has gone up, water table has dropped, natural flow, mental flow all were hindered, forest cover has gone down, the respect to womanhood has been destroyed by consumerism, urbanisation has resulted in slumization — in places like Surat specially.'

Ironically, it is in Surat, called the Diamond City, where I comprehend what makes Modi tick in Gujarat even when there is no mayhem on the streets. In the summer of 2012, the city was gearing up for the chief minister's visit and it is during the course of some public functions that I witnessed at close quarters Modi's strategy of securing the endorsement of the masses. Even in these *peacetime* public meetings, the embers are kept smouldering.

As I drive into the modern and ever burgeoning Surat, I am conscious that the city has had its political heroes — and been loyal to them. India's former Prime Minister, Morarji Desai was elected from this parliamentary constituency five times in 1957, 1962, 1967, 1971 and 1977. Kashiram Rana, the former Textiles minister in the National Democratic Alliance government headed by Atal Bihari Vajpayee, represented the constituency on six occasions. In 2004, Rana fell out with Modi and was denied the nomination which was then handed over to a new candidate — Darshana Jardosh — whose candidature was endorsed by long time Modi-aide, Anandiben Patel. This led to Rana's eventual ouster from the party and though he had joined Keshubhai and his associates, he could make little political impact and at the time of his passing in August 2012, had almost become inconsequential underlining that even one-time political stalwarts had to pay a price after falling out with Modi.

Modi's visit was actually of the whistle-stop variety and the three-pronged trip began in the afternoon. The first programme was the Annual General Meeting and Installation Ceremony of newly appointed president of Southern Gujarat Chamber

of Commerce and Industry (SGCCI). The second function was the inauguration of a new bridge over the Tapi river which was part of the series of development work worth 264 crores unveiled by Modi. The grand finale of the day's programme was at a sprawling ground on the outskirts of the city to mark the birth anniversary celebrations of Maharana Pratap — the chieftain of the Rajput confederacy whose battles with the Mughal empire under Akbar has frequently been portrayed in popular Hindutva culture as an instance of the historical struggle between Hindus and *invading* Muslims.

Even at the SGCCI function staying away from politics was difficult for Modi. He reiterated a point that he had begun making from early 2012 — that the Centre was putting a cap on export of cotton but had been encouraging a “pink revolution” by promoting export of mutton by huge subsidies. Modi contended that the subsidy for mutton export is even bigger than 2,242 crores — the financial outlay for National Dairy Plan. The speech at Surat coincided with new data from the US Department of Agriculture's Foreign Agricultural Service that showed India was poised to emerge as the world's largest beef exporter in 2012. This was where Modi began obscuring lines. Pink is euphemism for blood and mutton is used to imply all non-vegetarian food items. Without using the word Hindutva, Modi argued that duty is imposed on export of cotton but not on mutton, an indication of the Centre's orientation towards those engaged in the trade of *flesh* (*maans*). He used words carefully ensuring that he does not get accused of inflaming passions but prompted listeners to wonder on the religious identity of those engaged in beef export. Modi perhaps conveniently skipped to mention a simple fact in his speech: that India's prowess in beef export is purely technical — the USDA does not make the distinction between the cow and the water buffalo, the meat of which is also called “beef”. Throughout 2012, “pink revolution” was a recurring theme in various speeches of Modi and was aimed at generating revulsion towards those who were engaged in the trade of meat export.

But the convention centre in Surat where Modi delivered the speech had constraints — both because it was an enclosed venue and also because of the class background of his audience before whom demonstrating the virtuosity of his vocal chords would have seemed incongruous. But Modi soon got that opportunity when he took to the stage shortly before sundown at a gathering organized by a body called Samast Rajasthan-Haryana Samaj to celebrate the birth anniversary of Maharana Pratap. There however was a catch: the meeting was organized on a date which was not the actual birth anniversary of the Rajput king — neither by the Gregorian calendar nor by the Hindu calendar. It wasn't even a watershed birth

anniversary year (500, 550 or a similar multiple). Instead 2012 was his 472nd birth anniversary year giving rise to a suspicion that the programme was finalized with the sole intention of providing Modi with a public platform.

Modi made the best use of this chance and his speech revealed how he deftly delineates his ideology from that of his political detractors. He began by arguing how “secular” India and Indians — especially after independence — failed to adequately honour national heroes like Maharana Pratap and Shivaji and proceeded to highlight how they had been “virtually defanged” in history books and official documents. Modi’s attribution was clear — this was done by successive governments who didn’t “care about Indian culture, Indian history and Indian heroes.” Successive governments at the Centre, according to Modi in the speech, divided the tradition of the people. He added that those who prevent heroic characters of medieval India (read Hindu rulers) from getting their due were trying to divide the nation, and empowering those who wanted to subjugate the majority. Immediately thereafter, Modi concluded that this only showed that the ‘1200-year-long struggle for freedom has to continue.’ It became more than clear that this was indeed Modi’s home territory because of the felicity with which he dovetailed contemporary politics with his understanding and presentation of history. The 1200-year-long struggle for freedom that Modi mentioned was obviously an attribution to the advent of Islam in India and the decline of the Chauhans in Delhi. Thereafter Modi kept on underlining how for the past 1200 years, India had been governed — and is still — by a Delhi Sultanate — using the latter word very suggestively. The nation, he thundered, had to be ‘rid of the rulers’ who have controlled India ‘directly or indirectly’ for the past 1200 years and this includes the major part of the sixty-five years since independence. The battle has to be waged at all levels — even at the level of ‘primary education where the Hindi alphabet that is equivalent to the English “T” must mean *talwar* (sword) and not *tapeli* (vessel).’

Modi was fully aware that he was addressing a community which had an electoral presence outside of Gujarat. At the gathering, he also tried to emotionally bond with the people and cleverly mentioned how the people of Gujarat have very significant historical linkages with Rajasthan and parts of Haryana. ‘Chetak,’ he claimed — referring to the legendary horse of Maharana Pratap — had his ancestry in the land of which he was chief minister. ‘Chetak’s mother was Gujarati,’ Modi said to a thunderous applause. To me it seemed as if the season of election was already in bloom in Surat although there was still time before the state would go to polls.

Modi’s targets were well identified. The so-called secularists, ‘one particular

family which thinks power is theirs by birthright' and those who work towards strengthening the Delhi Sultanate. He reverted to the theme of the day's meeting — Maharana Pratap — and claimed that the king had fought for a ban on cow slaughter an 'issue that we are still fighting for in this country where the brave people gave their lives to protect the honour and pride of the country, its people, its women and their cattle.' Wily that Modi is, he steered clear from any direct mention of his political adversaries and drew obvious analogies, while presenting a golden period in history and reiterated his commitment to take India back to its "old glory". The ground in Surat that summer evening reverberated with applause at each of Modi's assertions. As I left the city well after dark to return to Ahmedabad, I knew that Surat had rediscovered a political hero.

For the bulk of the twentieth century the social fabric of Gujarat has resembled a tattered mat. Every major social upheaval with a violent episode as the main element to *draw* the media, resulted in a heated debate on the spontaneous nature of violence versus pre-planned theories and theorists. This issue was also raised after the demolition of Babri Masjid — was it a boisterous crowd gone berserk or a well-coordinated plan. Whenever the debate surfaces, I am reminded of a turn of phrase I used in the aftermath of the events of 6 December 1992. Written in the context of L K Advani's admission that the day had been the saddest day of his life, I had argued that it might be easy for humans to tame and ride a tiger at will, but it is very difficult to dismount at will — especially after it gathers speed.

In the context of the post-Godhra riots, amongst large sections of Hindus in Gujarat, a feeling of intense hatred and dislike of Muslims exists and this sentiment is always on the edge to turn one human tragedy into a full-blown pogrom as was evidenced during the Godhra carnage. The *enemy* in Gujarat is clearly identified as not just a faceless *other* — but has been given a definite identity— religious minorities. Modi in 2001 inherited this tattered society. Vajpayee had said that he was confident that Modi would be a practitioner of "good" statecraft and follow Raj dharma. But the policies pursued by the state government in the decade since the post-Godhra violence, further polarized Gujarat. As several elections demonstrated, such tactics yielded comfortable electoral victories. The moot point is whether Gujarat and Modi have struck final postures or is there a possible reversal of this trend in the future?

The politics of hate and animosity with an accompanying undemocratic tone has also affected people outside Gujarat. While it is difficult to quantify, as yet, the extent of support beyond the state for the Modi-approach to management of social relations, the impact in the virtual world has been obvious for several years. The

RSS developed expertise in non-mainstream forms of information dissemination much before other political formations. It was famed for its whisper campaigns which mostly originated from the daily shakha from the 1950s after it regrouped and revived activity following the post-Gandhi assassination ban being lifted. Modi had been part of the information network during Emergency, ferrying information from one underground group to another.

In the days when the print media was the primary vehicle of information, non-journalist writers who articulated the RSS viewpoint, kept up a regular flow of “Letters to the Editor”. But in the pre-Godhra era, there was an element of restraint because the demolition of the Babri Masjid though a “victory” also caused a setback to the movement. The Gujarat pogrom and Modi’s cock-a-snook style was a decisive “taught them a lesson” moment. By then internet had also become more potent and became a much wider medium. In the decade that followed, in the words of Ramachandra Guha in his book, *Patriots and Partisans*,¹ there emerged a ‘certain kind of Indian who gets up before dawn, has a glass of cow’s milk, prays to the sun god, and begins scanning cyberspace for that day’s secular heresies.’ In the issue of *Outlook*, dated 19 November 2012 — the same issue which carried excerpts from Guha’s latest book, Debarshi Dasgupta mentioned that such people are now routinely called Internet Hindus, IHs. He wrote: “The term IHs goes back to a January 2010 tweet by CNN-IBN deputy editor Sagarika Ghose who had described them as “swarms of bees.... They come swarming after you at any mention of Modi, Muslims or Pakistan!”

These IHs fight the same battles in cyberspace that Modi supporters and other hard-nosed sympathizers of the Sangh Parivar do on the streets of the cities, towns and villages they live in. They write hate mails, threaten people, display their misogyny and consider a job well done by filling up response columns on websites and cramming the social media. Guha has quoted and analyzed at length from these abusive mails or responses to his articles.

There are very few who have regularly written on matters related to the politics of Sangh Parivar, Gujarat or Modi and have not been on the receiving end. I too was “blessed” by one such IH who was incensed by a short profile of Modi I wrote for the Special 17th Anniversary Issue of *Outlook*. A certain Gautam Bhattacharya wrote in the middle of his diatribe: ‘I am utterly serious in calling for the organizing of a counter cabal of concerned citizens who will identify and hunt down and physically exterminate these sources of evil, as exemplified by Mukhopadhyay and the many voices raised in *Outlook*. No longer must an omnibus tolerance be

extended by Indians. Too long have we accepted meekly vileness thrown against our religion and our values, for the space of 1000 years.'

The politics and policies since 2002 which has spawned such viciousness has portents for the future. A senior leader of the RSS who has been quoted previously in this book and requested anonymity, is somewhat "disturbed" by the chain of events in Gujarat because he feels that it would eventually lead to the RSS getting a "bad name" (like it did post the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi) despite not endorsing the continued politics of hostility in the state. I asked how he foresaw Gujarat through a periscope. What he said was worrisome: 'I think there can be tension among communities and because of that there can be a spurt in violence — it can be both by default or design like an *explosion* as it happened in 2002. It is possible that people might be angry in different places. But I also believe that the State has a basic duty — to act in a non-partisan and non-sectarian manner as it has to provide law and order, safety and security to the helpless people to whichever community they might belong to. This is particularly true after the counter provocation like the Godhra incident stopped. Muslims now are too weak to do anything so why continue with this. This is not happening and the politics of animosity is being strengthened...it's unfortunate.'

From the time the idea of Hindutva was *re-introduced* in Indian political and social thought through the course of the Ayodhya agitation, the votaries of the idea have operated with their back-foot firmly in the crease. It has always been argued that "Hindu India" is under siege. Kandala Singh has an interesting argument in her Masters dissertation — "Islamophobia in India: A case study of Gujarat 2002": 'This *other* poses a threat to the self, and needs to be controlled by violence. Thus, violence against an enemy *other* forms a basis for such discourse. Further, such violence is framed as vengeance and retaliation, which displaces blame away from the perpetrators of the violence. Often, this blame is transferred to the targets of such violence. For these reasons, I would argue that it is justified to label the Hindutva discourse Islamophobic.'

Fear of Islam and a phobia of its practitioners is hardly a sentiment that can lead to the reconstruction of the Gujarati psyche. The secondary position of Muslims in Gujarat stems from the campaign that there is a need to restore to Hindu past glory that was taken away by Muslim invaders and their supporters. It is argued that the threat of a *takeover* remains and it has to be ensured that after having *woken up* once, Hindus cannot lower their guards and allow the old status quo to stage a comeback. Muslims can continue to live but on the terms and conditions set by the majority. The argument for "moving on" may apply, although unjustifiably, in the

immediate context of making a living but has little effect on the long-term goal of resolving social conflict. Till that happens Gujarat will continue to live on the edge of a precipice where life is “normal” for long durations but once it gets triggered and goes beyond the edge there is no way but to witness another freefall.

DEVELOPMENT SUTRA

Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass.

– Anton Chekhov

In the Monsoon Session of Parliament in July 2002, Union Home Minister and President of the BJP, L K Advani, who had also been recently elevated as Deputy Prime Minister rose up in defence of Narendra Modi during a discussion on tardy relief measures in riot-torn Gujarat. He said: 'Let him go to the people...The Chief Minister does not need your certificate. The Chief Minister needs a certificate of the people of Gujarat which he is going to get.' This was in defence of a man who wanted immediate elections in Gujarat even as several others and most importantly the Election Commission, thought the idea to be preposterous. The elections eventually were held and as expected, Modi secured a massive mandate from the electorate in December 2002.

But on 16 December, the morning after the verdict, in his hours of lonesome solitude — well before the crack of dawn when the din of the previous night's victory celebrations had died down, Modi wondered what to do with the massive endorsement. Modi had won the virtual referendum on the post-Godhra violence by clever conversion of spontaneous violence into channelized politics of hate. But while an electoral campaign could be run by fuelling distrust towards a community of people, hate could not be the basis of governance. Before anybody else in Gujarat ever conceived the phrase, Modi had to truly begin devising a strategy to “move on”. The Hindu Hriday Samrat (he who ruled over the hearts of Hindus) had to make way for someone else. But who could that be?

That the thought for an image makeover would have crossed Modi's mind can be concluded with a fair amount of certainty because he was never short of the ability to read the writing on the wall. This realization was also buttressed by the post-poll

survey of Centre for Studies in Developing Societies which said that the majority of voters in Gujarat — including those who voted for BJP — wanted to focus on economic development and growth. There remained twenty-two per cent voters who still wanted the government to continue hot pursuit of terrorists (an obvious misnomer for anyone *looking* suspicious) but they were outnumbered by people who wanted the ‘government to restore communal harmony and instil confidence among the minorities.’ Another eleven per cent of respondents wanted the ‘government to focus on improving the image of Gujarat both within and outside the country.’

Less than a month after leading his party to the massive victory, Modi shed his saffron attire in favour of a dapper look. During the election campaign, Modi, ad nauseam used the number — five crores to mean the total population of Gujarat. In his new avatar he converted this figure into hundreds of thousands of crores. Instead of people, the numbers now denoted the Indian currency. The exclusivist posture of the campaign was replaced by an entreating approach and his arms at a Mumbai meet in January 2003 and another one in Delhi were wide open ready for an embrace. This Mumbai meeting was hosted by the Confederation of Indian Industries or CII and the captains of industry and trade queued up to heap lavish praise on Modi.

He was termed a “visionary chief minister” by the majority of speakers who turned up. Seeing the mood among the assembled lot, the Chairperson of Thermax Ltd, Anu Aga, and the then CEO of HDFC Bank, Deepak Parekh — who had reservations for the way in which Modi was feted — chose to remain silent while Nimesh Kampani, chief of J M Morgan Stanley, P P Vora of IDBI and Wockhardt CEO, Habil Khorakiwala cozied up to Modi and made a point to mention their *Gujju roots*. Slowly his confidence grew and Modi was back to use of trademark one-liners, albeit with a different orientation: ‘The government has no business to be in business,’ and ‘I will turn red-tapism to red carpet,’ Modi said signalling a marked thrust to free-market economy at a time when many feared that his RSS roots and his old association with the stalwarts of the Swadeshi Jagran Manch would reflect on the state government’s economic policy.

At this meeting, there was only one voice of dissent, but it was not from the world of industry. Jairus Banaji, who created a furore at the meeting was a scholar at Oxford and a well known figure in the *non-establishment* Left, having been a Trotskyist guru in the 1970s in New Delhi’s Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), among his many avatars. He was evicted from the meeting after he was audacious enough to stand up and look Modi in the eye and say that he was “tainted” because

he had the blood of thousands on his hands. But besides yielding a headline and some *juice* in the body copy of the reports of that meeting, no collateral damage was done to Modi and he returned with the assurance from several participants that they would support his ventures: meaning they were willing to pump in money provided security was assured.

But Banaji's vent was indicative of the wave of revulsion at the post-Godhra violence that swept the intelligentsia and did not leave representatives of the corporate world untouched. At another CII meeting in Delhi, industrialists, Jamshyd Godrej and Rahul Bajaj, were among the lead players to make, what *The Hindu* reported on 7 February 2003: "indirect references" about the post-Godhra violence. 'Without directly mentioning Godhra and the subsequent communal riots, both voiced concerns about the security and law and order situation in the *State of Mahatma Gandhi*.' The fact that even former CII Director General, Tarun Das was present on the stage meant that the body had officially endorsed such criticism of Modi.

Being pilloried by the representative industry body was not a new experience for Modi. In April 2002, CII chose Sonia Gandhi to inaugurate its annual summit in Delhi and got Prime Minister Vajpayee to address the concluding session. The themes of the session were indicative of how a large number of industrialists and corporate honchos perceived the political backdrop: "Numbed Sensitivities: How Do We Dream Again?"; "The Uniqueness of the Ba'hai: A Quiet Religion"; "Social and Ethical Breakdown in India: What Shall We, The People, Do?"; and "Gujarat: Act of Faith or Breach of Faith?" The undertone in all sessions was the post-Godhra violence and the most reviled character was Modi. Vajpayee picked up cudgels on behalf of the beleaguered chief minister: 'The climate of debate in our country in recent months has become so highly vitiated — by half truths, exaggerations and polemical assertions — that even the CII platform was not spared....Let no one use this tragedy (Gujarat riots) to make such sweeping generalisations about the happenings in India.'

All eyes were on the session on Gujarat where Anu Aga narrated what she claimed to have seen during her visit to Gujarat and then came with the most damning comment: 'As business people, we tend to focus and limit our attention only to the business and economic loss. We as industrialists have chosen to define that the business of business is business. We have narrowed our responsibility to maximising shareholders' value. Business today represents the most powerful force...it can be the most potent agent of social change provided we choose to define the business of business as human well-being...I urge each of you to shed your fears,

your indifference, and with concern stand up for the fundamental values of our country.'

About the same time, Deepak Parekh, Narayana Murthy of Infosys, Azim Premji of Wipro and Airfreight's Cyrus Guzder also joined the long list of Modi-critics. There however was one fundamental difference between the time when Anu Agha made her critical remarks and when Jamshyd Godrej and Rahul Bajaj voiced their disquiet on events in Gujarat: Modi had a massive mandate endorsing whatever steps he had taken. He now wished to make use of this to subdue the corporate leaders and their representatives into submission.

After a lengthy defence, Modi left an angry man but soon got associates within the industry to begin a counter campaign. The Resurgent Group of Gujarat (RGG) was launched and took up cudgels on behalf of the Gujarat chief minister. They suggested to CII that unless the trade body made "suitable amends", battle lines on the lines of Gujarat versus CII could be drawn up. The key members of RGG included Gautam Adani of Adani Group, Indravadan Modi of Cadila Pharmaceuticals, Karsan Patel of Nirma Group, and Anil Bakeri of Bakeri Engineers along with the top honchos of Ashima and Torrent and a few others. The RGG was in fact, a continuation of Modi's strategy, first unveiled in October 2002 after it became evident that the pogrom of 2002 had been catastrophic not just for Gujarati Muslims but also for the global draw of industry in the state. To overcome this, the Group of American Businesses in Gujarat comprising mainly NRIs was formed and Modi got Suresh Mehta to address the inaugural meet which strategized on "rebranding" Gujarat. Mehta indicated what was really worrying the Modi regime: 'Some doubts have been created in foreign countries and the state government promised a facilitating environment to the large non-resident Gujarati community for investment. In return, the industrialists also promised to assist in creating "brand awareness about Gujarat in US".' The first goal of Modi was clearly to regain lost international respect — his belief was that once investment flowed back again from across the shores, Indian investors would follow suit.

Modi however also knew the limits of an NRI-dependent growth strategy — that it may improve his image abroad but it would not fetch him votes in India. As a result, he bolstered his supporters among Gujarati industrialists. On 28 February 2003, a couple of weeks after the controversial meeting in Delhi, at the collective budget viewing session held by the CII's Gujarat unit, very few members turned up reinforcing fears that a massive exodus was on the cards unless some attempts were made to assuage Modi. The episode also created a serious rift between CII and the Gujarat government, and this even extended to a cooling of relations with the BJP-

led national government. Finally, after several weeks, Tarun Das flew down to Ahmedabad with a regret note. In an interview with *Business Today* in December 2009, after he relinquished office, Das reminisced about the incident:

We talked (at the CII meeting) about security in the state and if it was safe for business to go there. Modi was angry. After his return to Gandhinagar, we had our members (we had about 200 in Gujarat) worried. I didn't know anyone in the BJP and called Arun Jaitley. It was an evening that a cricket match was on and we sat in his house watching Tendulkar, and talked. For two hours. Jaitley wanted to know everything: who I was, what CII was, who the office bearers were, what was their thinking... At the end, he told me Modi was coming to the Jaitley home for dinner and he would talk it over. Some days later, we spoke again and Jaitley told me that Modi wanted an apology. That was out of the question. But I offered that we would draft a letter at the end of which we would say that CII regretted the misunderstanding. It was not an apology but we were sure that the media would make out it to be one. And, it did. The evening I was leaving to meet Modi, my wife accosted me, *You just can't do this....* Among our close friends are Anu Aga, Azim Premji, Jamshyd Godrej and several from the Parsi and Muslim communities. My answer was that I had two options: I could quit and say I will not do this. Else, I had to look after our members.

Das chose the latter option!

Anger at what happened in the Delhi CII meeting also erupted within the Gujarat Chamber of Commerce and Industry (GCCCI) and in Gujarat Electronics and Software Industry Association and it added to the pressure on CII to make amends — after all the two were sort of rival bodies to CII. Members felt that CII should not have permitted critical views of individual members to be made public from a dais. It was clear that the “Modi Charm” was working within Gujarat and GCCCI president, Mahendra Shah made a statement: ‘People should have thought before making such statements about Gujarat in the first place. In future anyone who has doubts should come to Gujarat and see the ground reality before making any statement.’ Round One went to Modi and it also had a spillover effect: Tarun Das in fact took the initiative to invite Modi to its high profile, India Economic Summit, organized with the World Economic Forum, in an effort to forge a closer bonding between Modi and CII.

But before this round of fracas with CII, Modi quietly unveiled the idea that was germinating in his mind for a long time: that good governance also meant cutting the red tape and this was first put forward to a group of Non-Resident Gujaratis,

visiting Delhi to participate in the first ever Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD) function. In January 2003, less than a month after securing a mandate, Modi spelled out his plan at an interactive session at the PBD celebrations: make e-governance a way of life. During this session with people of Indian origin from various nations, Modi promised that there would be no pending files in his government and that transparency in decision making process will be ensured. He also outlined five cornerstones of his government's policies: Education, Water, Energy, Human Resources, and Security for the five crore Gujaratis (his way of saying that Muslims would be part of the overall growth strategy and not be extended any special privileges).

A couple of months after Modi returned from the "offending" CII meet in New Delhi and Tarun Das offered an apology, Modi announced the first biennial Vibrant Gujarat Business Summit which over the next decade became a yardstick of evaluating international enthusiasm for the Modi regime. Commenting with the benefit of hindsight on the decision, the *Daily News and Analysis* wrote in January 2011 before the fifth edition of the Summit:

Such meets, though extremely vital for businesses, were invariably hosted by industry federations and at best, supported by the state and central governments. But in Gujarat, a "Modi"ified version of this age-old concept was adopted wherein the state government itself hosted the event, invited companies to explore investment opportunities in the region, and in the process, interact and of course do business with existing interests in the state. Thus was born Gujarat government's biennial Vibrant Gujarat Business Summit 2003...and the rest is history.

But when Modi organized the first Vibrant Gujarat Business Summit from 28 September to 2 October, its basic purpose was political: to use the occasion to demonstrate that the state's pariah status had come to an end. Modi knew he had his back to the wall but he nonetheless kept plodding along. In August, Modi toured England and Switzerland to attract participants to the Vibrant Gujarat Business Summit but wherever he went, the response was hostile. A British paper even called him Monster Modi. Such reference however was of little concern to Modi because in a shrewd move he dovetailed a completely "un-Modi like" programme during his visit to Switzerland. This was done with the aim of claiming an important facet of the freedom movement as part of his political heritage.

The Publications Division of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting which has published biographies of numerous freedom fighters, also published a book titled *Shayamji Krishna Varma: The Unknown Patriot*. The subject of this

book was an Indian freedom fighter of that name who had been active in London and Europe in the last two decades of the nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth century. He set up the Indian Home Rule Society and founded the famed India House. He died in 1930 in Switzerland and wrote in his will that his ashes be interred till India became free at which point it should be taken back to the country of his birth. Varma was originally from the coastal town of Mandvi in Gujarat. Like numerous other forgotten narratives of the Indian national movement, Varma's ashes lay forgotten in a vault in Geneva. In August 2003, before his visit to Europe, Modi learnt of this and planned to get the ashes back to India. His return after a not-so-successful campaign for the Vibrant Gujarat Business Summit was however to a jubilant crowd that was hastily cobbled together with the assistance of the Maharashtra unit of BJP with support from Shiv Sena. Modi paraded Varma's ashes through Mumbai before taking it to Mandvi through several districts of Gujarat in a trademark chariot-style coach and the sojourn was given the heavily Sanskritized name of Veeranjali Yatra (a yatra to pay an ode to a revolutionary).

The yatra continued for almost a fortnight in which Modi claimed a direct connect with the freedom struggle and positioned himself as a true Gujarati who had "rescued" the forgotten remains of a martyr. This was a part of the makeover that Modi began after the verdict of 2002. Modi eventually ordered the construction of a memorial to Varma in Mandvi — a replica of India House and named it Kranti Teerth (a revolutionary pilgrimage of religious destination). In the summer of 2012, Modi proudly referred to it in the middle of a quasi-election speech in Surat, though the subject did not fit in with the flow of thoughts that he was weaving. Modi implored that if there was anyone who was visiting Kutch, then a stopover in Mandvi was essential. I believed that the suggestion was for my benefit as Modi was aware of my presence at the meet and the plans to travel to Kutch. I did go visiting Varma's memorial and was impressed with it. The memorial drew a fair sprinkling of tourists and the museum did not let an opportunity go to establish that Modi had been instrumental in bringing back Varma's ashes and conceptualizing the memorial. After Kranti Teerth, no one else in Gujarat can claim "ownership" of this facet of the freedom struggle.

But to come back to the main preoccupation of Modi in September 2003 — Vibrant Gujarat, it was not aimed at securing endorsement from people in the state. Rather, the goal behind the initiative was manifest in Advani's inaugural address when he accepted that the state's image had been tarnished abroad because of a "sustained propaganda" and that the Summit provided an opportunity to undo this. He criticized people who had "knowingly or unknowingly" heaped on Gujarat an

inhuman reputation and thereby to the rest of India. Advani hoped that the response of foreign investors would reverse this perception. The timing of the investors meet was aimed at presenting the colourful side of Gujarat — it was bang in the middle of the nine-day Navratri festival when both young and old, men and women dress in the most vibrant colours and dance till the wee hours of the morning.

Darshan Desai, writing for *Outlook* in October 2003 asserted: ‘Though his critics still have misgivings, the Gujarat chief minister’s heady mix of culture and commerce has made many Gujaratis stand up and take notice... The mix of celebration, business and patriotism has been branded as “Vibrant Gujarat”. Many top Modi aides believe they have pulled off a marketing coup.’ On the morrow of the concluding day, it did appear that true: seventy-six MOUs for eighty projects were signed for 66,068 crore rupees. It naturally made headlines. What however did not, was the fact that in November 2011, the Gujarat government closed the review process of the first two Vibrant Gujarat Global Investors’ Summits after recording nearly sixty per cent of the MOUs signed. But the absence of the fine print regarding the possibility of more than forty per cent MOUs not fructifying, assisted Modi’s attempt to erect a new facade — both for him and the state.

Scepticism apart, the first Vibrant Gujarat Business Summit was the time when significant sections of the media began diluting the anti-Modi stance. Uday Mahurkar wrote for the 13 October 2003 issue of *India Today*: ‘For a state that got international attention in the past couple of years for just bad news — the massive earthquake in 2001, the Godhra train tragedy and the subsequent riots in 2002 — there is finally some good news. Or at least a promise of good news. Vibrant Gujarat... may well give the state the much-needed push towards the path of development.’

Even before Modi became chief minister, Gujarat was on its way to becoming the most preferred destination when it came to industrial investment. The state’s success was due to its entrepreneurial endowment on the one hand and assistive policies pursued from 1960 by politically assertive governments backed by a bureaucracy that believed being proactive was an essential tool for survival in the state. The collapse of the trade union movement in Gujarat around the time when it developed a stranglehold in West Bengal further enabled industry to become more vigorous in Gujarat. According to the 2011 census, the urbanization in Gujarat is forty-three per cent, compared to the average of thirty-two per cent in India. The substantially high disparity in the extent of urbanization and the resulting development that it resulted in was not a new phenomenon and when

Modi became chief minister he primarily had to take corrective measures to pull out the state from the morass it was slipping into during Keshubhai Patel's tenure.

Barring those sections in industry who were politically supportive of Modi and some others who considered that the business of business was restricted solely to pursuit of business and its benefits, many others underwent a sense of revulsion and despair at the post-Godhra violence. It is not that everyone was politically concerned — rather, their reason for reining in their resources in the state was a simple matter for any efficient government to address: security. A secure environment had been in short supply in Gujarat as sporadic rioting continued well into the electoral campaign of 2002. But with the mandate secured, there was a need to stymie such occurrences to prevent the Opposition from demanding the sacking of Modi and his government because of a breakdown in law and order.

At the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas interactive session, Modi listed “Security” among the five focus areas of his government. Modi's attempts to woo industry bore fruit and the presence of top international industrial honchos at the Vibrant Gujarat Business Summit — Nigel Shaw from British Gas, Steve Twilley of Royal Dutch Shell, Shell India's Marc Den Hartog, Ed Samson of Niko Resources besides of course the big catch, former US Senator Larry Pressler had the desired effect: it prompted the Ambanis to promise an investment of 8,000 crore rupees in energy and broadband sectors. In less than a year, the mood was buoyant. Darshan Desai in another article summed it up: ‘The festive atmosphere in Gujarat and the jubilation all around has drowned out the criticism of the Modi-baiters.’

One of the oft-repeated arguments in Narendra Modi's defense is now a cliché and often endorsed by many including internationally acclaimed writers, opinion leaders and successful industrialists: Modi makes business a pleasure and delivers on his promises. And perhaps like many other theories this will also go down in history as one of his achievements. But there is another way of looking at the hype surrounding government decisions. I was in Gujarat in the autumn of 2012 and even as the state was in the process of preparing for Vibrant Gujarat 2013 — the sixth edition—several compilations of data were emerging from diverse quarters which showed a significant gap between the MOUs signed at these summits and the ones which actually fructified. From figures culled together from government records we come uncannily close to the old adage — “Lies, damned lies, and statistics”. In the first Vibrant Gujarat Business Summit, out of seventy-six MOUs that were signed, only forty-two projects were actually started with an investment of 38,000 crores against the promised amount of 66,068 crores. The numbers declined further in the second, third, fourth and fifth summits: in

percentage terms it stood at thirty-six per cent, twenty-three per cent, eight per cent and just 1.4 per cent for the last Summit in 2011.

During an interview with Modi, I steered away from the controversy over these figures knowing full well what the outcome would be and instead asked him a more general question: 'In the decade after the 2002 riots you have consciously tried breaking from the past — concentrated on development and have been complimented even by the Rajiv Gandhi Institute of Contemporary Studies (RGICS) for this. You developed this concept of Vibrant Gujarat very soon after the 2002 verdict. Was this part of your image makeover?'

Modi was precise though a tad irritated: 'Look at the records and see what I had done for the first 100 days after becoming chief minister — that is before Godhra and then compare it with what I did after that and what I am doing even now. You will find that Modi is doing the same thing. The image, that has been built that I went into a reactive mode because of Godhra, is wrong. Like this Vibrant Gujarat Business Summit — I had organized the first Investment Summit — called Resurgent Gujarat — in February 2002. The British were a partner — Godhra incident happened after that. It is not that I started something new after that to change my image. It is a different thing as I became more experienced, I increased its scale — worked harder.'

Point taken — I had wanted to say to him — especially the thought behind the last line. The February experience definitely gave Modi lessons in how not to do things as despite the then British High Commissioner reading out a statement of the British government welcoming business ties with Gujarat, nothing concrete emerged from this meet. It was similar to the event in February 2000 with Keshubhai as chief minister when no MOUs were signed. Even earlier in 1998, the Intechmart Business Fair was held and though almost eighty MOUs worth 12,000 crore rupees were signed, not all finally became reality.

Like in the past, I kept chipping away with small strokes: 'Initially after Godhra, people in the industry were hesitant, critical — not sure if they wanted to invest in Gujarat...'

'You must keep one thing in mind that after Godhra — not for a single day did any industry remain closed. No banks were closed for even a day after the incidents; this is the reason why I say that any evaluation of my tenure cannot be done on the basis of what has been written or said in the media. What should be the parameter of evaluation — did schools runs, were exams held, did shops stay open, did markets remain vibrant — everything was running but still there was so much negative campaign.'

By the time Modi organized the second Vibrant Gujarat Business Summit in January 2005, the political environment in the country had undergone a dramatic change: the Congress was back as a ruling party after the shock defeat of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance in May 2004. A politically hostile Union government however did not prevent Modi from bettering the outcome of 2003: this time MOUs for a total of 226 projects valued at 1,06,160 crore rupees were signed and they covered core infrastructure areas like ports to textiles and apparel, engineering and automobiles and oil and gas.

The strategy of attracting investment to the state, cutting down on bureaucratic red tape, centralizing every decision making process and thereby reducing the role of individual ministers resulted in two developments: Modi acquiring a larger than life image — a messiah of development and most in the industry concluding that 2002 was an aberration that was now past. The tactics also saw endorsement from significant sections of the intelligentsia. In the summer of 2005, the RGICS and the German funding agency, Friedrich Naumann Stiftung brought out a report authored by economists, Bibek Debroy and Laveesh Bhandari titled, *Economic Freedom for States of India*.¹ The report included an economic freedom ranking and Gujarat was on top of the list. Uday Mahurkar reported on the development: ‘The report is the best possible news for Modi, weighed down as he is by party rebels. The parameters on which the study ranked Gujarat are difficult to contest, even though Modi has also inherited much of what’s right with the state from earlier regimes. He can, however, claim credit for some crucial aspects: Gujarat boasts of the lowest power subsidy, has a better than average power situation, low levels of corruption compared with other states and a business-friendly environment.’

This endorsement was backed by similar kudos awarded to the state from *India Today*, the magazine which began the annual State of States Report from 2003 and regularly featured Modi’s Gujarat on top of the evaluation list of various parameters. This was ironic because though Modi remained high on the “dislike” list, he found more and more converts to his fold — at times even from ideologically inimical backgrounds which naturally led to quizzical reactions. The stamp of approval by a report carrying the imprint of the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation created a political controversy and in the words of Debroy, ‘ruffled political feathers. The gory details do not matter. The outcome was that I exited from RGICS.’ The political controversy surrounding Modi had not died down and a large number of assessments of Modi’s governance and economic policies were still being done through the prism of 2002. In November 2012, Dhiraj Nayyar commented on Gujarat being a ‘frequent winner of *India Today*’s State of the States

Awards in the last 10 years' and wrote:

The Gujarat Chief Minister is not perfect. He still hasn't convincingly explained the complete breakdown of the law and order machinery during the 2002 riots. Yet, he has proved to be an efficient administrator facing no serious charges of corruption... Modi has converted Gujarat into the most preferred destination for Indian investors, particularly in manufacturing. The state has, for example, attracted the auto industry away from Maharashtra, Haryana and Tamil Nadu, courtesy easy land acquisition policies, excellent road infrastructure, modern ports and uninterrupted electricity supply. Modi's government hasn't promoted industry at the cost of agriculture. The farming sector, which has struggled to grow at a rate beyond 4 per cent nationally in the last decade, has grown at just over 10 per cent per annum in Gujarat over the same period. Modi has leveraged the Sardar Sarovar project to irrigate large parts of arid Gujarat and encouraged water harvesting to conserve water. Gujarat is the poster state for Bt cotton cultivation and horticulture in India.

The reason behind the surge in appreciation for Modi's development programmes and economic policies was due to the third component of Modi's strategy — after wooing of industry through Vibrant Gujarat Business Summits and frequent interaction with industry and the winning over sections of the intelligentsia and the media. The third element on Modi's makeover drive was streamlining existing programmes and come out with more innovative initiatives. What enabled Modi to give a cutting edge to his government and secure the approval of independent assessors were the five points he listed at the PBD meet in Delhi in January 2003. The difference being that they had names which appealed to his vote base: *Jal Shakti* (better management of water resources), *Jan Shakti* (streamlining human resources), *Urja Shakti* (develop and conserve energy resources), *Gyan Shakti* (power of education) and *Raksha Shakti* (strengthening security). Modi also introduced some other initiatives — for instance the Jyotigram Yojna which in 2002 provided four-hour power supply to domestic and cottage industry users in half of Gujarat's 18,000 villages. The scheme to popularize drip and sprinkler irrigation technique among farmers which eventually resulted in high agricultural growth trajectory in Gujarat and the emphasis on ensuring that Narmada waters reached Kutch further created an image that Gujarat was moving away from the post-Godhra violence stagnation. On top of all this, in 2005, the Modi government presented a revenue surplus budget — the first time in the state's history.

But critics remain and in an elaborate economic critique of the Modi government policies, *The Economic Times* in July 2012 made the following points: economy was

growing but only steadily; nothing spectacular and surely with problems lurking; Modi had actually succeeded in cutting red tape by marginalizing political leaders; a lot of Modi's success becomes part of the overall credo due to one of the most efficient PR machineries ever managed by a political leader; that nothing moves in Gujarat without the support of Modi's hidden hand and finally only those Muslims who are in business have grown (which means they agreed to "move on"). The report in *The Economic Times* also drew attention to an uncomfortable figure: 'The official Socio-Economic Review 2011-12 states that the total length of roads in the state has increased to 74,117 km at the end of 2008-09 from 74,112 km in 2007-08: an achievement of 5 kms!'

Predictably, Modi's reaction was an angry one. The Gujarat government "responded at length" to the story. It charged the paper of using 'outdated data and subjective opinion of (a) select few.' There were a few other points in the article which both parties examined with fine-tooth combs and the purpose of this recapitulation is not to pronounce a verdict on who was right. However, one point that was made by both has been reiterated by others who have critically evaluated the economic performance of Gujarat under Modi. The state government rejoinder said: 'While talking about the growth rate, comparisons have been made between Gujarat and other states for 1993-2010. Despite the fact that this is the highest among the states compared in the article, the present chief minister assumed office only in 2001. Hence the proper way to compare is the "pre-Modi" period with "post-Modi" period.'

The Economic Times reply to this point in the rejoinder is matter of fact: 'Our sole intention behind producing data from before 1979 and up to 2010 was to establish two points: growth in Gujarat has always been steady regardless of the regime and the state's present growth is undoubtedly good but not miraculous.' The dispute remains unresolved and there are conflicting opinions on whether Gujarat would have maintained the growth trajectory it achieved since 2001 even if Modi had not been chief minister — stamp of an individual versus the logic of the state's own growth momentum.

Certain insights in Gujarat are so plainly obvious that they neither require the use of the *inner eye*, nor empirical evidence. In cities — even in Ahmedabad — there is a clear stratification of areas and on the basis of communities living in them. Invisible *Laxman Rekhas* (the line that Ram drew for his wife in the Ramayana which she was to cross only at the risk of her chastity) delineate Hindu localities from Muslim ones. One gets to realize that the line has been crossed very quickly if one is travelling by an auto-rickshaw: it starts bumping more after entering a

Muslim area because roads are ill-maintained when compared to those where Hindus live. At night they are also darker than the wide avenues in colonies that are inhabited by Hindus. In its 11 April 2011 issue, *Outlook* compiled troubling data of disparity: Muslim children — particularly girls — tended to drop out from school at the earliest; urban poverty among Muslims is 800 per cent higher than among upper caste Hindus and 50 per cent higher than among OBCs; the levels of unemployment among Muslims is abysmally poorer when compared with their Hindu counterparts and most of them are likely to be self-employed; Muslims are more insecure than Hindus in regard to petty crimes like thefts; and finally that though Muslims account for almost twelve per cent of the bank accounts, they have been able to secure only 2.6 per cent of the loans that have been disbursed. The Sachar Committee, that was appointed in 2005 however unearthed ironical data regarding the educational status of Muslims in Gujarat. According to 2001 census, Muslim literacy in the state was pegged at 73.5 per cent as opposed to 72.8 per cent for the entire state and fifty-nine per cent for all Muslims in India. Figures from the 2011 census will demonstrate the differential — if any — when Gujarat *became* vibrant.

But this is a dichotomy that is not evaluated by potential investors before deciding to head for Gujarat. According to a study conducted by ASSOCHAM, Gujarat ‘attracted highest number of investment proposals in India amounting to Rs 16.28 lakh crore, which is about 13.5 per cent of the total live investments worth Rs 120.34 lakh crore promised in India as on December 2011.’ The assessment survey further stated that ‘out of the total proposals, Gujarat attracted 39.2 per cent in electricity, 24.2 per cent in manufacturing, 16.2 per cent in services, 14.3 per cent in real estate, 5.2 per cent in irrigation and 0.9 per cent in mining.’ Part of the reason why Gujarat by 2012 had emerged as the most preferred investment destination was due to the hype generated with the Vibrant Gujarat Business Summits that created an image of unlimited resources pouring into Gujarat. Attracting Indian industry that was turned away from other states like the Tatas from West Bengal whose Nano project got a home in Sanand close to Ahmedabad also helped and most importantly, the ease with which land is acquired for industrial use. A source told me with a glint in his eye that Modi makes this process seamless by using “The Godfather” technique: ‘He gives the village heads an offer they “cannot” refuse.’ When it comes to growth — especially if it enables him to consolidate Brand Modi — the chief minister brooks no obstruction. One time *bête noire* of Modi and Prant Pracharak of RSS in Gujarat, Manmohan Vaidya said: ‘Narendrabhai has managed the project of Vibrant Gujarat very efficiently and also

introduced several innovative ways for investment which did not exist earlier — like tourism. But the main reason why it has got talked about so much is that he has been very successful in marketing his development model.’

Such viewpoints have got buttressed by research papers like the one by Abusaleh Shariff of the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER). In *Gujarat Shining! Relative Development of Gujarat and Socio-Religious Differentials*, published by the Washington-based US-India Policy Institute, the economist reaches an unflattering conclusion: ‘On most of the measures Gujarat does not fare well, and rather it is way down on 4th to 6th place in the list of states of India. The study finds no evidence to the hype that Gujarat is the favourite destination of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) ranking below Maharashtra, New Delhi and Karnataka.’ Shariff’s paper is based on available data of the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) and NCAER’s human development survey and information from the Sachar Committee report. The base-line derivations are disturbing and point to the obvious anomalies in Gujarat which have got sharpened under Modi and could in future be reasons for the erosion behind his political support.

To start with, there is a problem with the hunger levels: ‘Gujarat surprisingly emerges as a State with high levels of hunger, while simultaneously boasting high per capita income and consistent income stability.’ But more stark is the peculiarity in Gujarat — that its relatively lower poverty levels (compared to other states) is not matched by human development at an even plane and is instead lower, thereby giving states with higher poverty levels to also boast of better human development standards. On the issue of FDI levels being lower, Shariff makes a contentious claim: ‘Hype and hoopla built around foreign direct investment in Gujarat is a lie. Gujarat can be considered a hunting ground “for NRI and corporate politics”, and that “the FDI hype” is designed to facilitate tax subsidies, cheap licensing, under-priced land and low royalty payments to the investors....Politics works in such a way that Gujarat is used as a platform for corporate negotiations and investments in other states.’

But more damaging data is put together when it comes to differentials on the basis of religion: poverty levels among urban Muslims are 800 per cent higher than upper caste Hindus but only fifty per cent more than among Hindu-OBCs, suggesting that OBCs continue to be almost at the bottom of the Hindu pyramid. Over sixty per cent of Gujarati Muslims (not indicative of the migrant Muslims) live in urban areas and are the most deprived social group. In comparison, poverty levels among rural Muslims, is 200 per cent higher than upper caste Hindus. Educationally, Muslims in Gujarat languish: though there is a seventy-five per cent

net enrolment, only twenty-six per cent complete matriculation — much lower than forty-one per cent for the other historically deprived sections — the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Peculiarly, the highest number of student dropouts in school is in the fifth standard which means that pre-teenagers are either joining the army of “no-gooders” or becoming part of the work force — family or otherwise. The paper has also claimed that though the central government had launched from April 2008 a nationwide scholarship scheme to overcome Muslim’s deficit, Gujarat had ‘not even cared to implement this programme.’

Be it employment or the erosion of Muslim’s presence in the work force, there has been a steady decline over the years and has not been reversed by any state policy. With little choice in the organized sector, the majority of Muslims in Gujarat are either engaged in petty trade or are self-employed. At fifty-three per cent, this is significantly higher than forty-three per cent among Hindus. Even when it comes to security, Shariff noted that Muslims are more likely to be targets of crimes like theft and burglary and in case of ‘occurrence of harassment and threat of girls, 17% urban Muslim households reported such an occurrence which is considerably higher relative to their share in the households. The only other community having higher share of harassment of girls is the SCs in rural areas — with 34% households reporting 39% of such events.’

It is not that there has been no development under Modi. Shariff is honest to write that ‘Gujarat does have some positive features; over 90 per cent paved roads to villages, 98 per cent electrified villages with 80 per cent electrified homes and 18 hours of electricity everyday, 86 per cent piped water supply and better phone connections, banks, post offices, bus connection compared to other states. Agricultural extension work, too, is better than in other states.’

First time visitors, or those who choose to skim the surface of the state find such indicators positive and these elements were consciously projected by a massive Public Relations operation to convey the sense that Gujarat was several steps ahead of the rest of the country though many experts in areas of development and economic studies viewed the situation differently. From the time of the first Vibrant Gujarat Business Summit, these positive facets of Gujarat were utilized to enable Modi in chalking out a new identity for himself. As criticism by representative industry leaders demonstrated and because investigations into the Godhra incident and post-Godhra violence continued tardily, he remained virtually a political pariah outside of Gujarat. Within Gujarat, people were keen for resumption of business after the difficult years that began with the cyclone in Kandla in June 1998.

Early in his stint Modi concluded that he needed professional help for image

building and brand promotion. From the time he conceived the idea of Vibrant Gujarat Business Summits, it was first branded and then marketed. Vinod K Jose, in the profile on Modi in *The Caravan* in March 2012, mentioned about the successful marketing of the project and wrote that the international PR firm, APCO had won two international awards for promoting Vibrant Gujarat Business Summits. Even before moving to take the assistance of PR professionals and IT managers, Modi had used the services and talents of others. One such person who was routinely used for his multifarious populist talent was Bhagyesh Jha, an IAS officer who has also been a popular draw in Kavi Sammelans (mass poetry recitations). In August 2012 when Modi hosted his first Google Hangout, Jha as the principal secretary of sports, youth and cultural activities departments was the primary host of the event.

In another article on concerted image building in *The Economic Times*, in July 2012, Binoy Prabhakar and Mitul Thakkar wrote that Gujarat government has used two PR agencies — APCO Worldwide to tend the world media (the *Time* magazine cover story in March 2012 being among its crowning glories) and Mutual PR for the Indian media. Modi is not shy of using a professional team of image builders and managers. Prabhakar and Thakkar quoted a senior official of Mutual PR as saying that Gujarat government has not been a reticent customer but instead ‘has loads to talk about, be it the developments on the industrial front or the socio-political ones.’ Modi’s image building is not only through traditional media because ‘he is also one of the first Indian politicians to have understood the power of the internet as a marketing medium. Today, he runs his campaigns through Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. He is a methodical blogger and fans can download Narendra apps on the iPhone and Android platforms. To his admirers, Modi is only trumpeting achievements. But to critics, his marketing reeks of propaganda.’

In fact as one drives through Gujarat there is no escaping Modi. Everywhere there is either a banner or a hoarding with his face sticking out in the middle of nowhere. Though I did not hear them myself, many I met swore that Modi’s recorded messages are played in government elevators. Naturally, Modi’s decision to use a Public Relations firm for both personal image building and projection of the state is used by his critics. They contend that APCO has a dubious heritage and has often provided similar services to Zionist and other non-democratic institutions and leaders. The issue is such that any judgement is squarely dependent on the primary perspective — what does one consider Modi to be — a mass murderer or messiah or maybe neither.

The development man image of Modi was most evident to me the moment we

drove into Bhuj after almost a day-long haul through several districts of north Gujarat. Though it is fairly late in the night, the swanky hotel that was to be my base for the couple of days I intended spending in Kutch was testimony to the reconstruction of a ravaged district. The next morning, I find the city in contrast to the images stored in my mind's eye from my stay in the district fifteen years ago. Multi-storeyed buildings are visible in large parts of the "new city" and the old city has no traces of the earthquake that began the Modi era of Gujarat. Kirti Khatri, editor of *Kutch Mitra*, a local newspaper is known for his scepticism of the Modi regime. But still he contended that 'history was created in Kutch in five years between 2001 and 2006. The extent of industrialization which Kutch did not witness in decades took place in just five years.' Kutch in fact has risen like a phoenix and this had greatly to do with the managerial abilities of Modi who made reconstruction of Kutch his first mission. When I first broached the idea of this biography with Modi and during a telephone conversation, indicating my desire to visit Kutch, he was most forthcoming: 'You must go there. After all, my journey in Gujarat as chief minister began from there.' Khatri however adds a caveat: 'It is not Modi alone who should get the praises. He was the implementer and all policy decisions were taken during Keshubhai's time. Moreover, Modi had Suresh Mehta as his Industries minister and he was very able and efficient.'

Khatri may have a point, but history is replete with instances where the king has got all the kudos for the hard work put in by the foot soldiers — a Shah Jahan for the Taj Mahal being probably the most striking example. In popular perception it is Modi alone who made the difference. This is evident in the district profile prepared for Vibrant Gujarat 2013: over sixty per cent of total salt production is contributed by the district; twelve Special Economic Zones (SEZ), thirteen industrial estates, three industrial parks and three ports; the world's largest manufacturer of Submerged Arc Welded (SAW) pipes; and highest production and largest reserve of Lignite and China clay in Gujarat. In fact, Kutch accounts for almost forty per cent of the total projects under implementation (in 2012) in the state. Modi has also successfully marketed Kutch as a tourist destination and the White Desert festival is a great draw during the winter season. At Dordo village, on the edge of the Rann of Kutch, I noticed a fully functional solar powered ATM of the State Bank of India. The village was also conspicuous with huts with thatched roofs but which had split-level air conditioners for much needed comfort during the trying summer months! This was indicative that tourism has resulted in economic affluence at least for those who are in the "zone" and for this, people like Mutwa Miyan Hussain, sarpanch of Dordo who also oversees the tourist resort run by the village panchayat, are

beholden to Modi. He says that since Modi first came to the Rann of Kutch in 2006 the area has seen internet penetration in villages besides of course the regular signs of development: primary and high schools, Mother Dairy outlets, a pond in the village and solar-powered water pumps besides of course uninterrupted electricity supply. Though not all villages in Kutch are as developed as Dordo, it nonetheless is impressive to visitors and goes to buttress Modi's claim that Gujarat has become more vibrant in his tenure...

The Vibrant Gujarat Business Summits actually bolstered *Gujarati Asmita*; Gujarat's pride was regained and people perceived Modi as a hero with another attribute –the power to attract finance into a state which had lost all its credibility and was desperately crying for repair. However, apart from putting his state on a trajectory that would once again invite investments, Modi attended to several domestic initiatives. Prior to the election in December 2002, the waters of Narmada river finally flew into the dry bed of the Sabarmati on the outskirts of Ahmedabad which was followed by benefits of Narmada's waters further reaching Kutch through pipelines. Readers would remember that a day after Modi assumed office in October 2001, he ordered Narmada waters to be diverted to Sabarmati.

As is well known, the Narmada Valley Project has probably experienced the longest gestation period mainly because of the controversies surrounding the project and due to protests stemming from environmental and displacement issues. It was only in the late 1980s, that work on the Sardar Sarovar Dam, that directly seeks to address irrigation and civic water needs of Gujarat, began in real earnest. However, it was to Modi's fortune that Narmada waters began flowing into the state soon after he became chief minister. This resulted in the benefit for this project accruing to him politically. Suresh Mehta accepted that Modi had been extremely lucky but was able to convert this to his advantage whereas Modi's detractors could do little. Modi was also on an overdrive and launched three more innovative programmes between June and October 2003: Kanya Kelavni Rath and Shala Praveshotsav as part of girls' education drive and Jyotigram Yojana, the scheme to provide twenty-four-hour non-stop power supply to villages.

Much before I decided to write this biography, I always wondered how Narendra Modi got to hone his skills in the art of governance. After all, he had never negotiated the web of administering from close quarters except for the brief period in 1995-96 when Keshubhai was chief minister and he was called "super chief minister" by all and sundry in the power corridors of Gandhinagar. So without riling Modi on issues that I knew would get him snappy, I asked him precisely what was on my mind for a long time: how did he learn the ropes of administration and

governance after he became chief minister?

He answered without much thought: 'I had learnt from the Sangh the basic skill of running an organization. One major component is human resource management and in the Sangh we are taught this from the beginning — how to use manpower resources to the hilt, to the optimum levels. In government this is very easy. Identifying a team, building it, get the team to do the work. This is what I learnt from the Sangh. I was successful in making a team, in conducting open discussions, generate and adopt new ideas — all of it that I learnt in the Sangh.'

I posed yet another question: 'But what about generating ideas — the team will only follow them. It is your job to develop them. Before 2001 — you were known to have successfully set up and managed party organizations and managed agitational programmes but never any ideas at policy level — you were always the organizational man. So how did you do this?'

'I think it is probably a god-gifted ability. Even I would be surprised at times about how I got a particular idea. Like for instance, the solar panel on top of a canal (launched in the summer of 2012). Even I do not know how God gets me to do these things or how I come to get these ideas. Even the Jyotigram Yojana — giving directions to separate the agricultural feeder and domestic feeder. Now I am not a technical person — and no one gave me this suggestion, it just came to my mind — why can't we do this? I just asked why do you not provide electricity for 24 hours? Basically, I had a lot of pain because I grew up in a village where there was no electricity and we faced hardships because of this. So I asked my officers where was the problem? I used to be told that there is a lot of power theft, that if power was supplied then there was tripping because of power thefts. That there is not enough power generation. So I asked them why don't you segregate the feeders — let one supply go to the villages for the homes and another for the agricultural fields. So when I said this for the first time, my officers started laughing. If you look at the file, for one year the entire file had nothing but rejection notes from various departments. All weighing 10 kgs (*laughs*). No one was willing to agree with me. But I insisted — now you have to do this. Now we are getting kudos from the entire country because of this.'

His answer and this particular part of the exchange got me thinking and I asked him about something that I had heard: 'After getting an idea on a subject about which you do not know much, do you try to reach out to a domain expert by speaking to people in your known circle?'

Modi said: 'I primarily and essentially have a very curious nature (*jigyasu swabhav*). Even when I was not chief minister whenever I got a chance to learn

something new I never wasted the opportunity. I would go to lectures or seminars even if I had nothing to do with it directly. Even today whenever someone comes to me, anyone comes to me, I listen. I listen to every new idea. I believe that since I grew up in a small place and did not have the right exposure, I must learn from anyone who has knowledge.'

'And do you also invite people specifically to come and brief you?'

'Yes of course, I do.'

Talking about ideas and learning brought up another issue that has dominated analyses of the *new* Narendra Modi: how much has he been influenced by economic models in other countries — be it totalitarian nations like China or more democratic societies like Japan?

'I am never influenced by anyone or any place. There is no need — I get inspired not influenced. There is no denying that in the 21st century, Asia is going to be the dominant force in the world. The only confusion is who will lead — China or India? That is the basic debate — so we must essentially try to understand and comprehend all the major powers of Asia — we must understand the strong points and also the weaknesses. So that is why I try to understand Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, South Korea — and also China and Japan. I consider that China has a great strength in its manufacturing — and so I have strengthened our manufacturing strength. If their strength is youth power then we also must understand that we also have the same power — we just have to focus our energies to strengthen this. If we do not go out and see this, then how will we plan our strategy? I always try to work for the best of the country and if I am in charge of a municipal corporation and feel that I can strengthen the country by doing good there — in that municipality — then I will do so. Since I now have the charge of Gujarat — I can benefit the country by making Gujarat stronger. I am driven only by this idea and that is what motivates me in whatever I am doing.'

In less than a year after securing a mandate, Modi appeared like a man in frenzy. He set a blistering pace of travel: one day he was at Mumbai interacting with premier industrialists during the Economic Round Table Conference; the second day he was at Bengaluru engaging in a dialogue with IT experts with a view to promote investments in Gujarat. In just a few days Modi was off again — this time within the state to Navsari in south Gujarat for the first Adijati Lok Kalyan Mela (Tribal Welfare Fair); launched Sujalam Sufalam — to address the drought prone northern region of the state; E-gram service in villages; Nari Gaurav Niti, a policy to promote gender equity; creation of water ponds, marked by a claimed achievement of constructing more than one lakh farm ponds within a hundred days. The hectic

pace of development programmes that Modi launched were with the twin intentions of preparing for the 2004 parliamentary elections that had been advanced by several months by the BJP leaders owing to their calculation that the move would benefit the NDA, and also to deflect attention from the investigations and trials of the post-Godhra incidents: for instance in June 2004 the retrial in the Best Bakery case, in which fourteen people were burnt alive on the outskirts of Vadodara, began at a Mumbai court.

If one looks at the map of Gujarat, the disconcerting fact is that barring the districts of Jamnagar, Porbandar and Amreli in Saurashtra; and Valsad, Navsari and Dang in south Gujarat, every other district was affected by post-Godhra violence. The National Human Rights Commission in its order of May 2002 stated that the state government in a report to it, declared that a 'total number of 27,780 arrests had been made, involving both crimes and as preventive detention.' The crimes in the days and weeks following the Godhra carnage resulted in more than a thousand deaths. The maze of legal cases that emerged out of the debris that was strewn all around, have been a study of several focussed studies and the last word on this is yet to be written. But among the cases that came to symbolize the brutalities of the gory days, the Best Bakery case had all elements of melodrama. The attack on this Muslim-owned obscure bakery in a Vadodara locality grabbed headlines because of the brutal burning down of fourteen people. The nineteen-year-old girl, Zaheera Sheikh, who witnessed the crime in which her family members were roasted alive by a 500-strong mob driven by hate, epitomized a victim who barely survived, like countless others who were destined to carry the narratives of 2002 for their next generations. This case was among the first where judicial activism, at the instance of the Supreme Court, made its presence felt in regard to pursuit of justice for the 2002 riots. It was also among the few where media intervention demonstrated beyond doubt, the complicit nature of the State in the violence. The media also demonstrated, thanks to a clandestine recording of a boastful conversation with the local BJP leader by *Tehelka*, that the political leaders who spurred violent incidents used inducements later to get key witnesses to retract their original statements. By the time Modi hit the road to woo investors, it was imperative for him to change focus and thereby transform his image from what was often disparagingly used by his critics: Vinash Purush (destruction man).

Like they say in the world of advertising: perception is reality and more than establishing a brand, often at times it is rebranding which makes marketers fret ceaselessly. Although Modi relentlessly widened his repertoire just like a performing artist, till 2007 his primary identity remained rooted in the Godhra incident and its

fallout. This also got more pronounced in March 2005 with the United States' decision to deny a diplomatic visa to him and cancel Modi's tourist visa for 'severe violations of religious freedom.' The decision as per a section of the US Immigration and Nationality Act which prohibits anybody who was 'responsible for, or directly carried out, at any time, particularly severe violations of religious freedom' from entering the US, created a furore. Not only did the BJP criticize the US, the Indian government officially asked the Americans to review the decision and the Congress in Gujarat asked Modi to introspect the reasons behind the refusal. Eventually, Modi cancelled his visit to the United Kingdom as well following advice from the Centre about a possible threat to his security. The post-Godhra violence stuck to Modi like a parasite, the only difference being that it was beneficial for both. The man who Sonia Gandhi labelled "Merchant of Death" prospered and so did the countless others who "serviced" this industry of death.

Modi's final makeover began on Tuesday, 7 October 2008 which also marked the seventh anniversary of his becoming chief minister of Gujarat. This was one day which probably marked the transition of Narendra Modi from being a Hindu Hriday Samrat to Vikas Purush ("development man"). One of the most respected industrial houses of India, a group which has made great contributions to nation building and is often lauded with the distinction of manufacturing "from steel to salt", the Tata Group's, Tata Motors, chose Sanand in Gujarat for its Nano car project. On 3 October 2008, Tata Motors had announced curtains for the Nano car project in West Bengal as the situation had got out of hand after several protests led by Mamata Banerjee, who was then in Opposition and spearheading the agitation with other activists. On 7 October, after several tough negotiations, Tata Motors announced their decision to relocate the factory to Gujarat and perhaps because after recent past experiences, Gujarat seemed to encourage an investor-friendly atmosphere and most importantly, it was conducive for hassle-free production capabilities.

Gujarat's strength has been the fact that though it accounts for barely five per cent of the country's population and almost six per cent of the country's geographical area, the state contributes to about sixteen per cent of industrial production in India. Besides a KPMG discussion paper, for CII, that points this irony out, there are several other assessments which have cited statistics to contend that since its formation in 1961, Gujarat's industry has almost quadrupled every decade. Noted economist, Bibek Debroy has argued that since Modi became chief minister there was a 'discernible pickup in Gujarat's growth performance' especially during the Tenth Plan period (2002-07). In the summer of 2012 with an election

round the corner, Modi's detractors and supporters marked their positions on the starting blocks armed with different sets of data. But whichever way one looked at it, a *Business Standard* report dated 1 August 2012 mentioned a cold set of facts: an ASSOCHAM study showed that Gujarat had 'emerged as the most preferred investment destination out of the twenty emerging industrial states in India.' The study by this industry body, also claimed that Gujarat 'attracted highest number of investment proposals in India amounting to Rs 16.28 lakh crore, which is about 13.5 per cent of the total live investments worth Rs 120.34 lakh crore promised in India as on December 2011.' The study arrived at its conclusions after analyzing growth pattern of the twenty states during 2004-05 to 2009-10.

It was this backdrop which probably led to the Tatas to opt for Gujarat in 2008 but given their unique symbolic status in Indian industry, the decision had a spiralling effect. Over the next few years other auto makers — Ford and Peugeot — also shifted to Gujarat and Maruti also showed an interest to make the state its new destination after the July 2012 incident of violence in its Manesar factory in Haryana which left a senior executive of the car manufacturer dead and almost a hundred injured. Why have auto makers made a beeline for Gujarat? Is it purely a "follow the leader" syndrome or was it because there is a certain amount of largesse available courtesy the state government? This question was also put by Virendra Pandit of *Business Line* in a report dated 8 September 2011: "What attracts global and Indian automakers to Gujarat?"

While the State Governments and officials of the companies setting up shop in Gujarat have remained tight-lipped about the financial concessions — particularly after the main Opposition party, Congress, claimed in 2009 that the Modi Government doled out concessions to the tune of Rs 33,000 crore to Tata Motors in order to woo them to Sanand — the reality may be somewhat different.

The State Government, in its industry promotion policy, provides tax benefits to projects having a minimum investment of Rs 1,000 crore, provided they stick to their timeline and begin production within a specified period. No other State Government works as fast as the one in Gujarat when it comes to implementation. Besides, for all practical purposes, the only decision-maker in Gujarat is Mr Modi himself — a workaholic and hard taskmaster, working 20 hours a day.

When I read the last line, I was reminded of his daily routine which Modi mentioned and concluded that probably he did not exaggerate when he said that his "work had become the only friend". There surely are some personal sacrifices which political leaders have to make in their single-minded pursuit of power!

In the years since inking the deal with Tata Motors, Modi not only consolidated his position as “development man”, he also emerged in May 2012 as the leader in the pack of best possible future prime ministers in a poll conducted among handpicked CEOs of leading companies. At a time when the possibility of Pranab Mukherjee becoming President was not being taken seriously, Modi got the support of nineteen CEOs as the best man for the top spot. He was followed by Mukherjee, often referred in media circles as the man who could never become prime minister, in the second spot with ten endorsements from CEOs.

But what is the vision of the man when it comes to personal development of people and how does this fit in with his vision of the ideal growth strategy? From 2008, development of skills for the youth has been a major component of Modi’s mantra. Having a somewhat tangential viewpoint on the current emphasis of focussing solely on development of skills among youth in place of simultaneous attention on imparting knowledge, I decided to engage Modi on a slightly theoretical note and asked: ‘If you remain at the helm of affairs in Gujarat what would you want for Gujarat?’

It was an expansive Modi this time: ‘If we want the 21st century to be the century of India — and that should be the common goal wherever we are — in Gujarat or in other states, in municipality or at other levels, we must attempt to take India to new heights. We must understand the best way of extracting demographic dividend — there is 65 per cent youth and we have to utilize their energies and think how to do this. I think this can be done by skill development and for this our emphasis should be on developing the skills of the youth and produce the finest human resource in the world.’

I then asked him what I have often asked many others — probably because I find it uncomfortable to be following on Chinese footsteps: neglect of knowledge may be all right in a totalitarian regime like the one Beijing runs. But in a political culture like India with a backdrop of its social and cultural diversity and the debate over majority and minority, it needs to be explored and discussed if negation of a knowledge-driven quest in education would be appropriate. ‘It has been seen that if too much emphasis is paid on developing skills then pursuit of knowledge gets less emphasis. Have you been able to give any thought to this question?’

‘Now this is a matter of debate. In every era there will never be a shortage of people who contribute by their knowledge and which percolates down the society. I do not think there will be an absence of knowledge in our society — at least this is what I believe. The absence will be — or has been of those who are to carry it and for this you will require skills. I do not think anyone can stop the flow of knowledge

or that the absence of knowledge will be felt — today the poverty is not of the flow of knowledge — for instance global warming is the biggest threat but we have a huge reservoir of knowledge on this issue...’

As Modi was asserting these lines, my thoughts went back to his early inspiration — Swami Vivekananda. To what extent was his abstraction different from the reductionism that Modi was pursuing in the summer of 2012? I let the thought pass and asked another question instead: ‘But along with this emphasis on skill development pursued by leaders like you, there has also been a trend for more than two decades to move towards vocational courses. Before this there was a preference for Applied Sciences over Pure Sciences...’

‘I do not think we can reduce knowledge or assess its pursuit in terms of courses pursued. Courses, syllabus, certificate and degrees are completely different from knowledge and its pursuit. This does not mean that someone who becomes a doctor cannot make a mark as a poet. Gujarat is the first state which has taken a policy decision to allow change of streams. If you have passed class twelve with commerce as a subject— that does not mean that all other avenues have closed for you. We have taken a policy decision to allow anyone to change to science stream later on. We are the first in India to inter-link all streams and this does not bind a person to one particular sphere. I believe that in coming days we will witness the success of this decision.’

It was obvious Modi enjoyed the Vikas Purush tag much more than any other and didn’t need much prodding. He continued when asked about what were his future goals for the state?

‘New Gujarat within Gujarat — that is our target. We will focus on coastal Gujarat and establish a new Gujarat there. The era of Krishna in Dwarka will be recreated. The coastal area will be where we will build big, new, ultra-modern cities — that is the only place now available and also because, Gujarat will become the hub of international trade. For India also, Gujarat is going to be most strategically positioned for international trade. Globalization and global economy is on a growth trajectory — no can stop that. The market will remain global; and the share markets in Europe will influence the Indian share market within seconds. We will have to develop accordingly.’

At this juncture I realized that my time on that day was running out with Modi. He had discreetly conveyed the message to me some minutes ago by looking askance at his wristwatch. But when he felt the need for another polite signal to me, he looked at the fairly nondescript wall clock to his left. I was sitting across the fairly large-sized table in his office chamber in his twin-bungalow residential

complex and when he looked at me in the middle of my question, I softly queried if he was getting late. Modi kind of nodded and I smiled, promising to wind up in a few minutes and asked him a question on a matter which a large number feel is the hypocritical obsession of successive state governments: will Gujarat remain legally alcohol-free state, would the government policy of prohibition continue forever? The question becomes all the more important in the backdrop of the massive network of illegal alcohol trade in the state, especially during elections, and though the state government has introduced death penalty for those involved in the manufacture and trade of alcohol, estimates suggest that the state exchequer could be losing anything between 12,000 to 15,000 crore rupees by way of revenue loss. The issue became significantly important because under Modi, Gujarat has also emerged as a preferred tourist destination. In fact, in March 2012 *India Today* had featured a small report on the issue and suggestively headlined it: “Time for a Malt March in Gujarat” and commented that the state’s ‘outdated alcohol prohibition policy’ was casting a negative shadow on tourism. But Modi was not cowed down by suggestions that he followed the beaten path and didn’t want to risk irking women voters by reversing the prohibition policy. He looked me in the eye and said: ‘Prohibition is a part of the value of life — it is not cosmetic. There is a commitment towards the policy — of the Gujarat government and of the people, the women and mothers. And I think that Gujarat is on the right track on this.’ I provoked Modi further ‘We keep reading about a huge parallel economy of alcohol trade. Do you think you or any other administrator will ever be able to review this policy?’

“There must be a review to remove deficiencies. But there is no question of removing prohibition because it is part of the values....’

While walking out of Modi’s residence which runs up higher telephone bills than his office, demonstrating that the man follows a “work from home” principle — or rather is always on the job, I got lost in the maze of galleries till a friendly security guard directs me to the exit door. I wonder if Modi will continue working more from home after the new swanky rupees 150 crore high-security office — called “Panchamrut”, meaning that it would be the source of elixir for the people of the state — becomes functional. The winding path out is in a way symbolic of the thoughts that run through my mind. Utmost among them is a simple question: what is the QED of Modi’s Vikas Purush endeavour? Undoubtedly, the first outcome of the makeover drive is that it has given Gujarat and the majority of its people a new *asmita* or identity. From a state notoriously known for the 2002 pogrom, it is now often cited as a model to replicate by people in other states — at

least as far as infrastructure projects are concerned. Modi is often endorsed as an able administrator by people outside Gujarat — a surprising development because baring negative aspects of the man, no other feature has been visible on the national theatre. It is this Vikas Mantra which also has the potential to become Modi's escape route from an image that has to be somewhat diluted, if not shed completely, if he has to make a transition to national politics. Asked to weigh this possibility, almost every Hindu Gujarati — who can be called an average Gujarati — that I spoke with in the course of writing this biography, felt that Modi playing a role in national politics would be a natural elevation and a clear endorsement that Modi has been able to recast himself as Vikas Purush. But Modi also faces the sternest challenge in his attempt to gain acceptability for the reincarnate: data has shown that Modi's development sutra has left large sections of society untouched. In the run up to the elections in 2012, Modi promised to pursue more inclusive policies and shed his bias for the outward sheen.

Like every other action of Modi, assessments of his government's economic and development initiatives are also viewed from partisan perspectives. His critics tend to look at the negatives while the camp followers focus only on the positives. But before I get into listing out those, I get riveted on a facet of Narendra Modi during the course of one of my interviews. At one point, an aide walked into the room to disturb the conversation. It was obvious that there was someone waiting outside for a quick word. He apologized and went out of the room and returned after a few minutes. In most cases, political leaders or other public personalities would need a prompt on what was being discussed prior to the interruption. But Modi did not need any such — he just walked in and before sitting resumed answering the question and I had to hastily switch on the recorder. What did this indicate? Obviously that he had, what is called in the language of computer hardware, a high RAM as a result of which he could simultaneously stay focussed on multiple issues and thoughts.

Besides this personality trait, there was another dimension of Modi that I was constantly confronted with in the course of writing this book: his ruthless efficiency. To run his machinery in a well-oiled manner, Modi uses a fairly large support staff. But there is no duplication of responsibility. If there is one aide who is responsible for fixing his appointments, then that is his only task. Similarly, if someone is assigned to manage his IT interests, the person is given no other task. This also enables his entire team to have knowledge of only a fraction of the entire operation. They all live in little boxes unmindful of the larger picture. Modi's colleague, Dileep Sanghani, who has known his boss since the 1980s, spoke about Modi's

work style: 'There is no pleasure higher than work for him and development is his weakness. He uses technology to the maximum and keeps learning the use of the latest breakthroughs and applications. He works till very late — probably he is the last one in the entire ministry to sleep and is accessible to everyone till very late in the night — even at eleven you can pick up the phone and speak to him. During meetings with ministers, he has suggestions for each ministry (many would interpret this information as an instance of Modi dictating specifics to each minister). To make suggestions to ministers he reads about subjects related to each ministry.'

What Sanghani says is also corroborated by an officer who has worked with Modi for long. He told me that Modi often invited subject-experts and asked them to come prepared with Power Point presentations. He places similar demands on his ministers and senior officers if they wish to come and seek his clearance on any proposal. 'He wants to see the pros and cons of every issue in black and white terms and not in abstraction,' the officer confided. But as far as decisions are concerned, all risks are his. This is obviously a trait that Modi picked up from his days in the RSS where the leader of every small unit and even the top boss — listens to views of others, but is always ultimately guided by his instinct.

It was instinct that made Modi move to areas like rural electrification. But it was also his political orientation that has made him steadfast in his policy of making no concessions whatsoever to religious minorities. Modi's development priorities have mirrored his overall political viewpoint. This is the reason why he has left himself open to criticism that his programmes are not inclusive. But even in areas where there are no issues of socio-religious differential, but are of paramount importance to the well being of all citizens, not adequate attention has been paid because these elements are not visible during cursory visits and thereby are not a great draw for the Vibrant Gujarat script.

To begin with, for a state where one-third of the population is under age fifteen, less than half (forty-five per cent) of children between one and two years are fully vaccinated against the six major childhood illnesses: tuberculosis, diphtheria, pertussis, tetanus, polio, and measles. The National Family Health Survey-III established 'one-third of children still have not received the recommended three doses of the polio vaccine.' The NFHS-III survey also indicated trends that resulted in a major embarrassment for Modi in the summer of 2012: fifty-two per cent of children are stunted or too short for their age; in the first six months of their lives more than one in five children are undernourished; and more than one-third of children under the age of five years even in the wealthiest households are stunted, while sixteen per cent are wasted, and thirty per cent are underweight. Anaemia

among women and children is another major worry: among children between the ages of six months and six years, seventy per cent are anaemic; and fifty-five per cent of women in Gujarat suffer from anaemia. Despite poor indicators on various health fronts, there is very little awareness on health insurance and only ten per cent of households have medical insurance cover of some degree. In the context of the low level of nutrition, Modi made a major faux pas when Amol Sharma from the *Wall Street Journal* asked him about prevailing malnutrition and Modi attributed this to vegetarianism which was dominant in the state due to Jain-Vaishnav influences and to growing beauty consciousness among young girls.

For the majority of people visiting Gujarat or even those who live in comfort zones in the state — both in terms of area and their level of affluence, Gujarat is indeed vibrant owing to great roads, uninterrupted power supply and world-class mall-multiplex culture besides golfing societies and several profit-churning businesses. However for forty-five per cent of the households of the state who have no toilet facility, the reality does not appear as rosy. These portents of a low-grade disquiet against state policy have remained dormant for long owing to a seeming political conscious. But when this sentiment will get — if at all it would — channelized into an electoral distrust of Modi is a matter no analyst can foretell and all analysis would be possible only with the benefit of hindsight.

But given the shrewdness of Modi, he has taken corrective steps: the moment he realized that, in one of the rare moments of losing focus he had told Amol Sharma from *Wall Street Journal* something that made him an object of ridicule, Modi tried to regain lost ground by almost immediately appointing a State Nutrition Mission. Similarly, Modi has been aware of the charge of pursuing policies that discriminates against Muslims and other religious minorities. But a report in *The Times of India* in November 2012 stated that Gujarat had ‘emerged as the state with the largest number of Muslim cops posted in police stations, beating states with a higher proportion of the community in their population.’ At one level, this is the beginning of taking corrective steps and a move towards reintegrating minorities. But on the other hand, unless backed by other policies and programmes, such deployment is little beyond lip service. Not too much should be read into a tweet of Modi on 19 November 2012. He tweeted, ‘On the occasion of Samvatsari, let us embrace forgiveness and compassion, and spread harmony and brotherhood. *Michchami Dukkhadam.*’ (Jains seek forgiveness by saying these two words in a ritualistic washing away of sins.)

So then what is the final QED of Modi’s Vikas Purush thrust? I found the answer to this in a rather irreverent review of two books on Gujarat — Debroy’s

and Atul Sood's *Poverty Amidst Prosperity* by T C A Srinivasa Raghavan in *Business Line* in November 2012. He in fact conveyed my sense on Gujarat:

Two books on Gujarat's economy, by two highly competent economists, arrived on my table recently. When I told the Editor that one of them was all praise for the State and the other very critical, he told me a story from his schooldays.

As part of the Hindi curriculum, he said, one of the stories he had to read was called *Dhaal ka Rang* meaning the colour of the shield hanging from a tree. Two friends could not agree whether it was blue or green and got into a heated argument until a third chap came along and said it was blue on one side and green on the other. This being exactly true of Narendra Modi's Gujarat, I thought I'd write about the two books together. This is not a review as I have no opinion to offer on the volumes, not least because the authors are very good friends of mine. Suffice it to say that a lot of people should read these books and form their own opinions.

At the end of his narrative on distinguishing features of the two books, Srinivasa Raghavan wrote: 'I would like to ask Debroy and Sood two questions now. How come Modi gets only half of the popular vote? How come Modi gets as much as half of the popular vote? Aristotle apparently said that generally in societies "the whole is greater than the sum of the parts". We should perhaps apply that to Gujarat's economic success or failure over the Modi period because numbers alone never tell the whole story in human affairs.'

No account of Modi and Gujarat can ever be complete without a reference to Dhirubhai Ambani, probably the first Gujarati entrepreneur who gave the new emerging business class in his state the courage to have faith in their ability to overhaul *purana paisa* (family run businesses). Modi shares Dhirubhai's brashness and confidence in his own methods that his predecessors have not followed and peers dare not ape. The legendary business tycoon had recognized Narendra Modi's exceptional talent to persevere very early in his life and had once tellingly commented: 'Modi *lambe race ka ghoda hai*' (Modi is a long-term player.) This for his supporters has worked like a protective armour and for his detractors been an inconvenient truth.

HERE AND BEYOND

The best way to predict your future is to create it.

– Abraham Lincoln

Narendra Modi did not begin his campaign for the Gujarat assembly election in the autumn of 2012 with the sole intention of making it to the podium to take oath as the state's chief minister for the fourth time. His goal lay beyond Gujarat — in the citadel of power in Delhi. But to reach there, Modi had to begin by taking baby steps — in the beginning on home ground, later through more treacherous political terrain. Securing Gujarat with a thumping majority was thus a prerequisite. There was a brief period when he was nervous and his supporters expressed fears of Modi getting bogged in the quagmire of internecine warfare within the Sangh Parivar like the mythical character, Abhimanyu, in the Mahabharata who was trapped within the web of Chakravyuh. But by the time the campaign concluded, Modi was confident that his triumph was preordained, what mattered was the margin.

When it became amply clear that victory was formally his for the third time in a row, Modi headed to the state headquarters of his party in Ahmedabad and addressed assembled crowds. However, Modi's real audience was outside Gujarat and he chose a medium to speak — which was understood by people in other parts of India, who were watching live images on TV channels. The people of Gujarat had already given their stamp of approval so there was no need to speak in Gujarati any longer and he therefore chose Hindi in which he is equally eloquent. The linguistic transition was easy. But would Modi be able to make such an effortless transition from the political agenda which motivated voters in Gujarat to endorse his regime once more, to a worldview where distrust and fear are not the cementing sentiments and where social exclusion is not the defining basis of a development strategy? Although very far away in history, and particularly for those who carried "Modi as PM" placards, close to their chests, the four small, yet meaningful Persian

words, said several centuries ago by Delhi's Sufi saint Nizamuddin Aulia, could have been a wise intervention: *Hunooz Dehli Door Ast* (Delhi is still far away).

Since the autumn of 2011 when Modi embarked on the Sadbhavna Yatra and virtually kick-started an electoral campaign that ran for more than a year, he allowed the “Modi as PM” campaign to continue unabated within his party and outside it. Modi never hid his ambitions and instead when asked about it during the campaign, replied that for the moment he was looking at only Gujarat — in essence meaning that he was formally throwing his hat into the ring, but *after* securing the state in his bag. In one of my interviews, I had also asked Modi this question. His reply was typical of a man who did not wish to commit anything but was yet willing to play ball: ‘It is a very loaded question and different people have different ways of answering such questions. If someone says that I will do whatever the party tells me to do — then he will get trapped. And if he has no interest then also the person gets trapped. It is very difficult to answer such questions. It is for writers (like you) to study and come up with their assessment — if the party takes such a decision whether it will benefit or suffer — you writers have to assess.’

But after securing a mandate that was almost at the two-third mark, and after deciding to speak to his audience outside Gujarat via live TV networks on the evening of 20 December 2012, Modi decided to indulge in a limited amount of grandstanding: the most significant of his utterances being his first ever public expression of remorse by seeking forgiveness for any mistake he may have committed during the campaign. For a man not known to express regret even in private, the choice of language and words to articulate his views, indicated Modi's realization that he would have to henceforth speak in two contrasting styles: one directed inwards to the people of Gujarat and other directed to the people outside. But even when Modi speaks to the people in Gujarat, it would be worthwhile to keep in mind that he has never shared the pain and suffering of the “other” and instead has merely celebrated the joy and successes of the majority.

However the dilemma of choosing different octaves while addressing dissimilar audiences is a conundrum Modi will face throughout the race for the prime ministerial sweepstakes. On the one hand, he shall be bound to justify the overwhelming emotion of retribution, a fact that many in his own fraternity find difficult to ignore despite its eclipse by the chanting of the development mantra in the campaign of 2012. But on the other, Modi will have to contend with the fact that the India where he needs to gain acceptability, is not only larger but also varied and most importantly politically fragmented in comparison to the “lateral” state housing six crore Gujarati people who were easily converted. It would be foolish to

suggest that Modi is unaware of the complexities; after all, he is anything but a political ostrich.

It is therefore up to Modi to decide if the process he set in motion on 19 November 2012 by articulating sentiments of forgiveness and compassion and calling for the spread of harmony and brotherhood, on the occasion of the Jain festival of Samvatsari, is to be taken forward. This tweet, mentioned earlier, almost went unnoticed — and probably not understood — but the sentiment was taken forward in his victory speech. The toning down of his rhetoric was also evident when he did not make a mention of the tenth anniversary of the terrorist attack on the Akshardham Temple — an episode that played a major part in his electoral campaigns in 2002 and 2007. In the middle of his 2012 campaign, Modi opted to skip mentioning this — clearly by conscious choice and not due to oversight. This however does not mean that there is a change in his approach to the issue of secularism; it is only a matter of emphasis at various periods in time. It would be interesting to see how Modi continues to balance between the two contrasting Indias — one which endorses his politics of exclusion and the other that may reject the idea vehemently.

Modi's journey will have to go through many portals — initially within his own party, the larger political fraternity and subsequently beyond the cloistered group. He will also have to cross the paths of many other regional leaders who are no pygmies in their own fiefdoms. Moreover, as most of them also share a trait of Modi — of paying scant regard to viewpoints other than his own — the path to forging a common political front will be more difficult. Given India's spiritual diversity, Modi's willingness to risk his "base camp" by an overt gesture of a Congress-style public repentance for 2002 will be essential for his greater acceptance at a national level. This need not necessarily be verbal but can even be what Ashis Nandy suggested in April 2012 when speaking to *Outlook* magazine. To the man who he once labelled a textbook fascist, the social scientist advised, 'go to a dargah. Go to Ajmer Sharif and apologise. The Khwaja is supposed to be benevolent and very forgiving.' But it is not a Sufi saint from whom Modi would seek deliverance; he will be looking for greater acceptance from several others who may not be so forgiving afterall.

But even if this were to happen and strictly in the realm of conjecture, it would dismay Modi's core supporters in Gujarat and a group of Hindus elsewhere who feel that the majority community deserves a greater say in matters of governance and social conduct. He may thus decide against any such tokenism and hope to polarize the aggressive Hindu sentiment the moment there is negative reaction and

coagulation of minority sentiment in favour of any other party. Interestingly, the dilemma Modi faces is similar to the one faced by his party in the aftermath of the demolition of the Babri Masjid-Ram Janmabhoomi complex: what had been achieved was no longer relevant for the course ahead; the main worry was how to go beyond. However as a larger entity, the BJP had the luxury of replacing its leader but Modi has no such privilege — he certainly cannot change his face and the overall demeanour, but he can alter his tone and tenor, however only to the extent that he does not become a clone of others in the race.

Mark Twain once remarked that the ‘secret of getting started is breaking your complex, overwhelming tasks into small, manageable tasks, and then starting on the first one.’ Will Modi internalize this advice in his attempt to make headway on the highway to Delhi to convert the “Sultanate into a Rashtra?” The first bastion which Modi would have to secure is his party. For the major part of the period following National Democratic Alliances’ shock defeat in 2004, the BJP has been an army without a general. This resulted in the emergence of regional chieftains challenging the central might. Some like B S Yeddyurappa and Babulal Marandi quit the party owing to a clash of aspirations with the central leadership while others like Modi, Shivraj Singh Chouhan of Madhya Pradesh, Vasundhara Raje Scindia in Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh’s Raman Singh succeeded in keeping adversaries at bay.

Modi will have to contend with another norm within the BJP: it has traditionally never encouraged state leaders to move to the national stage. The most significant national leaders — Atal Bihari Vajpayee and L K Advani — transcended the state from where they were elected (both from more than one state). Even stalwarts who were extremely influential within the party — Bhairon Singh Shekhawat for instance — essentially remained regional leaders and Modi will have to break this tradition for a ticket to Delhi. There is also the issue of Advani continuing to remain politically active and unless there is a change in this situation and, there is little likelihood of the party opting for any other leader to be its electoral mascot.

The BJP has also had a serious issue over handling of *enfant terrible* like Uma Bharati, once among the biggest crowd pullers of the party in north India. Questions that arose within the BJP in the immediate aftermath of the Gujarat verdict were related to a “second term” for Nitin Gadkari and if and when Modi would be anointed as the prime ministerial candidate. These two issues were however more in the realm of the daily hunt for a headline point in a media report. But a much bigger question — and the manner of its resolution — will be a pointer to the direction of Indian polity and the change, if any, that Modi introduces in his persona.

There have been very few victories in state assembly elections that result in awkwardness for the leadership of the winner. Why was the verdict from Gujarat one such rare one? Why did Modi's victory create more problems for the BJP than the Congress which has not won an election in Gujarat since 1985? And, will the tempestuous relationship between Modi and central leadership of the BJP play out over time? Will Modi remain a fringe player on the national platform of the party or would he eventually branch out after remaining in the sidelines and to prevent the Sangh Parivar from slowly chipping at his blocks? Or would Modi eventually be able to browbeat the national leadership into submission?

The last possibility would have been beyond the pale of doubt after the verdict of 2012 if it had yielded what Modi had wanted it to be as also indicated by many opinion and exit polls: significantly upwards of 120 seats for BJP instead of the 115 which the party eventually secured. Though a remarkable victory by any standards, did the verdict of 2012 demonstrate Modi's dwindling returns? After all, in 2002 he led the party to victory in 127 seats which was down to 117 five years later and further reduced to 115 in 2012. Within the big picture these numbers pale into insignificance. But Modi's performance is always examined through a magnifying glass and even the smallest slip is treated like Sachin Tendulkar in his prime: anything less than a century in every odd match was considered as the onset of a slump in form. But the victory in 2012 was more significant because it was a mandate secured by Modi virtually on his own as almost the entire Sangh Parivar was ranged against him. If rural Gujarat had also turned out as emphatically as urban-and semi-urban Gujarat did in favour of Modi, the victory would have been sweeter.

The extent of the anti-Modi sentiment within the Sangh Parivar was evident in *Sadhana*, the weekly Gujarati magazine and the official organ of the RSS. The magazine was ironically once part of Modi's portfolio in the 1980s when he was not yet deputed to the BJP, but in the course of the campaign in 2012 it maintained strict neutrality between Modi, Keshubhai Patel and most importantly, the Congress. In one of its issues, the magazine featured a cartoon with an empty chair with the three contenders circling around it. In another, the magazine carried a report on the problems faced by people during Modi's tenure and on the poll promises that were not kept. Another issue carried a suggestive headline — "Is Saurashtra Ready For Change?" All such reports would have held their space in every privately owned magazine or newspaper but to be featured in official organs of the RSS was a different matter — it only demonstrated the extent of the campaign within the organization and its affiliates, to oust Modi. What made the issue

politically significant is that the magazine, like all RSS publications, was under the direct charge of Manmohan Vaidya, as Prachar Pramukh (publicity chief) with whom Modi has differences and has been referred previously in the book.

Modi the pace of his bandwagon. Over the years, there has been considerable erosion in the supreme stature of the RSS leadership owing primarily to the leadership's inability to evolve with changing times and adapt to the omnipresence of technology, media and the changed value systems in post-liberalization India. Readers would recall several instances of Modi's run-ins with the RSS leadership — the national leadership as well as those in the state. In the middle of the campaign, Modi had also visited Nagpur to personally bring to the notice of Mohan Bhagwat, the Sarsanghchalak, that the state leadership was creating impediments for him, but the groups inimical to Modi were not reined in during the campaign.

The problem that the RSS leadership has with Modi is over his style of functioning and the fact that he has the ability to render the entire organization ineffectual. This was the primary reason why the RSS leadership despite agreeing to Modi's demand to order the sidelining of Sanjay Joshi from the BJP in May 2012, chose to prop up Gadkari as a countervailing force to him through the campaign period. How Modi redefines his relationship with the Nagpur-based leadership will play a significant part in his career ahead — he clearly has to enable the RSS to come to terms with the fact that it has evolved beyond the client-patron pattern, so common within the Sangh Parivar.

The victory in 2012 was also significant because social polarization, a recurring theme in the Modi chronology, was almost relegated to the backburner. Instead the “D” word assumed great significance and Modi and his campaign managers continuously projected his development face within and outside Gujarat. It was only during the “insecure phase” of his campaign that Modi opted to remind people of the existing social polarization with tactics like referring to Sonia Gandhi's Political Secretary, Ahmed Patel, as Ahmed “Mian”. It only helped Modi when towards the fag end of the campaign, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, contended that minorities felt insecure in Gujarat under Modi — another instance of the trap that Modi set for the Congress early in his tenure.

The biggest lesson for Modi and several other poll pundits from the verdict was that voters in the state in “normal” times remained oriented towards their personal goals and aspirations and did not care much about cultural and territorial

hegemony. The unstated sentiment of Modi's campaign was that a mandate which gave him significantly more than 120 seats would put him on the express highway to Delhi and anything short of this would force him to take the normal and slow moving passenger train. Despite layers of electoral analysis attributing reasons ranging from the presence of Keshubhai to factional feuds within the Sangh Parivar, Modi would have realized that for the voter who turned out, issues pertaining to their personal well-being remained more central than the idea of their vote being a ticket for Modi to become prime minister.

The verdict in a way negated Modi's assertion made to me that people from Gujarat nurtured a deep-seated sense of hurt because Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel was not made prime minister in 1947 and what stemmed out of the argument — that the moment Gujaratis were able to identify a leader with a chance to get a shot at the top spot, they would rally behind her or him. Despite the fact that there have been very few leaders from Gujarat after Morarji Desai who held prominent positions either in government, ruling party or the Opposition, the voters were primarily focussed on local issues before finally voicing their preference for Modi as prime minister.

One of the reasons Modi could not improve on his 2007 performance was his conscious attempt to exclude several from his six crore bandwagon and religion perhaps notwithstanding. Had he adopted a more inclusive approach in his development programmes, Modi may have succeeded in restricting, if not eliminating completely, the muted sense of disenchantment among the lower middle classes and those below that strata because Modi's "development sutra" made little sense to them. This was best evidenced in the result for the Sanand assembly constituency, the much talked about transition point in Modi's evolution as Development Man. The BJP lost this seat to the Congress. Although Modi's supporters lauded his approach of not announcing sops in budgets and making populist promises in his election manifesto, the strategy worked only with a polarized electorate in a limited region.

In hindsight it may be argued that when Modi began fashioning his development reincarnate after securing the mandate in 2002, he had already made up his mind that the ultimate bastion he wanted to conquer was outside the state. The thrust of the development programmes that he pursued with great vigour were those that were most visible to people outside the state — highways, electricity, industry, agriculture and tourism. For a country with inadequate infrastructure facilities in most parts, this was most significant and is the primary reason why people see Modi positively: at least he ensures better roads and a regular supply of electricity.

At the risk of flogging a cliché, it is indeed very lonely at the top for Modi and as mentioned earlier in the book, he chooses to be alone and courts loneliness passionately. In the political context, more than his cabal who wrote several odes to Modi, it is the man who had to justify his *existence* by showcasing accomplishments beyond the “management” of the post-Godhra violence. But just as Modi expects the critics to look at the situation from his prism, he also — if he wants to make steady progress on the road to Delhi — has to look at the world by standing in the shoes of those Gujaratis who did not vote for him. Political isolation is after all not new for Modi; he cut his teeth within the RSS fold and when he was making a transition from being a young man in search of an identity to one who was clear about his goals, he also came face to face with challenges which made him alter his persona at different stages and in most cases by genuflecting to his seniors.

I had once drawn him into a short exchange while mentioning about the dwindling support for the BJP from coalition partners, Modi gave me an indication on how he visualized his evolving strategy: ‘When Atalji became prime minister for the first time in 1996 — we got no allies — Akali Dal and Shiv Sena had been with us earlier but not new allies. But in 1998 the situation changed — the parties and their leaders were the same but just because our seats increased, the allies also increased (laughs). Then in 2004 when our seats got reduced — the allies got reduced. The issue therefore is that the number of allies depends on the winnability of the BJP. If allies become confident that by associating with the BJP their chances will increase, they will come and join BJP. But if they think that BJP will become a burden and that we will be able to save a few seats by going it alone, then they will not join hands with BJP.

‘So all this — the question of allies — will depend on the strength of the BJP. And the BJP will also have to make its allies stronger and this can be done only when the party itself becomes stronger than what it is now. You do not have to undermine allies — but if we are not strong ourselves, then how can we strengthen them? For instance, if someone gives me 10 seats in Tamil Nadu to contest — but if I do not win those seats, then who will give me a chance to contest again? So my responsibility in the beginning would be to win at least those 10 seats — everything else is secondary. If Naveen Babu (Patnaik) thinks that if I give them 50 seats to contest and they will win those so my government is sure to be made, he will come with us. Like in Bihar — our people have shown that — we have a strike rate of 98 % (in 2010 BJP won 91 out of 102 seats contested).’

I asked Modi at that point if in his mind the BJP’s winnability will increase if he is presented as *the* leader. But as was expected, he smartly warded off that question.

Not just Modi, no other political leader would actually stake his or her claim in such a fashion; rather, Modi will wait for a groundswell of opinion to build up a demand for his anointment. In conversations with Modi an unstated strategy can be discerned. It is evident that Modi would want to divide the states into those where striking pre-poll alliances is a necessity for the BJP and the rest where such a strategy would not make a major change in its fortunes. Thus the necessity for Modi to be more pliable and tone down his brashness will become imperative in states where the BJP would have to perforce strike pre-poll alliances.

A major handicap that Modi faces is of course in the image that he has so assiduously cultivated and which many of supporters say is only a mirage: his overt antipathy towards the *minority* numbers that form part of his six crore Gujaratis. Throughout 2012, in the run up to the Gujarat elections, the media frequently echoed the assertions of the likes of Nitish Kumar expressing reservations about Modi being named as the prime ministerial nominee of the BJP.

However, even if his potential allies are silenced with political promises in the future, the biggest undoing of Modi will possibly stem not from his political orientation but from his overarching personal trait: an inability to look at a discord from any viewpoint except his own. Political intolerance can still be tempered, but authoritarian streak can be a big handicap in the times of coalitions. It is easy to be a “benevolent dictator” in a state where one has the support of close to fifty per cent of the voters, but that formula is unlikely to be a hit when one has less than thirty per cent of the popular vote in one’s kitty.

Modi is evidently not very comfortable with the idea of coalitions and thinks some of his initiatives can herald the return of single party governance. I asked him about how he looked at the coalition era and the fact that this phase did not appear to be fading away. Modi replied that he was seized of the matter and in the state, he had taken the initiative at the level of panchayats to make voting compulsory but how the legislation awaits Governor Kamla Beniwal’s assent. Modi was unequivocal in his view that ‘by compulsory voting, this problem will get resolved.’

But his argument seemed too simplistic to me and I decided to probe further. He held forth once again: ‘If there is hundred per cent voting, a lot of ills would be removed. The chances of good people being elected will also go up. At times the silent voter will give a good result.’

But won’t this be undemocratic? I asked him. Introducing some kind of regimentation by way of a legislation?

‘What we have passed in Gujarat is fully democratic and we have given the option of not voting (by including the option of none-of-the-above) because, the

right to protest and expressing opposition and anger is an integral essence of democracy. We are in fact taking this one step forward. Presently, voters get the right to select someone but we are also giving the right to reject and this is the beauty — that is our marketing point... We are just saying that people can no longer remain silent — this country is yours and you cannot remain silent, your participation is needed. Later on, we can make further reforms and say that till the time no candidate gets 50 per cent of the votes, the result will not be declared (like in the presidential polls).’

Modi’s answer led to another query — one on electoral reforms and the fact that it had been almost a decade that the system of mandatory declaration of assets and criminal cases had been introduced. What had been its impact and if any further changes were necessary? Modi’s reply hints at an issue that is likely to figure significantly if he gets a chance to list them: ‘A declaration must be there that neither the candidate nor any member of her or his family has any black money stashed away in any country abroad.’

In all my conversations with Modi and after speaking to a large number of people who have known him closely, even in professional capacities, the lasting image is that of a man who is every bit a “doer”, innovative, an efficient manager, an ace strategist and the list is endless. The flip side of this is an endless litany of pejorative terms which is why in the context of Gujarat and Modi, the phrase “move on” has obtained significant credence. However if there is one weakness that Modi shares with several of his peers and obviously at the regional level then it is about centralization of power. Modi has never displayed traits of an ideologue and readers would recollect, has often drawn assistance from subject experts in his tenure as chief minister, reducing his ministers to mere appendages of his larger-than-life persona. While this works at the state level for all chief ministers, most have found it difficult to make a transition after coming to the Centre. Historically, leaders in all parties who have had their first exposure to politics at the national level have succeeded more than those emerging from a provincial background where a certain element of dictatorial tradition is ingrained. If Modi wishes to aspire for a key position in national politics he has to guard against following in the footsteps of West Bengal’s Left Front and its charismatic leader — Jyoti Basu. The Communist coalition remained in office for thirty-four years but barring the shot he almost got in 1996, Basu remained a regional chieftain.

Modi often told me that in politics there are no full stops except those ordained by destiny. The story of Modi's evolution will not end with the verdict of 2012. It would be a recurring theme in Indian political history till the time he remains politically active. On a personal note, I would like to recollect that this book enabled me to convert what I believed to be a full stop in the story of my personal acquaintance with Modi into a continuing sentence. Towards the end of the writing of this book as my interaction with Modi dwindled and my phone calls mostly began to be unreturned, I once again drew belief from Modi's utterances that the only full stops are by divine sanction. At that moment, I decided that whatever be the reality of the moment, I would never believe that the completion of this biography would not put a full stop in my quest for unravelling the enigma of Modi.

In fact, I consider that it would be a tragedy for both if I have to put a full stop in the process of my trying to understand Modi from his perspective despite sharp differences on key issues and for him too, if he chooses to shut himself from people like me who he knows will not end up ending singing paeans addressing him, but are willing to evaluate various facets of him with an open mind and even appreciating if the need be, irrespective of different viewpoints. Modi needs to understand that appreciating unabashed scrutiny is the hallmark of a true statesman, while writers must agree to travel on boats of oarsmen in whom they have no — or little — faith.

Like many confessions made through the course of this book, I would like to admit that I did not expect that towards the end of writing this book I would become persona non grata in Modi's world. I hope that I would continue to get an opportunity to interact with him not because of any largesse that in any case would be unwelcome, but because of the window of understanding that it may provide into the mind of one of the most significant Indian political leaders of the new millennium. But if life does not spin that way and I continue to get either an engaged tone whenever I call Modi or I am confronted with a shut door whenever I go to his doorstep, I would never regret it and consider it a price I paid for being allowed to write this book with his nod — though without endorsement of the final version.

Writers have to make a choice of what they seek through their words.

In my journey into Modi's past, present and his mind, I was constantly guided by Ernest Hemingway's words: 'My aim is to put down what I see in the best and simplest way.'

I hope I have been able to do this to the best of my conviction.

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- * CNN-IBN put out a video excerpt and its transcript of the interview a day after the aborted recording. All interviews and telephonic conversation between Modi and me which have been reproduced in the book, were conducted in Hindi and the transliterations have been done faithfully to reflect the tone and tenor of the conversation.
- ** In April 2009, the Supreme Court appointed a Special Investigative Team headed by a former chief of CBI, to investigate specific cases of violence against Narendra Modi.
- *** Gujarat government appointed a one-member inquiry commission immediately after the 2002 post-Godhra violence. Later, this was converted into a two-member commission.
- * Protests were disallowed at the Boat Club, parallel to Rajpath in 1988 when tens of thousands of farmers squatted here for more than a week.