

Gujarat elections 2007: an appraisal

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"I am proud that I am a human, and I am a Hindu/every moment I experience I am big, wide, I am Sindhu."

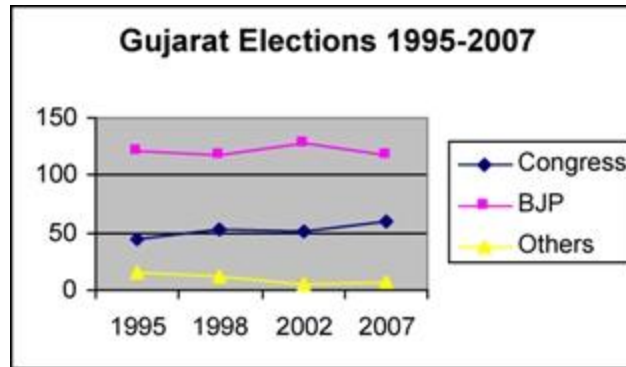
– Narendra Modi.

Introduction

After gaining independence in 1947, the Indian National Congress party (INC) ruled the Bombay state (which included present-day Gujarat and Maharashtra). Congress continued to govern Gujarat after the state's creation in 1960. During and after India's State of Emergency of 1975-1977, public support for the Congress Party eroded, but it continued to hold government until 1995. In the 1995 Assembly Polls, the Congress lost to the BJP and Keshubhai Patel came to power. His government lasted only two years. The fall of that government was provoked by a split in the BJP (led by Shankersinh Vaghela) which has won most of the subsequent polls. In 2001, following the loss of two assembly seats in by-elections, Keshubhai Patel resigned and yielded power to Narendra Modi. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) retained a majority in the 2002 election, and Narendra Modi has since served as Chief Minister of the state. On 1 June, 2007, Narendra Modi became the longest serving Chief Minister of Gujarat. On 23 December, 2007, the BJP won the state elections in Gujarat and Narendra Modi became the Chief Minister for the third time in a row. It is not often that a provincial election in India, or indeed anywhere, draws international attention. The recently concluded elections in Gujarat did so for two reasons. One, Gujarat is perceived as one of bellwether states for Indian national elections due in 2009. Second, Gujarat holds a unique position as a laboratory for the most militant variety of right-wing Hindu nationalism. Both reasons were given added weight with the election to a third term of Chief Minister Narendra Modi of the right-wing Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), currently in opposition in the national legislature. There could be a debate on whether Modi won because of his charisma, economic development or a combination of other factors. But the point is that the people of Gujarat have voted for Modi with an overwhelming majority. Was his victory due to Vikas Modi or Hindu Modi image or a combination of both? Will Narendra Modi now jump into the national political scene?

Gujarat State Assembly

Gujarat is governed by a Legislative Assembly of 182 members. Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) are elected on the basis of adult suffrage from one of 182 constituencies, of which 13 are reserved for scheduled castes and 26 for scheduled tribes. The term of office for a member of the Legislative Assembly is five years. The Legislative Assembly elects a speaker, who presides over the meetings of the legislature. A governor is appointed by the President of India. The leader of the majority party or coalition in the legislature (Chief Minister) or his or her designee acts as the Leader of the Legislative Assembly. The administration of the state is led by the Chief Minister.



Source *India Today*, 7 January, 2008.

Demographics

In Gujarat, according to the last census, Dalits comprise seven per cent of the population; tribals, 15 per cent; Patels, 18 per cent; Baniyas, four per cent; Brahmins, three per cent; Muslims, nine per cent; Kshatriyas, including Thakors (backward class Rajputs), 16 per cent; and Kolis (mostly landless labourers), 20 per cent. The remaining eight per cent are classified as other backward classes. The most powerful and vocal group are the Patels, who tend to vote en bloc. In the last election, they voted in favour of BJP. Out of 182 legislators in the Gujarat assembly, more than 40 are Patels. They dominate the Cabinet as well. The Patels are strongly opposed to the Kshatriyas (upper class Rajputs).¹

Narendra Modi: Personality

Modi was born in the northern Mehsana district of Gujarat, to a middle-class family. He has four brothers, Somabhai, Amritbhai, Prahladbhai, Pankajbhai, and one sister called Vasantiben. Modi completed his schooling in Vadnagar and did his masters degree in Political Science from Gujarat University. People affectionally call him Namoo and Mahatma Modiji. Inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, Narendra Modi has often promoted vegetarianism as a lifestyle essential for purity of thought and action and considers meat eating as a resource-intensive activity that burdens the world food resources.

True, Mr Modi has become anathema to liberal and secular India, but what has yet to be attempted is a full examination of his life. Who, for example, is aware that the teenager Mr Modi spent nearly two years of his life at the foothills of the Himalayas, seeking wisdom? Or, as acquaintances say, that he was married off against his will at the age of 14 by his father to a girl two years younger, whom he never saw subsequently. Because of the age factor, this wedding was not legal, and the young girl in question is today a schoolteacher in Gujarat, living out her life in obscurity.

Mr Modi's father had apparently been afraid that his headstrong son would become a sanyasin, and hence sought to tempt him into a household life. However, Mr. Modi refused the conjugal bed and has since kept away from his so-called spouse, by not meeting her even once after marriage.² As a young man, he joined the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, a Hindu nationalist organisation. He became a full-time worker and organiser for it, and was later nominated by it to be a representative in the Bharatiya Janata Party. He joined the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh in the year 1974 and was involved in the anti-corruption Nav Nirma ("Reconstruction") Movement. He joined the Bharatiya Janata Party in the early 1980s. He helped maintain the relations between the RSS and the BJP. In 1988, he became the General Secretary of the Gujarat State BJP unit. He is believed to be a protégé of Lal Krishna Advani, who is a senior leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party himself. Advani has praised Modi on numerous occasions, referring to him as "a leader who, after being subjected to a malicious and prolonged campaign of vilification, has been able to impress even his critics with his determination, single-minded focus, integrity and a wide array of achievements in a relatively short time."³

Modi was believed to be a back-room operator for the political party in the beginning, but during the elections, he portrayed himself as a pro-Hindu leader and campaigned on a platform of Hindutva.

2002 Gujarat Riots

Narendra Modi is considered to be a pro-Hindutva person. On 27 February, 2002, Hindu-Muslim riots broke out in Gujarat when more than 50 Hindus were burnt alive in a train for which Muslims were held responsible. The Hindus in the state struck back by attacking Muslims, looting their properties and killing them in cities and villages of the state. More than 500 people died in the riots and several thousands of people lost homes. Modi is viewed as a Hindutva hero in the riot hit cities like Ahmedabad, which has a long history of communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims. Modi's government was criticized severely from all parts of the world for not controlling the riots. He was blamed for propelling the riots which led to death of several Muslims. The United States Department of State in its International Religious Freedom Report 2003 stated:

'The Gujarat state government and the police were criticized for failing to stop the violence, and in some cases participating in or encouraging it. NGOs report that police were implicated directly in nearly all the attacks against Muslims in Gujarat, and in some cases, NGOs contend, police officials encouraged the mob. The Government dispatched the NHRC to investigate the attacks against Muslims, but the NHRC's findings that the attacks against Muslims was a comprehensive failure on the part of the state government to control the persistent violation of rights of life, liberty, equality, and dignity of the people of the state,' led to widespread criticism in the Hindu community and allegations of government partiality.⁴ Hence, Modi resigned from the post but was re-elected by a huge margin in December 2002 in the Assembly Polls and he became the Chief Minister again.

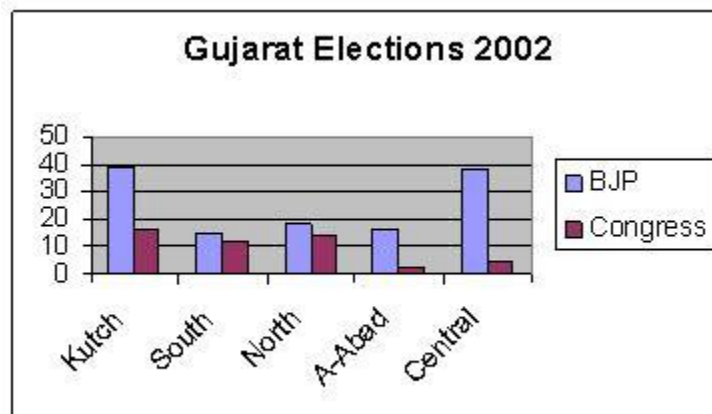
The Gujarat Assembly Election Results 2002

Party	Seats
BJP	126
Congress	51
Others	4
Total Seats	182

Source: <http://www.indian-elections.com/>

But the BJP lost the national election in 2004 in Gujarat, although it was not a heavy loss when compared to other states. Modi is still blamed for his inability to stop the Gujarat riots.

Party Position in Different Areas of Gujarat

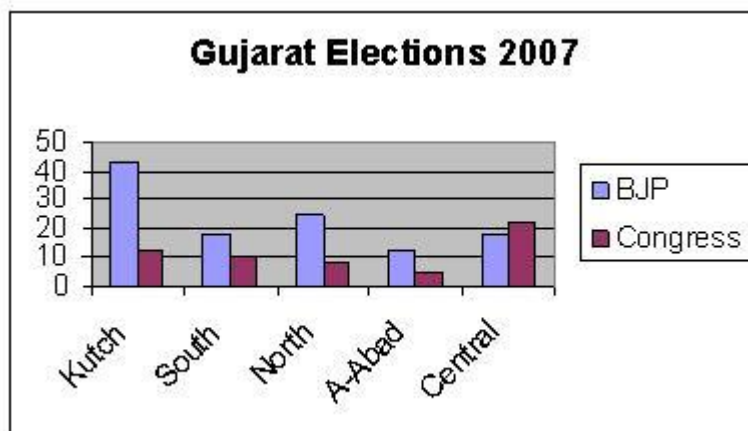


Source: INDIA TODAY January 7, 2008 p.36.

Gujarat Elections 2007

The result was that the BJP, led by Mr Modi, secured 117 seats in the 182-member house, five less than the 2002 election held after the Gujarat carnage. Like the last time, he successfully played the anti-Muslim card and equated terrorism with Muslims. Congress came second with 62 seats. However, it increased its tally by 11 seats by winning in the riot-affected areas, central Gujarat. The party bungled over selecting candidates, fielding many who in the eyes of the voters were BJP men.

Party Position in Different Areas of Gujarat



Source: INDIA TODAY January 7, 2008 p.36

The Congress never presented a clear-cut alternative to Hindutva because it was too much on the defensive and too ready to compromise. On the other hand, the BJP or Mr Modi did not hide their philosophy of saffronising India. What the party and Mr Modi did was an antithesis of the freedom struggle, which was waged, not only to oust the British but also to establish a democratic, secular polity. These principles are enshrined in the Constitution. Even when it was clear that Pakistan would be an Islamic Republic, the resolve in India was to convert it into a secular state. If the nation wanted to have a Hindu rashtra, nobody could have stopped it from doing so because 80 per cent of the population in the divided India was Hindu. Still the proposition was not even discussed because the ethos of freedom struggle was secularism.

One of the greatest myths being propagated about the election is that it was fought on the agenda of 'development.' In fact, Mr Modi played the communal card right from the beginning, when he agitated the Ram Setu issue, and time and again highlighted 'terrorism' – no more than shorthand for Islam and Muslims. The tone of the communal campaign became especially shrill when Mr Modi shamelessly justified the cold-blooded killing of Sohrabuddin Shaikh in a fake encounter. But Hindutva shadowed the campaign all the way through. Mr Modi's very persona concentrates vicious communalism within itself and exudes it.

To start with, the long expansion of the BJP's social base in Gujarat seems to have come to an end. During the period stretching from the anti-Babri mosque movement to the massacre and beyond in 2002, the BJP managed to split the Congress party's traditional base among Gujarat's 'core minorities,' comprised of Adivasis, Dalits and Muslims, and among subaltern but numerous layers like the Kolis, who form about one-fifth of the state's population. Thanks to the appeal of militant Hindutva, the BJP attracted a significant proportion of votes from the first two groups in 2002.

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Modi: The Next Prime Minister of India?

Will Narendra Modi now jump into the national political scene? Is he the Bharatiya Janata Party's only 'Great Hope', its real prime ministerial candidate? As Modi took the oath for the third time as Gujarat's Chief Minister, these questions are crowding the political air in New Delhi as well as in Ahmedabad.

Hindutva poster boy and Gujarat Chief Minister, Narendra Modi, has emerged as a rallying point for all the BJP leaders following his outstanding performance in the Gujarat Assembly elections, but state leaders feel that he still has a long way to go to become a national leader.

However, the party, which is trying to brand Narendra Modi as the new Hindutva mascot, does not mince any words to laud his performance and feels it would be stretching things too far to think that Modi could emerge as a national leader at this point of time. "The next Lok Sabha election will be contested under L. K. Advani's leadership. Advani is our candidate for Prime Minister," a senior BJP leader said. "There is no question of Modi becoming Prime Minister despite his victory in Gujarat election."⁵

"Modi's popularity has increased after the Gujarat elections. So Modi will continue to campaign in Maharashtra and other states,"⁶ BJP leaders said, giving an indication that the Gujarat pattern could be duplicated in Maharashtra for the 2009 Assembly elections. Despite the airing of Tehelka tapes just on the eve of elections, and issues like the fake encounter case of Sohrabuddin Shaikh, opposition from Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) cropping up besides the anti-Modi campaign unleashed by the Congress, Modi stunned his detractors and fuelled speculations that he could soon become a national face of BJP. BJP's elites said that "Modi certainly has good future in national politics. But he will complete five years term as CM of Gujarat."⁷ Party workers want Modi to campaign across the country in view of his clean image and charisma.⁸

BJP insiders see power equations changing fast within the party following the victory in Gujarat, but not fast enough for Modi to reach the centre-stage immediately. L. K. Advani, the BJP's candidate for prime minister in the next Lok Sabha polls, will count on Modi more and more being a MP from Gujarat. Party General Secretary Arun Jaitley too will see a lot of promise in him for a national role. But there are others, including the RSS, who will not have any role for him at the Centre at this juncture. Jaitley said, "Politics does not accept any form of stagnation. Politicians, personalities evolve over a period of time."⁹

With the RSS having just given the approval to Advani's projection as a PM candidate, that too 13 days before the Gujarat results, the message was clear to everyone in the BJP, including Modi. The next few months will see the party working hard to project a united face.

It was not without a reason that BJP President Rajnath Singh was prompt in making it clear that nobody was "bigger than the party" and that the Gujarat win was a "combination of governance, ideology and development." His reluctance to give Modi full credit for the Gujarat victory drew angry reactions from supporters in Ahmedabad.

Pressed even further, Singh said, "There is no first or second category in our party and in the next Lok Sabha elections; the BJP will contest elections under the leadership of Advani, who is our prime ministerial candidate."¹⁰

True, Modi defied everyone for this win – senior BJP leaders who were hoping that his ego would be cut to size if the seat tally went down sharply, the dissidents including veteran Keshubhai Patel who nurtured

hopes of a hung House for them to play a part, and the RSS Parivar, particularly the recalcitrant VHP, which could not stand his personality cult.

Despite all this, Modi cannot make it big before the next Lok Sabha polls because what makes him tick in Gujarat does not suit the BJP in other states, say BJP functionaries. The NDA allies are not ready for him. Nor are other BJP leaders who are still upset by his manner and methods.

Besides, with the BJP having just declared Advani as the Prime Ministerial candidate for the next general elections, Rajnath Singh remains the BJP President until February 2009. The RSS won't let him be disturbed. Nor will other senior BJP leaders. That means Modi will have to bide his time.¹¹

The Role of Congress in BJP's Victory

The BJP maintains that Modi was using only development discourse for his campaigning and it was Sonia Gandhi by her remark of 'maut ka saudagar'¹² that compelled Modi to use the Hindutva card which then changed the entire nature of the campaign. This can hardly convince any reasonable mind. Gandhi's ill-advised remark played right into Modi's hands. It gave him the platform to show his Hindutva face in a more aggressive manner than he had done all through the campaign. Even Arun Jaitley, who is known to advise him against taking an extreme Hindutva plank, agreed that a Hindutva dose was necessary. Sonia's remark was a God-send. From that pivotal moment, Modi launched a high-pitched assault, portraying the Congress as supporters of terrorists like Azfal Guru and Sohrabuddin. The Congress failed to counter his charge and similar remarks by party General Secretary Digvijay Singh and Spokesman Abhishek Singhvi added to the blunder¹³. Sonia displayed grace and sagacity by not seeking scapegoats and congratulating everybody who had worked hard for the party, but the damage had been done. By failing to project anyone as Chief Minister, it lost credibility and votes. The biggest mistake it made was that it gave tickets to seven BJP rebels, turning Congress workers against the party¹⁴. In fact it was planned that Hindutva discourse will be the last minute mantra. Development discourse was thought to be effective but perhaps there was lurking doubt and to dispel that doubt, Hindutva discourse had to be used very tactically, throwing entire blame on the opposition after all.

What Mrs. Sonia Gandhi said was in no way contrary to facts. There was enough proof to maintain that Modi had used death and destruction to win 2002 election (which in all probability, he would have lost). In that election, there was no reference to any development. 2002 campaign was heavily loaded with Hindutva discourse and he had earned enough bad publicity throughout the world. He could not afford to deploy pure Hindutva discourse in this election.

The Election Commission was also watching and he could not afford to be on the wrong side of law. He, therefore, cleverly crafted his winning strategy – to use development and Hindutva at the last stage and hang the blame on Sonia's 'maut ka saudagar'. If he was so sure of development factor why did he not use it in 2002 election? On the contrary, he is enjoying its after effects even in this election.

The main reason for Modi's victory in 2007 is that Congress, under the leadership of Sonia Gandhi, contested these Gujarat elections on single issue that Modi is responsible for massacre of thousands of innocent Muslims in 2002 Gujarat pogrom. But despite being in power at Center since early 2004 and despite 'Tehelka' exposure and despite Modi's own statement approving fake encounter of Sohrabuddin, Sonia Gandhi could not get Modi in jail for his alleged heinous crimes. Therefore, the people again voted Modi to office in 2007 elections.

There is now another question: will the Gujarat model be as effective in other states? Even after 2002 win, the BJP was saying we will repeat Gujarat model in other states but it lost in several states. The fact is that BJP is in power in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan by itself like in Gujarat and yet these two states have yet to go the Gujarat way i.e. they have still not become 'Hindutva laboratory' like Gujarat.

Impact of BJP's Victory in Other State Elections in 2008

India is a highly diverse country – bewilderingly diverse, and what is possible in one state cannot happen in other states. Even CPM cannot repeat its model in states other than West Bengal and Kerala otherwise it would have captured other states long ago. Gujarat is more suited for Hindutva as West Bengal and

Kerala are more suited for left ideology. Gujarat is more suited for rightwing Hindutva ideology for a number of reasons.

Traders are generally very conservative and are known to be supporters of conservative traditions. For the same reason, Gujarat, unlike Maharashtra and other states, never saw any reform movement. The reform movement, which brought into existence the Swaminarayan sect, itself was a very conservative religious reform movement. Today, the Swaminarayan movement is most popular and hegemonic in Gujarat. Swaminarayan temples are being built wherever these Patel Gujaratis live spending crores of rupees. Huge complexes have come into existence.

Thus Gujarat never experienced modern reform movement like Bengal or Kerala or Maharashtra or Karnataka. And hence the vice-like hold of conservative religion on Gujarat. Narendra Modi has shrewdly exploited this for his political rise. Also by organizing 2002 carnage of Muslims, he built his charismatic image and now he is shrewdly combining it with his development discourse.

Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan will also face election soon. These states are very different; both in economic and political sense. M.P. has already seen change of three Chief Ministers and the present one carries the stigma of being corrupt as he is facing serious corruption charges. He cannot claim the charismatic position that Modi enjoys in Gujarat. Same is the story of Rajasthan. Both in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, feudal culture is still quite strong and modern capitalistic development does not hold any attraction as it does in Gujarat.

In Rajasthan, the VHP tried its best to convert it into Gujarat and often held out this threat but it never succeeded. Mrs. Vasundhara Raje Scindia could hardly employ the Hindutva discourse as she comes from a ruling family of Gwalior and has very different experience. Modi, on the other hand, belongs to low Hindu caste of Gujarat and in order to rise to higher status, can employ reactionary religious ideology without any qualms and seek his own revenge for being humiliated all through history. It is an important question: why Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, like Gujarat, could not become Hindutva laboratory? Obviously conditions in these two states and caste and community equations are very different. Neither Madhya Pradesh nor Rajasthan can ever become Hindutva laboratories like Gujarat. Nor development a la Gujarat can be effected in these two states. Obviously, the Gujarat model cannot be repeated even in these two BJP held states, much less in other states of India.

In Uttar Pradesh, there is no question of BJP using the Gujarat model. It has, in Mayawati, met more than its match and she is going strong and has Dalit-Muslim and a section of upper caste votes also. Also, leaders like Rajnathsinh or Kalyan Singh hardly can claim the charisma that Modi enjoys. And in present day Uttar Pradesh, it is not possible for BJP to organize Gujarat like genocide to gain any charisma. Thus, it will be seen that Gujarat is what it is on account of its own specificities and BJP's dream of repeating Gujarat can hardly be fulfilled in other states.

As for 11 less seats in 2007 for Modi, it is simply due to the fact that 2002 elections were contested by Modi with his party BJP at center where as 2007 elections were contested with Congress at the center.

Conclusion

The December 2007 Gujarat elections were actually the fourth consecutive BJP victory in Gujarat and the fifth consecutive defeat for the Congress Party. The last time the Congress party actually won a state-wide election in Gujarat was 1985! Thus, Mr. Modi and the BJP victory in Gujarat should not necessarily be read as a harbinger of BJP victory, and the Congress-led coalition government's defeat, in national elections. The next general elections are in states with competitive BJP-Congress contests; Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, states with multiparty contests with large numbers of parliamentary seats, and where the Congress faces an established BJP ally or vice versa. Other state elections held in 2007 do suggest that the BJP is gaining on the Congress compared to a year earlier, but there are reasons to qualify this perception. The Congress lost power in three small states (Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Punjab)—two to the BJP and one to a BJP ally—while winning a fourth (Goa). However, the vote shares of the rival parties were close in all the contests, and the first three fit the pattern of states tending to vote out incumbents in every election. If this pattern holds, two large BJP-ruled states (Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan) should revert to Congress rule later in 2008. More

importantly, in India's largest state, Uttar Pradesh, the BJP and the Congress both lag far behind two regional caste-based parties that are currently allied with neither of the major national players. For the BJP, this is a major blow, as it came to power nationally in 1990s by becoming the largest party in Uttar Pradesh.¹⁵

Therefore, Modi's victory cannot be attributed to his popularity solely but due to Congress's failure to win popular support led by Sonia and a group of other so-called secular political parties. They simply failed to get Modi hooked by law even after the passage of five years of the heinous crimes allegedly committed by Modi.

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