



by JONATHAN AITKEN

## India's Jekyll and Hyde

**T**HIS YEAR'S election in India, a marvel of modern democracy with 815 million eligible voters going to the polls, has the potential to change the country for the better economically, and for the worse spiritually.

Simmering just beneath the surface of the campaign lurks a real prospect of religious subjugation, persecution of minority groups, and serious communal violence. Yet much of the electorate is also optimistic that the country's economy could be revitalized. How will these conflicting scenarios play out?

The hopes and fears of tomorrow's India are focused on the election's anticipated winner, Narendra Modi, leader of the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party). He is the odds-on favorite to become the country's next prime minister. His party will certainly take the largest number of seats in the Lok Sabha—lower house of Parliament—although for regional reasons he may narrowly fall short of an absolute majority. One way or another, there is little doubt, following the usual coalition horse trading, that by the end of May, India will have a new political landscape dominated by Modi and the BJP.

At first glance the BJP revolution has much to commend it. The charismatic Modi has run on a ticket that promises double digit growth, soaring employment, deregulation of bureaucratic bottlenecks, and a war on the notorious corruption of the long-ruling Congress party. Many voters be-

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lieve Modi will deliver because, as chief minister of Gujarat, he has run a squeaky clean administration presiding over the highest economic growth and the lowest unemployment of any state in the country.

Narendra Modi also has a personal narrative which challenges the boundaries of India's caste-ridden elites. He rose from poverty, starting out as a tea seller at a railway station. He is a fire-brand orator. When he tilts his lance at the Gandhi dynasty the hits are palpable. Modi is contemptuous of Rahul Gandhi, the forty-three-year-old great grandson of India's first premier Jawaharlal Nehru, the grandson of Indira Gandhi, and the son of Rajiv Gandhi. Although his political abilities have been mediocre, Rahul now leads the Congress Party because he stands next in the hereditary lineage of his forbears.

At the election draws nearer, Modi is ridiculing his opponent as "the incompetent owner of a failing family business." "These Gandhis have been giving us the same story for forty years," he bellows to the crowd. "They never guessed that this chai-wallah (tea boy) would come and bring them to account".

His fiery speeches and his impressive track record in Gujarat have given Modi big political momentum. On a recent visit to India, I was amazed by the cult-like enthusiasm for the BJP leader expressed in settings as diverse as smart Delhi dinner parties, remote coffee huts in the foothills of the Himalayas, business meetings with Mumbai millionaires, and conversations with taxi drivers around five cities.

If there was a common theme in these discussions it was that Modi was the answer to India's unfulfilled aspirations. "China is leaping forward. We are going backwards," said one of my interlocutors. "Look at the potholes in this road. There's no money to repair them because Congress party officials have pocketed \$20 billion of bribes in the

last ten years alone."

A leader who can rebuild the nation's roads and send its growth rates climbing will be a force to be reckoned with. But there may be a dark side to Narendra Modi arising from the spiritual part of his history. Some Indians who are in sympathy with his secular policies fear his militant Hindu nationalism. They also worry that the alleged persecution of minorities that may have been a part of his past could be a part of his future.

The most significant threat to pluralism and secularism in India derives from a Hindu nationalist ideology known as Hindavi. This ideology is espoused by a body of organizations known collectively as the Sangh Parivar. Its chief organ is the extremist Hindu Group Rashtriya Swayamseka Sangh (RSS). Modi is a lifelong member of RSS in whose cause he made many speeches in his early career whipping up Hindu hatred against Muslims.

In 2002, a few months after he became chief minister of Gujarat, a Hindu rampage swept through the state, killing some 2,000 Muslims. The orgy of slaughter and rape was revenge for the killing of fifty-nine Hindu pilgrims on a train by Muslims. Modi was accused of aiding and abetting the pogrom.

The facts of this bloody episode are murky. Investigations by the Supreme Court have been inconclusive, partly because a great deal of evidence was lost or willfully destroyed. No charges were ever laid against Modi, who has remained nonchalant about the outrage. Last year he responded to allegations over his role in the violence by infamously saying that he regretted the suffering of the Muslims in the same way as he would regret the death of a puppy run over by a car in which he was a passenger.

Apologists for Modi point out that the massacre happened more than a decade ago, that he has since been careful to downplay tensions between faith groups, and that all Indians, including poor Muslims, would benefit from his growth policies. This sounds plausible to Hindu voters who make up 80 percent of the electorate. But to a huge swath of minorities, including Sikhs, Buddhists, Christians, Dalits, and above all Muslims, Modi is a leader tainted by a history of sectarian hatred.

Communal violence is a worry in twenty-first century India. Despite a constitution that enshrines the right to freedom of religious belief, there is a pattern of rioting and killings emanating from religious intolerance. Christian and Muslim communities are the most frequent victims of persecution by Hindus. A dispassionate and detailed view of these on-going tensions is fairly presented in the February 2014 report "India: Communalism in an election year" by the human rights group Christian Solidarity Worldwide. The report gloomily warns that Narendra Modi's electoral

success “could give rise to worsening communal tensions across many more areas of India.”

Many an opposition leader has softened a hard line stance upon reaching the summit of power. But most informed observers of Indian politics seem reluctant to give Modi the benefit of the doubt so long as he remains an RSS member and an ardent Hindu nationalist. At best he is seen as an economic Dr. Jekyll and a religious Mr. Hyde. If the latter side of his character comes to the fore, India’s traditional religious freedoms could be tested to the breaking point.