Student Theses                                                Baruch College

1-1-2015

# Why Did Narendra Modi Win? Investigating whether religious nationalist sentiment was responsible for one of the most significant power shifts in Indian history
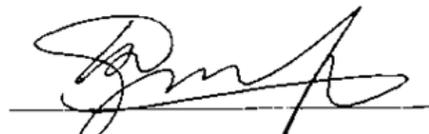
Abhinaya Swaminathan
*Baruch College*

# Why Did Narendra Modi Win?

*Investigating whether religious nationalist sentiment was responsible for one of the most significant power shifts in Indian history*
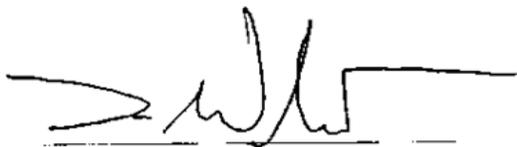
By: Abhinaya Swaminathan

Submitted to the Committee on Undergraduate Honors of Baruch College of the City University of New York in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Political Science with Honors
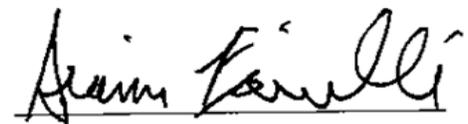
May 14, 2015

Prof. Myung-Koo Kang

Prof. Till Weber

Prof. Arianna Farinelli

# Table of Contents

# Acknowledgement

I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to Professor Myung-Koo Kang who has afforded me with extraordinary patience and guidance while I was writing this thesis. His willingness to ensure my success despite the fact that I missed deadline after deadline, and to keep me focused on the task instead of getting distracted by secondary questions, had far more to do with the successful completion of this thesis than my own efforts. I would also like to thank Dr. Frank Heiland for working with me to ensure that this thesis would have the chance to be reviewed. My two departmental readers, Professor Till Weber and Professor Arianna Farinelli were very gracious in agreeing to read this thesis and I thank them for their kind consideration. Finally, I would not have known where or how to start without the ever helpful Keri Bertino and Heather Samples, whose commitment to guiding honors thesis writers was a blessing that I could not have done without.

# Abstract

This thesis investigates the causes behind the Narendra Modi-led victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the Indian general elections of 2014. The BJP won a landslide victory against the incumbent United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition government led by India's oldest party, the Indian National Congress (INC). The landmark power shift raised alarm in certain circles due to Modi's controversial past, most notably his alleged role in failing to prevent or stop the bloody religious riots that occurred in 2002 in Gujarat, during his tenure as Chief Minister of that state. His party, the BJP, has also long been associated with right-wing Hindu nationalist groups. As a result, BJP's victory, particularly under the leadership of Modi, has caused concerns over whether Hindu nationalism is gaining strength in the historically secular South Asian nation.

This thesis rejects the notion that rising Hindu nationalism was responsible for Narendra Modi's victory to argue that Modi's rise to power can instead be attributed to two things. First, the incumbent government's 'policy paralysis', i.e., its inability to pass any significant reform legislation, contrasted with Modi's decisive, and therefore appealing, style of leadership that promised a more efficient government. Second, Modi's electoral campaign strategy, which operated on two broad fronts, first, by making the election a presidential-style personality contest, and second, by turning the political discourse away from his murky past and towards his record of fostering economic development in Gujarat. Far from being a sign of the rise of Hindu nationalist ideology in India, BJP's victory in 2014 is thus indicative of a broader, and more secular, movement of Indian political winds towards stronger leadership and the neoliberal economic policies embraced by Modi.

# List of Abbreviations and Key Terms

1. **BJP**　　　　　　：　Bharatiya Janata Party, right-wing party with ties to Hindu nationalist groups. Won the Indian general elections of 2014 by an outright majority.

2. **INC**　　　　　　：　Indian National Congress. India's oldest political party established well before the country's independence. Historically part of the ruling coalition at the center and loser of the 2014 general elections.

3. **NDA**　　　　　　：　National Democratic Alliance. Coalition formed under the leadership of the BJP. Approximately center-right on the political spectrum. Formed the government following the 2014 general elections.

4. **RSS**　　　　　　：　Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. Right-wing Hindu nationalist organization with close ties to militant Hindu groups.

5. **UPA**　　　　　　：　United Progressive Alliance. Coalition led by the INC that formed the government after the general elections of 2009. Approximately center-left on the political spectrum and loser of the 2014 elections.

6. **Economic Voting**　：　Voting behavior that takes its cues primarily from how well the economy is performing. The broad assumption here is that voters will reward an incumbent government for presiding over a healthy economy and punish it for presiding over a lackluster one.

7. **Hindu Nationalism**　：　Nationalist sentiment that believes in the superiority of Hindu religious culture, and in the identity of India as a Hindu nation. The dominant form of Hindu nationalism in India is 'Hindutva,' the philosophy adopted by the RSS.

8. **Veto Player**　　：　A member of a coalition who has the ability to prevent a decision from being made by threatening the withdrawal of their support of the coalition.

9. **Parliamentary Democracy**　：　A democratic system of government in which the executive and legislative functions are jointly vested in one body known as the Parliament. The party or coalition that achieves the greatest representation in Parliament forms the government and elects the Head of Government, who is commonly given the title of either Chancellor or Prime Minster. India is a parliamentary democracy. Its current prime minister is Narendra Modi.

# Chapter 1: Introduction

When the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won the 2014 general elections in India for control of the lower house of Parliament, known as the 'Lok Sabha 'or the "people's house," it secured 282 out of the 543 seats in that house (51.9%) to became the first party to win these elections by an outright majority in three decades.[1] Not only that, the 2014 elections also witnessed the highest voter turnout in the history of these elections in India, with a 66.38% voter participation rate. The last time that a single party was given such an overwhelmingly clear mandate by the Indian people was in 1984. At that time, the country's then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi had just been assassinated. Her son, Rajiv Gandhi, led the Indian National Congress (INC) party to a landslide victory by riding on a sympathy wave during the subsequent elections, which had thus far held the record for voter turnout at 64%.[2]

Usually, in Indian elections, a coalition of parties who have won enough seats together to form a majority in the Parliament needs to come together to form the government. This was the case in 2009, for example, when the INC formed a coalition of parties named the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) who collectively had enough seats to constitute a majority in the Lok Sabha. The BJP correspondingly had formed the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition, which had formed the main opposition to the incumbent UPA government since 2009. As Table 1.1 presents below, comparing the performance of the two major national parties, INC and BJP, as a percentage of the total

---

[1] Election Commission of India, "Archive of General Election 2014: Performance of National Parties," Election Commission of India, last modified 2014, http://eci.nic.in/eci_main/archiveofge2014/20%20-%20Performance%20of%20National%20Parties.pdf.

[2] Press Trust of India, "Highest Ever Turnout of 66.38% Recorded in this Lok Sabha Election," *The Times of India*, May 12, 2014, http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/news/Highest-ever-turnout-of-66-38-recorded-in-this-Lok-Sabha-election/articleshow/35028268.cms?.

seat share of the coalitions that they head, the UPA and NDA respectively, in the general elections of 2009 and 2014, shows why the BJP's recent victory was of particular note:

**Table 1.1**

| Party/ Coalition | Seats Won in 2014[3] | Seats Won in 2009[4] |
|---|---|---|
| INC/ UPA | 44/ 59 (74.6%) | 206/ 262 (78.6%) |
| BJP/ NDA | 283/ 336 (84.2%) | 116/ 159 (72.9%) |

Table 1.1 shows that just the BJP's seat share in 2014, at 283 seats, exceeded the 262 seats held by the entire UPA coalition which formed the government in 2009. Clearly, the BJP has achieved a decisive victory in these most recent elections.

That the BJP achieved such a remarkable victory under the leadership of Narendra Modi, one of India's most controversial politicians, is especially interesting due to the controversy surrounding the politician. The Human Rights Watch group, among other such groups, has accused Modi of being complicit in the deadly 2002 Hindu-Muslim religious riots that occurred in the Indian state of Gujarat, when he was Chief Minister of that state.[5] Until very recently, Modi was prevented from entering the United States and some European countries that had imposed a visa ban on the politician as a gesture of condemnation for his government's suspected abuse of human rights during the 2002 riots. On the other hand, Modi has also won every election since 2002 to the office of Chief Minister in Gujarat and has remained the darling of Indians who admired his ability to

---

[3] Election Commission of India, "Archive of General Elections 2014."
[4] Election Commission of India, "Archive of General Elections 2009: Performance of National Parties," Election Commission of India, http://eci.nic.in/eci_main/archiveofge2009/Stats/VOLI/12_PerformanceOfNationalParties.pdf.
[5] Smita Narula, "We Have No Orders to Save You: State Participation and Complicity in Communal Violence in Gujarat," *Human Rights Watch* 14, no. 3 (April 2002), http://www.hrw.org/reports/2002/india/gujarat.pdf.

bring outstanding economic development to the state of Gujarat. This dual perception of Modi has made his rise to power an object of fascination to Indians and others alike.

Modi's rise and the BJP's victory were also set against the backdrop of a period of sluggish economic growth in the world's largest democracy, which many blamed on the incumbent coalition government's 'policy paralysis.' Although the UPA's poor economic performance appears to be the primary reason for why that coalition lost in 2014, the concern over whether Modi's victory means that his Hindu-nationalist affiliations have now been endorsed by Indians is a legitimate one that is worth further study.

**The Puzzle – Modi's Controversial Rise to Power**

Narendra Modi's path to power started with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a volunteer right wing Hindu-nationalist organization that was originally set up in 1925 to unite the Hindu community during the Indian independence movement. The RSS proclaims that its mission is to carry the nation to the pinnacle of glory and ensure the protection of Hindu Dharma."[6] The organization promotes conservative Hindu-centric values and believes in the identity of India as a Hindu nation. Modi became involved with the RSS at a very young age, eventually rising to serve as a *pracharak*, or propagandist, someone who lives in austerity to spread Hindu religious teachings, and recruit for the cause of "Hindutva," i.e., the philosophy of Hindu nationalism. He joined the political offshoot of the RSS, the BJP, in 1987 and rose through the ranks of the party in a manner that is, by all accounts, quite impressive and indicative of the greater things to come.[7] In 2001, by showing great initiative in responding to a deadly earthquake that hit the Bhuj

---

[6] "Welcome to RSS," Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, accessed May 5, 2015, http://www.rss.org/knowus//Encyc/2014/8/22/Welcome-to-RSS.aspx.
[7] Andy Marino, "The Early Years," in *Narendra Modi: A Political Biography* (HarperCollins Publisher India, 2014), Kindle edition.

region of the Indian state of Gujarat, Modi was able to secure support to be the next chief

minister, i.e., the *de facto* head of each state government in India, of that state.[8]

Just a few short months into Modi's term as the chief minister of Gujarat, in

February 2002, deadly religious riots occurred in the state. A train full of Hindu pilgrims, on

their way to help build a temple at the site of a former Mosque, caught on fire, resulting in

the death of 58 people. A Muslim mob was blamed for the incident at the time, but later

reports cast doubt on this claim.[9] Hindu mobs turned on the state's Muslims in retaliation,

and months of devastating violence, particularly noted for the occurrence of horrid rapes

and brutal killings, followed. Official accounts put the number of dead Muslims at a 1000

people, with over 20,000 Muslim homes, businesses, and places of worship destroyed, and

over 150,000 people displaced from their homes.[10]

Right from the start, there were suspicions over whether the state's Narendra Modi-

led BJP government somehow aided or otherwise encouraged the Hindu rioters. These

suspicions worsened when police did nothing to control the thousands of angry Hindu

mobsters on the day after the train fire.[11] Senior officials in Modi's administration spoke to

the press and to investigators on the condition of anonymity and based on their testimony,

it was alleged that Modi had met with members of his administration during the early days

of the riots and instructed police officials to "allow Hindu rioters to vent their anger against

---

[8] Ross Colvin and Satarupa Bhattacharjya, "Special Report: The Remaking of Narendra Modi," *Reuters*, July 12, 2013, xx, http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/07/12/us-india-modi-idUSBRE96B02320130712.

[9] Celia W. Dugger, "Fire Started on Train Carrying Hindu Activists Kills 58,"*The New York Times*, February 28, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2002/02/28/world/fire-started-on-train-carrying-hindu-activists-kills-58.html.

[10] Celia W. Dugger, "Religious Riots Loom Over Indian Politics," *The New York Times*, July 27, 2002, http://www.nytimes.com/2002/07/27/international/asia/27INDI.html?.

[11] Ibid.

Muslims."[12] In a scathing report titled "We Have No Orders to Save You," the Human Rights Watch group detailed the accusations against the Modi government, alleging that the state's law enforcement officers were deliberately ordered to not stop the riots.[13] Modi's supporters and human rights groups have fought bitterly ever since to settle the truth or falsehood of these accusations.

Eventually, a Special Investigations Team set up by the Supreme Court of India cleared Modi of any wrongdoing with regards to the riots in 2012.[14] Modi himself has, since 2002, turned all of his focus on making Gujarat an economic powerhouse and maintained his distance from radical, or at least violent, Hindu nationalism. He was reelected as Gujarat's chief minister for three successive terms, even carrying the vote of a significant portion of the state's Muslims. His victories have mainly been attributed to his administration's superior management of the state's economy, which has made the state of Gujarat grow at a faster pace than the rest of the country and led to the coining of the term, "Modi-nomics."[15]

However, questions have remained regarding Modi's ties to Hindu extremism, casting a shadow upon his eventual victory and rise to the office of Prime Minister in 2014. This thesis addresses whether or not Hindu nationalist sentiment was the reason for Modi's victory, and consequently, whether India is turning away from the strong secular tradition it has held ever since its Independence from the British Empire and Partition from the Islamic nation of Pakistan in 1947.

---

[12] Manu Joseph, "Shaking off the Horror of the Past in India," *The New York Times*, February 15, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/16/world/asia/16iht-letter16.html.
[13] Narula, "We Have No Orders to Save You," 2002.
[14] Ibid.
[15] "The Gujarat Model: How Modi-nomics was forged in one of India's most business friendly states," *The Economist*, January 10, 2015, http://www.economist.com/news/finance-and-economics/21638147-how-modi-nomics-was-forged-one-indias-most-business-friendly-states.

**The Argument - How Modi won despite, not because of, his Hindu Nationalist past**

In this thesis, I argue that Modi's victory primarily resulted from two factors: first, the incumbent government's failures contrasted with Modi's show of strong leadership within his party, and second, Modi's savvy campaign strategy, which operated by turning the election into a presidential-style contest and by turning the discourse away from Modi's controversial past and towards his excellent economic track record in Gujarat.

The incumbent government's 'policy paralysis,' i.e., its inability to pass any significant reform legislation because of gridlock within the coalition was a major focus of the electoral discourse leading up to 2014. The failure of important economic reform legislation to pass through parliament, combined with highly publicized scandals and messy divides within the coalition, left the incumbent government vulnerable to credible attack by the Modi campaign.

Modi's decisive leadership style had a strong appeal to the Indian electorate. As leader of the BJP, Modi made a firm and highly visible break from the party's old order to set himself up as the head of a reformed, economic-growth and good-governance oriented "new" BJP. His management of the party also served as a metaphor for the kind of efficient government that he was promising to the Indian people.

Finally, Modi's campaign strategy was successful by operating on two broad fronts. First, it turned the elections into a presidential-style personality contest, something that is unusual in Indian politics, where the norm is for parties and ideologies to clash against each other. This worked in Modi's favor because his opponent for the post of Prime Minister, INC's Rahul Gandhi, was ill equipped to match Modi's charismatic persona. Second, the campaign directed discourse away from Modi's murky past as related to his

alleged involvement in the 2002 Gujarat riots, and towards his record of fostering strong

economic growth as Chief Minister of his state, Gujarat. His '*Ache Din*', or 'Good Days'

campaign strategy united different sections of the Indian population under the common

banner of economic growth.

**The Research**

Literature Review

I primarily refer to the work of Mira Debs, a junior fellow at Yale's Center for

Cultural Sociology, to understand the historical context within which the two major

national parties in India, the INC and the BJP, developed their identities as supporters of

secularism and Hindu nationalism, respectively. In an article written for *Nations and*

*Nationalism*, a journal of the Association for the Study of Ethnicity and Nationalism, Debs

writes about how, "cultural traumas are advanced by carrier groups with clear interests at

stake including political or material gain, artistic expression, collective processing or group

identification."[16] Carrier groups here refers to groups that are in power and may include

categories as varied as politicians, journalists, and artists. These carrier groups often

construct and deploy "cultural trauma narratives" which, according to Debs, "must be

authentically resonant with a mass public" in order to be successful in creating a powerful

nationalist sentiment that benefits the group in question.[17] This explains how the INC,

which was in a powerful position during India's Independence from the British Empire in

1947, was able to advance its image as a force for secularism by shaping the narrative of

the traumatic events that occurred during the struggle for independence.

---

[16] Mira Debs, "Using cultural trauma: Gandhi's assassination, partition and secular nationalism in post-independence India," *Nations & Nationalism* 19, no. 4 (October 2013): 637. doi: 10.1111/nana.12038.
[17] Ibid.

Political scientist George Tsebelis' veto player analysis of Western European parliamentary systems is also applicable to this thesis. Tsebelis work helps us understand why a country such as India, which has a parliamentary democracy, can experience political gridlock. In parliamentary democracies, the executive and legislative functions of government are jointly vested in Parliament, as opposed to systems where a legislative assembly and a president handle these functions separately. The parliamentary system thus seems to be more efficient. However, combining this system with a multi-party democracy leads to the creation of coalition governments, where the coalitions so-formed may not always be ideologically united. The dynamics within such coalitions can lead to gridlock and inefficiencies, as described by Tsebelis' 'veto player theory.'

In his book, "Veto Players: How Political Institutions Work" (2002), Tsebelis uses data gathered on eighteen Western European parliamentary governments to find that there is a negative correlation between the number of "veto players" in a coalition government and the number of significant policy reforms passed by that government.[18] Veto players are defined as the members of a coalition who have the ability to prevent a choice from being made through the threat of the withdrawal of their support of the coalition. Tsebelis finds that, as the number of veto players in coalition increases, the ability of that coalition to make significant changes to the status quo decreases. A coalition government with a large number of veto players will thus find it harder to implement significant legislative changes. This effect is exacerbated by the presence of large ideological differences amongst

---

[18] George Tsebelis, "Governments and Parliaments," In *Veto Players: How Political Institutions Work*, New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2002.

the members of the coalition government. Tsebelis concludes, "Many veto players with big ideological distances between them means that legislation can only be incremental."[19]

Methodology

This thesis relied on a close reading of literature related to nationalism theory, coalition dynamics, parliamentary democracies, Indian history, and neoliberal economic theory to understand the circumstances of Modi's rise to power as the Prime Minster of India. The work of nationalism theorists and Indian political historians informed my analysis of the unique historical circumstances in India which made the 2014 general elections worthy of further investigation. The work of political scientist George Tsebelis in analyzing gridlock situations in parliamentary democracies informed my findings about why the incumbent UPA government became gridlocked and ineffective.

The bulk of my analysis was conducted through the study of hundreds of newspaper and magazine articles, both from Indian and international news outlets. Notably, I followed the media coverage of Modi's campaign through articles in newspapers such as *The Times of India*, *The Hindu,* and *The New York Times,* and magazines such as *Time* and *The Economist.* Political theory was adapted to understand events as they unfolded in news articles, with the result being that Modi's campaign activities and the corresponding media responses could be categorized into the two broad strategies detailed above. News media coverage of the campaign is thus used to show how Modi was able to preside over one of the most historic power shifts in the world's largest democracy by focusing on the incumbent government's failures, setting himself up as an effective leader, and directing the electoral discourse in his favor.

---

[19] Tsebelis,"Governments and Parliaments," In *Veto Players: How Political Institutions Work*, 99-100.

In the following pages I will set out to support my argument in three separate but linked chapters. Chapter 2, titled "Incumbent Government's Failures" deals primarily with the gridlock and divisions within the UPA coalition that caused it to become ineffective and lose favor with the Indian electorate. I show why the UPA was blamed for India's slowing economic growth by providing an overview of how significant reform on two key economic issues failed to pass parliament due to the veto player dynamics within the UPA coalition.

Chapter 3, titled "Modi's Rise to Leadership" explores the creation of Modi's image as an effective leader. Modi's highly visible and controversial split from the BJP's old order is detailed and analyzed to show how he benefited from being seen as the face a "new" BJP. Chapter 3 should also be understood within the context of Chapter 2. The policy paralysis of the UPA coalition was particularly vulnerable to attack by the Modi campaign because of how he had shown himself to be an effective and efficient leader.

In Chapter 4, titled "Modi's Campaign Strategy," I show how Modi's campaign was successful by adopting two broad strategies. First, the campaign turned the elections into a presidential-style personality contest by attacking Rahul Gandhi's status as the heir-apparent to the politically affluent Gandhi dynasty and portraying Modi, in contrast, as a self-made man who had 'earned' his position. Second, by consistently reinforcing Modi's economic track record, the campaign was able to side-step Modi's Hindu nationalist past.

In conclusion, I look to India's future. I argue that, although it is yet too early to know whether Modi can deliver on his promise of a better economic future for India, it is already clear that his campaign has fundamentally changed the dynamics of elections in the country. It has brought concrete change to Indian politics, which has relied, perhaps for too long, on Independence-era discourse.

# Chapter 2: Incumbent Government's Failures

In one important way, the UPA government's resounding loss in 2014, when it went from holding 202 seats in 2009 to merely 44 in 2014, was entirely predictable. The coalition had become gridlocked and unable to pass legislation that was seen as necessary to improve India's economy. Given that the country was experiencing slower economic growth and high inflation, public sentiment turned against the incumbent government, particularly when that government was seen to be inefficient and unable to function. Key to understanding the UPA's loss is the theory of economic voting, which holds that voters will punish an incumbent government for a poorly performing economy. This theory helps explain why the UPA's chances going into the 2014 elections on the heals of lackluster growth and double digit inflation were not very good to begin with. The UPA's problems were then compounded because it was faced with a challenger who was able to capitalize effectively on its failures.

The 'policy paralysis' of the UPA coalition, which was perceived as the root cause of India's poor economic performance, benefitted the Modi campaign by first turning public sentiment away from the incumbent government due to the 'economic voting' behavior detailed above and second, by setting the BJP up as a preferable alternative to not just the INC, but the UPA as a whole. This is the primary reason for the BJP's landslide victory in 2014, when it won by an outright majority. Further, this shows that the electorate's dissatisfaction with the UPA government was not fueled by a preference for a Hindu nationalist government, but rather by the UPA coalition's perceived ineffectiveness in managing India's economy.

**Historical Context – Origins of the UPA Coalition**

Historically, the INC has been overwhelmingly more successful in gaining control of the government in India. The party, either on its own or through a coalition, has been in power at the center for a total of 49 out of the 67 years since India's independence from the British Empire in August 1947. The party's success is largely attributable to its being credited with leading India to Independence and then building on the momentum of that credit to consolidate power over the long-term. The first prime minister of India after independence, Jawaharlal Nehru, belonged to the INC and the party has since contributed six other prime ministers to the Indian government, with many of them serving multiple terms.[20] The INC was continuously in power on its own strength from Independence until 1977, and then again between 1980 and 1989. It governed through coalition between 1991 and 1995, and once again between 2005 and 2014, at which time the Modi-led BJP party defeated the INC-led UPA coalition. It is important to note that, other than the INC, the only other party to have won by an outright majority during any election in India's entire history since Independence is the BJP, which was only able to achieve such a feat in 2014.

Over this time period, the INC's economic policies have changed considerably. Having been in power so often, the INC has naturally had a defining role in the shaping of the modern Indian economy. Under India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, the party endorsed socialist economic policies, a legacy which followed the party for quite some time afterwards. The INC's mission statement calls for the establishment of a

---

[20] "Former Prime Ministers," Prime Minister of India, accessed May 5, 2015, http://pmindia.gov.in/en/former-prime-ministers/.

"Socialist State based on Parliamentary Democracy" in India.[21] However, these socialist policies, which were most strongly implemented under the prime minister-ship of Jawaharlal Nehru and his daughter Indira Gandhi (incidentally also periods of extraordinarily slow economic growth in India), have steadily moved more towards the center in recent years. In fact, in 1991, the INC led India to economic liberalization, which laid the foundation for the repaid period of double-digit growth that India experienced a decade ago. Interestingly, the finance minister of the country at the time, who was responsible for implementing the liberalization measures, was Dr. Manmohan Singh. Dr. Singh was also the prime minister of the UPA government, in a sign of the dissociation between what the UPA must have known to be the right economic policy direction and what it ended up implementing.

The INC's monopoly on being the one party that speaks for all of India at a national level has also loosened in recent years, leading the party to rule mainly through coalition in the recent past. The party like all major national parties has increasingly relied on the support of regional parties to constitute a majority in parliament. National parties such as the INC and the BJP represent broad umbrella positions that they are not able to fit to the needs of every single region. National parties usually agree to form coalitions before the elections, and sometimes before even the campaigning begins, and "share" some constituencies with various regional parties. While the national party is expected to win the most seats within the coalition, the regional parties play the important role of capturing seats that cannot be reached by the national party. These regional parties are usually formed along communal lines and may often have key ideological differences with the

---

[21] "Indian National Congress," Indian National Congress, accessed May 3, 2015, http://www.inc.in/about-congress/mission.

13

party leading their coalition. As such, coalitions are always *negotiated* into place, not assumed automatically due to ideological similarity.

The UPA coalition was originally created in 2004. The below table shows its original composition, along with the respective number of Members of Parliament (MPs) from each party:

**Table 2.1**

| Party[22] | MPs[23] | State(s)[24] |
|---|---|---|
| Indian National Congress (INC) | 146 | National |
| Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) | 23 | Bihar & Jharkand |
| Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) | 16 | Tamil Nadu |
| Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) | 10 | National |
| Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK) | 6 | Tamil Nadu |
| Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) | 5 | Andhra Pradesh |
| Jharkand Mukti Morcha (JMM) | 5 | Jharkhand |
| Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (MDMK) | 4 | Tamil Nadu |
| Lok Jan Shakti Party (LJS) | 4 | Bihar |
| Kerala Congress | 2 | Kerala |
| Indian Union Muslim League  (IUML) | 1 | Kerala |
| Jammu & Kashmir People's Democratic Party | 1 | Jammu & Kashmir |
| Republican Party of India | 1 | Maharashtra |
| All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimen | 1 | Andhra Pradesh |

As Table 2.1 shows, the coalition was composed mainly of regional parties, although each regional party had only a few seats. It was a reality of the UPA government in 2004

---

[22] India times News Network, "United Progressive Alliance: Partners in Government," *The Times of India*, July 8, 2006, xx, http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/specials/United-Progressive-Alliance-Partners-in-governance/articleshow/1716941.cms.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Election Commission of India, *Notification No.56/2015/PPS-II*, (New Delhi: Gazette of India, 2015), http://eci.nic.in/eci_main/ElectoralLaws/OrdersNotifications/year2014/Notification%20English%2013.01.2015.pdf.

that all of these parties were needed to form government. In addition, the outside support

of the Left Front was also needed in order to pass legislation since the coalition by itself fell

short of a majority with only 225 seats (41.4% of a total 543).

In 2009, the second iteration of this coalition, i.e., UPA – II, was formed. UPA – II was

actually in a better position than UPA – I. Although the coalition had since lost the support

of the Left Front, the Republican Party of India, MDMK, and PMK, UPA – II actually held 262

seats in parliament after the 2009 elections bringing it closer to majority by pushing its

seat share to 48.3% out of the total 543.[25] The coalition did this with the help of new

members, the Trinamool Congress (18 MPs) and the Bodoland People's Front (1 MP). The

coalition, both times, was broadly Center-Left in ideology, although ideological unity was

never one of its strong points. Some parties in the coalition, such as the DMK, had

previously been a part of the NDA coalition when it was in power, indicating that their

alliance with the INC was less based on common ideology than on striking a bargain to stay

in power.

**Policy Paralysis**

Two key economic policy issues demonstrate the policy paralysis of the Congress-

led United Progressive Alliance government. Reforms in the fields of labor laws and natural

resource allocation have long been identified as necessary to India's sustained economic

growth. The World Bank has been among the leading critics of the UPA's policy. More

tellingly, both the Indian political right and left have disavowed the UPA's so-called "pro-

---

[25] Indo-Asian News Service, "2009 Lok Sabha Election: Final Tally," *The Hindustan Times*, May 17, 2009, xx, http://www.hindustantimes.com/newdelhi/2009-lok-sabha-election-final-results-tally/article1-411793.aspx.

poor" policies for simultaneously hurting corporate interests while failing to help the very

population that the laws were created to protect.

India's labor laws were a relic of British colonial rule, and included several archaic

policies such as requiring companies with over a hundred employees to obtain government

permission before firing workers. In theory, these laws were designed to protect workers'

rights. However, the strict and complicated labor regulations led to declined investment by

companies in key sectors such as manufacturing and retail. This has resulted in the creation

of a large informal labor sector in India, which is harmful not only because of the lost

potential for economic growth but also because informal workers received little to no

protection from the existing labor laws.[26] Further, even when labor is not informal, there is

evidence to show that this policy has hurt the very population that it was designed to

protect by discouraging firms from hiring during an economic uptake, reducing the

flexibility of Indian labor to negotiate independent contracts, and the implementation of

subversive tactics by management of large to break up unions in an effort to reduce the

number of employees.[27]

The problems with existing labor policy had come to light long before Modi or the

BJP ever took to the stage to criticize the UPA. A survey conducted between July 2009 and

July 2010, by the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), for example, reported that only

200,000 jobs were created annually during the UPA's first term between 2004 and 2009, in

[26] Amin, Mohammad. "Labor Regulation and Employment in India's Retail Stores," *World Bank Social Protection and Labor Papers*, no. 0816 (The World Bank, 2008).

[27] Kaushik Basu, Gary S. Fields, and Shub Debgupta, *Retrenchment, Labor Laws and Government Policy: An Analysis with Special Reference to India*, (Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, 1996), http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTDECSHRSMA/Resources/india.pdf.

contrast with 12 million jobs during the NDA government's rule.[28] Even the Left Front, which should have been a natural ally of the UPA's left-leaning policies and which in fact was part of the UPA coalition when it was originally formed criticized the coalition's policy by calling it "a policy of deception," for the frustratingly contradictory impact that it was having.[29] However, despite early identification of the problem, the UPA was not able to enact the needed major reforms throughout its five-year term.

Natural resource allocation is a highly politicized issue in India. Particularly under the UPA government, burdensome bureaucratic procedures were accompanied by rampant corruption, leading to the stalling or cancellation of several major projects. The infamous "Coalgate" scandal exemplified this type of resource misallocation. Under UPA rule, the government granted rights to various 'coal blocks,' or mining rights to parcels of coal-rich land, to private firms through a 'no-bid' process for prices far below the actual value of these resources, with the resulting loss in revenue estimated to be around $33 billion.[30] The Indian Supreme Court recently ruled that these allocations had been carried out against public interest and nullified the rights of private interests to coal blocks that were granted to them under UPA rule. Similarly, between 2007 and 2010, an estimated $29 billion in revenue was lost when the telecom ministry under UPA rule corruptly

---

[28] Economic Time Bureau, "UPA Government Ignored Farm, Labor Reforms; Failed at Creating Jobs: Experts," *The Economic Times*, June 29, 2011, xx, http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2011-06-29/news/29717210_1_pro-poor-schemes-upa-government-lakh-jobs.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Comptroller and Auditor General of India, *Performance Audit Report on the Allocation of Coal Blocks and Augmentation of Coal Production,* New Delhi: Ministry of Coal, 2012, http://www.saiindia.gov.in/english/home/Our_Products/Audit_Report/ Government_Wise/union_audit/recent_reports/union_performance/2012_2013/Commercial/Report_No_7/i ndex.pdf (accessed November 13, 2014).

undercharged mobile telephone companies for frequency allocation licenses[31]. This '2G

Spectrum' scandal, as it was known, was a source of major embarrassment for the UPA. The

Supreme Court of India, in this case as well, quashed the licenses that had been granted to

telecommunications companies during the UPA's tenure.[32]

The 'Coalgate' and '2G Spectrum' scandals touched on issues of both bureaucratic

inefficiency and corruption resulting from lack of transparency. In both these cases, the

Congress party took the brunt of the blame for the UPA government's failures, and

disagreements within the coalition became more pronounced. The resulting dysfunctional

central government further weakened confidence of private interests, who were already

experiencing major setbacks due to the mass cancellation of improperly issued licenses. In

a 2014 interview with *BBC News,* World Bank Chief Economist Kaushik Basu, while

remaining optimistic about India's long term prospects, endorsed the view that "policy

paralysis" and "poor governance" had played a major role in the slowdown of economic

growth that India seemed to be experiencing in the past couple of years.[33] Precisely at the

time when reform of the so-called "license raj," referring to India's corrupt and complicated

system of issuing licenses, was needed, the central government was unable to deliver.

This 'policy paralysis' of the UPA government can be explained by looking at the

composition and dynamics of the coalition government. First, the coalition, and particularly

the INC, did not have the strength in parliament to effectively direct legislative agenda.

---

[31] Comptroller and Auditor General of India, *Performance Audit Report on the Issue of Licenses and Allocation of 2G Spectrum,* New Delhi: Ministry of Coal, 2012, http://www.thehindu.com/news/performance-audit-report-on-the-issue-of-licences-and-allocation-of-2g-spectrum-cag-report/article889943.ece (accessed November 13, 2014).

[32] India Today Online, "What is the 2G Spectrum Scam?," *India Today*, October 19, 2012, http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/what-is-the-2g-scam-all-about/1/188832.html.

[33] Soutik Biswas, "World Bank Chief Economist on Future of India's Economy," *BBC News*, January 30, 2014.

Second, the coalition was not very ideologically united, leading to difficulties in enacting sweeping policy measures that all members could agree on.

Political Scientist George Tsebelis' findings appear to be borne out in the experience of the UPA government in India between 2009 and 2014. The UPA coalition held 262 seats after the 2009 election results, of a total of 543 elected seats in Parliament. The coalition was headed by the Indian National Congress, which held 206 seats.[34] The government thus lacked the simple majority of 272 seats required to pass legislative measures without the support of independent parties outside of the coalition. Further, the coalition-forming party, the Indian National Congress (INC) lacked the simple majority required to effectively set the legislative agenda even within the coalition. As such, the UPA government was unable to pass the kind of sweeping economic reform measures needed to combat the structural macroeconomic problems of a country still in the process of implementing the liberalization measures that were only introduced in 1991.

Further, the Centre-Left ideological stance of the UPA coalition was forged together from a wide range of ideological positions held by its members, where the only uniting factor amongst them appears to be a common distrust of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). When the coalition was originally formed in 2004, the member parties agreed to a "Common Minimum Programme,"[35] which was meant to establish a few minimum points of cooperation within the coalition despite the clearly acknowledged policy differences amongst the membership.

---

[34] "Key Highlights." In *Archive of General Elections 2009*. Vol. 1. New Delhi: Election Commission of India, 2009.
 http://eci.nic.in/eci_main/archiveofge2009/Stats/VOLI/24_KeyHighlights.pdf (Accessed November 23, 2014).
[35] "UPA Government to Adhere to Six Basic Principles of Governance," *The Hindu*, May 28, 2004, Accessed November 23, 2014, http://www.thehindu.com/2004/05/28/stories/2004052807371200.htm.

The coalition was always in danger of falling apart at the slightest provocation. For example, in 2008, the Left Front party decided to withdraw support from the UPA when its ideological differences with Congress became untenable after the India-United States Civil Nuclear Agreement was signed. The Left Front was opposed to the agreement and withdrew its support from the coalition, intentionally triggering a vote of confidence measure in Parliament. The remaining members, led by Congress, narrowly survived the vote of confidence and proved their majority, but not without becoming embroiled in another scandal, this time being accused of attempting to bribe Members of Parliament for their votes. Even though the legitimacy of the vote of confidence was ultimately preserved, it appeared that the UPA's Centre-Left "Common Minimum Programme" had fallen apart. As the alliance amongst the political parties who were opposed to the BJP fell apart, the BJP began to appear as an increasingly viable alternative to lead the central government.

**Impact on Modi's campaign**

The gridlock and corruption scandals of the UPA government were tied with poor economic performance of the country. India began experiencing a period of slower economic growth since 2012, with every economic forecast attributing the slowdown to the perceived gridlock in the INC-led UPA government.

Below charts illustrate economic growth and inflation over the period from 2000 – 2014. As chart 2.1 above shows, India began experiencing a slowdown of economic growth during the UPA's second term between 2009 and 2014. Although there were brief spikes in economic growth, the overall trend of less than 6% annual growth seemed quite unimpressive, particularly for a country that seeks to lay claim to China's title of the most impressive developing economy in the world. Particularly when combined with consumer

price inflation that spiked to the double digits under the UPA's governance (see Chart 2.2), the economic performance of the country seemed sorely misguided.

**Chart 2.1[36]**



INDIA GDP ANNUAL GROWTH RATE
Percent Change in Gross Domestic Product

**Chart 2.2[37]**



INDIA INFLATION RATE
Annual Change on Consumer Price Index
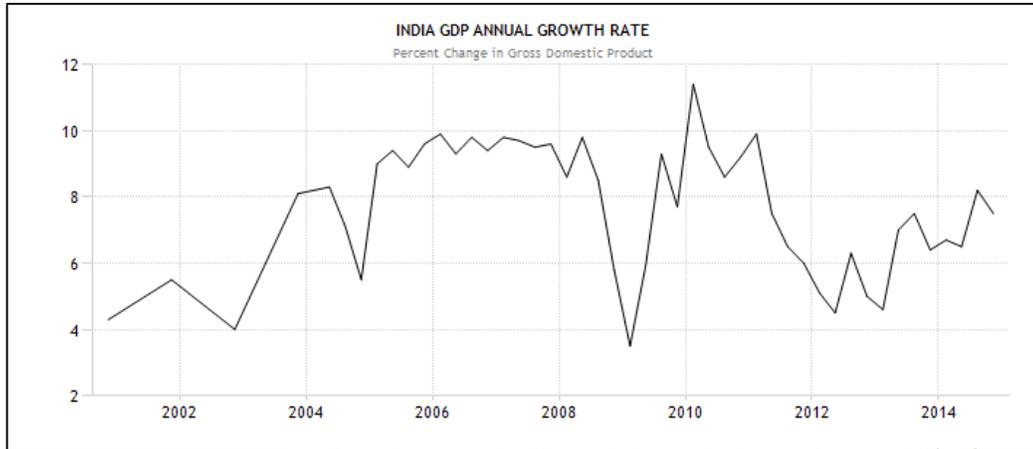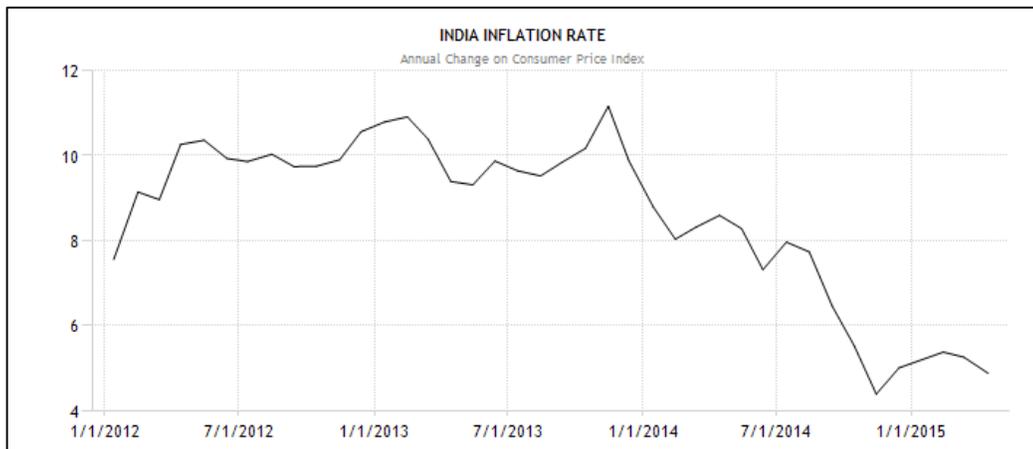
This was bad news for the UPA since, India's parliamentary democracy system is particularly susceptible to the phenomenon of "economic voting," i.e., voting behavior, either in favor or against the incumbents, that is tied to economic performance of the state. Researchers have long noted that, "greater clarity of responsibility facilitates economic

---

[36] Trading Economics, "India GDP Annual Growth Rate," *www.tradingeconomics.com*, 2015, http://www.tradingeconomics.com/india/gdp-growth-annual.
[37] Trading Economics, "India Inflation Rate," *www.tradingeconomics.com*, 2015, http://www.tradingeconomics.com/india/inflation-cpi.

voting and therefore electoral accountability."[38] Since Parliament holds both legislative and *de facto* executive power in India, the electorate is able to clearly tie economic performance of the country to actions of the incumbent in that body. This can be contrasted with a presidential system of government, such as the one in the United States, where the President and Congress share responsibility for government and it may not always be possible to blame one branch over the other for the economy's poor performance. For the UPA, this meant that the blame for India's slowing economic growth and high inflation landed squarely at the coalition's door.

Modi's campaign was keenly aware of the UPA government's perceived policy paralysis and its consequent mismanagement of the economy. One of Modi's key campaign themes focused on this oft-repeated phrase: "Less Government, More Governance." The politician's autobiographer, Andy Marino, who followed the candidate closely on the campaign trail notes that Modi consistently focused on "the reform of political institutions, and the relationship between citizens and the state." Mr. Marino further states that the Modi campaign positioned the election as, "a choice between reform and empowerment on the one hand, and retrenchment and entitlement on the other."[39] This is in reference to the Center-Left politics of the INC, which has historically believed in the welfare state, especially for minorities. The emerging middle class population in India, along with other domestic and private foreign interests, were thus particularly receptive of Modi's campaign against the traditional, big government and heavy regulation policies of the UPA

---

[38] Sarah Hobolt, James Tilley, and Susan Banducci, "Clarity of responsibility: How government cohesion conditions performance voting," *European Journal Of Political Research* 52, no. 2 (March 2013): 165, doi:10.1111/j.1475-6765.2012.02072.x.
[39]  Andy Marino, "Prologue," in *Narendra Modi: A Political Biography* (HarperCollins Publisher India, 2014), Kindle edition.

government, particularly at a time when the INC appeared unable to carry out even its stated policy objectives.

The second effect that the incumbent government's failures had was to make the BJP the primary alternative to the entire UPA coalition. This is evident in the way that the BJP was able to win seats away from not only Congress, which is the party that is usually in direct contention with the BJP, but also from several regional parties which had hitherto only been in competition with other regional parties.[40] For example, in the nation's capital, New Delhi, BJP won all nine seats, defying expectations that the hugely popular regional grassroots party originating in Delhi, the Aam Aadmi Party (APP) would win at least two or three seats.[41] The BJP in 2014 thus became the first party since 1984 to win the general elections by an outright majority, a clear sign if any that the country was moving away from the problems posed by electing multiple regional parties to form coalition governments.

Every such setback of the UPA government thus directly translated into a victory for the BJP. By directly positioning themselves as a united front against the alleged Hindu fanaticism of the BJP, the coalition members ended up setting the stage for BJP's single-handed, landslide victory in 2014. As macroeconomic problems worsened and successive corruption scandals rocked the central government, the BJP's controversial involvement with Hindu nationalist parties became a secondary concern. The dysfunctional and inefficient coalition government stripped each of the individual member parties of their respective regional political influence, and transferred it en masse to a single national party i.e., the BJP.

---

[40] Election Commission of India, "Key Highlights", Archive of General Elections 2009
[41] Vishal Kant, "BJP All the Way," *The Hindu*, May 17, 2014, xx, http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/bjp-all-the-way/article6018963.ece.

# Chapter 3: Modi's Rise to Leadership

Modi's rise to the leadership of the BJP needs to be understood within the historical context of the Indian political tradition. The identities of the INC and the BJP as the secular and Hindu nationalist parties, respectively, have played a key role in how these parties are perceived within and outside of India's borders. Modi not only faced the burden of his own controversial past, he also had to work with the BJP's association, as a whole, with Hindutva ideology. He dealt with this problem by making a highly visible break from the BJP's old order and then assuming leadership of a new BJP. This split from the old order allowed Modi to reshape the BJP's brand and also to forge his identity as a strong leader.

Modi's image as an effective leader was a key component of his campaign in 2014. In large part, Modi relied on his track record of running an efficient administration in Gujarat to craft the narrative of his strong leadership skills. After all, his administration had won reelection every time. Business leaders and young Gujaratis in particular had long supported Modi for the way he "took charge" of Gujarat's economy to make the state one of the most investor friendly regions in the nation.[42] The incumbent government's 'policy paralysis' was particularly vulnerable to the image that Modi presented of himself to the Indian electorate.

**Historical Context – Origins of the INC/BJP Divide**

The central political divide in the 2014 general elections in India can be traced back to the time of the country's independence from British rule in 1947. Sectional tensions between Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs had reached a dangerous peak at the time due to the

---

[42] James Fontanella-Khan and James Lamont, "Modi Puts Gujarat Economic Growth on a Fast Track," *Financial Times*, May 6, 2012, http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/4b4264a4-5d79-11e1-8bb6-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3Zzoxx3dP.

debate over whether the former British colony should be partitioned into two new countries, secular India and Islamic Pakistan. Ultimately, the worsening of religiously motivated violence, and the efforts of British colonial officials and prominent Indian politicians who favored a two-state solution to the religious divide precipitated in the partition of the country. Partition resulted in the retributive genocide of an estimated one million people and the forced migration of an estimated six to fifteen million people away from their homes.[43] Territorial dispute over the border region of Jammu & Kashmir between Pakistan and India persists to this day leading to brief and not-infrequent bursts of violence at the border. Partition, and the associated religious divide, has thus significantly informed Indian cultural and political consciousness since the days of independence.

The debate over Partition at the time of India's independence, and the concurrent assassination of the foremost leader of the Independence movement, Mahatma Gandhi, established two distinct Indian political traditions. The first, adopted by the Indian National Congress (INC) and endorsed by Mahatma Gandhi, promoted a secular India with aggressive affirmative action measures to protect and support minorities in a country that is overwhelmingly Hindu. The second, a conservative and Hindu-nationalist position, was first adopted by the grassroots volunteer organization, the Rashtriya Swayamvasevak Sangh (RSS), and later popularized by the RSS' more mainstream political offshoot that was established in 1980, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

---

[43] Mira Debs, "Using cultural trauma: Gandhi's assassination, partition and secular nationalism in post-independence India," *Nations & Nationalism* 19, no. 4 (October 2013): 635-653. doi: 10.1111/nana.12038.

INC's strength as the most successful party in Indian history is often attributed to the Indian people's strong identification with a secular tradition. Mira Debs of Yale University's Center for Cultural Sociology finds that Gandhi's assassination in 1948 was key to developing both India's and the INC's identification with secularism. She points out that this traumatic event "was immediately embraced by Congress party politicians who used the assassination to reinforce the idea of a unified secular nation."[44] The INC emphasized the fact that Gandhi's assassin, Nathuram Godse, was a member of a Hindu extremist group. This allowed them to show the Hindu majority nation that Muslims were not the enemy, religious extremism was. The INC was not the sole group that tried to emphasize secularism in India following Gandhi's assassination. British colonial officials and leading news outlets also embraced this narrative.[45] However, because the INC was in power and in charge of crafting this narrative against religious extremism, the party itself became inextricably linked with India's secular and unified identity

The INC has rigorously maintained its secular image since Independence. The party's official website quotes its President, Mrs. Sonia Gandhi, from her speech during the 125th anniversary celebrations of the party, as saying, "The Indian National Congress has always represented a secular, democratic, just, and inclusive India."[46] The placement of the adjective "secular" ahead of all the others is not accidental. The implicit promise that the INC makes to the Indian electorate is that it can be a guardian of the nation's secular identity. Building on the momentum of its role during and just after Independence, and on

---

[44] Ibid, p.636.
[45] Ibid. p. 641.
[46] "Indian National Congress," Indian National Congress, accessed May 13, 2015, http://www.inc.in/about-congress/mission.

the successful creation of the secular-India narrative, the INC has since almost acquired the status of being the default ruling party at the center.

The RSS fell on the other side of that image divide. The fact that Gandhi had been assassinated by a former RSS member and a Hindu, did not stop the RSS from fueling anti-Muslim sentiment after the incident by turning the blame towards that community and calling for a Hindu-nationalist India in contrast to the Islamic Pakistan. In the process of creating a secular identity for India following Gandhi's assassination, the INC government under Nehru actually banned Hindu nationalist groups including the RSS and arrested about 20,000 members of such organizations. Those arrested in this manner were only released eight months later, after "they agreed to give up violence and pledge allegiance to the Indian constitution and flag."[47] This indicates that the INC's narrative of its own secular identity, from the very beginning, included the demonization of Hindu nationalist groups. Since the BJP eventually was an offshoot of the RSS, it has had to carry this legacy of violence and anti-Indian sentiment that the INC encouraged the nation to associate Hindu nationalists with.

Although the INC has since had its own problems with being associated with communal tensions, most notably during the INC-sponsored actions against the Sikh community following the assassination by a Sikh guard of the party's leader and the country's then prime minister, Indira Gandhi, in 1984, the party still retains claim to its carefully developed identity as a supporter of secularism and protector of minority groups. The BJP, by contrast, is permanently associated with Hindu nationalism and anti-Muslim sentiment due to its close ties to the outspoken Rashtriya Swayamvasevak Sangh (RSS).

---

[47] Debs, "Using Cultural Trauma," 641

Further, the BJP's identity as a Hindu nationalist party has prevented it from being a truly equal political opponent to the INC.

As things stood just before the general elections in 2014, this political divide still seemed firmly established, although circumstances of both parties had changed since the days of Independence. Unlike in 1947, the INC was no longer the sole dominant power at the center in 2014, having been forced in the previous general election to rule through a hobbled-together coalition. In recent years the secularist image which has been the INC's greatest strength since the Independence era, has ironically turned into a reputation for communal and 'vote-bank' politics. The BJP in 2014 was also not easily categorized as mainly a religious-nationalist party, mostly due to the efforts of its prime ministerial candidate to portray the party as the harbinger of economic growth and progressive change. This is the historical context within which Modi rose to leadership, a fact that had a crucial role in securing his victory.

**Split from BJP's old order**

On September 13, 2013, Narendra Modi was formally announced as BJP's prime ministerial candidate. The party's parliamentary board, its primary decision making body, was mostly in favor of this choice, with one notable exception. Political veteran and the pre-eminent face of the BJP party of the last several years, Mr. Lal Krishna Advani, staunchly opposed the selection of Modi as the prime ministerial candidate. Almost concurrently with the party's announcement that Modi would be the leader of its campaign, Advani released a blunt letter that contained harsh criticism of the decision. In this letter, Advani stated that he was "anguished" by the decisions that BJP's president Rajnath Singh was taking

regarding the party's direction and refused to attend the parliamentary board meeting or endorse Mr. Modi as the candidate.[48]

The split between Advani and the other leaders of the BJP created quite a furor in the media. Advani was widely viewed as the "patriarch" of the BJP and speculation ran abound as to how the BJP was going to appease Advani. It was suggested that the party would set up two campaign committees, one headed by Modi and the other by Advani.[49] Ultimately, the BJP leadership was never fully able to bring Advani on board and his harsh letter on September 13th pretty effectively closed the door on any efforts to unite the BJP's old leader with the newly anointed one. Such a spectacular and controversial beginning was apropos of the campaign that was to follow. By coming to power within his party in a manner that was openly in conflict with the established party machine, Modi was able to launch a campaign that was 'free of the baggage', so to speak, that the BJP had carried under its old leadership.

Advani's involvement with the RSS and the larger umbrella of Hindu-nationalist politics harkened back to the years just after Independence when religious divides were particularly pronounced. His family migrated to India from what is now Pakistan during Partition.[50] He began his political career as a volunteer for the RSS in the Indian state of Rajasthan. In 1980, Advani became a founding member of the Bharatiya Janata Party along

---

[48] B. Muralidhar Reddy, "It's Official: Modi Is BJP's Choice." *The Hindu*, September 13, 2013, National sec. http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/its-official-modi-is-bjps-choice/article5124375.ece.

[49] India Today Online, "Split Wide Open in BJP as Advani Camp Protests Undue Haste Shown in Elevating Modi," *India Today*, June 11, 2013, xx, http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/split-wide-open-in-bjp-advani-camp-protests-undue-haste-shown-in-elevating-modi/1/279506.html.

[50] L K Advani Communications Office, "About Advaniji," lkadvani.in, accessed May 4, 2015, http://www.lkadvani.in/political_career.php.

with Atal Bihari Vijpayee and was appointed as the party's general secretary.[51] Thus, Advani is an integral part of the BJP's image and role in modern Indian politics.

Advani is also closely associated with the other infamous religious riots to have occurred in recent times, which followed the destruction of the Babri Masjid mosque in 1990 in Ayodhaya, Uttar Pradesh. This incident occurred during a time when the Bharatiya Janata Party was part of the National Front Coalition government at the center following another historic defeat of the INC, a fact that had made Hindu militants bolder than ever. Advani was one of the foremost leaders of the Hindu militant movement to destroy the Babri Masjid, or the Babri Mosque, in order to build a temple on that site to commemorate the fact that Hindus considered the city of Ayodhya to be the birthplace of their God, Ram. He had organized and led a 2500-km march, or "yatra," to Ayodhya, and was in fact arrested for his role in inciting religious violence that resulted in the death nationwide of over a hundred Hindus and Muslims.[52]

Although Modi and Advani were both embroiled in allegations that they were Hindu extremists, the effect that these allegations had on the two men is vastly different. The Hindu pilgrims who were killed in the train fire in 2002 were travelling to the site of the former Babri-Masjid to help build this Ram temple, thereby making the 2002 riots almost a continuation of the incident in 1990. In effect, Modi was accused of furthering the same extremist cause in 2002 that Advani was accused of championing in 1990. However, Modi retained deniability on the allegations that he encouraged the 2002 riots and was in fact re-elected as Chief Minister with a landslide margin. In fact, his re-election platform focused

[51] Ibid.

[52] Nemeth, M., and A. Bose, "Bloodshed in holy battle," *Maclean's* 103, no. 46 (November 12, 1990): 32, *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCO*host* (accessed April 27, 2015).

heavily on placing the blame for the riots on radical Islamic activists.[53] Advani, on the other

hand, was clearly implicated in the religious violence in 1990.

Although Advani attempted to temper the fallout from the Ayodhya riots by stating

that he regretted the demolition of the mosque, his reputation as a Hindu-nationalist

hardliner has remained.[54] He has remained a prominent leader of the BJP, but he only ever

rose to the rank of Deputy Prime Minister when the BJP next came to power through the

National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition in 1998. Following the retirement of the

NDA's leader and the well-known moderate, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who had been India's

Prime Minister from 1998 to 2004, Advani was unable to lead the NDA to victory in the

general elections of 2004, which incidentally also resulted in the formation of the UPA

coalition that would eventually be ousted by the Modi campaign in 2014.

As such, Modi's split from the Advani-faction of the BJP was of no little significance.

When Mr. Advani finally resigned from all party posts in a letter to the party president, he

made it clear that the split between him and those who backed Modi as the new face of the

BJP was ideological in nature. Specifically, he was of the view that the BJP under Modi was

set to take a different ideological approach from the one that he and the other original

leaders of the party had espoused. Unfortunately for Mr. Advani, the fact that the BJP was

likely turning away from its old ideology was perhaps welcome news to India's electorate,

which has broadly favored secularism over religious nationalism, as is apparent from the

success that the INC has enjoyed historically using the secular agenda.

---

[53] Amy Waldman, "Hindu Nationalists Win Landslide Vote in Indian State," *The New York Times*, December 16, 2002, http://www.nytimes.com/2002/12/16/world/hindu-nationalists-win-landslide-vote-in-indian-state.html.
[54] "The Irresistible Rise of L.K. Advani," *The Economist*, July 4, 2002, http://www.economist.com/node/1217140.

**Modi's leadership of a new BJP**

Media coverage of the divide within the BJP clearly picks up on the significance of Modi's disassociation from the party's old Vajpayee-Advani order since the split gave Modi a blank slate on which to present the new BJP brand. In an opinion piece in one of India's leading newspapers, the *Times of India*, popular columnist Ashok Malik wrote, that "the party [BJP] had outgrown identity politics and the RSS umbrella" and that, "it needed to carve a new agenda." He went on to observe that after an "ugly" reelection to Chief Minister-ship in 2002, Modi had changed tack in Gujarat, transforming the narrative of his administration from one of Hindutva to "one of Gujarati pride, of economic hope and social aspiration, of growth and prosperity." Mr. Malik concluded his observations by saying that Modi's ability to transform the narrative in Gujarat away from Hindutva and towards progress had the potential to help the BJP sell that same dream to all of India.[55]

Modi was indeed able to revitalize the BJP agenda in this manner. But the fact remained that he had forcibly pushed Advani out of the party's leadership, an act that reverberated through the months of campaigning. It was proof that Modi had taken complete charge of the BJP and any opposition within the party would not be tolerated, even if it came from party stalwarts. There may have initially been a split in the BJP's leadership. However, by the time the campaign was in full swing the BJP as whole threw its weight behind Modi and the candidate gained a reputation for uniting the party under a new leader.

If there were concerns about Modi's authoritarian tendencies, the campaign dismissed them in the same way that it dealt with all other criticism – it rebranded a

---

[55] Ashok Malik, "Modify or Perish," *The Times of India*, June 8, 2013, http://www.timescrest.com/opinion/modify-or-perish-10487.

negative into a positive. In an interview in July 2013, Modi countered criticism of his leadership style by saying, "A leader who doesn't take a decision: who will accept him as a leader? That is a quality, it's not a negative," and insisted that he had not run his administration in an authoritarian manner, but only tried to lead an effective and efficient team. In a move that would become characteristic of his campaign, Modi rebranded his much-criticized management style as one in which a "decisive" leader made the best use of a "team effort" by his administration.[56]

This approach was successful because of the political climate in which Modi was pursuing it. As established in Chapter 2, the incumbent government had become paralyzed and was being perceived as ineffective. For Indians who wanted economic growth, and who wanted it now, a prohibitively strong-willed leader would have appeared to be a natural choice. In an article written just after Modi was elected, The Economist refers to Modi as "India's Strongman" and notes the mood in the country by referring to a joke that, "until last week India had no government, now it has no opposition."[57] The implication here is that Modi exerts such strong control over Indian government that there can't be any credible opposition that is very successful against him. The same article, however, talks about how this development in Indian government is a positive one. Having the mandate of a victory by outright majority, combined with Modi's "personal power" may make this prime minister the most effective one in India's recent history.[58]

---

[56] Ross Colvin and Satarupa Bhattacharjya, "Special Report: The Remaking of Narendra Modi," *Reuters*, July 12, 2013, http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/07/12/us-india-modi-idUSBRE96B02320130712.
[57] "India's Strongman: Narendra Modi's Amazing Victory Gives India its Best Chance Ever at Prosperity," *The Economist*, May 24, 2014, xx, http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21602683-narendra-modis-amazing-victory-gives-india-its-best-chance-ever-prosperity-indias-strongman.
[58] Ibid.

# Chapter 4: Modi's Campaign Strategy

The UPA government's policy paralysis was an external factor that greatly benefited the Modi campaign. The split from the BJP's old order and Modi's subsequent rise as a powerful leader was well-orchestrated by his campaign but ultimately, that factor owed its success as much to Modi's strategy as it did to the historic Indian political context within which these elections occurred. So far, it is clear why the incumbent government lost favor with the electorate and how Modi's BJP emerged as the preferable alternative, therefore explaining why the BJP won. The sheer resounding *scale* of the BJP's landslide victory in 2014, however, can only be explained by looking at the Modi campaign's brilliant management of the media. By turning the elections into a presidential-style contest and also by successfully focusing the discourse on Modi's economic track record, the campaign was able to take Modi from being a controversial regional politician to a sensational national politician who could command such a landslide victory.

**A Presidential-Style Campaign**

One consequence of Modi's dramatic ascent to the top of the BJP hierarchy was that the election became more about the candidate than about the party. This is somewhat unusual in Indian politics, since elections are most often a contest between two or more competing parties, and not personalities. The pre-eminent candidate within each party who is expected to be the prime minister in case of victory is well known to the electorate. However, the position of prime minister is one to which one member of the winning party or coalition is selected by their party or coalition and appointed by the President *after* the election, once that party or coalition has proven to the President of the country that it has enough seats to constitute a majority in the parliament. As such, each party or coalition

usually pitches its platform and ideology against that of the other, rather than directly contrasting candidates with each other.

Modi's campaign, on the other hand, more closely resembled the campaign for the presidency in the United States. Modi acted as the face of all of BJP and was meticulous about reaching out to all parts of the country, instead of simply focusing on the BJP's strong constituencies and allowing BJP's regional allies to handle the campaign in the other areas. For example, Modi's campaign website was enabled to be translated into one of several Indian languages and even some foreign languages.[59] This shows the wide-reaching and inclusive nature of the campaign. By contrast, the INC's website still only shows the capability to be translated into three languages. This was an important note to strike in a country such as India, which in recent years has come to be dominated by regional parties.

*The Economic Times*, in its analysis of Modi's campaign, notes that Modi behaved much like an effective CEO. He was the sole link between "'the organisation' (BJP, RSS) and 'outside' (electorate, partners)."[60] Particularly within the context of the incumbent government's failures, Modi's ability to manage his party as a strong executive was very useful to his candidacy. Instead of votes for the party being translated into a Prime Minister-ship for Modi, the 2014 election was about votes for Modi translating into votes for a BJP government.

This strategy was particularly effective when placed in contrast with the one adopted by the Congress campaign. Rahul Gandhi, heir to the Gandhi political dynasty and

---

[59] Home | www.narendramodi.in |, accessed April 27, 2015, http://www.narendramodi.in/.
[60] Vinod Mahanta et al., "Narendra Modi's Brilliantly Run Campaign Offers Many Lessons for Business Leaders," *The Economic Times*, May 30, 2014, xx, http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2014-05-30/news/50211403_1_narendra-modi-nilanjan-mukhopadhyay-team-modi.

the son of the party chair, Sonia Gandhi, was the party's nominee for the office of the Prime Minister. Although the INC was in power at the center, the party's current Prime Minister was Dr. Manmohan Singh, who had served for ten years in that office. So, the INC was also in need of some rebranding given this key change in the party's platform.

However, Rahul Gandhi proved to be far less effective in presenting his party as a united front to the electorate than Modi was with the BJP. Although both candidates were products of their respective party's political history, their individual personal histories were very much part of the political discourse in the period leading up to the election. The contrast between Modi's self-made image and Rahul Gandhi's image as a Cambridge-educated scion of the powerful Gandhi family could not have been clearer.

Mr. Modi was born into the Ghanchi community, which is categorized as an Other Backward Class (OBC) under Indian law, a category that encapsulates a number of castes that are determined to have been negatively affected by India's rigid caste system.[61] It is now well known that he became involved in politics at the grassroots level as a volunteer for the RSS, joined the BJP when he was thirty seven years old, and worked his way up the ranks of the BJP by showing an extraordinary ability to handle the crisis of an earthquake in his home state of Gujarat in 2001.[62] During campaign season, the nickname of 'Chaiwala,' one that was alternatively considered positive by some and negative by others was developed for Modi. 'Chaiwala' means 'tea-seller' in the Indian language of Hindi. When Modi was a young boy, he sold tea with his brother at a railway platform in India.[63] The

---

[61] Government of India, *The Gazette of India: Extraordinary*, (New Delhi: Comptroller of Publications, 1999), accessed March 1, 2015, http://www.ncbc.nic.in/Writereaddata/note15635288544824097205.pdf.
[62] Rama Mohan, "The Rise of Narendra Modi: From Chaiwala to NDA's Prime Ministerial Candidate (Timeline)," International Business Times, last modified February 24, 2014, http://www.ibtimes.co.in/the-rise-of-narendra-modi-from-chaiwala-to-ndas-prime-ministerial-candidate-timeline-540316.
[63] Ibid.

'chaiwala' is an ubiquitous feature of Indian railway systems and this little detail of Modi's

background not only increased his reliability but also emphasized his dramatic rise to

power.

Rahul Gandhi, on the other hand was born into a political dynasty that has been at

the center of Indian politics since well before independence. Rahul Gandhi was the son of

former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and his Italian-Indian wife, Sonia Gandhi. His was also

the grandson of Indira Gandhi, another former prime minister and the great grandson of

Jawaharlal Nehru, who was no less than India's first ever prime minister. To say that his

eventual rise to the position of the INC's prime ministerial-candidate was universally

expected would be an understatement. His imminent rise to power quite easily contrasted

with the way Modi had climbed the ranks through his own efforts, and the Modi campaign

took full advantage of that fact.

Modi engaged in a systematic effort to discredit Gandhi's credentials to hold the

office of the prime minster by primarily targeting the latter's ancestry. On the campaign

trail, Modi took to calling Gandhi, 'Shehzada,' which means 'prince' or quite literally, the

'son of a Shah'.[64] The implications of the word cannot be missed. On the surface, it referred

to the fact that Rahul Gandhi had been born into what was perhaps the most politically

powerful family in India. Further, the word 'Shah' originally referred to the Muslims kings

of India during the Mughal period. In another barb at the INC's candidate, Modi once

mockingly congratulated mosquitoes for "daring to bite" the scion of the Gandhi family,

with the implication being that the INC's candidate was usually given special treatment due

---

[64] "Narendra Modi Mimics 'Shehzada' Rahul Gandhi at Chhattisgarh Rally," NDTV.com, last modified November 15, 2013, http://www.ndtv.com/india-news/narendra-modi-mimics-shehzada-rahul-gandhi-at-chhattisgarh-rally-541195.

to his family's power.[65] While such rhetoric was clearly inflammatory and designed to provoke a strong populist reaction against Rahul Gandhi, the fact remained that it worked. The INC was ill-equipped to engage in a battle of barbs and paid the price when the electorate ceased to take its candidate as seriously as it did Modi.

It wasn't so much that Rahul Gandhi failed to match Modi at his own game. Rather, Rahul Gandhi and the INC consciously made the choice to run a campaign that stressed, "party, over personality."[66] The INC, in a decision that was symbolic of its image as the traditional *status quo* of Indian politics, decided to run the same traditional campaign that it had run over the past several decades. The party and its regional allies approached the election on multiple fronts. This strategy may have worked if the party's candidate for Prime Minister had at least acted as the glue between these multiple fronts but unfortunately, Rahul Gandhi possessed neither the charisma nor the political clout to assume such a role. Ultimately, Modi's innovative (for India) presidential-style campaign strategy proved to be the more successful one, particularly because it was run against an incumbent government that had come to be perceived as stagnant and paralyzed.

As such, Modi's spectacular rise as the leader of the BJP had the dual effect of presenting him as an effective and appealing leader, and also turning the campaign into a presidential-style contest that his opponent, Rahul Gandhi, was ill-equipped to handle. This strategy was a way for Modi to present an alternative to the traditional approach adopted by the INC. Unlike Rahul Gandhi, whose qualifications to be prime minister arose primarily

---

[65] Press Trust of India, "Narendra Modi 'congratulates' Mosquitoes for Daring to Bite Rahul Gandhi," NDTV.com, last modified November 18, 2013, http://www.ndtv.com/assembly/narendra-modi-congratulates-mosquitoes-for-daring-to-bite-rahul-gandhi-541495.

[66] "Modi's Presidential Style and Congress' Amorphous Approach Chart New Campaign Territory," *The Times of India*, April 9, 2014, http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/edit-page/Modis-presidential-style-and-Congresss-amorphous-approach-chart-new-campaigning-territory/articleshow/33462472.cms.

from his family's strong hold on the INC's leadership, Modi had relied on his own track record to present his candidacy and ensured that the electorate knew that he had done so. This kind of candidate-focused politics is somewhat unusual in Indian politics, particularly in recent years, and the Modi campaign executed it to great success.

**Changing the Discourse**

When Modi was announced as the leader of the BJP's 2014 campaign and its intended candidate for the office of Prime Minister, a group of leading academics and intellectuals of Indian origin published an open letter in the British newspaper *The Independent*. This letter was titled, "The Idea of Modi as Prime Minister Fills Us with Dread" and was signed by academics from such universities as the London School of Economics and the University of Cambridge.[67] In another open letter to The Guardian, artists and academics such as Salman Rushdie and Anish Kapoor expressed their belief that a Modi victory would, "bode ill for India's future as a country that cherishes the ideals of inclusion and protection for all its peoples and communities."[68]

Modi was notorious in the international political community, particularly for his dispute with the United States government. In 2005, the US imposed a visa ban on Modi for his alleged role in the 2002 riots.[69] In 2013, Modi was invited to speak at the Wharton India Economic Forum (WIFE) at the University of Pennsylvania regarding his economic growth model in Gujarat, an invitation that WIEF withdrew at the last minute in the face of

---

[67] "Letters: The Idea of Modi in Power Fills Us with Dread," *The Independent*, April 21, 2014, http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/letters/letters-the-idea-of-modi-in-power-fills-us-with-dread-9273298.html.
[68] "If Modi is Elected, it will ode Ill for India's Future," *The Guardian*, April 10, 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/10/if-modi-elected-india-future-gujarat.
[69] "No Entry for Modi into US: Visa Denied," *The Times of India*, March 18, 2005, http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/No-entry-for-Modi-into-US-visa-denied/articleshow/1055543.cms.

opposition from some of its professors.[70] Modi's US visa ban stayed in place through most

of 2014. However, just one short year later, In *Time* magazine's 2015 list of the world's 100

most influential people, US president Barack Obama was the author of Modi's profile blurb,

where he praises the Indian politician as "India's Reformer-in-Chief."[71] The *Time* profile

was a sign of a dramatically reversed reception of Modi by not only the US and other

international governments, but also by foreign media.

This dramatic change in the media and international political reception of Modi is in

great part thanks to the brilliant strategy his campaign adopted, in which it sought to

'change the discourse.' The notion behind this strategy is best explained in the words of the

world's most famous fictional ad man Don Draper, who said, "If you don't like what is being

said, change the conversation."[72] This is exactly what Modi did, by turning the focus away

from his troubled and controversial past with regards to religious riots and towards his

well-documented success in transforming his home state of Gujarat into an economic

powerhouse.

There is certainly truth behind Modi's image as the architect of Gujarat's economic

prosperity. Jyoti Thottam writes in a *Time International* article about Modi's meteoric rise,

> "Gujarat**'s** $85 billion economy may not be the largest in India, but it has prospered
> without the benefit of natural resources, fertile farmland, a big population center
> like Mumbai or a lucrative high-tech hub like Bangalore. Gujarat's success,
> even Modi's detractors acknowledge, is a result of good planning--exactly what so
> much of India lacks."[73]

---

[70] "Modi's Address at Wharton Cancelled," *The Hindu*, March 4,
2013, http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/modis-address-at-wharton-cancelled/article4472532.ece.
[71] Barack Obama, "The 100 Most Influential People: Narendra Modi," *Time*, April 16,
2015, http://time.com/3823155/narendra-modi-2015-time-100/.
[72] Leslie Linka Glatter, "Love Among the Ruins," *Mad Men*, Directed by Leslie Linka Glatter. AMC, August 23,
2009.
[73] Jyoti Thottam, "Boy from the Backyard." *Time International (Atlantic Edition)* 179, no. 12 (March 26, 2012):
28-31. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCO*host* (accessed April 26, 2015).

However, what makes Modi unique amongst all the other Chief Ministers across India who have also brought economic growth to their respective states, is his ability to capitalize on high profile instances of his success. He has effectively made his brand synonymous with economic growth fueled by neoliberal policies.

That the Modi campaign adopted this strategy deliberately and completely self-consciously is apparent. A 2002 *New York Times* interview with Narendra Modi provides insight into why his campaign for India's most powerful office made managing the media discourse a priority. When asked if he regretted anything about how he had handled the 2002 riots, the then Chief Minister had replied that his "only regret" was that "he did not handle the news media better."[74] While that reply may appear callous at first glance, it is also undeniably the mark of highly media-savvy politician. Modi's understanding of the importance of directing the political discourse in the media was perhaps his greatest advantage during 2014 election campaign.

The Modi campaign's focus on managing the media did not stop with news outlets. Modi is one of the most active politicians on social media platforms, most notably Twitter where he has 11.9 million followers as of April 27, 2015, making him far and away the most popular Indian politician on social media platforms.[75] In fact, Modi's popularity on Twitter is second only to another populist politician, US President Barack Obama.[76] Needless to say, Modi's social media presence was particularly impressive in a country where people

---

[74] Celia W. Dugger, "Religious Riots Loom Over Indian Politics," *The New York Times*, July 27, 2002, xx, http://www.nytimes.com/2002/07/27/international/asia/27INDI.html?.

[75] Narendra Modi, "Narendra Modi (@narendramodi)," Twitter, accessed April 27, 2015, https://twitter.com/narendramodi.

[76] Joyojeet Pal, "Banalities Turned Viral: Narendra Modi and the Political Tweet," *Television & New Media* 16, no. 4 (May 2015): 378-387, *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCO*host* (accessed April 27, 2015).

between the ages of 21 and 44 make up 36.3% of the population, second in significance

only to the population under age 21, who make up 47.9% of the country.[77]

Modi's savvy management of social media, as well as the fact that he firmly

established himself as the bringer of economic progress to Gujarat, had a curious effect on

the Indian political discourse, particularly in terms of its impact on the middle class and

private interests. In the face of his overwhelming popularity and association with

modernity and progress, debates over whether or not he was a radical Hindu nationalist

appeared petty and quarrelsome. This notion was promoted by the Modi campaign itself,

which reached out to the Muslim community under the banner of a united India for

economic progress.

In an address to predominantly Muslim audience in Uttar Pradesh, Modi stated, "We

(the BJP) believe in economic development, while you play the politics of votes, letting

Muslims languish in poverty."[78] The effect that this had on the country's Muslims was

palpable. In an Al Jazeera profile of a cross-section of Indian Muslims, one young Indian

Muslim states, "holding grudges against the country's candidate for PM, who has been

given a clean chit in the court [referring to the Supreme Court-appointed Special

Investigations Team's report clearing Modi of all charges], would just be a huge loss - not

just for the BJP - but for us - India's Muslims."[79] The young Muslim's opinion is in the

minority compared to all the Muslims surveyed by Al Jazeera. However, his words perfectly

frame the argument that Modi was presenting to Muslim electorate in the country. Even if it

---

[77] Government of India, Census 2011
[78] Shaikh A. Rahman, "Modi, Muslims, and Divided India," *AlJazeera*, March 3, 2014, xx,
http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2014/03/muslims-modi-divided-india-
20143362734969484.html.
[79] Ibid.

did not convince all Indian Muslims, it was certainly appealing to enough of them to make a difference. This is symptomatic of the Modi campaign's genius in discrediting criticism. The campaign's successful framing of Modi's past within the context of his economic success managed to turn weakness into strength.

Further, the campaign implemented this strategy by attacking the economic policies of the INC, particularly on entitlement programs and other left-leaning policies that burdened businesses with British-era regulations. This criticism proved to be particularly effective on the massive Indian middle class, and emerging private interests, both domestic and foreign. This is in direct contrast to the INC's political strategy that has historically counted on the "lower social orders as its most important voting bloc."[80] An October 2011 article in the *New York Times* profiles the emerging middle class in India, declaring that the middle class was the "fastest growing demographic group" in the country, one that appeared to be shedding its traditionally characteristic political apathy. The article goes on to observe that the new middle class is "tightly wedded to the private sector" and its interests are not exactly aligned with the rural masses that have traditionally dominated Indian elections and kept the INC in power.[81]

Modi's attempt to influence the political discourse was thus successful because of two reasons. First, Modi proved to be an extremely media-savvy politician, particularly when it came to embracing social media platforms such as Twitter. Second, he offered the Indian electorate a sufficiently engaging alternative topic of conversation i.e., economic

---

[80] Ashutosh Varshney, "India's Democratic Challenge," *Foreign Affairs*, March 2007, http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/62451/ashutosh-varshney/indias-democratic-challenge.
[81] Jim Yardley, "Protests Awaken a Goliath in India," *The New York Times*, October 29, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/30/world/asia/indias-middle-class-appears-to-shed-political-apathy.html?pagewanted=all.

development. Not to mention, Modi's charismatic media presence also had the effect of making him more 'likeable' and less apt to be characterized as the villain who had masterminded a religious pogrom in his home state. As a result, the one issue that could have stopped the Modi campaign in its tracks, i.e., his association with Hindu nationalism, took a backseat to his image as the bringer of economic growth and prosperity.

# Chapter 5: Conclusions

This thesis has tried to address the question of whether Narendra Modi's victory in the Indian general elections of 2014 indicated that Hindu nationalism was starting to take hold in India. In addressing this question, it is important to make the distinction between what Modi may individually believe, and what his campaign presented to the nation. While we cannot know with absolute certainty that Modi is not a Hindu extremist at heart, we can certainly deduce from his campaign that he did not win the support of the Indian electorate with religious nationalist sentiment. Modi's brilliantly executed campaign in 2014 would have been successful under any circumstances, but it had the added advantage of being particularly adapted to the political and economic realties of India in the new millennium.

Given the reality of a gridlocked coalition government and a challenger who had a proven track record of efficient government and superior economic performance, the Indian electorate made the rather obvious choice of picking the challenger. The UPA coalition had clearly become 'paralyzed' and was unable to pass significant reform legislation. High-profile political scandals such as the '2G Spectrum' scandal and the 'Coal-gate' scandal dealt harsh blows to the INC's image and caused divisions within the UPA coalition. The government came across as disorganized and inefficient, and at a time when the Indian people were growing impatient for faster economic growth *à la* China. In this sense, the INC lost the 2014 election for the same reason that it has lost elections during the 67 years since India gained independence. It's own failures and mismanagement of its image caused it to "lose" votes to the opposition.

The INC's loss was exacerbated by the total contrast presented by Modi's leadership of the BJP. While the BJP is a natural alternative to the INC in Indian politics, Modi made his

party a more palatable choice to secular India by breaking away from the old leadership. As the leader of the newly rebranded BJP, Modi presented the BJP under his leadership as the preferable alternative to the disorganized UPA coalition.

Further, the *scale* of Modi's victory, i.e., his ability to "gain" votes from not only those who were disillusioned with the INC but from a broad cross-section of Indians, is entirely attributable to the unique strategies adopted by his campaign. It was a campaign that was well managed from the top-down, and it acted as a perfect metaphor for the type of administration that Modi's platform promised to the electorate. It not only capitalized on the UPA government's failures but also presented a credible promise to lead India to a better future.

It also brought new aspects to Indian electoral discourse, such as presidential-style personality politics, and national (as opposed to communal) appeal. Modi's individual appeal translated into votes for the BJP, raising the appeal of the party throughout the nation. Gandhi's lack of appeal on the other hand, hurt the INC as a whole. This may have long-term ramifications for politics in India, particularly to the INC. The INC has a long and unbroken tradition of being chaired by a member of the Gandhi dynasty, all descendants of India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. Perhaps that streak ends with Rahul Gandhi, if he continues to be a weak match to Modi's strong persona.

Finally, Modi's campaign managed media discourse regarding his image to perfection by directing the conversation away from his association to the 2002 riots and towards his record of bringing economic development to Gujarat. While it is tempting to dismiss Modi's media strategy as a shallow attempt to disguise his controversial past, an alternative argument can be made that Modi has truly learned his lessons from 2002 and

that he has come to understand the pitfalls of communal politics. In a country such as India, which despite its secular identity has long struggled with religious tensions, it is an unfortunate truth that all of the major political parties have a history of engaging in politics that seek to capitalize on religious tensions. As such, Modi's campaign was notable for the way it resisted the temptation to do so. This thesis ultimately seeks to emphasize that Modi's victory was not because of, but despite, his Hindu nationalist past.

In fact, Modi's victory not only moves away from a religious-nationalist strategy, but also potentially offers an alternative to the forced, and often hypocritical, secularism that has been adopted by certain democracies. The new Modi administration moves away from the INC's insistence on maintaining an entirely non-religious image while continuing to play communal politics. Instead openly embraces its Hindu identity while disassociating that religious identity from the economic and social welfare of the country. This could be very important for a nation such as India, which is highly religious at the individual level (as evidenced by the continued existence of a rigid caste system), and yet seeks to maintain secularism at the collective level (as evidenced by the repeated success of the INC's secular image in past elections).

Narendra Modi will have been in office for a year in May 2015. It is unclear whether his promise of "Ache Din," i.e., "Good Days," has yet fully materialized. The country has yet to see what the Modi administration's response would be to a major religious conflict. While Modi himself may have adopted a neutral tone in his public remarks about religion and minorities, members of his administration continue to give indications that they may not be very willing to protect the rights of minorities in the way that the INC has done in the past. Modi's Minister for minority affairs, Najma Heptulla, said at the very start of the

administration that she was opposed to "reservations," which is the term for affirmative action-inspired quotas that have been set up in India for minorities, because they killed the "spirit of competition," and drove the point home harder by declaring that "Muslims are not minorities."[82] Along the same vein, the Minister for social justice, Thawar Chand Gehlot said that he believed the reservation system benefitting religious minorities was "unconstitutional."[83] There is also the question of how involved the RSS, the BJP's parent organization, will be in Modi's administration. The RSS continued to insist that India is a "Hindu nation," a notion that many in BJP are likely to still hold due to their close ties to this organization.[84] Although the fears that the Modi government will systematically target Muslims and religious minorities are yet to materialize in any concrete way - the reservation system is still in place, for example – it may yet be too soon to tell whether religious minorities will suffer under this administration.

On the other hand, Modi certainly seems to be tackling the challenge of better governance and neoliberal economic reform in India, the two key aspects of his platform. For example, Modi announced plans to downsize the Planning Commission, a relic of the Jawaharlal Nehru-led near-socialist era of Indian history.[85] This is a measure that tackles both fronts of Modi's agenda – restricting government bodies to make them more efficient, and implementing neoliberal economic policies, in this case, deregulation of the economy.

---

[82] Sitaram Yachury, "Initial Signals from Modi Government are Ominous," The Hindustan Times, June 3, 2014, http://www.hindustantimes.com/sitaramyechury/new-government-new-manifesto-how-far-will-they-go/article1-1225401.aspx.
[83] Ibid.
[84] Press Trust of India, "India is a Hindu Nation, says RSS Chief Mohan Bhagwat," *India Today*, August 17, 2014, http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/india-is-a-hindu-nation-says-rss-chief--mohan-bhagwat/1/377521.html.
[85] Kumar Uttam, "Plan Panel may Lose Sheen, Turn into Think-Tank," *Hindustan Times*, May 22, 2014, http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/planning-commission-may-lose-sheen-turn-into-think-tank/article1-1221654.aspx.

Politicians on both ends of the spectrum have long criticized the Planning Commission for "over-regulation of ministries and state governments."[86] This government, however, may be the first since the post-Independence era to actually work on re-structuring the Planning Commission to make it less powerful and over-arching. This may have the effect that Modi intends, which is to remove regulatory burden on states so that they can attract investment, or it may have the effect of derailing the economy due to less oversight. The Modi administration would also have to address concerns over whether neoliberal policies tend to worsen inequality and encourage risky behavior through less oversight of the private sector, although these effects may not be apparent for several years to come.

A full evaluation of the Modi administration is thus not possible at this time, and we cannot know whether Modi intends to follow through on his campaign's promise of focusing on economic development for all sections of the Indian population. We can conclude with certainty, however, that the Modi campaign has fundamentally changed the way politics are conducted in India. Historical assumptions about parties and personalities no longer seem to hold sway in the way that they used to, at least when faced with as savvy a campaign as the one run by Modi. This is in all likelihood a positive sign for India's future, as the country may now have the chance now to form a new national identity not restricted by Independence-era thinking.

---

[86] Ibid.

# Bibliography

Amin, Mohammad. "Labor Regulation and Employment in India's Retail Stores." *World Bank Social Protection and Labor Papers*, no. 0816 (2008). Accessed November 23, 2014. http://siteresources.worldbank.org/SOCIALPROTECTION/Resources/SP-Discussion-papers/Labor-Market-DP/0816.pdf.

Basu, Kaushik, Gary S. Fields, and Shub Debgupta. *Retrenchment, Labor Laws and Government Policy: An Analysis with Special Reference to India*. Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, 1996.

http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTDECSHRSMA/Resources/india.pdf.

Biswas, Soutik. "World Bank Chief Economist on Future of India's Economy." *BBC News* (New Delhi), January 30, 2014.

Colvin, Ross, and Satarupa Bhattacharjya. "Special Report: The Remaking of Narendra Modi." *Reuters* (Gandhinagar), July 12, 2013.

http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/07/12/us-india-modi-idUSBRE96B02320130712.

Comptroller and Auditor General of India. *Allocation of Coal Blocks and Augmentation of Coal Production*. New Delhi: Ministry of

Coal, 2012. http://www.saiindia.gov.in/english/home/Our_Products/Audit_Report/Government_Wise/union_audit/recent_reports/union_performance/2012_2013/Commercial/Report_No_7/index.pdf (accessed November 13, 2014).

Comptroller and Auditor General of India. *Performance Audit Report on the Issue of Licenses and Allocation of 2G Spectrum*. New Delhi: Ministry of Telecommunications, 2012.

http://www.thehindu.com/news/performance-audit-report-on-the-issue-of-licences-and-allocation-of-2g-spectrum-cag-report/article889943.ece (accessed November 13, 2014).

Debs, Mira. "Using cultural trauma: Gandhi's assassination, partition and secular nationalism in post-independence India." *Nations & Nationalism* 19, no. 4 (October 2013): 635-653. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCO*host* (accessed March 1, 2015). doi: 10.1111/nana.12038.

Dugger, Celia W. "Religious Riots Loom Over Indian Politics." *The New York Times*, July 27, 2002. http://www.nytimes.com/2002/07/27/international/asia/27INDI.html?.

Dugger, Celia W. "Fire Started on Train Carrying Hindu Activists Kills 58." *The New York Times* (New Delhi), February 28, 2008. http://www.nytimes.com/2002/02/28/world/fire-started-on-train-carrying-hindu-activists-kills-58.html.

Election Commission of India. "Archive of General Election 2009: Performance of National Parties." Election Commission of India. Last modified 2009. http://eci.nic.in/eci_main/archiveofge2009/Stats/VOLI/12_PerformanceOfNational Parties.pdf.

Election Commission of India. "Archive of General Election 2014: Performance of National Parties." Election Commission of India. Last modified 2014. http://eci.nic.in/eci_main/archiveofge2014/20%20-%20Performance%20of%20National%20Parties.pdf.

Election Commission of India. *Notification No.56/2015/PPS-II*. New Delhi: Gazette of India,

2015.

http://eci.nic.in/eci_main/ElectoralLaws/OrdersNotifications/year2014/Notificati
on%20English%2013.01.2015.pdf.

Fontanella-Khan, James, and James Lamont. "Modi Puts Gujarat Economic Growth on a Fast
Track." *Financial Times* (Charanka, Gujarat and New Delhi), May 6, 2012.
http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/4b4264a4-5d79-11e1-8bb6-
00144feabdc0.html#axzz3Zzoxx3dP.

"Former Prime Ministers." Prime Minister of India. Accessed May 5, 2015.
http://pmindia.gov.in/en/former-prime-ministers/.

Government of India. *The Gazette of India: Extraordinary*. New Delhi: Comptroller of
Publications, 1999. Accessed March 1, 2015.
http://www.ncbc.nic.in/Writereaddata/note15635288544824097205.pdf.

*The Guardian*. "If Modi is elected, it will Bode Ill for India's Future." April 10, 2014.
http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/10/if-modi-elected-india-
future-gujarat.

"The Gujarat Model: How Modi-nomics was forged in one of India's most business friendly
states." *The Economist*. January 10, 2015.
http://www.economist.com/news/finance-and-economics/21638147-how-modi-
nomics-was-forged-one-indias-most-business-friendly-states.

*The Hindu*. "Modi's Address at Wharton Cancelled." March 4, 2013.
http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/modis-address-at-wharton-
cancelled/article4472532.ece.

Hobolt, Sarah, James Tilley, and Susan Banducci. "Clarity of responsibility: How

government cohesion conditions performance voting." *European Journal Of Political Research* 52, no. 2 (March 2013): 164-187. doi:10.1111/j.1475-6765.2012.02072.x.

Home | Www.narendramodi.in |. Accessed April 27, 2015. http://www.narendramodi.in/.

*The Independent.* "Letters: The Idea of Modi in Power Fills Us with Dread." April 21, 2014.

http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/letters/letters-the-idea-of-modi-in-power-

fills-us-with-dread-9273298.html.

"Indian National Congress." Indian National Congress. Accessed May 13, 2015.

http://www.inc.in/about-congress/mission.

"India's Strongman: Narendra Modi's Amazing Victory Gives India its Best Chance Ever at

Prosperity." *The Economist.* May 24, 2014.

http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21602683-narendra-modis-amazing-

victory-gives-india-its-best-chance-ever-prosperity-indias-strongman.

India Times News Network. "United Progressive Alliance: Partners in Government." *The

Times of India*, July 8, 2006.

http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/specials/United-Progressive-Alliance-

Partners-in-governance/articleshow/1716941.cms.

India Today Online. "Split Wide Open in BJP as Advani Camp Protests Undue Haste in

Elevating Modi." *India Today*, June 11, 2013.

http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/split-wide-open-in-bjp-advani-camp-protests-

undue-haste-shown-in-elevating-modi/1/279506.html.

India Today Online. "What is the 2G Spectrum Scam?" *India Today*, October 19, 2012.

http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/what-is-the-2g-scam-all-about/1/188832.html.

Indo-Asian News Service. "2009 Lok Sabha Election: Final Tally." *The Hindustan Times*

(New Delhi), May 17, 2009. http://www.hindustantimes.com/newdelhi/2009-lok-

sabha-election-final-results-tally/article1-411793.aspx.

"The Irresistible Rise of L.K. Advani." *The Economist*. July 4, 2002.

http://www.economist.com/node/1217140.

Joseph, Manu. "Shaking off the Horror of the Past in India." *The New York Times*, February

15, 2012. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/16/world/asia/16iht-letter16.html.

Kant, Vishal. "BJP All the Way." *The Hindu* (New Delhi), May 17, 2014.

http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/bjp-all-the-way/article6018963.ece.

"Key Highlights." In *Archive of General Elections 2009*. Vol. 1. New Delhi: Election

Commission of India, 2009.

http://eci.nic.in/eci_main/archiveofge2009/Stats/VOLI/24_KeyHighlights.pdf

(Accessed November 23, 2014).

L K Advani Communications Office."About Advaniji." lkadvani.in. Accessed May 4, 2015.

http://www.lkadvani.in/political_career.php.

"Love Among the Ruins." *Mad Men*. Directed by Leslie Linka Glatter. AMC, August 23, 2009.

Mahanta, Vinod, Moinak Mitra, Priyanka Sanghani, and ET Bureau. "Narendra Modi's

Brilliantly Run Campaign Offers Many Lessons for Business Leaders." *The Economic

Times*, May 30, 2014. http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2014-05-

30/news/50211403_1_narendra-modi-nilanjan-mukhopadhyay-team-modi.

Malik, Ashok. "Modify or Perish." *The Times of India*, June 8, 2013.

http://www.timescrest.com/opinion/modify-or-perish-10487.

Marino, Andy. "Prologue." In *Narendra Modi: A Political Biography*. HarperCollins

Publishers India, 2014. Kindle edition.

Marino, Andy. "The Early Years." In *Narendra Modi: A Political Biography*. HarperCollins

      Publishers India, 2014. Kindle edition.

Modi, Narendra. "Narendra Modi (@narendramodi)." Twitter. Accessed April 27, 2015.

      https://twitter.com/narendramodi.

Mohan, Rama. "The Rise of Narendra Modi: From Chaiwala to NDA's Prime Ministerial

      Candidate (Timeline)." International Business Times. Last modified February 24,

      2014. http://www.ibtimes.co.in/the-rise-of-narendra-modi-from-chaiwala-to-ndas-

      prime-ministerial-candidate-timeline-540316.

"Narendra Modi Mimics 'Shehzada' Rahul Gandhi at Chhattisgarh Rally." NDTV.com. Last

      modified November 15, 2013. http://www.ndtv.com/india-news/narendra-modi-

      mimics-shehzada-rahul-gandhi-at-chhattisgarh-rally-541195.

Nemeth, M., and A. Bose. "Bloodshed in holy battle." *Maclean's* 103, no. 46 (November 12,

      1990): 32. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCO*host* (accessed April 27, 2015).

Obama, Barack. "The 100 Most Influential People: Narendra Modi." *Time*, April 16, 2015.

      http://time.com/3823155/narendra-modi-2015-time-100/.

Pal, Joyojeet. "Banalities Turned Viral: Narendra Modi and the Political Tweet." *Television &*

      *New Media* 16, no. 4 (May 2015): 378-387. *Academic Search Complete*,

      EBSCO*host* (accessed April 27, 2015).

Press Trust of India. "Highest Ever Turnout of 66.38% Recorded in this Lok Sabha

      Election." *The Times of India* (New Delhi), May 12, 2014.

      http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/news/Highest-ever-turnout-of-66-38-

      recorded-in-this-Lok-Sabha-election/articleshow/35028268.cms?.

Press Trust of India. "India is a Hindu Nation, says RSS Chief Mohan Bhagwat." *India Today*,

August 17, 2014. http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/india-is-a-hindu-nation-says-
rss-chief--mohan-bhagwat/1/377521.html.

Rahman, Shaikh A. "Modi, Muslims, and Divided India." *AlJazeera*, March 3, 2014.
http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2014/03/muslims-modi-divided-
india-20143362734969484.html.

Reddy, B. Muralidhar. "It's Official: Modi Is BJP's Choice." *The Hindu*, National sec.
(September 13, 2013). (accessed March 10, 2015).
http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/its-official-modi-is-bjps-
choice/article5124375.ece.

*The Times of India*. "No Entry for Modi into US: Visa Denied." March 18, 2005.
http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/No-entry-for-Modi-into-US-visa-
denied/articleshow/1055543.cms.

Thottam, Jyoti. "Boy from the Backyard." *Time International (Atlantic Edition)* 179, no. 12
(March 26, 2012): 28-31. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCO*host* (accessed March
13, 2015).

Trading Economics. "India GDP Annual Growth Rate." *www.tradingeconomics.com*. 2015.
http://www.tradingeconomics.com/india/gdp-growth-annual.

Trading Economics. "India Inflation Rate." *www.tradingeconomics.com*. 2015.
http://www.tradingeconomics.com/india/inflation-cpi.

Tsebelis, George. "Governments and Parliaments." In *Veto Players: How Political Institutions
Work*, 99-100. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2002.

"UPA Government to Adhere to Six Basic Principles of Governance." *The Hindu*, May 28,

2004. Accessed November 23, 2014.

http://www.thehindu.com/2004/05/28/stories/2004052807371200.htm.

Uttam, Kumar. "Plan Panel may Lose Sheen, Turn into Think-Tank." *Hindustan Times* (New

Delhi), May 22, 2014. http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/planning-

commission-may-lose-sheen-turn-into-think-tank/article1-1221654.aspx.

Varshney, Ashutosh. "India's Democratic Challenege." *Foreign Affairs*, March 2007.

http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/62451/ashutosh-varshney/indias-

democratic-challenge.

Waldman, Amy. "Hindu Nationalists Win Landslide Vote in Indian State." *The New York

Times* (New Delhi), December 16, 2002.

http://www.nytimes.com/2002/12/16/world/hindu-nationalists-win-landslide-

vote-in-indian-state.html.

"Welcome to RSS." Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. Accessed May 5, 2015.

http://www.rss.org/knowus//Encyc/2014/8/22/Welcome-to-RSS.aspx.

Yachury, Sitaram. "Initial Signals from Modi Government are Ominous." *The Hindustan

Times*, June 3, 2014. http://www.hindustantimes.com/sitaramyechury/new-

government-new-manifesto-how-far-will-they-go/article1-1225401.aspx.

Yardley, Jim. "Protests Awaken a Goliath in India." *The New York Times* (Dwarka, India),

October 29, 2011. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/30/world/asia/indias-

middle-class-appears-to-shed-political-apathy.html?pagewanted=all.