

India has Elected its First Fascist Prime Minister

By Nick Gier

Citizens in the largest democracy in the world went to the polls over the last five weeks. A record 66 percent of the 814 million eligible voters turned out, and handed the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) a decisive victory.

The BJP won in 24 of the 35 states and special constituencies, an election victory whose magnitude has not been seen since the days of Indira and Rajiv Gandhi. Rajiv Gandhi's record 414 parliamentary seats in 1984 will, however, be difficult to top. The Gandhis' Congress Party was soundly defeated this time, as the BJP won 282 seats to Congress' 44 in the 543-member Parliament.

The fascist government of dictator Benito Mussolini claimed that it had made the Italian trains run on time. As the longest ruling chief minister of the Indian state of Gujarat, Narendra Modi did indeed improve its economy—building new infrastructure and bringing in foreign investment. The lot of the state's poor, however, did not change. Now as the nation's new BJP prime minister, Modi promises to reverse the nation's faltering economy.

Narendra Modi, India's Brown Shirts, and Nazi Sympathizers

Since 1971, Modi has been a member of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a militant Hindu nationalist organization founded in 1925 and modeled on Mussolini's Brown Shirts. Even in the face of international criticism, Modi has refused to change his state's school curriculum, which praises the achievements of Nazi Germany and describes Hitler as a "charismatic" personality.

A report of the Indian Human Rights Commission condemned the Modi administration for "promoting the attitudes of racial superiority, racial hatred, and the legacy of Nazism." The swastika comes from an ancient India, and many Hindu nationalists use the symbol and claim to be more Aryan than any European.

N. V. Godse, the man who assassinated Mahatma Gandhi in 1948, had been an RSS member until he formed his own Hindu paramilitary organization in the 1940s. RSS activities had been previously banned by British authorities, and then four times by the Indian government from 1948 to 2008.

As Gujarat's chief minister Modi tried to compel all government employees to attend RSS meetings, but even his own BJP assembly members rejected these totalitarian tendencies. These may well reappear as Modi takes on his new role as the nation's leader. Critics say that he has little tolerance for civil liberties and the rule of law.

Criminal Charges Against Modi's Right-Hand Man

Modi's closest associate is Amit Shah, fellow RSS member, who at one time was head of ten administrative departments in Gujarat. Shah has been charged with several crimes and politically motivated murders, which he blames on a "witch-hunt" by the opposition Congress Party. Shah is not alone: the *Wall Street Journal* reports that "nearly a third of members of the lower house of Parliament, and 31% of state legislators, have criminal cases pending against them, including kidnapping, robbery, murder and rape."

Shah is also known for his anti-Muslim sentiments, and, during the election campaign, he said that the BJP should seek revenge against Muslims who, he claimed, instigated riots in Uttar Pradesh in 2013. Neutral observers say that it was Hindu extremists, not Muslims, who were responsible for the violence, which led to 60 people killed and 40,000 displaced.

2002 Anti-Muslim Pogrom in Gujarat

In 2002 Gujarat experienced extensive sectarian violence in which upwards of 2,000—mostly Muslims—suffered deaths by burning, hacking, and occasional police gun fire. Over the last fifty years, according to Bikhru Parekh, Gujarat, among all the Indian states, has averaged the highest number of deaths from religious violence per capita.

As early as November 2001 various Hindu nationalist organizations—the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), its youth group Bagrang Dal, and the RSS—distributed weapons (mainly swords and tridents, the god Shiva's three-tipped spear) to thousands of people for a campaign to protect Hindus from alleged Muslim terrorists. Parades of armed Hindu men took place in many cities with BJP officials presiding.

Much like the marking of Isarelite homes in Egypt before the Exodus, Hindu homes in Gujarat's Dahod district were flying the Hindu nationalist saffron flag (complete with a swastika) as a list of Muslim homes and shops was published in many newspapers. A VHP leader was touring Gujarat's Dahod district saying: "These Muslims do not allow a new Hindu temple to be built in Ayodhya. They should be killed."

Trying to deflect charges that he was responsible for violence against Muslims, Christians, and Dalits (formerly "untouchables"), Modi responded that he was just a passenger in the back seat of a car that ran over a puppy. Modi was too obtuse to realize that the car is an analogue of state agencies for which he is directly responsible.

Modi also forgot that all chief ministers sit in the back seats of their Hindustani Ambassadors (modeled on the 1956 Morris Oxford) with full authority over their domains. He has stated that his only regret about the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom is that he did not handle the media very well.

Train Fire Kills 94 Hindu Pilgrims; Muslims Tried and Convicted

On February 26, 2002, the Sabarmati Express departed for Gujarat from the north, and it contained Hindu pilgrims returning from Ayodhya. There, on December 6, 1992, Hindu fanatics had destroyed the Babri Mosque and had replaced it with a temporary temple to the Hindu god Rama. Witnesses on the train reported that the militants shouted militant Hindu slogans all along the way and threatened the other passengers with spears and lathis (metal-tipped batons).

The next morning the train arrived at the Godhra station in Dahod district. A press report relates that at the station, "a Muslim girl was molested and an attempt made to pull her into the train. A Muslim tea vendor. . . was insulted and sent out of the coach by the rowdy elements, some of whom climbed onto the roof of the train and made obscene gestures at Muslim women living opposite the railway station."

Fights broke out and there was stone throwing by both Muslims and Hindus. As the train departed it halted suddenly as an intense fire broke out in one of the coaches. The corpses were essentially incinerated, but the assumption is that most of the 94 people burned alive were Hindu pilgrims. Hindu nationalists claimed that Muslims set the fire, but every single investigation, except one done by the state BJP government, concluded that the fire was an accident caused by a stove on the coaches.

A Gujarat police report stated that Muslims threw fire bombs at the train, but there was no evidence of burning from the outside of the coaches. Such an alleged attack would have been general, not specific to one coach. In February 2013, 31 Muslims were convicted in a Gujarati court for setting the fire and 11 of them are due to be executed. Indian capital cases are automatically appealed and it will be a long time before the legal process is over.

After the train fire at Godhra, anti-Muslim attacks spread throughout Gujarat; and Modi, according to one of his own cabinet members, told his police force to allow the pogrom against Muslims to run its course. It was reported that Modi silenced the head of the state police force when he objected to the order, and another civil servant who demurred was found dead.

Hindu-instigated violence was state-wide comprising 21 cities and 68 provinces. It even extended into rural areas where there had never been any sectarian conflict. The pogrom continued for several months and the official death count was 822 (mostly Muslims), although unofficial sources put the final toll at over 2,000 killed.

About 250 mosques were destroyed (statues of Rama's faithful servant Hanuman were placed in many of the ruins) along with hundreds of Muslim homes. Damage to Muslim businesses was estimated at \$152 million. Hindus took over many of the Muslim shops and a state-wide boycott of Muslim businesses still continues.

The Indian Commission on Human Rights found that there was "premeditation in the killing of non-Hindus [and] complicity by Gujarati State government officials." K. N. Panikkar concurs: "It was state sponsored, state supported, and if eyewitnesses are to be believed, state directed. . . . What happened in Gujarat was . . . an organized massacre of Muslims with the state's active complicity and connivance."

In 2004 the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (CIRF) investigated the Gujarat violence and concluded that Narendra Modi was guilty of failing to stop the attacks. The U. S. State Department did its own research and decided to ban Modi from traveling to the U.S. In 2013 the CIRF reaffirmed its recommendation that Modi not be granted a U.S. visa. In wake of Modi's huge election victory, President Obama has now invited him to the White House.

Gujarat is Gandhi's Home State

Gujarat is Gandhi's home state, and it is where most of the exquisitely beautiful temples of the Jain religion are found. Gandhi claimed that growing up among the strictly non-violent Jains was one of the principal influences on his later world-view. In 1917 Gandhi established an ashram on the Sabarmati River, and he and his disciples called it home until the British confiscated it in 1933.

It was from this ashram that Gandhi organized and carried out one of the most successful campaigns of his political career. Gandhi and 78 well-trained disciples marched 241 miles to the salt works at Dandi and, although beaten mercilessly by Indian police, still managed to make their own salt in defiance of the British salt monopoly. It is, therefore, sadly ironic that BJP leader Lal Krishna Advani, who was the BJP's prime minister candidate in the 2009 election, represents the Sabarmati area in the Indian Parliament.

Modi's defenders criticize the press for calling him a Hindu nationalist, saying that reporters do not call the GOP a Christian nationalist party. There are certainly many

Republicans who are Christian nationalists, but GOP spokespeople do not praise those who attack mosques and certainly do not recommend that they be replaced by churches.

Nick Gier taught religion and philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years. Two of his books related to this column are *The Virtue of Non-Violence: from Gautama to Gandhi* (SUNY Press, 2004) and *The Origins of Religious Violence: An Asian Perspective* (Lexington Press, November, 2014). This column is an excerpt from chapter 2 of this book.