

BOOKS & ARTS

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THE RISE AND RISE OF NARENDRA MODI

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Books | What happens when a party of true believers led by a ferociously motivated politician takes on a dying government? *Robin Jeffrey* charts an enigmatic politician's rise to the top

Right:

BJP's best chance: Narendra Modi during his time as chief minister of Gujarat, at a Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry dinner in London in 2003. Sang Tan/AP Photo

The Modi Effect: Inside Narendra Modi's Campaign to Transform IndiaBy Lance Price | *Hodder and Stoughton* | \$32.99

Lance Price ran Tony Blair's media operation during New Labour's successful 2001 British election campaign, and as a journalist he has interviewed more than twenty global political stars, including Margaret Thatcher, Nelson Mandela and Bill Clinton. When he decided to write a book about Narendra Modi, India's new prime minister, he requested an interview and, to his surprise, he got it. Giving this kind of access was, he thinks, "an improbable choice" for Modi to have made, and he reckons that "no other writer, Indian or foreign, was to be allowed the same privilege." That might be pushing it a little, because Andy Marino, author of *Narendra Modi: a Political Biography*, suggested to the *New York Times* that *he* was "the only foreigner known to have unfettered access to Mr Modi." And Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay, author of *Narendra Modi: The Man, The Times*, also reports being treated well by Modi.

This is not to belittle Price's engaging book, simply to point out that when it comes to conducting the media, Modi is unequalled. He has been a student of political communication for forty years and he makes few decisions about public presentations without calculating their impact. He chooses carefully those who get access, and he knows how to make them feel special. Modi may well have read *The Spin Doctor's Diary*, Price's insider account of the Blair government.

An account of the remarkable 2014 Indian election by an established Western political operator like Price also represents another gem in Modi's political crown. "You can criticise me as much as you

want,” he disarmingly tells Price, but what he wants to emphasise is the unique character of the 2014 campaign waged by his Bharatiya Janata Party. There’s been “no campaign before on this scale using social media and technology... anywhere in the world,” he tells Price, and he’s right. Indian elections are always astonishing, but this one was breathtaking.

Price offers the standard account of Modi’s origins and childhood. He was the son of a petty shopkeeper from a lower (but by no means the lowest) caste. He helped out on his father’s tea stall. He was an average student but a keen reader and was attracted to debating and drama. He joined the school cadet corps and then – the key youthful event – he joined the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, or RSS, when he was about fifteen.

The RSS was, and still is, dedicated to creating a Hindu-dominated India in which its version of Hindu religion holds sway. Its roots date back to the 1920s, with some of its inspiration coming from the interwar fascist movements of Europe. It has a murky record of conflict with other religions and with those who advocate a “secular” India, in which the state maintains religious neutrality. Today, the RSS has millions of members. It also has an ideology – a body of beliefs that, however simplistic, motivates its members and makes them disciplined and active.

The official story is that Modi’s parents made an arranged marriage for him as a teenager. It was never consummated. Although his wife is still alive, the couple appears never to have lived together. Instead, Modi did what many young Indian men have done: he wandered through India as a pilgrim. A young man’s search for himself as a roaming ascetic is a time-honoured practice, as familiar to Indians as “going overseas” is to Australians. Modi was following in the footsteps of his great hero, Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), the nineteenth-century ascetic who brought Hinduism to the attention of the West when he appeared at the Chicago Congress of Religions in 1893. Vivekananda, Modi tells an interviewer, is “my spiritual and intellectual role model.”

By the 1970s, now in his thirties, Modi was a full-time RSS worker and was completing a correspondence degree from the University of Gujarat. “Until 1978 I was behind the curtains,” he tells Price, “but over the years I was picking up skills that were required and this made me a master organiser.”

Those skills were recognised in the mid 1980s when the RSS placed him with the newly formed Bharatiya Janata Party, or BJP. Modi’s role was to be a hinge between the two organisations, doing his best to ensure that the BJP stayed in step with the RSS. And so the full-time worker for an ideologically passionate movement became a political operative who had to build organisations to win elections. He cemented his reputation as an organiser in 1991 when he acted as advance man for a “chariot journey,” or *rath yatra*, a barnstorming propaganda tour by the BJP president covering much of India.

Modi’s fascination with media and organisational techniques marks him out among Indian politicians. As one profile, written after he became chief minister of his native Gujarat in 2001, quotes him as saying, “I was one of the first users of email in India. I used to chat a lot on my computer.” On Modi’s bookshelf the same interviewer noticed *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, the bestselling 1989 self-improvement manual by Stephen Covey.

Modi made two visits to the United States in the 1990s. During the 1994 trip, many photos of which are available online, he travelled widely on a visitor program. His 1999 visit is less well documented. According to one account, he had “media training” and visited for either three weeks or three months. But by 1999 Modi needed little “media training.” Indian journalists were already describing him as “the homespun saffron savant” with “an uncanny skill” for memorable one-liners.

Then, in 2001, he was shoehorned into the post of chief minister of his home state, Gujarat. A BJP government, facing elections in the coming year, was faltering, and a man who had never contested an election seemed to have the best chance of saving it.

Modi's great stain came soon after, in February 2002. A train carrying Hindu devotees returning from a visit to a religious site stopped at Godhra, a railway station in rural Gujarat. What happened that day is unlikely ever to be clear, but a carriage was attacked, more than fifty people, most of them women and children, were burned to death and a Muslim mob was held responsible. The Gujarat government permitted the bodies of the dead to be brought in procession to Ahmedabad, and over the next few weeks at least a thousand Muslims were murdered in “counter-violence.” In one of the most widely publicised examples, an elderly Muslim, a former parliamentarian, was dragged from his home, butchered and burned.

Modi pleaded ignorance and helplessness, and went on to be exonerated by official inquiries. One of the ministers in his government, however, was convicted of murder. Modi went onto the persona non grata lists of Western governments, including the United States and Australia.

Price says that the 2002 riots were a subject Modi “refused to engage with” in his interviews. Modi's position is that the allegations against him have been dismissed by the highest courts and he has more important things to do than go over old ground.

The riots served the BJP well. Muslims are less than 10 per cent of the population of Gujarat, and the BJP under Modi won a thumping victory in state elections in December 2002. Modi led it to further victories in 2007 and 2012. At the same time, he built a reputation as a can-do chief minister committed to *vikas* – development – and providing an economic environment in which ambitious people could do business. Gujarat gained reliable electricity and better roads than most of India.

On social indicators, the state hovered around national averages but well below southern states like Kerala or Tamil Nadu. The infant mortality rate, for example, was forty-eight per 1000 births in Gujarat. The all-India average was fifty; in Tamil Nadu it was twenty-eight; in Kerala, twelve. More than 40 per cent of Gujarat households did not have toilets. Primary school enrolments and retentions were close to the national average.

Though the unevenness of Gujarat's social and economic performance was well documented, the listless Congress Party, which led the national government until last year, was unable to mount an effective critique during last year's national election campaign. A large part of the reason for the BJP's victory lay in the ineptitude of the outgoing government and the exasperation of voters around the country.

Price is most interesting when he describes that campaign. It was, as Modi claimed, a landmark operation that brought together a powerful combination: trailblazing technology and tens of

thousands of devoted campaigners. Technology alone won't win elections, but the right technology in the hands of fired-up supporters will.

Modi's team organised close to 1400 "hologram rallies" – public meetings in isolated towns where his image was beamed onto a stage in 3D by telecom link. Not surprisingly, people came from far and wide to see the show. Modi, a commanding stage presence, made the most of it, even down to careful selection of his wardrobe.

As Price rightly points out, though, the unsung heroes of the campaign were the tens of thousands of BJP and RSS workers who ensured that the Modi message was emblazoned everywhere in every form – on t-shirts, in iPhone apps, on posters and on face masks. The election was won by a party of true believers, led by a ferociously motivated politician, deploying boldly innovative communication tools against a feeble incumbent government that even its sympathisers despaired of.

Price acutely highlights the fact that India's admirable election codes and practices don't place a ceiling, or reporting requirements, on what parties can spend. Candidates, on the other hand, have their expenses carefully monitored, and the maximum permissible expense in a parliamentary constituency is about A\$120,000. But a political party can raise any amount and spend it however it likes – provided funds are not targeted for a particular candidate in a particular constituency. "It is quite possible," Price writes, "that this was the most expensive election anywhere in the world." Many of India's big businesses relished the prospect of a Modi victory.

Price describes the Modi manner of functioning in well-known terms. Modi works incessantly and is financially honest. He's in politics for the power and the glory, not the dosh. He's ready to accept good ideas – if he can be convinced he thought of them first. He works through bureaucrats who he decides are able; he turns them loose; he is polite (and ruthless) in dealing with them and (unlike Australian prime ministers?) doesn't phone them before dawn. He keeps political colleagues on a tight leash: nothing grows in the shade of this banyan. The only person with full access is the shadowy Amit Shah, a Gujarati politician, whom Price never gets to meet in spite of three appointments (all cancelled) and invited email questions (never answered).

Overall, what's not to like about an honest, highly motivated man with a reputation for effectively running a state of sixty million people for twelve years?

Modi-sceptics harbour two main fears. First, the "Gujarat model" of development, crucial to the story that Modi and the BJP told so effectively to Indian voters, was never as good as the brilliant way they told it. And whether the techniques of an all-powerful chief minister in a single state can work nationally, with twenty-eight states and two dozen major languages in the mix, is an open question.

Second, Modi continues to delicately pirouette around the murderous events in Gujarat in 2002. He knows that many of his core supporters thought that the mayhem was just fine: Muslims were "shown their place" in a Hindu state in what should be a Hindu India. Modi's attempt to express regret in an interview with Reuters in 2013 resulted in the embarrassing "puppy episode" in which he said, "If we are driving a car... and... if a puppy comes under the wheel, will it be painful or not? Of course it is... I'm a human being. If something bad happens anywhere it is natural to be sad."

In the year since he came to power, Modi's supporters on the ground have steadily pushed the Hinduising agenda. Modi tries to stay aloof. Indeed, in June he appeared to chide overzealous (some might say inflammatory) supporters: "Some unfortunate comments have been made, which were totally uncalled for. Our constitution guarantees religious freedom to every citizen and that is not negotiable. I have said this before and I say it again: any discrimination or violence against any community will not be tolerated."

This is what many Modi-sceptics expected: at the top, an appearance of being above the fray, focused on development and India's place in the world; at the grassroots, and through various institutions, plenty of Hindu-chauvinist (not to mention patriarchal) seeds being planted and fertilised.

Part of the attraction of Price's book lies in the comparisons he makes. He reckons that among Blair, Thatcher, Clinton and Obama, "none... ever engaged a crowd with such fervent, visceral passion as Narendra Modi." Modi is also "the hardest to fathom" of the political leaders Price has encountered. Given such ambiguity, even critics might hope for the success of Modi's "development" program and a fadeout of Hindu chauvinism. Such an outcome might result in a more prosperous, better-educated, cleaner India – something like a South Korea with a Hindu colouring no more noticeable than, say, the "Christian" colouring of Britain under its Church of England monarch. It's a nice notion, but you wouldn't bet the farm on it. •

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