

Narendra Modi

— A Political Biography by Andy Marino

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Air Commodore (R.) Khayyam Durrani
Email:

This is the story of an extraordinary man. Narendra Modi – a tea boy who rose to become the Prime Minister of India by virtue of his hard work, dedication, and practical expediency. His coming to power has not only broken the tradition of dynastic politics in India but also ushered in an era of a new meritocratic India where “what you are” matters more than “who you are and where you came from.” It, in fact, marks the beginning of the end of the overrated Indian political elite who considered a common man unfit to cross the threshold of 7 Race Course Club (PM’s Official Residence).

Narendra Modi did not belong to the Delhi Club and came from a humble background. He was born in a small town of Vadnagar in Gujrat on 17 September 1950. India’s first general elections took place shortly after Modi’s birth and Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru’s Indian National Congress won an overwhelming – 364 out of 489 seats and set up an ideology of socialist dogmas via Cambridge University and the London School of Economics which was founded by Fabian Socialists. This hegemony of the socialist economy continued to dominate the Indian economy for over 60 years and nobody including Janata Party ever thought of getting rid of the license-per-

mit-quota system.

As Nehru stood to speak as the Prime Minister of the new government in 1952, little Narendra Modi was forming his first words and nobody could imagine that this little boy’s words would, in future, change the economic and political direction of India.

Vadnagar, in 1950, was a quiet semi-rural backwater without electricity and Narendra’s father, Damodardas, earned his living from a tea stall set upon the platform of the town’s railway station. When Narendra arrived he joined his two elder brothers Sonu who was six years old, and Amit just four. There ‘would come’ a sister, Vasanti, two years after Narendra was born, and then two more brother Prahad in 1955 and Pankay in 1958. All eight – parents, brothers and sisters – lived in a mud house about 40 feet by 12 feet. Water had to be fetched from a well but bathing and laundry were done in the lake nearby. After school Narendra would race to his father’s tea stall and would serve tea to railway passengers. When Narendra was only eight year old, he began to attend the meetings of Rashtria Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).

Narendra at three years of age has been betrothed by his parents to a girl from a nearby

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town. Narendra was not happy with this engagement and when her fiancée Jashodaben was 15 years old, Narendra left his house and never saw Jashodaben in his life. Jashodaben never remarried although they never cohabited.

Narendra graduated from BN High School in Vadnagar before falling out with his parents and fiancée. Later on he acquired through correspondence a Master's degree in political science from Gujarat University. Narendra led a nomadic life and was constantly on the move. He looks back at his days as a wandering ascetic with some fondness.

"There was no comfort in my life. I had a small bag and my whole life was in that bag. I was not keeping anything else with me. For 30 years, I was like this and every day I was eating with different families. I have never taken the food of my choice. This morning, I will go to this family and say 'yes, I will come please give me some food'. Second day, another residence, third day, another. Every month, 'I am taking my food in a different home'".

Why did Narendra desert his parents and was so scared of marriage is anybody's guess but his traumatic experience must have left some irreparable scars on his personality influencing his behavior in later life.

In India, misfits and seekers find their way to gurus and ashrams but Narendra's religiosity was of a different type. He was more attracted by the thrill of debate, action, and agitational politics rather than spiritual seclusion and passive submission. He learnt to organize rallies and political meetings at an early age and was much inspired by Harmanrao Inamdar or "Vakil Sahib" as he was known. He got himself recruited in "Balswayamsevak" a junior cadet of RSS and learnt the virtues of discipline, dedication and hard work. Vakil Sahib proved to be an enduring influence on his political outlook and his ideas of human potential. "He used to teach us to always

try to discover the other person's virtues and qualities and try to work on them" says Modi today. "Don't focus on the deficiencies but you have to focus on his (positive) qualities". Such were the lessons of dealing with the personnel which he had learned from practical life which are usually the subject to discussion in any business school.

India's defeat in the Sino-Indian conflict in 1962 affected young Narendra and at the age of thirteen he wanted to leave Vadnagar and wanted to join a Sainak School (sort of military college) but his father did not allow him to do so. The teenaged Narendra watched the 1965 Indo-Pak conflict and was stirred. "Narendra was charged up and _____ on how all Pakistanis should be decimated" recalled a resident of Vadnagar who knew him back then. After a few years of wandering, Narendra returned to Gujarat and was associated with Swami Vivekananda the Ramkrishna Mission in Rajkot. At the Rajkot Mission he was turned away from the monkish life and was told that his destiny lay elsewhere. One day in late 1969 or early 1970, Narendra reappeared at his family home unannounced after two years of absence. After seeing him at the door, his mother broke down and asked him hysterically where he had been to which he replied "the Himalayas", in a very calm and matter-of-fact manner. His father was not home and neither did he ask anything about him. Narendra stayed overnight and then set off again the next day. He never returned to Vadnagar for over twenty years and even today he maintains very little contact with his brothers. His mother Hiraben now ninety four live with her daughter. So when Modi jokes with the media that he can be trusted no to be corrupt because he has no family dynasty to promote, he is telling the truth.

Narendra arrived in Ahmedabad as a penniless and jobless nineteen years old lad and devoted himself to RSS work. Ahmedabad became the

hub of Hindu Muslim riots in 1969-70 and Narendra turned into an RSS activist. For the first time he got a home “Hedgewar Bhuwan” which was the headquarters of RSS. He did all household chores, serving tea and cleaning the house. Little by little his duties and responsibilities increased. “Then slowly, I started looking at the mail that came in and then writing the replies. My work kept on increasing slowly.”

After playing an active part in India’s politics Modi’s views about the economy of India had matured. He realized that a turnaround in economy was not possible through Nehruvian style state socialism. Since the independence growth rate had been only 3 percent per annum, which was not enough to make a dent in the poverty under the license-quota-permit raj. The outlook of political parties would never change. Poverty would persist if there was not enough wealth to go around. All that could be done was to take someone’s slice and give it to somebody else. The only obvious solution was to take a bigger pie and that entailed an alternative economic model: a free market economy. Modi also had his views on “Human Resource Management” at the national level. Modi got a change of implementing his views on human resource management during 1985-86 drought in Gujrat. RSS wanted to seek donations from abroad and collect funds to overcome this drought. Modi suggested that the relief work should be on the basis of our human energy. He suggest that they could mobilize people to collect one sweet called sukri from each and every family to provide nutrition. This was a new approach and the end of the conventional approach to address economic crisis. Modi came up with another appealing slogan “modernization not westernization” which meant that technology should be adopted to suit Indian requirements. Modi’s leadership qualities and management skills were

being gradually recognized and in October 2001, from an ordinary worker of RSS, he rose to become the Chief Minister of Gujrat.

During his tenure as Chief Minister, the tragic incident of Godhra train attack and Hindu Muslim riots created havoc in Gujrat in which Modi was implicated. However, the author in his book quotes evidence to prove that Modi, as Chief Minister, did his best to stop rioting. While it is important to rebalance slanted and biased reports about the 2002 Gujrat riots, the facts of the matter is that Modi was Chief Minister and the carnage happened on his watch and he refused to apologize. Modi’s hawkish remarks against Pakistan and his past record have earned him a reputation of honoring President Theodore Roosevelt’s injunction to “speak softly and carry a big stick.” Only time will tell whether his economic policies have been successful or not. Modi’s critics say that he is a schemer and devious coveting only ultimate control.

The book is an interesting fast-paced, exhaustive, and a well-researched work based on material collected through interviews with Narendra Modi. It goes not cover Modi’s performance and achievements as a Prime Minister because it was published in 2014 when Modi was still a Prime Ministerial candidate. Though, Andy Marino, the author of the book, claims to be very objective and realistic in his assessment of Modi’s enigmatic personality and the problems faced by India, some readers doubt his capability to understand the cultural complexities of the mysterious land of India being a British.

The book is certainly readable, fair and captivating but the author has not been able to provide concrete evidence to exonerate Modi from the responsibility of Gujrat communal riots in 2001 resulting in the deaths of 790 Muslims and 254 Hindus with 223 people missing.

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