

**By Sidharth Mishra**



We are in the midst of a very crucial battle of ballot being fought in political significant western state of Gujarat. The protagonist of the battle, Prime Minister Narendra Modi cannot afford to lose here for that would impair his image of remaining unbeatable in his home turf. The first round of polling is over. Another round remains.

□ **Gujarat Model** The Prime Minister has won three legislative assembly polls here as Chief Minister and the one before that as party's chief strategist. During the 23 years that he ruled Gujarat as the chief minister, he assiduously built his image of a development-oriented administrator. This was necessary for his larger political ambitions at the national stage, to counter his doppelgänger as a votary of Hinduvta. Ever since the party faced defeat in the national polls in 2009 under veteran Lal Krishna Advani, Modi quietly started to build on his ambitions. And this could not have been done merely on the basis of his strong Hinduvta image.

This needed to be supplemented with a more secular reflection. It was then that he started to aggressively flaunt the Gujarat Model of Development. He had to move beyond the Hinduvta tag to get the reluctant voters crossover to his side.

The move paid rich political dividends as it helped consolidating his position as the spearhead of the BJP campaign for the 2014 Lok Sabha polls. The campaign in the run-up to these polls Modi promised 'ache din' (good days) like Gujarat for the rest of the country. However, three years down the line, as Gujarat votes for electing the next government, Gujarat Model of Development doesn't find place in the notations of the campaign tune.

### Script Of Poll Campaign

The script of poll campaign in Gujarat today is who is a bigger or a better Hindu, with the opinion of Muslims of the state having been made almost irrelevant. Why is this happening? The politics of Gujarat in the past three decades has been closely linked to the Ramjanambhoomi Movement. Following the post-Godhra riots of 2002, the politics of Hinduvta peaked in the past three elections.

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The attempts of the Congress to hold Narendra Modi responsible for the riots affected the party's fortunes adversely. The majority community saw these attempts of the Congress as an affront on their interests. Thus the loss of support for the party which reached a crescendo in the 2014 Lok Sabha polls with the Congress losing on all the 26 seats in the state.

But three years down the line, the BJP, which is still likely to win the state polls, looks extra-ordinarily desperate to salvage a victory. This is because, it realises that its glorious victory marches in the past polls have largely been on the account of consolidation of Hindu votes and not any appreciation for a development model.

The BJP's worry is that a decade and half after the post-Godhra riots, the Hindu 'hatred' for the minority community looks to have ebbed. The Muslims on their part too have tried a repositioning and given up aggressive posturing. Such a situation has thrown an opportunity for the rivals of BJP to get a slice of the Hindu vote, a chance which the Congress doesn't want to let go.

The challenge for the BJP is to keep the Hindu vote intact but the task has been made difficult by such challengers as— Hardik Patel, Alpesh Thakor and Jignesh Mevani, who all are Hindus. The BJP may claim that these men at grassroots are no great leaders of their community; that the perception about them is highly aggravated. A close analysis of independent India's poll history would however show that perceptions play a big role in the downward percolation of support for political leaders.

### Odd Combination

The triumvirate of Patel, Thakor and Mevani have no ideological common ground. But the Janata Party experiment of 1977 and other tryouts thereafter has shown that in India anti-establishment political conglomerations seldom have needed the glue of a common ideology. Though these conglomerations have proved to be brittle combinations in the long run, they nevertheless have served purpose to achieve short-term political goals.

The current developments in Gujarat point towards the possible revival of the politics of the

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1990s of Mandal versus Kamandal. Mandal (the politics of caste) when strong has weakened the Kamandal (read Hinduvta) forces and vice-versa. These three caste-leaders belong the generation who would have missed the Hindu-Muslim hatred which led to the catastrophe of Godhra, thus there preference for Mandal over Kamandal.

For them the seeking of rights for their community is seeking financial security for their caste persons. When such a situation arises, even believing only due to perception management, it creates doubts about Gujarat Model of Development. A defeat for the BJP in the polls, which the pollsters are ruling out for now, would dent the image of the Prime Minister as a leader capable of taking the nation out from the present economic mess.

### Conclusion

With another 18-month in office, a defeat in Gujarat could possible slowdown implementation of his schemes of governance. A resurgent opposition would not allow the government the space both inside and outside the parliament to give its agenda push. Poor performance in Gujarat may end up in the Centre having a lame-duck government for the remaining term of NDA government.

Despite the points enumerated above, defeat of BJP in Gujarat is a very unlikely situation. In defeat of BJP would be loss of prestige for Prime Minister NarendraModi. Will the Gujarati voter embarrass the Prime Minister to that extent? The voter has to be really mad with anger with the Gujarat Model to do so.

(Sidharth Mishra is Editor & CEO CapitalKhabar.in. First published in DB Post, Bhopal)