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159 million Indian Muslims are among the poorest in the country

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By Abhay Singh



March 30 (Bloomberg) — As [Narendra Modi](#), chief minister of the state of [Gujarat](#), walks into a cavernous tent filled with 20,000 investors and business leaders in western India, he's greeted like a Bollywood movie star. Conference goers surround the politician to shake hands, snap photos and touch his shoes — a show of reverence in India.

After the January conference gets under way in the city of Ahmedabad, billionaire [Anil Ambani](#), whose empire ranges from telecommunications to financial services, steps to the lectern. He praises Modi, 58, for turning Gujarat into India's top destination for investors before paying the Hindu nationalist the ultimate compliment: He should be prime minister.

Since Modi became head of Gujarat in 2001, he's lured investors with a rapid approval process for developments, a network of roads and ports and uninterrupted power supply — a rarity in India.

"If Narendra Modi can do so much for Gujarat, imagine the possibility for India by having him as the next leader of India," Ambani says.

Some 40 kilometers (25 miles) from the conference, in a Muslim ghetto called Juhapura on the outskirts of Ahmedabad, Modi's name isn't celebrated. He's a top official in the Hindu nationalist [Bharatiya Janata Party](#) (BJP), or Indian People's Party, which opposes special treatment from the government of any one religious group, including Muslims.

Contaminated Food

For the 700,000 residents of Juhapura, the water runs only 15 minutes a day, potholed asphalt roads are lined with rubble and government-subsidized shops sell contaminated flour and rice that make people sick, says Mohammad Ishaq Sayed, a tailor who lives with his family of six in a one-room, 100- square-foot (9.3-square-meter) apartment.

"We live in Gujarat and still we get nothing," says Sayed, 53, sitting in a plastic chair outside his apartment, where naked electrical wires snake along the walls. "Why is there no development for us? What enmity do they have with us? We are Muslims, that's why."

As India continues to tally the economic costs from the terror attacks by Islamic militants that killed 164 people in Mumbai in November, Modi stands out as a symbol of a nation that, 62 years after independence, has yet to come to grips with a sectarian divide that's fueled decades of violent riots and the marginalization of Muslims.

Shut Out

The 158.6 million Muslims, which account for 13.4 percent of India's [population](#) of about 1.2 billion, are among the poorest people in the country. They are shut out of jobs and unable to get equal access to education, according to a 2006 government-sponsored report. At state-run companies such as banks and railways, Muslims make up only 4.9 percent of the workforce.

Thirty-eight percent of them live in such deprivation that they consume less than 2,100 calories of food a day, the report says. By comparison, 20 percent of Hindus living in cities don't receive proper nutrition.

Alakh Sharma, director of the [Institute for Human Development](#), a New Delhi-based group that studies labor markets, development policy and education, says India's exclusion of Muslims from the mainstream hampers its economic growth.

"If 13 percent of the population is alienated and doesn't become part of the economic process, how will the country continue to grow?" Sharma says. "It'll affect demand for goods and become a source of conflict and strife."

'Scary Prospect'

In more than two decades in the BJP, during which time he's ascended to the position of general secretary, the third- highest rank, Modi has been in the middle of the sectarian conflict whose origins go back centuries.

Modi helped organize a campaign in 1990 for the BJP leader to drum up support for building a Hindu temple at the site of a Muslim mosque in the state of Uttar Pradesh, according to his Web site, [narendramodi.in](#). In Gujarat alone, the BJP campaign spurred 1,520 violent incidents between Hindus and Muslims from April 1990 through April '91, according to a report by the New Delhi-based Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies.

"Modi's rise is a very scary prospect for India," says Shabnam Hashmi, an atheist who runs [Act Now for Harmony](#)

and Democracy, a group started to counter sectarian politics in India. "He polarizes people by promoting the ideology of hate." Jagdish Thakkar, Modi's public relations officer, didn't respond to several requests for an interview.

Rampaging Mobs

In February 2002, four months after Modi took control of Gujarat, Hindu mobs went on a rampage against Muslims after a fire on a train claimed 58 lives, among them Hindu pilgrims. In the riots that followed, more than 1,000 people were killed, mostly Muslims, while Modi allegedly instructed police to stand down and allow the violence to continue, according to an investigation by the eight-member [Concerned Citizens Tribunal](#). The group, with no legal standing, was made up of former judges, professors and a retired police officer.

"If you are a minority you are pushed to the brink and treated like dirt in this state," says Cedric Prakash, a Jesuit priest who runs a human rights center in Ahmedabad.

Modi has denied the allegations from the citizens group and critics.

"My future will be determined by the people of Gujarat," Modi said at a conference sponsored by the Hindustan Times newspaper in October 2007. "In a democracy, criticism is welcome, but I am against the allegations." The Supreme Court of India is still investigating the riots.

Holy War

The killings in Gujarat partly inspired Lashkar-e-Taiba, an Islamic militant group based in Pakistan, to launch its holy war against India, according to a study on the Web site of the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, a U.S. Department of Defense institute in Honolulu.

In November, 10 members of Lashkar-e-Taiba attacked two luxury hotels, a Jewish center, a cafe and railway station in Mumbai, according to Indian officials. In a massacre that shook India, the terrorists killed 164 people, including 26 foreigners. Earlier in 2008, the Muslim group Indian Mujahideen claimed responsibility for a series of bombings in three Indian cities.

The spate of violence weighs heavily on Indians as they elect a new prime minister starting in mid-April. The BJP is attacking the ruling Indian National Congress party for being soft on terrorism. The government of Prime Minister [Manmohan Singh](#), 76, has delayed the hanging of a convicted Muslim terrorist sentenced to death in 2002 — a fact that the BJP's candidate, [Lal Krishna Advani](#), 81, rails against on the campaign trail.

Slowing Economy

The BJP is trying to return to power after a six-year term from 1998 to 2004, during which time it stiffened prison penalties for terrorists and lengthened the maximum detention period for suspects who hadn't been charged to 180 days.

"People lived under six years of a BJP government, but the end of terrorism was not one of its achievements," says [Mahesh Rangarajan](#), a professor of modern Indian history at Delhi University. "The terrorism card that the BJP could cash in on is gone."

India's economic downturn may be an even bigger election issue in a country where voters have regularly rejected incumbents, Rangarajan says. The economy grew 5.3 percent from October through December, the weakest pace since the last quarter of 2003. The recessions in the U.S. and Europe, combined with the terrorist strikes in 2008, are taking a toll on India's tourist industry.

Partition

The number of visitors to the country plunged 12 percent in February compared with a year earlier. A February poll by an Indian affiliate of CNN showed that neither party would gain 50 percent of the vote, forcing the winner to cobble together a coalition government.

The divide between Hindus, who make up 80.5 percent of the population, and Muslims runs deep. In the 16th century, the Mughals, an Islamic dynasty, took over and ruled the land until the British made the subcontinent a part of its empire three centuries later. Before Britain relinquished control of India in 1947, it partitioned the nation into Muslim Pakistan and Hindu-majority India to buffer historical conflicts.

Eleven million Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs were uprooted, seeking refuge in one of the two countries and clashing along the way. The violence took 500,000 lives. Since the 1960s, there have been at least four major sectarian battles each decade in India, spurred by everything from a Muslim's cow entering a Hindu's house to conflicts over religious sites.

'This is Not Our Country'

Muslims, fearing violence, tend to live together in small clusters in places like the Byculla area in Mumbai and the neighborhood of Nizamuddin in New Delhi, according to the 2006 report sponsored by the Singh government, "Social, Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community in India." In Ahmedabad, Gujarat's largest city, where investors have backed new malls with big grocery and electronics stores and movie multiplexes, some apartment complexes are off-limits to Muslims, according to the rules of occupancy set by building owners.

Activist Hashmi says her family, because of its Muslim name, has felt unwelcome in parts of New Delhi. In 2003, her daughter, then 7 years old, came home from school after being verbally attacked.

"Another girl told her that we should go live in Afghanistan, this is not our country," Hashmi says.

Finding Jobs

Muslims also face obstacles in finding employment at state-run companies, which provide 70 percent of the full-time jobs with benefits in India, the report says. At Indian Railways, one of the country's largest employers, with 1.4 million workers, Muslims make up only 4.5 percent of the total. Among civil service officers — bureaucrats, diplomats and police — 3.2 percent are Muslim. At banks such as State Bank of India, the No. 1 lender, the figure drops to just 2.2 percent. Of the 30 companies in the Bombay Stock Exchange's benchmark Sensitive Index, only

one — software services provider Wipro Ltd. — is led by a Muslim, billionaire [Azim Premji](#).

The report recommends that employers include Muslims in hiring to increase their numbers.

"A very small proportion of government employees are Muslims, and on average, they are concentrated in lower-level positions," the report says. "While no discrimination is being alleged, it may be desirable to have minority persons on relevant interview panels."

Drop Outs

Dev Desai, an economics undergraduate student at GLS College in Ahmedabad, encountered discrimination recently when trying to get a Muslim friend and fellow student a job.

"I spoke to some people and told them she was from my college and studies with me," says Desai, a Hindu. "On hearing her name, they asked if she is Muslim. When I said yes, they told me to let it be."

The minority group lags behind in education as well, partly because of a shortage of schools that teach in Urdu, a language used by Muslims. As many as 25 percent of Muslim children ages 6-14 never attend school or drop out. Muslim kids in the Juhapura ghetto face another issue: Their school is in a Hindu area.

"Some children are afraid and don't go," says Niaz Bibi, a resident and mother. "Their thinking is, we'll never get a job so why study? Might as well learn a vocation like fixing cars."

Bollywood

In top colleges offering science, arts, commerce and medical courses, only 1 in 25 undergraduate students is Muslim.

"This has serious long-term implications for the economic empowerment of the community and consequently for economic development of the country," the report says.

India has put aside its sectarian differences in a few areas, such as its movie industry. Muslim film celebrities [Shah Rukh Khan](#), a romantic leading man also known as "King Khan," and [Aamir Khan](#) often top the box office. Aamir Khan starred in Bollywood's biggest hit of 2008, Ghajini. While Indians have never elected a Muslim prime minister, lawmakers have selected three Muslim presidents, the titular head of government, including A.P.J. [Abdul Kalam](#) from '02 to '07.

Modi mocked the government report, which was chaired by retired judge Rajindar Sachar, at a conference sponsored by India Today magazine in March 2008.

Spiraling Investments

"Mr. Sachar came to see me and asked, 'Mr. Modi, what has your government done for Muslims?' I said, 'I've done nothing,'" Modi said. "Then I said, 'Please also note that I've done nothing for Hindus either. I work for the people of Gujarat.'"

As head of the state, Modi has spurred a construction boom by attracting a slew of investors, including [Sabeer Bhatia](#), co-founder of e-mail service Hotmail. Investors pledged \$243 billion to Gujarat at the 2009 [Vibrant Gujarat Global Investors' Summit](#) in January, a 60 percent jump from the previous event in 2007. In a country infamous for bureaucratic red tape, Gujarat lures investors with a streamlined process requiring developers to get approval for major projects at only one agency, the Gujarat Infrastructure Development Board.

Tata Group, the \$62.5 billion conglomerate that owns everything from salt to software companies, got permission from the state to build a plant to produce the \$2,500 Nano, the cheapest car in the world, in three days.

Hindu Nationalist

"Most of us in India have come to regard a time frame of six months or three months as an average time to get clearances," [Ratan Tata](#), chairman of Tata Group, said from the stage at the January conference in Ahmedabad. "In this particular case, that tradition was shattered, and we had our land and most of our approvals in three days. That, in my experience, has never happened before."

After Tata's speech, Modi walked toward the lectern and gave the executive a hug before addressing the crowd himself.

"Even in a recession, companies aren't going to stop manufacturing," he said. "They will prefer a destination where low-cost manufacturing is possible. This is a chance for a country like India, if we can provide a low-cost manufacturing environment, to grab this opportunity."

Modi joined the burgeoning Hindu nationalist movement as a teenager after growing up in a family of modest means; his father ran a tea stall at Vadnagar railway station in Gujarat, according to a 2007 article in the Times of India.

Ideological Fraternity

After completing his master's degree in political science at Gujarat University in the 1970s, he became a member of the Rashtriya [Swayamsevak Sangh](#), or National Volunteers Corps, his Web site says. The RSS advocates that Hinduism is central to Indian culture and life.

At the time, northern India was recovering from a famine and sectarian violence was rising: 500 people were killed in Ahmedabad in 1969. Members of the still active RSS take part in regular military-style parades, drills and exercises dressed in white shirts and khaki shorts. The RSS, which hatched political groups that would coalesce into the BJP in 1980, remains the fount of the party's ideas.

"The RSS ideology is all about cultural nationalism," says Prakash Javadekar, spokesman for the BJP and a member of India's upper house of parliament. "We are an ideological fraternity."

Babri Mosque

The BJP built itself into a national power starting in the late 1980s with a campaign to construct a temple where a

mosque stood in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh. Modi, who joined the BJP in 1987, helped organize a 10,000-kilometer journey for [Advani](#), now the BJP's candidate for prime minister, to rally support for the temple and the party. Advani's trip in a truck, with the bed trussed up to resemble a chariot from Hindu mythology, was scheduled to end at the site of the mosque.

Hindus believe the site was the birthplace of the Hindu god Ram and that a temple once stood there until Muslim invaders destroyed it in the 16th century and built the Babri Mosque.

Advani's journey was cut short when authorities arrested him in the state of Bihar in October 1990. According to Advani's Web site, he was arrested by political foes who opposed a resurgence of nationalism in India. Two years later, Hindu mobs tore down the mosque, fomenting riots in Mumbai that claimed more than 1,000 lives, mostly Muslims.

Train Fire

The temple campaign catalyzed Hindu support across India for the BJP, which won its first national election in 1996 and its second in '98.

"Communal violence in the last two decades is a result of the manipulation of religious sentiments by Hindu right-wing organizations for political gains," according to the Institute of Peace & Conflict Studies report. "The politicization of the temple-mosque issue and the subsequent demolition of the mosque gave the BJP the opportunity to consolidate its vote bank."

Javadekar rejects that claim, saying the Congress Party's sectarian politics and favoritism toward minorities poses the biggest danger to India. Javadekar says the BJP supports the equal treatment of all religious groups in India.

"That means you do justice to all and appeasement of none," he says.

The 2002 riots in Gujarat began with a fire in a train coach carrying Hindu pilgrims returning from Ayodhya. A [commission](#) set up by the Gujarat government said that Muslims set the fire after an altercation at the station between some pilgrims and Muslim vendors.

Lost Everything

The report of the citizens tribunal, which was released in October '02 and based on about 2,000 interviews, shows the fire started within the coach and was not deliberate, says Ghanshyam Shah, a social scientist who was a member of the tribunal.

As news of the fire spread through the state, Hindu [mobs](#) surrounded Muslim neighborhoods, destroyed houses with homemade bombs, raped and killed women and butchered men, according to the three-volume report of the citizens tribunal.

"We escaped with just the clothes on our backs," says Sayed, the tailor in Juhapura. "Everything was destroyed. Our house was torn down, and all our possessions were stolen."

Sayed, his wife and three sons were rescued by a Muslim police officer and taken to a camp outside Juhapura.

"The Muslim officer risked himself and brought us to the camp," Sayed says.

Police Don't Arrive

The police didn't respond to calls for help from many Muslims, according to the report. It details the murder of Ahsan Jafri, a former member of parliament from the Congress Party.

The attack on the neighborhood where Jafri lived in Ahmedabad began on the morning of Feb. 28, 2002. A high-ranking police official visited Jafri at 10:30 a.m. and assured him that police reinforcements were on the way to quell the riots. The police never came even after Jafri's desperate phone calls to Modi's office and the police. Jafri was dragged out of his home and killed in the afternoon, as were others who had taken shelter in his house, the report says.

Three years later, in 2005, the U.S. State Department denied Modi a diplomatic visa and revoked his existing one under a section of the Immigration and Nationality Act that bars entry of foreign officials who are complicit in severe violations of religious freedom.

'Absence of Healing'

"The violence in Gujarat in 2002 was extremely serious; it went on for months," says Delhi University's Rangarajan. "If you travel in the hinterland of Gujarat, what is more serious is the absence of a healing process."

In 2008, six years after the riots, the Supreme Court of India formed a special team to investigate the violence. In February, the team arrested Deputy Superintendent of Police K.G. Erda, the officer in charge of the area where Jafri lived, for dereliction of duty and abetment of murder, according to Mitesh Amin, Erda's lawyer. Erda has been released on bail, and the Supreme Court has halted the trial, Amin says.

In March, investigators submitted their confidential report to the court, which asked the Gujarat government to file a response by April 13.

The 2002 riots shouldn't taint Modi's reputation as a good administrator, says [Ajit Gulabchand](#), managing director of Mumbai-based Hindustan Construction Co. The company is building an \$8 billion waterfront development in Dholera, an industrial and business hub.

Carnegie Mellon University

"What happened was terrible," Gulabchand says. "The question is, Are we moving on? Here is somebody who welcomes people and creates an atmosphere for business and other investments to thrive."

[Yogesh Patel](#) and his business partner, Hotmail's Bhatia, are also bullish on [Gujarat](#). They're building university campuses in Dholera and have partnered with Carnegie Mellon University to open a graduate school there.

During a meeting last year, after Patel told Modi about the potential for generating solar energy in northern

Gujarat, the chief minister immediately called in a bureaucrat and asked him to get working on a plan.

"It's like dealing with a private enterprise and talking to a CEO," Patel says.

'Modi Has to Evolve'

While political analysts say Modi is a possible future candidate for prime minister, he would face hostility from Muslims. "God will bring Modi down one day," Sayed says.

In states with large Muslim populations, where they comprise more than 15 percent, Modi would have to soften his anti-Muslim image.

"Modi's problem is very real," Rangarajan says. "Modi has to evolve."

In Ahmedabad's Juhapura ghetto, Hindus built a 10-foot- high wall with barbed wire at the top to separate themselves from Muslims. The wall is a reminder of the issues confronting Modi and his party as they vie to rule India again.

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