

NARENDRA MODI – THE GAMECHANGER

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REBELLION AND DIRECTION A PEEK INTO MODI'S GROWING YEARS

*Do not be afraid of a small beginning, great things come afterwards.
Be courageous. Do not try to lead your brethren, but serve them.*

— Swami Vivekananda

A young child of 12 years took the train to Mehsana to respond to his patriotic call. He used to serve tea to passengers in the trains, but had never dared to go inside the coaches with an intention to travel. He did not even inform his father for the fear of being stopped. He had come to know that smartly dressed soldiers of the Indian Army had come to Mehsana to board trains to the borders. He just could not stop himself. At the Mehsana railway station, which is a junction, he was excited to see Army personnel transiting and doing one thing or the other.

He became a part of the NGO that was honouring the *jawans* going to the India-China border. China had attacked India and soldiers were being rushed to the borders to fight the enemy. The young boy did not

know what to do; so he took the task of serving tea and snacks to the soldiers. This boy was none other than the present chief minister of Gujarat, Narendrakumar Damodardas Modi.

Like any other child, Narendra too had many aspirations. One of these was to join the Indian Army. But like many poor children of his hometown, he could not do anything except dream about it.

Poverty came in the way of his dreams and he could not travel to take the examination for the Sainik School in Balachadi, Jamnagar. He had somehow managed to collect rupees two for the money order that was to be sent to the school as the examination fee. For the first time in his life, he visited the local post office and got the form filled with the help of people present there. He sent the money order. Immediately came the admit card, but he could not go. His father told him that the family had no money to send him to Jamnagar to take the examination and asked him to complete his studies at the local school. Narendra was a student of the fourth grade back then.

Narendra or ND, as his schoolmates addressed him, was born at 11 am on 17 September 1950 in a poor family of Ghanchi caste that fell in the category of Other Backward Castes (OBCs). His moon sign is Scorpio, and sun sign is Virgo with star constellation called Anuradha.

The school record carried over to the college at Visnagar shows his date of birth as 29 August 1949. His associates say this was a mistake

since people those days did not maintain birth certificates and the date of birth reached the records through the word of mouth. However, after proper calculation by his mother and other family members, the date of birth accepted by one and all is 17 September 1950 and Modi has been celebrating this date as his birthday.

His father Damodardas ran a small tea shop adjoining Vadnagar railway station close to the main entrance. Young Narendra was assigned the task to take tea in an aluminium kettle to serve passengers in the trains that came to Vadnagar and left for either Mehsana or Taranga Hill. This was his way to supplement the family income. He would sell tea in earthen *kulhads* (small container made of baked earth). One cup of special *chai* (tea) cost *two annas* (one *anna* was equal to six paise) whereas the *chalu chai* (normal tea) cost one *anna*. There used to be coins of one paise, two paise, one *anna*, two *annas* and four *annas*.

Alongside the platform and in front of the ticket counter is open space with half walls on three sides and a tin roof. *Sadhus* used to stay here for months and Narendra would often spend time with them while serving tea.

Now, the town has a population of 30,000-35,000. During Modi's formative years, the town was a *panchayat* with a population of 18,000-20,000. The place is now connected by well-laid roads besides the railway station that serves as a link with Mehsana on one side and

Taranga Hill on the other. It had a metre-gauge line that is still a metre gauge.

Earlier, the station served as the nerve centre for the town's activities. Thousands of people could be seen going to the station with their lunch boxes in hands so that they could catch the train to go to other places for their respective jobs. Students from Vadnagar used the trains to go to Visnagar College, about 14 km away towards Mehsana. The morning and evening trains, in particular, would bring lots of crowd; the crowd brought with it a plethora of activities and stories discussed over sips of piping hot sweet tea.

At present, three local trains ply between Mehsana and Taranga Hill, making it six trips in all. There is no train on Sunday. There is only one counter to sell tickets. There is no tea shop closer to the railway station. A bicycle servicing shop and an irrigation oil shop have come up at the place earlier owned by Damodardas. A concrete structure now stands where once semi-permanent structures made of mud and wood stood. There used to be a canteen inside the railway station that is closed now for many years. The trains have lost their importance and road transport has become more efficient.

During Modi's childhood, there were eight passenger trains that passed through Vadnagar, of which the first one from Taranga Hill to Ahmedabad passed at six in the morning. The train from Mehsana to Kheralu came at 8 am and the one from Kheralu to Mehsana at 9 am. There was another train from Patan to Kheralu at 11 am. Two trains — one from Kheralu to Vadnagar to Mehsana and the other one from

Palanpur to Taranga — crossed at Vadnagar at 12-30 pm. This was followed by the Taranga to Palanpur train at 4 pm and the one from Ahmedabad to Taranga at 8 pm. So the town was abuzz with activity till 8 pm. Sikander Khan Qureshi remembered that all trains used to be of 10 to 12 coaches.

The trains spruced up activities and generated jobs around the station. The timing of the trains was important for young Narendra since he would have to leave the class and run to the tea shop. He needed to reach the railway station before the train entered the platform. After the train left, he would rejoin his classroom sessions. Since Narendra had no watch and also that the trains often came late, he had to depend on the whistle of the trains. His primary school and even BN High School, where he studied, were hardly a kilometre from the station.

Modi's associates remembered him walking to the railway station at about five in the morning to open the shop and prepare for the day. He would take along the essential items that were needed to make tea. Later, his father would come and prepare tea. Towards the side of the railway station, where Narendra's father ran the tea shop, is one of the six gates that once dotted the Vadnagar outline. Closer to this gate are three shops vending tea and food items; all owned by Muslims.

One of the shops belongs to Babubhai Amirbhai Khan or Babu *chacha* as he came to be addressed with the passage of time.

The shops wore the same look that they did some 40 years ago. Babu *chacha* was once very close to Modi. The young Narendra would cross his shop daily everytime he would go to the railway station or return. He would warmly greet other Muslims who would gather at the tea shop. Babu *chacha* fondly remembered him as a very hard-working and humble boy.

Another person who stayed in the locality, Firoz Khan, recalled how Narendra used to rush to the station early morning every day. He appeared committed and sincere to everyone he interacted with. Muslims of the area knew Modi also because his residence was at Kalavasudev Chachar, a neighbourhood of Muslim-dominated Sembhavada to the west of Vadnagar. There are two Muslim-dominated areas: one is in the west and the other in the east called Chakla near Amtol Gate, which is closer to the railway station. The Muslims who stay at Amtol Gate are poor, whereas those staying at Sembhavada are relatively rich. Most people remembered Modi as affable and courteous. He grew up playing with young Muslim boys.

There was never a communal discord in the town. “We lived as one, never mindful of being a Hindu or a Muslim,” said 74-year-old Maqbool. Hasan Ali, who was involved in carpentry, said that Modi had done a lot for the development of the state and so should be given a chance at the Centre. Including Vadnagar, there are seven villages that have a sizeable Muslim population. These villages — Badalpur, Maulipur, Kesimpa, Sekhpur, Rasulpur, Sadiqpur and Vadnagar — together have a population of about 40,000 Muslims. No untoward

incident happened in Vadnagar during the 2002 riots, Hasan Ali recalled.

Some Muslims in Vadnagar pointed out to the secular tradition of the Modi family. They fondly remembered Modi's father Damodardas providing shelter and home to a Muslim boy Abbas Mohammad Ramsada (Momin). Abbas's father was a farmer from Kesimpa village who would come to the APMC market in Vadnagar on a regular basis and stop at the tea stall owned by Damodardas. They became friends. His son Abbas used to study in BN High School and had to come daily from the distant village. In 1973, when Abbas was in matriculation the family ran into financial difficulties. His father had already expired in 1970 and there was no way he could raise the resources and continue his studies. When Damodardas came to know of this, he brought Abbas home and asked him to complete his studies. Abbas recalled his stay at Modi's home for one full year and how well he was treated by the whole family. He testified to the fact that the family never discriminated between Hindus and Muslims. He was treated as an integral part of the family and accompanied them on social visits. Abbas later studied M.Com and LLB and is now employed with the Gujarat government.

The Modi Family

Narendra's family originally came from Navdotra village in Gujarat's Banaskanthadistrict, which is closer to Rajasthan. His great

grandfather Maganlal Ranchoddas decided to settle in Vadnagar and set up a grocery there. Narendra's father Damodardas was the grandson of Ranchoddas.

The family belonged to the extremely backward *Ghanchi* caste that specialised in the occupation of oil pressing (*teli* caste). The same caste is found in areas of Rajasthan.² Oil pressing people came to be referred to as *Ghanchis* because the traditional name for the oil pressing machine is *ghanch* or *ghani* in Rajasthan.

But how can the surname 'Modi' belong to an other backward caste in Gujarat or Rajasthan? Modis are normally *Marwaris* of Rajasthan, but they are not backward. They are a business community and there is no trace of Modis in Rajasthan in the oil-pressing trade. The oil-pressing community bearing the Modi name is found in Bihar. Their women used to go house to house selling oil and they were referred to as *Modiyayin* (ladies of the Modi caste). They are an OBC spread over areas of Bihar bordering Jharkhand, such as Gaya in Bihar and Kodarma and Ranchi in Jharkhand. It is quite possible that some Modis of Bihar moved away to Gujarat some 200 years ago and settled there.

BJP MLA from Chapra Vishwanath Bhagat did his own research and found out that such a migration took place about five generations back. Former president of the BJP's Bihar unit, Professor Gopal Narain Singh, and Bhagat tried to trace the origin but they could not say anything with authenticity.

The Modi clan claims descent from the Kshatriya community in Rajasthan. Some 700 years ago, they were close to the kings and used to ensure that people involved in oilpressing were doing their job well. As the story goes, the oil pressing people fled the occupation since they were subjected to a lot of physical pressure and confinement. Thereafter, the Kshatriyas took up the profession and gradually emerged as a new offshoot called Ghanchis.

Now, due to intense caste consciousness, various members of the community have come under the Sahu *samaj* and their number is close to 16 crore. Modis from Gujarat are also members of this larger grouping.

Damodardas was born in 1915. He had five brothers. One of the brothers, Narsinhbhai, used to run the railway station's official canteen. A blue-coloured stall made of tin stood at the same place — closed and locked. It looked old, dilapidated and dusty, having fallen to disuse. It looked like any tea stall that one normally finds at any small railway station. Outside, opposite to Damodardas's shop on the other side of the radial road was another tea shop run by another brother, Narottambhai. This tea shop catered to the passengers at the bus stand that brought people from different places and connected them to the railway station. Now, some construction has taken place at the old bus stand. The new bus stand has come up at a site opposite the railway station. Another brother, Jagjeevan owned a shop that sold *bhajja* (fried Gujarati snacks) relished by people with tea.

There were two more brothers, Jayantibhai and Kantibhai, who later became teachers at Durbar. Sombhai (elder brother of Narendra)

said that Jayantibhai became a teacher in 1960 whereas Kantibhai got the job in 1965. Narendra was not taught by any of his uncles since he had already left the Durbar when they joined.

Narendra was Damodardas' third child. His father lovingly called him Kumar. He had five more siblings. His eldest brother Sombhai was born in 1944, second brother Amritbhai in 1946 and sister Vasanthi in 1955. Later, Prahlad and the youngest brother Pankaj were born.

All of them are happily settled. Sister Vasanthi is married and lives in Visnagar. Amritbhai has his own small business and stays aloof from the family. Sombhai retired from the State government's health department and now he runs an old age home in Vadnagar on behalf of a charitable trust. He spends at least two days a week in Vadnagar and the rest of the time in Ahmedabad. He has a busy social life. Prahlad used to run a kerosene business; later, he became an office-bearer of the union of Fair Price Shops.

Pankaj, the youngest brother, is employed with the Gujarat Information Department. He moved permanently to Gandhinagar after he was transferred there. Narendra's mother Hiraba stays with Pankaj. Pankaj sold the Vadnagar house in 2003, much to the dislike of his mother. But since no one was ready to stay there, there was no point in hanging on to it. The house is still known by its once illustrious occupant, the Gujarat chief minister.

The house was like a train compartment with 12 by 40 sqft dimensions. It had an entry from the front into the room that acted as

the living room. From this room, one could enter another that had a half partition wall to make a closet for kitchen and another for worship. The last room was small, almost half the size of the first room. The floor was not cemented and would be plastered with cow dung paste on a regular basis. On the first floor, there was a room that catered to guests who visited the family quite frequently. Imagine such a big family living in such a small accommodation! The two neighbouring houses adjoining that house sported a pristine look in wood and concrete. The original Modi house has been renovated by the new occupant and looked modern.

All of Narendra's brothers have now shifted to either Ahmedabad or Gandhinagar. Modi keeps minimal contact with the family. He has told all his kin that none of their activities should sully the name of the family. All the brothers have ensured that they do not indulge in any activity that can be damaging for Modi's image. This self-censorship has continued and has stood the test of time. No charge of nepotism has ever been levelled against Modi. None of the family members have ever gone to the CM house for any work.

Modi did not attend wedding of any of his brothers except Sombhai. The family was so poor that they could not make arrangement for photographs. This explains the reason for absence of photographs of Modi's social functions.

Modi visits his mother occasionally to receive her blessings; he makes sure to visit her on his birthday. When he became the chief minister

for the first time and went to seek her blessings, she said: “*Beta kadilanchna leis*” (Son, never take bribe). This lesson has stayed etched in Modi’s mind very strongly and may have contributed to the zero tolerance for corruption at the chief minister’s office (CMO).

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