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# Making Gujarat Vibrant: *Hindutva*, development and the rise of subnationalism in India

TOMMASO BOBBIO

**ABSTRACT** *A significant aspect of India's postcolonial history has been the rise of subnationalism—popularly addressed as the challenge of regionalism—which has often pitted the Indian state against the regional centres of power. In fact, the organisation of Indian territory along linguistic lines favoured the emergence of regional movements challenging the authority of the central government in arguments typical of nationalist rhetoric, such as the specificity of language, territory and traditions. This notion of subnation, however, has taken a new turn during the past two decades of neoliberal reforms as regional states compete with each other to attract greater foreign and domestic investment and to secure higher growth rates. Taking as a point of departure the case of 'Vibrant Gujarat', this article proposes rethinking the emergence of subnational cultures in the past two decades in the light of the effects of the neoliberal economic reforms and the rise of Hindu extremist movements in the political arena.*

From 1991 onwards the progressive opening of India's economy to foreign and private investment, and the further devolution of competences to the single governments in terms of economic policies, enhanced a competition among states to secure the highest share of private investment and capital.<sup>1</sup> In this context Gujarat came forth as one of the model-states for this type of development pattern. In applying neoliberal directives, the government of Gujarat emphasised aspects such as the deregulation of the labour market, the creation of special economic zones (SEZ), and forms of tax relief to companies choosing to invest in the state. In this way it secured high levels of private investment, and became the state recording the highest rate of growth of per capita income among the 16 major states in the post-1991 reforms period. Such patterns of economic growth underpinned the creation of a discourse around 'progress' and 'modernisation', in which the middle classes were seen as the protagonists of a sort of social and economic revolution that projected Gujarat in the global world. In particular, since the early 2000s, the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader Narendra Modi to the chief

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ministership of the state marked a turn both in the way development projects were enacted and in the way these were advertised to the general public and the media.

When he inaugurated the first ‘Vibrant Gujarat Global Investors’ Summit’, in September 2003, Chief Minister Modi outlined the main political lines through which he sought to lead the state of Gujarat in a new era of economic development and growth. The launch of the Summit was conceived as part of his new political strategy. The initiative represented the effort, on the part of the state government, to carve out a role for Gujarat in the competitive landscape of India’s post-reform economy. At the same time it was meant to focus public and media attention on the economic and development policies enacted by the government of Gujarat.

The timing of the summit is noteworthy. In 2003 the state was still shaken by the consequences of the anti-Muslim pogroms that had taken place, with the complicity of the local government, one year before. The Assembly Elections in November 2002 had been fought entirely around the alleged responsibility of the BJP government for allowing widespread massacres of Muslim civilians all over Gujarat. In this scenario the party obtained a landslide victory, which represented also a tremendous personal success for Narendra Modi. The Chief Minister, who was known to be a *Hindutva* hard-liner, had toured the state extensively, holding rallies in hundreds of villages and towns. During the campaign, named the *Gaurav Yatra* (Procession for Pride), Modi turned upside down all the arguments that the media, opposition parties and human rights associations had thrown at him and his government. According to his rhetoric those who pointed the finger against the brutalities perpetrated against Muslims were in fact accusing the whole population of Gujarat of being murderers, religious fanatics and the like.<sup>2</sup> While setting up a defensive argument for himself and his party, Modi sought to address ‘the people of Gujarat’ as a whole, implicitly enclosing in this group only the Hindus.

While this kind of propaganda proved effective in terms of electoral results, soon after the election Narendra Modi apparently shifted the scope of his political agenda from a blatant communal platform to a more inclusive, development-oriented one.

The summit was to be the store-window to advertise the state as the best place in India to invest capital. In order to do this, the government shaped a campaign around three main points: first, Modi’s cabinet was a model of good governance, so all procedures for allowing private investment were simple and secure; secondly private investors would be granted fiscal benefits for investing in the state; thirdly thanks to the inherited attitude to business and to social harmony of the Gujarati population, private investors would find Gujarat the ideal environment to start new economic activities.

Thanks to the success of the first Vibrant Gujarat event, the summit has been repeated on a biennial basis, with increasing success in terms of participation from both institutional and private subjects, and in terms of the amount of investment determined through memoranda of understanding (MOU). Over the years Modi’s rhetoric has increasingly centred on an

argument that tends to emphasise cultural and social elements as determinant in making Gujarat the best place to invest in. In this frame, the idea of a so-called 'Gujarati ethos' emerged as a pivotal element to describe the local society as naturally oriented to business: 'Gujarat is a land of entrepreneurs', as Modi claimed during his inaugural speech to the 2011 summit.<sup>3</sup>

At several times in postcolonial India local politicians have made an assertive use of local, or subnational, feelings to gather electoral consent.<sup>4</sup> What makes the construction of an idea of 'Gujaratiness' unique is its equation with propaganda around economic development in the frame of the rise of Hindu extremism in the state.<sup>5</sup> This gave to the subnational idea an intrinsic exclusive character, deriving from two different elements. On one side, the 'natural orientation to business' of the Gujarati population referred to the traditional milieu of high-caste Hindu and Jain traders of urban Gujarat, thus conferring on the subnational idea a defined Hindu tint. On the other side, fashioning the Gujarati identity in the light of a neoliberal conception of economic development referred directly to an imagined model of a globalised middle class milieu, while implicitly endorsing a culture of intolerance towards those sectors of society which are left behind by this economic model.<sup>6</sup>

This article explores the historical roots and contemporary success of the subnational Gujarati culture, in relation to rise of the BJP as the undisputed political force in the state since the 1990s. Through a historical investigation of the elements that contributed to delimiting the boundaries of present-day Gujarati subnationalism, the following analysis highlights the role that this kind of rhetoric had in fostering the emergence of an aggressive, self-assertive public culture in urban Gujarat.

### **Origins of Gujarati subnationalism: Maha Gujarat *Andolan* (1956–60)**

Although regional stereotypes have been encapsulated in rhetoric around economic development and the so-called upper-caste Hindu traditions of the Gujarati culture, the emergence of subnational ideas in the political arena is not a phenomenon confined to the last two decades of the twentieth century. Strong echoes of the political use of regional cultural stereotypes can be found in the early days of India's independence, when Gujarat was still part of the Bombay state and urban middle classes started demanding the creation of a separate state enclosing the Gujarati-speaking communities.

The movement advocating the creation of a state of Gujarat, which took the name of 'Maha Gujarat Andolan' (Movement for a great state of Gujarat), became part of the controversy involving the Union Government and the Congress Party over the territorial reorganisation of the Indian territory, in the wake of Independence. At that time the territory of present-day Gujarat was split between the Sauhrashtra princely states, including the Saurashtra peninsula and Kachchh, and the state of Bombay, which merged part of Gujarat with Maharashtra and part of present Karnataka.

The controversy started within the Congress Party, soon after the formation of the first Nehru government in 1947, as the administrative

organisation of the Indian state was to be resettled, either along linguistic or territorial lines. According to the first principle, linguistic divisions would have granted equal access to jobs in the public services as well as the creation of an administrative system that was comprehensible to most citizens. Conversely, the criterion of organising the territory in wider regions, merging together areas with different linguistic groups, and thus establishing a common language for the whole administrative system, would have simplified the reorganisation of the political map of India by dividing its territory into five or six states. This organisation would also have answered the fear that, in the long run, a division along linguistic lines could foster separatist or autonomist feelings among local elites.<sup>7</sup>

Within the bilingual Bombay State, controversy over the reorganisation of the territory increasingly focused around the destination of the city of Bombay after the supposed division of the state. While belonging 'traditionally' to a Marathi-speaking area, the city was the headquarters of a strong community of Gujarati and Parsi traders and businessmen. The Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti (United Maharashtra Committee) had started organising agitations in the late 1940s to ask for the creation of a Marathi-speaking state, with Bombay as its capital.<sup>8</sup> In 1952 a group of intellectuals and professionals representing the Gujarati-speaking people organised the first Maha Gujarat Conference in Ahmedabad: meant to be a public answer to the agitation in Maharashtra, the conference became the first moment in which leading personalities in the city advanced the request for a state of Gujarat.<sup>9</sup>

At the end of 1955 Nehru announced the decision to implement a plan to divide Bombay state into two monolingual units, Gujarat and Maharashtra, and to grant the city of Bombay the status of Union Territory, under the direct administration of the central government. However, this plan triggered off large protests in Bombay: leaders of the Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti were immediately arrested and the police opened fire over the demonstrators, killing more than 80 people.<sup>10</sup> Partly as a consequence of the riots, and partly as the result of cross-party parliamentary opposition, Nehru's government withdrew the three-state resolution and, on 8 August 1956, sanctioned the maintenance of a bilingual Bombay state, as part of the States Reorganisation Act.<sup>11</sup> This date marked the beginning of the agitations in Ahmedabad and other cities of Gujarat. Students, workers and political activists from the Praja Socialist Party and the Communist Party started a series of demonstrations in the streets.

During the peak of the agitation (8–13 August 1956), leaders from the various groups formed a united front under the banner of the Maha Gujarat Janata Parishad (Maha Gujarat People's Association), with the intent of giving an organised form to the protests. The Association concentrated its activity in direct opposition to the central government and the Congress party, especially against the figure of Morarji Desai, the 'supreme leader' of Gujarat Congress. At an organisational level the Parishad sought to mobilise the Ahmedabad citizenry using a highly symbolic vocabulary. The Parishad appealed to the collective emotion generated by the death of young students

and workers from the police shooting. In the language of the agitators the victims became ‘martyrs’ (*shahid*) and the celebration of a ‘martyr’s day’ (*shahid din*) had a central role from the beginning of the movement. The decision to create a bilingual state was challenged on the ground that the Gujarati-speakers comprised roughly 33 per cent of the total population of the bilingual state. The language issue was then channelled into people’s fear of becoming marginalised in their own territory, as if a second type of foreign rule would be imposed upon the Gujarati population.

When the emotional wave of the protest faded, under the leadership of Indulal Yagnik, the Maha Gujarat Janata Parishad entered a new phase, in which it focused more on an institutional strategy, oriented at transforming people’s support into votes and then at bringing the protest onto the official ground of parliamentary politics, both at the state and at the national level. Such a strategy, which eventually led to the creation of the state of Gujarat in 1960, was characterised by a lower level of violence and sanctioned the emergence and consolidation of a new class of politicians, either drawn from the lines of dissident Congressmen and from the leftist parties, or from the milieu of young middle-class college students. Behind the presence of a leader like Indulal Yagnik, whose moral authority among the people of Ahmedabad had consolidated during the struggle and remained unaffected until his death in 1972, many activists of the Parishad emerged as future leading figures in the state’s political arena. People like Chimanbhai Patel, who became president of the Gujarat branch of the Congress (I) and controversial chief minister of the state (1973–74 and 1990–94), and Ashok Bhatt, one of the leaders of the BJP and a *Hindutva* hardliner within his party, took their first steps in the political life of Gujarat as members of the Maha Gujarat Janata Parishad.

The Maha Gujarat movement fostered the consolidation of subnational symbols in the political rhetoric of Gujarat. Many of the seeds planted during that movement can be seen in the kind of subnational rhetoric that emerged in the political life of Gujarat towards the end of the past century. The ideological platform of the movement consolidated the notion, widely shared among urban middle classes in the state, of a Gujarati identity defined through language, territory and history. From the creation of the state onwards, the memory of the movement has been thoroughly institutionalised, as for instance through the construction of a monument in the centre of Ahmedabad city, or through the institution of a memorial day which is widely attended by local politicians. Thus, if Maha Gujarat represents the first step in the assertion of a specificity of local people within India, the present claim for a Gujarati *ethos* can be seen, in continuity with the previous movement, as the revival of a local identity in a ‘globalised’, Hindu version.

### **From ‘Maha’ to ‘Vibrant’ Gujarat (1980s–2000s)**

During the 1980s the impact of the crisis that laid waste to the whole textile industrial sector in Ahmedabad and Surat had the proportions of a catastrophe. Nearly one-third of the population of Ahmedabad was

dependent on the mills for its income and resided in areas that had grown up around the industries.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the industrial crisis forced local and state administrators to redesign economic and planning strategies in order to favour the establishment of new private enterprises in the city. In this context the 1991 New Industrial Policy (NIP), adopted by the central government and applied differently by single states, provided the opportunity for the Gujarat government to plan economic development through the privatisation of services and the liberalisation of investment in the state.<sup>13</sup> By the end of the 1990s, projects of urban development and new infrastructure building sought to transform Ahmedabad in the state's storefront for promoting private investment. In the political and public debate the image of a globalised city was gradually substituted for that of an industrial city.

As a result of this process, during the 1990s the state of Gujarat improved its economic record, climbing up the national rankings relating to economic growth and average income to consolidate its image as one of the healthiest economies in the Indian Union, although its ranking with regard to social indicators, such as literacy (especially for women), infant mortality and child labour, remained poor.<sup>14</sup> For large sectors of the urban middle class, which had more access to higher education and could enter the labour market as a highly skilled workforce, the economic reforms opened new chances and better paid jobs. For these sectors privatisation and liberalisation became opportunities for upward mobility.<sup>15</sup> Large cities attracted the largest share of investment and developed as economic centres based on financial and service-based activities. Being the largest city of Gujarat, Ahmedabad attracted consistent investment in the industrial (mainly pharmaceutical and chemical), the financial and the construction sectors. The image of an economic success thus began to overcome the shadow of the textile industry crisis. Political forces and mass media depicted the reconstruction of the city's economy in the 1990s, from an industrial to a financial base, as a positive strategy that was dragging the city out of the crisis of the previous decade. Such elements consolidated in a narrative about the success of Ahmedabad and its population in overcoming the crisis, and created an image of the city as a globalised urban centre with a large and dynamic middle class. 'From mills to malls' became a recurrent motto that well summarised the rhetoric of progress entrenched in this narrative: a commercial sector flourishing on the ashes of the old decaying textile industry; the redefinition of the urban territory and the emergence of new poles of commercial activities; the city conforming to a supposed globalised model of urban development; the rise of an urban middle class that was in line with a 'westernised' imaginary based on consumerism.

From the early 1990s most political forces in the state, as well as in India as a whole, appropriated such elements in the construction of a propaganda discourse that equated the implementation of neoliberal economic reforms with a positivistic idea of 'progress' and 'modernity'. By understanding concepts such as globalisation and modernity in 'purely technological terms', political actors filled their discourses with a rhetoric that considered technological progress as the driving force of innovation at all levels of

society, from communication to industrial organisation. Economic indicators assumed increasing importance as mirrors of social progress, and this equation contributed to creating a public culture that progressively identified economic growth with social welfare at large, and in which commodity production and consumption became cultural phenomena.<sup>16</sup> Arguments advocating economic growth as the primary objective of ‘modern’ politics (as against the previous phase of a centrally planned economy) constituted the undisputed core of a political culture that permeated the public debate in the state. In this idea of progress high GDP growth rates in the long run would benefit all sectors of society, leading to a progressive ‘eradication’ of poverty all over India.

In Gujarat the emergence of such a political culture assumed peculiar features and went along with the rise of the BJP as a dominant electoral force, particularly in large urban centres, towards the end of the 1980s. The party took the basic elements of neoliberal economic propaganda—liberalisation, privatisation of services and infrastructure management, deregulation of the labour market, globalisation of investment—and enclosed them in an ethno-nationalist frame. By associating economic progress and religious bigotry, the Sangh Parivar contributed to producing a political culture aimed at addressing an imagined urban, Hindu middle class. The main targets of the Hindu political propaganda were those sectors of the urban milieu that were striving to modernise and to adopt the symbols of a lifestyle that was at the same time globalised (in its adoption of consumerism) and typically ‘Indian’ (in its allegiance to the exterior canons of religious devotionalism). In this sense, in delineating the guidelines of a political ideology that interwove the call for economic liberalisations with strong ethno-nationalist propaganda, the Gujarat branch of the BJP in the early 1990s was a precursor of the programme that the party was to adopt at a national level.<sup>17</sup>

This strategy has proved successful in bringing the BJP to power in Gujarat since 1995 (in Ahmedabad it was already the largest party in 1990) and, more importantly, it contributed to the emergence of the cliché of a ‘middle class ethos’ in narratives of self-representation for large sectors of the urban population. The construction of such a culture borrowed typical elements of a so-called Gujarati cultural tradition, specifically from an upper-caste Brahmin and Bania fold, mixing them with the stereotypical features of a globalised society, in order to create the image of the Gujarati population as more predisposed to entering global economic markets and doing business in a ‘modern’, post-industrial, economy.<sup>18</sup> Modernity, globalisation and development became keywords to represent the economic miracle of Gujarat.

The claimed success of economic reforms in the state was inscribed in figures that showed Gujarat as the fastest growing economy among Indian states in the early 2000s. Implicitly recalling an imaginary of positive, endless progress, from both an economic and social perspective, such a narrative glorified the new course in economic policies and, at the same time, referred to a specific—although indefinite—social group, the urban middle class, as the actors of process. The model of a traditional mercantile culture formed the cultural background that made Gujarat a natural environment for



economic development. Such a narrative, taking from widely shared traditional stereotypes, depicted mercantile elites of Ahmedabad as traditionally peaceful and tolerant. Interestingly, the common practice of vegetarianism among Brahmin and Bania groups (both Hindu and Jain) recurred frequently as a sort of proof of the peacefulness inherent in the upper caste social milieu of Ahmedabad.<sup>19</sup> At the same time industrial peace, the heritage of the Gandhian culture of peaceful trade unionism in the city, became another element in the construction of an image of Ahmedabad as a peaceful environment, as a place where ‘even late at night a woman can move around and walk alone without fear’.<sup>20</sup>

In line with the emerging dominant narrative mercantile traditions, industrial past and peaceful environments became the elements that justified the emergence of Gujarat as a fast growing economy in the post-1991 reforms years. These features contributed to portraying a stereotypical Gujarati businessman (sic) as the model entrepreneur in the globalising economy. While Gujarat as a peaceful state represented the ideal environment for private investors to install new activities, the Gujarati population was naturally oriented towards business. In this perspective, the equation between peace and business in the name of globalisation aimed to project ‘Gujarat and Gujaratis’ as ‘more westernised and modernised than the rest of India and Indians’.<sup>21</sup>

Economic recovery was thus depicted as a mixture of spontaneous initiative and entrepreneurial spirit of large sectors of the population, who sought new economic opportunities in establishing commercial activities and other private initiatives. Such a vision called for a notion of a Gujarati ethos that has become a widely-shared cultural stereotype in present-day Ahmedabad. According to this perspective, the ethos defined a sort of inborn inclination towards business that most Gujarati people were supposed to have.<sup>22</sup> Hence, economic growth came as many people reacted to mill closures by starting small businesses and other activities. In the words of a prominent leader of the BJP in the city, the economic recovery was mainly ascribed to people’s ‘courage’ and self-initiative.<sup>23</sup>

The rise to power of Narendra Modi in the state (2001) exacerbated the main arguments of such a cultural construction in the public debate. A staunch advocate of economic reforms, Modi used the narrative of a Gujarati ethos to promote his economic policies and to project the state, and himself, as in the forefront of good governance and progress in India.<sup>24</sup> The launch of the ‘Vibrant Gujarat Global Investors’ Summit’ must be understood against this background.<sup>25</sup> Addressing the conference in several public speeches, Modi adopted all the symbols that consolidated the equation between Gujarati culture and business in the name of ‘modernity’. In his speeches during the summit Modi clarified the programmatic idea that lay behind the initiative, at the same time showing how his government understood economic growth at a cultural and social level.

On the launch of this function I want to apprise you all of our achievements, of the potential that is available in Gujarat, on the possible wealth generating

partnerships that exist, on how global entrepreneurs can join us in our march towards progress, and how investors can reap rich dividends in Gujarat. I would say if you plant a rupee in the Gujarati soil, you might be able to get a dollar in return! Such is Gujarat's entrepreneurial spirit.<sup>26</sup>

Themes of modernity and globalisation recurred in Modi's speeches as constant reminders of the positive effects that economic growth would almost naturally produce in society. Privatisation and modernisation would bring an 'infusion of modern technology' in the state's economy and this would eventually benefit all sectors of society.<sup>27</sup> Modi traced the lines of a peculiar development pattern that appeared to combine modernity with traditions as, according to his arguments, the local cultural heritage made Gujarat the best place to start new economic activities. In this way, cultural stereotypes entered the political arena to define the traits of a supposed uniqueness of Gujarati society. The relationship between 'commerce and culture, trade and tradition, entrepreneurship and entertainment' would make Gujarat competitive 'in the modern times of the World Trade Organization'.<sup>28</sup>

Such a narrative underpinned the construction of the image of a Gujarati ethos, which supposedly represented the rise of the middle class. Discourses of this type formed part of a public culture which conferred legitimacy to the BJP on different levels. The party could present itself as the champion of the state's economic recovery and as the sole representative of the Gujarati spirit of entrepreneurship. It also managed to gather support from all those sectors of urban society that represented themselves as the middle class and that sought to protect their interests and social status. On another level, such arguments relied on the promise of upward mobility and welfare for all those backward groups that were in fact penalised by the reformed economic system.

However, at a social level, the consolidation of a middle class culture took the form of an increasing intolerance towards the circumstances of the urban poor and a further marginalisation of the Muslim minority groups in the city. In this sense, if in the political arena the BJP tried to build the image of a secular party in the name of economic growth and globalisation, as a cultural phenomenon the idea of a Gujarati ethos consolidated a reality of social exclusiveness, shaped on communal lines. Behind the positivistic image of progress and modernisation, the consolidation of such culture among large sectors of urban society concealed a further polarisation of that society, and legitimised politics of exclusion and discrimination as a common practice.

### **Subnational chauvinism and cultural exclusion**

The emergence of a 'middle-class culture' in the public representation of urban society was largely based on symbols calling for a regional cultural specificity of the Gujarati identity. Interestingly, political leaders and the mass media referred to the so-called economic recovery of Ahmedabad city always through the mediation of the idea of Gujarati ethos. Relating the

city's economic growth mainly to the people's attitude towards business proved a successful political argument. In this sense every single citizen was entitled to be part of the city's aspirations to modernity through individual initiative, spirit of entrepreneurship and 'courage'. At the same time, while embodying the positive outcomes of modernisation, the idea of 'Gujaratiness' created a defined rift between the rich, those who could afford modernity and globalisation, and the poor, who lagged behind in the construction of a global economy.<sup>29</sup>

Hence the idealisation of so-called Gujarati traditions as the base of a middle-class culture became a first, powerful element of cultural discrimination. The idea of a Gujarati ethos referred directly to the cultural and social environment of traditional mercantile elites in the city, mainly upper caste Brahmin, Bania and Jain. Elements such as vegetarianism, peacefulness and business orientation belonged to a specific imaginary found in the Jain and upper caste Hindu traditions, as well as in Gandhi's legacy in the city's social milieu. These references proved instrumental, in the discourses of Hindu extremist associations, in strengthening their position as representative of the supposedly original traditions of the state. As Ashis Nandy noted in a controversial article, soon after Modi's re-election to the Gujarat chief ministership in 2007, 'Gandhi himself has been given a saintly, Hindu nationalist status and shelved'.<sup>30</sup>

The rhetoric about the peace-loving and non-violent Gujarati people defined the boundaries of cultural and social exclusion in a city like Ahmedabad, which had grown largely over a lower-caste, migrant labour force. When discussing the relationship between the representation of Gujarati people as non-violent and the frequent occurrence of riots, Ashok Bhatt, senior BJP leader from Ahmedabad, declared that '*we* never have problems with *other* people, and this is a long lasting tradition of Gujarat'.<sup>31</sup> In this case, the distinction between '*we*' and '*other* people' reveals the disruptive potential of a narrative based on subnational stereotypes. On the one hand, the apparently inclusive character of this rhetoric encompassed all those 'courageous people' who reacted to the industrial crisis by starting individual businesses and commercial activities. Such a category implicitly included all those tens of thousands of former mill labourers who were forced to reinvent themselves as self-employed, street vendors or casual labourers.<sup>32</sup> In fact, for these sectors of informal and insecure workforce, the transition from an industrial to a service economy can be better considered as a symptom of their utter lack of contractual power and helplessness, rather than the outcome of a business mentality. On the other hand, the continuous reference to subnational symbols acted as a reproduction, on a local scale, of the Hindu extremist propaganda at the national level: arguments equating the Indian nation with the Hindu population of India were transposed to a regional dimension, with the direct effect of projecting the local branch of the BJP—and its leader Modi—as the true representative of the traditional Gujarati culture both internally, towards the non-Hindu and non-Gujarati religious minorities, and externally, asserting the specificity of Gujarat within the Indian nation.

Subnational chauvinism proved a powerful argument in the hands of local Hindu extremist leaders to project their political propaganda into a broader cultural frame, and became an essential element designed to mask intolerant and sectarian feelings behind the smokescreen of an urban, middle class ethos, combining a strong traditional heritage with attention to development and modernisation. As emerged from the testimony of many social workers and activists, in Ahmedabad the equation between Hindu and Gujarati identities became so rooted among certain sectors of society that native Gujarati Muslims were automatically classified through their religious affiliation instead of their regional origins, or mother-tongue.

In this perspective the subnational discourse underpinned what has been defined as a process of 're-imagination' of the state, based on the interrelation of ideas and values at different levels, from the religious to the economic, in order to include *Hindutva* within an ideology of development and modernisation. The consolidation of a regional identity as a widely shared culture in the city represented the success of the Hindu extremist associations in their 'battle for control of the culture of the state, and especially of Ahmedabad'.<sup>33</sup> The mixture of religious, cultural, political and economic issues, which merged in the broader reference to a Gujarati ethos and subnational identity, constituted a seductive ideology for large sectors of the urban population, and proved a powerful tool for political organisations and extremist groups to mobilise masses of people around religious issues.<sup>34</sup>

In 1990, from the moment the BJP took control of the state's administration, subnationalism became a hegemonic discourse that constantly informed the party's political rhetoric. Subsequently Modi's rise to power marked a further increase in the political use of these symbols, in strong association with a Hindu extremist rhetoric. Modi projected himself as a model of the Gujarati ethos, making business a pivotal element of his political image. In doing so, he projected himself as a leader with strong roots in the local community and culture, but at the same time strongly committed to leading the state's economy in the global market. Consequently, after consolidating his popularity in the state, Modi exploited his image as a strong local leader to renegotiate the boundaries of his personal political power both within the state and in the relationship with the centre.<sup>35</sup>

The massive wave of anti-Muslim violence in 2002 represented a watershed in terms of the political debate within the state and in the balance between the state and the central authority.<sup>36</sup> As Indian media gave almost complete coverage to the riots, and as human rights organisations and activists came to investigate the events early on during the violence, large sectors of public opinion, within and outside Gujarat, openly questioned the state government's attitude during and after the violence. In light of this situation the state government, and the chief minister in person, set up an aggressive propaganda campaign against the press, the opposition parties and all those sectors of civil society that had mobilised to denounce the various abuses that public agents had committed during and after the riots. This counter-propaganda represented a further step in the consolidation of a subnational idea among large sectors of the Gujarati population.

In the months preceding the election (November 2002), Modi toured Gujarat extensively, seeking to aggregate the electorate around his figure and in defence of the people of Gujarat against the attacks of media and opposition parties. The name he gave to the campaign, *Gaurav Yatra*, clearly highlighted the emotional over the political intention of the whole operation. The *Yatra* was meant to represent the pride of the entire Gujarati population, and Modi appointed himself the defender of local people's culture and ethos from 'the unprecedented criticism . . . following the post-Godhra violence'.<sup>37</sup> During the two months of campaigning the chief minister sought to transform the electoral competition into an ideological battle in defence of the culture and traditions of Gujarat. The main narrative underlying the campaign described Gujarat using national attributes, thus allowing the BJP to reframe the debate around the pogroms in antagonistic terms. Media coverage of the violence and political attacks against Modi and his government were portrayed as examples of a propaganda discourse aimed at vilifying the people of Gujarat. In this frame the debate was not about whether or not Modi's government was somehow involved in the eruption and expansion of the conflict all over the state, but called the whole people of Gujarat into question for all being considered 'rapists and murderers'. In rally after rally Modi developed his discourse by constantly labelling all accusations against his government as anti-Gujarat:

[Congressmen say that] Gujaratis are violent people. They say that here people stab passers-by with knives. You must have heard all this. The Congress says that Gujaratis keep petrol bombs with them in their pockets. And then they use them to burn people alive in the streets! They [Congressmen] have played with Gujarati pride. Who are the culprits of Godhra? You tell me. Had nothing happened in Godhra, would anyone have hurled a single stone?<sup>38</sup>

The election results showed that this propaganda paid high dividends in terms of votes. The BJP obtained more than two-thirds of the seats in the Legislative Assembly (and 49.85 per cent of the votes), testimony that an aggressive propaganda campaign, based on two forms of identity, religious and cultural, had reached wide sections of the electorate, both in rural and urban areas. While the campaign was still going on, many commentators denounced Modi's decision to embark on the *Gaurav Yatra* as an attempt to reap electoral benefits from the carnage, and from this point of view the chief minister achieved his goal.<sup>39</sup> However, from a different angle, the battle that Modi fought during the electoral campaign was not limited to the forthcoming election—the *Gaurav Yatra* was in fact aimed at consolidating a sense of 'unity' and 'self-respect among fifty million Gujaratis'.<sup>40</sup> In this sense the propaganda discourse that accompanied the *Yatra* was in line with the whole rhetoric around the ethos and uniqueness of the Gujarati people that had informed BJP politics in the state from the previous decade. After their victory in the 2002 election, Modi and the BJP gradually abandoned anti-Muslim slogans in favour of propaganda that emphasised the achievements of the government in terms of economic growth and

development. The launch, in September 2003, of the Vibrant Gujarat Global Investors' Summit sanctioned a new phase for the state's government. In this effort to clean up the party façade in the face of public opinion, Modi resorted even more frequently to the vocabulary of subnationalism instead of to blatant anti-Muslim slogans.

The reorganisation of the state's economy acted as a further element that strengthened a sense of unity and cohesion among Gujarati people. Under the blanket of Gujarati identity, such rhetoric proved successful in representing the aspirations of large sectors of the urban population to be part of a 'modern' middle-class fold. Narendra Modi personified the success of these politics as he represented the most powerful stereotypes related to the Gujarati ethos: success as an economic reformer, religious devotionism, capability to secure social peace.

### Revisiting secularism

Paradoxically, in Gujarat the space for a debate about secularism has shrunk considerably since 2002. As a moral value and a political practice secularism was reframed and gradually entrapped within the context of economic policies.<sup>41</sup> As a by-product of the consolidation of the BJP as a dominant political force in the state, development-oriented arguments also assumed a hegemonic role within a debate over secularism. In fact, the political and cultural agenda summarised in the 'Vibrant Gujarat' slogan affirmed the notion that high GDP rates and economic growth were the only elements that could foster equality in India.

In recent years the idea that true secularism comes with economic development has become a key point in the political culture of Gujarat today. According to this perspective, economic growth is the only factor that can lead to a general improvement of people's life conditions, and thus curb social inequalities in the long run. Thus a liberalised and privatised economy provides the possibility for everyone, irrespective of their social or religious affiliation, to succeed and move up the social ladder. The relationship between secularism and economic growth in a liberalised market represents a powerful argument in the hands of Hindu extremist political leaders, who elevate economic indicators as the sole argument by which to measure equality of opportunity and respect for all religious groups.<sup>42</sup>

Moreover, it has been convincingly argued that the construction of a secular ideology based on economic arguments functioned as a smokescreen to conceal communal politics behind the realisation of 'development programmes'. While on paper neoliberal reforms granted equal opportunities to all citizens, in fact religious inequalities emerged in terms of real access to economic resources and to government-funded development project.<sup>43</sup>

The debate around secularism was thus reframed as a discussion about economic growth and development strategies. The construction of a subnational rhetoric based on the idea of 'ethos' constituted a powerful form of exclusion of religious minorities. The definition of a strong subnational identity shaped on typically Hindu, upper-caste elements became

the background for the emergence of a development-oriented idea of secularism. Following from this perspective, shifting the balance of the secular principle to economic arguments can be seen as the end point of two decades of identity politics in Gujarat. As we have seen, the call for a Gujarati 'ethos' functioned as an ideological cover to conceal communal feelings and a deep intolerance towards religious minorities and backward groups. In this sense the equation between economic development and secularism represented a further step.

In September 2011 Narendra Modi launched a new campaign, named the *Sadbhavana Mission*, to 'further strengthen Gujarat's environment of peace, unity and harmony'. During the following three months, Modi toured the state with the aim of promote a message of social peace based on economic and development arguments. The success of Gujarat in terms of GDP growth and income has become the main argument to counter allegations against the chief minister and his government of being communally biased.

The unhealthy environment created by the unfounded and false allegations made against me and the Government of Gujarat, after 2002 riots, has come to an end. For the past ten years, it has become fashionable to defame me and the State of Gujarat. . . Every citizen of Gujarat has internalized peace, harmony and development. Gujarat has experienced an unparalleled phase of peace, harmony, and development in the last decade. Gujarat is committed to march forward on this path only.<sup>44</sup>

As sociologist Shiv Vishwanathan has pointed out, development has become the pillar of a new discourse on secularism: 'Secular-speak is always in the language of economic rationality. Investment can be calculated, so it is rational. Anything outside this is subjective, ethnic and irrational.'<sup>45</sup> The political connotation of subnational arguments has thus become an element in legitimising the politics of exclusion in the name of progress and development.

### Acknowledgements

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### Notes

- 1 I Hirway, 'Dynamics of development in Gujarat; some issues', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 26 August–2 September 2000, p 3111. See also D Mahadevia, 'Interventions in development: a shift towards a model of exclusion', in A Kundu & D Mahadevia (eds), *Poverty and Vulnerability in a Globalising Metropolis: Ahmedabad*, New Delhi: Manak Publications, 2002.
- 2 See, for instance, the documentary *Final Solution* by Rakesh Sharma (2004), in which the director shows long clips of the speeches Modi delivered in rallies during the *Gaurav Yatra*.
- 3 'Narendra Modi's speech at Vibrant Gujarat', at <http://ibnlive.in.com/news/narendra-modis-speech-at-vibrant-gujarat-2011/140214-53.html>, accessed July 2011.

- 4 RD King, *Nehru and the Language Politics of India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997; and S Nag, 'Multiplication of nations? Political economy of sub-nationalism in India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 17–24 July 1993.
- 5 The rise of Hindu extremism in Gujarat is a well researched theme. See O Shani, *Communalism, Caste and Hindu Nationalism: The Violence in Gujarat*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007; A Yagnik and S Sheth, *The Shaping of Modern Gujarat: Plurality, Hindutva and Beyond*, New Delhi: Penguin, 2005; A Yagnik and S Sheth, *Ahmedabad, from Royal City to Megacity*, New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2011; A Nandy, S Trivedy, S Mayaram and A Yagnik, *Creating a Nationality: the Ramjanmabhumi Movement and Fear of the Self*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995; G Shah, 'Caste, Hindutva and Hinduness', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 13 April 2002; J Breman, *The Making and Unmaking of an Industrial Working Class; Sliding Down the Labour Hierarchy in Ahmedabad, India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004; H Spodek, 'In the Hindutva laboratory: pogroms and politics in Gujarat, 2002', *Modern Asian Studies*, 44(2), 2010. However, few authors have sought to analyse the cultural effects of a political rhetoric combining religious and economic propaganda. This article aims to fill this gap within the debate over identity politics and neoliberal reforms in present-day Gujarat.
- 6 Mahadevia, 'Interventions in development', p 80 ff, 120 ff.
- 7 In the 1920 session in Nagpur, the Congress had adopted the linguistic principle to organise its internal structure and, in the 1945–46 elections, the party's electoral manifesto included the objective of redrawing the political map of India along linguistic lines. This notwithstanding, Prime Minister Nehru, fearing the divisive potential of politics based on language, started favouring the non-linguistic option. See 'States merger proposal', *Economic Weekly*, January 1956.
- 8 TB Hansen, *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999, p 41 ff.
- 9 My reconstruction of the events is based mainly on the autobiographical accounts of two leaders of the then Maha Gujarat Janata Parishad, Brhamkumar Bhatt and Indulal Yagnik. The events referred to by these authors, and their interpretation, have been cross-checked with newspaper articles from the *Times of India* (Bombay edition), and the *Economic Weekly*. B Bhatt, *Lé Ké Rahemgé Mahagujarat* (in Gujarati), Ahmedabad: Dasharat Gandhi, Sarangpur, 1987; and Yagnik, *Atmakatha*.
- 10 TB Hansen, *Wages of Violence: Naming and Identity in Postcolonial Bombay*, Princeton NJ: Woodstock; Princeton University Press 2002, p 42.
- 11 'Opportunist solution' (editorial), *Economic Weekly*, 11 August 1956.
- 12 A Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002, p 249.
- 13 Hirway, 'Dynamics of development in Gujarat', p 3110.
- 14 M Nussbaum, *The Clash Within: Democracy, Religious Violence, and India's Future*, New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007, pp 133–134.
- 15 Shinoda has noted that traditional economic elites and upper class/caste groups, mainly Bania, Brahmin and Patel, had much higher access to state concessions for small-scale industries than did backward groups, Dalits and Adivasis (tribal peoples). T Shinoda, 'Institutional change and entrepreneurial development: SSI sector', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 26 August–2 September 2000.
- 16 F Jameson, 'Globalisation and political strategy', *New Left Review*, 4, 2000, pp 49, 53.
- 17 G Patel, 'Narendra Modi's one-day cricket: what and why?', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 30 November 2002, p 4832.
- 18 F Ibrahim, 'Capitalism, multiculturalism and tolerance: a perspective on "Vibrant Gujarat"', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 25 August 2007, pp 3446–3447.
- 19 Gujarat Chief Minister, Narendra Modi, in a speech to a summit of international investors, defined vegetarianism as the 'main strength' of Gujarati people, and a 'native' feature of the Gujarati culture. Modi, 'Speech delivered to the Vibrant Gujarat Global Investors Summit', 2 October 2003, at <http://www.gujaratindia.com/media/media4.htm>, accessed 14 January 2009.
- 20 KN Raval, 'Law and order in Ahmedabad', paper presented at the seminar 'Is Ahmedabad Dying?', Centre for Environmental Planning and Technology and Gujarat Institute of Civil Engineers and Architects, Ahmedabad, 1987, p XIV. The argument about girls moving about safely in the city in the evenings has become a recurrent *topos* in middle class narratives about the city, which people from higher social groups often presented to me as proof of its 'modern' character.
- 21 V Joshi, 'Cultural context of development', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 26 August–2 September 2000, p 3165.
- 22 Hirway, 'Dynamics of development in Gujarat', p 3106.
- 23 Interview with Ashok Bhatt, Member of the BJP, May 2008.
- 24 N Sud, 'The Nano and good governance in Gujarat', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 13 December 2008, p 13.



- 25 For a presentation of the initiative, see the official website at <http://www.vibrantgujarat.com/>.
- 26 N Modi, 'Speech delivered to the Vibrant Gujarat Global Investors Summit', 28 September 2003, at <http://www.gujaratindia.com/media/media4.htm>, accessed 14 January 2009, p 1.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p 5.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p 1; and Modi, Speech 3 October 2003, p 5.
- 29 Mahadevia, 'Interventions in development', p 80.
- 30 A Nandy, 'Blame the middle class', *Times of India*, 8 January 2008. After this article was published, the Gujarat Branch of the National Council of Civil Liberties filed a case against the author charging him with exciting communal feelings and tensions in the state.
- 31 Interview with Ashok Bhatt, May 2008, emphasis added.
- 32 M Chatterjee & M Shah, *Organising Street Vendors: SEWA's Experience in Ahmedabad City*, Ahmedabad: Self Employed Women's Association, 1997.
- 33 H Spodek, 'In the Hindutva laboratory', p 33.
- 34 A Prakash, 'Re-imagination of the state and Gujarat's electoral verdict', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 19 April 2003, pp 1602–1609.
- 35 Particularly since 2004, when the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance gained power in the central government.
- 36 For detailed accounts of the pogrom, see S Varadarajan, *Gujarat, the Making of a Tragedy*, New Delhi and New York: Penguin Books, 2002.
- 37 'Gaurav Yatra: Phase IV commences from Saturday', *Indian Express*, 4 October 2002.
- 38 N Modi, addressing a meeting during the *Gaurav Yatra*. The meeting was recorded and reported in Sharma, *Final Solution*.
- 39 See, for instance, *Communalism Combat*, special Issue, March–April 2002, p 110.
- 40 Sharma, *Final Solution*.
- 41 S Ganguly, 'The crisis of Indian secularism', *Journal of Democracy*, 14(4), 2003, p 16.
- 42 For a typical example of the use made by BJP leaders of the concept of secularism, see the interview with LK Advani, 'Advani goes back to future vowing to protect Hindu India', *Indian Express*, 25 November 2004.
- 43 N Sud, 'Constructing and contesting a Gujarati–Hindu Ethno-religious identity through development programmes in an Indian province', *Oxford Development Studies*, 35(2), 2007, p 137ff. See also R Sachar, *Social, Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community of India: A Report*, New Delhi: Prime Minister's High Level Committee, Cabinet Secretariat, Government of India, 2006, pp 149–150.
- 44 *Letter From Gujarat CM Narendra Modi to Citizens*, 13 September 2011, at [http://narendramodi.in/news/news\\_detail/1622](http://narendramodi.in/news/news_detail/1622), accessed September 2011.
- 45 A Yadav, 'The truth behind the stage show', *Tehelka*, 1 October 2011.

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