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It's Amit Shah's Rule in Gujarat, but can he Deliver in 2017?

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The BJP's national president, Amit Shah (left) and the Chief Minister of Gujarat, Vijay Rupani at a public function in Gandhinagar on August 19, 2016. Photo: Vijay Soneji.

*Narendra Modi's exit from Gujarat's State politics has brought into the open fissures and vulnerabilities within the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) that had been brushed under the carpet in the mega-marketing of the Gujarat model. The BJP's only hope today is its all-India president, Amit Shah, who virtually rules the State by proxy, says **Darshan Desai**, Editor of Development News Network.*

When the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) picked Vijay Rupani as the replacement for outgoing Gujarat Chief Minister, Anandiben Patel, there was shock all around. Rupani, who had neither experience nor seniority to justify his elevation, had edged out Nitin Patel, the senior most Minister after Anandiben. Patel's nomination had been seen as a done deal; so much so, he himself assumed he had been finalised for the post and had started giving interviews on his priorities as the new Chief Minister.

Rupani's elevation was a last-minute coup of sorts by the BJP's national president Amit Shah. Nitin Patel measured up by every yardstick. Besides being number two to the outgoing Chief Minister, he was a Patel, an important criterion given that Patels form the backbone of the BJP's support in Gujarat.

Yet in choosing Rupani, a first-time MLA, Shah clearly was sending out a signal. Consider the people he has ousted. The suave Saurabh Patel, the only English-speaking Minister, who had held the crucial portfolios of Industries, Energy, and Finance and was the government's interface with the corporate sector. He was dropped from Rupani's ministry and at a time when the State faces the prestigious biennial Vibrant Gujarat Global Investors Meet, which had established Modi as the most industry-friendly leader in the country. Not to have an English-speaking Minister in a BJP government of Gujarat is decidedly odd but it is apparent that he does not fit into Shah's scheme of things.

Before his elevation, Rupani was chief of the BJP's State unit. That February 2016 appointment too was done at the instance of Shah, and had caused similar surprise. Not just this, Rupani's current replacement in the party, Jitu Vaghani, is also a first-time legislator and is barely known even in the Saurashtra region where he comes from. He is again Shah's choice.

Shah's importance in Gujarat can be gauged from the fact that even at a time when his hands were more than full with the crucial Uttar Pradesh and Punjab assembly elections, his name was being mentioned in political circles as the favourite to succeed Anandiben. Many in the BJP, and even outside, believed that Shah would be Prime Minister Modi's masterstroke in Gujarat.

That did not happen. Nonetheless, today Shah virtually rules Gujarat by proxy, with the State party president, Chief Minister, and the council of ministers, all being his appointees.

Amit Shah, Amit Shah, Amit Shah. There is a veritable consensus that if anyone can pull the BJP out of the present morass and steer it to victory in the 2017 State Assembly elections, it is Amit Shah. It is almost as if the Prime Minister's closest confidant, and the leader of his strategic team, carries a magic wand that he will deploy to turn things around for a demoralised BJP in Gujarat.

Indeed, there is not one thing in the political scenario in Gujarat currently that is in the BJP's favour. Not even mathematics. The Patels, who are the party's key political, social and economic resource, have been ranged against the ruling BJP for the last over a year with their impossible demand for a quota for them under the Other Backward Classes category.

The Patel community, which is the lifeline of the BJP, was singularly responsible for the party's rout in the December 2015 district and taluka panchayat elections. In this election, the Indian National Congress (INC) bagged 23 out of 30 district panchayats and the BJP 8, while the corresponding numbers for the same election in 2010 were: BJP 29 and the INC 2.

In the taluka panchayats, the INC grew from 26 in 2010 to 134 in 2015, while the BJP fell from 150 to 67. When mapped, the rural hinterlands covered by the district and taluka panchayats loosely form around 112 Legislative Assembly constituencies of the total of 182. The remaining 70 seats fall under the 56 urban municipalities and six municipal corporations, most of which the BJP continues to control. Extrapolating from this, it would seem that if an election were held today to the Assembly, the INC would bag 112 seats to the BJP's 70.

The December 2015 local body election results showed a clear rural-urban divide with an edge for the INC. Significantly, even in its urban sweep, the BJP saw its vote-share falling against the INC's growth. The latter's vote share grew from 29.59 per cent in 2010 to 39.59 per cent in 2015, while the BJP's fell from 47.77 per cent to 44.67.

Even in the six municipal corporations, which have been BJP fiefdoms, the INC registered a vote share of 41.12 per cent, up from 33 in 2010 while the BJP's share decreased to 50.13 per cent from 51.68 per cent.

Even as the Patels were agitating, the BJP had a fresh problem on its hands in the form a mammoth Dalit uprising against the party. The revolt came on the back of an attack by *Gau Rakshaks* on a group of cow-skinner Dalits of Una. The video-taped beatings went viral on social media, and the result was an unprecedented revolt by Gujarat-based Dalits who stopped skinning cows. They also took out a huge protest rally from Ahmedabad to Una [covering a distance of about 337 km], and have since found support among Muslims. There have been murmurs among the Other Backward Classes, including the Kshatriyas, ever since the Patels started their agitation demanding a share in the OBC quota. In fact, an OBC, Adivasi Ekta Manch has already taken shape (tribals have 14 per cent reservation) and there is speculation that this might see the return of the powerful KHAM (Kshatriya, Harijan, Adivasi, Muslim) alliance that was the INC's victory formula in the mid-80's.

At the same time, there is scepticism over the ability of the moribund INC set-up with its failed State leadership to reap the benefits of the odds that are stacked against the BJP. Hinting at the ruinous factionalism in the party, a middle-rung INC leader told this writer, "There are in all 182 seats, but in the Congress' case 40 of these get reduced the moment the candidates' list is declared. So the BJP starts its fight for all 182 seats, we for 142." However, he believes that the INC truly has an opportunity this time. He cites several factors. An important one is that the party has always retained a tally of around 50 seats during the last five Assembly elections in the State, right from the first time it lost to the BJP in 1995 till 2012, irrespective of the political climate. Even in the Hindutva wave of 2002, it had bagged 51 seats, followed by 59 in 2007 and 61 in 2012, against 127, 117 and 115 of the BJP. It won the lowest of 45 in 1995, but improved its tally to 53 in 1998.

The biggest plus point for the INC, is of course the absence of Modi from the State. This has brought out all the fissures and wrangling that Modi had suppressed with an iron hand. For the INC, which has been unable to project a leader because of its perennial in-fighting, this is a major advantage, and there is a growing feeling that with some effort, it can fight a strong election against the BJP this time.

The question then is: With so much stacked against the BJP, what is it that Amit Shah can bring to the table? The BJP chief's expertise is election management, from choosing the candidate, planning ground-level strategies down to control of polling booths, he has been the man behind Modi's massive victories. Shah has been credited with an ability to outthink and outmanoeuvre the opposition even in the middle of an election, and that is one reason nobody is ruling out a BJP victory in this election.

To what extent Shah, who now has national responsibilities, can deploy his skills in Gujarat is still uncertain. It is known that when there is little left for the BJP to do in Gujarat, it plays the Hindutva card – and to guaranteed success.

However, this time, there is no Godhra or post-Godhra on the back of which Narendra Modi carved out the 2002 victory and from there to many successive wins and finally to Prime Minister. Modi knows that for Hindutva to work, it is best dressed up as cultural nationalism. The BJP has adopted this stratagem nationally ahead of the upcoming round of crucial Assembly elections. The idea is to divide the country into nationalists and anti-nationalists so that cutting across castes, people line up on the side of nationalism.

It is to take this idea forward that the BJP has come up with a plan to equate nationalism with the national flag. The unfurling of an eight-foot wide Tiranga in July and the ongoing Tiranga yatra are steps to awaken nationalist feelings in people.

Shah knows best how to propagate Modi's rhetoric on the ground. As the minister of state for Home in Gujarat he had established a rapport with the police force which, it is no secret, became his personal network in crucial times. Having held as many as 12 crucial portfolios at one time, Shah knows which string to pull and which to let go. He had Home, Law and Justice, Prison, Border Security, Civil Defence, Excise, Transport, Prohibition, Home Guards, Gram Rakshak Dal, Police Housing, and Legislative and Parliamentary Affairs under him. All this expertise comes in handy when chalking out grassroots electoral strategy and integrating that with Hindutva.

Amit Shah can reach where others in the BJP cannot and, so despite the heavy odds, the BJP sees him to be the one to steer it through Gujarat election -2017.

(With 28 years as a journalist, Darshan Desai has worked in various capacities in The Indian Express, Outlook and The Hindu in Gujarat, as resident editor for The Indian Express in Lucknow and associate editor, Tehelka and the Indo-Asian News Service (IANS) in Delhi. He contributes to the thewire.in, scroll.in, firstpost.com, catchnews.com, The Economic and Political Weekly, The Caravan, Down To Earth and IANSfrom Gujarat.)

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