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Divided they stand in Modi's land

By **AMANDA HODGE**

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THE doorway to slain Gujarat MP Ehsan Jafri's house is a tangled riot of perfume and colour, with fallen purple bougainvillea leaves teetering on a sea of wild mint and basil.

Inside there is only crumbling bricks and mortar.

All traces of the family that lived in this corner of prosperous Ahmedabad, and died on February 28, 2002, alongside dozens of Muslim neighbours, was hacked and burned in a few hours of murderous insanity or has since been looted.

Like the rest of the Gulbarg Society estate, the Jafri house is a reminder of a stain that cannot be wiped from the political slate of Gujarat's chief minister, Narendra Modi, no matter how great his success or devoted his following.

"This is Modi's development," says Kasambhai Alamnoor, an angry old man in crumpled safari suit, as he wades through weeds to his dead brother's ruined home.

He lost 19 family members to a Hindu mob that day - his wife, his mother, two children, two brothers, their wives, children and extended family.

The weeks-long Gujarat pogroms of 2002 were sparked by the deaths of 58 Hindu pilgrims in a train fire some said was deliberately lit by Muslims, though two probes concluded it was an accident in a carriage combustion heater.

More than 1000 people, mostly Muslim, died in the ensuing frenzied violence that Modi and his government have been accused of doing little to stop.

Sixty-nine people died in or around Jafri's home, despite the Congress MP's phone

appeals to police and authorities - including the chief minister - for protection.

"Modi wouldn't stop the riots, he couldn't protect this small community. How can he rule a country like India?" asks Alamnoor.

It is a question millions of Indians are debating as Modi, who for 11 years has run India's most business-friendly government even as he stands accused of subjugating Muslims for political gain, makes a determined tilt at the prime minister's residence.

Every major poll puts Modi and his Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party ahead in next year's national elections as voters turn away from the Congress Party, the traditional champion of secular India.

His record of economic growth is winning legions of supporters concerned at the government's failure to arrest the country's flagging growth rate.

Though he has faced persistent accusations of failing to deliver equally for Gujarat's Muslim population, figures from a 2011 national poverty survey suggest they are now also benefiting from development there.

Some economists have questioned the newer figures, saying they show such a spectacular reduction in poverty across India that they beggar belief.

One tells Inquirer: "It's fair to say that Gujarat has been among the better performing states in the last 10 years, but to describe it as a stellar performer is an exaggeration. Gujarat has been a top-tier industrial state for a long time, but it has always lagged on social indicators (health, poverty, education)."

Modi's reputation is buoyed by support from some of India's most powerful corporate titans, including industrialist Ratan Tata, who relocated his Tata Nano car factory to Gujarat in 2009.

Yet the main engine behind his prime ministerial push is not the corporate sector.

It is India's extremist Hindu nationalists, including the right-wing paramilitary Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and Bajrang Dal youth movement that played a bloody role in the

2002 riots and lists among its goals the protection of Hinduism from Muslim demographic growth.

Modi's long association with such groups, and his aggressive championing of the so-called Hindutva politics of Hindu primacy, has caused deep unease - and not only among India's 200 million Muslims.

Notwithstanding the political momentum behind the Gujarat politician, there are Indians who fear a Modi PM would threaten the constitutional foundation of secular, independent India. Modi - son of a lower caste chai wallah - is dividing India in a way this sprawling pluralist nation has not seen in decades.

THE uneasy border between Ahmedabad's middle-class Hindu Vejalpur and Muslim Juhapura enclaves is known among locals as the West Bank.

A wall runs the length of these neighbouring suburbs, a towering bifurcation topped with barbed wire in some areas, buttressed elsewhere by a moat of filthy water and garbage. It is a jolting reminder of the religious apartheid that has defined this city - and Modi's political career - since the 2002 riots forced Gujarati Muslims and Hindus to flee into homogenous enclaves.

On the Hindu side are new apartment blocks, sealed roads and footpaths. On the Muslim side, low-rise shanties line the goat-tracks of India's largest Muslim ghetto.

"This is the real Gujarat; no services, no water in the tap," says Arif Fauzi, a former commando with the paramilitary Central Reserve Police Force, of Juhapura. "Look at our community and then look at the Hindu community. It is the Line of Control."

At the end of another rutted road is the coeducational Crescent School Asif Khan Pathan built six years ago to meet the needs of his expanded suburb. He cannot remember a time when Ahmedabad was not segregated - the city began to seriously divide after riots in 1969 - but says apartheid has never been greater.

"It's not really possible to live in mixed suburbs any more," he says. Hindus face pressure not to rent or sell to Muslims. "Every side of (Muslim) society now lives here: the poor, huge numbers of middle class and very wealthy also."

Pathan shrugs off Modi's much-lauded "Vibrant Gujarat" model.

"When I look around my area I don't see progress. When I was growing up in Gujarat I remember good roads and businesses," he says. "Gujaratis are entrepreneurial by birth."

Modi and his team vigorously defend his economic record and the inclusive nature of his state's development as proof he will govern for all. At a rally in the election battleground state of Bihar recently he told supporters Hindus and Muslims should fight poverty and not each other.

The speech was interpreted as a shift from his Hindutva narrative, which helped sweep him to a two-thirds majority election victory in the wake of the riots.

In truth Modi's rhetoric took a conciliatory turn in 2011 after a Special Investigation Team ruled he had no case to answer for the murder of Ehsan Jafri, despite differing legal opinion that his decision to allow Hindu activists to display the bodies of Godhra train victims in central Ahmedabad incited the riots.

The chief minister celebrated his exoneration with fasts for harmony across the state and invited Qutubuddin Ansari to join him to prove Gujarat had put its communal troubles behind it.

The now 40-year-old Muslim tailor became the unwitting face of the riots after a photographer captured the moment he stepped on to his balcony - revealing himself to a Hindu mob below - and pressed his hands together in a desperate plea to a passing police convoy.

Time has done little to ease the trauma of that day; he cries as he describes rioters laughing while they looted and burned.

The prospect of a publicity stunt with Modi was unappealing. He declined this offer and another. "Hindus are happy because he has suppressed the Muslims, who now accept him only out of fear," he says.

Modi's recent wooing of Muslims acknowledges that to conquer New Delhi he must win the support of a constituency that largely loathes and fears him. Though some Muslim

organisations have softened, others are determined to thwart his ambitions. Jamaat-e-Islami Hind, a cultural organisation with offices across India, is even developing a Muslim how-to-vote guide to block Modi from power.

The group's Gujarat president Shakeel Ahmad - a long-time advocate for riot victims - insists a Modi-led central government is "fraught with dangers for Muslims and the larger interests of this country".

Ahmad's family has suffered for his outspokenness. In 2003 his son Harith, a volunteer in riot refugee camps, was arrested and jailed for six years for conspiracy to murder two Modi government politicians, who have since themselves been convicted and jailed for inciting mob violence.

"Despite Modi we're trying to live peacefully in Gujarat, but life isn't easy for us, for our children, for our businessmen," says Ahmad.

"There are police stations on every corner," he says, but no banks or government hospitals, few government schools. In fact, services are coming to older, crowded Muslim suburbs, though his lament is repeated across Ahmedabad, and Zafar Sareshwala has heard enough.

The former London-based investment banker, who runs three BMW dealerships, was once an enemy of the BJP and of Modi, whom he vowed to take to the International Court of Justice for his alleged role in the riots.

A year later he decided engagement was a better strategy and emerged from a meeting with Modi as his biggest Muslim supporter. Sareshwala has withstood withering criticism for allegedly switching sides for personal gain. But in his central Ahmedabad showroom he says it is time for Muslims to "come out from behind their victim mentality".

"I'm not saying everything is El Dorado here. What I'm saying is there was 100 tonnes of dirt and we have been able to remove 40 tonnes. In the 1990s people like me with a beard, or a woman in a burka, would not dare walk on this road. Now in any of these malls there are places for Namaz (prayers)."

He accuses Modi's critics of selective memory loss.

Gujarat has a history of caste and communal riots under previous Congress state governments, dating back to 1969 when many hundreds of Muslims died.

Sareshwala's own family lost businesses and homes several times over.

He says Modi has a large following among poor Gujarati Muslims who have benefited from a riot-free decade, and that most Muslims would have no problem if he became PM, even if they are scared to admit it.

"Hindus and Muslims have the same issues: they want education, they want to come out of poverty. Muslims want honest government and so do Hindus," he says.

Though Gujarat's political stability has come at great cost to the Muslim community, even Modi's critics will concede Muslims have benefited from the collective good of strong government.

Raheel Dhattiwala, an Oxford-educated sociologist who has studied the cause and effect of the 2002 riots, cites the current multi-million-dollar Ahmedabad riverfront development.

To redevelop the area, 19,000 families - mostly Muslim - had to be relocated from a miserable slum to new housing. The project has been criticised for driving the poor to the city's fringes, but Dhattiwala says many are happy just to have a home.

Of greater concern is the segregation, which reinforces inter-religious bigotry.

In 2008 Dhattiwala brought together unsuspecting Gujarati Hindu and Muslim college students in theatre workshops to research the "contact hypothesis".

The theory is that the deepest prejudices are diminished through social engagement - a supposition similar to the logic behind Sareshwala's volte-face. Although most of the students inevitably conquered their prejudices, the misconceptions were alarming.

"I remember one Hindu girl asking, 'Why do you Muslims kill and eat your children?' She said she learned it from her school teachers," Dhattiwala says.

Many Muslim students were convinced all Hindus wanted them dead.

Alas, the project was short-lived, though its findings could make instructive reading for Indian voters facing a potentially nation-changing choice.