

WORLD

In city of temples, he's hero and villain

VARANASI, INDIA

Indian leader's nationalism clashes with his economic program for constituency

BY MUJIB MASHAL

It was 4 a.m. at the Yadav family home down a narrow lane in Varanasi, the constituency of the Indian prime minister, Narendra Modi. Vijay Yadav, 30, cut buns and toasted them one by one on a gas stove with the help of his mother, Kamla Devi.

Mr. Yadav is a staunch supporter of Mr. Modi, and the snacks were for about 100 observers at election counting stations on Thursday for what would turn out to be a landslide victory for Mr. Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party — both strong proponents of Hindu nationalism in a country that is roughly 15 percent Muslim.

The Yadav family's roadside tea stall — which his father, a recent Modi convert, has been running for decades — is decorated with several fading pictures of Mr. Modi, including a couple on the refrigerator beneath icons of Hindu deities. The store's sign also bears the prime minister's nickname: NaMo Tea Stall.

"It took me five years to change my father to support the party and Modi, but my mother always supported," Vijay Yadav said, as he wiped away sweat with one hand and toasted a bun with the other. "Our whole family campaigned for Modi. We closed the tea stall for 15 days."

Five years ago, when Mr. Modi made formal his longtime ambition of leading India, he chose as his stage and constituency Varanasi, a city of temples and gods. On Thursday, Mr. Modi was re-elected to that seat, with a margin of nearly half a million votes. His party's resounding nationwide victory means the powerful and divisive prime minister will lead India for another five years.

Mr. Modi is a self-made man, having risen from modest beginnings through his party's Hindu nationalist wing to become the longest-serving chief minister of Gujarat, one of India's largest states. There, he was known for a blend of business-friendly policies that sped develop-



MONEY SHARMA/AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE — GETTY IMAGES

India's powerful and divisive prime minister, Narendra Modi, left, celebrating his re-election in New Delhi on Thursday.

ment and the promotion of Hindu nationalist ideology. Varanasi, an ancient city on the banks of the sacred Ganges River, offered the perfect backdrop to take that mix to the national level. Millions of visitors arrive every year — for pilgrimages, tourism or Moksha, a Hindu belief that the souls of those who are cremated on a funeral pyre by the sacred river will be free from the cycle of reincarnation. To bathe in the river is to wash away one's sins.

Mr. Modi framed his decision to stand for election in Varanasi as a religious calling, intertwining his name with the holy place. If he made progress in modernizing the city, he would receive positive word of mouth from visitors.

"I feel neither that anybody sent me nor that have I come on my own. It is Maa Ganga who has called me," Mr. Modi said, referring to the river as Mother Ganges.

Mr. Modi's mix of chauvinism and de-

velopment has brought him a solid bloc of Hindu votes at the national level that makes him seem infallible, even when his party is clearly struggling. The party has flaws, many say. But Mr. Modi?

"He doesn't even give love to his own family, because then what is the difference between him and the rest of the politicians," Vijay Yadav said. "It should be like this, leaving everything behind for the country."

It is clear that Mr. Modi has made his mark on Varanasi, a hugely challenging place for development because of the traffic that chokes its narrow streets almost around the clock. Projects to build roads and improve the delivery of electricity and cooking gas were completed swiftly.

"People go on for 24 hours. Working here is impossible," said Ram Gopal Mohale, a former mayor. "Every month there is a festival here, hundreds of thousands of people. We only get to

work for four hours a day. There are prayers from 3 a.m. to 11 p.m., and the cremation pyres go on for 24 hours."

Mr. Modi's cult of personality has grown so much that his followers in Gujarat have built a temple in his name, complete with a statue of the prime minister. A retired engineer in Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state, which includes Varanasi, has said he is raising money for a second Modi temple.

Mr. Yadav, who seems equally devoted to Mr. Modi, keeps large photographs of the prime minister at his home, in addition to the poster at his tea stall.

"When I see them, it gives me inspiration," he said.

But Mr. Modi's blend of development and Hindu nationalism — clearly aimed at a larger national audience — has often been unsettling in Varanasi.

In some neighborhoods he has re-



REBECCA CONWAY FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Families were moved and temples razed in Varanasi, India, to make way for a project.

placed dangerous overhead electric wires with underground cables, but he has exposed deep communal tensions.

Mr. Modi has also started a cruise on the Ganges so tourists can take air-conditioned rides. But boatmen who opposed the new cruise worry that their way of life, hundreds of years old, is now at risk.

Perhaps the most divisive project has been the construction of a corridor from the Kashi Vishwanath temple down to the Ganges. Hundreds of families had to be moved from the area and their homes razed, alienating Hindus and Muslims alike.

"People are coming from all over the world here for salvation, but we are being forced to leave," said Daya Shankar Srivastava, who runs a clothing shop in one of the few buildings that remain in the area.

Hindu leaders complain that many smaller temples were destroyed to make Mr. Modi's dream project happen. Muslim leaders worry because Vishwanath shares a wall with a mosque that feels increasingly vulnerable to the temple's expansion.

Swami Avimukteshwaranand, the head of Sri Vidya Math, a Hindu school in Varanasi, compared the razing of temples to build the Vishwanath corridor to the smashing of Hindu icons by Muslim emperors. When challenged on why Mr. Modi, a Hindu, would destroy temples, the swami lost his temper.

"Stop," he screamed, in front of an au-

dience of his followers and a smartphone that appeared to be broadcasting him live. "Does a Hindu destroy temples? Does a Hindu destroy icons? He is not Hindu. He cannot be Hindu."

S.M. Yasin, the general secretary of the local mosque association, said the encroachment on the mosque grounds and other instigations over the past five years have nearly erupted into bloody clashes on several occasions.

A security force of about 1,000 troops helps keep the peace, he said. Mr. Yasin said that Hindus and Muslims had long lived peacefully in Varanasi, but that Mr. Modi's government had broken that trust. "Today, no one is ready to listen," Mr. Yasin said. "If he comes back to power, he is coming with confidence."

For Mr. Yadav, the young devotee, it is Mr. Modi's dedication, and how easily he connects with people, that appeals to him.

He also likes Mr. Modi's embrace of Hindutva, or Hindu nationalism.

As thousands gathered on the steps facing the sacred river for the evening prayer ceremony on Thursday, a large sign with Mr. Modi's "watchman" slogan, projecting himself as the protector of India, floated in front of them in illuminated letters. The air-conditioned cruise boat was docked next to it.

And then, as if choreographed perfectly to Mr. Modi's wishes, the sound of the prayers and the jingles mixed with the fireworks of his victory celebration that lit the sky above the Ganges.