

Punjabi tycoon is Modi's top backer in US

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News

# Modi is his business: meet Gujarat CM's backer in US

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The allegations against the Gujarat CM about the 2002 riots are frivolous, says Chicago businessman Shalabh 'Shalli' Kumar.

He doesn't trust reporters, especially Indian reporters, and wanted to know more about Hindustan Times, as we settled down for a late evening interview. In the dim light of his suite in a tastefully quaint DC Hotel, Shalabh 'Shalli' Kumar looked of an indeterminate age, but was smartly turned out in a dark suit and red tie.

His executive assistant joined us with a quick "namaastey". Satisfied with my pitch about Hindustan Times, Kumar asked, straight off the bat, "Do you know how long I have known (Gujarat chief minister Narendra) Modi?"

I thought to myself "decades".

Kumar, a Chicago businessman, is one of Modi's most influential supporters in the US. He organised the high-profile March visit to Gujarat by three US lawmakers, and the videoconference between Modi and former speaker and one-time presidential hopeful Newt Gingrich.

They must surely go a long way, I reasoned.

"Just two years," he said, closely watching me look surprised.

In 2011, Kumar was trying to get Indian Americans to sign a petition urging the US to cut all aid to Pakistan in the aftermath of killing of Osama bin Laden. But the response was tepid.



Narendra Modi gestures as he walks at the lawns at his residence in Gandhinagar. (Reuters file photo)

"Then a friend suggested 'throw in Modi's name'," Kumar said. He didn't know Modi. But was curious to see how far that would go. It worked, to his continuing surprise. "People queued up to sign the same petition now," Kumar said.

Modi was now a mission for him: to rehabilitate him with the US, which denied him a visa in 2005 for failing to stop riots in Gujarat that killed 790 Muslims and 254 Hindus.

Kumar said he was convinced the case against Modi was political. "I have personally studied the entire case in meticulous depth, and I cannot imagine a more frivolous case than this."

That's the conviction of a faithful, others argued, specially the Coalition Against Genocide, which is spearheading the anti-Modi campaign here in the US.

"We are keeping an eye on him (Kumar) and those trying for a visa for Modi," said Shaikh Ubaid of the Coalition, which can be a formidable foe as the [Obama letters](#) demonstrated.

### **Man from Punjab**

Kumar is from Amritsar. He came to the US to study, at the urging of his father, a civil servant dogged all his life by corruption complaints filed by his wife, a Gandhian. And they remained married through it all, raising four children.

After finishing from the Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago, Kumar stayed on. He is now chairman and CEO of AVG Advanced Technologies, a maker of electronic products. Elder son Vikram Aditya--who has married 2007 Miss India Earth Pooja Chitgopekar--is now moving up the company ranks freeing the senior Kumar for his other passions.

Politics is one of them. He is a Republican, and like all Republicans worships Ronald Reagan and sees a likeness, he said, in his current favourite leader Modi.

### **Visa visit**

Modi's aides have said US visa is not priority for the chief minister himself. But it is to his legion of loyal supporters at home and here. Even BJP president Rajnath Singh.

Kumar first made headlines in India for the delegation of three US lawmakers he took to meet Modi - Aaron Schock, Cathy McMorris Rodgers and Cynthia Lummis.

They ended up inviting the chief minister to the US. They also promised to take care of the small problem standing between Modi and his supporters in the US - a visa.

The tour was mired in controversy over funding. And the state department jumped in -even before the lawmakers could return - saying US Congress doesn't do visas.

Kumar said he didn't understand the point of the controversy. "You know - you have lived here - every one pays for airfare, hotel stay, the lunch or meal at events," he said. Indian reporters didn't get that.

Those on the trip paid for the ride, he said, depending on what they wanted - ride on a chartered plane or commercial flights. "That is standard practice here," he said. True. But it's still not clear who paid for the lawmakers?

Kumar would only say, "More than 50% of the trip's total expenses were subsidised by NIAPPI (National Indian American Public Policy Institute, a Chicago-based think tank he founded with his son, daughter in law and others) in service of Mother India. Not a single dime was paid by anyone in India, let alone Modi. The trip was in full compliance with the very stringent ethics laws of the US Congress."

Offices of the three House representatives have not responded to requests for comment.

But Kumar ploughs on, undeterred.