

MOMENTOUS JOURNEY

Prime Minister Modi's Israel visit marks many significant firsts

WHEN ARIEL SHARON became the first Israeli prime minister to visit India in 2003, Atal Bihari Vajpayee gifted him a set of copper plates given by the local rulers of Kodungallur to Jews who came to trade on the Malabar coast as long back as 379 CE. The message inscribed on the copper plates says that the village of Anjuvannam belongs to the Jews and their descendants "so long as the world or moon exists." But Sharon's Israel had to wait for another 14 years for an Indian prime minister to return the feelings of admiration and friendship. Narendra Modi will notch up several firsts to his credit when he lands in Tel Aviv. He is the first Indian prime minister to visit the Jewish state — the trip marks 25 years of the establishment of diplomatic relations. For the first time, an Indian leader will not visit Palestine alongside. Importantly, Modi has succeeded in divesting India of the last vestiges of its enthusiasm for the Non-Aligned Movement. It's being called "de-hyphenating" the relationship between Delhi and Tel Aviv, with large dollops of pragmatism, a buzzword in the capital, thrown in. But this is not Modi's first visit to Israel — he went there in 2006 as Gujarat chief minister and by all accounts, liked it tremendously.

Much has changed over the last 25 years. While observers cite the impressive jump in defence ties — India became Israel's largest defence client at least a decade ago — which constitute one-fifth of the bilateral \$5 billion trade, the ministry of external affairs has been at great pains to emphasise less seductive areas of cooperation, such as agriculture, sanitation and water resources. The PM's oft-repeated phrase about India being a victim of terror has special resonance in Israel. The BJP and the RSS have always had implicit admiration for the strong-armed manner in which the Jewish state tackles its "Muslim problem"; going public on the "surgical strikes" against Pakistan, it could be argued, was an Israeli thing to do, given that similar exercises undertaken by previous Congress governments were kept firmly in the closet.

Israel returns the favour by giving India equipment that no one else would — including radar and communication equipment and the Phalcon AWACS which required US approval (given in 2003), thereby cementing India-US ties. With 1.25 billion people, Modi's India is definitely a big catch. As PM Modi begins to tweet in Hebrew, a momentous journey begins.