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HINDU NATIONALISM AND POLITICS IN INDIA
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‘Main bhi Godse’. I was sitting in my car at a traffic light in South Delhi and read these three words on a bumper sticker in the rear window of the car in front. Shock jolted me. How was it alright to publicly admire the man responsible for assassinating Mahatma Gandhi? The car turned right at the red light, and so did I, and it stopped next to two policemen. I slowed down and watched a jovial middle-aged man with a red thread on his right wrist and a vermillion tikka on his forehead, get out and speak to the policemen. They laughed as if he had uttered a joke. None of them bothered about the bumper sticker. It was almost as if the policemen didn’t notice it, and the man himself didn’t understand sticker’s grave implications. I had come across others with these views in Varanasi during the run-up to the national elections in 2014 and 2019. The posters in the offices of the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS) and Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) had heroes of the freedom struggle like Bhagat Singh and Sardar Patel but did not carry the pictures of Mahatma Gandhi or Nehru. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) under Narendra Modi won the popular mandate in both these elections, leading many scholars to the conclusion that Hindu nationalism had finally triumphed in Indian politics (Jaffrelot, 2021, Nag, 2014). But is there only one type of Hindu nationalism, and is it indeed a phenomenon only associated with institutional Hindu nationalism, the Sangh Parivar?

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Much of the key scholarship has tended to pit present-day Hindu nationalism of the BJP and RSS and the other members of the Sangh Parivar against the ‘secular nationalism’ of the Congress party. However, Hindu nationalism, in its various meanings and guises, has always been part of politics in India. The political ideas of Hindu nationalism operated within the Congress party too, and many of the subsequent stalwarts of institutional Hindu nationalism (Hindu Mahasabha, Arya Samaj and the RSS) were former congressmen. William Gould (2004, p. 266) highlights the complex and regionally diverse connections between the Congress party members and institutional Hindu nationalism. Concepts of tolerance, diversity, cosmopolitanism, inclusiveness, even secularism were associated with Hinduism and a sense of the ‘Hindu’ in Congress discourses.
From the early nineteenth century onward, we can identify three strands of Hindu nationalism in the political arena: incidental Hindu and inclusionary nationalism, public Hindu and exclusionary nationalism, and public Hindu and inclusionary nationalism.

The members of the Brahmo Samaj in the early nineteenth century were nationalists who happened to be Hindu. They thought that the way forward was to shrug off inequalitarian Hindu mores (the caste system, untouchability, ideas of purity and pollution associated with birth in a caste system). Raja Ram Mohan Roy and others advocated equality and social justice for a modern Indian, and their primary enemy was the caste-bound Hindu system with its archaic practices of widow burning and untouchability, which needed to be reformed first before tackling British rule. They urged the British to reform the laws to penalize such practices and worked at the societal level to spread the message. Nabinchandra Sen (1847–1909), Bipin Chandra Pal (1857–1927) and others publicly flouted caste rules and religious taboos. Bipin Chandra Pal narrates an incident involving lemonade. Since lemonade was produced and sold by Muslims, it was taboo for Hindus to drink it because it could ruin their caste status. But Pal did it anyway and was thrashed by his father. A few weeks later, Pal fell seriously ill, and the doctor suggested lemonade as medicine.

Now to have revenge on my father, I turned my face and resolved amidst a room full of people not to have water touched by a Muslim. My father said that it was alright. There was no ritual restriction on medicine . . . medicine itself is Narayana. After a lot of pampering like this, making a lot of fuss, at last I had the Muslim made lemonade from my father’s own hand.2

Another Brahmosamaji, Rajnarayan Basu said he drank brandy in his college days as an emblem of progress and civilization. He also ate biscuits and sherry as a protest against casteism because the bread and biscuit industry was run by lower castes and by Muslims in Bengal. Brahmosamaj nationalists wanted to create a ‘modern Indian’ by challenging rules of caste and Hindu ritual purity and had an inclusive definition of an Indian.

After the 1857 War of Independence, the scales fell from many Indian eyes, and the second half of the nineteenth century saw two trajectories that combined Hindu-ness with nationalism in different ways. The late nineteenth century saw the second variant of Hindu nationalism – public Hindu and exclusionary nationalism. As Madan (1999) points out, all India Hinduism emerged in the nineteenth century out of a welter of regional religious traditions such as Vaishnavism in the west, Shaivism in the south, and Shaktism in the east. Swami Vivekananda of the Ramakrishna Mutt, Dayanand Saraswati of the Arya Samaj and Congressman Bal Gangadhar Tilak, among others, sought to unite Hindus through appeals to their religious motifs. To rally the Hindus, Vivekananda appealed to a taboo – against eating beef – that all Hindus adhered to (Vivekananda, 1964). This is evident in his response to the question of whether eating meat (which he exhorted all Hindus to do) would include beef. No, said Vivekananda. All Hindus were united on one thing – that they did not eat beef. Why? Because the cow is a sacred animal, and here his discourse links being a Hindu with religion, and with inhabiting the land of India. Cows and buffaloes were slaughtered for meat in abattoirs run by Muslims, so this group became the immediate target of rioters led by the gau-rakshaks (cow-protectors) in the late nineteenth century. Cow protection, anti-beef eating and Ganapati festivals were celebrated to forge a warrior race of Hindus who could be rallied to free ‘Mother India’. Secret revolution-ary clubs and reading groups sprouted in the libraries and schools of Bengal and spread to other provinces. For this cohort the outsiders-conquerors included the British and the Muslims. This
strand linked a public display of Hindu-ness with an exclusionary definition of an Indian; Muslims particularly were excluded from the definition.

The third type of Hindu nationalism – public Hindu and inclusionary nationalism – also emerged in this period and found a home within the Congress party (set up in 1885). A non-revolutionary constitutional path advocated by Congress party stalwarts like Ranade and Gokhale urged Hindus and members of other religions to enter politics and government and change the evil practices of their religion through constitutional means while also adopting notions of equality, justice and freedom. They had a sense of Hindu-ness without subscribing to religious superiority or linking only Hindu-ness with a geographic entity, India. Mohandas Gandhi’s relativistic yet engaged pluralism was a variation on this viewpoint. It was another attempt to create an inclusionary pluralism, in Madan’s (1999) words, a participatory pluralism contingent on intercultural communication, judgment and choice. The goal was to forge an Indian nationalist movement that included other religions against British colonial rule.

The tension between what constituted Hindu-ness, who the enemy was and how one ought to treat non-Hindu Indians, what ought to be tackled first and what ought to be ignored continued all through the freedom struggle and complicated the definitions of Hindu nationalism and the ways it appeared in pre-independence Indian politics.

* South India had a different response to Hindu-ness as compared to Central and North India, and the link between Hindu-ness and Indian nationalism was reformulated in a different way. The non-Brahmin movement gained traction as it used the racial Dravidian motif to challenge Brahmin-Aryan supremacy and practices. A stalwart of the movement, Periyar (EV Ramasamy Naicker), was an atheist who strongly critiqued Hindu religion. He said Hindu religion justified inequality that rose from birth in a caste, its rules (shastras, itihasa and puranas) were put in place to justify such inequality and control the lower castes, and the rules also persuaded the lowest castes (the shudras) to accept their inferiority. Periyar condemned Hindu religion for valorising the Brahmins at the expense of the other castes. He eschewed the term ‘Hindu’ and urged his fellow south Indians to call themselves Dravidian or humanists. As V Geetha and S V Rajadurai (1998) point out, Periyar consistently identified nationalism with political Brahminism and was fiercely critical of nationalism. Even his campaign for a separate Dravidian nation was because of his opposition to caste, to what he called the Brahmin-Bania Indian nation-state and not because he was committed to a romantic ideology of a resistant Dravidian nationalism.

In north India, the Hindu Mahasabha emerged in the form of a Punjab Hindu Sabha in 1909 and an All India Hindu Mahasabha in the United Provinces in 1915, and as a political party in 1939 with V D Savarkar as president. Their goal was to give Hindus a stronger voice in politics and work for electoral representation on the basis of religion (Bapu, 2013). The Hindu Mahasabha was a mirror image of the Muslim League, which had similar goals for Muslims, and both followed exclusionary pathways. But simultaneously, an inclusionary pathway continued to be brokered by many leaders of the Congress party who advocated unified religious opposition to British rule. The line between these pathways was fuzzy, and the Congress party functioned as an umbrella for the varying points of view. William Gould (2004) shows how Hindu nationalism had an important effect on the thinking of more radical and influential Congress leaders in the United Provinces. The party members’ ability to espouse contradictory views shows us the ease with which the notion of a ‘Hindu’ could accommodate a range of meanings, strategies and symbols. Purushottam Das Tandon and Sampurnanand were both considered to be in
the socialist wing in the mid-1930s, but they were supporters of movements which in earlier decades had been associated with Hindu revivalism such as advocacy of sanskritised Hindi. Sampurnanand publicly talked about the consistency between his socialism and a sense of the Hindu nation. Tandon was a patron of the Arya Samaj and based his refutation of ahimsa on a Tilakite Hindu revivalism. After Tilak’s premature death, dominance within the Congress party shifted to Gandhi and an inclusive nationalism. Several congressmen left to form new organizations, and one of them was the founder of the RSS, Dr Keshav Baliram Hedgewar.

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‘The founder, Dr Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, was deeply influenced by Tilak whose thoughts, writings and work held way over Vidarbha and the surrounding regions, home to influential Congress committees,’ writes Sunil Ambekar (2019). As a member of the Congress party, Hedgewar popularized several of Tilak’s initiatives such as linking the Ganapati festival with a celebration of patriotism and Hindu identity, taking a revolutionary oath before Hindu icons, Chhatrapati Shivaji and Samartha Ramdas.4

In Nagpur in central India, the RSS was set up in 1925, which adopted a Hindu nationalism that linked racial and religious identity as Hindus with a geography, India. What set the RSS’s founding ideology apart from others that had also emerged in the 1920s was their ideology – ‘for establishing swarajya, it is necessary to acquire the physical strength of the opponent and then speak the language of peace’ (Ambekar, 2019). On 27 September 1925, on Vijayadashmi, an auspicious day for new beginnings, Hedgewar established the RSS with 25 members. He told Gandhiji that it was not possible to house the RSS within the Congress because their foundational philosophies differed. Congress’s philosophy was purely political, every action was driven by politics and powerplay; the RSS philosophy was volunteerism, an instinctive dedication for an all-round national development (Ambekar, 2019, p. 14). 5 The RSS was banned for a year after Gandhi’s assassination by Nathuram Godse who had joined the RSS in his youth and later became a member of the Hindu Mahasabha.

The RSS’s postulates, Ambekar (2019) points out, were to reshape society into a cultural nation (Rashtriyata), spiritual unity (Ekmata), oneness (samuhikta). Their focus on social revival among Hindus to reconnect with their ancient pasts had a societal ethos – they sought to bring back ancient traditions, languages and practices – and revolutionary rather than political imperatives. Though it shunned politics, its members did not, and were in fact, exhorted to participate actively in all arenas.

Even though it stays away from politics, its shakha and system has produced swayamsevaks who are now in politics and have attained high positions . . . The Sangh’s general line is the RSS will do nothing other than running shakhas but the Swayamsevak will enter every sphere of activity. The swayamsevaks will work in all domains of society – education, politics, economy, security and culture. 

(Ambekar, 2019, p. 27)

This bland statement disguises the political impact of the RSS through its members, the most powerful being Prime Minister Narendra Modi who was a pracharak of the RSS.6 It also masks the fact that the RSS’s core philosophy of Hindutva is the battle cry of the BJP (perceived as the political wing of the Hindu nationalist movement), and that the RSS’s postulates are found in the BJP’s election manifesto promises.
At the dawn of independence on 15 August 1947, the Congress party, which had spearheaded the nationalist movement and had to a large degree absorbed and to some degree, reconciled, divergent political ideas, now carried within it three main intellectual streams with distinct ideas on the shape and form of independent India. Bruce Graham (2007) characterizes these as follows: India as a liberal democratic state with a secular constitution, India as socialist state with collective principles governing social and economic organization, and India as a state that would embody Hindu traditions and values. In this third group, Graham (2007) classifies two types of Hindus: Hindu traditionalists who were essentially backward looking, conservative and justified the hierarchical social order, and Hindu nationalists who were forward looking and wanted to remould Hindu society and the state on corporatist lines. ‘In organized politics, these elements were concentrated in three bodies: . . . a large and influential group of Hindu traditionalists within the Congress party, a mixture of Hindu traditionalists and Hindu nationalists within the Hindu Mahasabha, and a contingent of Hindu nationalists within the RSS’ (Graham, 2007, p. 6).

Among those who championed a Hindu India, some left the Congress party and formed new political outfits. Syama Prasad Mookerjee founded the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS) in 1951 as a political alternative to the Congress party. A former congressman from Bengal, Mookerjee had joined the Hindu Mahasabha in the 1940s but quit it after Gandhi’s assassination and joined Nehru’s cabinet. He resigned from the cabinet over differences with Nehru and established the Jana Sangh. Mookerjee sought RSS and Arya Samaj’s support, but the RSS was silent because it had promised Patel it would function as a cultural organization (Nag, 2014). On Mookerjee’s death in 1954, the party came under RSS control, and Pracharak Deen Dayal Upadhyaya was appointed to run the party.

The electoral fortunes of these ‘Hindu’ parties were put to the test in 1951. In its election manifesto, the Hindu Mahasabha promised to establish a Hindu rashtra, patronize Hindu culture and annul Partition (Jaffrelot, 2000). The Jana Sangh’s election manifesto called for one nation, one culture and the rule of law; the nation would be built on the basis of ‘Bharatiya sanskriti and maryada’, which in practice meant ancient Hindu values. Secularism it dismissed as Muslim appeasement. Both parties wanted an ‘Akhand Bharat’ (undivided India), both opposed the Hindu Code Bill that sought to reform Hindu religious practices, and both also demanded a ban on cow slaughter. Their single-digit performance in the national and assembly elections came as ‘a rude awakening’, and also established the BJS as the main Hindu party (Mukul, 2022). They had expected the call of Akhand Bharat and their opposition to the Hindu Code Bill to resonate with the country’s majority. Instead, it was the Congress party under Nehru who won the mandate.

Nag (2014) points out that the party, influenced by the Arya Samaj, developed a north-Indian bias and promoted Hindi as India’s national language at a time when south India (Madras state) was gripped by anti-Hindi agitators led by Dravidian parties. We saw earlier how Periyar characterized Hindu nationalism as a Brahmin-Bania phenomenon. This north-Indian bias of the BJS carried over to its subsequent avatar as the BJP in 1980 and has continued to dog the party’s poor showing in Tamil Nadu until today. After Upadhyay’s tragic death (he was thrown out of a moving train) in 1968, another RSS pracharak, Atal Bihari Vajpayee took over, with L.K. Advani as his lieutenant. In 1977, the BJS merged with several centre and left parties opposed to the Congress party and Indira Gandhi’s state of emergency. They formed the Janata Party, which stormed to power in the national elections in 1978. But by 1980, the coalition had frayed, and the government fell after BJS members were expelled for having dual membership in the RSS. In its three decades of operation, the BJS was unable to build significant support among the Hindu electorate. Bruce Graham (2007) explains this failure in terms of the
restrictive scope of its founding ideology, limitations of its leadership and organization, failure to build a secure base of social and economic interests, and its inability to find issues that would create support for its particular brand of Hindu nationalism. The continuing dominance of the Congress party in the electoral arena was a key factor in keeping the BJS at the margins.

The BJP was formed in 1980 under Vajpayee who adopted Gandhian socialism as the credo much to the discomfiture of the RSS. In the 1984 parliamentary elections, after a sympathy wave following Indira Gandhi’s assassination wiped out the chances of the other parties and left the BJP with two parliamentary seats, Vajpayee was sidelined and Advani took over. The party returned to its predecessor BJS’s focus, namely linking Indian nationalism with being a Hindu. The dispute over the birthplace of Rama in Ayodhya became the vehicle, and Hindutva became the BJP’s electoral war cry. In 1989, as the Congress party lost the national elections, and its political hegemony began fraying, the Ram temple issue gained traction and helped the BJP carve out electoral gains among Hindu voters in successive elections.

How did Hindu nationalism espoused by BJS’s new avatar, the BJP, come to dominate Indian politics and government? It is a story of constitutional ambiguities about Hindu religion, subsequent court rulings that moved between three imaginaries of Hinduism that allowed for a distinction between Hindu religion and Hindu ideology, and the disenchantment with the Congress party.

*In Secularity and Hinduism’s Imaginaries in India, I highlight three stylized imaginaries of Hinduism as a religion, an ancient order, and as a culture and show how these wove through the Constituent Assembly debates on the role of the new state vis-à-vis religion, and problematize the role of Hinduism in the political and legal arenas. The overlapping and often contradictory pulls of the three imaginaries left their mark on the Indian constitution’s conception of the new state’s relationship with religion. If Hinduism was treated as a religion, how could the state conform to neutrality and separation of state and religion, and still reform unjust social practices within the Hindu caste system? If Hinduism was an ancient order based on the caste hierarchy, how could the state undertake social justice for the lowest castes? And if Hinduism was part of an Indian culture, how could the state bar it from political discourse? The Constituent Assembly members used all three imaginaries to construct the new state’s relationship with religion, and by doing so, peppered the Constitution with many contradictions. Ultimately, the Constitution did not define the terms ‘Hindu’, ‘religion’, ‘secular’ and ‘minorities’, leaving it to the courts and legislative amendments to do so. The contradictions produced by the three imaginaries bedeviled the judiciary’s interpretations of Hinduism, and contrary to the view that apex courts produce moderating effects in the arena of religious freedom, their judgments had unintended and deleterious consequences for religious toleration, and enhanced polarization (Shankar, 2019).

* A vivid picture of how a judgment can have an unintended and polarizing effect is evident in the utilization of the Stainislaus case by the Hindu nationalists. In 1978, a Christian missionary named Reverend Stainislaus challenged the Madhya Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act (passed in 1968) in the Madhya Pradesh High Court. The act prohibited conversion by force, fraud or inducement and prescribed one year’s imprisonment and a fine for those convicted. Stanislaus objected to the act on the grounds that the definition of inducement was overly broad. Losing the case in the High Court, Stainislaus appealed to the Supreme Court, where the case
was heard with another case from Orissa on a similar anti-conversion law. In its verdict, the Supreme Court of India upheld both acts. The Chief Justice, writing for the court, insisted that there was ‘no fundamental right to convert another person to one’s own religion’ because such a right ‘would impinge on the freedom of conscience guaranteed to all citizens of the country alike’ (Stainislaus v. Madhya Pradesh).

Interpreting the judgment as a victory for Hindus (vis-à-vis Christian missionaries), a BJS member (O.P. Tyagi) introduced the Freedom of Religion Bill in the Indian parliament in December 1978 that sought to prohibit conversion from one religion to another by the use of force or inducement or by fraudulent means. This proposal, which was backed not just by the RSS (Jaffrelot 2007, p. 287) but also by the Prime Minister of the ruling coalition, purportedly intended to offer scheduled tribes the ‘protection of the state’ from the missionaries. The language of the bill cited the Supreme Court judgement in the Stainislaus case as supporting the constitutionality of the bill. The prime minister later withdrew his backing because of an agitation by Christian groups and the Minorities Commission, which was established by the government in January 1978 for the regulation of religious and linguistic minority affairs. Christian leaders highlighted the violence that comparable legislation had given rise to in Arunachal Pradesh in northeast India. The Stainislaus judgement continued to cast a long shadow in subsequent years and has given Hindu nationalists new ways to express and legitimize their long-standing opposition to conversion in the language of religious freedom and judicial precedents.

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In 1996, two cases (henceforth Hindutva Case) were heard together by the Supreme Court of India on whether the use of the term ‘Hindutva’ in election speeches by the winning candidates was illegal because it pertained to religion, and contravened a law that forbade the use of religious rhetoric in election speeches. The two politicians (Prabhoo and Joshi) argued that the concept of Hindutva was cultural and nationalistic rather than religious; their opponents said the concept pertained to Hindu religion. Citing the difficulty of defining a Hindu, the then Chief Justice of India, J.S. Verma concluded that the terms ‘Hindutva’ and ‘Hinduism’ could not be equated with narrow fundamentalist religious bigotry.

Ordinarily, Hindutva is understood as a way of life or a state of mind and it is not to be equated with, or understood as religious Hindu fundamentalism. The word ‘Hindutva’ is used and understood as a synonym of ‘Indianisation’, i.e. the development of uniform culture by obliterating the differences between all the cultures coexisting in the country . . . .

(Prabhoo v. Kunte, 1996, paragraph 40)

The answer to whether the use of the word ‘Hindutva’ in an election speech is religious or not depends on the context, said the judgment. The mere word itself ought not to be narrowly construed as a religious term ‘unless the context of a speech indicates a contrary meaning or use’. In the abstract, ‘these terms are indicative more of a way of life of the Indian people and are not confined merely to describe persons practicing the Hindu religion as a faith’ (Prabhoo v. Kunte, 1996, paragraph 43). In the case of Prabhoo, the court ruled that the speeches amounted to corrupt practices under the act, while in Joshi, it did not. In the Joshi case, the court equated Hinduism (which it saw as ‘Indianisation’ or culture) with Hindutva, which was deemed to be non-religious nationalist rhetoric.
None of the earlier judgments had equated ‘Hindutva’ with ‘Hinduism’, but this one did so and likened both with ‘a way of life’. The judgment was criticised by several scholars for giving legitimacy to Hindu nationalist ideology, with the upshot being Hindutva = Hinduism = way of life and not a religion = Indianisation = development of a uniform culture, even if the judges themselves may not have meant to say so (Nauriya, 1996). Not surprisingly, the Hindu Right viewed the ruling as giving judicial imprimatur to ‘Hindutva’ as an ideology that expressed nationalism and Indianness rather than a religion, and legitimizing its use in politics. The irony was that in a previous judgment (Bommai v. Union of India), the Supreme Court recognized the potential of ‘Hindutva’ as a divisive religious mobilizing concept. In Bommai, the court reviewed the constitutionality of dismissing BJP-led state (sub-regional) governments for participating in unsecular activities. The dismissal came in the wake of riots between Hindus and Muslims in these states following the destruction of an ancient mosque in Ayodhya in northern India. The court ruled that a state government pursuing an unsecular policy was acting contrary to the constitutional mandate and could be dismissed under Article 356. ‘Unsecular’ activities included a political party’s ideological plank (in this case BJP’s Hindutva) in elections that had the effect of eroding the secular philosophy of the Constitution. The court said:

If a political party espousing a particular religion comes to power, that religion tends to become, in practice, the official religion. All other religions come to acquire a secondary status, at any rate, a less favorable position . . . under our Constitution, no party or organization can simultaneously be a political and a religious party. It has to be either. (Bommai v. Union of India, 1994, p. 236)

The Hindutva and Bommai judgements resulted in a paradox: the BJP was implicitly granted recognition as a political party (Hindutva judgement) and condemned as a religious party (Bommai judgement), though the court in Bommai maintained that no party could be a religious and a political party. In the court’s notion that in abstract terms Hindutva construed a way of life of Indian people, we see a Hindu nationalism that connected Hindu with a racial and geographic identity mingle with the strand of Hindu-ness that had an inclusive sense of an Indian.

While the courts were grappling with the concept of Hindutva, other political factors gave electoral impetus to Hindu nationalist rhetoric. The Congress party’s steady decline, which began in earnest with Indira Gandhi’s death, had opened up the electoral space. Indira Gandhi had successfully portrayed herself as a religious Hindu and publicly worshipped in temples and wore a rudraksha, but she also reached out to non-Hindus with her welfare promises of food, shelter and clothing for the poor. Her son, Rajiv Gandhi, who won a huge mandate after her assassination, spoke of economic resurgence, but his political naivety frittered away the mandate. In this vacuum, the BJP led by L.K. Advani grew its Hindu vote-base with a movement to build a Ram temple in Ayodhya (in northern India) in the precinct of the Babri Masjid mosque. In the 1989 elections, the BJP got 85 seats, up from 2 seats in 1984. Emboldened, the BJP and its fellow Sangh Parivar members matched their rhetoric with action in 1992 when the dome of the Babri Masjid was broken during a rally presided over by Advani and other top leaders. Looking back, it was a watershed moment. The physical destruction of a mosque, the placement of Ram’s idol, the popularity of TV series based on the Ramayana, the use of those TV actors as candidates – all created the aura around the BJP of being the party that would unite Hindus and make them proud Indians (Nag, 2014). The continuing presence of traditionalist or
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‘soft’ Hindus in the ruling Congress party, a presence that dates back to the pre-independence era, helped the BJP. In the Babri Masjid demolition, the central government’s inaction was seen as the failure of Prime Minister Narasimha Rao who was seen as a soft Hindu by some. Though Rao pointed to the constitutional difficulties of sending in central forces when the BJP-led state government had not formally asked for it, few bought that argument.

* By the late 1990s, the Ayodhya issue had run its course. Vajpayee, who had served as the Prime Minister for 13 days in 1996, and then as the head of the National Democratic Alliance coalition government from 1998 to 2004, had retired. With Advani in his 80s, the question was who would lead the BJP and whether Hindutva would be the centrepiece of its electoral strategy. The party under Advani had lost to the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition (led by Sonia Gandhi who appointed Manmohan Singh as the Prime Minister) in 2004, and again in 2009.15

In 2014, RSS pracharak Narendra Modi, the three-time Chief Minister of Gujarat, emerged as a strong candidate to challenge Advani. With the RSS’s backing, he became the BJP’s prime-ministerial candidate. The 2014 election rhetoric of the BJP revolved around development. ‘We will create a Gujarat for you in other parts of India’ – that was the promise in the films shown by BJP electioneers to villagers in north and central India. The stridency of the racial and religious motifs of Hindutva took a back seat to a softer Hindu-ness in its election rhetoric. The anti-incumbency factor, and voter distaste with the blatant corruption and poor governance of the Manmohan Singh–led UPA added to the potent discontent. For the first time in its existence, the BJP won 282 seats with 31% of the vote. The Congress party faced its worst-ever defeat, winning just 44 of the parliamentary 543 seats.

The BJP’s victory in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections came from five factors – Modi’s leadership and the absence of a strong candidate among the BJP’s opponents, the BJP’s success in convincing the electorate that it could deliver the so-called Gujarat model of good governance and development, voter dismaya with corruption in the previous UPA government, the BJP’s success in attracting new castes and groups, and the deep polarization of the Hindu-Muslim vote (Sardesai et al., 2014). The religious polarization angle is pertinent to our analysis and requires more scrutiny. The National Election Studies survey conducted by CSDS reveals that there was greater convergence in the voting behaviour of groups within the Hindu community, with 36% of all Hindus backing the BJP. Even during the communally charged decade of the 1990s, the BJP had failed to attract so many Hindu voters. ‘While the gap between Hindu support for the BJP and Muslim support for Congress was in double digits in most elections between 1996 and 2009 (except 1998), in 2014 it reduced to just minus two percentage points thus indicating strong polarization’ (Sardesai et al., 2014, p. 29). In central and western India, BJP and its allies got more than 60% of the Hindu vote, and the Congress performed very well with Muslims. Despite the high fragmentation of votes in northern India, the BJP managed to get 45% of the Hindu vote.16

In 2019, the Modi-led BJP improved on its previous electoral performance and won 303 seats with 37.3% of the vote, while the Congress party managed to win only 53 seats, losing its position as the main opposition party. In these elections, the BJP’s rhetoric shifted the focus away from the high unemployment and rural distress to questions of national security. Modi tapped into the 130 million youth voters, who though disappointed with the lack of jobs, still chose Modi because there was no alternative. The Congress party failed to project Rahul Gandhi as a viable opponent to Modi.
Political commentators have pointed out several reasons for the BJP’s rise: the decline of the Congress party and the Left parties, the strategic alliances of the BJP with caste groups, targeting the Congress party as an appeaser of Muslims and playing up Hindu fears of marginalization, and its promise to bring development and economic growth. All agree that one cannot talk about the BJP’s victory without addressing the Modi factor. Jaffrelot (2021) calls Modi’s victory the third age of Indian democracy marked by the rise of populist politics, ‘as promises made to the poor during election campaigns did not translate into policies’. He argues that BJP’s Hindu nationalist ideology has ushered in the era of an ethnic democracy informed by the promotion of a Hindu definition of the nation in opposition to the secularism enshrined in the Constitution. ‘The Modi government has promoted a new form of authoritarianism, weakened state institutions, distorted the electoral process and targeted minorities in an official and direct way and is now transitioning from a de facto Hindu Rashtra to an authoritarian Hindu Raj’ (Jaffrelot, 2021, p. 6).

Is BJP’s victory in two successive recent elections testimony to the dominance of Hindu nationalist sentiments among the Indian electorate? The Hindu CSDS-Lokniti Post-Poll Survey data found that the BJP increased its vote-share from 31% in 2014 to 37.4% in 2019, and this rise is from an increase in the Hindu voters’ support (from all castes) for the party, up from 36% in 2014 to 44% in 2019. The survey also revealed that Hindus who felt close to a party were three times more likely to feel close to BJP rather than the Congress. Muslim respondents who felt close to a party were five times more likely to feel close to the Congress.

But did Hindus vote for the BJP because of its brand of Hindu nationalism or because of its welfare policies? That is a trickier question to answer because the survey data are not clear on that issue. The BJP’s manifesto displayed a cafeteria-style set of promises that included its Hindu nationalist agenda, welfare policies and national security, and voters chose the ones they liked and voted for the party.

We get a glimpse of the answer in the Lokniti poll’s question: What was the most important issue for you while voting in this (2019) election? Lack of jobs (10%) and development (13.2%) featured most prominently, while Hindutva, Ayodhya, Pulwama attack, national security, nationalism and terrorism received less than 0.6%.

What the survey data show is that the BJP under Modi has managed to expand its vote-appeal to a larger coalition of castes who include the ‘other backward classes’ (OBCs), and the welfare schemes – houses, toilets and gas connections – of the first Modi government were cited by OBCs (but not scheduled classes [SCs] and scheduled tribes [STs]) as a reason for their vote. Kancha Illiah Shepherd (2021) argues that Modi’s victory came because he declared himself an OBC, appropriated Patel and subtly owned Ambedkar’s legacy, both of whom were neglected by the Congress, which by now, had also alienated the Dalits, Adivasis and OBC. Had he been a Hindutva Brahmin, he would not have won the elections, Illiah says. The point he makes about how Modi upended the hierarchical construct has a basis in the make-up of Modi’s cabinets. They include significant, not token representation of Dalits, Adivasis and OBC in his cabinet, unlike in the previous Congress and BJP coalition governments where the upper castes dominated.

* The Hindu nationalist agenda of the BJP has transformed India’s legal and political map. Within 50 days of coming to power in 2019, the Modi government pushed through some core agendas of its Hindu nationalist sentiments. The Triple Talaq Bill did away with the Muslim male’s religious practice of saying Talaq thrice to divorce a woman. Despite opposition from the
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Congress party and some others, the bill sailed through. Emboldened, the Modi government stunned everyone by scrapping Articles 370 and 35A pertaining to Jammu and Kashmir at one stroke and got these measures passed on the same day with the support of some opposition parties. This is a game changer for the conflict-torn state. Simultaneously, the state has been bifurcated into two Union Territories: Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh. With the Supreme Court verdict on the Ayodhya case that unanimously gave the disputed site to Hindus and ordered the government to set up a trust to build a Ram temple, and allocated five acres of land to the Sunni Waqf Board to build a mosque elsewhere, the BJP fulfilled a key part of its core agenda (Siddiq v. Das).

To understand the type of Hindu nationalism that is operating in public spaces today, we need to return to the complicated relationship between Hinduism and Hindus. Hinduism’s vast corpus contains an eclectic pluralism within (Doniger, 2015; Sen, 1962), and also more cautiously with other religions (Doniger, 2015, Long, 2022). One can agree with scholars that it is more useful to think of Hinduism not as a hotchpotch or a singularity but as a complex variety of sources and the power of the integrations that make up what we call Hinduism (Ghose, 2003).

Elaine M. Fisher (2018) argues that the sectarian religious publics of early modern South Asia provide us with the opportunity to rethink the criteria for a non-Western pluralism, founded not on the prescriptive model of Western civil society but on a historically descriptive account of the role of religion in the public sphere. She points out that Saivite (Shankara’s followers) and Vaishnavite (Ramanuja’s followers) adherents in tenth-century South India wore their sectarian identities on their foreheads and moved about in the public sphere. They were marked citizens or subjects. Pluralism in this context was not the absence of conflict but its effective resolution – a process, she says, that in Hindu early modernity was facilitated not by the removal of religion in public but by its active publicization and by the shared performance of plural religiosities.¹⁸

This public portrayal of a sectarian or religious affiliation (self-marked citizen) had an insularity. Certitude about the truth of one’s belief could lead to clashes with those with other beliefs, but it could also create an indifference to other religions and sects. Insular pluralism is what T.N. Madan (1999) calls mutual indifference disguised as tolerance. Insular pluralism has continued in India after independence; there are no injunctions against wearing one’s religious identity in public spaces such as universities or in government offices. That’s why the headscarf controversy in France and Turkey did not make sense in the Indian context because of this long tradition of functioning as marked publics. However, this insularity too is fraying as seen in the recent hijab controversy in coastal Karnataka where Muslim students were forbidden to wear a headscarf while attending classes in college on grounds that it was not part of the uniform. The BJP government in the state had made uniforms mandatory for students. Religious clashes erupted between Muslim students and Hindu students wearing saffron scarves and chanting the names of Modi and the BJP. In March 2022, the Karnataka High Court ruled that wearing hijab was not an essential religious practice in Islamic faith and upheld the ban. The Sangh Parivar’s brand of Hindu nationalism – public Hindu and exclusionary nationalism – is eroding the dominance of insular pluralism.

* It is indisputable that there is a larger and more vocal presence of an exclusivist Hindu nationalism now. The Hindu consolidation around Modi’s election victory has come with increased religious polarization. The 2019 post-poll Lokniti survey shows that religious minorities voted in large numbers for the National Democratic Alliance, that is, Congress and other
opposition parties. The polarization of voters on Hindu-Muslim lines was most acute in states with high proportions of Muslims, namely Assam, United Provinces, West Bengal and Bihar. At the same time, in state-elections, the BJP’s fortunes have ebbed and flowed. In April 2022, the BJP is ruling in 42% of India, and about 45% of the population. It has not been able to dislodge the regional parties in several states, and apart from Karnataka, the rest of southern India remains out of BJP’s reach where the party is seen as a Hindi-Hindu-Baniya-North-Indian entity.

In conceptual terms, we are seeing in India of the 2020s a breakdown of insular pluralism and a political impetus towards virulent religious polarization. There is a concerted move by a democratically elected government to draw a misleadingly neat circle around Hindu religion and Indian nationality (Jayal, 2021). New amendments to citizenship laws privilege the non-Muslim immigrant, and when applied in conjunction with the government’s stated objective to carry out a compilation of a national register of citizens, carries a grave threat to those Muslims in India who do not possess the documentary evidence of citizenship.

Technology may be a disruptor of these old patterns and create online spaces for these discussions, but it also enhances the ability of powerful groups, particularly the cash-rich political parties with their technology cells, to spread misunderstanding. For now, the BJP-fashioned Hindu nationalism looks likely to continue. The fractured opposition parties, the inability of the Congress party to provide a viable alternative, and the fragmentation of vote-banks as smaller and newer parties like Aam Aadmi Party and Trinamool Congress set their sights on winning elections in other states, looks likely to return Modi and the BJP to power in the next parliamentary elections. If the BJP loses a significant number of seats, and its vote-share falls in the next election, there may be some hope for it to be seen as voter disenchantment with the party’s Hindu nationalism. But if the BJP returns with more votes and seats in the 2024 national elections, the Hindu nationalists will see it as approval for its brand of Hindu nationalism and a Hinduisation of Indian politics. The Indian Constitution’s *Sarva Dharma Sambhava* will become a chimera.

**Notes**

1 The Sangh Parivar refers to the collection of Hindu nationalist political, social, student, cultural and economic organizations affiliated to the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS). These include the RSS, the BJP, Vishva Hindu Parishad, Bajrang Dal, ABVP and Bharatiya Kisan Sangh. It is also often applied to the Shiv Sena party, which shares RSS’s ideology.

2 Translated in an article on a historical overview of the Bengali platter in Sahapedia.

3 When World War II broke out, the Congress governments resigned in protest at India’s forced involvement. The Hindu Mahasabha saw the war as an opportunity to militarise Hindu youth and serve the nation after freedom, and advocated that Hindu youth enlist in the army. They joined the war committees, which had been boycotted by the Congress party, but individual Mahasabha leaders also joined the Quit India movement subsequently.

4 The RSS uniform – khaki shorts – was designed by Hedgewar originally for the volunteers of the Bharat Sevak Samaj he had created for the 1920 Congress Nagpur session (Ambekar, 2019, p. 30).

5 Hedgewar favoured an organization strong and free from frailty (of infighting), with everyone fully devoted to the cause (Ambekar, 2019, p. 9). According to Ambekar, he abhorred the cult of personality around leaders such as Gandhi and saw that even powerful movements such as the Swadeshi movement of Tilak petered out once he was jailed. It led him to the conclusion that the basis for liberation of the motherland could not be located in any one personality, and that national service should be systematized and a process ought to be created. From Ramdas (a medieval saint who was Shivaji’s spiritual preceptor), he acquired the idea of creating pure body, mind and intellect of a swayamsevak in a place where they could meet and discuss without discrimination and hierarchy. The concept of the shakha was born.

6 Ambekar, however, reiterates that ‘RSS does not engage in party politics; some swaymsevaks belong to a particular political party – BJP and work in politics’ (p. 209).
7 The framers of the Constitution were aware of the potential of conversion as a political time bomb. A review of the Constituent Assembly discussion on Article 25 that extends the right to propagate religion to all persons shows that the framers were divided on whether to extend such a right to citizens. Tajamul Husain urged that religion was a private affair between oneself and one’s creator and it had nothing to do with others; therefore, the right to propagate religion was wholly unnecessary. Another member (Loknath Mishra) held that the aim of propagation of religion was political and hence should be deleted from the fundamental and justiciable rights component of the Constitution. However, those in favour of incorporating the right prevailed; they said the right was not absolute and if any attempts were made to secure mass conversions through undue influence, the State had the right to regulate such activity (Shankar, 2019).

8 The Orissa High Court found the opposite to the Madhya Pradesh High Court. In Orissa, the court held the act ultra vires partly finding with the party who opposed the act, on the grounds that the definition of ‘inducement’ was indeed too vague and, as such, would prohibit too many proselytizing activities.

9 Mother Teresa wrote to the Indian Prime Minister Morarji Desai expressing her concerns. In response, the prime minister urged her to support the bill on grounds that the State had to be ‘particularly vigilant about the Scheduled Tribes whose protection is not only guaranteed by the laws of the land but is also enshrined in the Constitution. It is our duty to preserve every aspect of their way of life along with their religion and ways of worship. No group belonging to any creed should interfere with their religion and rituals’. See letter from Prime Minister Morarji Desai to Mother Teresa, 21 April 1979, reported in Goel (1998).

10 See Organizer, 15 April 1979, pages 1–15 for a full text of the bill.

11 See Jaffrelot, 2007, p. 287 for citations from newspapers.

12 The Constituent Assembly’s decision that religion would be delinked from politics, was codified in Section 123(3) of the Representation of People Act (1951), which forbade the use of religious rhetoric in election campaigns.

13 Asserting that Hindutva was synonymous with nationalism and ‘Bharateeyatva’, BJP party leader Vajpayee argued in a public meeting that the concept did not merit further debate as the Supreme Court had defined it in totality in its judgment (Times of India, June 7, 1996). Justice Verma later told the author that he had been misinterpreted.

14 In Bommai, seven justices agreed that ‘secularism’ was a basic feature of the Constitution. Only two, including Justice Verma (who later decided the Hindutva case) refrained from expressing an opinion on the definition of ‘secularism’. For the seven Justices, the meaning of secularism ranged from seeing the role of the state as one of passive neutral religious tolerance to an active protection of all religions. A majority ruling is not obvious in Bommai, since there was no order of the entire court; the nine judges expressed themselves through six opinions.

15 The mandate in the 1996 general election went against Congress. The BJP emerged as the single largest party and formed the government, but it fell after 13 days because no other party supported it. The saffron party again emerged as the single largest party in the 1998 and 1999 elections. The 2004 elections were a battle between two coalitions: the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance and the Congress-led UPA, with the latter scoring a victory. Manmohan Singh was appointed the prime minister by Congress leader Sonia Gandhi. As political commentator Kalyani Shankar (2019) points out, two parallel streams ran through his regime. One was Singh’s continuation of further liberalization, and the other was Sonia Gandhi’s left-leaning welfare policy. However, the gains were lost as the government suffered a policy paralysis after 2010 and became mired in corruption scandals.

16 The perception of a pro-Muslim shift of the Congress was noted by one of its senior leaders, A K Anthony, after the election results. He said the party’s proximity towards minority communities created doubts among other communities about its model of secularism and that there was a need to correct the notion that certain groups get special consideration within the Congress (Sardesai et al., 2014, p. 41).

17 The BJP’s growth is indeed notable, as it grew from a mere two seats in the Lok Sabha (lower parliament) in 1984 to 85 in 1989 and then to 120 seats in 1991. In 1996, it went up to 161 and bagged 182 in 1998. It won the same number in 1999. In 2004, there was a slide as the party won 138 seats, and in 2009 it went down further to 116 seats. From 2004 to 2014 it was out of power, but in 2014 the Narendra Modi-led BJP got a majority of its own (282 seats) and formed the government. The BJP improved on its performance in 2019 by winning 303 seats. By 2015, the BJP had the largest membership, 88 million, surpassing even the Chinese Communist Party’s 86 million. The BJP is also
the richest party today. In April 2022, the BJP and its coalition partners are governing 21 states (Kalyani Shankar, 2019).

18 Fisher (2018, p. 6) argues that Saivite and Vaisnavite were distinct religious communities. To belong to either was also to belong to a socially embedded community and to mark one’s religious identity as a member of a particular religious public. Doniger (2015, p. 512) complicates Fisher’s story by pointing out that in medieval India, people cared about philosophy enough to fight about it, mostly with words but sometimes with weapons. These fights were with other philosophical schools within Hinduism and also with Buddhism and Islam.

References


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