The Role of Hindutva in Indian Politics

The victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) incumbent Narendra Modi in the Gujarat state elections of 2002 has left the BJP riding a new high, while the Congress Party struggles to define itself in opposition. With upcoming assembly elections in eight of India's states, this year could be a defining one for both parties, as well as for the country. The larger question underlying the analysis of electoral politics is the future of Hindutva - a fundamentalist socio-political ideology that asserts a unifying Hindu culture for all Indians – and its implications for India's multi-religious population.

The significance of the Gujarat elections: The BJP has consistently fared well in Gujarat polls in the last decade. Its success was not a major upset, but its landslide proportions were a surprise. The impact of the communal riots that shook the state from February 2002 was expected to make the Congress a stronger contender in the polls. In the months that followed the riots, Chief Minister Narendra Modi waged a virulently communal campaign designed to inflame Hindu sentiments and by association patriotic zeal. This connection between being a Hindu and being a nationalist is a central tenet of the Hindutva ideology, but was used in a uniquely successful way in this election. While Hindutva was not the sole or even the determining factor contributing to the BJP's success in Gujarat, it is significant and will continue to play a role at the state and national level, in conjunction with and in reaction to a range of other political drivers.

The growth of Hindutva politics: The politics of Hindutva, as represented by India's ruling party, the BJP, cannot be separated from the larger grassroots social movement from which it stems, though the two aspects of the movement clash periodically. The BJP belongs to a family of organizations, known as the Sangh Parivar or "Sangh Family", which collectively represent the ideology of Hindutva in its many social and institutional forms. The primary ideological organization within the Parivar is the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), or World Hindu Council, which is supported by its youth wing, the Bajrang Dal. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) provides the organizational backbone of the movement, and is paramilitary in nature.

The organizational roots of Hindutva go back to 1914, to the creation of the Hindu Mahasabha, an organization founded to unite the nation under the banner of Hindu culture. Hinduism is a religion that is amorphous in its teachings, open to diverse interpretations and modes of practice, and polytheistic. The Mahasabha saw these values as a weakness because they provided few means of united mobilization, and therefore were perceived to offer little resistance to conquest, either by Muslim conquerors, or by imperialist powers. The hierarchical social character of Hinduism that privileges the upper castes, coupled with India's vast regional and linguistic diversity, were further barriers to cohesion. The Hindutva movement sought to "re-create" a golden age of Hinduism, one best epitomized by the rule of Rama, a human incarnation of the God Vishnu. The ingredients of this golden age, and of a unified Hinduism, however, had to be created by the Sangh Parivar. The belief that India's authentic culture lies in Hinduism has bred an anti-foreign outlook, a definition that encompasses the Muslims and Christians of India.

During the movement for independence, the Hindutva movement mobilized against the Congress party's secular and pluralist platform. The creation of Pakistan was seen as a betrayal of the principle of a single united Hindu nation. Congress and Mahatma Gandhi were seen as pseudo-secularists who were eager to pander to the Muslim minority at the cost of Hindu pride and the Hindu nation. The themes of injured Hindu pride and of victimization remain powerful ones in the movement. The assassination of Mahatma Gandhi at the hands of a Hindu fundamentalist soon after independence and the uproar it caused were a setback for Hindutva, and the Parivar fell out of the public eye for almost four decades. Its political arm, then called the Jana Sangh, was generally a marginal presence in Parliament.

The devolution of politics and Hindu Majoritarianism: Two related fractures helped to change this from the 1980s onwards. The first was the dismantling of the Congress Party's nation-wide political hegemony, and the resulting fragmentation of Indian politics. Since the national elections of 1989, no party has won an outright majority in the polls, and a succession of volatile coalition governments has ruled the nation. Regionally based parties have grown in power and prominence, and in the last national elections, the majority of votes cast were in favor of regional parties. The end of the Congress monopoly also heralded the end of Nehru's cohesive vision of India as a state united in its diversity, run in a highly centralized manner, and based on a Fabian socialist economic model. Although this opened up the field for regional parties – including the BJP, which is regional in scope – it also led to an ideological vacuum, and it was this vacuum that Hindu majoritarian sentiment helped to fill. In order to compete at the regional level, the Congress party played religious politics and relied on an obliquely defined "populist Hinduism", a strategy that the Parivar emulated with far greater ideological zeal in the Northern heartland of India.

The second "fracture" came in 1990, with the central government's decision to implement the Mandal Commission Reforms, an affirmative action program that created reservations at universities and in government jobs for the backward castes and tribes of India. This was the first step towards empowering

lower caste politics in India, traditionally seen as a Congress "vote bank".

The BJP traditionally received the bulk of its political support from upper-caste urban voters. The empowerment of the backward castes created a rift in the Hindu community; with backward castes and tribes constituting over 50 percent of India's Hindus, this was something the BJP could not afford. The issue that the Parivar chose to unite Hindu sentiment was that of building a temple to Ram on the site of a sixteenth-century mosque named after India's first Mughal emperor, Babar, claiming that the mosque stood on the site of Ram's birth (*janmabhoomi*). Sangh Parivar workers eventually tore down the mosque in 1992. The Parivar, Supreme Court and Central government have been deadlocked over the fate of the land on which it stood. The issue, however, has deep emotional resonance for Hindutva to this day.
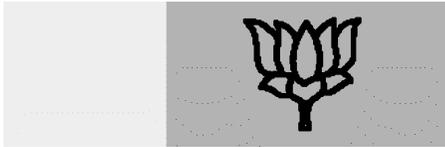
Balancing ideology and politics: Although Hindutva gained ground as an ideology from the 1980s onwards, the BJP was unable to form a lasting government at the center till 1999. More importantly, the primary factor enabling the BJP to form the central government after the 1999 elections was structural, not ideological. The Congress Party remains national in scope, and competes with regional and caste-based parties in state elections. This makes it difficult to build coalitions with them at the center. The BJP on the other hand has an established electoral presence in only a handful of states, and is able to build coalitions with regional parties. After the 1999 elections, it was willing to make significant concessions on its ideological platform to build bridges with secular allies, and was able to form a government with 23 primarily regional parties. Prime Minister Vajpayee's image as a moderate BJP leader has helped to keep the coalition together.

While this has been a successful political strategy for the BJP, it has caused tensions within the Parivar, most notably with the RSS and the VHP. The BJP has had to toe a fine line between alienating its governing coalition and alienating the Parivar. It depends on both for political power and legitimacy. This tug of war between two competing needs has led to contradictory statements and policies by the BJP on a range of issues, including the dispute over Kashmir, the Babri Masjid issue and, most recently, over the Gujarat riots. Under pressure from the Parivar, Modi was allowed to remain Chief Minister of Gujarat despite the law and order breakdown in the state. The fear following the Gujarat elections is that the BJP might be tempted to move from its largely centrist policies, and fully embrace in practice the ideological positions of the VHP and a new political strategy that political wags are calling "Moditva" or "Modi-ism."

The ingredients of political success: Such a conclusion is premature, and Indian politics remain far too complex to respond to a narrow ideological agenda. Elections in India reflect regional and community-based issues, and this was true of the Gujarat elections as well. Several factors set the Gujarat elections apart. Gujarat's urban density, degree of industrialization, economic priorities, and the absence of caste politics, all played in favor of the BJP. The riots played a key role, and it is noteworthy that they did not spread to any of India's other states. Gujarat's urban centers, particularly Ahmedabad, Baroda and Godhra, have an unusually bad history of communal violence, and Modi was able to successfully capitalize on anti-Muslim sentiment unleashed by the attack in Godhra that led to last year's riots as well as on a subsequent terrorist attack on the Akshardham temple in Gujarat.

Moreover, the BJP landslide was not uniform. In 64 constituencies in Gujarat, the BJP and the Congress were neck and neck and the BJP won by less than 3 percent; in some areas where the margin between the two parties was larger, third parties held the balance of the votes and strategic alliance building could have delivered a different result. This is a lesson the Congress appears to have taken to heart; it is now redoubling its efforts to build partnerships with regional parties and sort out internal dissent within the party.

But Gujarat also highlighted a critical aspect of the Sangh Parivar's work as an effective grassroots social movement. The RSS and the VHP have spent years cultivating a base in Gujarat, through labor unions, social work, building schools, and focusing on backward communities. If there is a message to be drawn from Gujarat, it is that the full impact of the Hindutva movement will bear fruit through its social organizing, not in the short-term political future of the BJP. Its social organizations occupy a space in civil society that cannot easily be regulated by the state, and they will continue to work for their social revolution with profound consequences for the country.

Looking ahead: There has been a shift towards, and cohesion of, the religious right in Indian politics in the past decade, but it does not trump the dynamics of regionalism and coalition building. The outcome of the upcoming state elections in Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Tripura and Delhi will depend on regional factors and the ability of parties to build alliances. Anti-incumbency sentiment may hurt the Congress, which is the incumbent in five of these states.

It is too early to start handicapping the national polls due in 2004. Leadership changes in the BJP and the Congress' ability to adapt to the changing needs of regional politics will have a powerful influence. But the issues to watch are clear. How will the increasingly Hindutva-influenced vocabulary of the coming year's political contests affect India's ability to manage its diverse population? And what will be the impact of this year's apparent swing to the right on the character and stability of the next national coalition? In general, the difference between India's major political parties on policy issues has diminished in recent years. Policy toward Pakistan could become more of a political football than it has been – with dangerous consequences.

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