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Ideology, Organization and Electoral Strategy of Hindu Nationalism: What's Religion Got to Do with It?

It is sometimes said that generals fight the last war. Similarly, political analysts tend to find the most recent global scourge in every societal ailment they encounter. In the 1940s and 1950s many populist movements and regimes were mistakenly viewed as “fascist”; in the 1960s and 1970s numerous third world nationalist movements were perceived as and professed to be communist; and since the Iranian revolution of 1979 “fundamentalisms” seem to have flourished. Sometimes more than one of these labels has been applied to the same movement. In India, Hindu Nationalism was—and often still is—perceived as fascist, particularly by its Indian critics, while outside observers have found it altogether too easy to treat it as the Hindu equivalent of Islamic radicalism. Consequently, before inquiring “how deep are the organizational roots of religious radicalism in India,” we have to first settle whether it is religious at all.

The first part of this paper accordingly examines the evolution of Hindu Nationalist ideology to emphasize a point that has been made many times: Whether or not Hindu Nationalism is “fascist,” it is most

assuredly not “fundamentalist.” Hindu Nationalists are concerned with the strength and unity of Hindus as a political community, not with their forms of worship. They have charged religious minorities with divided loyalty and have been responsible for organized mass violence against Muslims. However, they have not, historically, been concerned with imposing any view of Hindu religion on its practitioners or punishing Hindus who violate the precepts of the “true” religion.¹ In short, for Hindu Nationalists, there are traitors, but not apostates.

The second part of the paper reviews the evolution of Hindu Nationalist organizations. The section traces how local militant movements coalesced at the All-India level, how one organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) came to be identified as the central organization of this ideological tendency, and the relationship of the RSS to political parties and other organizations associated with Hindu Nationalism. The main theme of this section is the enduring tension in Hindu Nationalism between organizational loyalty and ideological purity on the one hand, and the need to build larger coalitions on the other.

The final section examines why Hindu Nationalism, which for so long existed on the margins of Indian political life, came to dominate the polity fifty years after independence. The focus is on electoral processes, not on the motives and violence of activists, which are discussed by other papers in this workshop. The argument is that the ideological factors often cited as reasons for the growth of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—the broadcast of Hindu epics during the Congress period of the 1980s, and the movement to replace a mosque at Ayodhya with a temple—played a permissive role at best. The growth of the BJP has occurred not as a direct result of these factors, but because of its ability to exploit material and status grievances among discrete segments of Indian society, as well as rivalries within the Congress party and between it and various regional parties. While most of these issues had a natural affinity with traditional positions of Hindu Nationalists, the affinity was not with a religious agenda but with a militaristic approach to foreign policy, a historic preference for

1. The only religious demand made by Hindu Nationalists—that the slaughter of cows should be banned—also grew out of a conflict between Hindus and Muslims in northern India and is now downplayed as many southern Hindus do eat beef.

smaller states (so as to strengthen the central government), and their historic opposition to affirmative action.

Ideology: Inventing a Hindu Nation

Hindu Nationalism should be distinguished from the nationalism of the Indian National Congress, or Congress party, often referred to as “Indian nationalism.” As Jaffrelot has pointed out, while the nationalism of the Congress party was essentially territorial and “civic,” identifying as Indians all inhabitants of the British Indian Empire, Hindu Nationalism has sought to identify an Indian nation according to ethnic criteria.² For Hindu nationalists, emphasizing Hindu identity is a way of overcoming the linguistic and regional diversity of India, by emphasizing a shared cultural heritage that also distinguished most Indians from non-Indians. There was, of course, an obvious difficulty: not all Indians were Hindus and, moreover, not all parts of India had a Hindu majority. Of course, for Hindu nationalists, this obstacle was an opportunity, for it was by casting Muslims as the Other and the enemy, that they have sought to unify Hindus. The challenge posed by Muslim-majority provinces was largely, though not entirely solved by the Partition of British India into India and Pakistan, but this left a greater difficulty for Hindu Nationalism—the diversity of Hinduism itself.

Hindus have no central organization, no single religious text and do not share the same rituals and practices, deities or beliefs. What Hindus across India shared was a distinctive social structure, composed of hereditary occupational groups or “castes” that were ranked according to various criteria.³ However, this social structure was as much a source of division as unity, as local “caste systems” varied considerably and lower-ranked castes were in the process of challenging it, in any case.

Moreover, to the extent that there was a pan-Indian “Hindu” tradition, it was the preserve of the one pan-Indian caste, the Brahmins, who formed an elite segment of priests and *literati* within

2. Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1996), chap. 1.

3. See Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus* (London: Paladin, 1972). Dumont's famous view that the criteria of “purity” and “pollution” were the dominant sources of ranking has since been challenged by many other authors.

Hindu society. Consequently, any effort to emphasize a shared Hindu tradition ran into resistance from both advocates of regional cultures and the champions of upwardly mobile castes. Not surprisingly, therefore, support for Hindu Nationalism has traditionally been limited to elite segments of the largest linguistic region, the Hindi-speaking Gangetic plain, and until recently had difficulty expanding outside that constituency.

Nonetheless, it is misleading to treat Hindu Nationalism as simply a conservative ideology aimed at preserving the privileges of the existing elite. B.D. Graham, who popularized the term “Hindu Nationalist,” aptly distinguishes “Hindu nationalists” from “Hindu traditionalists”:

Whereas the Hindu traditionalists were conservative in their approach, enlisting time-honored values to justify the continuation of a hierarchical social order, the Hindu nationalists wanted to remold Hindu society along corporatist lines and to fashion the state accordingly.⁴

Hindu traditionalists “stressed the need to preserve Hindu religious beliefs and social practices and to foster the study of the Hindi and Sanskrit languages and their literatures,” while Hindu Nationalists were “concerned not simply to conserve Hinduism but to develop the latent power of the Hindu community.”⁵ Hindu Nationalists, seemingly “inspired by European fascism” and “concerned with modernization and industrialization,” sought to “remold” state and society “along corporatist lines.”⁶ Hindu traditionalists, in short, might have been concerned with preserving the social order; but Hindu Nationalists sought, or at least were willing to remake that social order in order to promote the unity (*sangathan*) of Hindus as a political entity.

Despite this fundamental difference of orientation, Hindu traditionalists and Hindu Nationalists are often found in the same organizations

4. B. D. Graham, *Hindu Nationalism and Indian Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 6. Unlike Graham, I have chosen to capitalize “Nationalism” to distinguish Hindu Nationalists from Hindus who might be nationalist in the Congress mold.

5. Graham, “The Congress and Hindu Nationalism,” in D. A. Low, ed., *The Indian National Congress* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988), 174.

6. Graham, *Hindu Nationalism*, 44–45.

and cooperate politically, a fact that has often presented Hindu Nationalists with dilemmas over how to enlist a broader constituency. At the same time, Hindu Nationalists and Congress-style Indian nationalists also have many concerns in common, which on some issues makes it difficult to distinguish between these ideologically. A brief review of the common antecedents of these three tendencies in the religious and political ferment of the British colonial period might help clarify these ambiguities.

The ideological roots of Hindu Nationalism, indeed of Indian Nationalism, lie in religious revivalist and reform movements that emerged among educated Hindus in the nineteenth century. The first such responses in India were liberal reform movements especially in Bengal, which sought to "purify" Hinduism of those traits that appeared most barbaric to the Western eye. Like other, later movements, early Bengali reformers viewed Indian (Hindu) civilization as having degenerated from an earlier period of glory because of the corruption of Hinduism by those features of Hindu society, which most offended Western sensibilities: caste, untouchability, polytheism, child marriage and polygamy.⁷

Later in the century, various regions in India experienced a different kind of religious response to the challenge of foreign conquest. This combined militant religious revivalism with the political agenda of ending British rule and was often tied to an economic nationalism that was at the heart of all Indian varieties of nationalism. These movements occurred in different regions and typically blended pride in region and language with their religious revivalism and placed emphasis on promoting physical fitness, often founding gymnasiums for this purpose. In Bengal, activities were often conducted through secret societies that sometimes practiced terrorism; elsewhere they initiated boycotts of foreign cloth or with social reform.⁸ In Bombay

7. Jaffrelot, "Hindu Nationalism: Strategic Syncretism in Ideology Building," *Economic and Political Weekly* (20–27 March 1993): 517–20; Daniel Gold, "Organized Hinduisms: From Vedic Truth to Hindu Nation," in Martin Marty and R. Scott Appleby, eds., *Fundamentalisms Observed*, The Fundamentalism Project, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

8. John R. McClane, "The Early Congress, Hindu Populism and the Wider Society," in Richard Sisson and Stanley Wolpert, eds., *Congress and Indian Nationalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 66–67; Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India, 1885–1947* (India: Macmillan, 1983), 97; Rajat Kanta Ray, "Moderates, Extremists and Revolutionaries: Bengal, 1900–1908," in Sisson and Wolpert, eds., *Congress and Indian Nationalism*.

the Congress leader Bal Gangadhar Tilak was on the one hand opposing legislation that raised the age of marital consent for girls and promoting a new Hindu festival while, on the other, attempting to start a boycott of foreign cloth to protest countervailing excise taxes imposed on Indian cotton.⁹ Both Tilak and the terrorist societies of Bengal had a direct influence on contemporary Hindu Nationalism. Tilak's Ganesh festival was adopted by the Shiv Sena party of Maharashtra as an expression of Hindu assertion, while the RSS was influenced in its organization by Bengali terrorist societies.¹⁰

It is important to recognize that the nationalism of the Congress, too, shared motivations with these early religious reform movements. The secular liberalism of many Congress leaders, such as the first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, grew out of a conviction shared with Hindu reformers that caste, superstition, and obscurantism had contributed to the decline of Indian civilization. Congress' economic nationalism, like that of Hindu Nationalists, was a reaction to the experience of economic backwardness and colonial exploitation. Congress leaders were also afraid and suspicious of regionalist and sectarian divisions and, like Hindu Nationalists, believed that had Indians not been internally divided, they would never have been conquered. However, Congress leaders, especially after Gandhi, sought to overcome these differences by emphasizing the plurality and diversity of Indian civilization, while Hindu Nationalists emphasized—and if necessary invented—common elements.¹¹

V.D. Savarkar was the first to articulate a coherent ideology of Hindu Nationalism in a 1924 book titled *Essentials of Hindutva*. In it he identified the movement's objective as Hindu sangathan, or the unification of Hindus. Hindu Nationalist ideology, as expounded by Savarkar, was first and foremost an ideology about building a modern nation-state in India, and as such focused on questions that a doctrine concerned with religious revivalism would have largely ignored. The principal issues of the day for Savarkar, as for Nehru,

9. Sarkar, *Modern India*, 91.

10. Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement*, 35–36.

11. The Indian National Congress was founded in 1885. Gandhi took over its leadership in the 1920s.

were the political representation of and relations among different groups, and how to promote economic development. Savarkar justified his answers on the grounds that they would further the strength and unity of the nation, rather than by appealing to religious values.

What Savarkar sought to define and defend was not a set of religious values or practices, but an Indian nationhood defined in primordialist terms. For Savarkar, an Indian was anyone who viewed India as both “fatherland and holy land.”¹² The definition was self-consciously crafted to include all religious traditions that arose within the subcontinent, including Sikhs, Jains, and even Buddhists, but to exclude practitioners of “foreign” religions such as Christianity and, especially, Islam.

This concern for militancy in the face of an “invader” rather than an “infidel” is reflected after independence, for example, in foreign policy. Not surprisingly, Hindu Nationalists have been consistently hostile toward Pakistan, but this has often extended to the Muslim Middle East generally. Unlike the Congress, which has supported the Palestinian cause, Hindu Nationalists have long favored an alliance with Israel. Hindu Nationalists have also generally been more hawkish, calling for a commitment to military strength and often favoring the use of force and have been advocating the acquisition of nuclear weapons since the 1960s.¹³

Hindu Nationalism has also expressed its concern with strength and unity on a variety of other secular issues. Similar to the Arya Samaj—and the Congress—Hindu Nationalists have strongly favored trade protection and government action to promote domestic industry, positions that distinguished them from the conservative Swatantra Party of the 1950s and 1960s, as well as from opposition parties associated with farmers' interests. Unlike the Congress, they have been staunch defenders of private property but have at times advocated land reform and corporatist approaches to labor relations with the state mediating between labor and business to ensure

12. Gold, “Organized Hinduisms,” 1991.

13. See, e.g., Jana Sangh, *Jana Sangh Souvenir* (publication issued for the 15th annual session of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, 25–27 April 1969); Balraj Madhok, “Why Jana Sangh?” in Ramdas G. Bhatkal, ed., *Political Alternatives in India* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1967).

productivity. Consequently, Hindu Nationalists can often appear schizophrenic on economic policy when viewed through a conventional left-right lens, but their views are generally consistent with an ideology that is concerned primarily with questions of national unity, power and status.¹⁴

Hindu Nationalists have also historically expressed a strong preference for a unitary state and a more uncompromising stance on cultural assimilation in other areas, such as language, where they have historically favored the promotion of Hindi as a national language. The last two positions have made it difficult for Hindu Nationalists to penetrate southern India, whose inhabitants speak Dravidian languages that are unrelated to the Indo-European languages of northern India, although they have often borrowed Sanskrit words. Concerns over preserving regional identity have also made the four southern states, and some of the other non-Hindi-speaking states such as West Bengal, far more concerned with preserving states' rights. It was not until the 1990s when the BJP began to downplay these issues and ally with regional parties in these states that it was able to win elections in them.¹⁵

However, the area where Hindu Nationalists are generally acknowledged as having been consistent, and which defines them in the eyes of observers, is the relationship between Hindus and religious minorities. The principal question in the 1930s was whether to grant Muslims and other minorities special electoral representation. The Congress had agreed to rather limited concessions to Muslims and certain low-caste groups, but these were still more generous than Hindu Nationalists were willing to countenance.¹⁶ Hindu Nationalists accused Congress of violating the principles of secular nation building, a charge that they were to repeat throughout the post-independence period. Thus, denounced Congress' acquiescence in the reservation of seats for Muslims:

14. For a more detailed analysis see Arun R. Swamy, "The Nation, the People and the Poor: Sandwich Tactics in Party Competition and Policy Formation, India, 1931-1996" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1996), chap. 7.

15. Interestingly, S. P. Mookherjee, the first president of the Jan Sangh, the BJP's predecessor, who was from Bengal himself, had a more pluralistic view of language. See *Jana Sangh*, 75.

16. These "reserved seats" for Muslims were created by the Government of India Act of 1935, which created elected provincial governments, but were abolished by the Indian Constitution. Reserved seats continue to exist for certain low-caste groups.

They call themselves Indian Nationalists! But every step they take is communal. They have guaranteed special protection to minorities....Is that Indian Nationalism?....A truly Indian National electorate must be only an Indian electorate pure and simple....¹⁷

Savarkar's charge that it was Congress that was practicing "communal" politics extended also to Congress' accommodation of caste sentiments: "They mark down Hindu homes even according to castes ... and then allot their candidates according to their castes.... They appeal even to caste pride and caste hatred. In the election season they are communalists of the worst type...."¹⁸

This idea that it was Congress, rather than the Hindu right that was "communal," has remained an enduring feature of the rhetoric of this political tendency. Thus, S.P. Mookherjee, Savarkar's successor in the 1940s, stated in 1945:

Our fundamental difference is that we refuse to surrender on the basic principle of India's integrity nor do we subscribe to pandering to intransigent communalism.... [T]he Congress policy of appeasement has merely widened the national resistance and has gravely jeopardized the legitimate rights of Hindus as such....¹⁹

The charge of "pandering" and "appeasement" have since become staples of Hindu Nationalist criticism of the Congress policy toward minorities. The present Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee was attacking "the bane of pseudo-secularism" in the late 1960s.²⁰ In the 1990s the current deputy prime minister, Lal Krishna Advani, coined the terms "genuine secularism" and "positive secularism" to describe BJP positions.

17. Presidential speech to Hindu Mahasabha, 1938, excerpted in C. H. Philips, *The Evolution of India and Pakistan, 1858-1947* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 362.

18.

19. *Ibid.*, 369.

20. *Jana Sangh*, 55-59.

Organization: Unifying Hindus

Until the 1920s, the only coherent organization expressing militant Hindu views was a religious reform movement that drew as much on the reformist tendencies of earlier religious responses as on the militant revivalism of Tilak and the Bengal secret societies. This was the Arya Samaj (Aryan Society), which was founded in western India in 1875 and struck its deepest roots in the Muslim-majority province of Punjab. As with earlier reform movements, the Arya Samaj sought to simplify religious practice and remove untouchability as well as to incorporate elements of Christian and Muslim religious practice, most notably a purification ceremony used to elevate the status of low-caste Hindus and to “reconvert” Muslims and Christians. However, the Samaj sought the essence of Hinduism more in an idealized vision of an ancient age of valor than in the later philosophical traditions of monistic spiritualism, and at times sought to define “Hindus” less in terms of religious belief or practice than in terms of territorial and racial identity. Samajists dated the decline of Hindu—and by extension, Indian—civilization as having started with the Muslim conquests of the twelfth century and viewed Muslims as an adversary as much as the British.²¹ Finally, the Arya Samaj was both actively political and economically nationalist. In all these respects Arya Samaj anticipated later Hindu Nationalism, to which it eventually gave birth.²²

Despite its reformist agenda, the Arya Samaj’s anti-Muslim orientation led it to link up with other movements that stemmed from the growing conflict between Hindus and Muslims in the Gangetic Plain. A major source of this conflict was the rivalry between educated Muslims and Hindus over which language or, more accurately, script, should be used for official purposes. Hindi and Urdu are essentially the same language but written in the Devanagari (Sanskrit) and Arabic script, respectively. Advocates of Hindi have also sought to “purify” the language by removing words of Persian, Arabic and Turkish origin and replacing them with words of Sanskrit derivation; it is this Sanskritized Hindi that is taught and used for official purposes in

21. Gold, “Organized Hinduisms,” 1991.

22. For example, Arya Samaj leaders started an insurance company and a bank (the Punjab National Bank), and sponsored Indians to go to Japan for technical education. See Sarkar, *Modern India*, 39, 99, 127.

India. The choice between Hindu and Urdu made little difference at the level of spoken conversation but had tremendous implications for the job prospects of the two groups, as well as symbolic importance.

The language conflict linked up with a militant movement among Hindus in the northern Gangetic plain for the abolition of cow-slaughter. In the 1880s and 1890s, Cow Protection Societies instigated riots over whether Muslims should be allowed to slaughter cows, in the towns of Punjab and the United Provinces (UP) along the Ganges valley, climaxing with forty-five such riots and 107 killed in 1893.²³ Ironically, Cow Protection Societies appear to have grown out of town societies established to defend orthodox Hinduism against the challenge posed by Hindu reformist movements. These often competing Societies for the Defense of Orthodoxy (*Sanatan Dharma Sabhas*) frequently pursued very specific goals such as winning the right to organize—and control the patronage associated with—particular local religious festivals. Although primarily urban, the cow protection issue allowed the orthodox societies to establish links to the countryside, often through the travels of itinerant preachers, and through organizations set up to collect funds from the countryside and funnel them to town organizations. However, in the countryside they often targeted not only Muslims but also rising low-caste groups Hindus associated with cow-slaughter.²⁴

At the turn of the century many of these regional expressions of cultural regeneration and militant nationalism coalesced into a frontal assault on the liberal, secular, and gradualist ethos of the mainstream Congress leadership. The challengers were styled extremists, in contrast to the more liberal moderates, who sought political change through constitutional means. Extremism reached its peak during the *Swadeshi* (“Indigenous”) movement (1905–8), which sought to undermine British power and interests by boycotting foreign goods, especially British cloth, and led to a split in the organization in 1907 when extremists walked out and launched an India-wide *Swadeshi* boycott.²⁵

23. Sarkar, *Modern India*, 79.

24. Sandria B. Freitag, “Sacred Symbol as Mobilizing Ideology: The North Indian Search for a ‘Hindu’ Community,” *Journal for the Comparative Study of Society and History* (1980): 612–13, 615.

25. *Swadeshi* literally means “national” or “indigenous.” The conflict within Congress was triggered by a difference over how to respond to a British decision to divide Bengal between Hindu-majority and Muslim-majority regions.

Starting around 1907 provincial Hindu Sabhas (Hindu Councils) were formed by revivalist groups associated with the extremist tendency²⁶ and in 1915, the All-India Hindu Mahasabha was founded as an umbrella organization for these organizations.²⁷ (Brown 1985: 228). In 1923, the Mahasabha was given a formal organization modeled after Congress (Brown 1985: 228) and also started to become more expressly anti-Muslim and began to “show an interest in contesting elections as an independent force.”²⁸ At this time the Mahasabha incorporated the Arya Samaj’s *shuddhi* (“purification” or reconversion) program and “called for Hindu defence squads,” becoming in effect “an alliance of Arya Samajist reformers with Sanatan Dharma Sabha conservatives in a common Hindu-communal front.”²⁹

In the 1920s and 1930s the main achievement of the Mahasabha was to scuttle any compromises mooted between the Muslim League and Congress on separate electoral representation for Muslims. Mahasabha links with Congress continued until 1934—when Hindu traditionalists and Hindu Nationalists in Congress formed the Congress Nationalist Party to contest elections. Hindu Nationalism became more pronounced in the Mahasabha after V.D. Savarkar became president in 1937.³⁰

However, although Hindu nationalists were found in the Mahasabha, and Savarkar gave the movement its principal ideas, the principal organizational vehicle for Hindu nationalists was the RSS. Founded in 1925 by a medical doctor and former Mahasabha member from Maharashtra, K.B. Hedgewar, the RSS is most famous for its paramilitary organization and emphasis on inculcating martial values. The RSS has a hierarchical chain of command and is organized into local units called shakhas, whose members engage in daily training in martial arts and cultural activities and are expected to live an austere life, many remaining celibate. The second head of the RSS, M.S. Golwalkar, who took over after Hedgewar’s death in 1940, articulated an ideology of Indian nationhood in ethnic and racial terms that drew

26. Graham, “The Congress and Hindu Nationalism,” 172.

27. Sarkar, *Modern India*, 235.

28. Graham, “The Congress,” 172.

29. Sarkar, *Modern India*, 235.

30. Graham, “The Congress,” 175.

heavily on European fascism.³¹ At the same time, in pursuit of Hindu sangathan, the RSS sought—like the Arya Samaj—to incorporate low-caste members, a decision unimaginable within the framework of orthodox Hinduism.³²

The RSS viewed—and views—itsself as a cultural organization, not a political party. What this means is that it does not field candidates for elections although, as we shall see later, it has been closely associated with parties that do. RSS members were forbidden to openly enter party politics: “The true measure of their importance was in their agitational work and their unusual discipline.”³³ The motivation for this rigorous ethic of discipline and self-purification was a desire to overcome the “docility and mildness of the Hindus” (in the words of an early Mahasabha president) that was held to be the cause of their long subjugation to foreign (Muslim and European) rule.³⁴

Initially the political strategy of Hindu chauvinist politicians (both Nationalist and traditionalist) was to capture Congress. There were Hindu traditionalists in the Congress who, led Deputy Prime Minister Vallabhbhai, questioned the loyalty of Muslims and held out the possibility of Congress eventually absorbing the Mahasabha and the RSS. Mookherjee was even in the post-independence cabinet. Nehru, who was committed to building a secular state, was on the defensive within Congress until the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi in 1948 by a couple of former RSS members. Following the assassination the RSS was banned and, although the ban was lifted within a year, the idea of an alliance with Hindu chauvinist organizations was delegitimated in Congress.³⁵

These experiences convinced Hindu nationalists of the need to contest for power as well as to shed their communal image. When the Hindu Mahasabha, which was contesting elections, reaffirmed its decision to restrict its membership to Hindus, Syama Prasad Mookherjee, Savarkar's successor as president of the Mahasabha, resigned from the organization and founded a new electoral party that would be open to Muslims and would attract RSS members. The new

31. Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement*, 50–62.

32. Jaffrelot, “Hindu Nationalism,” 521.

33. Graham, “The Congress,” 334.

34. Jaffrelot, “Hindu Nationalism,” 520.

35. Graham, *Hindu Nationalism*, 9–12.

party was called the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, or Indian People's Party. Founded in 1951 just before the first elections to be held under universal suffrage, the Jan Sangh,³⁶ as it is better known, sought to give Hindu Nationalism a new face, that of an Indian nationalism that did not exclude minorities but rather made the test of Indianness an identification with the Sanskrit-based cultural heritage.³⁷ Thus, the code phrase ceased to be Hindu *rashtra* (Hindu nation) and became Bharatiya *sanskriti* (Indian culture).³⁸ This distinction continues to be made by many Hindu nationalists today. Both the Hindu Mahasabha and the RSS retained their separate identities, but the RSS was closely connected with the new party, lending many of its cadres to the Jan Sangh's leadership, and continues to be tied to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Jan Sangh's successor.

While the RSS played a central role in the Jan Sangh from the 1950s on, it continued to sponsor non-electoral organizations aimed at "unifying Hindus" and inculcating in them the values it thought essential to strengthen the Hindu nation. Principal among these are the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), or World Hindu Council, founded in 1966 and the VHP's youth wing, the Bajrang Dal. Taken together, these various organizations with ties to the RSS are often referred to as the *sangh parivar* or "Family of the Sangh (RSS)."

The VHP, which is said to receive much of its funding from Indian immigrants to the United States, has sought to bring the diverse sects of Hinduism together under a common umbrella, but with little success. The lack of a central organization to Hinduism meant that the VHP had to convince individual leaders of sects, monasteries to affiliate themselves with it. The major spiritual figures of Hinduism had no reason to lose their autonomy by submitting themselves to a central authority, so the VHP was only able to attract minor religious figures. Moreover, in its one effort to get these diverse spiritual leaders to agree on a common set of principles, the VHP was unable to find

36. The party's official name was rendered in English as "Bharatiya *Jana* Sangh," indicating a Sanskrit pronunciation, but it is usually referred to as the *Jan* Sangh, indicating a Hindi pronunciation. In the Devanagari script, which is used for both Sanskrit and Hindi, "Jana" and "Jan" are written identically. I use "Jan" except when referring to documents that use "Jana."

37. Graham, *Hindu Nationalism*, 13–28.

38. Donald Eugene Smith, *India as a Secular State* (London and Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1963), 470–71.

any that could distinguish Hinduism clearly from other religions.³⁹ The VHP eventually turned to other methods to unify Hindus, and began to champion the building of a temple at Ayodhya (discussed below). The VHP and Bajrang Dal have often acted independently of the BJP and are frequently blamed for carrying out violent attacks on Muslims, such as the massive riot in Gujarat state in March 2002.

Relations between the electoral and non-electoral wings of the sangh parivar are often strained, as electoral strategies frequently require reaching a wider audience than the RSS or VHP can appeal to. The Jan Sangh's founder, S.P. Mookherjee, who had never belonged to the RSS, as well as many of the party's early leaders, had no such affiliation. However in 1953, Mookherjee died in police custody in the state of Jammu and Kashmir, where he had gone to champion the cause of Hindu minorities who sought to eliminate Kashmir's autonomous status. The Kashmir issue has remained of vital concern for Hindu Nationalists to this day, and the BJP continues to call for the elimination of all special rights enjoyed by the state. Within the Jan Sangh, the consequences of Mookherjee's death were to allow the RSS to exert much stronger control over the party. Although the Jan Sangh continued to have presidents who were not RSS members, the real power in the party soon rested with its general secretary, Deen Dayal Upadhyay. With Upadhyay's murder in the late 1960s, the leadership of the party eventually passed to the two men who continue to lead the BJP today: Atal Behari Vajpayee and Lal Krishna Advani, both RSS members.⁴⁰

The 1960s saw the emergence of another Hindu Nationalist party, the Shiv Sena. The Shiv Sena was not associated with the RSS, although it emerged in the same region that had produced the RSS, the state of Maharashtra. Unlike the sangh parivar, the Shiv Sena was centered around a single leader, Bal Thackeray, a political cartoonist-turned-demagogue who was initially concerned with castigating not Muslims but South Indian migrants to the city of Bombay, Maharashtra's capital.⁴¹ The Shiv Sena turned to a militantly anti-

39. Jaffrelot discusses the VHP and reports that the only common elements they could find among all Hindu sects was bathing in the morning, and "remembering God." See Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement*, 196–202.

40. See Graham, *Hindu Nationalism*, chapters 2 and 4 for a discussion of this period.

41. Mary Fainsod Katzenstein, *Ethnicity and Equality: The Shiv Sena Party and Preferential Policies in Bombay* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1979).

Muslim position in the late 1980s and has been allied with the BJP since. The Shiv Sena has been much more openly and virulently anti-Muslim than has the BJP. In 1993 the party was blamed for carrying out riots against Muslims in Bombay and its leader, Thackeray, has frequently threatened to disrupt cricket matches between India and Pakistan, even when this would embarrass the BJP government, of which his party is a member.

The Jan Sangh ceased to exist in 1977 when it merged with other non-communist opposition parties to form the Janata Party. In elections that year, held after an eighteen-month period of emergency rule when most opposition politicians were put in jail, the Janata Party won power nationally and in many states, allowing many Jan Sangh leaders to hold office for the first time. However, the Janata Party was mired in conflict among its constituent units, and the ties of former Jan Sangh members to the RSS were one of the principal sources of concern. The party split twice, in 1978 and 1980. The second split occurred when former Jan Sangh members, along with some others, left to form the BJP.

The BJP initially sought to disassociate itself from the RSS, and the RSS in turn expressed neutrality between the BJP and the Congress, which was taking an increasingly Hindu turn. At first the party even declared itself committed to a program of “Gandhian socialism,” coining a novel phrase containing two words that none associated with the old Jan Sangh. However, the BJP won only two seats in the 1984 elections, when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi’s assassination gave Congress its biggest landslide victory ever. The party then cooperated with the VHP in a movement to construct a temple on the site of a mosque at Ayodhya. It has since vacillated between what Jaffrelot calls an “ethno-nationalist” strategy⁴² and one aimed at building a broader coalition of anti-Congress parties. This tension has continued during the BJP years in power.

Electoral Strategies

DURING THE 1950S AND EARLY 1960S, the Jan Sangh’s electoral strategy was aimed mainly at consolidating the conservative Hindu vote in North India. Despite occasional efforts to champion more populist causes such as land reform, it sometimes recruited traditional princes

42. Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement*.

as candidates in an effort to attract votes. Ideologically, its major focus was on preventing concessions to Pakistan. The party also supported the use of Hindi as a link language and is generally identified as a Hindi chauvinist party, although some Jan Sangh leaders often state a preference for Sanskrit. Finally, the party opposed the attempts to codify and reform personal Hindu law in the 1950s⁴³ and has continued to object to the lack of reform in the personal laws of other religions, although the issue is now couched as a call for a uniform civil code.

The party received a boost from India's military defeat at China's hands in 1962. This experience made the party's militant nationalism more acceptable, even resulting in the RSS being allowed to march in the annual Republic Day parade. The China war also led to contacts between the Jan Sangh and other opposition parties who believed Nehru and his defense minister had failed to adequately defend Indian interests out of a romantic belief in the natural affinity of socialist China and India. These efforts resulted in their support of a common candidate to defeat the defense minister, V.K. Krishna Menon, in a parliamentary by-election.⁴⁴

By the late 1960s, the Jan Sangh found itself pulled in different directions. It began to cooperate with other opposition parties in the Hindi-speaking north in an effort to defeat the Congress party. These parties shared an antipathy to the economic policy of the Congress, which emphasized state ownership and heavy industry. Most were also opposed to the centralization of power under the Congress, although for different reasons, and likewise favored making Hindi the national language for different reasons.⁴⁵ These coalitions were able to hold power briefly in several states between the elections of 1967, when the Congress party lost a large number of seats across the country, and that of 1971 when Indira Gandhi led a revived Congress to a landslide victory on a promise to "Remove Poverty." As the prospect of electoral success appeared to improve, the party made efforts to address questions of distributional justice and to broaden its appeal. This in turn, however, led to conflicts in the party. The bulk of the party leadership, led by two successive party presidents who continue

43. Smith, *India as a Secular State*, 471.

44. Walter K. Anderson and Sridhar D. Damle, *The Brotherhood in Saffron: The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and Hindu Revivalism* (New Delhi: Vistaar Publications, 1987), 172.

45. For an analysis of these alliances focusing on ideology, see Swamy, "The Nation, the People and the Poor," chap. 6.

to lead the BJP today, Lal Krishna Advani and Atal Behari Vajpayee, supported the “leftward” moves. However, a leading party ideologist, Balraj Madhok, who had served as president in 1967, sought to preserve the Jan Sangh’s identity as a conservative party and was eventually expelled.⁴⁶

In the 1980s, the Jan Sangh’s successor, the BJP, was initially the least successful of the three major fragments of the Janata Party. The others, the Janata Party and Lok Dal, had left the Janata experiment with strong enough bases to compete with the Congress in at least one state each and in the mid-1980s were able to come to power in Karnataka and Haryana, respectively. In other states, too, new opposition parties, sometimes breakaway factions of the Congress, were able to win power. These various regional opposition parties typically had in common a base among relatively prosperous farmers’ castes and represented the aspirations of upwardly mobile segments of their states.⁴⁷ The BJP, by contrast, despite having a strong presence in three states (Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Gujarat) was unable to win power anywhere and, as we have noted, fell to two seats out of 542 in the 1984 election.

However, in the five years following the 1984 elections, the Congress government of Rajiv Gandhi made a number of decisions that made middle- and upper-class Indians receptive to a more pro-Hindu and anti-Muslim appeal. First, under pressure from conservative Muslims, the government made controversial decisions that clearly violated the spirit of secularism and offended both Hindu and Muslim liberals. These included banning Salman Rushdie’s controversial novel *Satanic Verses*,⁴⁸ and passing legislation to overturn a Supreme Court ruling that had struck down provisions in Muslim personal law concerning a divorced Muslim woman’s right to alimony.⁴⁹ On the other hand, the government’s decision to broadcast year-long televised serials depicting the Hindu epics undoubtedly helped create a sense of shared cultural identity among Hindus around the country, appeared

46. Anderson and Damle, *The Brotherhood in Saffron*, 181–82, 186–87.

47. Swamy, “The Nation, the People and the Poor,” chap. 6.

48. Rushdie, whose family migrated to Pakistan but who himself moved back to India before emigrating to Britain, was of course sentenced to death by Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini.

49. The case was brought by Shah Bano, a Muslim woman who had been divorced by her wealthy husband of many years. The court granted her alimony under Indian civil law.

to identify the state more closely with the Hindu cultural tradition, and probably prepared the ground for the BJP's rise. Most importantly, a court ruling, probably instigated by the Gandhi government, opened the disputed religious site at Ayodhya to worship by Hindus.

The decision to open the Ayodhya shrine was apparently taken to placate right-wing Hindu politicians who were enraged by the decision to reaffirm Muslim personal law. It opened a Pandora's box of consequences that continue to plague India today. The site in question contained a mosque said to have been built by the first Mughal Emperor, Babur, and hence known as the Babri Masjid (Babur's Mosque). Since the middle of the nineteenth century there had been riots over the site as some local Hindu groups claimed that it had once held a temple marking the birthplace of the Hindu deity Ram, and that this temple had been torn down by Babur.⁵⁰ The site had been declared a disputed site and closed by the courts since 1949, and had excited little attention in the interim despite efforts by the VHP to politicize it. In 1988, under Advani's leadership the BJP decided to champion the demand for the construction of a temple on the site—dubbed Ramjanmabhoomi or “birthplace of Ram” by the movement—and launched a nationwide movement in support of it. The broadcast of the Ramayana, the Hindu epic depicting Ram's life, undoubtedly helped create a broad constituency for the movement—though not necessarily a deep one—and Advani toured the country dressed as Ram in a car altered to resemble an ancient chariot. In 1989, however, the BJP suspended the movement to conclude electoral alliances with the Janata Dal.⁵¹

The Janata Dal was formed when the Janata Party (or what was left of it) merged with the Lok Dal⁵² and a breakaway faction of the Congress led by Rajiv Gandhi's former finance minister, V.P. Singh. The Janata Dal struck separate deals with the BJP, the two communist parties, and various regional parties to ensure that the vote against Congress was united in as many parliamentary constituencies as possible. During the 1989 elections, the campaign focused on the corruption of the Gandhi government and a Janata Dal promise to waive

50. The belief has persisted despite the painstaking efforts of historians and archeologists to demonstrate that there is no evidence of such a temple having existed.

51. For details of this phase of the movement and the BJP's strategic choices, see Jaffrelet, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement*, chap. 11.

52. The Lok Dal, a north Indian farmers' party, had actually split into two rival factions centered in Uttar Pradesh and Haryana, respectively, but both joined the Janata Dal.

loans owed by farmers to government-owned banks. The BJP also based its campaign on these issues. The election saw the Congress party drop to its second-lowest seat tally since independence but, with 197 seats in the lower house of parliament, remain the largest party in the country. The Janata Dal emerged as the second-largest party with 143 seats, followed by the BJP with 86 and the two communist parties at around 50.

What is crucial to realize, however, is that the BJP's electoral alliance with the Janata Dal helped it at least as much in the 1989 elections as had the Ramjanmabhoomi movement. At the national level, while the BJP increased its seat tally from two seats in 1984 to eighty-six in 1989, its share of the votes increased only from 7.4 percent to 11.5 percent. The 1984 figure was probably lower than it might have been, as a result of the pro-Congress "wave" following the assassination of Indira Gandhi, while the 1989 figure is not much higher than the Jan Sangh's peak of 9.4 percent in 1967. Significantly, the state where Ayodhya is located, Uttar Pradesh, saw virtually no change. By contrast, the Janata Dal, with 17.8 percent of the vote, received a higher share of the national vote than did any party in Indian history other than the Congress or the original Janata Party, and also increased its share of the vote in a number of major states.⁵³

After the 1990 state elections, the BJP needed to ally with the Janata Dal, usually as a junior partner, in every major state where it won a share of power, except one. These were largely the Hindi-speaking states of the northern plain. In the 1990 state elections, it was the Janata Dal that came to power in the two largest states in the country, Uttar Pradesh—the state where Ayodhya is located—and Bihar. In two other states, Rajasthan and Gujarat, the BJP and Janata Dal were almost evenly divided, and agreed to let the BJP form the government in Rajasthan, leaving Gujarat to the Janata Dal. In Maharashtra, the BJP emerged as a significant opposition force only because of its alliance with the Shiv Sena. Only in Madhya Pradesh, a state where it had established an early presence and the Janata Dal was weak, did the

53. The relevant figures for the elections of 1984, 1989 and 1991 are reproduced in Tables 1, 2 and 3. For figures relating to earlier elections, see David Butler, Ashok Lahiri and Prannoy Roy, *India Decides: Elections 1952–1991* (New Delhi: Living Media Ltd., 1991). For a summary of the reservations issue and analysis of its political implications, see Swamy, "The Nation, the People and the Poor," chap. 7.

BJP take power by itself. An examination of the eight states where the BJP has established a presence in recent years confirms that the major increase in BJP votes came between 1989 and 1991, at the expense of the Janata Dal. Only in two states, Gujarat and Maharashtra, did the BJP vote increase significantly between 1989 and 1991. (See Table 1 on the following page.)

These observations are important, as it is sometimes argued that the BJP's 1988 campaign for the construction of a temple at Ayodhya helped the party significantly expand its base. In fact, there is little reason to think it did any such thing. It was only in the 1991 election, after the collapse of the Janata Dal, that the BJP reached 20 percent of the national vote and became a contender for power on its own in Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat and Rajasthan.

Rather than expanding as a direct result of Hindu Nationalist mobilization, the BJP was able to capitalize on its prominent position following the 1989 elections to exploit various other grievances in Indian society. Principal among these was the introduction of affirmative action quotas ("reservations") for the Other Backward Castes (OBCs) in 1990, which opened up many more fissures in Hindu society than are generally recognized. Secondary factors include the resentments of neglected regions within many Indian states, the persisting breadth of the Congress party's electoral support that led many regional parties to prefer to ally with the BJP (which did not challenge them on their home turf), and the perception among the urban middle classes that India was not receiving the international respect it deserved.

The turning point came in October 1990. Following the December 1989 elections, the Janata Dal had formed a minority coalition government in alliance with regional parties, with V.P. Singh as prime minister. The BJP and communist parties both supported the coalition in parliament, allowing it to claim a majority, but did not join the government themselves. Factional disputes erupted in the Janata Dal between V.P. Singh and Devi Lal, a farmers' leader who was deputy prime minister. V.P. Singh decided to cement his own political base by unilaterally announcing the government's decision to implement a long-standing government report that recommended affirmative action programs for OBCs.

The Indian Constitution had guaranteed national affirmative action quotas to the lowest-ranked social groups, the ex-"untouchables" or

Table 1. Vote share (%) in national elections, 1984–1991^a

State	Year	Congress	BJP	Janata factions ^b	
Bihar	1984	51.80	6.90	13.70	6.7
	1989	28.10	11.70	37.70	
	1991	23.6	15.90	34.10	
Gujarat	1984	53.20	18.6	16.6	2.3
	1989	37.0	30.4	27.7	
	1991	29.0 ^c	50.40	13.7 ^c	3.40
Karnataka	1984	51.60	4.70	35.1	
	1989	48.90	2.6	28.3	10.6
	1991	42.10	28.8	18.5	
Madhya Pradesh	1984	57.1	30.0	2.7	
	1989	37.7	39.7	8.3	
	1991	45.3	41.9	4.2	
Maharashtra	1984	51.2	10.1	7.6	
	1989	45.4	25.0 ^d	11.0	
	1991	48.4	29.6 ^d	9.9	1.4
Rajasthan	1984	52.7	23.7	11.2	3.9
	1989	37.0	29.6	25.7	
	1991	44.0	40.9	6.2	3.3
Uttar Pradesh	1984	51.0	6.4	21.6	3.6
	1989	31.8	7.6	35.9	
	1991	18.3	32.8	21.6	10.1
All-India	1984	48.1	7.4	6.7	5.6
	1989	39.5	11.4	17.8	
	1991	36.6	20.0	11.8	3.3

Sources: For 1984 and 1989 information: David Butler, Ashok Lahiri and Pranjoy Roy, *India Decides: Elections 1952–1991* (New Delhi: Living Media Ltd., 1991); for 1991 information: V. B. Singh, *Elections in India: Data Handbook on Lok Sabha Elections, 1986–1991* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1994).

^a This table includes data for Congress, BJP and main Janata factions in major states where the BJP vote has increased.

^b The larger faction is listed first; a second is listed only if it received more than 1 percent of the vote.

^c Congress and the Janata Dal (G) were allied and subsequently merged.

^d Includes Shiv Sena with 1.2 percent in 1989 and 9.9 percent in 1991.

“Scheduled Castes,” while allowing states to identify other relatively disadvantaged groups, or OBCs who also deserved affirmative action at the state level.⁵⁴ In the late 1970s the Janata Party government appointed the Mandal Commission to identify a national list of OBCs to create national quotas for them. The Mandal Commission used a combination of social and economic criteria to identify which groups fell below the state’s mean for socio-economic advancement, and its list consequently excluded a large number of prosperous peasants who were politically dominant in many states.⁵⁵ The Mandal Commission’s report was shelved when the Congress party returned to power in 1980.

When V.P. Singh announced he was going to implement the Mandal Commission report, riots broke out in cities across north India. (The south had had OBC reservations for some time and was not as affected.) Shortly thereafter the BJP announced it was reviving the movement for Ayodhya, and Advani started to lead a march of activists toward the site. Janata Dal state governments in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh blocked the march, arresting Advani and even ordering police to shoot marchers at Ayodhya. The BJP withdrew support from the government and the Janata Dal split shortly thereafter, with one faction governing briefly with the support of the Congress.⁵⁶ When elections were held in 1991, the Janata Dal’s share of the vote had collapsed and the BJP had benefited tremendously, increasing its vote share to more than 20 percent and its seats to 120. (Refer to Table 1 above.)

54. They are referred to as Scheduled Castes because they are enumerated in a list or “schedule.” Affirmative action quotas are also guaranteed to Scheduled Tribes—communities that traditionally lived on the margins of settled agricultural society.

55. For a detailed analysis of the politics of OBC reservations, see Swamy, “The Nation, the People and the Poor,” chap. 7. The groups referred to as “dominant peasant castes” vary from state to state and do not exist in some states such as Bihar, where the rural social structure was more sharply polarized. The best-known examples are the Jats in northwestern India (Haryana, Punjab—where Jats are Sikhs—and parts of Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh); Patidars or Patels in Gujarat; Kammas and Reddis in Andhra Pradesh; Vokkaligas and Lingayatans in Karnataka; Nairs in Kerala; and Gounders and Thevars in Tamil Nadu. For more details, see the various state studies in Francine Frankel and M. S. A. Rao, *Dominance and State Power in Modern India: Decline of a Social Order*, vols. I and II (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989 and 1990). Some of these groups, notably Thevars, have been granted OBC status.

56. For an overview of these events, see Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement*, chap. 12. It should be noted that Jaffrelot differs from the explanation of the BJP’s rise suggested here by ascribing it in large part to the Ramjanmabhoomi movement.

The most likely explanation for the expansion of the BJP's vote share between 1989 and 1991 is that many voters from upper or "dominant" peasant castes—who had supported the Janata Dal because of its agrarian emphasis but were not eligible for OBC affirmative action benefits—defected to the BJP as a result of the V.P. Singh government's decision to implement the Mandal Commission report. Unfortunately few opinion polls report the views of "dominant" peasant castes separately. However, one major opinion poll conducted prior to the 1991 election did provide a breakdown by occupation, which showed that the most dramatic change was the decline in support for the Janata Dal among "cultivators" and a commensurate increase in support for the BJP in the same group. (Refer to Table 2 below.)

Table 2. Support for major parties by occupational group, 1989 and 1991

Party	Election year	Business/ self-employed	Cultivators	Other work
Congress	1989	37	34	33
	1991	35	33	25
Janata Dal	1989	17	28	23
	1991	11	17	17
BJP	1989	20	14	17
	1991	28	25	24

Source: *Frontline*/MARG pre-election survey, data used courtesy of Mr. N. Ram.

Additional support for this explanation is provided by another major opinion poll conducted after the 1999 election, which reported the views of "dominant" peasant castes and broke down political support for the BJP by both caste and class. This poll showed that dominant peasant castes were second only to the traditional upper castes in their support for the BJP, and that this support drops off sharply as income declines. (Refer to Table 3 below.)

Table 3. Support for BJP by caste and class hierarchies, 1999

	Very high income	High income	Medium income	Low income	Very low income
Hindu upper caste	47	42	44	39	22
Hindu dominant peasant caste	37	33	36	21	12
Hindu upper OBC	23	27	19	20	14
Hindu lower OBC	28	18	19	15	16
Scheduled tribes	53*	44*	22	17	11
Scheduled caste	26*	23	17	11	7

Based on a small sample size.

Source: CSDS post-election survey analysis in Yogendra Yadav, "The BJP's New Social Bloc," *Frontline* 16, issue 23 (6–19 November 1999), <http://www.flonnet.com/fl1623/16230310.htm>.

In years following the 1991 election, the BJP was able to expand further in some states, notably the largest state, Uttar Pradesh, by exploiting other conflicts arising from the reservations issue, especially those between more and less disadvantaged segments.⁵⁷ The BJP also began to champion the cause of neglected regions within some of the larger Hindi-speaking states, calling for these states to be divided, and was consequently able to expand its appeal in some other states.⁵⁸

Even with all of these tactical forays, however, the BJP's share of the vote largely hit a plateau after 1991. In 1992 the party launched a movement centered on the Ayodhya conflict again, but the consequent destruction of the mosque by a Hindu Nationalist mob, and

57. Kanchan Chandra, "Post-Congress Politics in Uttar Pradesh: The Ethnification of the Party System and its Consequences," in Roy Ramashray and Paul Wallace, eds., *Indian Politics and the 1998 Election: Regionalism, Hindutva and State Politics* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1999).

58. David Patrick Stuligross, "A Piece of Land to Call One's Own: Multicultural Federalism and Institutional Innovation in India" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2001), 307–23.

subsequent riots, led to the party's defeat in 1993 in three of the four states it ruled. In 1996 its vote share was unchanged, and the Congress received more votes, although the BJP won 161 seats to the Congress' 140 and emerged as the single largest party in the parliament. Following the 1996 elections it was the Congress' turn to support a Janata Dal-led coalition government without joining it. When this arrangement collapsed in 1998, the Janata Dal fragmented again, and some factions allied with the BJP. Both the alliances, and the fact that the BJP was the only remaining viable vehicle for anti-Congress votes, allowed the party to increase its vote share to 25.8 percent, but this was still behind the Congress, although again the BJP won more seats.

The government's decision to test nuclear weapons and build a nuclear arsenal was popular with the urban middle class, but later that year the Congress defeated the BJP in two major states on the issue of prices. When the BJP's first coalition government fell in 1999, the following elections demonstrated that the relative vote shares were still virtually unchanged, and the Congress again regained some states in which it had previously lacked power. However, by now the BJP had largely cemented its alliance with a large number of regional parties, including former factions of the Janata Dal and Congress.⁵⁹

The BJP's inability to expand its vote share and its abysmal record in state elections have clearly worried the party's leadership. Since 1998 when the BJP came to power, the Congress has defeated the BJP or its allies in Maharashtra,⁶⁰ Madhya Pradesh (where a Congress government was re-elected), Rajasthan, Karnataka, Assam, Punjab and Delhi and Manipur. Other parties have defeated the BJP or its regional ally in Bihar (again winning re-election) and Tamil Nadu. In

59. The BJP's share of the national vote in 1996 when it increased its parliamentary strength from 120 seats to 161 was 20.3 percent, almost identical to its 1991 vote share. In 1998, when the BJP began to ally with disaffected regional parties, the party's vote share increased to 25.6 percent and remained at the same level in 1999. The Congress' vote share in 1996 and 1998 was 28.8 percent and 25.8 percent, respectively. The Congress did contest more seats than did the BJP but, unlike the BJP, had few significant allies adding to its tally. For details on the elections from 1991 to 1998, see G.V.L. Narasimha Rao and K. Balakrishnan, *Indian Elections: The Nineties* (New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications, 1999), 43; for details on all Indian elections since 1967, see the Election Commission of India's web site, www.eci.gov.in.

60. In Maharashtra a coalition government of the Shiv Sena and BJP was replaced by one of the Congress and the Nationalist Congress Party, a breakaway Congress faction.

Uttar Pradesh, the main prize, a BJP government was defeated but became a junior partner in a coalition government after the elections. After elections to several states in February 2002, Gujarat was the only large state where the BJP was in power without coalition partners, and in Gujarat the Congress had recently won local elections handily.

It is a sign of both the BJP's weakness and observers' distrust of the party, that the March 2002 riots in Gujarat, in which Hindu mobs burned Muslim neighborhoods and businesses over several days, were widely interpreted as a BJP ploy to return to ethnonationalist mobilization in an effort to ensure that it did not lose Gujarat.⁶¹ The Gujarat state government's subsequent decision to go for early elections seems to confirm this analysis. Since February 2002, the VHP has become increasingly assertive, while the national BJP government has begun to focus on its hard-line stance and military mobilization against Pakistan.

Conclusion

HINDU NATIONALISM AS A DOCTRINE has been concerned primarily with promoting unity and a sense of nationhood among Hindus rather than religion per se, but this has largely been motivated by and focused on demonizing minorities, especially Muslims. Although the doctrine has deep ideological roots in Indian responses to British colonialism, and it is served by organizations, notably the RSS, whose discipline, coherence and longevity are well-established, Hindu Nationalism until recently was a fringe movement limited to certain elite groups. The movement's expansion in the late 1980s and early 1990s came about in part because of the errors of other parties, but the popularity of the BJP, the main Hindu Nationalist party, appears to have peaked and may be in decline. Today the BJP is in power largely by default: the Congress is still not strong enough to win elections on its own, and other parties prefer the BJP to the Congress, which could threaten them in their own states.

61. The riots were ostensibly triggered by a Muslim mob burning on a train compartment carrying VHP activists back from Ayodhya. Most reports, however, suggest that the riots had been planned for some time and had the active backing of the state government.

However, with elections due in two years, domestic political losses are driving Hindu Nationalists to take risky actions with potentially far-reaching international ramifications. Hindu Nationalist electoral parties have historically oscillated between policies aimed at building broader coalitions and those aimed at shoring up the support of core activists. All the signs suggest that the BJP is returning to its militant strategy. The most obvious potential consequence for regional security is the possibility of a war between India and Pakistan that could go nuclear. A somewhat more likely scenario might be increasingly provocative actions at home, especially on the controversial Ayodhya issue, that lead to an increase in conflicts between Hindus and Muslims and, conceivably, result in greater tensions with the Muslim world, especially Pakistan.