

HINDU NATIONALISM, ELECTORAL POLITICS, AND THE RISE OF
THE BHARATIYA JANATA PARTY IN INDIA

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its remarkable success in the 1989 and 1991 elections in India, to the point where it has become the leading opposition party in India's national parliament. The BJP's powerful "Hindutva" ideology, based on the idea of a Hindu nation, has propelled the party to the forefront of Indian politics, and poses a major challenge to India's secular democracy. The central argument of this thesis is that by appealing to Hindu nationalist sentiments, the BJP has successfully "outbid" the Congress Party for the loyalty of Hindu nationalist groups, and successfully transformed public discontent into votes. Through an examination of the BJP's strategy and performance, this paper also concludes that the rise of the BJP has accelerated the pace of political decay in India. The BJP's rise coincides with heightened communal tensions, political instability, and a rise in populist politics, which undermines the institutions of political democracy in India.

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Glossary

| | |
|---------------|--|
| ahimsa | non-violence |
| Bharat | India |
| Harijans | "Children of God" - former Untouchables |
| Hindu rashtra | Hindu nation |
| Hindutva | an ideology advocating that Hindus form a single national group and that the Hindu way of life should prevail in India |
| kar seva | volunteer labour undertaken for religious purposes |
| kar sevak | lit. "action servant" pledged to volunteer labour |
| Lok Sabha | Lower House in India's national Parliament |
| puja | worship |
| Ram rajya | rule of Ram |
| ramshilas | Ram's bricks |
| rath yatra | pilgrimage on a chariot |
| sants | holy men |
| swyamsevak | volunteer |

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INTRODUCTION

Ainslee Embree states that, "It is in the working out of what is one of the most admirable features of India, the process of political democracy, that religion and politics formed their explosive mixture."¹ In the 1990's, this explosive combination has manifested itself in the form of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which has risen dramatically over the past two general elections to become the second largest party in the Lok Sabha after the Indian National Congress, and until recently, has controlled four state governments, including Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state. The BJP's powerful "Hindutva" ideology, based on the idea of a Hindu nation, and its cohesive, organized cadre, are unmatched by any other political party, including the Congress. For many Indians, the BJP represents a viable alternative to the Congress Party as the "natural party of government" in India, and many believe that the party's vision of a Hindu nation offers a solution to their economic and social frustrations.

This paper will examine the BJP's electoral resurgence in the 1989 and 1991 elections to become the leading opposition party in India's national parliament. The BJP's rising

¹ Ainslee T. Embree, "Religion and Politics," in Marshall M. Bouton and Philip Oldenburg, eds., India Briefing, 1987 (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987), p. 52.

electoral strength poses an interesting problem for several reasons. First, until the 1989 election the BJP's electoral performance had been almost totally eclipsed by the Congress Party. Does the BJP's rise, then, indicate the decline of the Congress, or is the party's success only a temporary phenomenon? Second, for almost its entire history, the BJP has been a communal party and yet, until recently, it has been relegated to the fringes of national politics. What has propelled the party into the political "mainstream"?

The BJP's rise coincides with a growing activism among Hindu fundamentalist organizations in India. Although the Hindu right has been a force in Indian political and social life since the time of the British Raj, it has recently shifted the focus of its anger from religious minorities to India's secular state which favours religious pluralism. The group self-assertiveness, defiance, and violence which characterize the activities of Hindu fundamentalist groups are, Daniel Gold asserts, "just the sort of human qualities that are likely to arise within a situation of political and cultural domination."² In this view, the secular state occupies a similar role to that of the colonial power. In the eyes of Hindu nationalists, the liberal, secular ideals which underpin the Indian state are totally foreign to India, and are holding back the full flowering of Hindu culture.

² Daniel Gold, "Organized Hinduisms: From Vedic Truth to Hindu Nation," in Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, eds., Fundamentalisms Observed (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 576.

Almost all Indian political parties, with the exception perhaps of those on the Left, have attempted to capitalize on the tremendous mobilizing potential of Hindu nationalist sentiments. The 1980's saw a marked increase in populist politics, which has undermined other channels and institutions of democracy. The party system has declined to such an extent that parties no longer play a socializing role in the political system, but exist purely to generate votes at election time. Combined with the growing use of Hindu communal sentiments by politicians, the normal instability of Indian politics has been rendered increasingly confrontational and explosive. The new "politics of opportunism" in India, based upon Hindu nationalism, poses a serious challenge to India's secular polity.

This thesis will begin with an examination of the BJP's predecessor, the Jana Sangh, whose philosophy has shaped much of the party's policy today. This is followed by an examination of the BJP's time in the "political wilderness" when it was attempting to create a more secular image for itself, and to distance the party from the more communal reputation of the Jana Sangh. However, under the leadership of L.K. Advani the party returned to its Jana Sangh roots. It was widely agreed by the BJP cadre that the attempt to forge a more centrist image for the party had been a failure, and that only by renewing its call for a "Hindu rashtra" or "Hindu nation" based on a Hindu religious ethos, "Hindutva", could the party ever hope to become a force at the all-India level.

An examination of the 1989 and 1991 elections will reveal whether this strategy has indeed achieved the BJP's goal of becoming a national force, alongside the Congress, in Indian politics. Are the BJP's electoral gains likely to be lasting, or do they simply indicate a temporary dissatisfaction with Congress rule? This raises the further question of whether the Congress party's decline as the predominant party in India is permanent. Furthermore, is the BJP a viable alternative to the Congress as the party of government in India? Can it broaden its support base to encompass all regions of the country, enough to form a parliamentary majority?

It appears to this author that the possibility of the BJP becoming a party representative of India's great diversity is severely restricted by its religious ideology and its close association with Hindu fundamentalist groups. While on the one hand, the BJP has made a sincere effort to broaden its support base beyond its traditional upper caste, middle class constituency in the Hindi-speaking north, the party's Hindu nationalist ideology seems to hold little appeal outside of these areas. I will argue that the desire to sustain the passions invoked by Hindu nationalism has caused the BJP to rely increasingly on Hindu nationalist appeals to capture political support, rather than on patient organizational work.

The BJP's strategy also represents a growing "normlessness" in the political system, which poses a serious threat to India's secular constitution. The BJP and its allies no longer feel "encumbered" by the rule of law, and in many

cases have openly defied the courts and flouted the Constitution in order to achieve their aims. The fact that such activity is possible portends grave consequences for the future of political stability in India.

CHAPTER I
SOME THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Religion and Secularism in Indian Politics

For many years, analysts of political and economic development assumed that religion and other parochial identities would have a diminished role in the modern world. They believed that the main issues of political discourse would be constitution making, economic growth, and "nation building". Indian nationalist leaders, such as Jawaharlal Nehru, similarly asserted that religious differences would be overwhelmed in the march of progress. Nehru also argued that Hindu-Muslim enmity was created by the British to divide the Indian people, and if left to themselves, "Hindus and Muslims would work together in a secular political order and would divide internally on economic and class, rather than religious lines."³

The persistence of communal conflict in independent India not only proves that Nehru and other nationalist leaders were wrong in their assessment of Hindu-Muslim relations, but that they misunderstood a potent force that would shape social and political life in India for generations to come. They insisted that religious identity was irrelevant to the freedom struggle,

³ Paul R. Brass, The Politics of India since Independence (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 3.

and treated calls for constitutional safeguards to protect different communities, namely the Muslims, as religious "fanaticism" meant to undermine the secular ideals of the new Indian state. But the perseverance of religious identities in spite of a state ideology of secularism raises some fundamental questions about the nature of secularism in India, and its relationship to religion and politics.

Secularism addressed a number of concerns of the nationalist elite. It declared that in spite of the numerical superiority of Hindus - approximately 83 per cent of the population - India would not be a Hindu state. All citizens would be free to practice their religion, no one would be discriminated against on the basis of religion, and no religion would be favoured over another. In the best liberal, democratic tradition, secularism meant that every cultural group in India was entitled to preserve, protect and promote its cultural life and language. Most important, nationalism and the nation would be based on loyalty to the State before the religious community. Based on this definition of national unity, the Indian government has assiduously denied communal demands for greater autonomy and political recognition.

At the same time, however, the government, the constitution and the courts have involved themselves in religious affairs in ways that have led to tension and conflict. National leaders have felt compelled to distinguish between the Hindu and non-Hindu population by guaranteeing Muslims and Christians their own personal law, while Hindus are

governed by the general laws of India. Other laws are in place to protect the rights of Muslims in Muslim majority areas, such as Kashmir. So while secularism can mean the right to practice one's religion without interference from the state, in practice it has come to mean that the government has a constitutional obligation to support the customs a community claims are essential to its survival.

Since the mid-1980's, there have been rising demands that all Indians should come under a common law, and that the provision of special laws for different religious communities violates the spirit of the constitution and compromises national unity. Not surprisingly, the most vociferous proponents of a common law come from the majority Hindu community who feel that their religious and cultural traditions are threatened by concessions being made to Muslims and other minority communities.

Hindu nationalist sentiments have been a force for political mobilization since the time of Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi himself used Hindu symbols to unite the heterogeneous and fragmented Hindu community against the British, but he also made special appeals for Hindu-Muslim unity. Gandhi's assassination in 1948 was the outcome of a sense of betrayal by a group of nationalist Hindus who believed Gandhi was responsible for making concessions to minorities, and thus violating the integrity of the nation.

This version of Hindu nationalism dominates political discourse in India today. Thus, modern politics provides an

arena for the conflict of competing visions of national unity. Competition takes place through the conventional mechanisms of democracy - political parties, voting blocks, and platforms. But when the democratic process appears unable to satisfy the claim to a Hindu nation, violence seems to be the inevitable solution.

Communalism

Communal conflict is the dominant form of social strife in modernizing societies. Communal cleavages exist alongside modern socio-economic cleavages such as class, yet are likely to be more salient, more intractable and more likely to provoke violent conflict. The persistence of communal conflict demonstrates that it is an integral feature of social change in plural societies.

Communal groups have three distinguishing characteristics: First, they are made up of people who "share in a common culture and identity,"⁴ and who share "clusters of beliefs and values";⁵ second, communal groups include the full range of demographic divisions within the society; and third, they are internally differentiated by wealth, status and power.⁶ Communalism may be defined as, "competitive group solidarities

⁴ Robert Melson and Howard Wolpe, "Modernization and the Politics of Communalism: A Theoretical Perspective," American Political Science Review 64 (Dec. 1970), p. 1112.

⁵ Cynthia H. Enloe, Ethnic Conflict and Political Development (Boston: Little, Brown and Company), p. 17.

⁶ Melson and Wolpe, "Modernization and the Politics of Communalism," p. 1112.

within the same political system based on ethnic, linguistic, racial or religious identities."⁷ These group solidarities generate "mutually pejorative attitudes and competitive behaviour."⁸ Communalism, then, pits different communal groups against each other in the competitive struggle for wealth, status and power, and places "group membership" above national identity.

The above definitions, however, conceal an important facet of the communal equation in India. The majority community can equate its own interests with the national interest, "and see even rational claims for justice by a minority religious community as an attack on national unity."⁹ National unity thus becomes, "a code phrase to denigrate legitimate assertions of cultural pluralism."¹⁰ Communalism both creates enmity between different cultural groups, and gives rise to competing definitions of the national community.

Modernization and Political Instability

The modernization process produces a variety of challenges to the creation and maintenance of political stability. Modernization involves a fundamental shift in values, attitudes

⁷ Milton J. Esman, "The Management of Communal Conflict," Public Policy, 21, Winter, 1973, p. 49.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ainslee T. Embree, "Religion and Politics," p. 51.

¹⁰ Ibid.

and expectations. It requires changes from particularistic to universalistic loyalties, from loyalty to the family, village, religious or ethnic group, to loyalty to the class or nation. Modernization expands people's knowledge about their environment through increased literacy, education and mass communication. Demographically, modernization increases vertical, occupational and geographical mobility, and creates rapid urban as opposed to rural growth.

Economically, modernization produces greater occupational diversity, and ushers in a sharp increase in the significance of commercial and industrial over agricultural activity. There tends to be a concomitant expansion of the geographical scope of economic activity, from the village or region to the national level in the form of a national market, national sources of capital, and national economic institutions. Ideally, modernization increases the level of economic well-being while decreasing the level of economic inequality.

Modernization's impact on the political sphere also comes in a variety of forms. Political modernization is often held to be the movement from a traditional polity to a modern polity. Understood in this way, political modernization involves three broad processes. First, it replaces traditional, religious, ethnic and familial political authorities by a single secular, national political authority. Second, political modernization produces new and differentiated political functions, and the development of specialized institutions to perform these functions. Third, it facilitates

the participation in politics of a variety of social groups in the society.

The above processes represent the direction in which political modernization should take, but do not accurately portray the actual effects of modernization on the political process. In practice, modernization "always involves change in and usually involves the disintegration of a traditional political system, but it does not necessarily involve significant movement toward a modern political system."¹¹ Social and economic modernization may indeed be taking place, but it does not necessarily follow that political modernization will also occur. Traditional institutions may deteriorate, but nothing rises up to take their place: Political participation occurs without the requisite institutions, such as political parties, to channel and control it; traditional authority erodes without the establishment of modern sources of authority; and particularistic identities do not give way to more universalistic ones.

Modernization makes all groups in the society more self-conscious and more self-assertive in relation to other groups. Even traditional groupings, such as tribe or caste, can become the focus of new identifications. As Huntington notes, "the increased consciousness, coherence, organization, and action which [modernization] produces in many social forces which

¹¹ Samuel P. Huntington, Political Order in Changing Societies (New Haven and London: Yale University Press), p. 35.

existed on a much lower level of conscious identity and organization in traditional society," is one of the most striking features of modernization.¹² Traditional groups then become new social forces, capable of meeting many of the needs for personal identity, economic advancement and social welfare which arise in the modernizing polity. The rise of group consciousness, however, is a major obstacle to the creation of political institutions that encompass a broader range of social forces. Two aspects of the modernization process tend to enhance group loyalties, and the potentiality of group conflict: social mobilization and economic development.

Deutsch defined social mobilization as, "the process in which major clusters of old social, economic and psychological commitments are eroded or broken and people become available for new patterns of socialization and behaviour."¹³ Social mobilization involves changes in peoples' aspirations and expectations which, if not satisfied, mobilize people into political action. The expansion of literacy and education enhances peoples' awareness of their environment, and the opportunities for advancement which exist in that environment. If the number of literate and educated people in the society grows at a faster rate than available jobs and opportunities, political instability ensues. And generally, the highly

¹² Ibid., p. 37.

¹³ Karl W. Deutsch, "Social Mobilization and Political Development," American Political Science Review 55 (Sept. 1961), pp. 493-514, cited in Melson and Wolpe, "Modernization and the Politics of Communalism," p. 1114.

educated will express their dissatisfaction through more extreme and violent means than the barely literate: "Alienated university graduates prepare revolutions; alienated technical or secondary school graduates plan coups; alienated primary school leavers engage in more frequent but less significant forms of political unrest."¹⁴

Economic development can also intensify the gap between peoples' aspirations and expectations. It widens disparities in income, and encourages rapid migration from rural to urban areas, thus undermining social ties and producing alienation. Economic development increases levels of literacy, education and exposure to the mass media, which in turn, increase aspirations beyond a level at which they can be satisfied.

It also throws groups into conflict with each other. Social mobilization causes peoples' aspirations to converge, and they come to want, and demand, the same things: more goods, more recognition, and more power. Dissatisfaction, then, can lead to communal conflict, but it also rouses the socially mobilized into political action. Increasingly, the road to social and economic advancement becomes political participation which, if not properly regulated, can lead to rebellion or revolution.

The rising demands and expectations of an increasingly participatory electorate pose a considerable challenge to the Indian political system. The "awakening" of the Indian

¹⁴ Huntington, Political Order in Changing Societies, p. 48.

electorate has thrust a plethora of diverse groups into politics, each seeking political advancement and political redress for their grievances. However, rising demands and expectations are only partly responsible for political instability in India. Far greater responsibility lies with the behaviour of politicians who channel and control grievances and dissatisfaction through the party system, and thus determine the direction political participation takes.

Political Competition in Plural Societies

In plural societies, open, democratic political systems tend to foster communal politics. Open systems encourage the participation of the masses in the political process which, in turn leads aspirant politicians to appeal to the most easily mobilized loyalties, and to present themselves as representatives of communal interests. Mass participation stimulates communal appeals, and communal conflict encourages the recruitment of communal elites. In effect, a vicious circle ensues whereby, "aspirant politicians make communal appeals and communal demands which exacerbate communal tensions; these tensions, in turn encourage the recruitment of leaders who will make communal appeals and demands."¹⁵ Thus, politicians can make communal cleavages politically salient, and transform a culturally diverse or "pluralistic" society into one in which politics is practiced almost exclusively

¹⁵ Melson and Wolpe, "Modernization and the Politics of Communalism," p. 1122.

along communal lines.

In order to win elections, political parties organize coalitions that are based upon natural cleavages that divide the society. A party that maintains the support of a broad range of groups can build winning coalitions at every election. But in plural societies, broadly-based coalitions can become impossible to sustain. They lie vulnerable to the machinations of political "entrepreneurs" who resort to "ethnic demand generation" to gain support, thus compelling moderates to adopt a less compromising stance in order to avoid defeat. The successful political entrepreneur, "manipulates natural social cleavages, makes certain of those cleavages politically salient, and exploits, uses and suppresses political conflict."¹⁶ The dominant elite, then, may face attack from "dissident ultras" within their respective communal groups for not being sufficiently vigilant in defending their own group, and for being too accommodating to others.¹⁷

In open, democratic systems, political entrepreneurs act with impunity. In the absence of sufficient correctives, political competition becomes based on "outbidding - on what is appealing even though it is not credible."¹⁸ Politics

¹⁶ Alvin Rabushka and Kenneth A. Shepsle, Politics in Plural Societies: A Theory of Democratic Instability (Columbus: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1972), p. 151.

¹⁷ Esman, "The Management of Communal Conflict," p. 73.

¹⁸ Giovanni Sartori, Democratic Theory (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1965), p. 68.

becomes, "a matter of bewitching rather than accomplishment, of promises rather than deeds," and mass mobilization comes to be associated with competitive demagogy and rabid populism.¹⁹

Yet, what gives rise to such destabilizing behaviour? Not all democracies fall victim to political entrepreneurs, nor does it follow that a culturally plural society must eventually give way to communal politics and communal conflict. Certainly, the modernization process heightens group identities, but in the presence of strong political institutions, these groups can be integrated into the wider polity. A highly institutionalized political system also encourages a wider identity beyond the ethnic group or community. Political entrepreneurship and outbidding, then, become symptoms of a more complex process of institutional decay.

Weak Party Systems and Political Instability

The primary institutional means by which political participation is regulated occurs through political parties and party systems: "Parties organize political participation; party systems affect the rate at which participation expands."²⁰ An effective party system structures the participation of new groups in politics in such a way as to

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Huntington, Political Order in Changing Societies, p. 401.

either pre-empt or deflect anomie political activity. A highly institutionalized party system is adaptable, complex, autonomous, and coherent, thereby enabling it to integrate new social forces into the wider political system.²¹ A weak, ineffective party system suffers from low levels of institutionalization; its political institutions and procedures lack "value" and "stability", and thus lack the means to prevent normless political activity.

Institutional decay leads to a decline in more moderate means of dissent and opposition. It renders traditional modes of articulating discontent ineffective, and so emerging social forces seek redress of their grievances outside the framework of the state, and outside the framework of civil society. Eventually, these social forces may overcome a weak party system by challenging its authority and legitimacy. Opposition parties, seeking political dominance, seeking to channel social unrest into votes and money, give social movements a "beach head" from which they can attack the whole political system. As soon as the opposition has secured its position, through increased support and electoral victories, it will attack any codes of behaviour valued by the entrenched political system. To the opposition, these codes, or norms represent the greatest obstacle to political power. The opposition itself becomes associated with a nationalist or revolutionary movement bent

²¹ For a discussion of Huntington's four criteria of institutionalization, please see Huntington, Political Order in Changing Societies, pp. 12-24.

on overthrowing the existing system, and if the ruling party fails to crush the movement, prevailing norms and institutions will lose their authority and legitimacy.

Institutional decay can become a catalyst for the emergence of religious nationalism. In a highly institutionalized party system, in which all parties agree to the rules and codes of political behaviour, ethnic or religious nationalist movements will remain on the "fringes" of the political system. Institutional decay, however, creates the need for new identifications and loyalties. People may come to identify with new groups that have evolved in the process of modernization who propagate values and symbols that are associated with older bases of association. The decline of more moderate means of dissent and opposition enable a religious-based party to capture support by appealing to religious nationalist sentiments. Thus, religious nationalism gains legitimacy through its endorsement by a political party, and the religious party in turn, can become a new and powerful source of people's identity.

In this thesis, I will argue that through the use of outbidding tactics, the BJP has dramatically improved its electoral strength in the 1989 and 1991 elections to become one of the most important forces in Indian politics. By appealing to Hindu nationalist sentiments, the BJP has successfully outbid the Congress Party for the loyalty of Hindu nationalist groups, and transformed public discontent into votes. I will also argue, however, that outbidding by an opposition party can

change the rules of political competition to the disadvantage of the ruling party. Unlike the government, which must reach compromises with other groups in the society, communal outbidders only owe responsibility to their group, and are therefore able to make more promises than the government. Communal outbidders also come to rely on extra-parliamentary "sites" of political competition where the government, sworn to uphold the law and work within the institutions of the state, is at a disadvantage.

Outbidding, then, has accelerated the process of political decay in India. Political competition has become a perpetual popularity contest, masking the complex issues of governance such as economic development. Electioneering and "vote-grabbing" have become a permanent feature of political competition, thereby undermining other institutions of democracy.

This argument gives rise to several sub-hypotheses. First, a political party based on religious nationalism lacks autonomy, and will always be the creature of the social forces to which it is beholden for organizational and ideological support. The BJP is dependent on the support of Hindu nationalist groups for its survival, and any attempt to break free from their influence will only lead to the BJP's organizational and electoral decline.

Second, the more a political party comes to depend on the support of extra-parliamentary groups, the more the party's agenda comes to be governed by these groups. This has several

important consequences for the BJP: firstly, if Hindu nationalist groups flout the law and defy the Constitution, the BJP may be forced to endorse or even follow these actions; secondly, the party's ability to govern may be hindered by its association with organizations for whom political power translates as the authority to establish a Hindu nation, rather than fulfill the needs of the people; thirdly, the party may divide between "hardliners", who favour close association with outside groups, and "moderates", who favour a more independent position. BJP "moderates", then, may find themselves under attack from "hardliners" for not being sufficiently vigilant in upholding the interests of the Hindu community.

Third, the emergence of religious bases of organization and authority create anomie and political decay. Religious nationalism excludes a large proportion of the population in its definition of what constitutes the nation. Those who are shut out will turn to their own religious group for sources of identity and security, and may even resort to terrorism to defend the group. Also, while the secular state manages to encompass and tolerate great diversity, to the proponents of a religious nation, any other loyalty outside the religious group amounts to treason.

Although a religious-based opposition party may be unable to broaden its support base to encompass other interests, or successfully perform in office, it can still capture support by denigrating existing bases of authority. By supporting an alternative vision of national identity, the opposition can

justify breaking the law in order to usurp the government. Moreover, growing normlessness in political activity encourages the rise of other "sites" of political competition beyond parliament and elections. Because the government is sworn to uphold the existing order, extra-parliamentary sites of political competition will work to the advantage of the opposition. In this way, the BJP's rise in Indian politics is incumbent upon its ability to sustain religious fervour between elections, and ensure that the main areas of political competition remain outside the purview of parliament.

CHAPTER TWO

FROM THE JANA SANGH TO THE BJP: EVOLUTION OF A COMMUNAL PARTY

Ideological and Organizational Roots: The RSS

The BJP's ideological and organizational foundation lay with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, a Hindu nationalist organization that traces its origins back to the 1920's.²² The RSS was founded in the town of Nagpur, in the state of Maharashtra in 1925 by Dr. Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, a Telugu Brahmin. Though Hedgewar was a member of the Hindu Mahasabha, a Hindu nationalist party, he worked closely with local Congress party workers in the Non-Cooperation League in 1921 and with Muslims in the Khilafat movement.²³ The failure of the movement, and the consequent outbreak of communal violence, convinced Hedgewar that India's freedom could only be won by Hindus, and to do so the Hindu culture and character needed strengthening:

²² Translates as "National Volunteer Organization". From this point forward, the initials "RSS" will be used.

²³ The Khilafat movement was taken up by Mahatma Gandhi in 1920 to protest against the British treatment of the Turkish ruler, the Khalifah, after Turkey's defeat in World War One. Although the campaign developed only among a small group of Indian Muslims, Gandhi believed that British behaviour violated Muslim religious sensibilities, and believed the campaign to be an opportunity to demonstrate "satyagraha", non-violent protest, as the perfect action in situations of injustice. By including Hindus in the anti-British protest, Gandhi also hoped to achieve communal harmony.

It became clear that Hindus were the nation in Bharat, and that Hindutva was Rashriyatva . . . Only Hindus could free Hindusthan and save Hindu culture . . . Hindu youth had to be organised on the basis of personal character and absolute love of the motherland.²⁴

Hedgewar and others believed that Gandhi's method of ahimsa, or non-violence, for achieving emancipation from the British would only encourage Muslim dominance of Hindus. A major influence on the development of the RSS's ideological foundation came from V.D. Savarkar's essay "Hindutva", in which he advanced the thesis that Hindus are a nation. According to Savarkar, Hindus are the indigenous people of the subcontinent and they form a single national group.

Under Hedgewar's guidance, the RSS became a highly disciplined organization in which swayamsevaks engaged in a daily routine of exercise, games, patriotic singing, and military-like drills and marching. In response to an increasingly militant Islam, the organization spread to almost every part of India in the 1930's, achieving particular success in north India - Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Bihar, the Punjab and the Central Indian princely states. By 1940, it claimed a membership of 400,000 people, primarily from north India. RSS recruits came mainly from urban areas among high-caste, middle-income groups, and among educated urban youths. But the RSS's angry diatribes against Pakistan in the post-Independence

²⁴ Jean A. Curran, Jr., Shri Guruji, the Man and His Mission (Delhi: Bharat Prakashan, 1957), p. 25, cited in Craig Baxter, The Jana Sangh: A Biography of an Indian Political Party (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 33.

period also attracted substantial support from refugees who had migrated to West Bengal and North-western India after Partition in 1947. As Andersen and Damle note, businessmen from Punjabi refugee backgrounds were, and still are, an important source of funds for the RSS.²⁵

The RSS had a very different vision of Indian nationhood from that of the Congress leadership who led the nationalist movement against the British. The Congress presented Indian nationhood in secular terms, where all Indians would be bound together by a common citizenship, and religious identity would not stand as a barrier to full participation in the nation. Although Gandhi felt uncomfortable with the "unspiritual" nature of the Congress' vision, he too rejected the idea that India was solely for the Hindu majority and believed that all religions could contribute to the growth of a new sense of Indianness.

For followers of the RSS and the Hindu Mahasabha, a religiously plural India was anathema. To them, India was "Bharat", a land where Hindus could practice their religious and cultural traditions without contamination by Muslims or Christians. Madhavrao Sadashiv Golwalkar, who succeeded Hedgewar as leader of the RSS after his death in 1940, expressed this idea in his book We or Our Nationhood Defined:

The non-Hindu peoples in Hindustan must either adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to

²⁵ Walter K. Andersen and Shridhar D. Damle, The Brotherhood in Saffron (Boulder and London: Westview Press, 1987), p. 49.

respect and hold in reverence Hindu religion, must entertain no idea but those of glorification of the Hindu race and culture . . . in a word they must cease to be foreigners, or may stay in this country, wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment - not even citizen's rights.²⁶

In the 1940's, the anger of Hindu nationalists was directed against the idea of partition, and against the Congress and Gandhi who seemed willing to sacrifice the Hindus' birthright. In their eyes, partition was the "vivisection" of the Holy Motherland, and Gandhi and the Congress traitors to all Hindus. The frustration of Hindu nationalists led to the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi in January, 1948 by Nathuram Godse, a young man who had connections with both the RSS and the Hindu Mahasabha. Gandhi's assassination demonstrated the devastating potential of Hindu communalism in Indian public life, but it also unleashed a wave of popular hostility against the RSS and other communal organizations. Following the assassination, Golwalkar was imprisoned, the RSS was banned, and the Hindu Mahasabha voluntarily withdrew from politics.

Birth of a Communal Party: The Jana Sangh

It is often said that the Jana Sangh arose out of a combination of a partyless leader, Syama Prasad Mookerjee, and a leaderless party.²⁷ After the ban on the RSS was lifted,

²⁶ M.S. Golwalkar, We or Our Nationhood Defined (Nagpur: Bharat Prakashan, 4th ed., 1947), pp. 55-56, cited in Craig Baxter, The Jana Sangh, p. 31.

²⁷ Craig Baxter, The Jana Sangh, p.54.

there was some suggestion, particularly among the organization's younger activists, that it take a more active role in politics. Not only did the organization wish to have political "protection" in the future, but the RSS also found it difficult to support the programs of any of the major parties: the Communists, which were seen as anti-religious and having a loyalty outside India, were alien to the RSS; the Congress party under Nehru was strongly opposed to the RSS and eventually completely closed the doors of its membership to the organization; and even the Hindu Mahasabha, which was ideologically closest to the RSS, was viewed by the younger RSS activists as stagnant. What was needed was a new party that would be based on "Hindutva" and manned by the RSS. The new party would stand for the true Bharatiya culture and do all in its power to stave off the dangers of communism. Golwalkar was not enthusiastic about the direction chosen by the younger members, and throughout his tenure he opposed any direct involvement in politics for the organization, although individual swayamsevaks were free to support whatever party they wished.

The program which was to be in large measure adopted by the Jana Sangh was first formulated by Keval Malkani, editor of the RSS mouthpiece Organiser. In Malkani's article, entitled "Programme for a New Political Party", he wrote: "The good government of Bharat . . . depends directly and fully on the formation of a nationwide party which will be as much revivalist of ancient values as it will be futurist in its

targets".²⁸ He further wrote:

If . . . the unity of the country is to be made stronger and more integral, ancient foundations must be reinforced and amplified and suitably modernised . . . The principle of this reorganisation in Hindustan can only be "Hindutva" . . . Communism can be combated and conquered in Hindustan by the Hindus only through Hindutva . . .²⁹

The idea that the Jana Sangh was best capable of staving off the threat of Communism was an oft-repeated theme in the writings of Hindu activists like Malkani. But Malkani's article also pointed to a fundamental dichotomy within the yet-to-be-formed Jana Sangh that is a continuing theme in its incarnation as the BJP: tradition versus modernity. While only the resurrection of Hindu principles can make India great, these principles must be applied in such a way as to help the country succeed in the modern world.

Mookerjee himself rose to prominence in Bengali politics where he was first elected to the Bengal Legislative Council as a Congressman in 1929. He became increasingly disenchanted with the Congress and in 1939, he joined the Hindu Mahasabha. On August 15, 1949, Nehru included him in his first Cabinet as Minister of Industries and Supplies. He resigned in September, 1949 when the Indian government took police action to quell a movement for the independence of the princely state of Hyderabad. After two years in the political wilderness, he was called upon to lead the Jana Sangh, which was officially

²⁸ Organiser, October 9, 1950 and October 23, 1950, cited in Craig Baxter, The Jana Sangh, p. 59.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 60.

founded in New Delhi on October 21, 1951. While Mookerjee did not picture the new party sweeping the polls at either the all-India level or at the state level, he did believe in the need for a new party.

The party adopted an eight-point program: 1) united Bharat; 2) "reciprocity instead of appeasement" toward Pakistan; 3) an independent foreign policy "consistent with Bharat's paramount self-interest"; 4) rehabilitation of refugees with "suitable compensation from Pakistan"; 5) increased production of goods especially food and cloth and decentralization of industry; 6) development of a single "Bharatiya" culture; 7) equal rights for all citizens regardless of caste, community or creed and improvement of the standard of the backward classes; and 8) readjustment of the boundaries of West Bengal with Bihar.³⁰ The program was largely designed to appeal to Bengalis (Mookerjee's support base), but there was in it the genesis of an all-India policy which would undergo some "fine-tuning" over the course of the next few elections.³¹ There was enough emphasis on "Bharatiya culture" in the program to deter non-Hindus from being attracted to the party, even though Mookerjee, who represented the least communal wing of the party, emphasized that the Jana Sangh should be open to all Indians.

RSS-trained individuals came to occupy key leadership

³⁰ Organiser, April 16, 1951, cited in Craig Baxter, The Jana Sangh, p. 70.

³¹ Ibid., p. 70.

positions within the Jana Sangh. Active members of the RSS, former members of the RSS, and RSS sympathisers constituted the backbone of the Jana Sangh's leadership and its rank and file, and this remains true of the BJP today. Similarly, the Jana Sangh's support base, and that of the BJP, almost exactly parallels the constituency of the RSS. In the 1950's and 1960's, Kshatriyas, Brahmins and Vaishyas, the dominant castes in Indian society, formed almost 80 per cent of the top hierarchy of the Jana Sangh. Harijans, Backward castes and minorities were almost completely absent from the party. An overwhelming number of Jana Sangh members were engaged in business, and financial support through membership subscriptions and contributions came predominantly from the middle class. The party's caste and class character reflected a homogeneous and unified support base that could be easily mobilized at election time. But it prevented the party from expanding its base to include more diverse castes and income groups, which might have enabled it to become a national alternative to the Congress Party whose support base was far more heterogeneous.

The Jana Sangh's ideological connection with the RSS also limited the party's appeal, and created friction within the party between those who wished to remain ideologically dependent on the RSS and those who wished to adopt a more modern, secular, forward-looking program. The Jana Sangh may have been "well-built" and "disciplined" in terms of its organizational and ideological association with the RSS, but

it also experienced its share of dissensions and defections at various levels of the party. Differences of opinion were treated harshly by the Jana Sangh leadership, and those who failed to "toe" the ideological line of the RSS faced punishment and expulsion from the party. This intolerance of dissent indicates both a hierarchical and authoritarian command structure within the party, and demonstrates the powerful hold the RSS maintained over its political affiliate.

Electoral Performance

The party made a bare beginning in the 1952 elections, polling only 3.06% of the vote and winning three seats in the Lok Sabha, two in West Bengal and one in Rajasthan. In the state assembly elections it won 35 seats or 2.76% of the vote. Over the next decade, the Jana Sangh steadily improved its electoral performances and became almost exclusively a party of the Hindi-speaking north. Here, the party's support base was almost exclusively in urban areas among shopkeepers, small industrialists and professional people. The Jana Sangh's preponderance in the north is exemplified by the results of the 1962 election where the party won 13.77% of Lok Sabha seats in Hindi-speaking areas and less than one-and-a-half percent outside. Uttar Pradesh became the leading state in Jana Sangh representation and, not surprisingly, the party was emerging as the strongest contender to the Congress in this state.

The 1967 election was a watershed in the Jana Sangh's electoral history up to that point. The Congress Party,

internally divided between two rival factions, suffered a significant decline in electoral support, especially in the Hindi-speaking north where the Jana Sangh emerged as the principal gainer.³² The Congress lost its majorities in Punjab, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal. The Jana Sangh won six of seven Lok Sabha seats in Delhi, became the official opposition in Haryana, and retained its status as the second largest party after the Congress in Uttar Pradesh. It also shared in the governance of Bihar, where the party experienced its sharpest increase in support, and in Madhya Pradesh. The Jana Sangh had risen to become the third largest party in the Lok Sabha, and a major force in the ranks of the opposition.

The Rise of Mrs. Gandhi and the Emergency

The rise of Indira Gandhi as India's third prime minister effectively curtailed any hopes the Jana Sangh may have had of becoming a national force in Indian politics. In 1971, Mrs. Gandhi called national parliamentary elections in order to win a popular mandate for her Congress (R), which broke away from the main Congress Party two years before. By appealing directly to the people with an emotive platform of garibi hatao

³² The period immediately following the death of Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri in 1966, was marked by an intense power struggle within the Congress Party between Mrs. Gandhi and entrenched state party bosses. Although Mrs. Gandhi had successfully consolidated her pre-eminence within the Congress by 1967, the division hindered any united effort by the party in the 1967 election, and the party won only a narrow majority in the Lok Sabha (See Table 1 for electoral results).

("abolish poverty"), Mrs. Gandhi's Congress (R) won a landslide two-thirds majority in the Lok Sabha, while the Jana Sangh captured only 7.4 per cent of the vote and 22 of 518 seats in the Lok Sabha.³³ The "Indira wave" continued after India's victory in the third Indo-Pakistan War, and Congress (R) victories in the state assembly elections of 1972 which confirmed Congress dominance at the state level.

Between 1972 and 1975, Mrs. Gandhi established a type of rule that was highly personalized and centralized. Cabinet ministers, party presidents, and chief ministers were chosen only on the basis of their loyalty to her. She transformed the nature of centre-state party relations by removing every Congress chief minister who had an independent base of support and replacing them with chief ministers who were personally loyal to her. At the national level, Mrs. Gandhi emasculated the organizational wing of the party, centralized the powers of lower units in the organization, and established authoritarian rather than democratic procedures for recruiting party officers.

This style of rule, however, was ill-equipped to deal with the crises that faced the Indian state during this period. Between 1972 and 1974, India's economy took a tumble. The monsoons failed, crops failed, and food prices rose. The inability of the government to alleviate the situation soon led to challenges to Mrs. Gandhi's dominance. Student uprisings

³³ See Paul R. Brass, The Politics of India Since Independence, pp. 70-71.

in Gujarat brought down the Congress government there. In Bihar, a movement arose to depose Mrs. Gandhi's government led by J.P. Narayan, a Gandhian, who had a "national" reputation equal to that of Mrs. Gandhi herself. The threat of the "J.P. movement" spreading to other parts of India, mass rallies in New Delhi in the spring of 1975, and charges of corruption brought against Indira for the 1971 election campaign, combined to form overwhelming resistance to Mrs. Gandhi and her Congress regime. In order to decisively check the rising tide of opposition to her rule, Mrs. Gandhi declared a state of Emergency on June 26, 1975. The entire country was eventually brought under direct rule from New Delhi, Parliamentary elections scheduled for March, 1976 were postponed, press censorship was implemented, and tens of thousands of those suspected of opposing the government, even Congress party workers, were jailed.

The RSS was banned for the second time in its history, and RSS offices and the homes of known sympathizers were raided throughout India. The ban drove most of its workers and cadres underground where they became part of the organised resistance against Emergency rule. The RSS, which had been variously labelled as reactionary, anti-democratic, and fascist, found itself in the unusual position of fighting for the restoration of democracy in India. Although some 25,000 RSS activists were held under the Internal Security Act within the first few weeks of the Emergency, almost 50,000 workers went underground.

With its organizational machinery still intact, the RSS

cadre of the Jana Sangh formed the backbone of the resistance movement. The organization published and circulated anti-government newspapers and information bulletins in India, and established a "Friends of India Society International" in London to put pressure on the British government to condemn the Emergency. The RSS also helped to launch a ten-week Satyagraha (passive resistance movement) against the Indian government in November, 1975 in which tens of thousands of Indians offered themselves for arrest. Approximately 80,000 people were arrested, bringing the total number of political prisoners to an estimated 1,40,000.³⁴

The participation of the RSS in the anti-emergency movement secularized and democratized the Jana Sangh, and enabled RSS-Jana Sangh cadres to become aware of their role as potent forces for socio-economic and political change. When Mrs. Gandhi called elections for March, 1977, the Jana Sangh decided to merge with other opposition parties in order to provide a united front against the Congress. The resentment of the Indian masses against the Emergency combined with the organizational strength of the Jana Sangh and the Bharatiya Lok Dal, the other major coalition member, swept the newly created Janata Party to victory with 45 per cent of the vote and 298 out of 542 seats in the Lok Sabha. The Janata sweep was primarily in the north where the effects of the Emergency,

³⁴ These figures are taken from Geeta Puri, Bharatiya Jana Sangh, Organisation and Ideology: Delhi, A Case Study (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt Ltd., 1980), p. 237.

including Sanjay Gandhi's slum clearance and sterilization programs, were most keenly felt. Here, the Congress won only 2 of 237 parliamentary seats. The Jana Sangh group, whose support base lay in the Hindi-speaking north, won 93 seats, making it the largest component in the Janata alliance.

The cabinet of new prime minister Morarji Desai included three Jana Sangh members, all of whom were also members of the RSS. President of the party, Atal Behari Vajpayee became Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lal Krishan Advani became Minister of Information and Broadcasting, and Brij Lal Varma became Minister of Industry. Jana Sangh members began to moderate their hard-line ideological stance to bring it more in line with the Janata Party's program of secularism, Gandhian socialism and economic and political decentralization.

In spite of this, the Jana Sangh's RSS connection aroused suspicions within the Janata Party that the RSS would use its organizational strength and resources to enhance the position of the Jana Sangh group. Many within the party, particularly from the Bharatiya Lok Dal group, began to demand that in order to retain membership in the party, the Jana Sangh group would have to sever its RSS connection. The dual membership controversy was a direct cause of the break-up of the Janata Party in July, 1979, when Charan Singh led his Bharatiya Lok Dal group out of the party. However, it was the cohesiveness of the Jana Sangh, rather than RSS manipulation that was the real problem: "The Jana Sangh group acted as a unit, and this capability enhanced its potential to assert power because the

other groups were not nearly so united."³⁵ Unlike the other groups within Janata, the Jana Sangh did not experience massive defections. As new elections approached, the Janata Party began to see many of its members, especially former Congressmen, defect to the Congress(I) Party.

The Jana Sangh's participation in the Janata coalition produced important consequences for the future development of the party. It gave the party its first taste of governing at the national level, and forced the Jana Sangh to soften its hard-line Hindu nationalist stance in favour of moderation and compromise. For the first time, the party entered the "mainstream" of national politics, and its broadened ideological base left open the future possibility of a more representative party.

However, the party's new image compromised its core support among Hindu nationalists. In particular, the Jana Sangh's foreign policy position, which it had now given up, formed a huge part of the party's public appeal. Moreover, the Jana Sangh's image became tarnished by its association with an unstable, inefficient government that proved to be a chaotic alternative to Congress authoritarianism. The collapse of the Janata coalition after less than two years in office further demonstrated that the opposition could only make gains when the Congress faltered, and only then as part of a coalition. No single opposition party carried enough support to confront the

³⁵ Andersen and Damle, The Brotherhood in Saffron, p. 221.

Congress alone.

The RSS emerged from the Janata phase with a particularly jaded view of politics. During the dual membership crisis, the RSS came under increasing pressure from Jana Sangh leaders to open its membership to non-Hindus. While Balasaheb Deoras, leader of the RSS, assured the Janata leadership that the RSS supported a secular state and respected all religions, he was apprehensive that a more inclusive membership might undermine the Hindu nationalist orientation of the organization. With regard to the dual membership question itself, the RSS decided to take no action especially after the Congress' electoral victory in the 1980 election. The RSS decided it was not in its interests to earn the enmity of the new ruling party, especially when so many members of the Janata Party were so opposed to the RSS. It is also probable that the RSS wanted the Jana Sangh to leave the Janata coalition.

A New Image

The January, 1980 general elections saw the return of Mrs. Gandhi's Congress to the centre of power in New Delhi on the campaign slogan, "Elect a government that works". The Congress swept the polls with 43% of the vote, while Janata was reduced to a mere 19%. It won only 31 seats, compared to the 203 it held after the 1977 elections.

The 1980 election was equally disastrous for the Jana Sangh. It won only 16 seats in the New Delhi parliament as opposed to the 93 it had won in the previous general election.

Uncertain of its future within the crumbling Janata party, and fearful of losing the support of the RSS, the Jana Sangh announced plans for a national convention to be held on April 5 to decide the future of the party.

Over 3500 delegates from both the Jana Sangh group and others who had left the Janata Party (including 15 of the remaining 28 Janata members of the Lok Sabha) met and formed the Bharatiya Janata Party.³⁶ Though the new party clearly wanted to retain the support of the RSS cadre for organizational purposes, and to portray itself as the legitimate successor to the Jana Sangh, it decided that only by adopting a more centrist image could the party recover the support it had lost to the Congress in the election. It adopted the more "secular" green and saffron flag similar to that of the Janata party, rather than the solid saffron flag of the Jana Sangh, and it adopted the lotus rather than the lamp as the party's new symbol.³⁷ It also did not restore the position of "organizing secretary" which had been the most important office in the Jana Sangh.

The BJP also sought to erase the communal image that had tainted the party during the period of Janata rule. The party placed special emphasis on communal harmony, and committed itself to the "full protection of the life and property of the

³⁶ Ibid., p. 227.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 228.

minorities".³⁸ In his presidential address to the National Council of the party in 1982, Atal Behari Vajpayee advised the opposition parties to "resist the temptation of compromising with religious and communal fanaticism . . . simply to get power", and asserted,

Only to the extent that we are able to insulate administration, politics and elections from the corrosive influence of caste, community and creed would we be able to strengthen national unity.³⁹

In the state assembly elections held in May, 1980, the BJP was able to reclaim much of the Jana Sangh's old support base. Its greatest gains were in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, which had Jana Sangh-led governments during the Janata period. The party was further buoyed by wins in two assembly by-elections in late 1981, and in January, 1982, it captured the Sagar (Madhya Pradesh) parliamentary seat from the Congress Party, which was outside the traditional area of Jana Sangh strength in the northwestern part of the state.

On May 19, 1982, four more states went to the polls - Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, West Bengal, and Kerala. The BJP worked out electoral arrangements with Charan Singh's Lok Dal in Haryana and Himachal Pradesh, and fought the elections alone in West Bengal and Kerala in hopes of becoming a third alternative to the Congress and communist-led alliances in

³⁸ Kameshwar Choudhary, "BJP's Changing View of Hindu-Muslim Relations," Economic and Political Weekly, August 17, 1991, p. 1901.

³⁹ Ibid.

these states.⁴⁰ It improved its standing in Himachal Pradesh from 24 to 29 seats out of 68, becoming the single largest party there, but its representation dropped in Haryana from 11 to 6 of the 90 assembly seats. In West Bengal and Kerala it won no seats, but justified its poor showing by claiming that it had intended only to acquaint voters with the party in this election.

The BJP's electoral successes over the first two years of its existence encouraged party leaders to be optimistic that the BJP could branch out beyond the Hindi-speaking north to become an all-India party. In February, 1982 the party's national executive resolved to concentrate on an electoral strategy for future elections rather than on attempting to form a "national front" with other opposition parties against the Congress. The BJP would "retain its separate identity;" it would support "concerted actions by opposition parties . . . on specific issues relating to people's welfare and democracy;" and it would participate in "electoral arrangements with other parties aimed at ensuring the defeat of Congress candidates."⁴¹

The three key state assembly elections of 1983, in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Tripura, dealt a severe blow to Congress dominance in the south. Although the BJP only won 18

⁴⁰ The arrangement broke down in Himachal Pradesh largely because many Lok Dal candidates refused to give up seats which had been assigned to the BJP.

⁴¹ Organiser, 28 February, 1982, cited in Andersen and Damle, The Brotherhood in Saffron, p. 230.

of 225 seats in Karnataka, and 4 of 294 seats in Andhra Pradesh, the Congress was crushed in all three elections and it was reduced to governing fourteen of India's twenty-two states. The Congress took its defeats in the recent state elections as an indication that the south would not support the party in the upcoming parliamentary elections, and so it decided to concentrate on rallying for support in the north where Hindu feelings were strong, and hostility towards non-Hindu minorities was pervasive. By adopting a Hindu "extremist" position, the Congress began raising fears in the north of "anti-national" groups and presenting Mrs. Gandhi as the stabilizer amid increasing instability. Consequently, the Congress was able to successfully cut into areas of BJP support in the Hindi heartland.

The BJP lost every seat it contested in the 1983 Kashmir assembly election, even though it had a traditional base of support in the Hindu-majority Jammu area of Kashmir. By mobilizing criticism against Kashmir's Chief Minister, Farooq Abdullah, Mrs. Gandhi succeeded in polarizing the electorate along communal lines, thus shifting Hindu support away from the BJP to the Congress. It is likely that many RSS swayamsevaks voted for the Congress in this election. The BJP also took heavy losses to the Congress in the February, 1983 elections for Delhi's two legislative bodies, traditionally a Jana Sangh stronghold.

As a further blow to the BJP, the RSS began to grow critical of the party's efforts to appear more "secular", and

accused it of down-playing the party's essentially Hindu character. The RSS argued that, "the BJP had failed to develop into a movement with a distinctive program capable of attracting mass support", and though "nobody need quarrel with its efforts to attract non-Hindus, . . . many may also view it as a certain weakening of character."⁴²

For many "moderates", the BJP was still tainted by its communal past and its association with the failed Janata government of 1977-1979. For Hindu "hard-liners", the Congress Party, not the BJP, was emerging as the committed defender of Hindu interests. Moreover, while the Congress shifted to the Hindu right, it continued to retain its support among moderates and minorities largely because it was perceived by a large portion of the electorate as "the only game in town." The BJP, then, faced a difficult choice. While the Congress Party was strong, the BJP could never hope to cut into its heterogenous support base, and as long as it played down its ideological roots, the BJP was in danger of losing its core base of support to the Congress.

The Jana Sangh was, in every sense, a communal party. It stood for a narrow ideology based on the notion that the Hindus of India formed a single national group and that religious minorities should be fully subordinated to the Hindu culture and religion. Such an ideology naturally discouraged

⁴² Andersen and Damle, The Brotherhood in Saffron, pp. 232-33.

minorities from supporting the Jana Sangh, and its ideological appeal remained confined to high-caste and middle-class Hindus in the Hindi-speaking north.

The Jana Sangh's narrow ideology had several implications. First, it limited the party's appeal so that it tended to make electoral gains only when the Congress Party performed poorly. In the 1967 election, for example, the Jana Sangh made significant gains in the north largely at the expense of a divided Congress. However, the Jana Sangh still only captured a fraction of what the Congress Party polled in votes and seats, and four years later, under Mrs. Gandhi, the Congress Party regained its electoral dominance.

Second, even when support for the Congress party declined, the Jana Sangh could not become a national force in Indian politics by itself. Only as part of a united opposition could it pose a serious challenge to the Congress. Yet the Janata experience demonstrated that opposition unity was elusive, and within only two years the coalition had broken down due to internal squabbles and power struggles. In fact, the Jana Sangh's connection with the RSS, which worked to the electoral advantage of the party after the Emergency, emerged as one of the central causes of the Janata breakdown.

This raises a third point: the Jana Sangh depended on the RSS for organizational and ideological support, and attempts to either "soften" the party's ideological stand or become independent of RSS influence were doomed to failure. In the 1950's and 1960's, Jana Sangh members who favoured abandoning

the narrow ideology of the RSS were treated harshly by the Jana Sangh leadership and were often expelled by the party. The party's RSS links also hamstrung its efforts to appear more moderate, especially after its incarnation as the BJP. The BJP not only found it difficult to escape its communal past, but it also became evident that if it attempted to do so the party would lose the support of the RSS, which constituted the organizational core of the party. The BJP's electoral decline in the 1983 state assembly elections demonstrated the heavy price the BJP would pay for alienating the RSS.

It appeared, then, as if the BJP had more to lose by abandoning its communal roots. Neither alone, nor as part of a coalition was the BJP strong enough to pose a serious challenge to the Congress Party, and its efforts to appear more secular only succeeded in alienating its core supporters. At the very least, the BJP's association with the RSS ensured the party's survival, and by 1983, this was becoming increasingly uncertain.

CHAPTER THREE
THE RESURGENCE OF THE BJP AND THE POLITICS OF
HINDU FUNDAMENTALISM

Several important themes and events emerged in the latter half of the 1980's which irrevocably transformed the face of Indian politics. The mid-1980's saw increasing social unrest, particularly among the Hindu majority, and the institution of government policies which tended to exacerbate caste and communal divisions. While all parties attempted to capitalize on the growing importance of communal sentiments, the BJP arose as the main beneficiary.

Hindu Communalism

After the BJP's severe rout in the 1984 Lok Sabha elections, in which it won only 2 seats, 14 fewer than it had in the out-going Lok Sabha, the party leadership began to contemplate which of its electoral legacies, the Jana Sangh or Janata, should shape the party's future. In particular, the BJP found itself in the unusual position of being more "moderate" than the Congress Party. The Congress under Rajiv Gandhi played upon "anti-minority" sentiments in the 1984 election campaign in the hopes of enhancing the "sympathy factor" which followed the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi by two Sikh members of her personal security guard. The BJP was in danger of losing to the Congress its traditional support in the

Table 1. Distribution by party of seats won in Lok Sabha elections, 1952-84

| | INC/ INCI | NCO/ INCJ/ INCS | CPI/ CPM/ SOC | BJS/ BJP | JNP | Other Parties | IND | Total |
|------|--------------|-----------------------|---------------------|-------------|-----|------------------|-----|-------|
| 1952 | 364 | - | 28 | 3 | - | 56 | 38 | 489 |
| 1957 | 371 | - | 27 | 4 | - | 50 | 42 | 494 |
| 1962 | 361 | - | 35 | 14 | - | 64 | 20 | 494 |
| 1967 | 283 | - | 42 | 35 | - | 125 | 35 | 520 |
| 1971 | 352 | 16 | 48 | 22 | - | 66 | 14 | 518 |
| 1977 | 154 | 3 | 29 | - | 295 | 5 | 29 | 542 |
| 1980 | 353 | 13 | 47 | - | 31 | 7 | 69 | 529 |
| 1984 | 415 | 5 | 28 | 2 | 10 | 7 | 75 | 542 |

INC: Indian National Congress
 INCI: Indian National Congress (Indira)
 NCO: Indian National Congress (Organization)
 INCU: Indian National Congress (Urs)
 INCJ: Indian National Congress (Jagjivan Ram)
 INCS: Indian National Congress (Socialist)
 CPI: Communist Party of India
 CPM: Communist Party of India (Marxist)
 SOC: Socialist Party
 BJS: Bharatiya Jana Sangh
 BJP: Bharatiya Janata Party
 JNP: Janata Party
 IND: Independent

Source: Paul R. Brass, The Politics of India Since Independence (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 70-71.

communally volatile "Hindi belt" in North India. The Congress Party even succeeded in capturing the support of the RSS, which in the wake of Mrs. Gandhi's assassination, believed the Congress to be the only party capable of holding together India's fragile national unity.

Subsequent government actions, however, betrayed the Congress party's alleged commitment to Hindu interests, and tended to fuel a Hindu "minority complex". In 1985, Shah Bano, an elderly Muslim woman in the central Indian town of Indore, sued for maintenance after her husband divorced her. The courts granted her a small sum of Rupees 500 per month. This led to immediate protests by Muslim religious leaders, the Muslim League, and the Jamaat-e-Islami, a Muslim fundamentalist group, which objected to the interpretation of Muslim marriage through "Anglo-Saxon" law. They held that Muslim marriage should be governed by Quranic law, which does not allow for maintenance. In early 1986, the government of India capitulated by introducing the Muslim Women Bill which overrode the Supreme Court's decision.

This incident reinforced the feeling among many Hindus that, "while the minorities continued to extract purely religious, even irrational concessions from the government, the majority was suffering by not demanding anything."⁴³ In their eyes, the Shah Bano case was just one example of the Indian

⁴³ Shekhar Gupta, "The Gathering Storm", in Marshall M. Bouton and Philip Oldenburg, eds., India Briefing, 1990 (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990), p. 33.

state attempting to appease the Muslim minority, a valuable Congress "vote bank", at the expense of the Hindu majority. Hindu organizations and spokespersons began to claim that,

. . . Hindus are being discriminated against - being denied their share of power by minorities voting as blocs, witnessing a dilution of their religious values by a liberalization that has spared other religious faiths, and being ill-treated in those parts of the country where they are themselves a minority or close to becoming one.⁴⁴

Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, which grants special status to Muslim-majority Kashmir, became another focus of Hindu frustration. Article 370 prohibits people from other parts of the country from buying land, starting a business, or even taking a government job in Kashmir.⁴⁵ Hindu nationalists argue that special privileges will also be extended to West Bengal and Assam where Muslims may become a majority if immigration from Bangladesh continues unchecked.

Beginning in 1984, nationalistic Hindus began to organize around a movement to "free" Hindu religious places which were currently occupied by mosques. The movement was spearheaded by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), an organization which has forged close ties with both the RSS and the BJP. It was founded in 1964 by Swami Chinmayanand to unite Hindu religious organizations for a common purpose. The organization has two levels: an "assembly of religion" (dharmsansad) with 500 members chosen by local branches, and an "advisory committee"

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 31.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 32.

(margdarshak-mandal) including members of various participating religious communities, including Jains, Sikhs and Buddhists.⁴⁶ Unlike the RSS and the BJP, the VHP is dominated by religious leaders, although laymen, including politicians from all parties, can be members. The movements's central political aim was to influence the "secular" policies of the Congress Party, and the VHP encouraged its followers to vote only for those parties which promised to "liberate" Hindu religious places.

In 1984, the VHP adopted the "freeing" of the Ramjanambhoomi shrine in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, as its prime objective. The VHP claimed that the Babri Masjid, a Muslim mosque, occupied the very site of the birthplace of the Hindu god Ram, where a temple called the Ramjanambhoomi had been constructed in His honour. The VHP further claimed that this temple was subsequently destroyed by the Mughal Emperor Babur, in order to assert Muslim dominance over Hindus.

The controversy over the site began in 1949, when on the night of December 23, images of the god Ram and his wife Sita miraculously "appeared" within the mosque. Devout Hindus took this as a sign that they must offer regular puja ("worship") to the gods there, and on March 3, 1951, the civil judge of Faizabad ordered that Hindus would have the unhindered right of worship in the mosque. The court's decision, however, quickly aroused communal tensions and eventually, the district

⁴⁶ See Peter Van der Veer, " 'God Must be Liberated'! A Hindu Liberation Movement in Ayodhya," Modern Asian Studies 21 (April 1987), p. 292.

administration decided to lock up the shrine, preventing both communities from worshipping there. The reopening of the mosque in 1986, largely under pressure from the VHP, was one of the proximate causes for the terrible communal riots which engulfed Delhi and the neighbouring city of Meerut in the spring of 1987.⁴⁷

In May, 1989 the VHP announced its intention of holding a fund-raising drive to finance the construction of a Hindu temple at Ayodhya, resulting in the involvement of devout Hindus all across the country. In what Shekhar Gupta refers to as a "communal masterstroke",⁴⁸ the VHP commissioned the making of millions of bricks in villages throughout India with Lord Rama's name engraved on them. The bricks would then be consecrated as ramshilas ("Ram's bricks") at streetside religious ceremonies and taken to Ayodhya by groups of devotees on November 9. This would not only be seen as an open provocation to the Muslims in every participating locality, but it ensured the presence of more than one million devout Hindus

⁴⁷ The Hindu-Muslim riots in Delhi and Meerut in 1987 are two of the worst communal riots since India's Independence. In Meerut alone, hundreds were killed as Hindu mobs went on a rampage, destroying Muslim homes and businesses. Asghar Ali Engineer believes that the central cause of the Meerut riots lay in the emergence of a new Muslim business class, which began to threaten Hindu dominance in the textile industry there. The VHP's "free the temple" movement thus gave Hindus and Muslims alike the sense that they were involved in a broader national cause to preserve and protect their community against the other. For a detailed account of the Delhi-Meerut riots, please see Asghar Ali Engineer, Delhi-Meerut Riots (Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1988).

⁴⁸ Shekhar Gupta, "The Gathering Storm," p. 40.

determined to lay the temple's foundation on November 9 in Ayodhya.

1989 Elections: The Politics of "Hindutva"

Hindu communalism found a willing champion in the BJP. Under the leadership of Lal Krishan Advani, who became BJP president in 1986, the party returned to its Jana Sangh roots. Advani intended that the BJP be perceived as the vanguard of the Hindu nationalist movement, far more than it had been in the first half of the decade under former president Atal Behari Vajpayee. Advani demanded the abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution, and accused successive Congress governments of giving special concessions to minorities while ignoring the majority Hindus. Hindus, he asserted, were the "glue" holding the Indian polity together, and the Congress policy of "indifference to India's common culture on the one hand, and a conscious pampering and promotion of a minority complex among the minorities on the other, has led to dangerous strains in society."⁴⁹ According to Advani, the Congress Party's adherence to "minorityism" amounted to nothing less than "pseudo-secularism", and only encouraged the Hindu majority to act, out of necessity, in communal terms.

The Ayodhya temple-mosque dispute dominated the 1989 election campaign, and both the BJP and the Congress attempted

⁴⁹ Presidential address by L.K. Advani to the NC session of the BJP at Vijayawada in January, 1987, quoted in Kameshwar Choudhary, "BJP's Changing View of Hindu-Muslim Relations," p. 1901.

to capitalize on the issue's popular appeal throughout the Hindi-speaking north. For the BJP, the temple movement represented a potent political force for uniting an otherwise fragmented community and thus, an opportunity of expanding its support beyond upper caste and middle class Hindus. In June, the BJP adopted its first resolution concerning Ayodhya, and stated that the ongoing debate over the Ram temple issue emphasized the "callous unconcern which the Congress Party in particular, and the other political parties in general, betray towards the sentiments of the overwhelming majority in this country - the Hindus."⁵⁰ Resurrecting the idea of "Hindutva" as its main platform, the BJP declared itself the sole spokesperson of the Hindu community.

Two weeks before the elections scheduled for mid-December, thousands of kar sevaks (lit. "action servants") led by the VHP and the Bajrang Dal, an ultra-militant Hindu organization, converged on Ayodhya for the foundation-laying ceremony. Fearful of alienating Hindus sympathetic to the temple movement, neither the Congress-led government in Uttar Pradesh, nor at the Centre did anything to prevent the mob from violating a High Court order which prohibited the laying of the temple foundation. The central government attempted to persuade Hindu activists to lay the foundation stone 100 yards away from the main entrance to the shrine, but on November 9, the Hindu mob laid the foundation stone on a plot claimed by

⁵⁰ Kameshwar Choudhary, "BJP's Changing View of Hindu-Muslim Relations," p. 1902.

Muslims as part of the mosque. This latest provocation sparked communal riots in cities across North India.

The rise in communal tensions in the country and the BJP's "Hindutva" platform combined to garner the party an unprecedented 85 seats in the 1989 Lok Sabha election to make the BJP the third largest party in India's parliament. With only two seats in the outgoing Lok Sabha, the BJP's performance both reaffirmed the ideological direction the party had taken, and heightened its status as a legitimate opposition party. The BJP reaped its greatest electoral rewards in those constituencies where Hindu sentiments on the Ayodhya controversy ran high - the party won absolute majorities in Delhi and Madhya Pradesh, became the largest party in Rajasthan, and together with the Janata Dal, totally routed the Congress Party in Gujarat.

In the state legislative elections held in February, the BJP formed governments on its own in Madhya Pradesh (where it won 219 of 319 seats) and Himachal Pradesh (46 of 85 seats), and was the dominant party in a coalition government formed in Rajasthan (85 of 199 seats). In the state of Gujarat, Congress dominance ended as the BJP captured 70 of the state assembly's 181 seats, only slightly less than the Janata Dal. In both the national and state level elections, the BJP failed to gain any seats in either the South or the East where Ayodhya was virtually a non-issue.

The 1989 election ushered in only the second non-Congress government in post-independence India. Scarred by the

Table 2. Lok Sabha Polls 1989

| State & Union Territory | Total Seats | Cong. (I) | JD | BJP | Others | Ind. | Vac. |
|-------------------------|-------------|-----------|-----|-----|--------|------|------|
| <u>North</u> | | | | | | | |
| Jammu & Kashmir | 6 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 1 | 0 |
| Punjab | 13 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 6 | 3 | 1 |
| Uttar Pradesh | 85 | 15 | 54 | 7 | 6 | 2 | 1 |
| Bihar | 54 | 4 | 30 | 9 | 10 | 0 | 1 |
| Madhya Pradesh | 40 | 8 | 3 | 27 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Rajasthan | 25 | 10 | 11 | 13 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Himachal Pradesh | 4 | 1 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Haryana | 10 | 4 | 5 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Delhi | 7 | 2 | 1 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Chandigarh | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| <u>South</u> | | | | | | | |
| Andhra Pradesh | 42 | 39 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| Tamil Nadu | 39 | 25 | 0 | 0 | 12 | 1 | 1 |
| Karnataka | 28 | 27 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Kerala | 20 | 14 | 0 | 0 | 6 | 0 | 0 |
| And & Nicobar | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Lakshdweep | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Pondicherry | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| <u>East</u> | | | | | | | |
| West Bengal | 42 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 37 | 0 | 1 |
| Orissa | 21 | 3 | 16 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| Manipur | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Meghalaya | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Nagaland | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Tripura | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Sikkim | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Arunachal | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Assam | - | - | - | - | - | - | - |
| Mizoram | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| <u>West</u> | | | | | | | |
| Maharashtra | 48 | 28 | 5 | 10 | 2 | 3 | 0 |
| Gujarat | 26 | 3 | 11 | 12 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Dadar & N. Haveli | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Goa | 2 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Daman & Diu | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| TOTALS | 529 | 196 | 139 | 85 | 90 | 12 | 7 |

Parties: Cong. (I) - Congress Party (Indira); JD - Janata Dal; BJP - Bharatiya Janata Party

Source: Walter K. Andersen, "Election 1989 in India: The Dawn of Coalition Politics?," Asian Survey, Vol. XXX, No. 6, June, 1990, p. 529.

corruption which plagued Rajiv Gandhi's first term in office, and smarting under a dual backlash from both its traditional Muslim constituency and Hindus in North India, the Congress Party captured only 196 seats in the 529 seat Lok Sabha. The Congress was completely routed in the Hindi-speaking heartland where its ambivalent stand on Ayodhya cost it both Hindu and Muslim votes. Muslims were outraged that the Congress allowed the foundation laying ceremony to take place, and believed the state government had struck a covert deal with the VHP. Many Hindus were angry that the Congress had permitted the ceremony to take place, only to forbid construction of the Ram temple. The Congress fared much better in the South, gaining 108 seats in contrast to the 68 it had captured there in 1984, and wresting two of the four state governments away from regional parties.

The victorious National Front led by V.P. Singh of the Janata Dal Party, emerged with 139 seats, only slightly more than half the votes required for a parliamentary majority.⁵¹ The Janata Dal did best in the North, particularly among Muslims, Scheduled Castes, and rural castes, where it won 106 seats. Unlike the BJP, however, the Janata Dal managed to make inroads into other areas - it won one seat in the South (in Karnataka), captured 16 seats in the state of Orissa in the East, and made a respectable showing in Gujarat and Maharashtra

⁵¹ The Janata Dal formed alliances with many regional parties to contest the elections. This "coalition" was known as the National Front.

in the West.

From the outset, there was never any doubt that the BJP and the Communists (44 Lok Sabha seats) would support the National Front to enable it to form a government with a majority in the Lok Sabha. But Advani, reflecting the predominant mood of the party, vetoed any consideration of the BJP joining the Singh government, though he did agree to support it from the outside. BJP candidates had been treated coolly by some segments of the Janata Dal during the election campaign, and memories of the 1977-1980 Janata fiasco were still fresh in the party's memory. Party leaders did not want to see a repeat of its humiliating treatment by the Janata Dal which had previously ostracized the party for its links with the RSS. The BJP was also guided by its desire to retain the party's own identity so that it could emerge as a major power broker after the election.

Within the year, relations between the BJP and the governing National Front broke down. Severe factionalism within the Janata Dal emerged soon after the election, and threatened to divide the government along caste lines. The majority of the Cabinet, consisting of Jats and other landowning castes, threatened to throw their support behind Devi Lal, V.P. Singh's main rival. In order to broaden his own and the party's support base, V.P. Singh announced on August 7 that his government would implement the recommendations of the Mandal Report which would raise the number of government jobs reserved for the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and

the so-called backward classes to nearly 50 per cent. This strategy promised to have widespread appeal among backward castes and Harijans, which had traditionally voted for the Congress.

The government's announcement triggered riots across North India as Hindus polarized into two warring factions of upper and backward castes. The BJP found its support base, both actual and potential, threatened and the party decided to withdraw its support for the National Front. In effect, the BJP had little choice for, as Harjot Oberoi notes,

Acceptance of the Mandal Commission report would have implied recognition of caste as the fundamental category of social organization in Indian society, whereas the BJP and its allies have always insisted that the most salient unit of stratification for Indian society is the religious community.⁵²

If the BJP continued to support the National Front, it would be seen as tacitly supporting the Mandal recommendations, which were anathema to the party.

In order to counter the effects of the Mandal Report, the BJP renewed its call for the construction of the Ram temple at Ayodhya. On September 25, 1990 party president L.K. Advani launched a rath yatra (lit. "pilgrimage on a chariot") from Somnath in the state of Gujarat to Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh, covering a distance of nearly 10,000 kilometers. The BJP's political intentions were clear. Advani's rath, which was in

⁵² Harjot Oberoi, "Mapping Indic Fundamentalisms Through Nationalism and Modernity" (Paper to be presented at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences Conference: Fundamentalisms Compared. November, 1991), pp. 9-10.

actual fact a Toyota van, was decorated with the party's symbol, the lotus flower, and its scheduled arrival in Ayodhya on October 30 was set to coincide with the start of construction of the Ramjanambhoomi temple. But before Advani could finish his much publicised pilgrimage, he was arrested in Bihar on the order of the state government on October 30.⁵³

Hindu activists were subsequently forbidden to travel to Ayodhya. But despite massive efforts by Uttar Pradesh security forces, more than 10,000 kar sevaks made a determined effort to reach the disputed site on October 30. The ensuing struggle between armed security forces and the Hindu activists left 12 dead and countless numbers injured. When the kar sevaks made a second attempt to storm the mosque on November 3, 18 more were killed.

The 1991 Elections

Soon after the Ayodhya incident, the National Front government of V.P. Singh fell, and fresh elections were called for the end of May. The BJP launched its most aggressive campaign ever. The party announced it would contest more than 450 seats on its own as opposed to less than 200 in 1989. Though party leaders declared that their goal was to improve upon their 1989 performance and establish the BJP as a credible alternative to the Congress and the Janata Dal, the leadership clearly intended to make a serious bid for the Centre. The

⁵³ Interestingly, the government of Bihar was led by the Janata Dal.

BJP's degree of campaign organization was unmatched by any other party. The party's stand on the temple issue had mobilized RSS and VHP workers solidly behind the BJP, and the number of posters, banners, pamphlets, life-size cut-outs, wall slogans, and video and audio cassettes in circulation attested to the party's financial affluence.

Unlike 1989, the BJP leadership downplayed the temple issue in this campaign. Party strategists feared the BJP was becoming a one-issue party, a fact that hindered its efforts in the South where the Ayodhya issue held little appeal. Instead, the BJP adopted a more pragmatic platform that would appeal to a broader segment of Hindus. In addition to economic liberalization, and an overt nuclear defense policy, the BJP now emphasized the idea of "Hindu nationalism" rather than the narrow, sectarian concept of "Hindutva". The BJP projected Hindu nationalism as the alternative to the separatist messages of casteism and "pseudo-secularism" which the leadership insisted were projected by the other parties. According to the BJP, political and social stability depended on a clear commitment to nationalism which they equated with the right of Hindus to assert their own values within their own country.

The BJP also made an effort to counter the effects of the Mandal issue by adding roti ("bread") and insaaf ("social justice") to Ram in its popular motto. In caste-ridden states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, the Mandal Report was in danger of overriding the Ayodhya dispute as the most salient election issue. Roti was an effort to appeal to the Scheduled Caste

vote, and it was hoped that insaaf would have meaning among the backward classes mobilized by the Mandal issue. In addition, in the BJP's election manifesto released in May, the party took a more flexible stand on job reservations by agreeing to reservations based on both the Mandal recommendations and economic criteria.

On the issue of religious minorities, the party leadership took pains to dispel the view that the BJP was a "communal" party. Party leader Atal Behari Vajpayee declared: "We do not want any discrimination on grounds of religion. All we demand is equal treatment of all citizens, irrespective of caste, religion or sex. By no stretch of [the] imagination can that be called communal."⁵⁴ The BJP leadership emphasized that the party did not stand for a theocratic state, and claimed rather that "minorities are safest in the hands of the BJP."⁵⁵ While to the other parties, the minorities were merely vote banks to be activated during elections, to the BJP they were "citizens of India with equal rights - no more, no less."⁵⁶

The assassination of Rajiv Gandhi in Tamil Nadu in May, 1991, altered the course of the election campaign, and the opposition parties clambered to counter the expected sympathy wave for the Congress. The BJP toned down its "anti-Rajiv" campaign and changed the main thrust of its platform from Hindu

⁵⁴ Atal Behari Vajpayee, quoted in The Times of India, May 22, 1991, p. 4.

⁵⁵ The Times of India, May 14, 1991, p. 1.

⁵⁶ The Times of India, May 2, 1991, p. 10.

nationalism to stability. As election day approached, the BJP found itself in the unprecedented position of being the primary target of the major parties. While in the past, political parties fought campaigns on the basis of a pro-Congress, anti-Congress platform, this time polarization occurred along pro-BJP, anti-BJP lines.

The BJP's actual performance came as somewhat of a disappointment. Although it improved its performance over 1989, it won only 119 seats,⁵⁷ and suffered unexpected setbacks in the three states it won in the 1990 state assembly elections. Its parliamentary representation declined in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh. The BJP's poor showing in the North and East among the Scheduled Castes and Tribes was a particular disappointment; evidently the party's appeal of "bread" and "social justice" failed to woo these constituencies away from the Janata Dal and the Congress. Nevertheless, exit polls suggested that the BJP managed to outpoll both parties among the Hindu upper castes, and made major inroads into the backward caste vote.⁵⁸

The BJP improvements in the South and East were modest: the party won 5 seats in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, captured 2 seats in Assam, and 10 per cent of the vote, but no seats,

⁵⁷ The BJP now has 117 seats in Parliament because Advani and Vajpayee each won two seats and each was required to give up one of them.

⁵⁸ India Today, July 15, 1991, p. 55.

Table 3. Lok Sabha Elections May-June 1991: Results

| State & Union Territories | Seats De-clared | Cong. (I) | BJP | JD | Others |
|---------------------------|-----------------|------------|------------|-----------|------------|
| Assam (14) | 14 | 8 | 2 | - | 4 |
| Andhra (42) | 41 | 24 | 1 | - | 16 |
| Arunachal (2) | 2 | 2 | - | - | - |
| Bihar (54) | 48 | 1 | 5 | 28 | 14 |
| Goa (2) | 2 | 2 | - | - | - |
| Gujarat (26) | 25 | 4 | 20 | - | 1 |
| Haryana (10) | 10 | 9 | - | - | 1 |
| Himachal (4) | 4 | 2 | 2 | - | 0 |
| Karnataka (28) | 27 | 22 | 4 | - | 1 |
| Kerala (20) | 20 | 13 | - | - | 7 |
| Madhya Pradesh (40) | 39 | 27 | 11 | - | 1 |
| Maharashtra (48) | 47 | 37 | 5 | - | 5 |
| Manipur (2) | 2 | 1 | - | - | 1 |
| Meghalaya (2) | 2 | 2 | - | - | - |
| Mizoram (1) | 1 | 1 | - | - | - |
| Nagaland (1) | 1 | - | - | - | 1 |
| Orissa (21) | 20 | 12 | - | 6 | 2 |
| Rajasthan (25) | 25 | 13 | 12 | - | - |
| Sikkim (1) | 1 | - | - | - | 1 |
| Tamil Nadu (39) | 39 | 28 | - | - | 11 |
| Tripura (2) | 2 | 2 | - | - | - |
| Uttar Pradesh (85) | 81 | 4 | 50 | 22 | 5 |
| West Bengal (42) | 42 | 5 | - | - | 37 |
| And.-Nicobar (1) | 1 | 1 | - | - | - |
| Chandigarh (1) | 1 | 1 | - | - | - |
| Dadranaga (1) | 1 | 1 | - | - | - |
| Daman & Diu (1) | 1 | - | 1 | - | - |
| Delhi (7) | 6 | 2 | 4 | - | - |
| Lakshadweep (1) | 1 | 1 | - | - | - |
| Pondicherry (1) | 1 | 1 | - | - | - |
| TOTAL | 507 | 226 | 117 | 56 | 108 |

Total Seats: 545; Elected: 543; Nominated: 2
 Seats subject to reelection due to resignation, death, and invalidation: 17

To be held: Jammu and Kashmir (6), Punjab (13)

Source: Walter K. Andersen, "India's 1991 Elections: The Uncertain Verdict," Asian Survey, Vol. XXXI, No. 10, October, 1991, p. 980.

in West Bengal, which remained a Marxist stronghold.⁵⁹

The BJP's most successful performance was in Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state, where it won 50 seats and almost one-third of the popular vote.⁶⁰ The BJP enlarged its base in remote areas of the state, including the western hilly regions where the party won 80 per cent of the 27 Lok Sabha seats as opposed to only 1.5 per cent in 1989. Significantly, this region has large concentrations of Muslims, Jats, Scheduled Castes, and backwards, the very groups which had traditionally supported either the Congress or the Janata Dal. By broadening its base into the rural hinterland, the BJP demolished its reputation of being a party confined to the middle class in urban areas.

The sympathy factor, which followed Rajiv Gandhi's assassination, propelled the Congress Party under P.V. Narasimha Rao to a parliamentary majority with 226 seats, while the Janata Dal was reduced to a mere 56 seats. The BJP became the second largest party in the Lok Sabha, and though its seat gain was modest, its percentage of the popular vote soared from 11.8 per cent in 1989 to over 20 per cent in 1991. The results of the election also undermined the accusation by some that the BJP's wins in 1989 were primarily due to seat adjustments with

⁵⁹ In West Bengal, the BJP captured the support of Hindu refugees who, the BJP claims, were fleeing religious persecution in Bangladesh.

⁶⁰ Walter K. Andersen, "India's 1991 Elections: The Uncertain Verdict," Asian Survey, Vol. XXXI, No. 10, October, 1991, p. 986.

other parties. In this election, the BJP contested almost every seat alone, and it was the only national party to increase its percentage of the popular vote in all parts of the country.⁶¹

While the opposition victory of 1989 appeared to be as much a vote "against" the Congress as it was "for" the opposition, the BJP's continued rise seemed to indicate that the opposition's success was no longer dependent upon the Congress Party's failure to perform, nor did the opposition need to be "united" in order to defeat the Congress. The BJP contested almost every seat alone in 1991, and it succeeded in closing the gap between its and the Congress' share of the popular vote.

The 1991 election also ushered in dramatic changes in traditional voting patterns. The Congress Party in particular found its support base threatened by both caste conflict raised by the Mandal issue and Hindu consciousness raised by the BJP. The core of Congress voting support was traditionally among the Brahmins and other upper castes, about 10% of the population, the Scheduled Castes and Tribes numbering about 15%, and the Muslims, about 12%. Despite the fact that the Congress captured the majority of parliamentary seats, it suffered losses in all three of these "vote banks". The Congress also lost support among upper caste Hindus because it replaced upper caste candidates with nominees from the backward castes in

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 986.

order to counter the Janata Dal's Mandal card. Many upper castes, in protest, turned their support towards the BJP which put forward many upper caste candidates. The BJP, therefore, found itself in an excellent position to capitalize on the electorate's disenchantment with the Congress and move beyond its traditional urban middle class constituency into areas of former Congress dominance.

Despite its gains, the BJP's support is almost totally confined to North India. In order to become the "natural party of government", the BJP must show that it has significant popular support in most regions of the subcontinent. After the 1991 election, the BJP faced a second challenge of reconciling its Hindu fundamentalist stance with its new role as a "responsible" opposition Party. While the Ayodhya issue had served its purpose well as an effective "vote-getting" issue, it also raised expectations among the BJP's allies in the RSS and the VHP that the party, once in power, would act on its promise to build the Ram temple. Understandably, the BJP was wary of forming a government in Uttar Pradesh where any softening of the party's stand on the Ayodhya issue was bound to lead to disillusionment among the party's supporters.

The BJP in Opposition

The above dilemma soon proved impossible to resolve, and tensions between "moderates" and "hard-liners" within the BJP emerged as a recurring source of conflict within the party. Moderates, led by former president of the party L.K. Advani,

favoured broadening the party's support base, particularly in the south, and following constitutional channels for the construction of the Ram temple at Ayodhya. Advani and his supporters resisted taking any action that would provoke a confrontation with the Centre, and thereby compromise the BJP government in Uttar Pradesh. Moreover, Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's accommodationist stance towards the opposition encouraged many within the party to believe that much could be gained by cooperating with the government. BJP moderates, then, were understandably alarmed when Bajrang Dal activists stormed the mosque on October 31, 1991 and planted three saffron flags atop its domes. They severely criticized this "thoughtless" action, and sought to distance the party from the VHP and Bajrang Dal which were clearly willing to break the law to achieve their aims.

Party president Murli Manohar Joshi, on the other hand, condoned such provocative actions. Unlike Advani, Joshi lacked a mass base, and was clearly concerned that his position as party president was insecure. Joshi's ekta yatra in December, 1991 and January, 1992 from South India to Kashmir, was meant to be "bigger and better" than Advani's rath yatra of the year before. Instead, it ended in humiliation for the BJP leader, who ended up being rescued from an angry mob in Kashmir by Congress Party workers. Joshi's rhetoric on Ayodhya, which echoed that of the VHP, produced serious tensions between himself and the Kalyan Singh government in Uttar Pradesh, and with moderates within the party.

The effect of the BJP's apparent schism was two-fold. First, it created a rift in the Sangh parivar (lit. "RSS family"), particularly between the BJP and the VHP. In the VHP's view, the BJP had not only reneged on an election promise, the party had also betrayed the loyalty of the VHP by failing to uphold its end of the bargain, which implied that in return for the VHP's support, the BJP would push for the temple's construction. The VHP resented the BJP's unwillingness to fulfill its mandate.

To the RSS, entrusted with "patching up" the internecine feud between the two organizations, the combine had worked too hard to risk a confrontation with the Centre and the dismissal of the Kalyan Singh government at this early stage. The strategy eventually evolved by the RSS, and agreed upon by the BJP and the VHP, was to continue to clean and clear the area surrounding the proposed site of the Ram temple without undertaking any construction. This strategy would be in keeping with a High Court order forbidding construction at the site, and would thereby ensure that some activity on the temple could continue without compromising the status of the BJP government in Uttar Pradesh.

Second, the division between moderates and hard-liners led to factionalism within the party, which seriously threatened to tarnish its image as one of the most cohesive and disciplined organizations in the country. At the national level, it manifested itself in the Uma Bharati-Govindacharya scandal, news of which broke out in April of 1992. In what has

been interpreted as a ploy by Joshi to weaken Advani, the press revealed an alleged love affair between Uma Bharati, a BJP MP from Madhya Pradesh, and Govindacharya, one of the BJP's top ideologues and strategists. Govindacharya was a staunch supporter of Advani, and Uma Bharati had challenged the leadership of Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Sundarlal Patwa, a Joshi supporter. In the end, Govindacharya was removed from his post and Uma Bharati was temporarily "quietened". However, the Uma Bharati-Govindacharya affair sullied the BJP's image and foreshadowed grave consequences if factionalism within the party were not brought under control.

At the state level, most notably in Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh, the coalitions forged during the 1991 election campaign were beginning to break down. The BJP in Madhya Pradesh was riven with factionalism, and in Uttar Pradesh, a tenuous coalition of upper castes and backward castes was rapidly disintegrating. The Kalyan Singh government was further plagued by charges of corruption coming from both the opposition and from dissidents within his own government. In short, at least two BJP state governments had failed to provide the very least of what they had promised: good governance.

As if to confirm a BJP decline, the party lost several by-elections in June in urban areas, including New Delhi. In rural areas in Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, the party did well largely because of disunity within

the Congress.⁶² By July, it was apparent that "cooperating" with the Rao government had not paid off any significant dividends for the BJP. While the party did obtain the deputy speaker's post in the Lok Sabha, the Congress managed to push through significant economic policy changes. When the BJP came close to reaping the benefits of its support by gaining the vice-president's post, Vajpayee being the party's foremost choice, the Congress passed an anti-BJP resolution at Tirupati and installed its own choice as President of India.⁶³

The Congress also showed no signs of making any concessions to the BJP on Ayodhya. Instead, the government referred all controversial questions pertaining to the disputed land to the courts which, although they granted the Uttar Pradesh government's request for the 2.77 acres of disputed land around the mosque, forbade the government from allowing the construction of any permanent structures there.

The lack of progress on the temple issue finally prompted the VHP to proceed with the Ram temple's construction, with or without the approval of the BJP and the RSS. For eighteen days in July, kar sevaks, in open defiance of the judiciary, proceeded to lay the Ram temple's foundation east of the Babri Masjid. Although kar sevaks managed to destroy five old Hindu temples within the mosque complex, a confrontation with the Centre was averted, and except for the state of Kerala in South

⁶² Yubaraj Ghimire, "Bharatiya Janata Party: The Saffron Slide", India Today, July 15, 1992, p. 30.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 31.

India, the country remained communally quiescent.

The kar sevaks' actions, however, forced the Rao government to take some action on Ayodhya. While it might be useful to have the BJP appear as a potential law-breaker, the government's persistent inactivity on Ayodhya jeopardised the Congress' vital Muslim vote bank. But the Rao government was reluctant to dismiss the Kalyan Singh government in Uttar Pradesh for fear of making a martyr out of the BJP. The government was equally reluctant to take over the disputed land, for then it would be saddled with the responsibility of solving the issue and taking the full blame for the consequences of its decision.

In an unprecedented move, Prime Minister Narasimha Rao met with Hindu sants ("holy men") in New Delhi on July 23 and 24, without the presence of BJP representatives. The sants agreed with Rao's proposal that the kar sevaks shift their attention to the construction of the non-controversial Shesh avatar (Lakshman) temple, also at Ayodhya. The government, in turn, assured the delegation that the Supreme Court would settle all cases pertaining to the Uttar Pradesh government's acquisition of the 2.77 acre site within three months.

While the truce forged between the government and religious leaders gave the government a temporary respite in finding a solution to the Ayodhya problem, it allowed the VHP to keep its options open until the end of October, ample time to prepare for another agitation. By shifting construction to the Lakshman temple, Hindu activists still maintained a

presence at Ayodhya. Furthermore, the VHP did not commit itself to abiding by any court verdict, so that whatever decision the Court reached, the VHP did not bind itself to obey it.

In contrast, the Rao government constrained itself by agreeing to a rigid time frame within which a decision on Ayodhya had to be reached. Similarly, when the government entered into negotiations on Ayodhya with the VHP and the All-India Babri Masjid Action Committee in August, it was agreed that the end of the negotiations would coincide with the Supreme Court's decision (the time frame of the negotiations was later extended to four months).⁶⁴

At first, the talks seemed to be going well, and the parties involved appeared to be in a conciliatory mood. Soon, however, the negotiations had reached a stalemate, and by the beginning of October, VHP leaders were warning the government that if it tried to divide Hindu religious leaders, this would lead to an "explosive" situation and the government would be responsible for the "grave consequences".⁶⁵ On October 31, the VHP announced that the kar seva would resume on December 6, and that once it resumed, would "never stop at any cost".⁶⁶ The VHP announcement succeeded in compromising the remainder of the negotiations, and the country braced itself once again

⁶⁴ A Muslim body committed to the preservation of the Babri mosque.

⁶⁵ The Times of India, October 18, 1992, p. 1.

⁶⁶ The Times of India, October 30, 1992, p. 16.

for another Ayodhya "showdown".

During the negotiations, the RSS suggested the BJP abdicate leadership of the temple movement to the VHP. Not only had the government excluded the BJP from the negotiations, but the RSS clearly displayed a preference that the construction of the Ram temple be entrusted to the VHP.⁶⁷ In a possible confrontation with the Centre, the RSS leadership believed that the BJP could be more useful in its role as a "responsible opposition" in parliament than it could be in the "frontlines" of the temple movement where its legitimacy would be easily eroded.

The BJP began to prepare for the likely political "fallout" which would follow the failed negotiations. The party demanded a general election, one that would be a "referendum on Ayodhya, national unity, and integrity in public life."⁶⁸ The BJP asserted that the Congress government had lost its credibility. In mid-November, it threatened to launch an agitation in Gujarat on the issue of the Central government raising fertilizer prices. The BJP leadership also began to resurrect old election campaign themes, such as the infiltration of undesirable "foreign elements" across India's borders, and the Muslim "insurrection" in Kashmir.

⁶⁷ In a meeting between L.K. Advani and Balsaheb Deoras, leader of the RSS, in October, Deoras expressed his displeasure with BJP in-fighting and announced that henceforth, the movement to construct the Ram temple would be led by the VHP. Reported in The Times of India, October 18, 1992, p. 9.

⁶⁸ The Times of India, November 9, 1992, p. 1.

As thousands of kar sevaks began to gather at Ayodhya in preparation for the proposed kar seva, the government deployed ten companies of the Provincial Armed Constabulary and four companies of the Central Reserve Police on November 26 to guard the disputed site around the clock. It seemed as if Narasimha Rao was not going to take any chances, in spite of assurances from both Advani and Kalyan Singh that the kar seva would be restricted to ritual singing and worship, and that the Babri mosque would be protected. Rather than being impressed with the government's show of force, however, Hindu leaders viewed the presence of armed forces as a "provocation". Kalyan Singh, in an apparent volte face, declared that he was committed to building the Ram temple and would even sacrifice his post for it.⁶⁹

The danger of the kar seva ("demonstration") escalating beyond control mounted. The BJP sent blatantly, and probably intentionally, "mixed messages" to the throngs of devotees arriving at Ayodhya, alternating between advocating construction and favouring moderation. It was estimated that by December 4, nearly 50,000 kar sevaks had gathered at Ayodhya, and more were arriving by whatever means possible. Janata Dal and Left Front MP's demanded that the government take firmer action, particularly since it was now obvious the Kalyan Singh government had ignored a court order to control the flow of devotees into the town.

⁶⁹ The Times of India, December 1, 1992, p. 1.

The events unleashed by the December 6 kar seva at Ayodhya will be etched in Indians' minds, quite possibly for generations to come. As the thousands of armed security personnel stood by and watched, kar sevaks armed with sledgehammers and pick-axes broke through security cordons and rushed the Babri mosque. By the end of the day, all three domes had collapsed and the structure lay in rubble.

The effect of the mosque's devastation reverberated through- out India, South Asia, and the world. In the weeks that followed, India suffered one of the worst episodes of communal rioting since the Partition of the subcontinent in 1947. By the middle of January, nearly 2,000 people had been killed in communal riots and countless others wounded. More than 550 people had been killed in Bombay alone, and a mass exodus of refugees, their homes destroyed in communal rioting, poured out of the city. In Bombay and Ahmedabad, it was estimated that over 50,000 people had become refugees, and many of these faced near starvation.⁷⁰ In neighbouring Pakistan and Bangladesh, even as far away as Great Britain, Muslims retaliated by attacking Hindu temples.

Initially, BJP and VHP leaders "regretted" the destruction of the mosque, claiming that it was the handiwork of "anti-social elements" who had infiltrated the ranks of the kar sevaks.⁷¹ Few protested against the dismissal of the Kalyan

⁷⁰ The Times of India, January 13, 1993, p. 1.

⁷¹ The Times of India, December 6, 1992, p. 1.

Singh government and the institution of President's Rule in Uttar Pradesh.⁷² Advani himself resigned as leader of the opposition owning moral responsibility for the events at Ayodhya. As the government crackdown on the Hindu right became more severe, however, the BJP's facade of humility and responsibility rapidly deteriorated. And it was uncertain whether the Rao government, already severely taxed by the growing law-and-order crisis in the country, would be able to summon the nerve to face the consequences.

Two days after the Ayodhya tragedy, senior BJP leaders including L.K. Advani, M.M. Joshi, and Uma Bharati were arrested by the Uttar Pradesh police. VHP leaders V.H. Dalmia, Giri Raj Kishore, and Vinay Katiyar were also arrested. The BJP called a nation-wide "bandh" to protest against the arrests, and mobilized supporters in almost every state. Advani defended himself and his colleagues, stating that the BJP had done everything in its power to prevent the mosque's destruction, and that they had wanted the temple to be constructed by legal means, but the "tardiness of the judicial process" had prevented this.⁷³ BJP leaders asserted that the temple's construction was consistent with the will of the people.

Both Houses of Parliament were forced to adjourn as the BJP and other opposition parties clashed over the arrest of BJP

⁷² Kalyan Singh had submitted his own resignation prior to the Centre's decision to dismiss his government.

⁷³ The Times of India, December 9, 1992, p. 4.

leaders and the decision of the Centre to rebuild the mosque. But the so-called "secular" parties were by no means united against the BJP. Instead, the Janata Dal and Left parties criticized the government as much as the BJP, calling for the Prime Minister's resignation for failing to take immediate action to avoid a communal war, and for failing to uphold the Constitution.⁷⁴ Many held the government equally responsible for the deteriorating law and order situation. More ominously, there even seemed to be dissension within the ranks of the Congress: Ahmed Patel, general-secretary of the All-India Congress Committee threatened to resign over the government's handling of the Ayodhya crisis.

The government subsequently banned five "communal" organizations including the RSS, VHP, Bajrang Dal, Jamaat-e-Islami, and the Islamic Sevak Sangh. As with the arrest of the Hindu leaders, the ban received a mixed response. Some believed it was a reassuring step toward quelling the communal violence in the country. Others were more pessimistic, citing the fact that the RSS had at least 22 different front organizations through which it continued to operate. Critics also asserted that the banning of Muslim organizations was a mere formality, an effort on the part of the government to appear "even-handed" in its response to the crisis.

The dismissal of the other BJP-led state governments in

⁷⁴ While the mosque was destroyed in the morning of December 6, the government did not issue a statement until later that same evening.

Madhya Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh, however, was almost universally condemned for being too one-sided. Many accused the Rao government of being motivated by purely partisan interests, and as the BJP correctly pointed out, the law-and-order situation in the Congress-led states of Maharashtra and Gujarat was far worse and yet the government showed no indication of dismissing them. Rather than stifling the leading opposition to the Congress, then, the government's action provided the BJP with an excellent opportunity to launch a full-scale agitation against the Centre. Even as evidence began to appear that the destruction of the mosque had been planned weeks in advance, the BJP warned of a "multi-pronged" plan of action against the government.⁷⁵

After the release of the BJP leaders in mid-January, Advani began to press for a mid-term poll on the basis of a five-point program which included construction of the Ram temple, holding elections in former BJP-led states, and lifting the ban on communal organizations. Joshi later announced that the party would take "direct action" if the government failed to take a decision on its demands by February 25. On that date, he warned, more than a million people would participate in an anti-government rally at the Boat Club in New Delhi.

By the end of February, New Delhi had become a veritable

⁷⁵ A story in The Times of India on December 20, revealed that there was evidence that a three-week VHP training camp had existed on the outskirts of Ahmedabad in Gujarat for training specialized VHP workers for the December 6 assault on the Babri Masjid.

fortress, sealed off from the rest of the country by heavily armed troops and kilometres of steel pipe and barbed-wire barricades. It was reported that more than 45,000 Hindus had been detained while attempting to travel to the capital to join in the huge anti-government rally scheduled for February 25.⁷⁶

This was the Rao government's first forceful response to the political challenge posed by the BJP, after three months of appearing weak and ineffectual. But in spite of the government's huge show of force, no clear victors emerged from the confrontation, which was smaller and less violent than predicted. While Prime Minister Narasimha Rao won praise for preventing the Hindu nationalists from marching on parliament without government forces opening fire, the BJP claimed that their party had re-established discipline over its cadre, who did not even throw rocks at troops blocking their way. Although the Congress Party's decisiveness in dealing with the situation bolstered its flagging image in some quarters, the government's repression of what appeared to be a peaceful demonstration appalled many Indians.

The government's action, and inaction, over the past several months seemed to suggest that it lacked the institutional means to cope with nation-wide disturbances. It remained uncertain how the government would react if faced with another nation-wide crisis. It was also becoming increasingly questionable whether the government had the authority to meet

⁷⁶ The Globe and Mail, February 25, 1993, p. 3.

the challenge posed by the Hindu right at the expense of democratic institutions. In the eyes of many Indians, the Congress government's response to the BJP poses as serious a threat to India's secular democracy as the Hindu right itself.

The forces of Hindu nationalism have enabled the BJP to make unprecedented electoral gains. The BJP has capitalized on Hindu nationalists' disillusionment with the Congress Party, and exploited the discontent in Indian society, which arose out of five years of Congress "misrule" under Rajiv Gandhi. By playing on Hindu nationalist sentiments, the BJP has successfully channeled social unrest into votes, and has provided a means by which Hindu nationalists can attack India's secular democratic system.

However, "having decided to ride the religious tiger, [the BJP] can't dismount without being swallowed."⁷⁷ The BJP's efforts to moderate its stance on the Ayodhya issue, and to become a "law-abiding" opposition after the 1991 elections, compromised its position among Hindu nationalists who expected the BJP government in Uttar Pradesh to immediately proceed with the Ram temple's construction, with or without the approval of the Rao government. The BJP, however, was too dependent on the organizational and ideological support of Hindu nationalist groups to follow an independent course, and eventually the party abandoned moderation on Ayodhya in favour of militancy,

⁷⁷ Anikendra Nath Sen, "Congress Drift Must Stop: Beyond the Failed Consensus Approach," The Times of India, December 11, 1992, p. 6.

which promised faster and more dramatic results. Moreover, the BJP's failure to sustain its Hindu fundamentalist rhetoric threatened to destroy its internal cohesion, and irreparably divide the party between moderates and hardliners, who might eventually go their separate ways.

The BJP's decision to follow the VHP's course on Ayodhya had the intended effect of shoring up the BJP's political support at the expense of the Rao government. Indeed, the Ayodhya temple issue emerged as a symbol of the effectiveness, or rather ineffectiveness, of secular governance in India. The destruction of the Babri mosque enhanced the secular government's weakness in the face of the strength of Hindu nationalism. The subsequent law-and-order crisis, which continued unabated for almost three months, seemed to reveal the Rao government's lack of political resolve, and succeeded in gaining sympathy for the BJP, the main target of the government's "crackdown" on the Hindu right. In addition, the government's apparent willingness to undermine the Constitution compromised the possible benefits of its most decisive action to date, the quelling of the February 25 anti-government demonstration in New Delhi. This action focussed people's anger and frustration with the current crisis on the Rao government, not on the BJP.

The BJP's angry rhetoric against the government, and its denigration of existing bases of authority, have polarized the Indian political system along the religious-secular divide. The more the Congress government appears unable to govern, the

more the BJP appears as the only viable alternative. Therefore, it is in the BJP's interests to encourage the current situation of anomie and political decay, in order to appear as the only party capable of restoring political stability to India.

CHAPTER FOUR

RISE OF THE BJP: CONCLUSION

Outbidding is an effective means by which political entrepreneurs defame the government and existing political institutions in order to capture votes and political power. Political entrepreneurs rely on populist appeals in order to "outbid" the dominant political elite in the competition for political support. Communal "outbidders" will attempt to mobilize the support of their group by attacking the government for compromising the interests of their community in favour of others.

The RSS' and the VHP's departure from the Congress Party, and the emergence of the Ram temple movement provided excellent opportunities for the BJP to "outbid" the Congress for the support of the Hindu right. The BJP's creation of a cohesive ideology based on "Hindutva" and later, Hindu nationalism, ensured the party's emergence as a new "entrepreneur" in the Indian political system. While the Congress Party successfully "manipulated" communal cleavages, and thereby ensured the political salience of Hindu fundamentalism, the BJP used Hindu discontent to channel political opposition against the Congress Party and the system to which it gave rise. The BJP attacked the Congress for accommodating minorities, especially Muslims, at the expense of the Hindu majority.

The BJP's success over the 1989 and 1991 elections shows

that its strategy has worked: many Hindus have come to view the BJP, not the Congress, as the best defender of their interests. But the BJP has come to be seen as not merely a spokesperson or lobby for Hindu interests at the Centre, but as the vanguard of a movement that would eventually see the establishment of Hindu rule in India. Many Indians have turned to the BJP out of unhappiness and discontent with five years of Congress misrule between 1984 and 1989, endemic corruption in public life, economic decline, and political and social instability. To these Indians, the BJP was organized, disciplined, and cohesive, something that almost all the other parties lacked.

Yet only a decade ago, the BJP was relegated to the political wilderness, with only four seats in India's national parliament. At that time, the Congress Party, not the BJP, was seen as the defender of Hindu interests. Indeed, Mrs. Gandhi's calculated move to the Hindu right in the early 1980's, and Rajiv's appeals to Hindu communal sentiments succeeded in wooing Hindu nationalist organizations away from the BJP. However, Congress government policies favouring religious minorities alienated Hindu nationalist groups which became an independent source of identity and authority. The Congress Party's decline, then, provided an opportunity for the BJP to mobilize Hindu nationalist groups solidly behind the party in 1989 and 1991.

The results of the 1991 elections seem to indicate that the Congress Party's decline may be long-lasting. While the

opposition's electoral gains in 1989 were, for the most part, due to a massive vote against Congress rule, the results of the 1991 election suggest that the Congress has not completely recaptured those crucial "vote banks" it had lost to the opposition in 1989. Its seat gain in the Lok Sabha was modest (from 196 seats in 1989 to 226 in 1991), and it only managed to gain a bare majority in parliament, meaning that on many issues it would be dependent on smaller opposition parties, such as the Janata Dal, for support.

The 1991 electoral results also suggest that the BJP has been the principal beneficiary of the Congress Party's decline. The BJP made inroads into areas of former Congress dominance, particularly among the upper castes in North India. But unlike the Janata Dal, the BJP improved on its 1989 electoral performance, and its share of the popular vote soared from 11.8 per cent in 1989 to over 20 per cent in 1991; in fact, it was the only national party to increase its percentage of the popular vote. This further indicates that the political system has become increasingly polarized between the two major parties, and that future political contests will be mainly fought out between the ruling Congress and the BJP.

The events following the 1991 election demonstrate that the BJP's fortunes also depend on its relationship with Hindu nationalist groups, and its ability to sustain the passions ignited by the Ayodhya controversy. After the election, BJP moderates like Advani appeared determined that the party should continue its organizational work in the south, and make an

effort to expand its base of support to include Harijans and other backward castes. To this end, Advani favoured cooperating with the government and placing less emphasis on Ayodhya. Party strategists believed that a continued emphasis on the Ram temple issue placed the BJP in danger of becoming a "one issue party", thereby undermining its attempts to expand beyond the north and west where Ayodhya was virtually a non-issue.

However, the softening of the party's position on Ayodhya initiated its decline. Hardliners within the BJP, like party president Murli Manohar Joshi, began to outbid the moderates, led by L.K. Advani, for the loyalty of party members and the support of the VHP and the RSS. Joshi's ekta yatra, in the winter of 1991-1992, was an outbidding ploy meant to assert the supremacy of his position over that of Advani, whose rath yatra the year before had gained the party so much popular support. This split not only threatened to compromise the party's unity and cohesion, but evidence began to emerge that if the BJP did not re-adopt a more militant course of action on Ayodhya, it might also compromise its organizational superiority and its electoral strength. The VHP, disdainful of the BJP's slowness to act, began to strike out on its own. In addition, the BJP's poor performance in the June by-elections seemed to indicate that the party represented a shrinking constituency. Its organizational work among the lower castes had not paid off, and its inaction on Ayodhya had alienated many of those who had voted for the party in 1991.

The BJP subsequently abandoned its long-term organizational interests in favour of following in the footsteps of the militant VHP and the Bajrang Dal. As a consequence, the BJP sacrificed its political autonomy, and placed itself under the direction of an extra-parliamentary opposition that was not above defying the Constitution and the rule of law in order to achieve its goals. Thus far, the party had at least maintained a modicum of independence from Hindu fundamentalist groups. Until now, these organizations had acted as the instruments of political parties to help them capture votes and support. Recent events, however, suggest that the BJP has become a political tool with which Hindu fundamentalists seek to realize their goals.

The above events suggest that the BJP has not evolved into a party which could effectively govern. Indeed, it is arguable that the BJP is less effective now than it was a year ago because it has sacrificed its independence and its future organizational interests in favour of pursuing a more activist route to political power. In particular, the BJP's association with Hindu fundamentalist groups compromises the party's institutional integrity. The opposition of the VHP prevented the BJP from adapting to its new role as the official opposition in the national parliament after the 1991 election. Similarly, the division which arose within the party between moderates and hard-liners indicated a lack of organizational coherence. Although the BJP is generally perceived as being more organized and cohesive than other parties, it appears

vulnerable to the same vagaries of Indian politics, especially corruption and factionalism. Most of all, the BJP lacks autonomy: the more it has become associated with Hindu nationalist groups such as the VHP, the more its political agenda has come to be dictated by these groups.

However, a religious-based party can overcome its institutional weakness by denigrating existing bases of political authority. Also, by propagating a religious vision of national identity, a party can justify breaking the law in order to undermine the government. The events surrounding the destruction of the Babri mosque demonstrate that both are effective strategies for gaining popularity and support, especially when the government lacks the institutional means to control such activity. The Rao government's inability to contain the communal violence which followed the mosque's destruction, and its own seeming lack of respect for the Constitution, overshadowed the fact that the BJP-VHP-RSS were the main instigators of political instability by their open defiance of the law. The anarchy created by the BJP's behaviour, then, may prevent a Congress resurgence and may ensure the Rao government's decline.

The rise of the BJP is a symptom of a wider process of political decay in India that has affected the entire party system. The style of politics begun by Mrs. Gandhi, and largely continued by her son Rajiv, centralized political power in the office of the prime minister, thereby undermining those political institutions which could channel and control

political participation, and the emergence of new social groups in the society. Furthermore, institutional decay can lead to a decline in more moderate means of dissent and opposition, causing politicians to increasingly rely on populist appeals in order to capture support.

The emergence of religious bases of political authority can hasten this process of political decay. Firstly, religious nationalism can create communal conflict and political instability in communally-divided states, which prevents the government from addressing problems of economic development and poverty. Secondly, religious-based political parties tend to lack autonomy and so are beholden to extra-parliamentary organizations that come to dictate their political strategy and agenda. The BJP's decision to follow the VHP's course on Ayodhya caused it to become increasingly confrontational towards the Rao government and more willing to defy the law to achieve its aims. Thirdly, because its support is often restricted to those who espouse the creation of a religious state, it will find it difficult to build broadly-based coalitions that would enable it to become a truly national party, representative of a diversity of groups in the society. Therefore, a party based on religious nationalism will usually come to rely on extra-parliamentary sites of political competition in order to capture support.

Indeed, once a party has aroused religious passions at election time, these passions must be sustained between elections if the party is to survive. A party based on

religious nationalism may break up internally if it does not sustain its fundamentalist rhetoric. Furthermore, its religious nationalist position may be the key to gaining a permanent advantage over the ruling party, particularly if it succeeds in polarizing the political system. Political polarization, then, can work to the BJP's advantage. In particular, it narrows the electorate's choice so that if the Congress fails to perform, the BJP can emerge as the only realistic alternative.

The rise of the BJP has ushered in a new style of politics in India in the 1990's that, if it persists, will further the decay of the Indian polity. Indian democracy has become subject to the opportunistic politics of parties and politicians. The idea of the party as an instrument of mass transformation has given way to "one of party as a mechanical contrivance which keeps you in power."⁷⁸ India's "awakening" democracy has meant that, more than ever, in the game of democratic politics, numbers count. But the politics of vote-grabbing has taken precedence over other institutions of democracy, and this has rendered the normal instability of electoral politics increasingly explosive. From this instability arises a direct challenge to India's secular polity. It is a challenge, "that seeks to combine the very freedoms and instrumentalities provided by democracy and the thoroughly crass and rabid forms of populism that are

⁷⁸ Rajni Kothari, State Against Democracy (Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1988), p. 242.

manifestly undemocratic."⁷⁹

If Indian democracy is to survive the coming decade, parties and politicians alike must reaffirm the secular Constitution. As the Hindu right remains disdainful of the rule of law, it is incumbent upon the Congress Party, the only other party which commands enough popular support, to see such an enterprise through. In the coming months, the party must abandon "vote bank" politics, and continue with its initiatives to liberalize the economy and rebuild the party organization. This has become increasingly difficult due to the unstable political situation, but unless the government shows some resolve, it is doubtful it can avoid a mid-term poll without once again using its coercive powers to crush the opposition.

The situation has become doubly pressing because it is unlikely the Muslim minority will remain quiescent forever. The Muslim community, as always, suffered the most losses in this latest episode of communal violence, and unless the government can deal decisively with Hindu fundamentalists, Muslims may resort to terrorism to defend their community. The government may become faced with a Hobbesian "war of all against all", with Hindus and Muslims battling each other, and the Indian state.

It appears, however, that the BJP is not about to abandon its current course in the near future. In particular, the party cannot turn back without losing the support of the VHP

⁷⁹ Rajni Kothari, "Challenge Before Nation: Dealing With Rabid Populism," The Times of India, January 22, 1993, p. 8.

and the RSS, which are not prepared to wait until the next general election to wield a direct influence on political discourse in the country. The BJP clearly hopes the instability created by the Ayodhya tragedy will delegitimize the government in the eyes of the Indian people. The BJP, in turn, intends to fill the political vacuum left by the fall of the Congress. As long as the BJP still has Ayodhyas to win, and unless the government proves capable of reigning in the Hindu right, the BJP will continue to defy the Constitution with impunity, and India's secular democracy will continue to reel from crisis to crisis.

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