

'The Congress sowed the seeds; the BJP reaped the harvest.' Is this a credible explanation for the apparent success of Hindu nationalism since 1979?

Since 1979 'Hindu nationalist' political parties, principally the BJP, have seen increased success in both national and local elections throughout India. The above assertion suggests that these parties cannot take the credit for their own success, and that it was the actions of the Congress party which led to this phenomenon. This explanation is credible to a great extent, but does not completely explain the surge in Hindu nationalism. Other factors were also at work, such as changes in the organisation and ideology of the BJP, socio-economic developments and a number of unpredictable external factors.

To suggest that Congress 'sowed the seeds' implies complete guilt on the part of that party; this may not necessarily be the case. Sumantra Bose talks of an 'organic crisis' in the Indian state and sees the rise in nationalism as part of an historical force, comparable to the rise in fascism in Italy. Bose quotes Gramsci's comment on Italy: it is the 'crisis of the unitary state...(that has) encouraged the rebirth of a confusedly patriotic ideology'. Hindu-Muslim conflict in this context is seen as more a manifestation of India's crisis than a causal factor. A critical role in the rise of Hindu nationalism was played by growing caste, class, linguistic, regional and ethnic cleavages, and a focus on Hindu-Muslim conflict as a cause tends to obscure these. There are two major dimensions to the 'organic crisis' - one at the level of the democratic regime, the other in the sphere of the multi-party system. In the regime there was a 'crisis of legitimacy'; it was no longer efficacious nor effective. Bose quotes Linz's definitions of these: efficacy is the 'capacity of a regime to find solutions to the basic problems facing the political system' while effectiveness is the 'capacity to actually implement the policies formulated, with the desired results'. Both of these were lacking in central government. In the multi-party system there was a 'crisis of hegemony', whereby the hegemonic role of Congress led to instability and unpredictability among other parties, and major problems within Congress itself, such as corruption and inefficiency. Parliament was ruled by the same family for 38 of India's first 42 years, suggesting that multi-party democracy was a concept which was still undeveloped in practice. In such a framework, the rise in Hindu nationalism was no arbitrary, chance phenomenon; it was deeply rooted in history and an expression of the 'organic crisis' facing the state. The opposition were not chosen because their proposals were inspiring, but because the continuation of Congress power was seen as detrimental to the continuation of India as a unified, democratic and secular state. Bose claims that it is likely to endure so long as the efficacy and effectiveness of the regime remain deficient, and so long as the crisis of hegemony within Congress persists and deepens.

This 'organic crisis' was not just some abstract historical force however; it shows itself in the actions of the Congress Party in the years both before and since 1979. In the 1950s and 1960s, agrarian dominants 'delivered' votes to Congress in return for guaranteed (if implicit) official sanction of their own hegemony at a local level. Such actions suggested that pure politics had already become more important to Congress than any ideology. Congress was filled, according to Rudolph and Rudolph, by those 'for whom politics was more...a way to make a living and get ahead in the world than a cause worthy of sacrifice'. Such problems helped to explain the rise of the more charismatic Mrs. Gandhi, using the populist slogan '*Garibi Hatao!*' ('Abolish Poverty!') to stoke genuine enthusiasm for Congress amongst the rural poor and 'progressive' sections of the urban middle class. Her style prefigured the political style of the 1980s - populist, plebiscitary and revolving around majoritarian politics. Such populism was to cause disillusionment though; the idea of abolishing poverty on an all-India scale was far too ambitious to deliver any immediate, visible results; while people can be fooled some of the time, they cannot be fooled all of the time.

The response of the government to various acts of communal violence contributed to this problem. One of the first examples was a student-led ethno-linguistic movement in Assam, demanding greater autonomy and the removal of 'foreigners' (non-Assamese) from the electoral roll. The government's reaction - a combination of repression and manipulation - led to violence on a massive scale. Despite the army being sent in, over 3000 Bengali immigrants were killed during election riots. This pattern was repeated when the emergence of a united anti-Congress party in Kashmir (the National Conference) provoked Indira Gandhi to label the movement 'anti-national' and 'pro-Pakistan', polarising the 1983 election campaign along communal lines. Congress criticised discrimination by Srinagar against the (mainly Hindu) south and used Hindu themes throughout their campaign. This exploitation of communalism set the scene for the BJP's later success. Harsh responses to dissent appeared again in Delhi. In Punjab, the Sikh militant Bhindrawale was promoted by Congress in order to weaken the Akali Dal, their main political rivals in the area. Sikh nationalism culminated in massive violence at the Golden Temple in Amritsar, ending the loyalty of many Sikhs to the 'secular' Indian state. Congress had become communalist in order to undermine its political opposition. Rajiv Gandhi's main election campaign slogan was 'national unity in danger', and Bose claims he 'criss-crossed the country abusing Sikhs in general'. Federalist revivalism was everywhere dubbed heresy and treason by the centre, and this politics of majoritarian nationalism, combined with a 'sympathy vote' after Indira Gandhi's assassination, delivered Congress its largest-ever election victory. The BJP were in 1984 totally decimated. However, they became the beneficiaries of the change in political tone engendered by Congress in 1989; a crisis of leadership credibility, economic downturn, dissent,

desertions, non-performance and general misrule by Congress meant that the BJP were able to benefit from this game of 'competitive chauvinism'.

A number of examples help to illustrate the part played by Congress in this phenomenon. One is the case of Shah Bano, a Muslim woman who had filed for alimony from her husband. He claimed this was illegal under *sharia* (Islamic law) so Bano took the case to the Supreme Court. They ruled that the laws of a secular state overruled any religious code. Rajiv Gandhi stepped in, forcing a law through Parliament which made *sharia* superior to civil law in cases pertaining to the maintenance of divorced Muslim women. This backfired badly; many Muslims deplored the way in which a huge Congress majority had violated the authority of the judiciary, while the Hindutva movement claimed Congress had become 'pseudo-secular', appeasing minorities at the expense of the majority. This concept of a 'majority under threat' is a recurring theme in Hindu nationalism. In fact, Congress had indeed become pseudo-secular, not because it was pro-Muslim, but because it had reduced 'secularism' to the sum total of 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' obscurantisms.

Another example is based around the conflict which has become the ultimate symbol of Hindu nationalism, the campaign to build a Ram Mandir on the site of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya. The Ramjanmabhoomi campaign, formed in 1984, initiated marches on Ayodhya, believed to be the birthplace of Ram. In 1989 the government allowed the VHP to stage the *Ram shila puja*, a procession of consecrated bricks intended for the construction of the mandir. The idea was to attract BJP supporters to the Congress party. In fact this was a massive failure; the BJP claimed credit for the procession, and six days after construction work had begun on a site adjacent to the mosque the government had to order it to stop, for fear of inciting violence. The campaign, which had captured the public imagination, became a part of the official BJP ideology. Hindu nationalists turned to the BJP, while Muslims turned to the Janata Dal and other parties. The BJP remarked that:

"in an atmosphere replete with vagueness and generality...BJP's clear-cut commitments are an assurance to the people that they have a no-nonsense party on which they can rely."

A part was played in the rise of Hindu nationalism by factors other than the mistakes of Congress, however. Socio-economic changes had some influence, as the locus of economic affluence and political power shifted, according to Vanaik, from a 'small layer of upper castes to a much larger stratum of intermediate castes', who received an enormous boost from the abolition of large estates and from the Green Revolution in agriculture. This heightened both rural-urban contradictions and those within the agrarian political economy. The urban middle class were hit

hardest by the new demands being made on government by the rural 'kulaks'. As this group forms the most natural constituency of Hindu nationalism, they felt a need for stronger political representation. There was also a campaign by the younger generation of 'other backward castes' for 'reservations' or 'affirmative action'; this threatened the lower-middle class and was unpopular among those from the 'forward castes' whose jobs were threatened. According to Addi, the idea promoted by the BJP was that 'religion can make social differences disappear' and therefore such reservations would be unnecessary.

Another external factor was the rise in Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East and Iran. Many Indian Muslims began to emigrate to the Arab world to take advantage of the higher salaries offered for domestic work and skilled manual labour, and would send money back home. This, coupled with increased insurgencies in Kashmir providing 'evidence' of a Pakistan-backed 'enemy within', caused many Hindus to believe the Hindutva rhetoric of a Muslim conspiracy to subvert the Indian nation. Indeed a general increase in assertiveness on the part of minorities allowed them to be demonised more easily by nationalist groups.

While Congress and external factors had a very important part to play in the rise of Hindu nationalism, it is also important to consider the BJP's role in their own success. The Hindutva ideology is seen by Bose as 'above all an extreme form of state-led nationalism', and not differing enormously from that presented by Congress except in its more anti-Muslim stance. In fact the BJP tend to fluctuate between militancy (usually preferred by the RSS and party cadres) and the moderate stance preferred by most party leaders (with Advani being a major exception). Hansen and Jaffrelot describe 'extremist rhetoric, moderate canvassing' - the BJP manifesto is stridently xenophobic, while the moderate Vajpayee is used as the public face of the party. Their attacks on Congress have been harsh, especially the charges of 'pseudo-secularisation', 'pampering of minorities', 'appeasement of Muslims' and 'foreign infiltration'. Since the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, the BJP has positioned itself as the natural locus of national unity and the guarantor of stable, responsible governance. It has shown more success when focussing not just on religious issues (which appeal in rural areas) but on national unity, which appeals to the urban lower-middle class and even to that Westernised elite previously believed to be unreachable by the BJP. On the central issue of Ayodhya, Ram was turned into a national symbol - a 'father of the nation'; cardboard cut-outs and posters of the proposed Ram Mandir were circulated on a grand scale. Even more important though was the negative depiction of the Babri mosque, representing a bygone era of Muslim domination over Hindus. Ram was depicted as a warrior-hero, struggling against the Muslim emperor Babur.

The suggestion that the weakness and cynical populism of the Congress party in the 1970s and 1980s is a very powerful one, and is broadly right. The vote for the BJP was as much a reaction against Congress as a show of support for their nationalist ideology. However, the BJP's focus on national unity rather than religion also contributed to its electoral success, and there were a number of external factors at work which made it easier for a stridently nationalist party to succeed.