Rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party
in India

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Since Independence in 1947 India has been a secular state, protecting its minority Muslim, Sikh, Christian, and other populations from its 80 percent Hindu majority. Until the late 1980's the country was ruled exclusively by the Indian National Congress party, which, beginning with the administration of India's first President Jawaharlal Nehru, supported the secular constitution of India and enjoyed popular support from Indian citizens. [1] However, in the late 1980's the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), espousing the idea of India as a distinctly Hindu state, has marked a notable shift to the right in societal voting patterns. While not yet successfully achieving their goal of eliminating the secularism of the Indian state structure and despite losing power to the Congress party once again in recent elections in 2004, they have gained considerable influence and become a real challenge to the once completely dominant Congress Party.[2] In fact, in the Indian Parliament's lower house, the Lok Sabha, the BJP went from only 2 seats in 1984 to 85 in 1989. The popularity rose from there to 120 seats in 1992, and to 182 seats by 1999. By 1996 they were the single largest party in the Lok Sabha.[3] Thus, why, after

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[1] Sunil Kumar. *Communalism and Secularism in Indian Politics: Study of the BJP.* (NewDelhi: Rawat Publications, 2001), 48

[2] *Ibid*, 50.

[3] Kumar, 66-70.

almost half a century of the Congress Party's continuous rule in support of a secular state, has the BJP gained considerable strength in their cause for the creation of a Hindu state?

While it is tempting to attribute the rise of the BJP and other right-wing Hindu nationalist political parties to a shift in public opinion, or some "transformation of the social structure"[4] in India, the rapid success of the BJP and its allied factions can only be explained according to their strategies in terms of mobilizing the public to their cause and the reasons that society was receptive to this. In this way, I have found three major factors that have served as the fuel for this unexpected and dynamic change from Congress to BJP dominance. The BJP's success, rather than simply a result of a shift in public opinion toward religious nationalism or right-wing politics, has been mostly a result of its ability to accommodate and adapt to society through strategic alliances with other political parties, exploitation of corruption and weaknesses in the Congress party, and programs aimed at social welfare.

In this vein, I intend to outline each of these three variables and how the BJP was able to use them to adapt to society's demands of and disaffections with the ruling Congress party. I will start by outlining some basic history and terminology to be used throughout this essay. In turn, I will describe examples of how the BJP learned to ally with different political groups to garner support from various portions of society, how they were able, and perhaps lucky in some instances, to capitalize on scandals and certain policies of the ruling Congress party, and finally how they used both of these factors to bolster their

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[4] Thomas Blom Hansen. *The Saffron Wave: Democratic Revolution and the Growth of Hindu Nationalism in India.* Vol. II-III. (Roskilde, Denmark: International Development Studies, 1997), 351

image as a provider of social welfare and societal improvement that other parties could not provide.

Historical antecedents and Important Terminology

In order to understand the BJP's position in Indian politics, especially when discussing alliances with other parties, a brief description of its genesis and main ideological bases is warranted before going more in depth. The BJP was preceded by the Bharatiya Janata Sangh (BJS), which by 1977 joined with the Janata Party. Soon, there was a split within the Janata party between those with ties to Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a non-political cultural group espousing Hindu nationalism, and the other faction that feared this group would attempt to undermine their overall cause. By 1980, those allied with the RSS broke away from the Janata Party and created the BJP under the leadership of Atal Behari Vajpayee, which modeled itself after the old BJS, but with a more centrist attitude that will be discussed further below.[5]

During its existence, the BJP has been allied with many groups, the first of which is the broad, anti-Congress coalition called the National Democratic Front (NDF),[6] but this gave way to other coalitions by the mid-1980's. Hindutva, a doctrine meaning "Hindu Nationalism" or the idea of fashioning India as a distinctly Hindu nation,[7] was an underlying policy of the BJP throughout its existence, being used in varying degrees as seen fit politically. For the purposes of this essay, the Sangh Parivar, a coalition of various right-wing Hindu nationalist parties like the

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[5]Manini Chatterjee. "The BJP: Political Mobilization for *Hindutva*." In *Religion, Religiosity, and Communalism*. eds. Praful Bidwai, Harbans Mukhia, and Achin Vainik. (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1996), 88-89.

[6] Kumar, 80

[7] Jayant Lele. *Hindutva: The Emergence of the Right*. (Madras: Earthworm Books, 1995), ii-iii.

Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), Shiv Sena, RSS, and BJP, has been an important group in the BJP's success and contains political and cultural groups that predate the BJP and had already "spread their tentacles" throughout civil society in India, [8] thus aiding their cause for broader support. The BJP allied with these groups strategically, as will now be discussed.

Strategic Alliances

This brings us to a description of how the BJP's willingness to take a "flexible stand" [9] on issues and coalitions has become one of the main factors in its rapid rise to massive support among Indian society. The alliances among the groups that came to make up the Sangh Parivar proved essential in the BJP's success because the combination of all of these groups allowed for the BJP to encompass various segments of society that they had previously had trouble incorporating into their electoral base without the other political groups' support, which is evident in the BJP's electoral victories. Indeed, just as the Congress Party's success was derived from its ability to combine many elements of society to make one "miniature Indian society,"[10] the BJP now too used this tactic to make its own "umbrella" organization.[11]

From its formation in 1980 to a crushing defeat to Congress in the 1984 elections, the BJP stayed away from its past ties to RSS and other right-wing organizations.[12] Instead, under the leadership of Vajpayee, they emerged promoting democracy, "positive secularism"—a commitment to protecting religious rights of all--and national integration.[13] After it won only 2 seats in the Lok

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[8] Chatterjee, 99
[9]. Kumar, 62.
[10] *Ibid*, 48-49
[11] *Ibid*, 182
[12] Chaterjee, 89
[13] Kumar, 78-79.

Sabha in 1984, the party shifted back to ally with the RSS and thus play up Hindutva under the new leadership of L.K. Advani.[14] This afforded BJP leaders the ability to still espouse a relatively moderate stance toward society, while also gaining the support of the large Hindu base already supporting the RSS.

Preceding elections in 1989, the BJP also allied with Shiv Sena, thus bringing in more support for the Hindutva cause.[15] In this way, the BJP smartly allied with groups that already had created a support network for their objectives. Importantly, the BJP saw and capitalized on the national Hindu uproar over the *Ramjanmabhoomi* issue, which was the movement concerning the disputed Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. Specifically, this movement focused on demolishing a mosque and building an Indian temple, or a Mandir, in Ayodhya on the site where Hindus claim a Mandir had once stood that was the birthplace of an important Hindu god, Ram.[16] The BJP formally signed a declaration in support of this cause, and even sent Advani on a *Rath Yatra*, a political and religious tour of the country, to gain support for this cause.[17] The results of the 1989 Lok Sabha elections, in which the BJP gained an unprecedented 85 seats (as opposed to just 2 in 1984),[18] proved the effectiveness of the new coalition of RSS, Shiv Sena, VHP, and BJP—comprising the Sangh Parivar coalition—in gaining the support of many sections of Indian society that the BJP would have had trouble receiving on its own.[19] In this way, the BJP's overall ideas gained support from a growing portion of society, both because of its own efforts and because of its attitude

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[14]. Chaterjee, 90

[15] *Ibid*, 97

[16] Hansen. *The Saffron Wave,* 401.

[17] Chatterjee, 96-97.

[18] Kumar, 67.

[19] Hansen. *The Saffron Wave,* 905.

promoting working with other similar-minded, although more radical, political groups that helped bring in the support of other segments of society that had previously supported these other groups.

The BJP's alliance with the Shiv Sena in 1988, for example, was undertaken by the BJP leadership because they saw Shiv Sena's "immense dynamism" in its support from various portions of society.[20] This was a common theme concerning the BJP's decisions to ally with other political groups. However, by 1992 various internal rivalries had created a rift in the BJP/Shiv Sena alliance. The BJP, because of its growing appeal as the frontrunner in the Sangh Parivar and as a more moderate choice to other factions within the Sangh Parivar, was able to capture some of Shiv Sena's political base,[21] thus strengthening the BJP and showing their ability to utilize these alliances for their own political gains.

Maintaining these key alliances with the Sangh Parivar allowed for its continual growth in electoral victories, winning a majority of seats in 1996,[22] until 2004 when it unexpectedly, but still rather narrowly, lost power to Congress. Through this alliance, the BJP has been able to play up its strong Hindutva roots when politically useful, such as during the period from 1989-1992 when the *Ramjanmabhoomi* movement was at its culmination in Indian society. At the same time it could still put on its moderate face in order to court minorities, even Muslims,[23] by promoting its "positive secularism" doctrine and "integral humanism," which stressed the importance of every

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[20] Thomas Blom Hansen. *Wages of Violence: Naming and Identity in Postcolonial Bombay.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 94.

[21] *Ibid*, 113.

[22] Kumar. 69.

[23] Hansen, *The Saffron Wave,* 917.

individual in society and how both society and the individual were "essential for the existence, growth, and manifestation of the other."[24]

Exploiting the Weaknesses of Congress

As noted before, the main source of the Congress party's strength among Indian society for so long lay in its wide "umbrella" of alliances, and policies that created what Sunil Kumar calls "a miniature Indian Society."[25] Events in the mid to late-1980's, however, led to fragmenting of the once all-inclusive Congress party and consequently to the BJP's ability to play off of these internal weaknesses for its own gain. While the party did attempt, during the time it was still the BJS, to counter the "authoritarian excesses" of Indira Ghandi's government in the mid to late 1970's,[26] it did not make much headway because it still lacked the coalition force that was to propel it forward, as outlined above. However, by the mid-1980's, following Indira Ghandi's assassination in 1984 and Ravij Ghandi's election thereafter, the BJP began to utilize corruption and weaknesses within the Congress party to gain support as a long overdue alternative to Congress party hegemony.

By the time of the 1989 elections, the BJP had a few key issues to use against the Congress in what Thomas Blom Hansen called a mostly "anti-Rajiv" campaign.[27] Indeed, a key component of their victory, along with the alliances mentioned above, was their anti-corruption stance against the Rajiv Ghandi government.[28] Specifically, this corruption pertained to the so-called Bofros Scandal, in which a Swedish company bribed high-level Indian

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[24] Kumar. 82.

[25] *Ibid.* 48-49.

[26] Hansen, *The Saffron Wave*, 381.

[27] Hansen, 399

[28] *Ibid*, 421

governmental officials for preferential treatment.[29] Also, in 1986, the Congress party had passed the Muslim Women's Bill, which the BJP were able to easily call an instance of how Congress "pandered" to Muslim's to gain votes against the majority of Indian society.[30]

Similarly, in the 1996 campaign, Congress was easily criticized by the BJP because of reports of excessive police brutality and the mismanagement of a relief effort in response to a major earthquake in Latur. The Sangh Parivar used this mismanagement to its advantage by organizing its own relief effort, which left a lasting impression in the eyes of many Indians. [31] Throughout these campaigns the Congress Party had also tried to discredit the BJP and its allies by calling them religious radicals. However, the BJP was able to use all of the Congress party's blunders as mentioned to discredit these allegations [32] while also promoting their centrist image based on their founding ideals. In all of these ways, it is clear that along with strategic alliances to broaden its popular support base, the BJP also was afforded the benefit of several scandals and blunders on the part of the Congress party that gave them more fuel for their rapid entrance into the dominant position in Indian politics. However, this is not to say that these scandals within the Congress party were the only impetus for the rapid ascendance of the BJP. As discussed above, their ability to choose alliances with parties that could encompass varying sections of society that were generally outside the publicly moderate face that the BJP was trying to promote

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[29] Chaterjee, 94.

[30] *Ibid*, 92.

[31] Hansen, *The Saffron Wave*, 902

[32] Koenrad Elst. "Introduction." In *Gujarat After Godhra: Real Violence, Selective Outrage* eds. Ramesh Rao and Koenraad Elst. (New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications: 2003), 16.

enhanced support greatly. In addition, their strong commitment to aiding the poor and improving social welfare also played a large role in conjunction with these weaknesses within the Congress, as will be discussed now.

Providing Social Welfare

Related to the above two factors in many ways, the BJP was able to provide and promote social welfare programs to enhance their standing in society. It was able to do this mainly because in addition to its own social welfare projects, each of its allies had their own programs to help the poor and others in society, and the BJP was able to capitalize on these measures. Related to the second point of my argument, they were also quick to point out that they were providing services that the Congress had failed to supply, thus again bolstering their image relative to the Congress'.

From the beginning the BJP, in its five founding principals, had supported the idea of "Gandhian Socialism," the main focus of which was "bread, freedom, and employment."[33] When they reorganized in the late 1980's to ally with the Sangh Parivar, they made it a key component of their new structure to fight for the needs of the poor,[34] thus allowing them to bring in lower and middle caste and class elements of society. In addition, in the specific context of Bombay, during the 1995 elections the party promised low-rent tenements to the poor population living in slums, which constituted 60% of the city's population.[35] Additionally, in Bombay the Shiv Sena/BJP alliance had "undoubtedly invested more in that area than had any of the previous state governments."[36]

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[33] Kumar, 79.

[34] Hansen, *The Saffron Wave,* 389-390

[35] Kumar, 69.

[36] Hansen, *Wages of Violence,* 208.

The later BJP policies of social welfare were a stated policy of theirs entitled "social engineering," which promised changes focused toward the low-caste, and predominantly low class, population of India.[37] Thus, by providing such services to the poor, they were able to improve their standing in society regardless of what people may have said about policies such as Hindutva. In this way, they were able to support their image of a centrist party, while the RSS and other Sangh Parivar factions espoused more radical doctrine. In addition, these programs also came as a way of pushing the Congress party's support down further relative to the BJP's growing success.

Conclusion

From less than successful beginnings in the early 1980's, the Bharatiya Janata Party had grown into a powerful force in Indian politics by the end of the decade, and has continued to maintain its place as an alternative to the once-dominant Congress Party. Despite Congress' long reign as a representative of most of Indian society, the BJP effectively countered it and even questioned its ideology promoting a secular India. Through strategic alliances, exploitation of weaknesses and corruption within the Congress party, as well as social welfare programs, the BJP gained considerable support throughout the 1990's in spite of its underlying Hindutva ideology, which promotes a distinctly Hindu, rather than secular, state. This example has universal application considering the BJP leaders' ability to court support despite what many believe is a radical, even "fascist,"[38] set of beliefs pertaining to religion

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[37] Kumar, 68-69

[38] Aijaz Ahmad. "Radicalism of the Right and Logics of Secularism." in *Religion, Religiosity, and Communalism*. ed. Praful Bidwai, Harbans

and politics. Despite this belief, the BJP draw support by creating a web of alliances that bring in various groups in society to their side. They have been successful in putting on a centrist face and highlighting Congress' inability to rule as well. Finally, their programs toward social welfare have engendered additional support beyond these other two mentioned factors. In this way, parties can enjoy support even if society does not support all of their doctrines, and their level support depends in many ways upon what they can offer society, despite radical elements within their ranks.

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