

# Shifts in Policy Paradigm in India: Re-emergence of the Hindutva Agenda

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## Summary

*The ideology of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has its roots in the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which has put forward a notion of a nation committed to the values of Hindu practices (Sanskrit). Initially conceptualised as a movement against the minority appeasement policies of the British colonial government, it emerged as a social movement to inculcate ancient Hindu morals and ethics among its members. The political arm, the Jan Sangh, which eventually became the BJP, could find little traction for the Hindutva movement in the face of the secular policies of the Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi governments. It co-opted the landed class and the merchants in its quest for political power, and initial success came from this right of center approach rather than pushing for a Hindutva agenda. It was only after the Congress governments, post 1980, veered towards a policy of focusing on minority votes that BJP emerged as an alternative.*

*This paper argues that there have always been two strands to the BJP approach – one a pro development, market friendly approach and the other, a hardcore Hindu agenda. During the Atal Bihari Vajpayee years, as it was a coalition of parties sympathetic to market-friendly policies. While there was less focus on the Hindutva agenda, it was never given up. In the second term of the Narendra Modi government 2019, it is clear that there is an ascendance of the ideological forces within the party and that the RSS is driving national policy on the basis of its core agenda.*

## Introduction

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is today the world's largest political party in terms of primary membership numbers, with its ideological and organisational links to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the BJP has 303 members in the elected house of the parliament, the Lok Sabha, and with its allies, commands a significant majority with over 370 seats. Yet, in 1984, the BJP was able to win only two seats in the parliament. The BJP was the ruling party between 1998 and 2004 under Atal Behari Vajpayee, and has been ruling since 2014 under Prime Minister Modi.

Modi was re-elected as prime minister with his party gaining an absolute majority in the Lok Sabha in the May 2019 elections. This is his second term. The next Lok Sabha elections are not due till 2024. With the economy growing slowly at just around five per cent in 2018-19, the government has been focusing on a number of measures that appear to go back to the party's original ideological commitments rather than focusing on issues of economic development. These include the abrogation of special status for Kashmir, the decision on building a temple at Ayodhya (a disputed site between the Hindus and the Muslims) and the denial of Triple Talaq to the Muslim community. The most controversial has been the

Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), recently passed by the parliament, and the decision to undertake surveys to determine a National Register for Citizens, which has caused considerable unrest and agitations all over the country. Any attempt to understand the strategy of the government and its mindset, which often come at the cost of economic reforms and development, requires a look at the background of the party's ideology and the main drivers of its policies.

## **Rise of Hindutva**

Core to the BJP's policies appears to be a concept of Hinduism that has been on the rise in India since the late 1980s. The ethnic nationalism of the Hindus dates back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. It started off as a cultural re-organisation launched in reaction to external threats through the Arya Samaj and the Brahmo Samaj movements and, some decades later, the Hindu Mahasabha movement. This was the time that the British colonial government, operating from Calcutta (now Kolkata), was encouraging Christian missionaries in the north-east, and proselytisation was reaching new heights in attempting to convert various tribal people and those of lower caste orders to Christianity. This was also when the British colonial government took to a 'divide-and-rule' policy, reaching out to Muslim minorities, leading eventually to the partition of Bengal in 1905. The Arya Samaj movement was a reaction to these external threats and created a Hindu identity that opposed this alienation. It traditionally projected an upper caste point of view. At the same time, the movement distanced itself from the criticism of idol worship and rituals and introduced modern features harkening back to the Vedic Golden age as the true source of Hinduism. The introduction of these modern features, and the emulation of certain modern tenets, enabled the movement to acquire a large following and legitimacy in Bengal, and even more so in Punjab, where the landowners and traders came under its influence.

The RSS was formed on 27 September 1925 by K B Hedgewar as a right-wing paramilitary volunteer organisation. Hedgewar focused on character training for the volunteers through 'Hindu discipline', and the organisation aimed to help unite the Hindu community into a Hindu rashtra (Hindu state). It drew inspiration from the emergence of right-wing groups in Europe at that time and focused on creating a separate identity for Hindu culture (Hindutva). It gradually grew into an umbrella organisation called the Sangh Parivar (family of the Sangh). Hedgewar was followed by Golwalkar, who extended the RSS' right wing thinking and expressed support for several extreme right-wing ideologies in Europe.

Earlier, the disputes arising out of the partition of Bengal in 1905, the formation of the Muslim League in 1906 and the creation of a separate electorate for Muslims under the Morley-Minto Reforms catalysed Hindu leaders coming together to create an organisation to protect the rights of Hindus. In 1909, Arya Samaj leaders Lala Lajpat Rai, Lal Chand and others established the Punjab Hindu Sabha, and Madan Mohan Malaviya presided over the Sabha's first session in Lahore in 1909. The same year, it criticised the Indian National Congress for failing to defend Hindu interests. Over the years, several such Hindu sabhas came up in other states. The combination of these efforts led to the formation of the Hindu Mahasabha in 1921. Malaviya and Lala Lajpat Rai were its early leaders. The organisation came under the influence of V D Savarkar, who was one of the earliest to propound the notion of Hindutva. In 1925, Hedgewar left the Mahasabha to form the RSS.

These twin approaches – one to right wing political ideology and the second focusing on Hindu rashtra as a state for Hindus – owe their origins to these developments.

The RSS focused on social conservatism and social outreach. The organisation grew in membership, reinforcing traditional values of Hinduism. The political aspirations of a Hindu identity party came up against a Nehruvian vision of a secular India that treated all religions with compassion and equality. It was difficult in these years to build a narrative of exclusive Hinduism.

Shyama Prasad Mukherjee was part of the Hindu Mahasabha, which did not share the Congress ideology. After independence, he demanded the integration of Jammu and Kashmir into India and was vehemently opposed to conferring special status to that region. He formed the Jan Sangh in 1951 and was arrested in 1952 for his views. He died in jail in 1952 – an event that has not been fully investigated. Deen Dayal Upadhyaya succeeded him in the Jan Sangh, who formulated a concept of integral humanism in 1965.

The word ‘Hindutva’ was first enunciated by Savarkar. In his study of the history of the RSS, D R Goyal says:

“Hindus have lived in India since times immemorial; Hindus are the nation because all culture, civilisation and life is contributed by them alone; non-Hindus are invaders or guests and cannot be treated as equal unless they adopt Hindu traditions, culture, etc. The freedom and progress of the country is the freedom and progress of the Hindus... Lack of unity is the root cause of all the troubles of the Hindus and the Sangh is born with the divine mission to bring about that unity.”<sup>1</sup>

Savarkar refined this into a Punyabhoomi (cultural origins) argument of religion that was originally Indian, as against religions that had origins elsewhere. Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism were born in India and qualified as indigenous religions, whereas Islam and Christianity did not. The concept of Hindu sampraday (culture) that goes beyond the concept of state boundaries was used to define Hindutva and comprised core Indian values such as the originality of religion to India and a respect for culture. The key features of this conceptualisation were promoted by the RSS.

In time, the RSS grew enormously in strength and influence. In Gujarat, the rebuilding of the Somnath temple, which started in 1951, was celebrated as a manifestation of a united and assertive Hinduism. In Orissa, the focus was on the Jagannath temple in the 1960s and 1970s. However, this movement could not gather strength in South India where the relationship with the Muslims and the Christians dated back to the foundation of these religions. Trade ties and the intermingling of cultures was a part of local history for over 1,500 years. The Muslims and the Christians were not seen as invaders or oppressors, as in north India. Uneven implementation in geographical terms challenged the RSS’ claim to represent the identity of the nation.

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<sup>1</sup> Goyal, D R, *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*, Radha Krishna Prakashan 1979.

## **Early Years of the RSS**

In the early years, the RSS focused on organisation building at the local level through the creation of a network of dedicated workers. In contrast to the Hindu Mahasabha, it gave priority to the development of a solid network of activists from 1951 onwards, while its political front, the Jana Sangh, implemented a strategy of party building. This led to some divergences. There was some overlap as well, with many members of the Jan Sangh having an RSS background.

The ideologues of the RSS, Hedgewar and Golwalkar and, subsequently, Balasaheb Deoras (all Brahmins) continued to press home a Vedic Hindu view of Hindutva on the organisation, and the message spread in the Hindi heartland. Golwalkar went beyond Hindutva and even professed admiration for Hitler and his policies. As mentioned, the emphasis on secular politics adopted by Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi prevented the political mobilisation of these feelings into electoral victories. In 1966, the Congress split, with Indira Gandhi forming the Congress (R). The Congress (Indira) was born in 1978 after another split. There was an attempt now to reach out to the minorities, especially the Muslims. Secular politics started giving way to selective support for lower castes and for Muslims, which the Congress started considering its vote bank. Over the next decade, this led to opposition parties aligning themselves with dominant castes in the states. The emergence of caste-based parties like the Samajwadi Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh in the 1990s and the marginalisation of the Congress in the south, especially Tamil Nadu, resulted in the Congress adopting policies to please the minorities. This gave the Hindutva movement a new opportunity.

Golwalkar had earlier thought that cow slaughter could be an issue on which the Sangh could launch a countrywide struggle, but that strategy failed. The next opportunity was the emotive issue of Shah Bano in 1985-86, when the Rajiv Gandhi government overturned a Supreme Court's judgement. This was seen as an effort to appease the minorities and it offered the Sangh a renewed opportunity.

## **Partition of India**

After the Partition of India in 1947, and as a consequent of the riots that followed, attempts at identity building continued through ethno-religious mobilisation, primarily through the creation of symbols like the demand for a temple at Lord Ram's birthplace in Ayodhya. The values remained Brahminical, with the Vedic age defining the high point of Hindu culture.

There were problems in converting this ideology into a political base that would attract voters up to the early 1980s. At one end was the secular nature of Congress politics and ideology that gave little room for an aggressive Hindu ideology to emerge. At the other, there was little reason for the Hindus to feel vulnerable due to secularism and, more importantly, the socio-economic development that was taking place was popular. The political alliances that the Jan Sangh made were confined to a narrow social base in the Hindi belt – the upper class, middle class and landed elite. During this period, the Hindus had to tone down their communal themes and develop an interest in other socio-economic issues. They relinquished exclusive reliance on their network of activists and tried to build

influence by co-opting princes and notables and building alliances with mainstream opposition parties. They were soon perceived to represent a right of center alternative to the socialistic patterns of the Congress. The original combination based on militant Hindu nationalism, ethno-religious symbols and the RSS were replaced by moderate strategies that allowed an understanding to be reached with other political entities. During the Emergency in India between 1975 and 1977, the dilution of the RSS' strategies accelerated, with the development of closer links with other parties. However, by 1980, the failure of these strategies was evident, and they returned to their original combination of strategies.

The original strategies were to create an ideological identity and capitalise on the feelings of vulnerability caused by perceived threats from other religions and ethno-religious mobilisations while also flexibly adopting specific patterns of local mobilisation. The implementation of these strategies required the existence of special conditions that came into existence only in the 1980s.

## **Strategy Rethink**

There was also the need for a strategic rethink. In 1984, after the assassination of Indira Gandhi, the BJP was reduced to just two seats in the parliament. There had been successes in state elections, including Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, but these were based on a socio-economic agenda and reaching out to the middle class, the merchant communities and the wealthy and the privileged, as an alternative to the left-leaning policies of the Congress era. These victories were not necessarily based on a core Hindutva agenda.

The Congress had appealed to the ethno-religious sentiment of the minorities, and had moved away from its earlier, secular, socio-economic development platform. It flirted with Hindu nationalism briefly, but soon moved back to issues of rural development and poverty alleviation. It was more concerned with welfare policies for the poor in the form of subsidies and doles, rather than economic development. The BJP considered this an opportunity for a Hindu nationalist resurgence, and the Ram Janmabhoomi issue was revived as a fulcrum for such a campaign. The focus was on Ayodhya, claimed by Hindu nationalists who alleged that a mosque had been built exactly where there had been a temple consecrating the birthplace of Ram. As such, the mosque had to go, and a Ram temple established. The movement saw some initial traction in Uttar Pradesh and some parts of the Hindi belt but was not accepted by all. In the interregnum, the emergence of caste-based politics in the Hindi states and the implementation of the Mandal Commission report<sup>2</sup> created cleavages in the Hindu votes. The BJP had to find alternate answers to meet these challenges.

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<sup>2</sup> The Mandal Commission, or the Socially and Educationally Backward Classes Commission (*SEBC*), was established on 1 January 1979 by the Janata Party government under Prime Minister Morarji Desai to "identify the socially or educationally backward classes" of India. It was headed by the late B P Mandal, an Indian parliamentarian, to consider the question of reservations for people to redress discrimination, and used 11 social, economic, and educational indicators to determine backwardness. In 1980, based on its rationale that Other Backward Classes (OBCs), identified on the basis of caste, economic and social indicators comprised 52 per cent of India's population, the Commission's report recommended that members of the OBC be granted reservations to 27 per cent of jobs under the Central government and public sector undertakings, thus making the total number of reservations for the Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribes and OBC 49 per cent. Though the report was completed in 1983, the V P Singh

By 1991, the Hindutva ideologues had been persuaded to revert to the Ram temple agenda, and Advani launched the famous Rath Yatra (chariot procession) across Hindi India. This time, the response was overwhelming and there was a strong support for the movement. However, the demolition of the Babri Masjid was not on their original agenda, and the party attempted to distance itself from this action. It was clear that the demolition had resulted in deep cleavages, and was not accepted by all, even among the supporters of the BJP. From 1993 onwards, the BJP leaders chose a more moderate strategy, downplaying communal issues and highlighting economic and development issues:

“The moderate combination relied on an ideological rapprochement with Hindu traditionalists, mobilisation on socio-economic, populist issues, and a co-option of notables while the radical combination was based on a strategy of identity building through the stigmatisation and emulation of the Other.”<sup>3</sup>

The BJP government that came into power in 1998 and remained till 2004 was well aware of these contradictions.<sup>4</sup> The internal contradictions were the choice between reverting to a core Hindutva agenda or making friends with like-minded parties to deliver an economic mandate that was less socialist and more free market oriented. Vajpayee, in a speech in the parliament on the programme for the National Democratic Alliance, enunciated this. He clearly stated that the programme did not include the temple at Ayodhya or the abrogation of the special status for Kashmir. He said this was not because his party had given up on these goals – it was because they lacked numbers to carry these changes through. Rather, there was consensus on the economic plight of the country and the need for development and growth. There was also need for India to be recognised as an important global player; hence, the nuclear tests, acceleration of the nuclear power programme, the missile programme and the mission to the moon. It was to signify that India had arrived on the world stage, a position that the party hardliners were happy with, even though they could not carry through with their original agenda.

Though both the extreme and moderate views were represented in the Vajpayee BJP cabinet during this time, there was a pragmatic approach to policymaking and governance, dictated primarily by the need to keep a flock of allies together. These allies did not subscribe to the Nehruvian socialist ideals and welcomed change that led to economic development. Key ministers in the Vajpayee government which were handling economic portfolios did not come from the RSS’ rank and file and were able to implement market-friendly policies. All this did not necessarily go down well with those of the RSS that were in government, and indeed, with the RSS itself.

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government declared its intent to implement the report in August 1990, leading to widespread student protests. The Indian public at large was not informed of the important details of the report, namely that it applied only to the five per cent jobs that existed in the public sector, and that the report considered 55 per cent of India’s population as belonging to the OBC, due to their poor economic and socio cultural background. Opposition political parties were able to instigate the youth to protest in large numbers in the nation’s campuses, resulting in self immolations by students.

<sup>3</sup> Christophe Jaffrelot, op. cit.

<sup>4</sup> The Supreme Court in this period had equated Hindutva with Hinduism. While it validated the core claims of the Jana Sangh and the BJP, it was still was a different interpretation from those of the earlier ideologues.

The author has been party, on more than one occasion, to explaining government policies to the higher ups in the RSS, with mixed results. However, on balance, this period turned out to be one of implementation of several measures that were market friendly and helped to take the country forward in economic terms. Several infrastructure initiatives and the liberalisation of the financial markets helped by investor-friendly conditions, enabled the government to be perceived as liberal and market-friendly.

The successor government, under the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), attempted to bring back earlier welfare policies of the Congress era, including a minimum wage programme and increases in subsidies and grants. However, the position was different in the states where the BJP was in power.

Throughout 2004-2014, when the government, headed by Dr Manmohan Singh, was in power, the BJP-led governments in the state focused on growth and economic development while the RSS went back to its roots of local level organisation, social change and re-enumeration of core values. Modi, even during the campaign that brought him to power in 2014, emphasised on the development that he had brought to Gujarat, and how the existing UPA government had missed all opportunities for growth. He focused on the perceived venalities of the government and the scandals surrounding it and promised 'growth for all'.

## **The Modi Government**

The first term of the Modi government between 2014 and 2019 included several initiatives – a Swachh Bharat or 'Clean India' programme which attempts to clean the Ganges, removal of open defecation and a number of investor-friendly measures. There was a new outreach in foreign policy, with the prime minister travelling to several capitals in an attempt create an atmosphere of acceptance by world leaders. There were some mistakes as well. The demonetisation initiative of 2016 has been criticised for causing considerable hardship to small industry and agriculture without attendant benefits; and the Goods and Services Tax regime, while needed, was inefficiently administered, leading to hardship for businesses. Critics have pointed to the flaws in these measures for slowing down economic growth. There were also stresses in the financial sector, with a large number of infrastructure loans turning nonperforming. Cases of fraud came to light. Though the government brought in several laws to correct the situation and recover the monies, progress has been slow. The lack of credit dragged down entrepreneurship.

Notwithstanding all this, the electorate gave a massive mandate again to Modi in 2019. However, things had changed. There were terrorist attacks out of Pakistan, and there was a strong response from the Indian forces and the air force. There was a wave of nationalism and identity that helped him to carry voters. Subtly, the narrative moved from nationalism to national honour and pride, and to ideals that had been the core to the party for several decades.

In the initial months after the elections, Modi renewed his contacts with overseas leaders, and an active external affairs minister, Dr S Jaishankar, carried on an excellent diplomatic outreach. However, it was clear that the economy was slowing, and the first budget did little to help it grow.

As recently as 2018, Mohan Bhagwat, the head of RSS, had reiterated the core values of Hindutva. He said it was based on patriotism, glory of ancestors and a respect for culture (sampraday). He reiterated the Pithrubhoomi (native land) argument propounded by Savarkar, which clearly delineates between religions originally Indian and alien religions. The new Hindutva conceptualisation of core Indian values, original religion/communities, and its imagination of persecuted minorities under Muslim rule appear to be the ideological sources that the CAA legalises.

The Act itself merely provides for all people belonging to originally Indian religions, as defined above, to have access to Indian citizenship. It does not discriminate against Muslims and other religions, but makes it appear that those following these religions need to adhere to the concept of Pithrubhoomi as set out.

The RSS in its present form draws a distinction between nation and the state, questioning the empowerment of the political entity (state) over the cultural entity (nation), and seeks to redress the balance.<sup>5</sup> Bhagwat announced over a year ago that there was a national consensus for his interpretation of Hindutva, and that the invocation of national unity through legal means was required, which the CAA provides, thus creating a constitutional basis for the Hindutva nation. This legal demand goes back to the origins of Hindutva. Golwalkar said that those whose Pithrubhoomi is India and Punyabhoomi is elsewhere cannot be Indian. Savarkar spoke of a common nation (rashtra) with a common race (jati) and, most importantly, a common civilisation (sanskriti). The CAA is, therefore, the culmination of the ideological aspirations of this party.

## **Legislative Measures**

The concept has been carried forward in the number of legislative measures that have been enacted by the new government. The abrogation of Section 370 of the Constitution, removing special status to Jammu and Kashmir and redefining its boundaries, was a promise that the BJP, and earlier the Jan Sangh, had made as early as 1951. The Ram temple at Ayodhya was a fulfillment of Hindu aspirations of the party from the 1980s. The removal of Triple Talaq was seen as a first step in the enactment of a common civil code.

It is clear that the policy and agenda of this government stem from the ideological underpinnings of the party. The current set of members of parliaments is substantially drawn from the RSS, and there are a number of RSS sympathisers at different levels in the government.

The most recent example of such ideologically driven policy, including economic and development policy, was apparent in the budget presented on 1 February 2020. It contained several announcements that were part of the RSS wish list. One of the most notable was the announcement of a national museum at Rakhigarhi, an archaeological site that was discovered and analysed in the last decade. The RSS believes that archeological evidence at this site establishes that the origins of Indian (Hindu) civilisation were indigenous, and that

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<sup>5</sup> In particular, it veers away from the nation-state concepts of the west, where religion is often subsumed into state narratives. In the Hindutva concept, the bhumi or land is defined by core Hindutva values and religion, and state boundaries are therefore an adjunct to this concept.



there was no invasion of Aryans from elsewhere, as believed. Though this is disputed, the museum at Rakhigarhi emphasises the RSS point of view. There are other announcements as well. The requests of the Bhartiya Kisan Sangh, the farmers' wing of the RSS, for a bigger focus on zero-debt farming, balanced use of fertilisers and pesticides, and small farmers' insurance have been accommodated. Most importantly, customs duties have been raised for many items that are being manufactured by small and micro enterprises in India, as has been the demand of the Swadeshi Jagaran Manch, an organisation affiliated to the RSS. At many points in the speech, the imprint of the ideologies is seen. While the ideologies and policy prescriptions have been the same for several decades, this time we are seeing implementation across many areas of the government. There is also the announcement for supporting data repositories. The Swadeshi Jagaran Manch, in particular, has been against universal access of data (which they call data colonisation), and the Budget proposal is to make it possible for data generated in India to be kept in India.

From all counts, the government is driving a nationalistic agenda based on the core philosophy of the party. It is clear that, unlike in the Vajpayee era, the moderates have taken a backseat. This has come at the cost of considerable international criticism, and indeed, a turning away from economic engagement by some countries (international patients to Indian hospitals for treatment, especially from the Gulf and Middle East, have declined substantially).

The prime minister, this time around, is less vocal on programmes close to his heart, including water, primary education, and health. He had invested again on external relationships but is less active in the last few months. Modi himself is steeped in RSS ideology, having been a member all his active political life, and has risen through the ranks in the organisation. Yet, as his years at the helm in Gujarat showed, he was keen on development and took pride in the state's economic achievements. A number of new initiatives happened in Gujarat in the period 2002 to 2014,<sup>6</sup> and he brought to the national stage a history of economic development achievements. However, it is clear from the articulations of the RSS, Bhagwat, and, indeed, several parliamentarians, that there is a shift towards achieving core Hindutva demands, and, therefore, the development agenda has taken a back seat. Perhaps this could have been foreseen when Yogi Adityanath was selected as the chief ministerial candidate in Uttar Pradesh – a clear shift now visible at the national level. It is quite clear that the policies are currently being driven by the party ideologues, not by Modi, and to that extent there is a diminution of his role and influence in governance.

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<sup>6</sup> Some of these initiatives included the Narmada Dam and extension of irrigation; provision of uninterrupted electricity to the villages; gas grid; and large investments infrastructure, including ports and large industrial investments.