

## ***The end of Hindutva?***

### ***A Reflection on the General Election in India, April/May 2004***

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How did the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) lose the 2004 elections? We can begin to answer this by pointing out the spectacular fall of some of the key members of the alliance: the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) was obliterated in Tamil Nadu; the Telugu Desam Party was decimated in Andhra Pradesh; as was the Trinamul Congress in West Bengal. In contrast, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) still emerged as the second largest party in the Lok Sabha; nevertheless it too suffered some serious reversals in key areas. For example, in Gujarat, where in 1999 the party had gained 21 seats out of 26, they gained just 14 seats. In contrast, the Congress doubled its 1999 tally in Gujarat. In Uttar Pradesh, where one senior party worker had predicted 50 seats for the BJP before the election, they were reduced to 10. Not only that, some major figures in the party and the government such as Murli Manohar Joshi (Allahabad) and Swami Chinmayananda (Jaunpur) lost their seats, and in the three constituencies which include the towns of Ayodhya, Benaras and Mathura the BJP also lost.

These losses have a symbolic significance. Gujarat is known as the 'laboratory' state – a testing ground, so it has been said, for the implementation of Hindutva. Ayodhya, Benaras, Mathura are the sacred sites of Hindu nationalism, places around which they have conducted major campaigns. Joshi and Chinmayananda – amongst others – have been key advocates of hardline Hindutva policies

In addition to such symbolically significant losses, on a general level the NDA's focus on Sonia Gandhi's foreign origins as a major campaign issue appears to have flopped, with voters decisively rejecting it as significant. Indeed, in the aftermath of the election, as Sonia made her decision to step aside, the most vociferous campaigners on this issue, especially Sushma Swaraj and Uma Bharati, have been strongly criticised for their stance

All this has been framed by the idea, most strongly advocated by the Communist Party (Marxist) leader Harkishen Singh Surjeet, that this was a mandate for secularism and tolerance, delivered by a discerning electorate. As the Chief Minister

of Assam, Tarun Gogoi, noted, 'voters rejected both Ram Janmbhoomi and Sonia Janmbhoomi' (India Express.com, 16/5/04)

In the context of these observations, it is legitimate to ask: is this the end of Hindutva? Can we see these developments as an indication that the significance of Hindu nationalism is waning in Indian national politics?

Of course, on one level this is an easy question to answer. The BJP, as the party of Hindu nationalism, is a party with a significant profile in national politics and a firm infrastructure which cannot be eradicated by one bad election result. It still has plenty of clout in central parliament, and is in power in several key states. Indeed, in the same round of elections, it won control of the Orissa State Assembly in collaboration with its local coalition partner, the Biju Janata Dal, and made significant gains in Karnataka. Just 6 months ago it also made significant gains in three assembly elections – Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh – a result which indeed is said to have been a major factor in persuading the government to head for early national polls. Clearly, then, as a political force, the BJP will be back

Yet even in those assembly polls at the end of November 2003, questions were being asked about the BJP's shifting strategy, after campaigns structured principally around issues of development and governance, rather than any overt 'Hindutva agenda' (see *Frontline* 20/12/03, 'Winning without Hindutva?'). This trend appeared to be confirmed by the NDA's general election manifesto, and the tenor of its campaign over the past couple of months. In the manifesto, key Hindutva themes such as the temple at Ayodhya, Article 370 of the Constitution, and the Uniform Civil Code do not feature very highly, if at all. The apparently low profile of Hindu nationalist themes was confirmed by the campaigning style of deputy prime minister L.K. Advani. Advani is notoriously linked to the idea of the yatra – which may be translated as 'pilgrimage' – as a political campaign strategy. In 1990 he undertook the famous Rath Yatra: a procession from Somnath to Ayodhya in a bus decorated to resemble the chariot (rath) of Ram, advancing inexorably on Ram's kingdom of Ayodhya in order to 'reclaim' his birthplace. The rath yatra became a grand symbol of the trajectory of Hindu nationalism as a political force aiming to fashion national culture in its own image. In this most recent campaign Advani again embarked on a yatra (Bharat Uday Yatra). This time, however, Advani proclaimed – 'this is not a rath yatra like the one I undertook last time. This is only a yatra in a bus'. Advani's 2004 yatra was still about the regeneration of the nation – but the emphasis was on economic issues and governance rather than cultural regeneration

These points seem to suggest that, although the BJP may have a future, perhaps its core ideology – a grand, all-encompassing, national ideology, with a vision based on the transformation of society – has been displaced. It no longer has the potential to become a hegemonic ideology in India. Instead, the BJP will continue to operate as a party with significance in particular regions, and elements of Hindutva will be implemented on the basis of local conditions and local judgements (as, for example, in Gujarat), rather than as part of a grand scheme to develop the national character. In this scenario the BJP may be seen as a regional party, a party with aspirations to gain power in particular areas of the country

This is an interesting scenario to consider, in particular because it is supported by the argument put forward by several analysts that Indian politics is becoming increasingly regionalised or fragmented (see, for example, Zavos, Wyatt and Hewitt 2004a). Coalitions, it appears, are now an integral ingredient in the national political scene. The Congress has belatedly acknowledged this, and its success in 2004 is built precisely on its ability to forge winning alliances based on a genuine coalitional strategy. For example, a post election analysis by Alistair McMillan for the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies in Delhi ('Alliances did the trick for Congress', see CSDS, 'How India Voted', <http://www.hindu.com/elections2004/verdict2004/stories>) argues that the Congress was able to gain partly because it contested less seats overall, thus leaving more seats to be contested by its allies. The BJP, on the other hand, decided to contest more seats than it had in 1999. The suggestion is that the BJP had begun to lose sight of its position as part of a coalition, just as the Congress had finally come to the conclusion that solid coalitions form the path to power.

The emergence of coalition politics as the standard model of political practice is, I would suggest, indicative of the foregrounding of a particular, fragmented idea of national identity in India – a kind of non-homogeneous idea of the Indian, which is able not just to accommodate, but actively to participate in and engender the plethora of regional, caste, linguistic, class and religious identities which have always been a feature of developing political identities in modern India (see Zavos, Wyatt and Hewitt 2004b, 7 – 8). This kind of fractured or decentred identity is antithetical to the broad project of Hindu nationalism, in that it denies the idea of homogeneity at the heart of Indian cultural and social life. If this really is the trajectory of modern Indian politics, then, we might again consider the conclusion that yes, this is the end of Hindutva as a political force.

The resonance of this conclusion, however, depends partly on how one conceives of politics. In the context of Hindu nationalism, I would suggest, formal politics – that is, politics focused on the state, on the winning of elections and the gaining of power - has a rather limited significance. To understand this, we need to focus briefly on a couple of the key concepts which underpin this set of ideas known as Hindu nationalism. Firstly, we need to understand the concept of ‘sangathan’, or organisation. A Hindu nationalist vision of the nation is intimately bound up with the progressive realization of a society which operates harmoniously, in an integrated and organised fashion. Most generally, this vision has been articulated as a kind of organicist approach: society operates like a body, each component part having its own valuable function. As the second Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) leader M.S. Golwalkar wrote,

All the organs though apparently of diverse forms, work for the welfare of the body and thus subscribe to its strength and growth. Likewise is the case with society. An evolved society, for the proper functioning of various duties, develops a multitude of diverse functional groups. Our old social order laid down a specific duty for each group and guided all the individuals and groups in their natural line of evolution just as the intellect directs the activities of the innumerable parts of the body. (Golwalkar 1966: 100).

The ideal Hindu, then, knows his place in this organism. Fulfilling one’s function in the organism, in a disciplined and orderly manner, is each individual’s dharmic duty, and leads to sangathan, a society which is perfectly organised.

The second, related, key concept to understand is integral humanism. This idea was developed by Deendayal Upadhyay in the 1950s/60s, and today features as a clearly marked ‘guiding philosophy’ on the BJP website ([www.bjp.org](http://www.bjp.org)). Integral humanism again revolves around the organisation of society on the basis of knowledge of dharmic duty. Upadhyaya interprets dharma as a kind of dynamic network of interrelated regulations by which life should be led. It is these regulations which govern social relations. When dharma is strong and recognised as such, there is no need for the ‘worldly’ control of society. Thus in the kritayuga, or perfect era, ‘there was no state or king. Society was sustained and protected mutually by practicing dharma’ (<http://www.bjp.org/philo.htm>, lecture 3). In subsequent eras, he explains, ‘disorganisation came into existence’, and as a result the state was introduced as an additional form of regulation (ibid.). So, the state functions primarily as one means of regulating society during an era in which consciousness of dharma amongst social

groups is relatively weak. In this sense, a Hindu nationalist approach to the state and formal politics is as one means, amongst others, of producing organisation in society

By understanding these concepts we can see that Hindu nationalism is primarily focused on the development of society, through the realisation of correct dharma amongst various 'functional groups'. Formal politics and the control of the state is significant, then, but it needs to be placed within the context of this broader focus, which conceptualises society as a range of segmented areas and functional groups. This point is graphically demonstrated by the fact that the BJP is really a part of a much broader set of organisations known as the Sangh Parivar. These organisations focus, in a segmented fashion, on particular issues: one organisation focuses on tribal welfare, one on education, one on labour relations, and so on - an interrelated and expanding network of organisations stretching across areas of social and cultural life.

A couple of brief examples will demonstrate this approach. In tribal areas of states such as Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and especially Orissa, Sangh organisations such as the Vanvasi Kalyan Parishad have been increasingly active in recent years, persuading tribals to eschew tribal religious practices in favour of Ram and especially Hanuman puja, and confronting Christianity aggressively. Indeed, a recent report noted that some villages in Gajapati district in Orissa were physically split down the middle, with a fence separating Christian communities from Hindu communities ('Saffronising the Tribal Heartland', *Frontline* 26/3/04).

A further example is seen in education. The Sangh now has an extensive network of schools, many run by the Vidya Bharati Akhil Bharatiya Shiksha Sansthan. The Vidya Bharati system supervises over 18,000 schools across India, with 1.8 million students and 80,000 teachers. The network focuses on Sanskrit, moral and spiritual education, yoga and physical development. It aims at the 'evolution of an alternative model of school education which is more in tune with Indian culture and ethos' (<http://www.vidyabharati.org/Activitiesorg.asp>).

These examples demonstrate the range and trajectory of Sangh activities across India. My contention is that almost regardless of the fortunes of the BJP at the polls, Hindutva is nevertheless a set of ideas, an approach to society, with a growing significance in India, because of the proliferation of ostensibly non-political organisations like the Vanvasi Kalyan Parishad and the Vidya Bharati. It is

organisations like these which Hindu nationalists themselves see as the critical sites of social transformation over the next few decades. A recent, post-election 'quote of the day' on the RSS website sums up the approach: 'The remedy for weakness is not brooding over weakness, but thinking of strength. Teach men of the strength that is already within them' ([www.rss.org](http://www.rss.org)). This quotation from the late nineteenth century reformer Swami Vivekananda demonstrates the Sangh's defiant post-election stance. The emphasis is on teaching, transforming society by helping Hindus to understand the implications of their identity as Hindus.

Unless the newly formed United Progressive Alliance engages with politics on this level, we are unlikely to see the 'end of Hindutva' and its influence on Indian political life.

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