

THE ‘MUSLIM THREAT’ AND THE BHARATIYA JANATA PARTY’S RISE TO POWER

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ABSTRACT

This essay will argue that the reasons behind the Bharatiya Janata Party’s (BJP) rise to national prominence in India during the 1990’s can be traced to the growing insecurity that the Hindu majority experienced during this period because changing conditions on the ground made it appear as if the nation was being controlled by the Muslim minority. The BJP played on this perception and mobilized politically, asserting that the increasing power of the minority necessitated solidarity in India’s Hindu population. The analysis that this essay will undertake will first characterize the reasons behind the Hindu perception of the Muslim threat. The subsequent section will examine the means that the BJP employed to play on the fears of the Hindu majority. In concluding, the essay will distil lessons from the BJP’s rise in the 1990’s and argue that in the future, the BJP will have difficulty returning to power on a purely Hindu nationalist platform because the perceived threat from Muslims is no longer as prevalent as it was during the 1990’s.

Introduction

The 1990’s marked the emergence of a new and unprecedented development in Indian politics as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a Hindu nationalist party, assumed a position of national significance. Some political commentators have argued that the emergence of this party was the culmination of a sustained effort on the part of the BJP, Bharatiya Jan Sangh (BJS), Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Rashtriya Swayamsavak Sangh (RSS) to bring Hinduism into mainstream politics.¹ While it is true that Hindu nationalism was a strong force nurtured by these groups prior

¹ Yogendra K. Malik and V. B. Singh, *Hindu Nationalists in India the Rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party*, Boulder, Westview Press, 1994.

to the 1990's, the entry of this force onto the Indian political scene heralded a new era in the history of Indian politics.

This essay will seek to answer the following questions: How and why did the BJP rise to prominence in the 1990's, finally winning a national election in 1998? Though the role of Hindu nationalist feeder organizations was important, this explanation does not account for the characteristics that made the 1990's unique. Specifically, the BJP's rise can be traced to the underlying fact that, during this period, there was a growing insecurity in the Hindu majority because changing conditions on the ground made it appear as if the nation was being controlled by the Muslim minority. The BJP played on this perception and mobilized politically, asserting that the increasing power of the minority necessitated solidarity in India's Hindu population.

The analysis that this essay will undertake will first characterize the reasons behind the Hindu perception that the Muslim population posed a threat to Hindus in India. Consequently, the essay will examine: (1) changing demographics (i.e., increase) of the Muslim population, and (2) political mobilization in the 1980's and 1990's (i.e., the growth of Islamic fundamentalism and changing voting patterns of the Muslim population). The subsequent section of the essay will examine the means that the BJP employed to play on the fears of the Hindu majority. In concluding, the essay will distil lessons from the BJP's rise in the 1990's and argue that in the future, the BJP will have difficulty returning to power on a purely Hindu nationalist platform because the perceived threat from Muslims to Hindus is no longer as prevalent as it was during the 1990's.

Changing Demographics of the 1980's and 1990's

Since the time of Independence to the mid 1990's, most data indicate that there was a significant increase in the percentage of the total population that was Muslim in India.² Specifically, between

² Malika Mistry, "Role of Religion in Fertility and Family Planning in India," *Indian Journal of Secularism*, 3 (1999), 9 Apr., 2006.

1947 and 1994, the Muslim population increased from a little less than 10% of the total population to just over 12% whereas the population of Hindus declined from 85% to 82%.³ In addition, reports show that Muslims had a significantly higher birth rate than did Hindus in the 1950's, 1960's, and the 1970s.⁴ For example, during this period, the *National Family Health Survey* indicated that while the fertility rate for Muslims was 4.41, it was 3.30 for Hindus, meaning that the average Indian Muslim woman had one more child than did her Hindu counterpart.⁵ Further, Table 1 below demonstrates that the decadal population growth rate for Muslims markedly increased in the following three decades: 1961-1971, 1971-1981 and 1981-1991.⁶ At the same time, the rate for all other religious groups declined. In sum, the Muslim population's pattern of growth prior to 1991 indicates that by the 1990's, a Muslim population bubble was at or near adulthood and continuing to grow.⁷ This increasing population was a major factor behind the Hindu perception that Muslims were growing in number and exerting a greater influence in India.⁸

Table 1: Percentage Decadal Growth Rates by each Religious Group

Religion	1931-1941	1951-1961	1961-1971	1971-1981	1981-1991
Hindu	13.23	20.89	23.69	24.15	22.78
Muslim	19.09	32.89	30.85	30.58	32.76
Christian	24.50	30.78	32.60	16.77	16.89
Sikh	31.60	26.53	32.28	26.16	25.48
Jain	15.81	26.73	28.48	23.69	4.42
Buddhist	4.28	16.71	17.20	22.52	35.98

³ Mistry, *ibid.*

⁴ Koenraad Elst, *Bharatiya Janata Party Vis-á-vis Hindu Resurgence*, New Delhi, Voice of India, 1997.

⁵ Neil Devotta, "Demography and Communalism in India," *Journal of International Affairs*, 56 (2002).

⁶ Mistry, *op. cit.*

⁷ Elst, *op.cit.*

⁸ Devotta, *op. cit.*

Another significant variable that influenced demographics in India during the 1980's and the 1990's was illegal immigration from neighbouring Bangladesh which witnessed a population explosion during the 1970's and 1980's. This rapid population increase combined with Bangladesh's slow economic development. As a result, the country was not able to support its growing numbers.⁹ Persecution of the minority populations during this period added a further impetus to migration patterns. Consequently, immigration from Bangladesh increased in the 1980's and the 1990's, and as of 1990, there were about 15 million Bangladeshi nationals living in India illegally.¹⁰

Illegal immigration contributed to the perception that the Muslim population in India was growing rapidly. Though there was a gap between this perception and the reality on the ground because some immigrants from Bangladesh were, in fact, Hindus fearing political repression, most Indians equated Bangladeshis with Muslims. As a result, the perceived threat to India's sovereignty from 'Muslim' immigrants from Bangladesh grew as illegal immigration increased.¹¹

At the national level, this perception was amplified by the fact that illegal immigration became a flashpoint issue during this period. For example, politicians in West Bengal encouraged Bangladeshi immigration as a means of garnering votes, a divisive policy that became controversial not only at the local level in West Bengal but at the national level as well.¹² Further, since the immigrant population from Bangladesh was concentrated in the border states of West Bengal and Assam,¹³ there was a skewed

⁹ Pranati Dutta, "Push-Pull Factors of Undocumented Migration From Bangladesh to West Bengal: a Perception Study," *The Qualitative Report*, 9 (2004): 335-358.

¹⁰ Dutta, *ibid.*, 335-358.

¹¹ Devotta, *op. cit.*

¹² Dutta, *op. cit.*, 335-358.

¹³ Dutta, *op. cit.*, 335-358.

belief that Bangladeshi immigrants were taking over these border states.¹⁴ Immigration from Bangladesh to India, thus, appeared to add to this regional divisiveness and emerged as a significant problem that constituted a 'Muslim threat' to India's sovereignty.

Changing Patterns of Activism

At the time of Independence, India's Muslim population was largely accommodating; they supported the Congress Party and sought to maintain their position in society by shying away from political conflict. In the 1980's and 1990's, however, the Indian Muslim voice became increasingly pronounced in various arenas of formal and informal politics. This section will examine two trends of mobilization that occurred in the 1980s and 1990s that contributed to the perception that Muslims were gaining power: (1) the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, and (2) the increasing importance of the 'Muslim' vote to election outcomes.

The Growth of Islamic Fundamentalism and Terrorism

During the 1980's and 1990's, Islamic fundamentalism witnessed a significant rise worldwide, most notably in Iran and Afghanistan.¹⁵ A parallel phenomenon occurred in India as a vocal sector of the Muslim population began to view extremism as a viable outlet and turned to terrorism as a means of furthering their cause.¹⁶ Though this did not mean that the majority of the Muslim population turned to advocating violence or radical reform, the growth in fundamentalist influence did become fairly apparent in Indian society. In examining the growth of militant fundamentalism in India during the 1980's and 1990's, it is important to emphasize the following: (1) growth of Islamic fundamentalism in General Zia ul Haq's Pakistan, (2) emergence of terrorist groups, (3) 'ethnic cleansing' and forced relocation of Kashmiri Hindus, and (4) terrorist attacks in Bombay in 1993. These factors fed into the perception that Muslims were challenging the Hindus of India.

¹⁴ Dutta, op. cit., 335-358.

¹⁵ Krishna Kumar, "Religious Fundamentalism in India and Beyond, *Parameters*, (2002): 17-33.

¹⁶ Kumar, *ibid.*, 17-33.

Fear of Islamic fundamentalism in India began with the 1977 rise to power of General Zia-ul-Haq in neighbouring Pakistan. After coming to power, Zia undertook an 'Islamization' policy and imposed *Sharia* law in the 1979 Hudood Ordinances. These draconian measures called for amputation of limbs as penalty for theft, flogging as punishment for adultery, and strict enforcement of Islam in all aspects of daily life.¹⁷ The Islamization of neighbouring Pakistan demonstrated the adverse consequences engendered by an adoption of Islamic fundamentalism.¹⁸ Thus, there was a heightened Hindu consciousness that emerged as a reactionary response.¹⁹

In conjunction with the growth of Islamic fundamentalist forces in Pakistan, the 1980's also witnessed a marked rise in terrorist groups in India. For example, the Student Islamic Movement of India (SIMI), founded on April 25, 1977 at Aligarh Muslim University,²⁰ grew significantly in the 1980's and 1990's and represented an example of a major fundamentalist group that began to exert considerable influence. The growth of SIMI was marked by two phases. In the first, during the 1980's, SIMI garnered support at the grassroots level while promoting the establishment of *Dar-ul-Islam* (land of Islam) in India, and the forced conversion of all Hindus to Islam by any means necessary.²¹ In the second phase, SIMI transformed into a terrorist organization that sponsored violent attacks directed at civilians.²² Beginning in 1992, for example, SIMI advocated a militant Islamic

¹⁷ Jessica Stern, "Pakistan's Jihad Culture," *Foreign Affairs*, November (2000).

¹⁸ Malik and Singh, op. cit., p. 71.

¹⁹ Robert L. Hardgrave, "The Challenge of Ethnic Conflict in India: the Dilemmas of Diversity," *Journal of Democracy*, 4 (1993): 54-68.

²⁰ Irfan Ahmad, "Between Moderation and Radicalization: Transnational Interactions of Jamaat-E-Islami of India," *Global Networks*, 5 (2005): 279-299.

²¹ Yoginder Sikand, "Islamist Assertion in Contemporary India: the Case of the Students Islamic Movement of India," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 23 (2003).

²² R Upadhyay, "Student Islamic Movement of India (SIMI)," *South Asia Analysis Group* (2003), 13 May 2006
<<http://www.saag.org/papers9/paper825.html>>.

fundamentalism that gained considerable influence among the Muslim minority in the Hindi heartland; SIMI organized a series of violent protests during which activists clashed with police and members of the Sangh-Parivar.²³ Consequently, SIMI's growth in the 1980's and its violent turn in the 1990's demonstrated the growth of militant fundamentalism in India.²⁴

The rise of the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), which occurred mainly in the early 1990's, demonstrated another important Islamic fundamentalist force that posed a radical threat to the Indian nation. The group was comprised largely of *mujahadeens* who came to fight in Jammu-Kashmir after the conclusion of the Soviet War in Afghanistan in the late 1980's.²⁵ While a detailed examination of the LeT's activities are beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note that the LeT undertook several significant terrorist actions against civilians in Kashmir. In fact, some scholars have argued that the LeT was covertly funded by Pakistan's ISI. Regardless of its funding sources, however, most scholars agree that the LeT acted as the primary force behind the growth of the Kashmir insurgency in the 1990's.²⁶

Another factor that contributed to the perceived threat from Muslims that Hindus experienced in the 1980's and 1990's came from the forced relocation of Kashmiri Hindus from Jammu-Kashmir.²⁷ Specifically, terrorist groups such as the LeT and prominent Islamic forces directed a campaign to displace Kashmiri Hindu Pandits, the most significant Hindu group in the state. As a result, thousands of Kashmiri Pandits were forced to flee the Kashmir valley, leaving behind their ancestral homes and properties.²⁸ The perceived human rights violations of a Hindu

²³ Sikand, op. cit.

²⁴ Sikand, op. cit.

²⁵ Samina Yasmeen, "Pakistan's Kashmir Policy: Voices of Moderation?", *Contemporary South Asia*, 12 (2003): 187-202.

²⁶ Yasmeen, *ibid.*, 187-202.

²⁷ Amalendu Misra, "Hindu Nationalism and Muslim Minority Rights in India," *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights*, 7 (2000): 1-18.

²⁸ Malik and Singh, op. cit., 225.

group by Islamic groups served as a symbol to the greater Indian population that Muslims posed a threat to the Hindu nation.

Finally, the terrorist attacks that rocked Mumbai on March 12, 1993 served as a symbol of the consequences of allowing Islamic fundamentalist ideals to flourish in India. Specifically, this attack marked the first terrorist attack of its size to strike a major Indian city. In the wake of the blasts, the official number of dead was 257 with 1,400 others injured. According to Yogendra Malik and V.B. Singh, the attack was allegedly undertaken in response to the communal riots that gripped India in the wake of the 1992 destruction of the Babri Masjid Mosque in Ayodhya.²⁹ In conjunction with the growth of Islamic fundamentalism in Pakistan, the increased violence of the Kashmir insurgency, and the displacement of Kashmiri Pandits, the terrorist attacks took the form of a direct threat to India; the destruction that ensued demonstrated the degree to which Islamic fundamentalist forces could challenge Indian sovereignty and, thus, spurred a continued perception in India that Islam was rising as an affront to the Hindu nation.

The 'Muslim' Vote

Before beginning the analysis of the trends in voting of the Muslim population during the 1980's and 1990's, it is important to briefly examine the fragmented body politic that emerged in the wake of Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984. Scholars have noted that as a result of her extremely personalized rule and the lack of development of a party organizational structure, the Congress party went into decline, creating a political vacuum which was filled by competing regional, caste and linguistic interests.³⁰ Further, because Indira Gandhi failed to alleviate poverty in the ways that she had promised in her *Garibi Hatao* platform, Indian people became disillusioned with Congress dominance and turned to alternate

²⁹ Malik and Singh, op. cit., 245.

³⁰ Robert Hardgrave, and Stanley Kochanek, *India: Government and Politics in a Developing Nation*, Orlando, Harcourt Press, 2000, 151-153.

political parties.³¹ As a result of the stark divisions that characterized the Indian body politic, the 1980's and 1990's were marked by a more competitive electoral environment in which coalition building and the support of consistent vote banks became the hallmark of a successful political strategy. Since the Muslim population constituted such a vote bank and parties sought to gain the 'Muslim' vote as a means of winning elections, the possibility emerged that they were determining political outcomes.

Specifically, this voting bloc became an invaluable source of political strength because Muslims tended to vote as a single entity; their common religion served to supersede issues such as class and region. Paul Brass labelled this phenomenon the "critical importance of the Muslim vote"³² as he argued that the Muslim population voted "*en bloc*,"³³ and that this unilateral support was essential to success during the 1989 9th General Lok Sabha Elections in Uttar Pradesh (UP).³⁴ For example, the Balampur Constituency, a constituency with 20% Muslim population, elected Fazlul Rahman as an Independent candidate because support for opposition parties was divided between the BJP, Congress, and regional parties; the Muslim vote, however, stood solidly behind Rahman.³⁵ In the same vein, in the Hamirpur Constituency where Muslims only made up 10% of the population, the Muslim vote was once again a key to success. The three major parties (BJP, Congress and Janata) divided the votes evenly. However, the party that received the Muslim vote, the Janata Party, claimed the constituency.³⁶

³¹ Yogendra K. Malik and V. B. Singh, *Hindu Nationalists in India the Rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party*, Boulder, Westview Press, 1994.

³² Paul R. Brass, "Caste, Class, and Community in the Ninth General Elections for the Lok Sabha in Uttar Pradesh," *India Votes*, ed. Harold A. Gould and Sumit Ganguly, Boulder, Westview Press, 1993, 108-138.

³³ Brass, *ibid.*, 114.

³⁴ Brass, *ibid.*, 108.

³⁵ Brass, *ibid.*, 113-117.

³⁶ Brass, *ibid.*, 113-117.

As a result, in the 1990's, parties began to directly seek the support of the Muslim vote bank. In fact, this policy became the guiding theme behind the emergence of Dalit and low caste parties who built coalitions consisting of caste blocs and the Muslim population. Three examples of such parties are the Samajwadi Party (SP), the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), and the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh.³⁷ In order to look at the pattern specifically, it will be helpful to study the rise of the BSP, a Dalit Party, based in Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. Scholars have noted that the BSP owed its rise in the late 1980's and the 1990's to its capacity to reach beyond the Dalit population to the Muslim population.³⁸

For one, the BSP undertook a concerted effort to run Muslim candidates as a means of attracting the 'Muslim' vote. At a rally in 1996, for example, the BSP Chief Minister Kumari Mayawati declared that "if in all the constituencies, the two lakh Muslim votes come to the BSP, then I can assure you that all of the fourteen candidates from the Muslim community will become members of Parliament."³⁹ Mayawati's statement exemplified the BSP olive branch extended to the Muslim vote bank. Specifically, in the 1996 general elections in Madhya Pradesh, 19% of the BSP candidates were Muslims though Muslims only made up 5% of the population of the state. As a result, the BSP polled 8.2% of the vote in Madhya Pradesh even though their previous highest voting total had been 4% in the general election of 1989.⁴⁰ A similar trend emerged in Uttar Pradesh during the 1996 general elections but to an even greater degree; Muslim politicians made up 51% of the candidates.⁴¹ As a result of this strategy, the BSP received 20.6% of the vote; their previous high had been 9.9% in 1989 (See Table 2

³⁷ Christophe Jaffrelot, "The Bahujan Samaj Party in North India: No Longer Just a Dalit Party?" *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 18 (1998).

³⁸ Jaffrelot, *ibid.*

³⁹ Kanchan Chandra, *Why Ethnic Parties Succeed Patronage and Ethnic Head Counts in India*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

⁴⁰ Jaffrelot, *op. cit.*

⁴¹ Jaffrelot, *op. cit.*

for a summary of the BSP's growth).⁴² Consequently, the numbers examined here indicate that because the BSP ran significantly more Muslim candidates in the 1990's, it was able to tally a much higher vote total than in previous elections and, thus, come to power in ruling coalitions.

Table 2: Percentage of votes polled by the BSP during the 1989, 1991 and 1996 general elections in Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh⁴³

Year	Uttar Pradesh	Madhya Pradesh
1989	9.93%	4.28%
1991	8.70%	3.54%
1996	20.61%	8.18%

Furthermore, once in power, the BSP pursued policies that continued to cater to Muslim interests. This exemplified the degree to which the BSP sought to curry the favor of the 'Muslim' vote. For example, Mayawati, who became the Chief Minister of UP in 1996, introduced policies that granted Muslims the same reservations as Scheduled Caste groups.⁴⁴

The voting patterns in the 1980's and the new coalitions that emerged in the 1990's demonstrated the importance of the Muslim population to electoral outcomes. As a result, there was an increased awareness of the power that they were wielding in the political framework.⁴⁵

A Brief Historical Comparison

In examining how Islamic radicalization and the growing importance of 'Muslim' votes affected the Hindu population, it is helpful to consider the 1940's and 1950's in comparative perspective. During this period, Hindu nationalism grew with the Muslim population's demands for a separate Pakistani state, a

⁴² Jaffrelot, op. cit.

⁴³ Jaffrelot, op. cit.

⁴⁴ Chandra, op. cit., 216.

⁴⁵ Chandra, op. cit., 216.

demand that was made formally by Mohammed Ali Jinnah in 1940 with the Lahore Resolution.⁴⁶ Further, in the aftermath of the Partition, the Sangh Parivar (a family of organizations including the Bharatiya Janata Party, Vishwa Hindu Parishad, and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, which comprise Hindu nationalism) grew because Hindus felt an increasing 'Muslim' threat. Through the past century, in fact, the growth of Hindu nationalist sentiment has been correlated with growing mobilization by Indian Muslims.⁴⁷ The rise of 'Islamic fundamentalism' and the importance of the 'Muslim' vote by the early 1990's presented the Hindu majority with a similar challenge. As a result, in both the 1940's and the 1990's, apparent threats posed by Muslims fostered the development of a heightened Hindu consciousness.

BJP Exploitation of the Perception

The BJP, Sangh Parivar, and the Media

The analysis up to this point has established that the 1980's and 1990's represented a time of growing fear on the part of the majority Hindu population that the minority Muslim population was increasing its presence in India, challenging Indian sovereignty, and controlling the politics of the country. Though this insecurity was based on some truth, it would have remained in the background if the BJP, the RSS, and other members of the Sangh Parivar had not worked to bring it to the attention of the Hindu population. Specifically, since members of the Sangh Parivar enjoyed grassroots support that had been cultivated since India's inception,⁴⁸ they were able to rally a popular foundation for the BJP. The RSS, for example, held mass rallies in the 1990's at which leadership emphasized the 'threat' that the Muslim population posed to Hindus in India.⁴⁹ Hindu nationalist forces also used the Indian vernacular press and other media outlets as a springboard from which to report the changing demographics of the Muslim population, the growth in

⁴⁶ Prakash Louis, op. cit., p. 56.

⁴⁷ Kumar, op. cit.

⁴⁸ Malik and Singh, op. cit., p. 71.

⁴⁹ Nikita Sud, *Secularism and the Gujarati State 1960-2005*, Department of International Development, University of Oxford (2003).

Islamic extremism, and the importance of Muslim votes.⁵⁰ Specifically, a key part of the Sangh Parivar strategy in support of the BJP was its effort to bring the change in objective conditions to the attention of the Hindu population through its use of mass media.⁵¹

The RSS' efforts at portraying the changing demographics in India exemplify this trend. Studies published by the group in the 1990's consistently emphasized the growth in the Muslim population and the threat that this population posed to the Hindu majority. For example, a study circulated by the RSS in the aftermath of the 1991 census read that "the fact remained as prominent as ever that the rate of population growth of Muslims is much higher than that of the Hindus, particularly in some areas where the majority is on the verge of being reduced into minority."⁵²

It is also helpful to note the changing nature of movies in the 1990's. During this decade, BJP sympathizers in the movie industry undertook a concerted effort to portray the 'Islamic' threat that India faced; a series of action movies depicted terrorists infiltrating India and plotting against the government. This trend culminated in the blockbuster hit *Mission Kashmir* which portrayed Islamic terrorists scheming to assassinate the Prime Minister.⁵³ As a result, scholars have noted that Hindi film dramas post-1990 displayed a remarkably consistent pattern in producing a monolithic Hindu identity under threat from Islam.⁵⁴ BJP partisans, thus, used Hindi film as an outlet from which to play up Hindu insecurity, harnessing

⁵⁰ Robin Jeffrey, "Media Revolution and 'Hindu Politics in North India: 1982-1999,'" 18 May 2006 <<http://www.himalmag.com/july2001/essay.html>>.

⁵¹ Jeffrey, *ibid*.

⁵² Foreword, "Bharatiya Janata Party, 18 May 2006, <<http://www.bjp.org/Publication/CE.pdf>>.

⁵³ Gyan Prakash, *The Muslim in Hindi Cinema*, Princeton University, New Jersey, 15 Nov. 2005.

⁵⁴ Sheena Malhotra, and Tavishi Alagh, "Dreaming the Nation: Domestic Dramas in Hindi Films Post-1990," *South Asian Popular Culture*, 2 (2004): 19-37.

the media as a means of communicating to people the changing conditions that characterized India at the time.

The Indian Government 'Pandering' to Muslims

The BJP employed several other strategies to cement a Hindu identity and take advantage of the unique conditions in India during the early 1990's. The remainder of this section will examine the following: (1) the characterization of the Indian government as 'pandering' to Muslim interests, and (2) the adoption of key 'symbolic' mobilizations that served to play on the underlying Hindu fear.

The BJP adopted a critical stance in the late 1980's and 1990's that emphasized key instances where the Indian government gave in to Muslims at the expense of the majority population. Consequently, the BJP played on the perception examined in the preceding sections by emphasizing cases where it appeared as though Muslims were controlling Indian affairs.

For one, the BJP emphasized what they called the lack of true secularism in India; instead, they claimed that the Indian secularism of the Congress and its institutions gave concessions to Muslims. BJP leadership, thus, denounced the presence of parallel Civil Codes; a secular code that governed Hindus and an Islamic code for Muslims.⁵⁵ The BJP also cited the Shah Bano case as an example of how Indian secularism gave concessions to Muslim interests. Though Shah Bano, who was divorced after 43 years of marriage, was awarded a monthly maintenance from her husband as per a Supreme Court ruling in 1978, political pressure from Muslim clerics induced Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and the Congress government to pass a Bill in 1986 that nullified the ruling.⁵⁶ The BJP quickly seized this opportunity to demonstrate how the Congress Party 'pandered' to Muslims at the expense of the Hindu majority.⁵⁷ Consequently, the BJP argued that India needed a

⁵⁵ Malik and Singh, op. cit., p. 83.

⁵⁶ Malik and Singh, op. cit., p. 83.

⁵⁷ Malik and Singh, op. cit., p. 110.

“positive secularism” whereby differential treatment of Indians on the basis of religion would not compromise the equality of all groups and citizens.⁵⁸

In the same vein, the BJP highlighted a series of other issues that exemplified the theme that the ‘tail was wagging the dog’ in Indian affairs. The BJP argued, for example, that the special status granted to the Muslim majority state of Jammu-Kashmir as per Article 370 of the Indian Constitution represented an issue on which the Indian government had given in to Muslim interests. Specifically, the BJP declared that the Congress Party had sold out Hindus because while Hindu majority states were treated equally and governed by a single law, the sole Muslim state in India was given special treatment.⁵⁹

Similarly, when Salman Rushdie published his *The Satanic Verses* in 1988 in which he portrayed the prophet Mohammed in a controversial light, the Indian government moved quickly to ban the publication after a widespread indictment of the book by prominent Indian Muslim leaders. As with previous cases, the BJP highlighted this incident as evidence of the fact that Muslims were controlling the formulation of policy and were curtailing free expression, a bulwark of Indian democracy.⁶⁰ Consequently, BJP mobilization was grounded in its usage of key events as evidence of the growing influence of Indian Muslims. The BJP was, thus, able to play on the underlying threat that the Hindu majority felt from the Muslim minority.⁶¹

‘Hindu’ Indian Nationalism and Identity Politics

The BJP also undertook a concerted effort in tandem with the Sangh Parivar to harness Indian nationalism as a mobilizing force by re-

⁵⁸ Shaila Seshia, "Divide and Rule in Indian Party Politics: the Rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party," *Asian Survey*, 38 (1998).

⁵⁹ Hardgrave, op. cit.

⁶⁰ Ramesh Thakur, "Ayodhya and the Politics of India's Secularism: a Double-Standards Discourse," *Asian Survey*, 33 (1993): 645-664.

⁶¹ Hardgrave, op. cit.

defining Indian identity as intrinsically Hindu. India was renamed in Hindu nationalist literature as “Ram Rajya” or as the “Kingdom of Ram.” In addition, the BJP, RSS, VHP and the Jan Sangh leadership portrayed Muslims as converts from Hinduism.⁶² In conjunction with a redefinition of Indian identity, the BJP worked with its Sangh Parivar allies to undertake targeted symbolic mobilizations. These served to demonstrate the theme that Hindus had to unite to preserve Indian identity from ‘foreign’ Muslim forces.

A primary part of the Hindu Right’s reformulation of Indian identity was its rewriting of Indian history. The history that the Sangh Parivar told was a story in which India’s Hindu population had been constantly suppressed and stifled by Muslim domination. Accordingly, BJP activists traced the peak of Indian civilization to the Gupta period prior to the 11th century. However, according to this story, Muslim conquests such as Mohammed of Ghazni’s invasion of India in the 11th century brought this civilization down. The subsequent Muslim conquests under the sultanate, and the growth of the Mughal Empire, thus, were depicted by the BJP and its allies as bloody struggles during which entire Hindu populations were victimized and massacred.⁶³ The BJP campaign emphasized the fact that the Muslims were foreign invaders and had sacked and pillaged the Hindu population in the past. This led to the formation of a distinctly Hindu identity directed at preventing a similar Muslim invasion in contemporary times, an invasion that took the form of the perceived threat that the Hindu population felt from the Muslim minority.⁶⁴

The Hindu Right’s rewriting of Indian history was combined with targeted, symbolic mobilizations that cemented an Indian ‘Hindu’ identity. In general terms, the BJP’s symbolic politics served to emphasize the perpetual conflict between Hindus and Muslims and demonstrate the increasing upper hand that the

⁶² Adeney and Sâaez, op. cit., p. 50.

⁶³ Elst, op. cit.

⁶⁴ Elst, op. cit.

Muslims were gaining. The Ayodhya campaign (i.e., 'Ram Janmabhoomi') represented the ultimate instance of the BJP's symbolic politics.⁶⁵ The effort to resurrect the temple at Ram's birthplace was an important means of demonstrating the threat posed to Hindus by Muslims and, in this way, consolidating India's Hindu identity.⁶⁶

In order to shed light on the BJP's politics of identity, it is helpful to examine 'Ram Janmabhoomi' in more detail. During this campaign, the BJP worked with the RSS to sponsor a mass Indian movement during which Hindus across India were encouraged to perform *puja* on bricks before sending them to Ayodhya.⁶⁷ Similarly, in 1990, L. K. Advani, a prominent leader of the BJP, undertook a *rathiyatra* (a religious procession) across India from the Hindu holy site of Somnath to Ayodhya while travelling in a bus decorated to resemble the chariot of the Hindu God Ram.⁶⁸ Finally, the BJP and the Sangh Parivar created posters and cartoons depicting the Hindu God Ram fighting against the Mughal ruler Babur.⁶⁹ Though these are only a few examples of the widespread symbols that the BJP adopted, more generally, they demonstrated how the BJP's symbolic mobilizations during the 1990s served to demonstrate the underlying theme that the Hindu identity and Muslim identity were in conflict; Hindus had to unite to defend their identity from Muslim invasion. Consequently, the increased perception of Muslim dominance in India was given a political outlet for expression in the BJP. As a result, the BJP rose to national prominence in the 1990's and unseated the Congress government in 1998.

⁶⁵ According to BJP leadership, the Ram Temple that had stood in Ayodhya had been demolished by the Muslim ruler, Babur, in 1528 and replaced with the Babri Masjid mosque; the ultimate symbol of Hinduism had been destroyed by the actions of a Muslim ruler and replaced with a Muslim shrine.

⁶⁶ Malik and Singh, op. cit., pp. 79-80.

⁶⁷ Malik and Singh, op. cit., pp. 79-80.

⁶⁸ Katharine Adeney, and Lawrence Sâaez, eds., *Coalition Politics and Hindu Nationalism*, 1st ed., New York, Routledge, 2005, p. 37.

⁶⁹ Malik and Singh, op. cit., p. 94.

Conclusion and the Future of the BJP

In sum, this paper has examined the BJP's rise to power in the 1990's. While there were a number of factors that underpinned this rise, the 1980's and 1990's marked a unique period in India during which it appeared that Muslims were gaining in prominence and exerting a disproportionately large influence in Indian affairs. Underlying this belief was the changing demographics of the Muslim population, the growth of Islamic extremism, and the increased importance of the 'Muslim' vote to electoral outcomes. These factors paved the way for the BJP to enter the political sphere and work with the Sangh Parivar to use the media to play on Hindu insecurity. Further, the BJP successfully characterized the Indian government as 'pandering' to Muslims, and undertook key symbolic mobilizations as a means of cementing a Hindu identity. The result was the rapid rise of the BJP in the 1990's which culminated in an electoral victory in 1998.

Considering the contemporary state of Indian politics, the argument that this paper has examined begs the question as to where the BJP will go from its most recent electoral defeat in 2004. An empirical regularity seems to exist suggesting that the BJP (and its predecessor political organizations) have followed an oscillating pattern; periods during which they are Hindu nationalist social movements and moderate phases during which they act as political parties.⁷⁰ A similar pattern emerged in 2004. After the BJP's loss, prominent BJP activists called for a return to Hindutva roots and radical Hindu fundamentalism as a means of consolidating control.⁷¹ Some scholars, however, have noted that the BJP needs to break out of its cycle. The BJP expert Christophe Jaffrelot argues, for example, that a "strategy of moderation appears to be necessary."⁷²

⁷⁰ Amrita Basu, "The Dialectics of Hindu Nationalism," *The Success of India's Democracy*, ed. Atul Kohli, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2001.

⁷¹ Adney and Saez, op. cit., p. 247.

⁷² Adney and Saez, op. cit., p. 247.

The argument made in this paper lends credence to Jaffrelot's argument. The 1990's marked a unique period in India in that the Hindu population felt increasingly vulnerable and insecure. Accordingly, the BJP was able to effectively use its polarizing, Hindu nationalist policies and symbolic mobilizations. This environment, however, has changed. Hindu-Muslim relations have improved, the Kashmir conflict has become less militant, and Muslims are no longer the coveted swing vote that they were during the 1980's and the 1990's. Specifically, the 'Muslim' vote has become increasingly divided by class.⁷³ In addition, alliances such as the Dalit-Muslim alliance have fallen apart because they failed to adequately represent a coalition of groups that did not share the same interests.⁷⁴

The future of the BJP as a viable second national political party, thus, lies in a moderate stance. It should emphasize its economic, domestic, and foreign policies as well as its ability to address those areas where the Congress Party has failed.

⁷³ Dipankar Gupta, "Caste and Politics: Identity Over System," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 34 (2005): 409-427.

⁷⁴ Gupta, *ibid.*, pp. 409-427.

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