

Government and Politics in India
(PIED 2420)

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Assessed essay (6b):

The political appeal of the Hindu Right reflects the failure of the secular state to meet the legitimate cultural aspirations of the vast majority of India's citizens. Discuss.

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The political appeal of the Hindu Right reflects the failure of the secular state to meet the legitimate cultural aspirations of the vast majority of India's citizens.

India, home of the Ganges and a multitude of Hindu Gods, is a country with a vast history, which goes back further than any European countries'. These are some of the impressions, which foreigners have of it. But as always stereotypes only show part of the truth. In particular when it comes to religion these can cause problems. Even though it is true that the majority of Indians is of Hindu faith, certainly not all are. Especially before independence and the following partition of India, the Muslim minority was a very strong force. As the Muslim Mughal Empire had ruled over the subcontinent for centuries, and later the Christians from Britain, it has been greatly influenced not only by these but also by many other cultures. Even within Hindu culture there are huge differences, similar to the differences between European nations. As Hinduism is very open to outside influence as well it is hard to pinpoint what best describes being Indian should mean. Another problem alongside the diversity of Indian culture is the fact that the Hindu religion is split up into the various castes all of which have various rights and duties to the system.

Whether independent India was ever intended to be a real secular country is open to discussion too. Gandhi's dream had been to create a united nation along the borders of the British colony. This meant that it had to be secular at least in name to include the large Muslim minority that existed in India under British rule. However, Gandhi himself was also a strong believer in traditional Indian customs, which often included religious ideas too. He did not believe in secularism as meaning religion should be excluded from politics but sought to include and be open to all the religions prominent in India. A "happy balance between religious beliefs ... and the demands of the modern society" (A. Sahay, in: Y. Malik and D. Vajpeyi, p.309) was possibly the aim of his work. It was more due to Pandit Nehru's work that politics became more secular, in the sense that politics and religion should be excluded from one another. Opposed to Nehru's but also Gandhi's ideas were the extremist Hindu

organisations such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) or the Hindu Mahasabha. Real life brought an abrupt end to the dream of a united motherland when Pakistan was created at independence. This led to massive migrations as Hindus and Muslims left Pakistan and India respectively to live in the new nations that were now divided on religious lines. This changed India into a much more homogenous nation than it had ever been as the Muslim minority was greatly diminished. So India for the first time in a long time became basically a Hindu nation again. However, Congress was still a very open-minded organisation and still believed in itself being the only true representative of the entire Indian nation. So even though Hindus now represented the vast majority of citizens in the newly created nation, in particular the Muslim, Christian and Sikh minorities still existed in considerable numbers. In addition Gandhi's dislike of the caste-system's inequalities had great influence on the resulting political system. Even though the word secular was not added to the preamble of the constitution at independence, but only in 1976 under Indira Gandhi's government, it was clear that Nehru aimed for India not to be a religious state. One of the ways the government attempted to enforce this solution was by means of positive discrimination. This was used in particular with reference to the tribal and lower-caste Indians. Indians should all become equal even if this would not happen out of its own impulse.

What this later caused was huge resentment within the rest of the population and forcing such a system on the people was all but impossible. In any democracy the majority has the most rights and, as most people would do, often begrudges handing over any of these to others, especially when this happens without their consent. However, at the beginning in India people were often favourably inclined toward these measures as it was part of the fresh start the newly formed and newly independent nation was making. Problems soon arose as the people became weary of all the changes to their traditional lifestyle as individuality was promoted in opposition to the communal sense of belonging. Unity of individuals appeared to be taken more important and political activity connected to religion was regularly denounced by the centralist powers of Congress. Sometimes this mistrust by the political

leaders became extreme, especially when they believed opposition parties might become too powerful and possibly challenge their position. This particularly became a problem during Indira Gandhi's period in power. She either ignored any possible conflicts, possibly believing they would not stay, or more often than not abused her powers in such ways as to try and eliminate the problem. However, her methods often resulted in an outcome completely the opposite of what she had had in mind. So in 1977 the opposition parties joined together in the United Front, which was to take power from Congress for the first time since independence. This included not only the main right-wing parties but also the Socialist Party. However, due to Jana Sangh's connections to the militant RSS and Mahasabha this coalition collapsed and gave Congress another chance to take power.

Jana Sangh then slowly changed its style. As the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) it has become more and more accessible to greater numbers of Indians. In addition the RSS and its sister the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) have also toned down their activities and have become more involved in social issues. Because it is now less radical the BJP has been able to become the strongest single force in Indian politics. This has meant that it is more capable of forming coalitions for government. It is important to point out that the BJP, though it is the biggest party in India now, is by far not as strong as Congress was in its most successful days. It relies heavily on support from many regional groups to form the necessary coalitions to stay in power. As it only receives about a quarter of the vote, the BJP's views can hardly be described as being supported by the majority of Indians. And of these voters the vast majority is male, upper-caste and Hindi-speaking. So the vast majority of female, lower-caste and non-Hindu Indians does not appear to greatly support the BJP's policies.

It is also questionable whether it was secularism's failure, which has caused the success of these new militant tendencies. I believe it is to a greater extent simply Congress' failure to adapt to a changing society. As a greater proportion of people is becoming richer these Indians have become dissatisfied with the policies promoted by Congress as they see their newly

earned riches threatened. It is also Congress' failure to react to communal problems between different religious groups. The troubles arising from Sikh demands in Punjab that culminated in Indira Gandhi's murder and massive violent retributions by Hindus, the persistent Kashmir-issue which has caused a number of violent encounters between Pakistan and India but also with local groups and also the conflict around the alleged location of the Hindu God Ram's birthplace in Ayodhya where a mosque was standing, are just the most prominent communal conflicts that Congress was unable to solve. The BJP was able to take the lead and make demands, which Congress either had to meet anyway or could not meet. In either case the BJP could say Congress did what they had told them or that Congress supported the non-Hindus respectively. In addition Congress has made a lot of mistakes in dealing with the issues and it never had a clear line of what it intended to do but appeared to make up a plan along the way without a distinct aim. In contrast the BJP has always had, or at least appeared to have, a clear ideology.

The future of the BJP is less predetermined. As the BJP becomes more involved in national politics it has also become more vulnerable to similar allegations as Congress has been recently. It has to accommodate parties in its coalition that often do not support the extremist Hindu policies. This watering down of their ideas has on the one hand caused the BJP to come into conflict with its roots in the RSS but on the other hand has also meant that it has been able to get more votes than ever before. However, as statistics have shown in its not only the Hindu-chauvinist BJP which has gained votes but also, and often to a greater extent, its regional allies who promote their own communal bases outside the Hindi-speaking Hindu heartland of northern India. However, the BJP has been the first party to successfully exploit religion as the basis of its politics. Congress on the other hand always wanted to keep above communal interests by appearing to work for all groups and trying to unite all Indians. They believed in true nationalism not being inherently based upon Hinduism.

What actually are the cultural aspirations of the vast majority of Indians? Hinduism permeates all areas of society in India. However, not all parts of

society actually benefit from this. As a result there have been numerous cases when nearly entire villages converted to Islam in mass ceremonies in an attempt to evade their predetermined status in society as members of lower castes or especially as outcastes. This is part of the reason why the Brahmanic Hindu-fundamentalists started to get more involved in social issues. The RSS aims to keep these lower-caste members within the Hindu-fold by stressing the importance of working together for a common good and the ideal of a dharma-led Hindu nation. Folk traditions are deeply rooted in Indian society, especially in the rural areas, which still represent the greatest proportion of Indian culture. An example for this is the refusal to accept such changes to their life-style as the ongoing conflict over widow burning. In recent years this has become more of an issue again as traditionalists appear to be regaining strength. At the same time Congress has lost its strong grip on the lower castes and impoverished Indians, which it used to be accustomed to as the patronage system started to disintegrate. The vote banks it had established through its connections with the traditional landowners have been all but destroyed as the beneficiaries of the Green Revolution have become more powerful.

The Hindu Right has in the past 10 to 20 years become stronger than it ever used to be after independence. However, this strength is partly based upon its increasing tendency to use violence in its pursuit of its ideals. For example the militant Shiv Sena party has successfully worked to become the governing party in Bombay. The good discipline and the organisational structures of the RSS were part of the reason for the BJP's success. Through this network they have become much more able to access all parts of Indian society. In a changing world, where globalisation has become the theme, many people are attempting to find security in tradition. Modern changes seem to threaten old ways of life. People all over the world find it hard to adapt to new forms of social interaction. Whether it is in Europe or India this means that populist parties can easily exploit insecurities. And the BJP is simply one of the many parties, which has successfully done this. Compared to some European countries the BJP has not even been as successful when it comes to the percentage of the votes gained. However, the difference in India

is that due to the first-past-the-post electoral system it has been able to secure a huge number of seats in the Indian parliament the Lok Sabha and through coalitions has come to achieve the goal of taking power on national level. This result still eludes many European nationalist populists. What is needed to unseat the BJP form power remains to be seen. On the one hand there is the possibility of Congress reorganising itself and becoming more self-confident to take power again, or on the other hand other groups could become more powerful and the unitary federal structure of India might be changed to a much more loose federation in which the various states receive a greater share of the power. This could under certain circumstances also lead to a reduction of communal conflicts as regional groups representing the majorities in their respective areas take control. However, the threat coming from changes such as these is that minorities, in particular minorities without a regional stronghold, such as Muslims or Christians which are both spread across the sub-continent, could loose out even more. This would mean that they could become victims of a much stronger source of discrimination as the regional majorities would be holding a much greater share of the power. However, I would argue it is not really the failure of secularism which has caused the recent problems but rather a change of the patronage system where newly rich Indians need to evade the traditional Congress system which does not support them. That is where the BJP comes in by setting up a new system of its own with these new elites. It therefore is rather a situation in which the over-lying ideology of Hindu religiosity gives a cover simply to a new system, which has developed because of the changes caused by Congress politics since independence.

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