

History of the BJP (1980-1990)

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The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has come a long way since it was founded a decade ago. That it won but two seats in the Lok Sabha elections in 1984 and 88 in 1989 is impressive in itself despite the fact that both the results need qualifications. What is clear is that it has carved out for itself a significant constituency in the country. It runs the Governments in Madhya Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh, is a dominant partner in the coalition with the Janata Dal in Rajasthan and is an assertive one with it in Gujarat. What is no less clear is that it has raised its sights and bids fair to raise them higher still.

On April 22, the BJP President, L.K. Advani, said its aim was to influence policy decisions by becoming a force to reckon with in Parliament while the Janata Dal wanted to acquire power. On September 20, however, the BJP General Secretary, K.L. Sharma, said: "The BJP will project itself as a single-party alternative". It would "fight the elections alone and perhaps there will be no seat adjustments also".

Sharma's projections are interesting: "In the North and the West we have established ourselves substantially. If we could increase our strength from two to 88, we can surely hope to progress from 88 to single-party majority."

"It is a party with a difference," Sharma emphasised. "We did not allow our identity to be confused."

The BJP's efforts to spread out in the South are well known. Latterly, it has tried to establish a foothold in Assam and West Bengal as well.

But this physical expansion has occurred along with a deepening of the ideological commitment and a sharpening of its credo. This is quite contrary to what its leaders had envisaged when they parted company with the Janata Party in April 1980. In an interview to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh weekly, *Panchjanya* (Deepavali 1980 issue), Advani disagreed with the view that the Janata Party would die because it had no ideology. It is an instructive exchange:

Advani: No, I do not agree with it, for in India, a party based on ideology can at the most come to power in a small area. It cannot win the confidence of the entire country—neither the Communist Party nor the Jan Sangh in its original form.

Panchjanya: But by ignoring the ideological appeal will you be able to keep together the cadres on the basis of these ideals?

Advani: Effort is being made to make them understand. That is why I want the debate to go on. In this context, some people have criticised me although even during the Jan Sangh days I used to advocate these ideas. I have already said that the Jan Sangh was initially built as a party based on ideology but slowly it departed from that course.

Panchjanya: However, despite its ideological anchorage, the Jan Sangh's appeal was steadily increasing.

Advani: The appeal increased to the extent the ideology got diluted. Wherever the ideology was strong, its appeal diminished.

Now Advani prides himself on the fact that he is ideologically pure and alone. He said on September 24, on the eve of the Somnath-Ayodhya *rath yatra*, "Ideologically, I am ranged against all political parties because of the issue. All political parties think alike." The issue was clearly defined. It was not the Rama Janmabhoomi issue. It was a "crusade in defence of *Hindutva* and a crusade against pseudo-secularism." Its goal is to break from the Nehru-Gandhi ethos and recast the policy.

On September 30 he bitterly complained that nationalism had weakened over the past 40 years while "perverted" secularism went on thriving. No other political party accepts this. The BJP has

set out to break the national consensus. In the process it has begun to rewrite history as well. This explains the ambition.

Its idiom is a familiar one. Time was when the BJP tried to distance itself from those who spoke it. A.B. Vajpayee, then its President, said in an interview with a Bombay monthly published in August 1980 that the BJP was different from the Bharatiya Jan Sangh (BJS) "in many ways". Articulate as ever, he amplified: "Having tasted power once, we realised that unless we became a party of the national mainstream and enjoyed support from all sections, we could not become a national alternative."

Today the BJP aspires to become a national alternative even as it prides itself on its isolation. In those days Vajpayee had a clear answer to the question, "So, what have you done to become a party of the national mainstream?" It was that the BJP must have an image different from that of the BJS. "The Jan Sangh was functioning more or less as an Opposition group...with a Hindu bias."

Vajpayee had, in an article in *Indian Express* on August 2, 1979, titled "All responsible for Janata crisis", criticised the RSS on grounds more than one. "Why does it not open its doors to non-Hindus?" It should define *Hindu Rashtra* to mean "the Indian nation which includes non-Hindus as equal members". As late as December 18, 1979 he asked the RSS to change its "methodology, ideology, programme and activities".

THE BJP was born as a result of the split in the Janata on the issue of some of its members' membership of the RSS, a fact which its leaders never cease to emphasise. But while in 1980 they claimed to be the real heirs to the Janata Party of Jayaprakash Narayan and not of the Jan Sangh, today they claim to be closer to the RSS than the Jan Sangh was.

Advani's speech to an RSS gathering in Coimbatore this year is most revealing (*The Telegraph* of May 17 published the text): "While in the case of the BJS the linkage was only ideological, in the case of the BJP the linkage is both ideological as well as historical." He referred to "the sister organisations like the VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad), the ABVP (Akil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad), BMS (Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh), the Sevan Bharati and the Kalyan Ashram, which are all based on the inspiration from the RSS."

Advani resented attempts to separate the two. People are asked to "realise that the BJP which you described as a good party is good only because of its association with the RSS." This explains the impetus behind the moves to expand geographically and concentrate ideologically. "We have to intensify our efforts, we have to project the viewpoint of the RSS, which is not being reflected so that with the instrumentality of the BJP in politics it gets more and more acceptance not only in terms of vote, in terms of parliamentary seats, in terms of Assembly seats and in governments but also in that they come to be respected."

On this basis, the BJP is not 10 years old. As a revival of the Jan Sangh it is nearly 40 years old. When Advani asserts that "the BJP had its genesis in the issue of the RSS: in 1980, he invites attention to its early phase which, in glaring contrast to its present phase, puts in unfavourable light its leaders' commitments then. On February 26, 1980, Advani

himself wrote to the Janata Party's president, Chandra Shekhar: "Our commitment to the party's principles and programmes, the concepts of Gandhian socialism and secularism, has been total and unequivocal." This, of course, was to secularism as understood by the Janata Party—a credo which Advani now dubs as pseudo-secularism. How have these very leaders come to abandon that commitment in so short a time?

The answer to this question explains much more than the process of evolution of the BJP. It reveals the essential nature of this important political force in the polity. The BJP leaders' reminders about the reasons for the split have a contemporary relevance, albeit for reasons different from the ones they imagine. On February 26, 1980, the Janata's Parliamentary Board endorsed a formula evolved in 1979 debarring office-bearers and legislators from participating in "the day-to-day activities of the RSS". For good measure partymen were also barred from working in any "front organisation which functions in competition to one sponsored by the Janata Party".

Piqued, the RSS Pratinidhi Sabha decided on March 23 that "nothing need be done in this matter" of changing its own constitution on these very lines. Vajpayee later (on April 13) lamented that if only the Board had waited for a week—and let the RSS act of its own accord—the Janata would not have split.

But the alacrity with which Advani called a convention of like-minded people on March 26 led some to suspect that the game was far deeper. One of the General Secretaries, Ramakrishna Hegde, instantly remarked that the move confirmed the belief that dual membership was not a non-issue after all and justified those who had raised the issue.

However, on April 4, 1980, the Janata came close to averting a split. Morarji Desai put forward a formula which is of great significance even today. It added to the party's constitution a cause committing members to accept "unconditionally and strive to preserve the composite culture and secular state established in our country and nation not based on religion. He shall not allow his membership of any other organisation to derogate from this obligation."

Given the RSS stand on India's culture it is hard to see how anyone can accept this formula and yet be an RSS member. Other clauses forbade members from working in competitive fronts, holding "exclusive meetings" or trying to capture the elected organs of the party.

Desai's formula was defeated by 17 votes to 14 in the National Executive on April 4. The 10 erstwhile Jan Sangh members voted for it along with Desai, Digvijay Narain Singh, Samar Guha and Asoka Mehta who presumably drafted the formula. Instead, the March 18 decision was affirmed. The party split. Nonetheless, at the foundation convention called by him and which met the very next day, Advani asserted that there was no question of reviving the Jan Sangh, while Vajpayee declared that the new party, the BJP, would endeavour to realise Jayaprakash Narayan's dreams.

But as events unfolded, the new party did not act as if it was heir to the Janata at all. On August 31, 1980, Vajpayee, the BJP President, defended the RSS and accused the government of appeasing the minorities. At the party's first plenary convention in Bombay on December 28, 1980, Vajpayee signi-

ficantly recalled the history of the Jan Sangh and its sessions in Bombay. "Gandhian socialism" was affirmed as one of the five commitments. The others were nationalism and national integration, democracy, "positive secularism" and value-based politics. "Plurality of religious faiths, ideologies, languages" and so on were acknowledged. But not "composite culture". There was a dark hint about people with "extra-territorial loyalties". A suggestion by Mehboob Ali, a former Janata Minister of Rajasthan, that the minorities' interests be protected was brusquely rejected.

Shortly thereafter occurred one of those events whose impact was perceived fully only later. Nearly five years later, the RSS chief, Balasaheb Deoras, said the conversion of a large number of Harijans to Islam at Meenakshipuram in Tamil Nadu in February 1981 had brought about an "awakening" among Hindus.

An article in *The Hindu* on June 15, 1981, titled "Why the mass conversion?" revealed that the causes were purely local in origin. But the event affected the communal atmosphere in the country greatly. The social tensions in Meenakshipuram subsided, but the atmosphere in the country continued to deteriorate. Communal riots took place in several parts of the country, the ones at Moradabad and Meerut being the worst.

A fine political scientist, Rajni Kothari, attributed the deterioration to a large degree to Indira Gandhi's changed style of politics. Inherent in this withdrawal from a populist to a managerial style of conducting national affairs was a turnabout from "secular" to "communal" politics. She had forged a new "winning coalition" in the Hindi heartland. The minorities had begun to move away from the Congress-I. Indira Gandhi made a bid for the Hindu vote, to the BJP's discomfiture.

The crunch came in the elections to the Delhi Metropolitan Council in February and to the Jammu and Kashmir Assembly in June 1983. The BJP fared miserably in both its strongholds. It won 19 seats as against the Congress-I's 34 in the 56-member Metropolitan Council. It could not win a single Assembly seat from Jammu and polled only 8.15 per cent vote. The Congress-I polled 45.39 per cent. The results shook the BJP. In 1983 it formed the National Democratic Alliance with Charan Singh's Lok Dal to work together in the legislatures as a joint bloc and "to coordinate their activities outside as well as in elections". It was ready to form a National Democratic Front with others. The Alliance, predictably, proved counterproductive.

The BJP found the ground being gradually cut under its feet. "Indira Gandhi's standing as a true leader of the Hindu community has now received electoral imprimatur," remarked Nikhil Chakravartty, senior journalist. Vajpayee made a last-ditch attempt to preserve his old line. In an interview to *Panchjanya* in August 1983, he asked it to clarify that "it does not stand for a Hindu state" and pleaded with it to take a stand on issues such as land reforms and those concerning the economy.

There were, however, pressures in the opposite direction and these were to sweep him aside gradually. He participated in the VHP's *Ekatmata Yagna* along with Advani and paid tributes to "the organising skill of the RSS, the backbone of the Parishad" (November 18, 1983), but was discomfited to find the VHP's President singing the praises of Indira Gandhi.

When the BJP's National Council ended its deliberations in Indore on January 8, 1984, Vajpayee could not conceal his dissatisfaction with the party's progress. It could no longer hope to be the national

alternative and acknowledged that now "no single party can". There were strains in the relations with Charan Singh. Vajpayee tried to reach out to the RSS by calling it an inherent part of the BJP's structure and extolling the unbreakable relationship.

But Balasaheb Deoras was intent on placating Indira Gandhi (*The Hindu*, January 30, 1984). The General Secretary of the RSS, Rajendra Singh, said: "We have supported the government on national issues." (March 24, 1984)

It was a cruel dilemma for the BJP. Neither the RSS line nor unity with the Opposition held any promise. In a *cri de coeur* Vajpayee told James M. Markham of *The New York Times* (June 14, 1984), shortly after Operation Bluestar: "Mrs Gandhi is playing a very dangerous game. The long-term interests of the country are being sacrificed to short-term gains. But encouraging Hindu chauvinism is not going to pay. As the majority community, Hindus must be above parochial politics." He added, "She wanted to take advantage of the Hindu backlash." These sage words could justly be applied to Advani's *rath yatra* today. But between it and Vajpayee's last-ditch stand in 1984 lay a period which saw a series of pathetic compromises by this tragic figure in Indian politics.

Indira Gandhi's assassination threw the entire Opposition off balance. It was too demoralised even to promise to work together if elected to power. Chandra Shekhar lay supine. The BJP forged an alliance with the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra. But Rajiv Gandhi swept the elections, riding on the sympathy wave.

When the BJP's National Executive met in Calcutta in March 1985, Vajpayee proposed that a working group be set up to reflect on the course the party had adopted and suggest a way out of the morass in which it found itself. Was the BJP's defeat due to "our decision to merge the Jan Sangh with the Janata Party in 1977 and withdraw from it in 1980?" "Should the BJP go back and revive the Bharatiya Jan Sangh?" That in his view "will amount to a slide back". The BJP had "no truck with the VHP" he stressed.

The RSS mouthpiece, *Organiser*, provided the answer in an editorial on April 7, titled "Revamping the BJP". The remedy lay in the restoration of the leadership's rapport with a sizeable section of its selfless cadres still alienated since the Janata days (read: the RSS). The BJP's stance of positive secularism and Gandhian socialism alienated them. What mattered was ideological cohesion.

Predictably, the working group's 47-page report answered the queries in favour of the leadership but recommended that the concept enunciated by Jan Sangh leader Deen Dayal Upadhyaya, "integral humanism", be adopted as "the basic philosophy" of the BJP instead of the "Gandhian socialism through the Gandhian approach to socio-economic system" could be adopted as one of the commitments.

When the report was presented to the National Executive in Bhopal on July 20, 1985, Vajpayee denied that there was any crisis of identity. Asked if it meant a return to the Jan Sangh, he countered: when did we get away from Jan Sangh? On November 6, 1977, however, he had said, "When we joined the Janata Party, we had given up our old beliefs and faiths...and there was no question of going back. No less revealing was his remark, on July 22, 1985, that "we wanted to assert our views in the (Janata) Government but the government broke up too soon. Had we been in power for some more time we would have imparted a new thinking to India's politics."

In October 1985 the National Executive abandoned "Gandhian socialism" but the National Council

retained it and also adopted "integral humanism".

TWO events took place later which provided considerable grist to the BJP's mill. On January 31, 1986, Faizabad District Judge K.M. Pandey ordered that the locks on the gates of the premises of the Babri Masjid be opened. On February 25 the Muslim Women's Bill was moved in Parliament to override the Supreme Court's ruling in the Shah Bano case. It was in this atmosphere that the BJP held its second plenary session in New Delhi on May 9, 1986. Advani replacing Vajpayee as the party President.

Advani flatly denied that the BJP was hardening its stand and attributed the changes to the altered situation (*Frontline*, May 31-June 13, 1986). By then, Rajiv Gandhi's popularity had begun to wane. The Bofors disclosures in April 1987 accelerated the process and the Opposition's fortunes revived. The BJP had its share of the gains when it formed a coalition with Devi Lal's Lok Dal after his spectacular victory in the Haryana Assembly elections in June 1987.

But there was no doubt that the RSS was not in the ascendant. In October 1987 it organised a meeting of the prominent Swayamsevaks working in the BJP, the VHP, the ABVP and the BMS, which was attended by Vajpayee and Advani. On October 21, Advani justified the conclave: "After all there is a linkage, all these organisations consist of people belonging to the RSS." On November 16, Deoras said the RSS entry into politics "in the near future" was not ruled out.

There began in 1988 a clear hardening of the BJP's line, which was strikingly reminiscent of its "Indianisation" programme two decades earlier. It was by no means sudden. Indeed, it had been in the making for some time. Two features of this phase stand out. One is candour. More than ever before there has been a series of blatantly communal utterances by Advani on the lines of Deoras' statements. The other is an openness about the linkage with the RSS coupled with greater assertion by the latter. The BJP shed its ambiguities and the RSS stopped its pro-Congress-I statements. Merrily or sadly, Vajpayee has sailed with these currents.

The BJP's plenary session in Agra on April 8, 1988 was a landmark. And Advani, who had on April 4, 1980 "unconditionally" pledged himself "to preserving the composite culture" of India, now discovered that "emphasis on the composite character of Indian culture is generally an attempt to disown its essentially Hindu spirit and content." At the RSS meeting in Coimbatore he said India's culture "is essentially a Hindu culture" and it "should be reflected in the various policies, programmes, attitudes and positions we take".

The BJP now openly avows that it seeks to protect Hindu interest. Only on September 30, 1990, in Bombay, Advani complained that today's leaders were afraid of speaking for Hindus. In the same breath he asked the minorities to accept this country and its culture. The implications of such pronouncements are obvious and far-reaching. A year ago, on September 24, 1989, at the National Executive, Vajpayee had said Hindu interests were synonymous with national interests. (*Indian Express*, September 25, 1989)

It was around this time too that Advani denied that Gandhiji was the Father of the Nation. "The party no longer feels squeamish about its close ties to the RSS, the Shiv Sena and the VHP," *The Times of India* editorially noted on October 17, 1989,

adding, "Mr Advani, while holding forth on 'Bharat Mata', now goes so far as to deny that Mahatma Gandhi was the Father of the Nation."

The BJP's alliance with the Shiv Sena is blatantly opportunistic. On July 4, 1988 Advani acknowledged that the Shiv Sena was extremist. On October 3, 1988 Deoras said he was "well aware" that it sought to capitalise on the "Hindu awakening". To Vajpayee the Shiv Sena was a "parochial and anti-non-Maharashtrian" party striving to become a pro-Hindu regional party. This year on March 17, Advani was glad to accept it as a pro-Hindu party.

The BJP tries to project itself as the only party committed to national weal, uninfluenced by electoral considerations. But in a moment of weakness, just as the National Executive adopted on June 11, 1989 at Palampur its famous resolution on Ram Janmabhoomi, he exclaimed, "I am sure it will translate into votes."

A systematic effort is made to instil among the Hindus the feeling that they are being treated unfairly. On September 29, 1990 in Ahmedabad, Advani said that even after 40 years of independence almost all political parties which have ruled the country have done nothing for the "betterment of the Hindu community" but had taken "special interest" in "appeasing" the minorities for their own "political gains". The next day in Bombay he went further: "When Muslims, Sikhs and other communities practise their religion, then we call them secular, but if parties like the BJP and the Shiv Sena practise Hinduism, then we are branded as communal." The semantic sleight of hand in juxtaposing a people's "practice" of religion with that of a party apart, the line is a dangerous one to pursue in a plural society.

The Jan Morcha and later the Janata Dal could not possibly have an alliance with the BJP, especially in its (the BJP's) post-1986 incarnation. It was invited to the Surajkund Opposition conclave by Devi Lal on September 23, 1987 but was shunned thereafter. The BJP resents this isolation and yet prides itself on it. Its support to the National Front Government, spelt out in Advani's letter of November 29, 1989, was with specified "reservations"—Article 370, Uniform Civil Code, Human Rights Commission and Ram Janmabhoomi.

The government's stand on the Mandal Report had widened the differences. For obvious reasons, the BJP perceives it as a threat to its strategy to unify the Hindu community on the plank of *Hindutva* and make a bid for power at the Centre. Asked how long the BJP's support would continue, Vajpayee ominously said on September 25: "We are waiting for the right time."

But it is the RSS which calls the shots. Towards the end of August a meeting of the RSS top brass in New Delhi decided to adopt a tough line on the Ayodhya issue even at the risk of rupturing the ties with the government. On September 12 came Advani's announcement of the *rath yatra* from Somnath to Ayodhya. The speeches he has made since have been defiant and communal. The issue, he said, was not the construction of the temple but the "basis of nationalism in the country". He is out to restore "national pride", echoed Vajpayee on September 23, while Advani amplified that the feeling of nationalism would glow. It is a "crusade in defence of *Hindutva*," he thundered on September 24. The next day he called it "the second phase of nationalist renaissance after independence."



IT has been a chequered career since the BJP was launched a decade ago. But people would be justified in asking whether the commitments its leaders solemnly made as late as April 1980 were, indeed, honestly made or, as Hegde suggested, were tactical.

It has a bearing on its present professions. For Advani, while arousing the people's feelings, assures the country that they are much more intense and even questions the secular creed. It "worries me...if the BJP had not tried to channel the feelings of Hindus, the consequences for national unity would not have been good."

Spoken in November 1989, the record shows these words are more of a hint, if not a threat, rather than an assurance. It is the BJP and its "sister" organisations which have been whipping up communal feelings.

The disquiet over "The bigger BJP" (*Frontline*, March 17-30, 1990) acquires greater relevance now:

Parallels are being drawn with the developments in Germany between the First and Second World Wars and the rise of fascism in Italy. Will not a party thrusting its way forward with the slogan of *Hindutva* press for a fascist polity sooner or later? Will it not be detrimental to the minorities? Will it not break the class organisations of the poor and the working class? Looking beyond the talk of clean public life and good governmental conduct, whose interests does it represent?

The article noted the BJP's denunciation of Hitlerite fascism "in its resolutions". But its firm links with the RSS and pronouncements on issues of the utmost sensitivity to the country's democratic and secular structure, especially in the recent months, show the fears to be justified. □

