

## **RELIGION AND INDIAN POLITICS**

Like caste that has gained salience in contemporary India, religion continues to remain critical in Indian politics. Both the Mandal formula and the Mandir agenda espousing the socio-religious demand of the so-called majority for the Ram temple in Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh seem to be most critical in re-conceptualizing Indian politics. There is no doubt however that the Mandal recommendations created conditions for the demand for temple to strike roots in Indian society. As Nicholas B. Dirks explains, once caste began to be used for denying rather than conferring social privileges, Hindu nationalists captured ground by calling for a notion of religious community to replace one of caste. Political parties holding the life wire of representative liberal democracy can hardly be indifferent to these ideological issues.

There is no doubt that Hindutva, as an ideology, created a sup-port base for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) by appreciating that cultural heritage of the country should not be ignored or dismissed simply because it does not measure up to modern criteria. The Mandir slogan paid massive electoral dividends to the BJP. In the aftermath of the controversial Rath Yatra in 1990, the BJP, for instance, almost doubled its popular vote from 11 per cent in 1989 to 21 per cent in 1991, winning 119 Lok Sabha seats. That was perhaps the upper limit of what a typical Hindutva slogan could achieve in terms of seats in the Parliament. Its increased tally of 182 seats in 1999 national poll was linked to a large extent with the failure of other parties to emerge as effective alternatives to the BJP.

Instead of being xenophobic, Hindutva also defends cultural ethos by seemingly integrating the best in our past with what it needs to learn from others. Nonetheless, its success is limited presumably because of Hindutva's homogenizing design. In fact, what is most negative in the entire conceptualization is the tendency to homogenize the Indian civilization and the texture of Indian identity. Hindutva does not seem to be designed to create a social coalition of diverse groups, but rather an aspiration to homogenize and construct a unity by submerging diversity. Indian civilization has drawn on various sources, including Hinduism. It is an outcome of long-drawn interactions among civilizational values, making it not a homogeneous whole, but a loose federation of different systems of thoughts and practices. Hence any attempt to homogenize it necessarily distorts and does grave injustice to it because Hindutva cannot, argues Bhikhu Parekh:

Unite all Indians because of its antipathy to minorities. It cannot even unite all Hindus because it stresses only one version of Hindu history and culture. Indeed it creates a deep division among them by classifying some as 'good' or 'true' and the rest as 'pseudo' or 'confused' Hindus.

*Hindutva* can therefore never strike a chord with the people at large presumably because of the sociological constraint, connected with the inherently pluralist character of Hinduism. Conceptually, Hindus cannot be nationalists, if the latter is understood as an ideological device seeking to 'homogenize' a set of people on the basis of well-defined criteria. This is perhaps the gravest impediment to at least the more extreme items on its agenda. Yet it would be wrong to conclude that the Hindu nationalist influence is on the wane because it is located in much broader space than that represented by the BJP. Because they overlap and blend with other key discourses on Indian society, culture, and identity, these are ideas which are manifested in a wide range of political actions and articulations. Hence the political impact of *Hindutva* needs to be measured, argues John Zavos in terms of its continuing activism [in large parts of India involving the marginalized sections of society]. where politics is manifested not in terms of formal state institutions, but as a contest for power in a network of localized institutions and practices. Simultaneously with the expansion of influence of Hindu nationalism, there is also the ascendancy of caste groups and caste-based parties especially in the 'Hindi heartland' which have gained enormous electoral clout in recent years.

#### *Decline of the Majoritarian Ideology*

In view of the rising importance of social compact, based on caste and not religion, the *Hindutva* brigade championing the Majoritarian claim thus seems to have lost its cutting edge, as the outcome of the 2004 national poll demonstrates. Even for sustaining the national coalition government that came into being in 1999, the BJP which drew on the Hindu nationalist agenda had to considerably dilute its specific ideological fascination to cement a bond among the ideologically incompatible coalition partners. So the growing importance of coalition politics seems to have struck at the very foundation of Hindu nationalism and also reaffirmed the strong roots of an indigenous variety of secularism in Indian. Both the Nehruvian *Dharma Nirapekshta* (state to maintain equidistance from all religion) and Gandhian *Sarv Dharm Sambhava* (peaceful co-existence of all religion) remain the governing principles for secularism. Indian variety of secularism is thus a mixed bag in the sense that it hardly corresponds to the conventional wisdom on the phenomenon. It was creatively articulated underlining the complexities of typical non-Western contexts. Secularism was thus not an ideology for Jawaharlal Nehru. For him, it was nothing but civilized behaviour,

practised by all but a few contemporary states in the modern world. The Constitution adopted the secular-ism and its Preamble confirms by declaring India as 'a secular republic', besides the guarantee in Part III of 'religious freedom' (Articles 25-30). Notwithstanding the constitutional validity, the role of the judiciary is also decisive in reinterpreting the idea of secularism in accordance with the transforming socio-political milieu. As an integral part of 'the basic structure' of the Constitution, secularism seems to be 'an inalienable' to the constitutional foundation of Indian democracy. Nonetheless, Indian secularism is a story of both success and failure. Despite constitutional guarantee and certainly powerful voice for secularism in the polity, the occasional outbreak of religious riots (as the 1984 Delhi anti-Sikh riot and 2002 anti-Muslim riot in Gujarat) is powerful statement of how fragile the secular fabric is in the face of majoritarian 'backlash' on people of different faith.

There is however no doubt that given the well-entrenched socio-political plurality in India, it is almost impossible for any political party with extreme views to capture power independent of partners. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) was perhaps a powerful public statement on the non-threatening image of 'Hindutva' that was largely 'cultural' and less 'political' as the ruling conglomeration puts the controversial partisan agenda of Mandir, abrogation of special privileges to Jammu and Kashmir under Article 370, and imposition of uniform civil code under the carpet. Once in governance, the BJP, for instance, found it politically expedient to continue with the Haj subsidy presumably to redefine its image as an organization with clear anti-Muslim bias. Similarly, the critical importance of the regional parties in the NDA accounted for appreciation for federalism as perhaps the most appropriate system of governance that, argues Katherine Adney, took the constituent states as 'equal partners'.