

**The 13th Lok Sabha:
a test of diversity and
dissent in India**

India: The 13th Lok Sabha: a test of diversity and dissent in India

(December, 1999)

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Introduction

This introduction is not intended as yet another scholarly analysis of the series events that occurred in India in 1999. That task has been remarkably done by many and a selected number of articles discussing some of these issues are put together in this dossier. It is our intention to introduce to the reader the rationale for this collection of articles, which discuss fully one or several of the events, whether they are of a political, social, economic, or of a religious nature. In that respect all these articles are conclusive in their arguments. This collection is grouped under four sub-headings, namely the 'Sangh Parivar', 'the National Democratic Alliance' which then is followed by 'Women', 'NGOs and the Minorities'. We consider the last three groups to be the most marginalized in the current set up.

It is our argument that in the euphoria of a stable National Democratic Alliance, the hidden agenda of the *Sangh Parivar* (Sangh family) should not be missed. The *Sangh Parivar* has once again managed to capture political power with support from a wide range of political parties in India, having made some compromises for the immediate future. Many scholars have warned against deception from *Sangh Parivar*. The warning from K N Panikar cannot be more direct, "(F)or those who are prepared to learn from the tactics of the fascists else where, it would be clear that these crutches are only temporary and would be discarded once the transitional phase is over."

Some may argue that with the present order of things the stock market indices are climbing, and simplistically conclude that 'growth' and 'development' is at hand. But what about other indices such as freedom of expression, women's empowerment, respect for minorities, community organizing etc?

The recent natural disaster in Orissa caused misery and death to many thousands of people. It would be extremely irresponsible for anyone to consider it a vindication from God. People, irrespective of their caste, colour or creed, rose to the occasion and generously contributed food, medicine, clothes and money to those in need. The relief work is still continuing. It is this generous and open attitude, innate among Indians that makes India a nation of great people. It is our hope for the future.

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James Joseph Keezhangatte

CHAN Beng Seng

From Sanskritisation to Hindi-isation and Hindu-isation: The 13th Lok Saba

Ranjit Sau, Economic and Political Weekly

The Gandhi-Nehru project was flawed at the core; it was an oxymoron par excellence. When caught in an inevitable bind it was converted into a Nehru-Gandhi script. In the 1999 general election campaign the Congress president proclaimed, should her party return to power in Delhi, electric power would be given free to farmers. The audience at Andhra Pradesh hustings, where she spoke, had a rib-rocking laugh to the point of tears. The specter of Indira Gandhi with her crude joke of 'garibi hatao' flashed in their mind. Here, again, the same dress, the same voice, the same glycerin tears, the same agenda: a dynasty, all dressed up visibly on the podium – the eerie shadow of Indira Gandhi is stalking the land again, they thought. This is the signature tune of the 13th Lok Sabha: the next reels will show a suspense-thriller with usual Bollywood masala.

It is too early to make a detailed analysis of the general election. However, the immediate causes of the Congress downfall are fairly straightforward: the party has no coherent story to tell the voters, its words ring hollow, its network of local organization is worn out. But that does not solve the other side of the mystery, namely, the success of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) at the polls. What makes BJP an attractive choice? What does BJP have that Congress doesn't? Why is the Nehru-Gandhi flip a flop? We begin our narration from this end.

Gandhi-Nehru Handloom

We all do two elementary productions, namely, propagation of species and procurement of subsistence, at two sites respectively: family and firm. Families assemble to build a society, and firms come to make the economy. To co-ordinate it all springs up another sector, the polity. A nation thus has three parts: society, economy and polity; they interact and seek an equilibrium.

India has several religions. Its society is said to be in equilibrium when each religious group ceases to have relative internal adjustment and there is no further

proselytisation, that is conversion from one faith to another. The equilibrium has thus two facets: intra-religion and inter-religion tranquillity. The economy operates within the infrastructure provided by the society and polity, but it can and does have a bearing upon the latter two as well. The polity is most agile; it responds mostly to the impulse from society and economy. It has some degree of autonomy, of course. The system consisting of these three parts evolves with its own momentum and absorbs external shocks. We shall view India through this lens of general equilibrium.¹

In shaping modern India Mahatma Gandhi and Pandit Nehru had, as it were a division of labour. Gandhiji mended the society and Panditji looked after the economy, while both of them were steering the polity. The exercise appears, no doubt, a bit hazardous. The scene reminds us of the case of two persons riding on one horse and racing the same three horses at the same time. So it was.

Gandhiji envisaged India as a society of permanently discrete communities, divided along lines of religion and each subdivided by varna, caste or similar other ascriptive marks.² The glue that is supposed to hold the disparate elements together is his doctrine of faith in all faiths: *Iswar Allah tere naam*. But clearly the patchwork may not be sturdy enough. For it perpetuates the sharp edges of demarcation and brings frictions and bruises. At the operational level it is even more volatile. Despite his grand scheme of Hindu-Muslim unity the Mahatma rejected inter-dining and inter-marriage. Once he declined to have dinner in the company of his Muslim friends Mohamed Ali and his brother on the tenuous argument that eating is a privately performed sanitary routine of life. He condemned Hindi-Muslim inter-marriage as incest [Bose 1998: 2094]. Clearly Gandhiji was building his castle on quicksands.³

For harmonious living two communities must not only recognize each other's religion as legitimate; they must also know and respect each other's intra-religion 'caste' structure. Mere 'tolerance' of religions is not enough. For example, a Hindu grocery-store-owner has to be aware of the social prestige of a Muslim scholar-theologian, ulema, in the latter's own community, and pay him equal respect in full, rather than throw him out as 'impure' from the shop's doorstep. The problem would be compounded when the respective caste ranks of two communities do not map one-to-one and monotonously. I have not found any evidence that would indicate that Gandhiji had time even to address the question, let alone answer it. In a word, the societal vision of Gandhiji was incomplete, underdeterminate, and inconsistent while, his own behavior on related occasions was inscrutable.

Gandhiji said a great deal on simple village life, civilization, charkha, and all that. However, his utterances on economic matters do not add up to a coherent whole. His insistence on cottage and village industries, spinning wheel, handloom, etc, belonged to a different universe, not known to the contemporary world⁴. Fortunately, Nehru did not pay much heed to it. What Panditji did, obviously, did not take us very far, either. He set up public sector projects everywhere and anointed them 'temples' of modern India. The public took him literally. You don't go to temples for hard work,

productivity, competition, innovation, investment, and such other earthly stuff, you go there to meditate. And so they did. By the time they woke up, it was too late.

The situation in the field outside those holy places was not much different either. By some estimates the Indian economy has remained stagnant for as many as 2280 years; the per capita income is virtually constant over the period between 320 BC and AD 1960 [Lal 1988:34]. Such a case of prolonged economic paralysis is rare in history. The caste system bears part of the responsibility. "The chief features of caste are: (I) Heredity: One cannot change one's caste. (ii) Endogamy: Every member of a caste must marry a member of the same caste and may not marry outside it (iii) Commensal restriction: Regulations are imposed regarding the acceptance of food and drink from members of other castes" [Radhakrishnan 1940:37]. "Two distinct tendencies are implicit in the caste system. The first is an acceptance of the existence of multiple cultures [one for each caste], including moral and religious norms, in any local society. '... Occasionally, a man is heard making slighting remarks about the hereditary occupations of other castes. The other tendency in the caste system is [Sanskritisation] the imitation of the ways of higher castes" [Srinivas 1996: 14; emphasis added]. The first of the two distinct tendencies of the caste system fills the Hindu society with deep ennui and distrust, which partly accounts for the millennia-old economic slumber. The second one, we shall see in a moment has provided a window of opportunity to the BJP. It transpires that both Gandhiji and Panditji had only a myopic grasp of the Indian ethos. The country promptly headed to the edge of precipice.

Nehru- Gandhi Heirloom

In due course, Nehru's daughter took over the rein, and the new Gandhi began to fill in the blanks. Her calculation was acute. The society, she saw, is split into three segments: lower-caste Hindu, upper-caste Hindu, and the Muslim and other minorities. Incremental return on any political investment will be higher in the first and third segments than in the second. She put on rudraksha mala, visited temples, mosques, churches, sought benediction of every guru who cared to open the door to her. And in the name of dalits, the weaker sections of society,⁵ she proclaimed a 20 point programme.⁶ The nation was impressed with her skill in balancing acts. The Nehru-Gandhi era dawned in right earnest.

Her son took the Indira strategy to its logical end with disastrous results. An editorial in *The Times of India* (August 4, 1994) writes that the total electoral rout of the Congress Party in Uttar Pradesh came after 1986, an occurrence that could be attributed to two major events. In February 1986, the Muslim Women's Bill was introduced in parliament in response to the Supreme Court's judgement in the Sha Bano case.⁷ This alienated the upper caste Hindus. In the same month, the district judge at Faizabad opened the locks of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya apparently at the prodding of Congress leadership. As a result the Muslims started to desert the Congress. As if that was not enough, Rajiv Gandhi started the election campaign in

1989 with a speech in Faizabad, the constituency in which the town of Ayodhya is located, promising Ram Rajya and announcing the 'shilanyas' for Ram temple. The demolition of Babri Masjid in December 1992 brought the curtain down on Congress fortunes in Uttar Pradesh.

In a word, the Gandhi-Nehru period saw an ostrich-like passive policy of supporting the social status quo, while the subsequent Nehru-Gandhi dynasty tried to actively exploit religious differences in order to protect itself. A third variety of policy towards religion will be narrated below – that is the BJP's innovation. If Indira Gandhi prostrated before a 'jagatguru' it was to seek her own political salvation; she was at the receiving end of blessing. By contrast, the BJP would operate on the supply side.

As cited above, one of the two distinct features of the caste system is the 'the imitation of the ways of higher castes'. Srinivas (1966) has a name for such climbing of caste ladder: sanskritisation. It has been a powerful force in the diffusion of Hinduism in remote past [Weber 1958:9-21]. A tribal chief would invite a brahmin priest who will come to the baptize the royal-highness-to-be into Hinduism and thus legitimize the Kingdom. May be even a kshatriya sib (gotra) going back to such and such sage (rishi) also can be arranged to further fortify the royal claim.

Such supply of caste recognition and upgradation has been greatly activated lately on demand. The kshatriyas, in particular are said to be in special need for this commodity. Historians like KM Panikkar maintain that actually there has been no such caste as kshatriya in the last 2,000 years of history. The Nandas were the last 'true' kshatriya, and they disappeared in the fifth century BC. Since then every known royal family has come from a non-kshatriya caste, including the famous Rajput dynasties of medieval India. Panikkar also points out that the "the shudras [of all castes] seem to have produced an unusually large number of royal families even in more recent times. The Palas of Bengal originally belonged undoubtedly to that low caste. The great Maratha Royal House, whatever their function today, could hardly sustain their genealogical pretensions connecting them with Rajput descent. One of the most important functions of genealogist and bardic caste was to legitimize mobility from the ranks of lower castes to the kshatriya by providing suitable genealogical linkage and myth" [Srinivas 1966: 9-10]. Another calamity has befallen this caste. The Islamic conquest and thereafter the British occupation of India had rubbed off some of the glaze of the valiant caste of kshatriya. It feels insecure about its identity [Bettle, 1996].

Meanwhile in different regions, there were few castes which, although not regarded as high, became relatively wealthy by reason of their ability to exploit certain special opportunities that came their way during the British rule. Examples of such success are provided by the teli (oilman) castes in eastern India, the distillers in Orissa, the noniyas (salt-makers) in Uttar Pradesh, the Kolis of coastal Gujarat, and kharwas of Saurashtra. When a low caste became wealthy it usually followed this up by sanskritising its life style and ritual, and claiming the status of a higher caste. The priests can provide the required service for consummating the formalities of

upgradation. A most eloquent example is the case of Amma Coorgs, a section of the main body of Coorgs, who came under strong brahminical influence in the first half of the 19th century and became vegetarians, teetotalers and donned the sacred thread. In course of time they became a distinct endogamous group, a caste even though they numbered only 666 (yes, 666!) individuals at the 1941 Census. A new caste was born. Thus a caste or section thereof would sanskritise its way of life and then claim to be superior to its structural neighbors or to the parent section [Srinivas 1966: 30, 90-99].

Like the interior of a galaxy where new stars are being formed ceaselessly, the womb of the Hindu society is all the time churning out new castes through sanskritisation; and like the galaxies in the expanding universe the caste-constellations are running away from each other at epic speed. Who says a Hindu Society is static, motionless? Of course, there was no Big bang; it was all a creation of the All Mighty! As we shall be made wiser in a few moments, the BJP will help make it even more dynamic, within the limit of the velocity of light.

Mathematics tells us that between any two numbers there is an infinity of numbers. So, between any two castes a large number of castes can be accommodated at ease. And in India there is a huge demand, we have just seen, for caste upgradation at different levels. The Sangh parivar has long been active in this field as supplier of the required facilities. The historical source of the Sangh parivar is traced to the Arya Samaj founded in 1875 in Punjab by Dayandanda Saraswati, as Sanskrit scholar. Opposed to certain aspects of caste system, idolatry and prevalent rituals, the Arya Samaj was strongly revivalist and proselytizing. Dayananda went about reorganizing Hinduism around a canonization of the Vedas. A crucial instrument to this end was the suddhi movement, a movement for purification of the faith. From the 1880s on the Aray Samaj established a system of educational institutions all over north India: Dayananda Anglo-Vedic (DAV) colleges where English was the medium of instruction. A sanskritised 'pure' Hindi was promoted in educational work with a view to making it a common national language. At the turn of the century the first regular Hindi magazines appeared, college curricula in Hindi were drafted and Madan Mohan Malaviya provoked by the inauguration of Aligarh Muslim University in 1898, initiated a protracted campaign for a Hindu university with Hindi as the sole medium of instruction. In 1915 Benaras Hindu University came into existence and it became a central point in the movement for making Hindi a national language.

The Arya Samaj promoted eradication of traditional caste identities defined by birth and suggested a caste system based on virtue and merit which in principle would be open to all. In spite of such radical postures the project remained largely conservative in its implications. The critique was aimed only at the immobility of the caste system, its brahminical orthodoxy and its exclusion of lower caste groups. But neither the hierarchical structure of caste nor the essential virtues and character ascribed to each varna and caste was questioned [Hansen 1999:74].

The Hindu Mahasabha, formed in 1915 with a view to galvanize the Hindu

community into a political unit capable of representing 'Hindu interests', initially functioned as one of the interest groups inside the Congress Party. With Sarvakar at the helm it became an independent force during the 1920s. There developed a symbiotic relationship between the Mahasabha and the Araya Samaj with double membership and an emerging ideological unity. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) arrived in 1925 to operate on the cultural front. Hedgewar, the founder, envisaged a synthesis of Arya samaj idealism and organizational strength. Throughout the 1930s the RSS maintained close relations with the Hindu Mahasabha for ideology and inspiration. Then under the leadership of Golwalkar, the RSS moved away from politics to concentrate on radical strategy of creating a brahminical RSS culture, a Bharat Mata in miniature, which by its example and high moral stature would gradually transform norms and habits of the larger society. During the 1940s the RSS became the most powerful Hindu nationalist organization in the country. One of the most important branches of the Sangh parivar, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), was established in 1964 to provide a bridge between the religious organizations and the RSS. Its objective was to consolidate Hindu society. It represented a continuation of the efforts of the 1920s to produce a Hindu nation through construction of rashtra mandirs and an all encompassing catholic national Hinduism overriding divisions of sect and caste. Several of the leading gurus of VHP have a background in the Arya Samaj, Hindu Mahasabha, Ramakrishna Mission, and other organizations that sponsor a 'nationalized' modern Hinduism – 'adapted to the modern age' - remains one of the very significant activities of VHP, it started as early as 1966 with the First International Conference in Allahabad. A broader activist line was adopted in the early 1970s when the VHP more systematically entered the field of social welfare with schools, medical centers, and hostels all over the country. Another important and widespread activity carried out under the auspices of the VHP is the Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram set up 1966 as a combined center of social work and (re-)conversion. It runs a large number of ashrams, schools, colleges, medical facilities, as well as hostels and scholarship programs for tribals. The Sangh parivar has several other members in its family such as the Sevika samity, the Durga Bahini, and the Patit Pawan.

The ancestry of BJP goes back to the Hindu Mahasabha and the RSS. It is the political front of the Sangh parivar, a vast network – a one-stop shopping mall – that can entertain one from cradle to grave in all spheres, social, political economic. There is nothing like it anywhere else in the world. Clearly, Congress is no match for the BJP in this.

V P Singh once commented in a television interview that the 'mandal' (implementation of Mandal Commission recommendations) would enter the 'kamandal' (a small sacred pot of holy water used in rituals by holy men, a symbolic reference to the BJP) and break it. But he was wrong. A cushy job, a little bundle of money from the land, or a few extra rupees from some trade, does not meet one's appetite, rather it whips it up. Some lucky people, no doubt have seen the faces of affluence; now they want higher social status, caste promotion, culture, in a word, sanskritisation. They will flock to the BJP. Congress has nothing to offer them; it never had.

Epilogue

The Mahatma, all due respect to him, was perhaps too god-like to the point of naivety. He was not simply aware of the failings of the ordinary people like us; he did not realize that it is not enough just to accept as legitimate and tolerate all religions. There is a set of annoying details for our daily existence in society. Where would, say, a Hindu weaver place a Muslim fruit-seller in the social matrix for measuring the corresponding respect due him? There is no answer to such a day-to-day question which is, to be sure, of vital importance for living in a village. So long as the society remains a collection of disparate communities with hard boundary-lines and varying internal hierarchies this problem of translation and evaluation would haunt a common man. It follows that the society of Gandhiji's dream was just that, a dream, not viable in theory or practice. On the other hand, for the Nehru-Gandhi Congress of today such questions are too theoretical, too abstract and philosophical; it has no time or inclination for such things. For it, efforts are more profitably spent in playing games with social divisions.

The basic model of BJP seems to have the virtue of logical consistency, but its premises are open to serious doubt. To take one example, Sarvakar evidently believes in the Darwinian concept of natural selection: struggle for existence and survival of the fittest. He says: "men, groups and races [are] in the process of consolidation under the stern law of nature, to get forged into that larger existence on the anvil of war through struggle and sacrifice. Those alone who can stand this fierce ordeal will prove their fitness, not only the moral but even the physical fitness that entitles races and types to survive in this world" [Sarvakar 1925;xii, cited in Hansen 1999: 79]. Now caste is based on endogamy and we have seen above that new castes are being born with even as few as 666 members. Endogamy within such tiny groups will be biologically injurious to the groups themselves and the species as a whole. For Darwin (1859:95) writes: "I have collected so large a body of facts, and made so many experiments, showing in accordance with almost universal belief of breeder, that with animals and plants a cross between different varieties, or between individuals of the same variety but of another strain, gives vigor and fertility to the offspring: and on the other hand, that *close* interbreeding diminishes vigor and fertility' (emphasis in the original). If this Darwinian 'general law of nature' holds for human beings, then endogamy by caste might have been very harmful to the vigor and fertility of the Hindus, which might be hard to recover by physical exercise and drill in khaki shorts.

No matter what happens to economy at large, there are always some people who will somehow get a lot of money. Almost all of them will seek caste promotion, and mathematically there is not a problem in accommodating their demand even if it is almost infinite. Between any two points on a line there is an infinity of points; in a multi-dimensional sphere the scope is even wider. The Sangh parivar will continue to have a busy schedule of performing sanskritisation. The BJP is here to stay for a while, at least.

The preamble to the Hindu Declaration of Human Rights (drafted in Sanskrit and not yet available in its official English version) goes as follows: "A Hindu is like any other human being, only more so, wherefore all human beings possess the following rights as they are all the children of the Earth and descended from Manu and possess rationality and morality in common" (pioneer, June 17, 1995, cited in Hansen 1999). But as far as we know, in a democracy no one is allowed to be 'only more so', it violates the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted and proclaimed by the United Nations, December 10, 1948. Such a discrimination is not grounded in the Hindu ethos of the Vedic era, either.

Yet the BJP is likely to have a tremendous appeal to the Hindu masses, all eager for sanskritisation. Not too long ago you heard a chorus of lambs: Indira is India. Expect soon a kirtan of hanumans: India is Hindia.

Notes

1. By contrast there are models of partial equilibrium. Among several brands of this category that are making rounds in India nowadays let us briefly mention three for clarity. One may be called the 'imagining' school, in which the starting point is 'imagination' of a novelist, poet, or bard. A community's identity, aspirations and evolution are all in someone's imagination, and they unfold through diffusion via communication media such as folklore, books or stage performance. A second one may be called the 'dalit' school which puts the political action of traditionally oppressed groups such as the scheduled castes (14.6 percent of total population) at the heart of the current dynamics of India. Third, there is the 'middle' school where it is the middle class of India that hold the key to almost everything. It is our cardinal axiom that the mode of production by and large shapes the consciousness, rather than the other way around.
2. Almost all religious communities have 'castes' in one form or another [Dumont 1966:201-12]. The Hindu caste system is most rigid in that it is anchored on the doctrines of 'Karma' and rebirth. Caste system in other communities are mostly non-hereditary, and fairly permissive. Let us emphasize here that the Hindu caste system does not have the approval of the Vedas; it originated in the later-day Upanishads coinciding with the rise of private property.
3. In ancient times foreign tribes had been absorbed into the Hindu society. "Hindu leaders accepted primitive societies and foreign settlers such as the Greeks and the Scythians into the Hindu fold and recognized their priestly families as brahmins and their fighting men as kshatriyas" [Radhakrishna 1940:357]. Great invaders such as the Saks (Scythians) the Yavanas (Greeks) and the Pahalavas (Parthians), and the Kushans were accepted as Hindus without hesitation. Much later a reaction against the 'savages from the central

Asian steppes' set in, especially after the tribes of Huns were taken over into Hinduism, and an unusually strong disinclination to intermarriage grew. At the moment, however, we are not talking about something like an invasion by the Huns.

4. Sen (1968:110) has concluded: "The Ambar Charka program is inflationary and is also likely to affect capital accumulation adversely. Far from creating any flow of surplus, it produces a flow of output value less than even its recurring costs. For the Ambar Charka to have no inflationary results and no recurring adverse effect on the national capital stock the workers would have to be paid Re 0-1-8 (less than two pence) per 8 hour day, which is quite absurd. As a technological possibility, the Ambar Charka seems to offer very little. "These results were initially published in a note in the Economic Weekly, October 19, 1957.
5. Sen (1980:447) is amused at the ambiguity of language: The phrase 'weaker section of the Indian population' "has not been descriptively very illuminating. As it happens, people drawn from this 'weaker section of the Indian population' do the heavy work in India, varying from breaking stones and bending iron to carrying heavy loads on their heads."
6. For a few months there was confusion about the exact number of points in the prime ministers program. Initially it was declared to be 21 point program, then the bureaucracy in the prime minister's office discovered to their horror that the last paragraph in the script of her radio address to the nation proclaiming the momentous program consisted only 'Jai Hind', which was not really a plan or a development project for the uplift of the weaker section. So the number was duly revised down to a round number 20.
7. In April 1985, the Supreme Court of India in a judgement had allowed a Muslim divorcee, Shah Bano, maintenance for life from the former husband. The Rajiv Gandhi government enacted a law in May 1986 that in effect, overturned the Supreme Court verdict.

Why did the BJP Succeed?

K.N. Panikkar

A fractured mandate again, even if the National Democratic Alliance led by the Bharatiya Janata Party has mustered enough support to form a government. No single party has got a majority, either in terms of votes or seats. While the BJP has just about maintained its earlier strength, the Congress has further declined. The communist party (Marxist) has barely held on to its seat share on its last election. Only the regional parties have managed to improve their position, whatever may be the reasons for the same. The Telugu Desam Party in Andhra Pradesh, Dravida Munedra Kazhakam in Tamil Nadu, Samajvadi Party and Bhajun Samaj Party in Utter Pradesh and Biju Janta Dal in Orissa, who jointly account for more than hundred seats are the prominent among them. The opinion voiced by some during the election analysis that this election reflects polarization of political forces and India is moving towards a bipolar system is far from the truth. In fact, the two main parties, the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Congress together account for about three hundred seats. The rest almost two hundred and fifty seats are in the kitty of smaller regional parties.

The BJP's success in this election is mainly due to its coalition strategy. After the election of 1996, it was generally held that the era of a single party government is over and the future lies with coalition based on reconfiguration of political forces. The only party which appears to have taken this situation seriously is the BJP. Given its communal ideological commitment and its active participation in the demolition of Babri Majid the BJP was not able to gather enough support to rain in power in 1996. As L.K. Advani recently confessed, the BJP then realized that it can't come to power with out incorporating the regional parties into its support base. It therefore cobbled up an alliance of eighteen parties in 1998 and twenty-four in 1999, although they had nothing in common ideologically and programmatically – by putting on the backburner its controversial Hindutva agenda. This strategy has yielded rich dividends in this election and the NDA has managed to gain a comfortable majority, thanks to the performance of the allies. More than one-third of the seats of the NDA is their contribution, most of them in single digit. Rather than the charisma of Atal Behare Vajpayee it is the Vikos, Ramadaosses, Chautalas and Abdullas who have made the success of the BJP possible. The critics of the BJP, particularly of the Left and secular, might decry this opportunist strategy, but for the BJP the proof of the pudding is in eating it. The BJP leadership has shown enough resilience to compromise the present to ensure the future.

In contrast the Congress refused to come to terms with the present instead it chose to cling to the past. It suffered from an exaggerated sense of self-importance and a misplaced trust in its nationalist legacy. It failed to realize that except in a few states the party machinery has corroded, no leadership worth the name existed and that its social base has considerably shrunk. These can hardly be recreated overnight as evidenced by the present results. The sympathetic crowds, which thronged the meetings of Sonia Gandhi, were not translated into votes primarily because the party did not have the machinery to do so. Some of its good candidates like Manmohan Singh in Delhi lost to relatively insignificant nominees of the BJP.

Unlike the BJP the Congress wrongly read the political present. It actually lost the election when it failed to provide an alternative after the fall of the BJP government. This failure is mainly due to miscalculation of its potential. The only way the Congress could have made a come back was through a coalition government for which several political formation had pledged support. Without seriously pursuing it and declining support to a Left led Government the Congress insisted on a single party government, failing which it opted for an election. The unexpected and impressive success in the assembly election in Delhi, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh was perhaps the main factor, which influenced this rather intransigent and politically unwise decision. The Congress thus lost an opportunity to bring the secular forces together. As a consequence the Congress faced the election without any allies, except the highly tainted parties like the AIADMK and RJD which instead of advancing its electoral prospects proved to be counter productive. Given the quick changes of government due to the failure of coalition the Congress hoped to romp home on the plank of stability and single party rule. But a party riven with dissension and desertion could not enthuse such a confidence in the electorate. What actually sealed the fate of the Congress was the lack of allies in a fractured polity in which small parties wielded decisive power in several areas. Many of them are individual based parties without any clear cut ideological moorings and therefore could be part of any political formation. While the BJP went out of its way to mop them up the Congress did not try to bring even the like minded parties to its fold.

The success of BJP to a large measure is rooted in the failure of the third front to posit a viable alternative to both the Congress and the BJP at the national level. Much before the elections the third front had already disintegrated. The united front experiment of 1996 was short lived. Its demise was largely pre-determined by the 'historic blunder' of the Left not accepting the prime ministership and was hastened by the infighting among the constituents of the front. The BJP's grand design of coalition took shape from the ashes of the United Front. But for that it would not have progressed much farther than the 1996 position. Ironically the third front committed to defeat Hindu communalism has actually facilitated its success.

Yet the third front still commands a political space as evident from the outcome of this election. The former partners of the third front, now dispersed in different camps

have done exceptionally well. Most of them like TDP, DMK, SP and RJD have gained success on their own strength and not riding piggyback either on the BJP or the Congress. If anything, the latter have gained from the influence of the former. For instance, but for the support of TDP and DMK the BJP would have drawn almost a blank in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. The election therefore affords an important lesson: the mobilization of Left secular democratic forces is still possible, provided there is a will to do so.

The Sangh School of Falsification

Praful Bidwai, Frontline

Whenever the Sangh Parivar is criticized for its sectarian intolerance and bigotry on the basis of facts, it resorts to slander and personal attack. Its treatment of *Communalism Combat* is the latest example.

However one assesses Atal Behari Vajpayee's record – and this column admittedly takes a dim view – it is undeniable that the Bharatiya Janata Party is pursuing a much larger agenda than what is contained in the National Democratic Alliance's (NDA) shoddily drafted, slogan-oriented, manifesto, "For a Proud, Prosperous India". As its own leaders have unabashedly said, the BJP is guided by a certain vision of India, which goes far, far beyond this policy or program, this or that tactic or manoeuvre. This vision encompasses more than the mandir-Article 370-uniform civil code "trishul", which the BJP says it has for the time being put in abeyance, but which it also keeps raking up. Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) chieftain Rajendra Singh is the latest to revive the nasty demand that Muslims should hand over the Ayodhya, Mathura and Kashi "temples" to Hindus. Parivar leaders have been raising these issues through out the past month.

The RSS-BJP vision, with its unique coherence, is that of a primarily Hindu India, resurgent after centuries of "foreign domination", an India fiercely nationalist, strong, in keeping with a tradition going back, according to its upholder, all the way to the vedic period. Whether this vision is called "cultural nationalism", civilisational patriotism, or plain Hindutva, it radically differs from our liberal, secular, pluralist Constitution. Its emphasis on hierarchical Hinduism, and on a puritanical interpretation of its texts, provokes understandable fears about Hindutva attitudes to issues relating to Dalits, adivasis, women, family, education, morality, knowledge, science and culture. After all, *sanatanism* has retrograde positions on all these matters.

No wonder social activists, as distinct from political leaders, have voiced such fears and concerns and often warned the larger public of the Hindutva menace and associated politics.

The latest example of such a civil society or non-governmental initiative is the public education campaign launched by *Communalism Combat*, a Mumbai-based magazine,

in the form of a series of 10 newspaper advertisements. These make a scathing critique of the BJP's claim to being "normal", tolerant or democratic. The campaign systematically demolishes a number of myths about Vajpayee, the RSS and the BJP. It cites unimpeachable facts – mostly their own quotes to back its contentions. It ruthlessly exposes the BJP to be a party of bigots, male supremacists, rabid casteists, who are against non-Hindus, indeed against Hindus at the lower rungs of the social hierarchy. The BJP emerges as a party that is so cynical in pursuing power that it can communalise the armed forces. It lavishes undeserved concessions on its cronies and is supremely indifferent to the masses. It is a threat to all that is healthy and valuable in Indian society. The *Combat* campaign has been effective at least partly because it fights the BJP on the favorable terrain of the mainstream national media, with its predilection (for the most part) for soft Hindutva, and its fear of attacking the BJP, especially after it has bestowed such favors as FM radio channels upon it, and used questionable methods to pressure it. *Combat* does not hide the fact that the space bought is "sponsored", presumably by anti-BJP political and business interests. Such sponsorship may not be to everybody's taste: many non-governmental organizations hesitate to accept it. But few would deny that the campaign has bite: Rajendra Singh could not have relished being reminded that he called Gandhi-assassin Godse's intentions "good" and "motivated by the idea of Akhand Bharat". Nor can Vajpayee deny that he said "the Sangh is my soul" and that he wrote to the colonial government denying that he played an active role in the 1942 Quit India Movement.

Combat is especially devastating on the Sangh's vile anti-women attitudes. It cites BJP vice president Vijayaraje Scindia's defence of *sati* (1987), Mahila Morcha president Mridula Sinha's rationalization of wife-beating and dowry (1983), and the recent beating up of an 18-year-old college student for raising a question during Vajpayee rally in Muzaffarnagar. *Combat* involved a number of women's organizations such as the Forum against the Oppression of Women, Manushi, Kali for Women, Ankur and Women's Centre's (Bombay) in this campaign.

The *Combat* advertisements have stung the Parivar hard. But rather than factually disprove its well-substantiated charges, the Parivar has characteristically launched a personal, *ad hominem* attack on *Combat Communalism's* editors and Admiral Vishnu Bhagwat who it claims is on the board of directors of the magazine. The RSS mouthpiece, *Panchajanya* (September 12) carries vividly captioned "interviews" with, or quotations from, senior journalists like The Indian Express Shekhar Gupta, and The Times of India's Dileep Padgaonkar, to create the semblance that they agree with the Sangh Privars tendentious charges against *Combat*. On close examination, it turns out that unlike hard-line *sanghis*, for example, Chandan Mitra, Kanchan Gupta, and N.K. Trikha, these journalists have refused to comment on the advertisements.

Panchajanya fails to answer even one of *Combat*'s 20-odd charges in its two page feature, but instead maliciously say that the magazine is financed by shady interests. It questions *Combat*'s credentials: an organization with out "address", and so on. But this is hardly more relevant than the provenance of the Parivar's own finances, some of which remain mired in either mystery or in North America. *Panchajanya*'s profile of *Communalism Combat* and its parent Sabrang Communications, is that they are dark, semi-secret, "anti-Hindu" and "anti-national" organizations devoted to destroying communal harmony and hence deserving of attack. (Such profiles have been used in the past to provoke Parivar fanatics into attack or abuse.) Remarkably, it is joined in this by the Samata Party's Jaya Jaitley who adds her own anti-Bhagavat angle to the slander.

Now, *Combat* editors Javed Anand and Teesta Setalvad are both seasoned journalists. Anand was a staffer with *The Observer* group, and Setalvad broke one infamous story about the Bombay police's partisan role during the January 1993 riots, publishing transcripts of a conversation in which an officer asks his men not to rescue Muslims from a devastating fire started by the Shiv Sena. According to them, the *Panchajanya* feature is substantially wrong. Admiral Bhagwat is not a director of *Combat* or Sabrang. And the *Combat* motto is "Hate Hurts, Harmony Works".

Vilification of secularists, based on willful falsification, is an old, well-rehearsed, parivar tactic. It has repeatedly used it in its desperate attempts to muzzle and malign individuals. I speak from personal experience too. *Organizer* and *Panchajanya* have repeatedly attacked me. An example of this Sangh School of falsification is their campaign in 1991, at the height of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, when I was Senior Editor with *Times of India*. On February 9 that year, I participated in a panel discussion organized by a small cultural organization, Jana Sanskriti, in New Delhi, along with Professor K.N. Panikar, Gyanendra Pandey and C.P. Bhambri, and Justice P. Subramaniam Poti.

I sharply criticized the anti-Babri mosque campaign as majoritarian, hate-driven and against the very foundations of India's secular-democratic-constitutional order. I said its leaders must be dealt with firmly in accordance with the law and prevented from spreading hatred. Several news papers reported my remarks. *Patriot* distorted them, its reporter adding his own twist that Parivar leaders must be "disciplined to the point of being killed". *Organiser* seized on this, and, without checking with me or Jana Sanskriti, flashed the front-page headline: "Times editor's *fatwa* to kill BJP men."

The story falsely linked the then Times editor Dileep Padgaonkar (alleging he too had "railed against" the *Organiser* on television) to the panel discussion and baselessly alleged that this was part of a larger plot: "Observers wonder whether the messianic zeal of the Times men is goaded... by their... proprietors' business interests in the Gulf countries and Pakistan...". It accused me of having "taken to public forums to preach murder against BJP 'obscurantists'... (and demanding) that BJP should be prevented from contesting elections..." This was a pure fabrication. The *Organiser* also equated secularists with "Islamic fundamentalists".

I was appalled. I published a clarification in *Patriot* on April 3, carried without comment or rebuttal. Padgaonkar sent a letter to *Organiser* refuting the malicious allegations against himself and me which the journal published with a vile editorial "Leftist Gunners", which further compounded its error. It refused to publish a clarification from Prof. Panikkar and Justice Poti. Meanwhile, a number of scholars and writers launched a signature drive. It said the *Organiser's* attacks are "irresponsible and odious", and reminiscent of "witchhunts and campaigns of character assassination" aimed at muzzling "critical voices". "Distressingly Mr. Bidwai and others have received several physical threats and abusive calls too. No one who claims to believe in democracy and freedom of expression can condone such intimidation," it said.

The letter was signed by eminent persons, including Romila Thapar, Rajni Kothari, S. Gopal, Bipan Chandra, Prabhat Patnaik, L.C. Jain, Justice V.R. Krishna Iyer, Swami Agnivesh and Bhisham Sahni, Anil Agarwal, Lotika Sarkar, Madhu Kishwar, Habib Tanveer, Vivan Sundaram and several other teachers and citizens. Instead of publishing it and apologizing, *Organiser* maliciously claimed that the letter was "a fraudulent document" and a "forgery" – merely because the copy sent to it had some overlapping signature, common in repeatedly photocopied circular letters.

This was exasperating. A manufactured story was published to malign someone. When 22 people of eminence protest against it, the letter is declared a "forgery". This would put to shame even the likes of Goebbels. Against such falsification, there is no defense – barring perhaps a prolonged criminal case. Such methods bear testimony to the fanaticism of the Parivar, and its paranoia about independently minded mediapersons and secular scholars.

There is a special edge to the calumny being hurled at *Communalism Combat* today. The BJP is no longer sure that it can pull off a victory in the elections. Its twin tactic of exploiting Kargil and attacking Sonia Gandhi on the issue of "foreign origins" has not worked. The party is only left with the rather shop-worn appeal of Vajpayee's "image" which is confined to the upper middle class, which does not count much for numbers. Campaigns like *Combat's* undermine even that appeal. They carry a special weight because they are not directly launched by the BJP's party-political opponents.

The BJP has a huge stake in the present election. If it performs worse than it did last year, with say 20 to 40 seats less, its claim to lead the NDA decisively and hegemonically will be weakened. It is not good if the NDA does better than in 1998. To call the shots the BJP itself has to do better. Anything less would give it the image of a declining force – no longer unstoppable in the decade-long "forward march". Parties like the BJP need the upbeat image for the "bandwagon" effect: many people vote for extreme right-wing forces because they are in the ascendant. If this changes, the BJP stand to lose more than just seats.

No wonder the BJP's campaign is a full-throttle, maximalist, no-holds-barred one. It is leaving nothing to chance. Unlike the Congress, which for a while fumbled, and made many tactical mistakes, the BJP has conducted itself in a planned, organized, purposive, manner. It can accept failure – indeed anything other than a big victory – only with the greatest of difficulty and with the least grace. What is on test is not only the party's appeal, but its will to power.

That is precisely why the BJP has polarized the political situation, packing educational institutions breaching electoral norms, shamelessly trying to politicize the armed forces, and resorting to slander. In some respects, it has followed a political scorched-earth policy, doing many things on the assumption that it might not return to power. The BJP's legacy translates into a terrible choice for its successor, which will be called upon to dismantle the damage that the communalists have done – in ways that (wrongly) look like replicating the same methods. This culture of confrontation is not exactly what India needs, but there may be no alternative to it if Hindutva's soldiers battle on in their utterly unscrupulous ways.

The choice that confronts the Indian voter is in some ways simple, even stark: either a politics based on Paranoia, calumny, half-truths and lies – necessary to sustain a hateful exclusion-, or an inclusive, pluralist, secular and democratic politics that believes in healing social rifts, in caring and shaping, in building a humane future for our people.

Saffron Terror

Praful Bidwai, Mid Day

The barbaric killing of Catholic priest Father Arul Doss in western Orissa is a black mark on Indian society and its claim to be tolerant, even civilized. That it happened a week after the murder of Sheikh Rehman, and within eight months of the burning of Rev. Graham Staines point to growing communal terror in Orissa. It may only be coincidence that Doss was killed on the eve of Janmashthami, Rehman on Raksha Bandhan day, and Stianes during Saraswati Puja. What is definitely not coincidental is the Hindutva inspiration behind the murders.

It is wrong to lay the blame mainly on the Orissa Government. It must of course, be condemned for the inefficiency, lack of coordination between the Mayurbhanj and Keonjhar police, and failure to apprehend suspect Dara Singh. But this must not be confused with the causative agency behind the killings – the Sangh Privar with its rabid anti-minority ideology and organization. The Orissa unit of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP claimed that Doss was killed because he was "an outsider, he had habits which local tribals didn't like." Its official statement did not regret the ghastly killing, but rationalized it as the Adivasis' resentment over "interference in their cultural life".

The BJP accuses Doss of having built a popular base among Adivasis. Yet it claims the same Adivasis killed him. Worse, it justifies the murder because Doss was "an outsider." This speaks of fascist xenophobia. Orissa DGP DK Mahapatra did himself no credit by saying Doss was killed because he practiced religious conversion. As DGP, Mahapatra's job is not to make academic analyses of the causes of crime, so much as to control it. It's a pity the Election Commission stayed his transfer. This will not embolden Orissa's terrorized public. It bears recalling that only one of the 300 who watched Rehman's daylight killing agreed to stand witness.

Behind the communal prejudice in Orissa was the misplaced view that religious conversion – church's main preoccupation – is semi-legal or illegal. In reality the church is involved in running schools, colleges, hospitals and community centers. Religious instruction is only a minor component of its agenda. The right of religious conversion derives from the freedom to "practice and propagate" one's faith, a fundamental right, itself part of the unalterable "basic structure" of the constitution. Those who rail against "forcible conversions" to "alien" faiths are either confusing

today's (marginal) phenomenon with early colonial practices in Goa or Mangalore, or elitistically arrogating to themselves the right to decide what's best for the "unwashed" masses who don't know they are being "duped".

Never mind who kept them "unwashed" and "ignorant" for centuries! Or that they don't complain of coercive conversion! It is hard to argue that the fundamental right to proselytize be restricted. Nor are India's religious minorities "outsiders". Christianity in India is centuries older than Christianity in Europe. Kerala's Christians embraced their faith 800 years before Brahminical Hinduism was born. Indian Islam evolved through rich interaction with many faiths and cultures and is as integral to Indian society as Hinduism. As for the way "indigenous" faiths like Buddhism or Jainism were banished and persecuted by casteist Hindus the less said the better.

A truly attractive feature of most South Asian societies is that they have no permanent "outsiders". They have generally been open, porous and compellingly plural, and respect a multiplicity of faiths. There is a healthy kernel from the past which we can build on. Our modernist-secular constitutions mandate just this. Forces like the Sangh Parivar oppose this with false notions of homogeneity, "unity", uniformity, suppression of difference – in the name of national glory. Such notions trample upon minority rights by invoking the majority. This is not democracy. It is majoritarianism. Democracy is about the rule of the majority, but this is not a permanent majority, based upon religion or ethnicity but a changing entity, pertinent to issues. Democracy is about universal rights and freedoms. In their absence, majority rule can become authoritarian.

Minorities are vital to democracies. As Gandhiji often said, the real test of a civilized society is not how it treats its majority, but how it treats its minorities. Harassment and intimidation of minorities speaks of a democracy's poverty. To put this in the language of modern ethics, the litmus test of fairness is to ask not how a democracy's average or privileged members function, but how well-treated its underprivileged and weak feel. On this principle, the security of the minorities become absolutely crucial. It cannot be compromised. That is precisely what the Sangh Parivar has done.

The past 17 months were marked by unprecedented communal insecurity, attacks on artists (M F Husain, Ghulam Ali and Dilip Kumar), frenzied activity to complete a prefabricated Ram temple, and attempts to communalise defense and national identity. The BJP promised there would be no communal riots; we had them in Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu. The BJP said minorities have nothing to fear from "tolerant" Hindutva. After the Wadhwa commission cover-up, it justifies their butchery. L K Advani, the self-proclaimed guardian of the nation, promised a white paper on the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and its "subversive" local collaborators. It is nowhere to be seen.

Today's communalised situation is a direct consequence of Hindutva prejudice, hatred and resort to deceit and violence. The election campaign, and the low poll turnout,

shows the BJP has failed to drum up a wave or enthuse supporters. It has little to offer. So it is cynically sowing prejudice and hatred.

Hidden and Not so Hidden

K N Panikkar

The Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) bid to capture power in the current election is based on a dual political strategy: first, to distance itself from the militant postures of other members of the Sangh Parivar and secondly, to project its prime ministerial candidate Atal Behari Vajpayee as a humanist and a liberal. This strategy has yielded rich dividends; the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) was made possible by this obfuscation, both of the character of the party and the ideological commitment of its leader.

Some of the alliance partners who treated the BJP as a pariah in 1996 now testify to its changed character. They also see Vajpayee's virtues, whatever they are, as unparalleled in the history of India's political leadership.

In the past the BJP's political campaign drew upon three main issues: Ram Janmabhoomi, common civil code and Article 370. In the campaign for the *mandir*, the leaders of the BJP, all of whom are members of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), were in the forefront.

In fact, it was Union Home Minister L K Advani, who through his infamous *rath yatra*, which left behind in its trail the dead victims of the communal passion he had aroused, imparted a real momentum to the *Mandir movement*.

The commitment of the BJP leadership to the construction of the temple was never in doubt. They were all present, including the 'liberal' Vajpayee, and some of them had danced in wild abandon, when the mosque was demolished. They were equally passionate about the enactment of a common civil code and the abolition of Article 370.

However, these contentious issues do not find a place in the national agenda of the NDA. Nor do they form the main planks of the election campaign. Given the contradictions within the NDA and the social base of some of its allies, the BJP was forced to make such a compromise for the sake of gaining immediate political power.

It is pragmatism, term it, if you like, political opportunism. And decidedly not the

principled stand of a party which prided in its ideological purity. Nevertheless, neither the BJP nor the other members of the Parivar have actually abandoned these issues. On the contrary they are being actively pursued.

Take the case of the *mandir*, for instance. The construction of the *mandir* is a project of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP). And it is unmistakably at it.

In fact, the temple is being ‘prefabricated’ in Rajasthan for its eventual construction in Ayodhya. The BJP leaders are privy to it. In fact, there is no ambiguity about their attitude. They have reiterated times out of number of their commitment to the Parivar’s agenda and that they are only waiting for an opportune moment to implement it, that is when the BJP gets an absolute majority in the Parliament.

This agenda is not any more hidden from any one. It is openly advocated and pursued by almost everyone in the Parivar – from Vajpayee and Advani to Uma Bharati and Vinay Katiyar.

But the issues like the Ram Janmabhoomi and the common civil code do not constitute the Parivars’ real and hidden agenda. They are only incidental to a large project – transformation of secular India into a Hindu state. That in fact is the hidden agenda. The BJP government secretly and surreptitiously pursued it during the last 13 months of its rule. This is an agenda that the RSS had conceived and elaborated during the last 75 years. And the BJP, it is no secret, is the political arm of the RSS and while in power worked in close collaboration with it. The RSS laid down the rules. Gave directives and the government implemented them, Ramakrishna Hegdes, Chandrababu Naidus and George Fernadeses feigned ignorance.

The program of the RSS is essentially cultural and ideological with a long-term perspective. In the past they have pursued it silently by setting up institutions and organizations and using them as channels for the creation of communal consciousness in civil society.

Education has been particularly important area. By now they have set up about 20,000 schools under different denominations. The Human Resources Development Ministry under the stewardship of RSS stalwart Murli Manohar Joshi, tried to mould the national education on the RSS lines.

A scheme for effecting this transformation was actually prepared by an RSS activist and presented to the state education ministers. It defined India as Hindu, Indian culture and civilization as Hindu and in fact sought to privilege the Hindu in all spheres. If Joshi had succeeded in implementing it, it would have been a major step in transforming India as Hindu.

Complementary to this is the attempt to change the character of Indian polity. The BJP rule has consistently tried to undermine the democratic institutions of the country.

Its leaders have not spared even the President. The 'liberal' Vajpayee has publicly criticized the President for upholding democratic traditions. In fact, the BJP wants to change the secular democratic character of the constitution and possibly, if the VHP leader Swamy Vamadev is to be believed create a Hindu and authoritarian constitution. There is thus a hidden agenda which is communal, anti-democratic and fascist.

However, the BJP's political base is not wide enough now to realize such an agenda. It is therefore necessary to conceal it in the garb of national agenda legitimized by parties and individuals with a secular and democratic past.

For those who are prepared to learn from the tactics of the fascists elsewhere, it would be clear that these crutches are only temporary and would be discarded once the transitional phase is over. The BJP stand for all that the Parivar represents – its intolerance, communal ideology and violent methods. That it is different from the other members of the saffron brigade is a myth, purposely created and propagated. And Vajpayee is its leader whose studied innocence and moderation is nothing but pretense. He is as much communal, anti-democratic and anti-humanist as any other leader of the BJP or Shiv Sena.

Positive Verdict

Editorial, Economic and Political Weekly

The major outcome of the elections to the Lok Sabha and the assemblies in a few states can be summed up as the prospect of a relatively stable government at the center, the strengthening of centrist politics and federal tendencies as compared to before the elections, the relative decline of identity politics and the beginning of a paradigm shift in Indian politics towards renewed focus on governance and development.

BJP-led National Democratic Alliance, along with the two allies who prefer to stay outside the alliance, the Telugu Desam Party and the Trinamul Congress, have a combined majority of 24 in the Lok Sabha of 543. There is a possibility of this lead going up when elections are held to the four constituencies where polling had to be deferred on account of floods. This insulates the government from blackmail by small constituents of the coalition. The Indian National Lok Dal, for example, has not seen any point in following up its demand for rolling back the recent diesel price hike with a threat to withdraw support if the demand was turned down. Only the Telugu Deasm is in a position to reduce the government to a minority on its own. The fact that it has chosen not to join the government but prefers to extend support from outside, instead of impairing the prospects of stability, actually strengthens them. This is because TDP leader Chandrababu Naidu's decision to keep his exit door firmly open would act as a restraint on the most potent source of instability for the government: the aspirations of the Hindu organizations which have links of varying closeness with the BJP.

The RSS, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Bajarang Dal and other organizations championing hindutva are happy that the BJP has come back to power. But given that the BJP's strength in the house remains static at 182 and it is dependent more than ever on the continued support of its allies, these organizations are deprived of the freedom to aggressively pursue their communal agenda. Except for the Shiv Sena, all the BJP's allies have a secular outlook and value the support of non-Hindu voters. If the Hindu organizations misbehave and the BJP-led central government refuses to act, the coalition is likely to collapse. The BJP as much as the Hindu organizations cannot but be acutely aware of this vulnerability. This is likely to deter adventurism on the latter's part.

Differences of opinion on basic policies is unlikely to wreck the BJP-led coalition because, except in regard to secularism and nuclear weapons, there is a virtual consensus among the major political parties, inside and outside the NDA. Differences on nuclear weapon policies are minor within the coalition.

The one real source of instability is power-sharing. The BJP and its allies have more experience in this now than in the past and have learnt, from the AIADMK's setback in these elections that the electorate does not take kindly to parties that disrupt a government of which they are a part for their own petty ends. If the ruling alliance learn to hold regular consultations among the coalition members on an institutionalized basis and there is no reason why it should not, this ceases to be a problem.

Centrist politics has been given a boost by two developments: the BJP's willingness to evolve away from its sectarian vision and the revival of the Congress. The moratorium declared by the BJP on the controversial demands for a Ram temple at the site of the demolished Babri mosque, a uniform civil code and scrapping of Article 370 is certainly less than renunciation of its erstwhile sectarian world view. At the same time, it is more than a ruse to win votes. The simple fact is that democracy is forcing the BJP to leave its communal agenda behind. And this pressure will remain so long as the vast majority of voters refuse to be communalized. Being hemmed in, within the ruling alliance, by parties with secular moorings and centrist views on most matters make the BJP more of a centrist party than in the past.

The revival of the Congress might be less than apparent, given the steep fall in the party's Lok Sabha tally from 141 in 1998 to 112 in these elections. But it has increased its vote share and commanded the support of 28.4 percent of those who voted in the Lok Sabha election. Of the five states that elected their legislatures alongside the Lok Sabha elections Karnataka and Arunachal Pradesh have gone to the Congress and so can Maharashtra if the party shows a modicum of sense in its dealings with the breakaway group, the Nationalist Congress Party. More significantly, the Congress is back in the reckoning in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar – being out of the race altogether for the 139 Lok Sabha seats from these two states is a handicap that the Congress does not have to worry about any more. Even as appendage to the Nehru dynasty, the party stands to grow further, provided it learns the lesson offered by its come-uppance in Bihar and Tamil Nadu that it is bad politics to rally the corrupt and the incompetent to fight the communal.

Another development that strengthens centrist politics is the clear message from the electorate that the identity politics sans governance has run out of steam. The Asom Gana Parishad in Assam and the RJD in Bihar have been marginalised in these elections. It is not that the RJD has grown any less keen to give voice to the backward castes, chiefly the yadavs, of Bihar or champion the cause of the minorities in that state. But there has been terrible dearth of governance there. And the electorate has punished the party for that as decisively as the electorate of Andhra Pradesh has rewarded the TDP's credible commitment to development. The Samajwadi Party's

gain in seats in UP, albeit with a reduced vote share, and the BSP's advance might seem to disprove the argument that identity politics has weakened. But only so long as two other factors are not taken into consideration. One, both parties have been trying, desperately to widen the social base of their support from the narrow stratum championing whose identity they had risen to initial prominence. Of the BSP's candidate this time, less than half were dalits. The SP has been wooing the upper castes assiduously. Two, both the parties gained additional seats in the course and as a result of the UP electorate's effort to punish Kalyan Singh government for its comprehensive failure to provide governance.

The BJP, of course, has been in a sense the biggest identity party of all. The drubbing it has received in UP – its seats have come down from 57 to 29 – show that three years talk of Ram rajya and hindutva does not compensate for malgovernance of the worst kind. The moratorium declared, at the national level by the BJP on its controversial demands is a moratorium by that party on identity politics. By aligning with the BJP and risking minority votes, were identity politics the principal consideration, Chandrababu Naidu gambled that voters would attach more importance to his commitment to development. And the gamble paid off. The punishment dealt out to parties in office in Karnataka, Orissa, UP, Delhi and Rajasthan in conjunction with the endorsement of good governance in Adhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and even Madhay Pardesh where the Congress's vote share went up even if its tally of seats did not, shows that anti-incumbency is nothing more than a euphemism for the voter's response to bad governance. Let there be no doubt about it – parties have been put on notice; voters want governance first and foremost.

The BJP and the Congress have been chastened on one count. There is no charisma of the central leadership or a single achievement that drives voters across the country to unquestioning support. State level and local level issues decide who will become the Prime Minister. This realization is as significant in strengthening the polity's federal foundations as the dependence of he ruling coalition on the support of a clutch of regional parties.

On the whole, a surprisingly positive denouement for an election that was supposedly devoid of real issues.

Election 99: Winning Was the Easy Part

Mahesh Rangarajan, Economic Times

Now that the elections to the thirteenth Lok Sabha are over and the National Democratic Alliance is home and dry, it is increasingly clear that the real challenges lie ahead and not behind the combine. Mr. Vajpayee's sheer experience and the network of seat-sharing arrangements locked the Congress and its partners out of the race in most states of the Union. For the third time in a row, the Bharatiya Janata Party has emerged as the single largest party in the House, But a closer look indicates that the very factors that propelled it to victory will give rise to problems of political management.

For one no one with less than 220 odd seats in tow has yet survived for more than two years in office. Even if mere endurance in government is not a problem, pulls and pressures from different quarters are. Our polity and certainly the well oiled campaign machinery of the ruling coalition give us the impression that the prime minister is the pivot of the political system. The fact is that compared to say, Indira Gandhi's time the scope and power of the office have shrunk considerably. In the new polity whose contours are only beginning to take clear shape, the center of gravity has shifted away from the Union towards the states.

It is in this respect, a measure of the BJP's far-sightedness, that it has factored the rise of regionalism into its own scheme of things. While the Congress still clings to the idea that one party can speak for all of India, its premier rival is close to the truth. But this admission of reality come with a political price, namely the wider horizons and increased appetite for power on the part of state-based parties. It is here that the trickiest and in a sense the most complex part of governance now lies. The Constitutional edifice and the share of revenues are heavily skewed in favor of the Center, but the direction of popular mandates is in the reverse direction. No major decision can now be taken without taking the states into confidence. The regional parties, especially those allied with the saffron combine are the real winners of the elections. They have increased their representation in the House as a whole as well as within the ruling alliance. In the last Lok Sabha, they accounted for 55-60 seats. In the new legislature they have nearly 80 seats between them.

There are, to be sure, significant overlaps of interest between the national party and its

regional partners. But there is a second dimension to this relationship. Now that the elections are over, there will be bargains to be struck and deals to be closed; these are in themselves no bad things at all. They are the stuff and substance of politics, with multi-party rule bringing in a new level of transparency to the process. But underneath all this will be a struggle to decide who will set the agenda for India, who will be master of the house. Political formations like Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and Mr Chandrababu Naidu's party have no time at all for Hindutva and its agenda. If brought back into the arena, Hindutva would destabilise their states.

Looking ahead, the very growth of Mr Vajpayee's party is bound to open up a conflict with the regional political parties. Only one can grow and often at the other's expense. This is starkly evident in the way in which the real winner of these elections, the chief minister of Andhra Pradesh played hide and seek with the major party on the question of joining the government. Unlike the Janata Dal (United), which has a profusion of leaders and shifting base of support, the regional groups have a unified command structure and a share of power in their own state. They have not demolished the Congress in their home state in order to enthrone the BJP as the new all-India hegemon.

In fact what we are seeing is a race against time as the southern regional groups push for further liberalization of the economy, and more devolution of fiscal powers. In the long run, it will matter less who rules India and matter much more how they coordinate the affairs that concern all the states. This urge for federalization lies at the heart of the victory of the ruling alliance. It is the implicit acknowledgement that all Indians need to creatively work for a more equitable federal system.

There is however a spanner in the works in the very composition of the legislative wing of the major party. A disproportionate number of members come from Hindi-speaking India, especially from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Despite making major gains in the west, a region that leads in economic reforms, several key portfolios are still likely to be given to leaders from the Hindi belt. Even as the slide in the numbers of MPs fighting on the lotus symbol in UP has been halved, gains elsewhere have ensured that the Hindi belt retains primacy within the party. Within this region it is master of the alliance: as you go west, east or south, the sun of the allies shines much brighter.

Unfortunately for Indian politics, the main concerns of politically powerful men and women from Hindi speaking India have less to do with economics of the free market or the socialist variety and more to do with sum of castes and communities. This may be an overly sweeping statement and should be qualified to single out those from the Gangetic plain rather than the other less sparsely populated states, where the picture is more positive. But the turbulence in the two most populous states looks set to continue, posing a challenge easy to identify and difficult to address in the short term.

In the past, both after 1977 and 1989, the main fissures in the non-Congress forces

that were voted to power came in the form of tensions between the Hindutva supporter and their socialist allies. As was the case last year, the latter are now pale shadows of their former selves. The real fulcrum of the system now lies in the regions that have been able to combine economic liberalization with a working social welfare system. It is here that the key to the success of the present alliance lies.

If the alliance stays true to the common agenda, the relationship will endure. But at some point of time, it will draw on the Sangh family, that the pace of change is being set by smaller, tightly knit forces that have a different vision of India, a loose confederation, not a tightly knit union. Until then expect a less bumpy ride.

Vajpayee's off to a false start

Sunil Jain, The Indian Express

Despite the rousing welcome given to it by the sensor and the flurry of announcements about the imminent second generation reforms, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's government appears to be off to yet another unsure start. Much like the last time Vajpayee was in power, the government appears to be fumbling at the start line. If the first few months of its governance were characterized by rolling back of its own policy measures then, this time the leitmotif appears to be the problems of managing too many partners.

It wasn't bad enough to have such a huge cabinet to accommodate all the allies, Vajpayee seems to have made it worse by his proposal to create several brand new ministries and departments within them to accommodate their demands for portfolios. Thus, tribal affairs is to be removed from the ministry of social justice and handed over to another minister. The industry ministry is being carved up into three pieces – one for Murasoli Maran, to handle along with Commerce, and another for Manohar Joshi, and third new one specifically for looking after the small scale sector. Culture is to be spun off into a separate ministry, primary education and literacy is to be made into a separate department. Drinking water is to get another full-fledged secretary, as are ports and highways in the ministry of surface transport.

To be sure, the extra expenditure as a result of this may not be much. More full fledged secretaries, for instance needn't mean fresh promotions, as there are enough bureaucrats who are already ranked as secretary but have no independent charges so far. And office space for the new ministries/departments will be carved out of the existing Bhawans, but think of the signal that it sends as far as the commitment to downsizing is concerned.

At a time when the governments intent, for example, is to do away with reservation for the small scale sector to encourage economic scales of production, what justification can there be for a separate ministry dedicated only to the small scale industry. And once a minister, a secretary and perhaps an additional secretary have been appointed, it is only natural that they should do their best to lobby for their charge. So let's continue with the reservation for the SSI sector, let's insist that banks give more loans to small entrepreneurs and so on. Now it is possible that despite this,

such proposals will get shot down at the Cabinet level, but think of the additional paperwork, delay and waste that is being built into the system. Every second application to the Foreign Investment Promotion Board will now have to be sent to this new ministry as well for its comments.

And though it is perhaps unfair to judge the performance of the new ministers by their first day in office, some of their statements are truly frightening. Manohar Joshi who now heads one part of the industry ministry told a news agency that the government should consider forming a special cell to investigate why public sector units are turning sick, and what can be done to revive them 'like we'd done in Maharashtra'. Now surely, after 50 years of independence any politician should know why PSUs have turned sick. And you have to be exceptionally naïve to think that no attempts have been made to revive these units, or not know that thousands of crores have been lost in doing precisely this over the years. To cite the most recent example for Joshi, just a few years ago the Indian Bank was given a bailout of Rs. 1,750 crore instead of being closed down or privatized after it wiped out its entire net worth following a mammoth Rs 1,336 crore loss in 1995-96. With no serious change in its management, it ran up losses of Rs 1,479 crore over the next three years, and now needs another bailout of Rs. 1,200 crore.

Similarly after telling the press that he would like to concentrate on the Bihar Lok Sabha elections first, the new civil aviation minister Sharad Yadav made it clear that he wasn't exactly in favor of privatization of either airports or of Air India – 'you know my background', he told new persons. To be fair to Yadav, at this stage at least he prefaced his statement by saying that he would abide by the government policy on the matter.

It is equally comforting to know that despite Joshi's views, it will be Finance Minister Yashwant Sinha who will be pushing for achieving the disinvestment target. And that even if Joshi is reluctant to refer new PSUs to the disinvestment commission, there are enough recommendations that have already been made by the Commission but not been acted upon, to keep the government busy for a few years.

Prime Minister Vajpayee, of course, has been known to recover ground after hesitant starts. After close to a disastrous first few months in office, in terms of economic reforms at least, Vajpayee did, for instance, move much further than previous government. And if Sinha is seen as 'swadeshi', it no longer has the odour it had when the BJP first came to power and raised fears that foreign companies would be discriminated against. Vajpayee, though needs to be extra cautious this time round. It was politicians like his present colleague Ram Vilas Paswan, for instance, who forced the government to give the striking bureaucrats a huge hike over what even the pay commission had 'recommended during the United Front regime. To succeed this time, Vajpayee will have to virtually play policeman, to ensure his colleagues are not allowed to pull a fast one over the country. *Ghar ka bhedi Lanka dh aya*, is a saying from the Ramayana that Vajpayee's surely familiar with.

The Three Keys to NDA's Security

Neerja Chowdhury, *The Indian Express*

With the elections over, the question on the people's mind now is: How stable is the Vajpayee government?

On the plus side is the arithmetic of the 13th Lok Sabha. This time the NDA has a total of 302 MPs. There are four constituencies in Bihar still to go to polls and the Alliance hopes to win three of these. Theoretically speaking, even if the largest supporting party the TDP with its 29 members were to pull out, the government would still have a bare majority in the Lok Sabha. The situation is far better than it was in the 12th Lok Sabha.

Even though the BJP has 24 allies, Vajpayee does not have to placate ones and twos like last time. He has, instead, to deal with half a dozen state bosses. From the way he constituted his cabinet, it is clear that he means to share power with them. They too have been chastened by the experience of the last six months, and are going out of their way to show that they are not out to blackmail the Prime Minister *a la* Jayalalitha, even as they lobbied for this or that portfolio.

Of the main allies, all except the TDP face elections in their respective states in anything from five months to two years. Whether it is the JDU in Bihar, or the BJD in Orissa, or the DMK- PMK-MDMK combine in Tamil Nadu or the Trinamool Congress in West Bengal, they will need the BJP. They smell power in the states and are not expected to do anything to strain their relations with the major party in the Alliance.

As for the TDP, Chandrababu Naidu obviously does not want rival power centers to develop in his party, which might happen if his party MPs enter the ministry. Jayalalitha's AIADMK parliamentary party almost split last year, though having witnessed the fate of both Laxmi Parvathi and Harikrishna, no TDP MP would take on Naidu easily. But then the TDP chief may not want to take any chances.

He has his own agenda and will no doubt make a bid for the Delhi *gaddi* at some point in the future. While supporting Vajpayee he wants to maintain a distance from the BJP so as not to antagonize the minorities. In the coming months Naidu can be

expected to bargain not for ministries in Delhi but for funds necessary to try and change the face of Andhra Pradesh. That could be his springboard to national politics.

There is a hypothesis that were Vajpayee to falter physically, someone like Naidu could make a bid for power at the head of a Front of regional parties from the NDA and from the other side with the support of the Left and the Congress, in a replication of the United Front experiment. But given his record, Naidu will not do anything that is patchy or short term, which any alliance with Congress is likely to be, unless the party splits and one group joins the Third Front.

The formal entry of Priyanka Vadra into the affairs of the Congress Party as MP from Amethi or as the president of the Youth Congress could also change equations. The greater her role, which could revive the Congress, the more the regional parties, which have Congress as their main opponent, would stick to the NDA. On the other hand her entry can also create more turmoil in the Congress and it is anybody's guess what leaders who can win their seats on their own but cannot work under her, will do. The stability of the government is, therefore linked to what happens inside the Congress also.

The greater danger to Vajpayee this time could however come so much from the BJP's allies as from within the party. There are those who believe that the BJP has become larger than the RSS. That many in the *Sangh Parivar*, having tasted the fruits of power, would not do anything to rock the boat. That some of the BJP leaders influence the Sangh as much as the other way around. That the RSS has little option but to accept Vajpayee as the leader of a coalition government or to put the core issues of the BJP – uniform civil code, Ayodhya, and Article 370 – on the back burner. And that the Sangh is more interested in capturing young minds through the education system and in getting into the police force.

But will the RSS which has worked for decades for the creation of Hindu Rashtra, allow Vajpayee to "Nehruvise the BJP", though the party under his leadership is on the way to becoming a right-of-Center force. He has sent clear signals by taking away the Department of Culture from Murli Manohar Joshi, remembered for the controversy over "Saraswati Vandana" and rewriting the textbooks, both of which had created an uproar. Joshi is one of those who have been consistent ideologically and is identified with the RSS.

A ticklish issue which will also have a bearing on the stability of the government is how the party leadership deals with its units in states where its allies are strong, as in Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, and Maharashtra. The allies will not like and expansion of the BJP in these states which is bound to be at their expense. But if the party tries to rein in its state leaders, it could have a problem on its hands. And it is not beyond the realm of the impossible for disgruntled state leaders to launch their own regional outfits. After all, that is how Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress came into existence. For years she chafed against the Congress' soft stance towards

the Left so as to keep the government in Delhi going. The story of the Tamil Maanila Congress was no different.

The key to the stability of the government are the three Ps – the overarching presence of Atal Behari Vajpayee, powersharing and performance.

Coalition Politics is Still Here

Swaminathan S. Anklesaria Aiyar
Economic Times

First the good news. The general election has improved the prospects of two things – stability and reform. The NDA's victory promises the most stable government for years. And Chandrababu Naidu's victory in Andhra Pradesh has shown all chief ministers that abolishing traditional subsidies and liberalizing the economy is a recipe for political success, not suicide, provided you simultaneously promote rural development with local participation.

Next the bad news. Notwithstanding Vajpayees victory, India remains very much in a coalition era, and this will be a hurdle to bold decisive governance. And notwithstanding Naidu's victory, the election results do not fully prove the case for abolishing subsidies and promoting decentralized rural development. So this is not going to be a watershed election. Vajpayee's majority means he has a good chance of lasting a full five term. So Moody's has raised Indian credit rating, and the stock markets have exploded. To some extent the new optimism is justified. What is not justified is the notion that India has a government that can act boldly and decisively.

Earlier, the NDA depended on palpably unreliable people like Jayalalitha for survival. Not any more. The NDA has won 298 seats out of 537, representing a comfortable majority of 59. Moreover, the BJP can nominate two Anglo-Indian members to the Lok Sabha, raising its majority to 61. So it can withstand defection by even a substantial group like the United Janata Dal or Telugu Deasm Party. That certainly improves its ability to take hard decisions. Yet a huge obstacle remains – the NDA's lack of a majority in the Rajya Sabha. Vajpayee promises top priority to passing bills which lapsed in the 1st Lok Sabha, on insurance, FERA, coal mines essential commodities and much else.

But without Congress support, these bills will fail in the Rajya Sabha. So coalition politics, not just within the NDA but across the political spectrum, continues to be the name of the game. The Congress may support some bills with which it is already identified. But it will see political advantages in blocking all other legislation, no matter how well-conceived to tarnish the BJP's image and make look a muddler that promises a lot and delivers much less. The NDA has little chance of gaining a Rabjya

Sabha majority anytime soon.

It rules a clear minority of states, of which Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu are the only significant ones. Each of these has more seats than the combined strength of Punjab, Haryana, Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh, which are also with the NDA. The split in the Janata Dal will help the NDA get a few more Rajya Sabha seats in Karnataka and Bihar. But it lost control of Rajasthan and Delhi in the state elections last year, and now looks on the verge of losing Maharashtra. It fared excellently in the general election in Orissa, Delhi and Madhya Pradesh, yet its opponents reign supreme in the respective state assemblies. Chandrababu Naidu is being cheered for a big win in Andhra Pradesh, but he actually won fewer seats than last time.

Without a Rajya Sabha majority, the new government cannot be bold and decisive. It will have to cajole the Congress to pass even a few bills, and abandon others as unpassable. It can take quick decisions in areas where no legislation is required (like confirming the new telecommunications policy). Yet many urgently needed reforms including the privatization of public sector undertakings, require legislative changes.

Similar caveats apply to Chandrababu Naidu's victory as a spur for reform in all states. His Janmabhoomi (rural development) scheme impressed voters more than the Congress party's promise of free power and cheaper rice.

Digvijay Singh's victory in the Madhya Pradesh state election earlier this year also drove home the potential of panchayati raj. Yet all chief ministers will not now go flat out for rural decentralization. They will note that the Left Front in Kerala, which pursued panchayati raj very strongly, fared poorly in the general election. And Digvijay Singh's gospel did not prevent the BJP from taking the lion's share of seats in Madhya Pradesh. So the election results present a mixed message.

After Naidu's victory, we can certainly hope that more chief ministers will abolish high-loss government monopolies in irrigation, power, transport and much else. Yet we must not expect too much. Remember that Naidu felt so panicky after abolishing traditional subsidies that he announced a scheme for free gas cylinders for rural housewives. The Union finance ministry estimates that this unwarranted giveaway could cost Rs 100 crore a year. Hence it has excluded Andhra Pradesh from the list of states that qualify for its loans-for-reform scheme. If Naidu does not renege on free gas, then growing rural demand, fuelled by free supply, could bankrupt the state as surely as free power did earlier.

The political temptation to offer new subsidies at election time remains very strong. True, free power did not save the Akalis from defeat. But the Congress unit in Punjab is as committed to free power as the Akali Dal.

In many states, local Congress units have openly defied all that Manmohan Singh

stands for, and even the official party manifesto. The party's unwillingness to rein in the state units shows how far India is still from a consensus on trimming unwarranted subsidies. A government white paper has shown that subsidies, broadly defined were around 15 percent of the GDP in 1997, as high as in the pre-reform era. Naidu's success may lead to a modest dent in subsidies, but not much more.

Some will say, thank heaven for small mercies. Fair enough. The election results do indeed contain some good news. But not enough to warrant euphoria about a watershed in politics or economics.

The great Indian Chauvinist Campaign

Vrinda Gopinath, *The Indian Express*

The no-holds-barred personal attacks on candidates, especially on women, in the election campaign has set feminists' teeth on edge. Outraged by insensitive remarks on womanhood, at least 12 women's organizations have pledged their support to an ad campaign to be released shortly in the print media by the Mumbai-based *Communalism Combat*. The advertisement nails the BJP and the Sangh Parivar for its archaic view of the role of Indian women in society. It lists gems that reveal the mindset of the Parivar.

There is former Rajasthan Chief Minister Bhairon Singh Shekawat's indifference when women's groups approached him to look into rape cases in Jaipur. He simply shrugged and asked what the hue and cry was about. The BJP's Mahila Aghadi President Mridula Sinha's retort in a magazine interview on wife-beating where she blamed the woman for provoking her husband to take the extreme step.

Former BJP vice-president Rajmata Vijayaraje Scindia leading a pro-sati march after the Deorala incident saying that "*sati*" was very much part of the Indian tradition. The Shankaracharya of Puri, Swami Nishchalananda's protestations that women should be debarred from reciting the sacred texts, forcing Arundhati Roychoudhry to walk out of a function. The instances are endless.

"While other parties may not be entirely pro-women, at least they have not come out with provocative anti-women statements," says Ritu Menon of the feminist publishing house Kali for Women.

"The BJP's doublespeak must be exposed. Their manifesto projects a pro-women agenda by their spokespersons do not hesitate to prescribe the traditional role to women in Indian Society."

The slander campaign took off when I&B Minister Pramod Mahajan attacked Sonia Gandhi at an election rally saying that if the country was so keen to have a foreigner as Prime Minister, then why not have Tony Blair, Bill Clinton or even Monica Lewinsky? This fuelled a raging debate on the urgent need for a gender-sensitive campaign, but did not prevent politicians of major parties from stooping even lower.

Like a stubborn case of acne, there were sporadic out breaks of personal attacks on women and women candidates. Samples: Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi's observation of AIADMK leader J. Jayalalitha singing at her campaign: "She may end up dancing in her next campaign." On her campaign song about Vajpayee's betrayal, Karunanidhi retorted, "If a woman says she has been cheated, we can only draw awkward conclusions."

At a rally, George Fernandes said of Sonia Gandhi: "What is her contribution to the nation? The two children she gave birth to." A BJP leader in Gujarat even called Sonia a bar-girl who danced in an Italian nightclub. Other opponents drew terrifying caricatures of her, liberally dipping into Indian myth and superstition. BJP leaders have called her a "*kalmukhi*" – someone who brought ill-luck and death to the family. HRD Minister Murli Manohar Joshi likened the Congress to Ravana and accused it of unleashing Sonia in the form of Surpanakha on the country. Even Jayalalitha was not spared. Mahajan called a *vishkanya*, "for anyone who touches her does not survive."

The Congress was not far behind in getting personal. Atal Bhari Vajpayee's adopted family came under scrutiny when Ghulab Nabi Azad and former Congress MP Rajesh Khanna asked "We may have to ask the Prime Minister how, without being married, he was a son-in-law. Who is married to whom?" Protests from the BJP sent the Congress scurrying for cover.

Madhu Kishwar, editor and publisher of *Manushi*, is however astounded that women wake up only when harsh words are hurled at them. "We live in a time when we are witnessing gross abuse of citizen's rights and if women ghettoize their concerns to very narrow women's issues, we have to ask what the greater concern is," says Kishwar. "It is equally important for women to be citizens as well." She is scathing about the BJP's *kalmuki* remark, says that the party will pay a heavy price. "Several elections ago, the Shiv Sena had made terrible remarks about women during the campaign and the party was routed."

Besides slander campaigns, women politicians have also come under grave physical threat. BSP leader and former UP Chief Minister Mayawati had a nightmarish stay at a Lucknow guest house two years ago when a mob of her opponents surrounded the boarding house, cut off the electricity and telephone lines and threatened her with knives and guns.

Mayawati was forced to lock herself and her party workers in until the next morning. Jayalalitha was manhandled and abused in the chambers of the Tamil Nadu Assembly. She swore that she would return to the Assembly only after she was sworn in as Chief Minister. She did not have to wait long.

BJP MP Sumitra Mahajan deplores the personal attacks on women candidates, especially the mythological reference to Sonia Gandhi, but she believes anyone who is thrust into leadership top-down is open to such attack. "When I started out I used to

ride scooters and bicycles," she says.

"Who is Sonia except a Gandhi *bahu* and Rajiv's *patni*? What is she on her own? Why does Sushma (Swaraj) not have all this mud-slinging? It is because she worked her way up and people respect that." Mahajan says she is under constant attack from the Congress Chief Minister Digvijaya Singh, who makes sexist remarks. Mahajan should be at home looking after her husband and family, for instance. She believes her public recitations of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* helped keep her detractors from making personal remarks. But she is stumped for an answer when she is asked why her famous colleague Uma Bharati was not spared a vicious and slanderous attack from her party-men. "What can I say?" says Mahajan, then adds, "perhaps she talks too much."

BJP ideologue K.R. Malkani is equally tight-lipped about the Uma Bharati incident. "Forget about it ... things happen," he says but he is biting about the Congress's personal attacks on the Prime Minister's family. "Pramod's (Mahajan) reference to Lewinsky was a slip of the tongue. After all, the whole world was mesmerized by the scandal and it was on top of his mind... but the attack on Vajpayeeji is nothing short of disgusting. And I believe the Congress's ploy of dramatizing the incident is more objectionable." Malkani does not pardon the use of *Kalmukhi*, *vishkanya* and other such references, but he shrugs off accusations that the BJP is set in a traditional mould.

Even Indira Gandhi visited *sati sthals*, how come nobody complained then? These are traditional institutions." As the campaign heats up, the tenor and content of public speeches show no signs of sobering up despite the Prime Minister's pleas and Election Commission's swift intervention.

It seems it will be a long time before women will have a level playing field in public life.

You're Addition of One, Mr Fernandes

Namita Bandare, The Times of India

Three Cheers to George Fernandes, our honorable minister of defence, for saying so fearlessly what the rest of the BJP locker room boys only dare whisper. To question Mrs Sonia Gandhi's credentials and see her as 'only' a mother who added two to the population of India is not a particularly original way of looking at working mothers. But it is a brave politician who voices these views and with such candour – and at election time too.

The bottom line is this. As a society we just do not recognize motherhood as an important social function. We dismiss it as a biological fact. Hence, women 'produce' children as cats produce a litter, factories produce cars, poultry farms produce eggs, fast food chains produce hamburgers.

Every working mother has held fears and experienced an enormous amount of guilt right from the time she gets pregnant. Fears that begin from, "Will they fire me?" to how she will put in those long hours that seem mandatory to professional success. Any woman who has career must feel the sting of Mr Fernandes' wholly unnecessary, ill-advised and - significantly – unrepentant statement regarding the Congress president's role as mother. Mr. Fernandes now tells - and to this end he uses a woman emissary, Ms Jaya Jaitley of his party – that he was merely repeating facts. Why then didn't he also repeat the 'facts' of Mrs Gandhi's experience as president of the Congress party and head of the various trusts she is involved with? Perhaps because all her career achievements get overwhelmed by the fact of her motherhood.

Fringe Figure

It seems strange that this view of women should come from an ally of the Sangh Parivar. After all, what's a privar without a mother? But in the world of the BJP and its buddies, Jai Siya Ram becomes Jai Shri Ram. Siya is really of no consequence. In the chauvinistic world of BJP and the RSS, bachelorhood is the preferred way of life.

So Sita is a fringe figure and perhaps Mr Fernandes, her only contribution was also to produce two children? In the world of the BJP and its allies, Sita does not matter, until a Deepa Mehta comes along and gives her lesbian protagonist the same name. Then

all hell breaks loose and another ally of the BJP, the Shiv Sena run amok protesting against the insult to Indian womanhood. This is something Ms Deepa Mehta who is based in Toronto presumably know nothing about. And since Mrs Gandhi is also not Indian born, perhaps the standards of Indian womanhood don't apply to her either. Yet what is the BJP's own track record? Where do women figure in a party where the head of its mahila morcha once famously defended wife beating by saying that often it's the woman who asks for it and where another leading light the now ailing Vijayraje Scindia, has defended sati as a part of Indian tradition?

Sexist Remarks

The flavor of the season is *behen hamari* Sushma Swaraj. She is the BJP's idea of a traditional-modern woman, paraded as spokeswoman every time the government needs to present its gender justice credentials. Yet when it came to the crunch the powerful ministry of information and broadcasting was taken away from her and given to a man who is personally close to the Prime Minister. Now, Swaraj has been pulled out of the mothballs, sindur and all to fight woman-to-woman against the *vedeshi bahu*.

Both Mr George Fernandes and Mr Promod Mahahan have made extremely sexist remarks in the past few days. While Mr Fernandes believes there is nothing wrong in what he has said, Mr Mahajan has blustered his way through.

There are several reasons for voting against Mrs Sonia Gandhi. Being a woman and a mother – even a foreign-born one – is not one of them. If anything it is a qualification. On the other hand, there is one very good reason for not voting for the National Democratic Alliance. It has reminded us once again of its strong anti-woman bias. At a time when we are posed for progressive legislation that will protect and enhance the status of working women (sexual harassment is now an offence), Mr Fernandes's view could take us back several years.

The Purse Strings as the Noose: Indian NGOs Face New Challenges

Human Rights Features

The Government of India has recently intensified its efforts to restrict the activities of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) by breathing new life into an anachronistic, emergency-era statute. The government's arbitrary application of the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act of 1976 (FCRA) at the behest of particular political interest infringes the fundamental rights to freedom of Association and expression guaranteed by international law and the Constitution of India and other Indian legislation.

The FCRA requires all Indian organizations and individuals that seek to receive foreign contributions to receive clearance from the Ministry of Home Affairs (the Home Ministry), in the form of either registration or prior permission. In recent weeks, the Home Ministry has deployed the FCRA as a blatantly political tool, seeking to intimidate NGOs that have been critical of the Government and its policies. On 25 September 1999, two Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) officials – in separate statements on the same day – called for the investigation and punishment of 13 NGOs for their sponsorship of newspaper advertisements criticizing the party's position on women's issues. The party officials assailed these organizations as "anti-national and anti-Indian" – not only on account of their sponsorship of the advertisement, but also based on their criticism of the Pokhran nuclear tests of May 1998.

Within days of these statements, the Home ministry dutifully served notice upon several of the 13 NGOs presumptively classifying the groups as "organization[s] of a political nature, not being a political party" under section 5 (1) for the FCRA. If unable to rebut this classification, these NGOs would be required to obtain prior permission from the Home ministry before receiving any foreign contributions. When another NGO, the Volunteer Action Network of India (VANI), publicly defended the groups, it too was promptly informed that the Home Ministry intended to cancel its registration to receive contributions from abroad without prior permission.

How does Home Ministry justify its attempt to cancel the FCRA registrations of these groups and their supporters? The Show Cause Notice served upon the NGOs alleges that these voluntary associations "ha[ve] been associated with the release of certain

advertisements in the press and with certain documents the contents of which are in the nature of comments of a political nature." The vagueness of this McCarthyesque description of the alleged misconduct is exceeded only by its potential chilling effect on the fundamental rights of Indian citizens to engage in collective political and social action. As of 6 October 1999, the Home Ministry had retaliated against over one dozen NGOs for their association with 'certain advertisements" and "certain documents."

Curiously, the Home Ministry has been highly selective in its efforts to regulate foreign funds in Indian political and social life. Sangh Parivar (the family of Hindu Fundamentalist Organizations) and Government officials have expressed outrage over the role allegedly played by foreign funding in support of Christian and Muslim organizations. However, Sangh Privar organizations are among the highest recipients of foreign contributions in India. Reports indicate that the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP or the World Hindu Council) has raised at least Rs. 86 million (approximately \$US 2 million) from the United States since 1980. Much of this money has been used to fund schemes that seek to intimidate tribal peoples from converting to Christianity or Islam, often under threat of violence. While other reports of misuse of foreign funds raised by "VHP America" abound, at no time has the Government sought to investigate this influx of foreign capital.

Even the BJP itself – which as a political party, is subject to more stringent restrictions under the FCRA – has received substantial foreign contributions. The Party's United States arm, the "Overseas Friends of the BJP." Routinely hosts expensive fund-raisers and has sent large delegations to India to campaign on behalf of the BJP – trips that are presumably financed with foreign funds. The Home Minister has, however, turned a blind eye to this conduct by members of his ideological fraternity.

These examples reveal a pattern of arbitrary enforcement of the FCRA that violates fundamental freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution of India and international human rights law. On its face and as applied, the FCRA violates Article 19 of the Constitution of India and several international human rights instruments that guarantee freedom of expression and freedom of association including Articles 19(3) and 22 (1) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) – ratified by India in 1979. The Government's arbitrary application of the FCRA also violates guarantees of equality and due process under Articles 14 and 21 of the Indian Constitution. Moreover, the decision to target NGOs that criticize the government's record on women's rights raised serious questions about the Government's commitment to implementation and enforcement of the Convention on the elimination of All Forms of Discrimination of Women, which India ratified in 1993.

The Home Ministry's deployment of the FCRA as a political weapon comes on the heels of another recent assault on the political and social space for NGOs in India. For example, the Government's recent imposition of an arbitrary clearance requirement for NGOs organizing international conferences contravenes India's constitutional

guarantees and International commitments. Such efforts signal an increasing unwillingness on the part of the Government to tolerate criticism and dissent.

While the government has a legitimate interest in holding NGOs accountable for financial or other wrongdoing, normal regulatory and criminal justice procedures provide sufficient institutional resources to accomplish this task. Narrowly-tailored financial reporting requirements for NGOs serve legitimate governmental interests and should remain in place. However these laws should be administered by the Ministry of Finance, rather than the highly politicized Home Ministry. And to the extent that the direct channels of political participation are to be reserved for Indian citizens, the proper target of regulation are political parties and the candidates they field for office, not voluntary organizations and advocacy groups. Democracy and human rights depend upon the vitality of civil society which in turn, depends on the ability of NGOs to operate free arbitrary legal obstacles. The Government's heavy-handed use of the FCRA to restrict the legitimate activities of politically-disfavored NGOs represents yet another troubling retreat from Indian democratic tradition.

Attack on NGOs and Peoples Movements

R.M. Pal, Legal News & Views

After a systematic vilification campaign led by the mullahs against NGOs in Pakistan, for a number of years, the Government of Pakistan, specially the West Punjab Government, has now come down heavily on NGOs. The west Punjab Government wants to have absolute power in matters relating to granting registration to NGOs; and the Government is to decide what NGOs can and cannot do. According to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), a well known NGO, the Government "want to be in a position to judge their performance, to know how they get and spend their funds, and to impose a variety of punishments on them including dissolution of their governing bodies. And they want to strip them of their role of diffusing political awareness among the people.

The present BJP government, in the midst of the general election in the country, has acquired "profound wisdom" from Pakistan; it has done something much more obnoxious. It has issued a show cause notice (dated 27 September 1999) to a large number of NGOs including a well-known research center in Delhi, Indian Social Institute. It states, inter alia: "It has come to the notice of the Central government that, in the run up to the on going general election, your association has been associated with the release of certain advertisements in the press and with certain documents the contents of which are in the nature of comments of a political nature" – reminiscent of what Mrs Indira Gandhi, specially her sycophants did during the infamous emergency in 1975-76.

A couple of short points. The letter, to put mildly, is vague, indecent, and insulting. The Universal understanding with regards to people's movement is that NGOs must be free of government interference and that they must be left free to decide how best they can serve the cause of the people and their welfare. Second, can there be any social issue related to social justice, democratic aspirations, and human rights which is not of a "political nature"? For example, when four nuns in Madhya Pradesh were raped, a section of Hindutvadi leaders maintained that Christian missionaries represent "anti-national forces working against Hindu interest in the country", and that the gang-rape was a "reaction to those anti-national activities". Which means plain and simple, that those who are not "patriotic" according to Hindutvadis can be raped. Can a civilized nation permit criminal acts in the name of "patriotism"? Many NGOs

expected the de facto ruler of the country and the most important Hindutvavadi ideologue Mr. L.K. Advani (whose ministry has issued the show cause notice referred to above) to condemn this justification in a forth right manner. Instead, he tried to wriggle out of this justification by saying that the BJP section of the Hindutvavadis are not involved in this. This is quibbling to put it mildly. As is well known, the VHP, Bajarang Dal, RSS, Shiv Sainiks are all integral parts of the family, the Sangh Privar, and Mr. Advani presides over its political wing. Mr. Advani did the same with regard to the Shiv Sena-BJP government's rejection of the Srikrishna Commission Report on the 1992-93 communal riots in Bombay. All these reflect a dominant section of our people being intolerant of minorities, political reaction and social/religious barbarism. If NGOs and people's movements are not outraged by such a culture of intolerance and practices of tyranny and oppression – it does not matter which parties/formations promote such a culture – will they be worth their salt? This outrage is against a particular political culture. Does this entitle the government to notify such NGOs "as an organization of political nature"?

The BJP government might note what HRCP in Pakistan affirms in this regard: "The civil society cannot be made to abdicate concern for the civil and political rights of the people".

How "thoughtful" politicians can think so thoughtlessly comes out clearly from a statement made by Indian Social Institute: "It totally denies the charges. It has not issued any advertisement or document of partisan political nature. But some of our concerns as citizens have been protection of civil and political rights as enshrined in the Constitutions. What has happened in the last couple of years of governance is an attack on India's secular polity and the Constitution. ... [Our] purpose is to defend the Constitution from all kinds of assault".

It is obvious that the show cause letter is to scare activities in the people's movements, to tell freedom loving people to keep their lips sealed against any erosion of freedom of thought and expression.

It is an insult to our secular and pluralist society that we follow the mullah culture of Pakistan. If NGOs allow this drift to continue, our national life will face total degeneration. It is important, therefore, that NGOs wage a total war on this horrendous act of the government. This is an appropriate case in which all thoughtful and freedom loving peoples must resort to non-violent civil disobedience and ask the government to withdraw this obnoxious letter.

In this context civil liberties groups and NGOs may take note of what the HRCP did in more or less a similar situation in Pakistan. A few months ago the West Punjab government banned the publication of the HRCP's quarterly magazine on some flimsy and totally unlawful ground. The HRCP asked the government to withdraw its notification. It did not receive any reply from the government. It continued to publish the magazine.

PRESS RELEASE of Indian Social Institute

Response to the show cause notice by the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India to Indian Social Institute, New Delhi.

Indian Social Institute is an institute of research, training and advocacy. Its primary focus is on dalits, tribals, women and other marginalised communities. As an institute of human concern, it responds to the emerging concerns of society in collaboration with like minded people and organisations.

We, in the Institute, are dismayed by the show cause notice issued to us by the Ministry of Home Affairs. The said notice alleged that 'in the run up to the ongoing general elections, your association has been associated with the release of certain advertisements in the press and with certain documents the contents of which are in the nature of comments of a political nature'. The Institute totally denies the charges. It has not issued any advertisement or document of partisan political nature. But some of our concerns as citizens have been protection of civil and political rights as enshrined in the Constitution. What has happened during the last couple of years of governance is an attack on India's secular polity and the Constitution. As a body of concerned researchers and citizens, upholding and protecting the Constitution is our primary task.

The Institute is not, as alleged in the show cause notice, an association of political nature. But social research cannot be done in a vacuum. It has to look at reality from the socio-economic, cultural and political dimensions. Given the nature of the Institute, all its research is field-based and factual. Even documents and publications brought out by the

Institute are centred on facts though may be critical of political elite.

The research results are highlighted in the public domain for advocacy and interventions. The Institute protests all human rights violations and in their protests the Institute joins similar organisations and protestors. The purpose is to defend the Constitution from all kinds of assault.

The show cause notice, therefore is meant to stifle dissent and to silence all those who

protest against the vested and hidden interests of the state. And this, as an Institute, we are determined to resist.

The Papal Test

Ishan Joshi, Outlook

It's been a narrow squeak, but the Vajpayee government's handling of the controversy around the visit of Pope John Paul II to India – its first major test – seems to be working. Assuming of course, there's no madcap attempt to disrupt the pontiff's engagements in Delhi – which include an address to the Asian Synod of Bishops at the Sacred Heart Cathedral, a Holy Mass at the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium and a meeting with representatives of all religions at Vigyan Bhavan.

In fact, even as the Goa-to-Delhi protest yatra by a Sangh parivar-backed outfit was prevented from entering Madhya Pradesh on Thursday, senior leaders, from Vajpayee and Advani to Jaswant Singh, were busy trying to stand firm against any attempt to disrupt or criticize the Pope's visit. Yet, the protests – though enfeebled – seemed to persist. And the Government's hands will only be full if it can't rein in organizations thinking of launching an ad campaign raising questions they want the Pope to answer.

For, even as the government works overtime to ensure that the papal visit goes without a hitch and is saved from the international opprobrium heaped upon it in the wake of attacks on Christians last year, the fact remains that the Sangh parivar's dreams seem to be coming to fruition. Of creating a country where any social, cultural or religious strand seen as opposed to or "foreign" vis-à-vis the Hindu is regarded as fair game.

The government was accused of not doing enough to hold back those demanding an apology from the Pope for "forcible conversions" allegedly being carried out by Christian missionaries in India and the "atrocities" committed on Hindus in Goa during the Portuguese rule. Despite a spirited rebuttal by external affairs minister Jaswant Singh and home minister L.K. Advani in Parliament, the Vajpayee government's attitude towards the whole issue is still being held suspect. "They may be doing the needful in letter but certainly not in spirit," says a senior church official.

As the all India Catholic Union pointed out – in response to the Vajpayee government "advising" vice-president Krishan Kant not to attend the all-religion meet organized for the pontiff on November 7 ostensibly because a representation of a secular state could not be present at a non-official religious function: "The government's advice

seems to be in consonance with statements issued by members of the ruling party and associates in the Sangh parivar who've been protesting against the Pope, our faith and our Church... Non-official functions of a religious nature are routinely attended by the highest dignitaries." The charge from senior members of the church is clear: the Sangh's using one freedom (of speech) to curtail another (of religion).

But the government seems far too busy patting itself on the back for not having pushed the Sangh too far while sticking to its official stand of ensuring the Pope's visit is a successful one. According to sources in the PMO, Vajpayee and Advani have been in close touch over this issue and have played a crucial role in "persuading" the VHP et al in "seeing reason". While Advani had held talks with Sangh leaders in the second week of October, Vajpayee too is reported to have spoken to the VHP's Ashok Singhal and Giriraj Kishore a week later. "Both leaders were clear that burning of effigies or any other agitational program against a state guest was not acceptable," says a prime ministerial aide.

Sources point to a distinct change in the protestors attitude as a result of "high-level intervention", but critics see this as another example of the Vajpayee government's desire to keep the fundamentalists on board. Just as many in the Church (and the Opposition) refuse to believe that the refusal to allow Kant to attend a function for the Pope had anything to do with the MEA not wanting to irk China because Dalai Lama will also be there. "At best, it's a pretext. The point is that after having leaned on the hard-liners to curb on their protests, they are so indebted they couldn't snub the Sangh," says a senior Congress leader.

Likewise, the Opposition felt sops were being offered to hard-liners by Jaswant Singh, who speaking in the Rajya Sabha earlier in the week, said that "repentance was a part of Christian ethics". The uproar from the Opposition brought forth a clarification that he was making no demands or asking for an apology but many felt he'd signalled clearly where his sympathies lay. The Church also pointed out that senior government figures have disapproved of the agitation against the Pope but without naming the organizations behind it. Then there are those in the BJP like party vice-president J.P. Mathur who've on record said "protests are a right but should be peaceful".

In its defence, a BJP leader says the government's gone out of its way to curb even peaceful protests through persuasion, because of the sensitive nature of the issue. That not only the government but also the party has officially distanced itself from the VHP's agitationist agenda. That a commitment's been given in Parliament by Senior ministers assuring full security and success for the visit and that it was this government which gave the go-ahead for the visit in the first place when China said no. The MP government might try and make political capital of preventing the Goa-Delhi yatra from entering the state, he says, but it was the home ministry which sent out a note to all states telling to prevent any such incident.

The Sangh, though, clearly believes its purpose has been achieved: that despite the

"limitation" of the BJP and a coalition government, political parties, religious organization or those working in the socio-cultural field are having to recognize that India's a secular but Hindu majority country. Which is why theories about cracks within the Sangh parivar (between the BJP and RSS/VHP) may be a bit premature. There are, of course, many hardliners chafing at the bit and skirmishes with 'moderates' will intensify; but the governments' response to the anti-Pope agitations seems to indicate more of a division of labor than a divide within.

Meanwhile, the agitation has opened fissures between Hindus and Christians in the Northeast, West Bengal, Orissa, MP and Gujarat. And also among the BJP's political allies, including the TDP, MDMK, Trinamul and the BJD. But the BJP is confident of managing both. In terms of strategy, the government may have been spot on and the dictates of electoral politics probably mean that the mistrust of minorities, while "a saddening development" for some in the ruling hierarchy, doesn't affect her popular support. But then there is the view that there is more to governing India than being sharp managers.

The Staines Killings: Religious Intolerance and Government Inaction

Human Rights Features

In the early hours of 22 January 1999, Graham Staines and his two young sons Timothy and Philip were burned alive inside their jeep at Manoharpur village in the Indian State of Orissa. According to police, Staines and his sons had no way of escaping death when a mob of 30 people descended upon the village, poured petrol on the station wagon and set it alight. The mob was reportedly chanting slogans of the Bajrang Dal, a militant Hindu fundamentalist organization that had been terrorizing Christian and Muslim minorities in the area for months.

Following the Staines killings, the Government of India established a Judicial Commission of Inquiry chaired by Supreme Court Justice D.P. Wadhwa. On 5 August 1999, the Government published the Commission's report, the contents of which indicate a continuation of the status quo. The report ignores the systematic nature of attacks on religious minorities and evades the question of governmental responsibility in encouraging such offences. The report's failings are especially troubling in light of the upcoming national elections. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) promises religious toleration and respect for minority rights but its practices while in power have promoted a different agenda. The Staines Commission report does nothing to alter, and perhaps even perpetuates, this situation.

Contrary to the Commission's report, the Staines killings can best be understood by taking into account the wider context: growing Hindu fundamentalism and systematic attacks on religious minorities. Immediately following the Staines murders, Hindu fundamentalist organizations sought to justify the killings by alleging that Graham Staines had been converting Adivasis (tribals) in the local district to Christianity--a charge that has been used to excuse a plethora of crimes against Christians in the past year. As public opinion, both national and international, expressed its outrage, the Government of India condemned the killings and declared them an aberration in a "land of toleration." Yet in 1998, more Christians were attacked in communal incidents than in all fifty-one years since Independence. On 24 February 1999, Home Minister L K Advani admitted to the Rajya Sabha, the Indian Upper House, that a total of 116 attacks against Christians had occurred in 1998 (Press Trust of India, New Delhi, 24 February 1999). While the Government has attempted to portray the attacks

as sporadic, the calculated and systematic nature of the campaign reveals a more organized agenda.

Behind these attacks are various Hindu fundamentalist organizations, which are collectively known as the Sangh Parivar (the Hindu Fundamentalist Family of Organizations). In simple terms, Sangh Parivar ideology holds that to be Indian is to be Hindu. While Hindu fundamentalism has been a feature of Indian politics since the 1930s, in recent years its ideology has moved from the fringe of political and social discourse into the mainstream. Since the BJP formed the national government in March 1998, Hindu fundamentalist organizations—such as the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) along with militant organizations—such as Bajrang Dal—have been empowered in Indian public life. With the likely election of another BJP-led coalition in the September 1999 elections, the ascent of grassroots Hindu fundamentalism seems destined to continue. While the BJP is the most moderate organ of the Sangh Parivar, its rule has provided encouragement and legitimacy to fundamentalist ideology. The BJP has found itself incapable of taking decisive action against those members of its ideological fraternity that are inciting and perpetrating violence against Christians.

Hindu fundamentalists do not have a monopoly on religious intolerance in India, nor are such hate crimes new. In 1984, following the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, over 4,000 Sikhs were systematically murdered, as the Congress (I) Party Government turned a blind eye; the resulting Mishra Commission was toothless. Eight years later, in Hindu revivalist fervor, the Babri Mosque at Ayodhya was destroyed leading to rioting and the murder of hundreds of Muslims.

While little has been done by any Indian Government to ease communal tensions, the BJP Government has tacitly condoned the attacks by granting impunity to offenders and by encouraging public support for the cause of religious militants. This complicity was clearly evident in the Prime Minister's call for a debate on conversions as a response to the anti-Christian violence—even though, with no evidence of forced conversions, the Prime Minister on 3 February 1999 recoiled from the debate. The short-lived conversion debate provided the Sangh Parivar a platform for its anti-Christian invectives. It also diverted attention from the Government's inaction and the impunity with which Hindu militants perpetrate their crimes. Following the Staines murders, Home Minister L. K. Advani defended Hindu fundamentalist organizations such as Bajrang Dal stating that he "know[s] these organizations and there are no criminals." Not only did this statement reveal the Home Minister's apologist position towards fundamentalist militancy—as well as disregard the pending court cases implicating Bajrang Dal in serious human rights abuses against Muslims in 1992—but it also undermined the possibility of a thorough and independent investigation into the crime.

The BJP Government has officially condemned the Staines killings--although not those members of the Sangh Parivar who publicly excused and justified the killings--and established a Judicial Commission of Inquiry. The Commission's terms of

reference were very narrow, however, providing only for an investigation into the Staines killings and the charges of conversions in the region. They did not extend to Sangh Parivar activity and the related communal violence in the region that had precipitated the attack on the Staines family.

On 21 June 1999, the Commission presented its report to the Government of India, which released the report several weeks later. The report blamed the killings on a single individual, Dara Singh, who remains at large (although journalists have been able to interview him). The report claims that Dara Singh manipulated "disgruntled elements" into carrying out the murders pursuant to his personal agenda against Christians. The Commission found that no organization had been involved in the crime, thereby absolving the Sangh Parivar of any responsibility. However, in vindicating the Sangh Parivar the Commission disregarded the fact that Bajrang Dal is not an organization with strong central leadership nor does it maintain membership registers, and thus it may defy the Commission's assumptions about organizational behavior or organizational involvement in the crime. Furthermore, if, as it was widely thought, Dara Singh was involved in the Bajrang Dal, there would be no record of his membership. Finally, the Commission did not review the crime's place in the context of rising anti-minority sentiment in the district, courtesy of the Bajrang Dal.

These anti-minority sentiments were, however, indirectly recognized by the Commission. In examining allegations of conversions, the Commission found that as a preacher Graham Staines was not indulging in conversions and was doing a "good job." It noted that Staines did not realize there was an "undercurrent" against him. The Commission's terms of reference did not allow it to investigate the cause or wider consequence of this undercurrent. It is well known, however, that in the months leading up to the Staines murders, Bajrang Dal activists had been rousing anti-Christian feeling and violence by alleging the conversion of Adivasis. Muslims in the region had also been targeted in the organization's communal activities. These factors were not examined by the Commission, because its mandate extended to the role of conversions, not the role of communalism, in relation to the crime.

Importantly, India has comprehensive legislation to deal with crimes based on religion and incitement to violence against religious minorities. The Constitution of India, the Indian Penal Code 1860 and the Code of Criminal Procedure 1973 provide model safeguards for religious freedom. Moreover, India ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, binding it to the protection of minorities. Yet there is insufficient political will within the Government of India to silence those who incite violence against minorities or to ensure the prosecution of perpetrators.

The half-hearted response of the Government of India to the Staines murders has revealed a Government torn between its ideological affiliations and good governance. The Wadhwa Commission report is simply another sign of a Government eager to be perceived as doing something, while in reality limiting the effectiveness of meaningful investigations and efforts at obtaining accountability. In its failure to

protect the rights of Christians, the authorities have compromised the human rights of all minorities. In order to secure the confidence of minorities and civil society, the Government of India must begin vigorously pursuing and prosecuting those who incite and engage in these crimes. Until the Government takes such action, the killing of Graham, Philip and Timothy Staines will remain not an aberration, but a brutal symptom of the diminution of space for minorities in India.

Denial and Obfuscation: The Report of the Justice D.P. Wadhwa Commission of Inquiry

Human Rights Features

India's tradition of religious tolerance was cruelly mocked earlier this year when Australian missionary Graham Staines and his two young sons, Timothy and Philip, were burned alive inside their jeep by a mob in Manoharpur village in the Indian state of Orissa. The event was widely perceived as the culmination of a year of unprecedented violence against Christians. Released on 5 August 1999, the eve of India national elections, the Report of the Justice D.P. Wadhwa Commission of Inquiry (the Commission) has served to politicize the killings rather than to reassure minorities. The Commission has strong evidence of their complicity, and has sought to downplay attacks against the Christians deeming them a media fabrication.

On 25 August 1999 the South Asia Human Rights Documentation Center (SAHRDC) released a report entitled *Report of the Justice D.P Wadhwa Commission of inquiry: Judicial Commission or Injudicious Cover-up?* The report provides a comprehensive evaluation of the Commission's findings in light of Written Submissions of Counsel for the Commission of Gopal Subramaniam, the evidence before the Commission and the national context of the Staines's killings. The report of SAHRDC calls into serious question the Commission's methodology and conclusions. The Commission's report is inadequate as an investigation into a criminal incident: as an inquiry into the broader context of the Staines's murders, it is morally and politically irresponsible.

The Commission concludes that Rabindra Kumar Pal. Alias Dara Singh, led the mob of *Adivasis* (tribals) that murdered the Staines. Dara Singh, an individual motivated by 'misplaced fundamentalism,' was actively pursuing an anti-Christian crusade in the Manoharpur area. Specifically, Dara Singh alleged that missionaries such as Staines were forcibly converting *Adivasis* to Christianity. The Commission quotes one of his appeals to locals for assistance. "Christian pastors are destroying the Hindu religion. They have come to Manoharpur and we shall assault to kill them and set fire to their vehicles and the Church as well. All of you kindly help me." Dara Singh is still at large.

Widespread press reports linked the killings, as well as Dara Singh, to Hindu

fundamentalist groups including Bajrang Dal which has been operating in Orissa since 1993. Bajrang Dal is the youth wing of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), a member of the Hindu Fundamentalist Family of Organizations known as the *Sangh Parivar*. The *Sangh Parivar* also includes the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) a group widely believed to have been involved in the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi – as well its mainstream incarnation, the BJP.

Despite substantial evidence to the contrary, the commission found that "[t]hat there is no evidence that any authority or organization was behind the gruesome killings" (Report of Justice D.P. Wadhwa Commission of Inquiry. Page 111). This conclusion contradicts much of the testimony presented to the Commission, as well as many of its own statements. There is substantial evidence that Dara Singh was a supporter, if not a member, of Bajrang Dal. Indeed, the Commission's report notes that seven witnesses attested to Dara Singh's connections with Bajrang Dal, and four other to his connections with the BJP. The Commission's own Investigating Team found that Dara Singh was a Bajrang Dal activist, had attended RSS rallies, and had campaigned for the BJP in Patna during the 1998 parliamentary elections.

In addition, numerous police officers including, the Director General of Police for Orissa and the Superintendent of Police of the neighboring Mayurbhanj District, testified that Dara Singh was a Bajrang Dal worker. Similarly, investigations conducted by the Revenue District Commissioner in Orissa, the National Human Rights Commission and the National Commission for minorities all linked Dara Singh to either the BJP or Bajrang Dal. The Commission's own investigating team concluded that Dara Singh was an activist and supporter of Bajrang Dal, although it could not find any documentary evidence that he was an official member of the group.

The Commission's report does not mention the numerous other witnesses belonging to the *Sangh Parivar* who testified that Dara Singh is a member of Bajrang Dal and the BJP. This evidence is found only in the Written submissions on behalf of Counsel for the Commission. Inexplicably, the Commission neither incorporates this evidence into its findings nor provides any reason for discrediting the testimony. The submissions of Gopal Subramaniam, on the other hand, do evaluate this evidence and unsurprisingly reach conclusions contrary to those of the Commission.

In rejecting the suggestion of Dara Singh's involvement with *Sangh Parivar*, the Commission relies on two witnesses. The first witness, an RSS member and follower of Dara Singh, claimed to have no knowledge of Dara Singh's involvement with RSS. The second witness testified that Dara Singh was not a member of Bajrang Dal; but this witness was not cross-examined on this point. This questionable testimony provides little support for the commission's conclusions. The only other evidence relied on the Commission was Dara Singh's taped denial in a television interview conducted after the murders. In short, the Commission had no sound basis for disregarding the overwhelming evidence that Dara Singh was indeed linked to the *Sangh Parivar*.

The evidence or perhaps the lack thereof, speaks for itself: the Wadhwa Commission of Inquiry had no compelling reason to conclude that Dara Singh was acting alone. In fact, the Counsel for the Commission, concluded that the evidence of Dara Singh's involvement with the *Sangh Parivar* "suggests strongly in favor of a further inquiry/ investigation by the [Central Bureau of Investigation] into all aspects of the conspiracy" (Written Submissions on behalf of the Counsel for the Commission, Volume 2, Submission (h), page 555). The Commission, however, ignored the advice of its own Counsel and issued a blanket absolution of the *Sangh Privar*.

The Commission's conclusion, however, cannot be attributed solely to investigative incompetence. An examination of all the full report indicates that it is clearly tied to a political agenda as well.

While the Commission states that the Staines' murders cannot be termed an isolated incident, the Report never once refers to the widespread anti-Christian violence which occurred one month earlier in Dangs district of Gujarat. Indeed, the Commission does not mention the fact that there were more attacks against Christians in 1998 than in the 51 years since Indian independence combined. Nor does the commission mention that, at the time of the killings, India was in the throes of a national debate on conversions at the behest of the BJP Prime Minister A.B. Vapayee. Nevertheless, the Commission found that allegations of Christians converting locals motivated the attack against the Staines, even though Graham Staines was not personally involved in the conversions.

The report fails to assess the Staines' killings as part of the growing problem of violence against Christians in India. To the contrary, the Commission analyzed four alleged anti-Christian incidents that occurred in areas near the Staines murders and concluded that these events were either fabricated, or were not religiously motivated. Remarkably, the Commission's Report seems to suggest that Christians have nothing to fear because alleged attacks against them are simply a media beat up. Even a cursory review of the facts, however, belies the Commission's suggestion.

Furthermore, the timing of the report could not be better for the political fortunes of the BJP. At a time when the BJP is attempting to move into the political mainstream, the Commission's report seeks to assuage fears of religious minorities and tolerant Hindus that the BJP is unable or unwilling to control militant groups such as Bajrang Dal. The Report simultaneously strives to placate the BJP's ideological brethren by refusing to expose the involvement of these groups and investigating allegations of forced conversions. Moreover, the Commission holds the Congress State Government of Orissa responsible for the crime casting them as weak on law and order while the policing effort leading up to and immediately after the Staines' killings was unquestionably poor, it was unreasonable for the Commission to conclude that the 'an efficient and responsive administration could have prevented this unfortunate incident' (Report of the Justice D.P. Wahawa Commission of Inquiry. Page 142). This untenable conclusion smacks of party politics.

The Commission's findings seem aimed at defusing anger from all sides by holding that Staines was not involved in conversions, and that the *Sangh Parivar* was not responsible for his murder. Neither Christians nor Hindu fundamentalist groups were guilty, only one deranged individual. Whether or not this political balancing act will satisfy the BJP's comrades and the mainstream electorate is unclear, but what is certain is that the Commission has done nothing to reassure minorities that their rights will be protected in accordance with international law and the Constitution of India. Instead, the Hindu Fundamentalist instigators and perpetrators of anti-Christian violence have gotten away with it. Yet again.

**Press statement of Rev. Dr. James Massey,
Member of National Minorities Commission at the
Press Conference held on August 2nd 1999 at
Ahmednagar, Maharashtra, India.**

Christian Participation in Politics

Based upon the model offered by our Lord Jesus Christ in the Bible, we make three suggestions for the Christians by following which, they may respond to the current political situation in our country.

The first and foremost suggestion with regard Christian engagement in politics is:

Most of the political parties are basically interested in votes and to get these, they tend to respond to special – some times narrow interests of particular religious or caste groups.

Christians certainly cannot be partners in such approaches. Besides, any path which is not comprehensive may lead us even to become communal in outlook.

Involvement of Christians in politics, therefore, has to be on different footing, which must be holistic in nature. There are larger and graver issues facing the nation and society that demand the attention of every Christian. The Christian person should tread carefully and not play into the hands of politicians, for active and meaningful participation, the Christian person can find models in both "*prophetic politics*" and "*messianic politics*"

In the case of Prophetic politics two points must always be kept in mind:

- a. The protection of the poor and the weak against imperial and despotic rule, and
- b. The reminder that the true sovereign is God and under his sovereignty, the ruler or State is supposed to be a servant to the people.

It is the foremost duty of the ruler or State to protect the rights of the subject especially the poor and the oppressed.

The second model of the "Messianic politics" as referred above is the extension of the first model, that is, "Prophetic politics." The Prophet Isaiah has given the full details of the Messianic politics in his book (chapters 9, 11, 53). About the Messianic ruler he says: "With justice he will judge the poor and defend the humble in the land of equity; like a rod his verdict will strike the ruthless and with his word he will slay the wicked. He will wear the belt of justice and truth will be his girdle" (Isaiah 11:4,5)

Of course, our Lord Jesus Christ himself has provided an alternative paradigm or model of politics. His politics was based upon the concept of "*the suffering servant*". The political 'order' envisioned by Jesus is exactly the opposite of the political order propagated by most of the political parties in our country.

The objective of the politics of Jesus was the formation of a "just society" based upon justice and righteousness. It is these parameters, which Jesus left us Christians to decide our participation or engagement in politics. The Christians and the Church are supposed to respond to this obligation, which their Lord Himself has laid upon them. The same obligation is laid upon Christians by the State also, as its full citizens.

In a way, our second suggestion is linked with the first because it calls on every Christian to support the democratic system of our country. This is not only because the system was adopted, after independence, by the Constitution of our country, but also because this system falls nearest to the Christian understanding of the human being, the world and the political order derived from the law and love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

However as we know already, at present we are living a life of contradictions because, though in principle, we have accepted political democracy based on equality, yet we continue to practice – even after 50 years of Independence – blatant inequality in the areas of our social and economic life.

This means that social democracy which forms the base of political democracy, is still absent from the life of the Indian Society. Christians can very usefully engage themselves in the task of establishing social democracy in the country which will pave the way for a just society as envisaged by the prophets of the Old Testament, as well as, by our Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

In a nutshell, the politics of democracy, which includes the politics of peoples movements, actually reflects God's politics with the world in Jesus Christ.

Our third suggestion is addressed to the Church, that it should not only pray for a change or a good future government. The Church should actually mobilize its members to begin to think and work for change.

The present demand on the Church is to play a concrete and effective role in the coming elections by preparing her members to enable in electing such a government which will protect the interests and rights of the poor, Dalits Adivasis, religious minorities and others who have been threatened by the present crisis created by fascist forces in the country. Currently, the whole democratic and secular system is under threat. Christians have double obligations (of their faith as Christians and of the Constitution as Indian Citizens) to side with those forces that will help in preventing India from becoming a Totalitarian State, and help in continuing with its best democratic and secular traditions.

In Christian Belt, Faith in Pawar May Pull the Votes, not Religion or Origin

*Satyajit JOSHI & M.S. Khedkar,
The Indian Express*

When Sharad Pawar parted ways with the Congress after questioning Sonia Gandhi's origins, the sizeable Christian Community of Ahmednagar district, where missionaries first landed in Maharashtra in the last century, watched with some degree of trepidation.

Having traditionally voted for the Congress, they knew they would soon be wooed by the Congress in the name of Sonia and the NCP which will remind them that Pawar has always been their leader. And that is exactly what is happening now because both parties realize that the large number of Christians in the district can influence the poll outcome.

For most Christian voters here, the issue of Sonia's foreign origin is irrelevant. Yet the NCP is not disturbed because Pawar's men know that local political compulsions can overcome any sentimental invocation.

Ahmednagar first caught the eye of the missionaries because it was backward and drought-prone. St Hume Memorial Church, the first church in Maharashtra outside the Mumbai belt, was set up in Ahmednagar City in 1833. All 13 tehsils of the district today have sizeable Christian votes.

Many Christians believe that the chances of the Congress candidates in the district will not improve simply because Sonia Gandhi is now at the helm and is spearheading the party campaign. Rev AQ Salvi of Wadala Mission, which runs a hospital at Wadala on the Pune-Aurangabad Road, says he does not find "any special feeling" among the Christians for Sonia Gandhi. "Her Christianity is not an election factor. What may however, influence the decision of the Christians will be the attacks on churches in Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa," he says. He says it matters little whether Sonia has a foreign origin because "she is not an issue for us". Young Bablu Patekar agrees with Rev Salvi.

There are still others who say the voting trend would depend on how big or small a

factor Pawar is today. Father Andrew Jadhav of Christ Niwas, Ghodegaon, says the Christians will accept the decision of the voters no matter what the outcome is. He says the Christians in the region share a good rapport with even the BJP and Sena workers and many of them respect Atal Behari Vajpayee as an individual.

Father Jadhav, however, believes that the split in the Congress will lead to a division of Christian votes. He says it is unfair to focus on Christians alone because "all voters are exposed to all kinds of temptations" during the elections.

Father Jerome Gonsalves of Holy Spirit Church, Shevgaon, says he will not be surprised if the Christians end up voting for Pawar's candidates since they are all known to the locals. "Sonia Gandhi's religion or her foreign origin are not issues here because people basically know her as the widow of Rajiv Gandhi."

Others like Rev. M A Shinde bring cheer to the Congress camp. He is all for Sonia Gandhi. "Her foreign origin is not the issue since she married an Indian. Security is the most vital issue for Christians. Sonia Gandhi may get some sympathy because of her religion but it will mostly have to do with her being a member of the Gandhi family."

Father Michael Waghmare of St. Theresa Church, Haregaon, also backs Sonia Gandhi's bid. While he appreciates Pawar's contribution to Maharashtra, he points out that the man has defected twice from the Congress.

Pawar's influence is restricted to Maharashtra. Christians will vote for a party and not an individual. As for Sonia's religion, it really does not come into the picture since she married a Hindu," says Father Waghmare.

Where does Vajpayee fit? Practically nowhere, if you go by Sister Francisca of Shevgaon. "Vajpayee's image is better than that of any other politician. But I don't think Christians will vote for him. He is the right man in the wrong place."

So for the Christians of Ahmednagar, it all boils down to choosing between Sonia and Pawar. Some from the community have a way out of this predicament. They say let us do a balancing act. Vote the Sonia Congress for the Lok Sabha and send Pawar's party to the Assembly. It is to be seen just how many buy this suggestion.

ACRONYMS

AGP	Asom Gana Parishad
AIADMK	All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam
BJD	Biju Janata Dal
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BSP	Bhajun Samaj Party
DAV	Dayanda Anglo Vedic
DMK	Dravida Munedra Kazhakam
FCRA	Foreign Contribution Regulation Act
HRCP	Human Rights Commission of Pakistan
ISI	Inter-Services Intelligence Indian Social Institute
JDU	Janata Dal United
MDMK	Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam
MP	Member of Parliament Madhya Pradesh
NCP	Nationalist Congress Party
NDA	National Democratic Party
PMK	Pattali Makkal Katchi
PSU	Public Sector Unit
RSS	

Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh

SSI

Small Scale Industries

SP

Samajvadi Party

TDP

Telagu Desam Party

VANI

Volunteer Network of India

VHP

Vishwa Hindu Parishad