

Hindu Nationalism and Hindu Mahasabha: Organizational Base of BJP

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Abstract

The present study tries to trace the historical roots of the Bharatiya Janata Party – the principal political vehicle to espouse the Hindu nationalist feelings. The study deals in detail about the concept and growth of Hindu Nationalism. The alignment of Hindu Nationalism with politics in the form of Hindu Mahasabha. The foundation of the Hindu Mahasabha by V.D. Savarkar has been discussed. A thorough and gripping account of the strengthening and the organizational development, separation from Congress and decline of Hindu Mahasabha after independence has been presented.

Keywords: hindu nationalism and hindu mahasabha, bharatiya janata party

Introduction: Hindu Nationalism

Among all political parties in India claiming to uphold Hindu nationalism, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is the most significant one. As a concept, Hindu nationalism has been defined as a feeling of pride in the ancient glory of the Hindu culture and traditions. At present, the BJP is the main articulator of this conception. Over the period of time, this party has become one of the largest political parties in the country. It has challenged the supremacy of the Indian National Congress which upholds a form of secular nationalism and held sway over the Indian politics for quite a long period.

As a concept, Hindu nationalism is centuries old but the way it has been linked with politics is a new phenomenon in the Indian politics. Formed in 1915, the Hindu Mahasabha was the first national political party with a Hindu nationalist ideology. The Hindu nationalist ideas also existed within the Indian National Congress but were “largely developed outside it” (Berglund, H., 2004)^[1].

The formation of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in 1925 marked the beginning of a broad movement with cultural, religious and political aims. After the independence, the movement strengthened itself within the political arena by supporting the formation of a new political party named the “Bharatiya Jana Sangh” (BJS). Until 1977, when the BJS was merged into the Janata Party, its political agenda was “mainly on religious and cultural issues like cow protection and the introduction of Hindi as a national language. Despite its nationalist ideology, it was never successful outside its traditional stronghold of northern and central India” (Berglund, H., 2004)^[1]. After its break-up with the Janata Party, the BJS was resurrected under the name of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Despite its dismal performance in the 1984 Lok Sabha elections, the BJP has gradually emerged as the largest political party in the Indian parliament. The party’s ideology and organization was perfectly suited to the new political climate of the early 1980’s. During these years, ethnicity and religion were frequently used factors to

divide the voters. The party was largely helped by the RSS and its extensive grass root network. At the national level, the party exploited two legal cases: the Shah Bano and the Ramjanmabhoomi-Babri Masjid.

The Hindu nationalism has historically been influenced by three main traditions: classical Hinduism, Hindu reformism and modern nationalism. The word “Hindu” did not figure in the classical texts of Hinduism. It had first “appear [ed] in Indian literature as late as in the 8th century AD. It was coined by Persian invaders, used by Arab historians and signified the people living east of the river Indus. Later, it acquired a religious and cultural meaning” (Berglund, H., 2004)^[1]. The Hindu nationalists base much of their ideological mobilization on classic Hinduism. They regard the *Vedas* as the core of their thought and recognize the *Puranas* and the traditional Hindu practices as important bearers of Hindu culture and religion.

During the 19th and 20th centuries, a large number of Hindu reformist movements against the practices of Sati, Caste system, Child marriage, etc. were launched. Among the reformers Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) was the initiator. His goal was to develop Hinduism free from superstition. He renounced the caste system, child marriage and *sati*. He founded the *Brahmo Samaj* in 1828. Later in the 19th century, Swami Dayanand Saraswati (1824-1883) founded a more aggressive reform movement, the *Arya Samaj*, in 1875 in Bombay. Dayanand based all his beliefs on the *Vedas*. The *Arya Samaj* promoted the nationalist elements in the Hindu reformism. Swami Dayanand was the first to stress the importance of using only nationally produced goods, i.e. the concept of *Swadeshi*. Swami Dayanand was “the first man to use the term *Swaraj*. He was the first to insist on people using only *Swadeshi* things manufactured in India and to discard foreign things. He was the first to recognize Hindi as the national language” (Jayaprasad, 1991)^[2, 5].

A number of other reform movements were founded in the late 19th century. Most notable among them was the Ramakrishna Mission (a largely non-political organization),

founded by Swami Vivekananda in 1897. He made great efforts to make Hinduism known in the West. The Theosophical Society in Madras, founded by Annie Besant, played an important role in the freedom movement. Both these movements emphasized the Hindu unity and contributed to Indian patriotism. Some of the basic tenets of the Hindu reformism became integral parts of Hindu nationalism and “the threat from the West, as well as from Islam, was vividly projected. For the Hindu nationalists, Hindu reformism increased the possibility of uniting all castes and sects against foreign influences” (Berglund, H., 2004) [1].

The struggles of independence in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries generated a spirit of keen Hindu revivalism. Hindu revivalism and philosophical idealism expressed themselves in two forms; leadership and scholarship. The first manifestation was the clear emergence of a number of great leaders. Among them, “Swami Dayananda, Ramkrishna, Vivekananda, Aurobindo Ghosh, Shradhanand, Madan Mohan Malaviya, Paramananda, V.D. Savarkar, Moonje, Dr. K.B. Hedgewar and Shyama Prasad Mookerjee were the outspoken leaders of the political and social interests of the Hindu community”. Through numerous research works, a section of scholars and teachers strengthened the faith in the achievements of ancient Hindus and provided consolation and self-confidence to the people who had been politically suppressed for a long time. R.G. Bhandarkar, Harprasad Sastri, Pandit Gurudatta, Brajendra Nath Seal, Lekharama, Surendranath Dasgupta, Benoy Kumar Sarkar, K.C. Bhattacharya and Dr. S. Radhakrishnan were some of the significant names (Jayaprasad, 1991) [2, 5].

In the late nineteenth century, Arya Samaj and its activities played a great role in the growth of Hindu Nationalism. Arya Samaj was not a political party but its ideological content was used for political purposes. Its many members were active in politics and some of them were within the Congress.

The Hindu Mahasabha

The Hindu Mahasabha was founded by V.D. Savarkar who had defined a Hindu as “a person who regards this land of Bharatvarsha from the Indus to the Seas, as his fatherland as well as his Holyland”. In Mahasabha terminology, Jains, Buddhists and Sikhs are offshoots of Hinduism and can be regarded as full citizens in a Hindu Raj. “Neither Muslims nor Christians could be expected to accept the “holy land” designation of Bharat-varsha” (Baxter, C., 1969) [3].

Origins of Hindu Mahasabha

The Muslim League was founded by a group of Muslim Leaders on December 30, 1906, in Dacca. The ‘aims and objects’ adopted by the League were: to promote feelings of loyalty among Muslims of India to the British government, and to remove any misconception between the Muslims and the British government; to protect and advance the political rights and interests of the Indian Muslims and to respectfully present their needs and aspirations to the Government; and to prevent the rise of any feeling of hostility among the Indian Muslims towards other communities. With this, thus, the first major ‘communal’ political party had emerged on the scene. It was communal in that “its membership was confined to one community, and its program was the furtherance of the

political and general well-being of that community. Nonetheless, the group also called for a non-hostile attitude towards other communities so long as this lack of hostility was in keeping with the basic objectives of the organization” (Baxter, C., 1969) [3]. The original programs of the Hindu Mahasabha followed the same lines. The roots of the organization can be traced to two early movements in Bengal and Punjab (Protest against partition of Bengal and *shuddhi* movement in Punjab). These two provinces and Maharashtra had provided much of the leadership to the Mahasabha.

Soon after the emergence of the Muslim league, the United Bengal Hindu Movement was formed in 1907. It came as a direct response to the founding of the Muslim League as well as a result of the turmoil in Bengal resulting from the partition of the province. The movement comprised a group of more moderate Hindus who were not in sympathy with the revolutionary activities of ardent nationalists led by Aurobindo Ghosh and others. The Punjab Hindu Sabha founded in 1907, also became the spear head of the movement that eventually led to the establishment of the Akhil Bharat Hindu Mahasabha. The Punjab Hindu Sabha had held five conferences from 1909 to 1914 at Lahore, Amritsar, Delhi, Ferozpur and Ambala. The membership of the Sabha was largely been confined to urban Arya Samajists. The Arya Samaj had played an important role not only for the Jana Sangh but also for the Mahasabha and the RSS in north India in general and Punjab in particular.

By 1914, the Congress had met three times in Lahore (1893, 1900 and 1909) and in each case many of the active members of the Reception Committee were from both the Punjab Hindu Sabha and Arya Samaj. During the 1906 session in Calcutta, a close relationship had emerged between Lala Lajpat Rai, Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Bipin Chandra Pal – “Lal-Bal-Pal”.

These contacts among the Hindu leaders had led to the formation of an all-India body to counteract the growing influence of the Muslim League in which all along with Mohammad Ali Jinnah, Muhammad Ali and Shaukat Ali were gaining importance. In December 1915, the Punjab Hindu Sabha sponsored a meeting at Allahabad in which an “All-India Hindu Mahasabha” was set up. The annual sessions of the Mahasabha and the Congress were generally held at same time and place. “In theory the Mahasabha was a forum within the Congress, in which Mahasabha members could express their views and work for the protection of Hindu interests, but in such a manner as not necessarily to be anti-Muslim” (Baxter, C., 1969) [3]. The Mahasabha strongly opposed the separate electorates granted to the Muslims by the Lucknow pact of 1916, which indicated the future demand of Mahasabha for a “one-man, one-vote” Constitution of India.

Some of the important leaders of the Mahasabha who were prominent in the Congress also were Lala Lajpat Rai and Madan Mohan Malaviya. The former continued his association with the Mahasabha till his death on November 17, 1928. Malaviya, who died on November 12, 1946, last presided over the Mahasabha at Patna in 1935.

In 1923 session at Banaras, the Mahasabha supported the programme ‘*shuddhi*’ (purification), the process of reconverting to Hinduism for persons who had left the fold. The movement was largely propagated mainly in the Punjab and North West Frontier Province. The Arya Samaj started it

as “purely religious propaganda, with political motives in the minds of only some of its members”. The most prominent of the Arya Samajist and Hindu Mahasabha leaders in the *shuddhi* movement was Swami Shraddhanand. The *shuddhi* process was immediately responded by the Muslims with riots and counter propaganda. Even more, there was opposition from within the Congress, of which Gandhiji was the principal guide.

In 1924, a series of communal riots occurred at many places: Delhi, Calcutta and Lucknow. The most serious riot had occurred in Kohat (Sept 9) in the North West Frontier Province. A united conference was called on September 26, 1924 in New Delhi by Hakim Ajmal Khan, a past Congress president; Maulana Muhammad Ali, the Khilafat leader, and Swami Shraddhanand. But, it failed to prevent the tide of communal hatredness and riots which continued during 1925 and 1926.

In a counter propaganda program the Muslims began the *tanzim* (organization) and *tabligh* (propaganda) which were missionary movements for reinforcement of faith.

The 1924 session of Mahasabha, under the presidency of Malaviya, was held at Belgaum and attended by Mahatma Gandhi, Muhammad and Shaikat Ali and Motilal Nehru passed two resolutions. The first resolution was about the elimination of untouchability and second to support direct elections without separate electorates or reservation of seats. The second resolution horrified the Muslims as they treated it as anti-Muslims. It was for the first time that the activities of the Hindu Mahasabha were given a political orientation. The purpose was not only the social and religious upliftment of Hindus but also to provide a platform to focus and express opinion on political problems.

On December 23, 1926, a Muslim murdered Swami Shraddhanand. In the midst of these disorders (conversion attempts, murder of Shraddhanand and rioting), the Mahasabha continued to hold its annual meetings. In these sessions enough care was taken off not to instigate Muslims. A large number of prominent Congress-men took part in the Mahasabha sessions. In the 1926 elections many moderate members of the Congress broke away and joined the Swarajist Party, including Pt. Motilal Nehru and Chittaranjan Das. Later, two other groups also broke away from the Congress. One was the Responsivist Cooperation Party (later as The India Nationalist Party) of Malaviya, N.C. Kelkar, B.S. Moonje and M. R. Jayakar. Interestingly all of them remained presidents of the Mahasabha. Another group was the Independent Congress Party, of which Lala Lajpat Rai was a key member. The Mahasabha gave its support to both the India Nationalist Party and the Independent Congress Party to oppose the Swarajist Party and its Pro-Muslim attitude.

Separation of the Mahasabha and the Congress

In the late 1920s the gap between the Congress and the Mahasabha had started to emerge. The reasons behind the gap were the death of Hindu chauvinists like Lajpat Rai, Shraddhanand and involvement of many people like Malaviya and Rajendra Prasad more with the Congress than the Mahasabha. As a result, the Mahasabha became very weak. However, it rekindled under the able leaderships of Dr. B.S. Moonje and Bhai Parmanand. During this period, it began its

journey as an “all-India Hindu Organisation, with strong, independent, bold and clear-cut policy, taking up matter which concerned whole Indian community and judging them primarily from the Hindu point of view” (Baxter, C., 1969)^[3]. The new leadership of the Mahasabha had direct relations with the Lal-Bal-Pal group of the Congress. Bhai Parmanand was closely associated with Lajpat Rai. Pal’s revolutionary group in Bengal was represented by Ashutosh Lahiry. The Maharashtra group included Tilak, Moonje, Jayakar, Kelkar and V.D. Savarkar. Most of them were Chitpawan Brahmins (Brahmin community living in Konkan region of western Maharashtra is known as Chitpawan (or Chitpavan or Konkanastha) Brahmins. In Sanskrit language, Chitpavan is preferred). Savarkar was the central personality in the Mahasabha from the time of his presidency (in 1937) until his retirement from politics (in 1948). He had demonstrated his intense Hindu nationalist feelings even during his school days. He organized a patriotic society at Fergusson College, Poona and on one occasion he arranged a rally addressed by Tilak. For the same reason he was expelled from the college. However, he was able to secure a scholarship to study in England.

In 1910, the Government of India exiled him first to the Andaman Islands and then to Ratnagiri, Maharashtra (Savarkar was arrested in London where he had taken part in the assassination plot of Curzon-Wyllie, an associate of the Secretary of state. For the reason, he spent 27 years in the jail (1910-1937). It was at Ratnagiri that he wrote *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu*, published in 1923. He was barred from political activities until 1937 by the government, when he became president of the Hindu Mahasabha.

In 1933, the Mahasabha session was held in Ajmer in the presidency of Parmanand. In the session he said: “Hindustan is the land of the Hindus alone, and Musalmans and Christians and other nations living in India are only our guests. They can live here as long as they wish to remain as guests” (Baxter, C., 1969)^[3]. A call for the eradication of Urdu, being a foreign language, was also raised during the session.

In 1937 elections of Central Assembly, the Mahasabha supported the Congress Nationalist Party winning thirteen seats as compared to 44 seats of the Congress. In the North West Frontier Province in 1937 and later in Bengal, the Mahasabha got an opportunity to join the cabinets.

In 1937, Savarkar was elected president of the Mahasabha at Ahmadabad. He headed the Mahasabha consecutively for about seven years (1937-1943). He stepped down in 1943 due to ill-health and gave way to Shyama Prasad Mookerjee. The World War II brought the resignation of the Congress ministries as they were not consulted before declaring war on behalf of India. On this instance, the Mahasabha extended general support to the British to take advantage of the prevailing crisis. On November 15, 1939, the Mahasabha further resolved that “The British Government must bear in mind that India can never extend a willing cooperation unless she felt that the cause of her freedom was likely to be served in a substantial measure by offering responsive cooperation” (Baxter, C., 1969)^[3].

The Quit India Movement organized by the Congress in 1942 was also opposed by the Mahasabha. A resolution was passed in a Working Committee held on August 31, 1942, asking all

Mahasabites to remain at their jobs. When, the Congress leaders were imprisoned by the Government, the Mahasabha assumed the leadership of all political parties in the country. There was sizeable increase in its membership during this period. However, the gains of the Mahasabha during this period were short lived. As the Congress leaders were freed, they again attracted the allegiance of vast majority of Hindus. While the League was moving towards partition and had adopted the Pakistan Resolution in Lahore in 1940, the Mahasabha was emphasizing the indivisibility of India and the democratic solution of 'one man-one vote'. With the arrival of Lord Mountbatten in India, the process of both independence and that of partition speeded up. On June 3, 1947, Mountbatten announced his plan for independence and partition.

Mahasabha after the Independence

From November 30 to December 1, 1947 the working committee of the Mahasabha met in New Delhi to decide the future course of the party. For the purpose, a committee was appointed to reorient the policy of the Mahasabha to make it more effective as a progressive organ in social, economic and political fields and uplift the Indian masses, parties and organizations with similar objectives. Before the committee could report, an event shocked the Mahasabha to its very foundations. On January 30, 1948, Nathuram Godse (a Chitpawan Brahmin), assassinated Mahatma Gandhi when he was going (Birla House, New Delhi) for his evening prayer meeting. Previously, Godse had some connections with the Mahasabha (an office-bearer) and the RSS. He was "an ex-member of the RSS...but resigned in 1934, when Hedgewar refused to take the RSS into direct political activity" (Jha, S. C., 1989). After the said event, the RSS was banned and the Mahasabha was placed under severe restrictions by the Government of India. Many leaders of the Mahasabha were arrested under the Preventive Detention Act. After extensive efforts it was found that neither the Mahasabha nor the RSS conspired with Godse. It is interesting to note that during the same period, vice-president of the Mahasabha, Mookerjee, remained a member of the Nehru Cabinet as minister of Industries and Supplies and no one had accused him of complicity in the murder. Even before the assassination, Mookerjee had advised the Mahasabha to leave politics and devote itself to social work.

In the Working Committee meeting on Feb. 14, 1948 Mookerjee wished the party to drop its communal membership requirement and open it to all communities. On August 8, 1948, the Working Committee met to consider Mookerjee's advice. The president of Mahasabha, Bhopatkar, opposed Mookerjee on all points. The Working Committee supported Bhopatkar and retained the communal character of the Mahasabha. On this account, Mookerjee resigned from the membership of the Mahasabha in December, 1948, which was accepted on May 7, 1949. The exit of Mookerjee from the Mahasabha lost its only effective spokesman and many of its supporters to the Jana Sangh, later founded by Mookerjee.

Conclusion

In the concluding remarks it was assessed that the Hindu Nationalism and the Hindu Mahasabha worked as the

organizational base for the present largest as well as the ruling party BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) and the former BJS (Bharatiya Jana Sangh). The hindu reformist and other movements promoting nationalist feelings manifested the emergence of a number of great leaders such as, Swami Dayananda, Ramkrishna, Vivekananda, Aurobindo Ghosh, Shradhanand, Madan Mohan Malaviya, Paramananda, V.D. Savarkar, Moonje, Dr. K.B. Hedgewar and Shyama Prasad Mookerjee. Later, V.D. Savarkar founded the Hindu Mahasabha and Shyama Prasad Mookerjee founded the BJS presently known as BJP.

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