

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) & the Politics of Conservatism in India

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Three Paradoxes

Hypothesis 1

Dominant one-party system ultimately gives rise to the emergence of polar-opposite political opposition.

Hypothesis 2

- Conservative parties turn moderate once they assume power.

Hypothesis 3

- Conservative parties are harbingers of coalitional politics.

Evolutionary Politics

Need to explore the circumstances behind its evolution.

- Dominant one-party system (Duverger 1968).
- Post-colonial inclusive politics.
- Marginalisation of the opposition.
- The ideological inheritance
- Bharatiya Jan Sangh
- Trauma of partition

Electoral radicalism

Lack of unity is the root cause of all the troubles of the Hindus and the BJP is the answer to that disunity.

Parliamentary Elections

Seats Won

● 1984	-	2
● 1984	-	86
● 1991	-	120
● 1996	-	182

Hindu Right and its Ideology

- Savarkar (territorial nationalism)
- Golwalkar (racial & cultural purity)
- Advani (homogenous religious identity)

Intellectual Inheritance

- Orientalist distinction between “us” and “them”
- The colonial demarcation of inherited identity
- Belief in a golden (Hindu) past
- Exclusion of the voice of opposition and the consolidation of conservative thinking.

Philosophical Foundations

- Discourse of inherited legitimacy
- Identity-based politics
- Majoritarian democratic framework
- Conflation of Hindu space with national space

The followers / cadres / card holders

- Party and patriotism
- Spatial belonging and segregation
- Syncretic hybridity among the loosely defined Hindus
- Cultural affinity
- Purity vs. pollution

From Cow-belt to the Capital

Explaining BJP's Electoral Success

- From regional to national politics
- Political Organisation
- Consolidation of the Hindu Middle Class
- Coalition Politics
- Electoral fatigue with dominant one party rule (i.e. Congress)

Articulation of Identity

- Successful Spatial Strategies (Deshpande 1998).
- Articulation of physical-material and mental imaginative of social space.
- Conflation of the social with the political space.

Appeal & Attraction

- Message of change
- Fatigue with the Congress Party
- Failure of secularism
- Appeal to politically conscious Hindu middle class

Objectives

- Progressive occupation and control of the space.
- Re-crafting it within the narrative of homogenous religious identity.
- Denial of heterogeneity of the inherited socio-political and religious heritage.

Challenges to Spatial Transformation

- Ethno-linguistic profile
- Cultural commitment to heterogeneity
- Particularisation of BJP's north-Indian identity

Qualitative Contribution

Economy

- Stepping away from 'license-permit-quota raj'.
- Decoupling from the socialist economic system.
- Reintegrating the economy into the global economic structure.

People-centered reform

Nationalist parties are more mindful of their roles once they are in power (???)

Religious Arena

- Greater communal cohesion while in power.
- End of the politics of “vote bank”

Economic Arena

- Poverty eradication programme
- Facilitation of individual wealth creation

Party reform

Political Arena

Politics of bipartisanship

- Federal coalitional politics

(Inter-party alliance)

- Facilitation of regional parties

(Successful alliance politics)

Foreign Policy

Paradox of conservatism

From ambiguity to transparency:

BJP's worldview through a realist lens.

- My enemy's enemy is my friend'
- Hindu diaspora's support to nationalist agenda

Outcome....

- Consolidation of India's external image.
- Greater bilateral co-operation.
- Peace with the arch-rival / enemy Pakistan.
- Acceptance of wider modernity project
- Adhering to rules and goals of globalisation

Politics of Violence

- BJP's early political trajectory to power in India has been vested in a particular geography of violence (Oza 2007: 153).
- Rhetoric and popular participation
- Constituency of Hindu reactionary politics

Electoral engineering through violence

- Discourse on 'justified revenge'.
- Hindu-Muslim riots
- Hindu-Christian riots

Outcome...

Do parties which come to power through ballot continue to follow a path of violence following their election / assumption of power?

Pre-election rhetoric and post-election behaviour.

National conciliation and localized violence

Three Pointers

- First, unlike its counterparts elsewhere, the BJP is constantly evolving in its policy directions and approaches and appear to have gone from espousing extremist nationalism to moderate inclusion.
- Second, the BJP rather than being treated as a fascist fringe has now broadened its base by attracting supporters from across the political, religious and identity divide.
- Third, The new conservatism of the BJP seems to be committed to national-self-reliance and pro-poor.

And...

- Conservative parties only appear at a time of national crisis.
- Once been in government they find it hard to return to power.
- Nationalists moderate their ideology / position following their assumption of office.
- The minority conservatives continue with violent agenda

Future of Conservatism / the BJP

- Political Wilderness or Consolidation (2000-2008).
- Return of the reformed natives?
- Leadership and ideological questions
- Policy challenges (What more / new can they offer?)

Key Questions...

- What do the rise and growth of right-wing conservative parties in democracies tell us?
- Why do they appear in the political systems with a healthy democratic experience?
- What makes them particularly attractive to the electorate?

They appear because...

- Of the continuation of dominant one party system.
- Their message may be inherently negative – but they nonetheless invigorate the political system.
- Appear in times of deep national crisis.
- Good for democracy?
- Become lessons for the electorate not to lend their support in future.