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**The Saffronisation of Civil Society -
A Study of Hindu Nationalism and Organisational Life in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh**

1. INTRODUCTION

Political forces mobilising on the basis of caste, ethnicity and religion have for the last decade seriously threatened Indian secular democracy. Hindu nationalist forces, strongly supportive of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), have posed the most powerful challenge. This challenge presents a problem strongly related to the issues of democratisation and development in the Third World. Every multi-cultural state needs to accommodate conflicting demands from various groups, both constitutionally and in its daily administration, in order to guarantee the respect for democratic rights and to facilitate social and economic development. The Indian solution has been a secular democracy, based on the principle of equal treatment of all religions. The BJP argues for a Hindu state, with the constitution and the political institutions based on Hindu values and traditions. It was the leading party in the coalition government that lost the elections in 2004, and despite this loss it continues to be a dominant force within Indian politics.

The party is a two-faced organisation with both democratic and non-democratic features. The riots in Gujarat in March, claiming more than 800 lives, is only one example of how parts of the Hindu nationalist movement use political violence with the intent of demonstrating Hindu supremacy over the national minorities. This type of violence has been on the agenda of the Hindu nationalist movement ever since its formation, but has been combined with more accepted forms of activities within civil society. The movement has for more than half a century been engaged in social welfare, education, health care etc., and its political wing - the BJP - has generally worked through legal means. The practice of political violence is part of a Hindu nationalist tradition, which in the Indian debate is often labelled "fascist".

While the political success of the Hindu nationalist forces are beyond doubt and has been studied by both Indian and foreign scholars, the impact on civil society relations has drawn less of attention. Despite this, much of the work carried out by the Hindu nationalist movement aims not for changes on a political level, but rather for a more general change in the mind-set of the Hindu majority. This is especially relevant regarding the relations to the

religious and ethnic minorities. The best example is perhaps the work of the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) which has ever since its formation in 1925, been working with cultural issues, trying to steer clear of party politics. While the RSS has always had strong links with the dominant Hindu nationalist parties, its reluctance to be directly involved in every day politics must be seen as a strategy to advance the Hindu nationalist cause. Although aware of the value of its connection to the BJP (previously the Jana Sangh), the RSS and many other organizations choose to work within the civil society to achieve its goals of Hindu supremacy. Their work is conducted in cooperation with the BJP, but is more of a long-term project than the election-focussed party politics. The RSS has for almost eighty years been working to unite all Hindus under the Hindu nationalist flag, constantly trying to strengthen the Hindu culture as defined by the movements chief ideologues: V. D. Savarkar and M. S. Golwalkar.

Despite the connection with the BJP and other Hindu nationalist parties, this work may be analyzed separate from the developments within party politics. Changes definitely took place also during the periods when the success of the BJP and the Jana Sangh was very limited, while the strong showings of the BJP in the last decades may be explained by a host of factors, not only on a general increase in the influence of the Hindu nationalist movement. While some dominant issues within Indian politics do suggest a strong linkage between the electoral success of the BJP and the increased Hindu nationalist presence in the civil society, such as the Ayodhya movement, this study is an attempt to more thoroughly analyze this linkage. What has been the impact of the Hindu nationalist movement within civil society? While encountering stiff resistance from other segments of the Indian civil society, the BJP has during its successful campaigns drawn on both its fascist tradition, as well as a democratic practice. How do the secular forces of Indian civil society counter this challenge? These processes are studied within two different areas: The women's movement and the human rights movement.

The project aims for a broad analysis of local civil society and a presentation of the current Hindu nationalist challenge. The effects of its political practices will be addressed by drawing on previous research on the ideological aspects of the BJP, and by analysing the interplay between various factions of the Hindu nationalist movement in the local setting. The BJP's definition of the role of women in society differs strongly from that of the mainstream of the women's movement. The project catches this conflict by analysing the work of women's rights organisations outside the Hindu nationalist fold. Special attention will be given to a recent incident in Varanasi politics: The attempted shooting of Deepa Mehta's film "Water", in which local civil society was engaged in a violent conflict concerning religious and national sentiments versus freedom of speech.

The study is connected to a more general debate on democracy in the third world. A wave of democratisation has swept across primarily Asia and Africa, adding to the previous changes in Latin America. Having taken the step from authoritarianism to at least a formal democracy, these societies now face an even more difficult challenge: To develop into consolidated and mature democracies, despite often weak economies and various forms of ethnic and religious segmentation. Within both social science and international development aid, the necessity of stable democratic rule is emphasised as a prerequisite for sustainable economic and social development. The relations that various groups and organisations form with the state, but also with other actors within civil society itself, are crucial in the understanding of these processes. This is equally true for third world countries with strong democratic traditions, India being a case in point, where democracy has to be constantly reinvigorated and developed in order to fight off threats against its basic tenets as well as to address inequalities within society. With its analysis of popular participation in the local democratic process, the project is expected to contribute to the understanding of the processes leading to a sustained democratisation.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND EARLIER WRITINGS

2.1. Civil society

The concept "civil society" has been brought back to life after a long time in the shadows. Drawing mainly on the experience of the opposition movement in East Europe, political theorist re-launched the concept in the 1980s, claiming that civil society worked as a counterforce to an oppressive state, and constituted the arena where democracy was essentially built. In the 1990s the concept was increasingly put to use also in the debate concerning democratisation in both developed and developing democracies. In a Third World context, the importance of a functioning civil society has been acknowledged in analyses of both transitions to democratic rule as well as in the consolidation of democracy. Although a concept largely associated with western political philosophy and liberal theory, the debate on the role of civil society in the popular struggle for democratisation in the third world has recently witnessed a significant growth, also among scholars who do not share a liberal view on politics and development (Cohen and Arato 1992). Gordon White defines civil society after excluding the private sphere of the family, and describes the participants in this civil society as associations, which "...are separate from the state, enjoy autonomy in relation to the state and are formed voluntarily by members of society to protect or extend their interests and values" (White 1994: 379).

Civil society is often seen as the key to a successful democratisation, as open, pluralist and internally democratic groups organise the citizens as a counter weight to the state. In this

project, the definition of civil society is more open, defining it as a public arena outside the immediate control of the state. It includes links between individual citizens as well as formal and informal associations of citizens. We reject the notion of civil society as being by definition favourable of political democracy, and we accept that also groups which lack openness and pluralism may be considered to be part of civil society, including associations formed on the basis of primordial identities, such as religion, caste and ethnicity.

In our specific case the Hindu nationalist movement uses civil society to strengthen Hindu identity and to weaken the position of the minorities, undermining the secular Indian democracy. However, the Hindu nationalist challenge can be expected to evoke resistance from other groups within civil society and efforts to defend democracy and minority rights. The connection between civil society and democratisation then depends on the respective strength of the Hindu nationalist forces and its adversaries within civil society.

2.1.1. Civil Society in India

Popular mobilisation within the Indian civil society was evident already in the colonial period, largely connected to the anti-colonial struggle. However, many observers point out that both the Indian state and Indian civil society differ from that of the west. Indian civil society is considered to be weak as an autonomous sphere, due to the strong position of the state and the fact that power relations within other spheres permeate the civil society. According to Partha Chatterjee, the ideal of both the modern state and civil society was planted into India by colonial rule, resulting in a civil society, which is based on the various communities rather than the individual citizen (Chatterjee 1993: 230-237). These communities are based on religion, caste or ethnicity and are now at the centre of political mobilisation, which involves political parties as well as other parts of Indian civil society. Amir Ali suggests that the cementing of the community-based identities, which were formed during the colonial period and sustained after independence, obstructs a democratisation of Indian society, and refers to the current Hindu nationalist challenge as a case in point. (Ali 2001).

Associational life grew stronger in connection with and after the years of Emergency rule 1975-1977, and although the political impact is contested, there is no doubt that the activity within civil society has increased. Traditionally strong categories have been trade unions, caste movements and peasant movements. Recent decades have seen a growth also of "new social movements", including women's organisation and environmental groups (Omvedt 1998). Some scholars have also begun to analyse social movements within the framework of civil society theory (Chandoke 1995, Kothari 1996, Blomkvist 2001).

2.2. Hindu Nationalism as Political Theory

Hindu nationalism emphasises the cultural content of Hinduism, rather than the religious, and the party argues for a Hindu state in which also the various minorities must respect Hindu values and traditions. In formulating the research problem, I draw on research conducted on the BJP in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, 1993-1999, presented in my dissertation (Berglund 2000). The BJP has never gained more than 26% of the national vote, but through alliances on both national and state level it was able to form a government in 1998, as well as to stay in power after the 1999 elections. The party constitutes the political wing of a broader Hindu nationalist movement, which includes a large number of cultural and religious associations, most notably the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), formed in 1925, and the VHP (Vishva Hindu Parishad), formed in 1964, as well as trade unions, student organisations, women's organisations, and various other associations. The banners and clothes of some of the most devoted activists are often of a saffron, yellow colour, and the movement is sometimes described as the "saffron Wave", hence the concept of "saffronisation".

To some extent the fascist tendencies of the BJP is an effect of Hindu nationalist ideology itself. The label "fascist" should however only be used in describing a non-democratic and violent political practice, as is common in the Indian debate on the BJP. Theoretically, Hindu nationalism is instead best defined as a kind of cultural nationalism. It opposes liberal or territorial definitions of the nation, which focuses on the respect of individual rights, rather than various collective identities. Cultural nationalism rejects liberal individualism and instead argues that every nation and state should let its cultural roots guide its political identity. A thorough analysis of the ideology of the BJP is found in my dissertation where Hindu nationalism is defined as cultural nationalist and mono-communitarian (Berglund: 2000). The latter concept is derived from the party's demands for an increased "hinduisation" of Indian society, where the cultural and religious identity of the Hindu community is put forward on the expense of the minorities.

The Hindu nationalists have been organised politically primarily in Bharatiya Jana Sangh, which in 1980 was transformed to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Both the political theory and practice of the Hindu nationalist movement is a challenge to the existing form of Indian secular democracy. The party is highly critical of what it calls the "pseudo-secular" model, largely attributed to liberal and socialist ideas within the Congress and the Indian left. This model is basically an Indian interpretation of a western concept of secularism. In the Indian version, secularism is not defined as the full separation of state and religion, but rather as the equal treatment of all religions. In practice this has developed into a system in which all citizens are treated equal, with some important exceptions. One such exception is the civil

code where different laws apply to the various communities, including issues such as marriage, divorce and adoption. To the Hindu nationalists this is an example of what they call a "pseudo-secular" practice, in which special rights are extended to the minorities. In the 1980s and 1990s a number of different campaigns were pursued with the intent of strengthening the cultural and political identity of the Hindus, often by targeting the Muslims as a pampered minority. The most important campaign was the Ram Janmabhoomi movement which centred around a conflict in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, where a Hindu temple marking the birth place of the Hindu god Ram was allegedly destroyed and replaced by a mosque in the 16th century. While no historical or archaeological proof of such a temple exists, the movement demanded the shifting of the mosque, the Babri Masjid, in order to enable the construction of a new temple. The campaign culminated in December 1992 when the Babri Masjid was attacked and finally destroyed, followed by Hindu-Muslim riots all over India, claiming more than 2,000 lives.

While the campaign has to some extent hurt the democratic credibility of the BJP, there is no doubt that it at least in the short run gained politically from it. Many of its more radical demands has now been dropped from its agenda, but this must be seen largely as a tactical manoeuvre in order to satisfy their partners in the coalition government. As was tragically displayed in the recent riots in Gujarat, the Ayodhya issue is still very much alive, showing that the current coalition government is by no means able to control the fascist tendencies of the Hindu nationalist movement. Instead, the riots are an example of how the Hindu nationalist challenge persists, and that it continues to challenge Indian secularism and Indian democracy itself.

2.3. Hindu nationalism in Indian civil society

The Hindu nationalist challenge is manifested in a number of ways. Grass root groups within health care, education, gender awareness etc work side by side with militant and violent prone elements, displaying the movement's strange mix of democratic and fascist traditions. These two traditions are in conflict, although the party often uses them interchangeably in order to increase its influence. But this is not necessarily a smooth process. A genuine conflict between these practices exists, and the outcome of this struggle is never fully predictable. The shooting of Deepa Mehta's "Water" is a case in point, where the initial reaction from the BJP was to allow the production of the film, and where the party discouraged the rest of the movement from any campaigning. Despite this, local Hindu nationalist groups managed to stop the shooting, much to the dismay of the national leaders.

The movement has its own women's organisations, and has during the last decade been very active in redefining the role of the Indian woman (Sarkar and Butalia 1995, Basu 1999). The rights of women are discussed in relation to a traditional Hindu culture, very different from the ideals of the liberal and progressive women's movement (Purushothaman 1998, Ray 1999, Kalpagam 2000). On the issue of human rights, the movement is directed by its generally negative position on minority rights. BJP advocates a human rights charter based on Hindu culture and tradition, requiring the minorities to adapt or face the consequences (Human Rights Watch 2000, Nirmal 2000). The BJP is pressing ahead with its agenda on women's issues and human rights, but its attempt to convert electoral success into a strengthened position is met with strong resistance. Civil society is one arena in which Hindu nationalism struggles against more progressive and secular ideas, using both the brute force of its fascist storm troops, as well as democratic methods.

Despite the high standards of Indian social science and the attention the emerging Hindu right has received, Hindu nationalism and civil society is still an under-studied area. As pointed out above, the research on Indian civil society is limited but growing. Regarding the Hindu nationalist movement a number of comprehensive studies exist (Jaffrelot 1996, Hansen 1999, Ghosh 1999). Also the supporting groups RSS and VHP have been studied (Damle and Andersen 1987, Hellman 1993). Regarding the role of the movement within civil society, a vast number of articles and books have been presented, usually emphasising its negative role in communal riots. This project will consider both the fascist and the democratic aspects of the movement, as well as the interplay between them. The outcome of this process forms the Hindu nationalist challenge, which is manifested in local civil society, where it draws support but also provokes resistance. The project should enable us to get a better picture of the formation of both the Hindu nationalist challenge and its opposition within civil society, thereby improving our understanding of the democratisation process.

3. THE FIELD WORK

The study will be conducted in the city of Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, in which the BJP has dominated politics for the last two decades the 1980s, much helped by its agitation around the Ayodhya issue. It has formed the government at state level on several occasions, but is facing strong opposition from two largely caste-based parties: the Samajvadi Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party. The city of Varanasi has a population of more than one million, with a Hindu majority and a Muslim minority of roughly 20%. Varanasi is a religious centre of great importance for Hindus, but also Muslims, and the urban life is in many senses more traditional than in other major cities in Uttar Pradesh, with little industrialisation and a domination of traditional small-scale business such as the sari trade.

3.1. Women's rights in Varanasi

A number of Hindu nationalist organisations work with women's rights. Examples of groups that have already been contacted for this project are *Rashtriya Sevika Samita* (National Women Workers Council), *Vanbasi Kayan Sangh* (The Welfare Association for the Tribals) and women's wing of the BJP, the *Mahila Morcha*. Interviews with representatives and members of these groups will enable us to understand the Hindu nationalist challenge also from within the movement. This part of the study will be greatly helped by the contacts established with the party during my last project in the city.

The reactions to the Hindu nationalist challenge will be recorded through interviews with representatives of groups that are outside the Hindu nationalist fold. How is the Hindu nationalist challenge perceived? Has it been successful? How has the resistance against it been organised? During a planning trip to Varanasi in January this year a number of suitable organisations were identified, preliminary interviews with representatives of some groups were also conducted. Within the field of women's right the network SAMANVAY was formed in 1999 as a platform for co-operation amongst groups working for women's rights. The network is explicitly non-political, in the sense that the various groups should not be affiliated to or influenced by any political party. SAMANVAY includes roughly twenty different groups which meet regularly to discuss current problems and to co-ordinate their efforts. The type of work carried out vary from group to group, and the network is a good basis for investigating both the possible success of the BJP in influencing civil society, as well as reactions against this challenge.

3.2 The "Water" incident - religious sentiments versus freedom of speech?

Deepa Mehta's film "Water" discusses the role of Indian women, more specifically the poor living conditions of the Hindu widows that traditionally gather in Varanasi. The film describes the lives of these widows in the 1930s, and the script was approved for shooting by the national censor board. Just before the shooting started, a campaign against Deepa Mehta's presentation of Hinduism was organised by groups closely related to the RSS. The protests soon turned violent, and when the shooting started the film crew was attacked and the decor destroyed. A large number of organisations, especially women's organisations, came out in favour of Deepa Mehta, arguing that she had the right to express her views on the matter, and that the protests were examples of a patriarchal behaviour. The protest intensified and despite the permission initially given, the local authorities decided to stop the shooting, claiming that they could not guarantee the safety of the film crew.

The "Water" incident includes issues of ideological importance to the Hindu nationalist movement. Most important was the allegedly negative presentation of Hindu religion and society. Since the film crew was mainly non-Indian, and the film was expected draw largely an international audience, the image of India and Hinduism was considered to be at stake. Furthermore, the fact that the shooting took place in a holy city and at the banks of the holy river Ganga was interpreted as a challenge to Hindu supremacy. The issue of freedom of speech was according to the protesters irrelevant, showing the non-democratic streak of Hindu nationalism. The matter was further complicated by the fact that the national government was at the time led by the BJP, and that the party at national level accepted the shooting. The incident allows us to study how these non-democratic forces were mobilised, and why they were able to dominate the rest of the movement. The interviews in the project will be open-ended, and conducted at all levels of the organisations. If needed, interpreters will be used.

4. CO-OPERATING RESEARCHERS

This project has been developed within the framework of PODSU (Politics Of Development, Stockholm University), and its second research programme "Citizenship, Interests and Civil Society". PODSU has since its formation in 1995 received support for its research environment from Sida/SAREC, and a new PODSU programme will be launched from 2003, still with the focus on Third World democratisation. Strong emphasis will be on international co-operation and the rejuvenation of the research group, and this research project is an important part of PODSU's strategy for future capacity building at Stockholm University.

The fieldwork in connection with my dissertation was conducted in collaboration with Prof. Rajani Ranjan Jha, and Prof. Chandrakala Padia, Department of Political Science, Banaras Hindu University (BHU), Varanasi.

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