

## *Hindutva Discourse and Sanskritisation Syndrome: Understanding the Implications of Globalisation in India*

**M. N. Panini**  
Centre for the Study of Social Systems  
Jawaharlal Nehru University  
New Delhi

This paper attempts to account for the dramatic ascendance of the ideology of Hindutva to the centre of national discourse in India by upstaging the ideologies of equality and social justice that, till the late 1980s, held sway over politics. It is possible to trace the genealogy of this startling turnaround to the rivalry between the Akali Dal and the Congress Party in Punjab in the 1980s that pushed the parties to court Sikh religious leaders who set the political agenda of the State. Even as the Khalistan movement that demanded a separate Sikh state petered out, the Supreme Court judgement over maintenance to be given to the Muslim divorcee Shah Bano by her former husband incensed Muslims who viewed it as an unwarranted interference in the interpretation of Muslim personal law. In deference to the popular feelings of Muslims, the government amended the Muslim Personal Law to bring it in accord with the mainstream interpretation of the Shariyat.

As the Shah Bano controversy died down, a seemingly innocuous district court's order reversing a decision it had handed out decades earlier locking the gates of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya opened a window of opportunity for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to bring its agenda of Hindutva to the forefront of Indian politics. The court's decision in effect allowed Hindus to worship the icon of Lord Rama that had mysteriously appeared inside—an event that had led to the court's decision to lock the gates of the Masjid in the first place. Some Hindus claimed that the first Moghul emperor Babur had ordered his deputy to bring down a temple that had stood on the sacred site of Lord Rama's birth to build a mosque that came to be known as the Babri Masjid. Some Hindus wanted to avenge this disgrace to Hinduism by acquiring the sacred land and rebuilding the temple even as the Muslims suspected that the legend of Babri Masjid was a cleverly inserted by Hindu fanatics to attack Muslim interests.

Some cynical observers point out that the district court's decision to unlock the gates of the Masjid was prompted by Rajiv Gandhi's advisers who were desperately looking for ways of winning over Hindu voters who felt let down by the Congress party's 'appeasement' of the minorities. Although the gates were opened during Rajiv Gandhi's tenure as Prime Minister, it was the BJP that benefited from the event. The BJP together with other organisations spawned by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Bajarang Dal took advantage of this dispute to effectively subvert the 'secular' agenda of backward class politics and of peasant movements that had in 1989 threatened to marginalize the party and its ideology. The BJP withdrew support to the Janata Dal government that had extended reservations of jobs in the government to the backward classes and its leader Lal Krishna Advani launched his Rath Yatra to mobilise Hindus in favour of his campaign to

'liberate' Rama's birth place. His campaign culminated in the destruction of the Babri Masjid on December 6, 1992 by rampaging mobs that had been mobilised at Ayodhya. The destruction of the Masjid drew worldwide condemnation from Muslim countries and led to widespread Muslim riots followed by Hindu-Muslim riots in India. In 1994 some of the alienated Muslims retaliated by carrying out a series of bomb explosions in Mumbai killing several innocent people. These explosions led to a backlash of riots orchestrated by some of the right wing organisations thereby further sharpening Hindu-Muslim antagonism in the country.

The environment of mutual suspicions and antagonism between the Hindus and Muslims created by the Ayodhya campaign has served the BJP well; the party's ideology of Hindutva has been able to erode the votebanks of Dalits (Scheduled Castes), of Scheduled Tribes and of the Backward Classes at the expense of demonising and alienating the Muslims. This was evident in the riots triggered off on February 29, 2002 by the massacre of about 150 passengers travelling in a train carrying pilgrims returning from a VHP organised ritual in connection with the construction of the temple for Rama on the disputed site at Ayodhya. The following day the backlash against the Muslims was severe, brutal and widespread as media reports suggested the collusion of the administration and the police in the mob atrocities and brutal killings of innocent Muslims. The 'pogrom' of killing and looting continued unabated for nearly three months; Muslims even in the rural areas of Gujarat became targets of frenzied mobs.

The Gujarat riots resulted in the death of more than a thousand Muslims; it set off worldwide condemnation of the State government for its inaction. The Human Rights Commission of India sent a team to investigate into the riots and published a report condemning the inaction of the government and police on their inability to curb violence and maintain law and order. It also hinted at the leading role of some of the leaders of right wing parties and of the cadres of VHP and Bajrang Dal in directing mob attacks. The Gujarat government came in for severe criticisms in the Parliament as several MPs demanded the ouster the government and the imposition of President's rule in the State. There was widespread disapproval and condemnation of the Gujarat incidents in the other States of the country. Even the Prime Minister who visited Ahmedabad after the riots pulled up the Chief Minister to fulfil his 'rajdharma' although he later came out with a strong statement in the Chief Minister's defence. Some observers feared that the riots might spread to other States' fortunately their fears turned out to be unfounded as several non governmental organisations and other voluntary bodies organised rallies and demonstrations in protest against the killings in Gujarat. The Confederation of Indian Industries too expressed its unhappiness but later it reversed its stand.

The criticisms, however, left the government unfazed and unapologetic. In fact, the BJP, the ruling party in the State felt smug about its prospects and called for early elections to the State assembly. The elections held after over a year proved the BJP right; the party, instead of being punished by the electorate got an overwhelming approval from the electorate. The elections proved beyond doubt that Hindutva ideology had acquired mass appeal; the BJP leader and Chief

Minister Mr Narendra Modi who led the party's election campaign with a strong and aggressive advocacy of Hindutva virtually became a hero of the masses. Under such circumstances, it is understandable that the leaders of the Congress party which was regarded as providing a credible opposition to the BJP had to visit important temples in the State to ensure that the Hindu voters were not alienated. The Congress party's advocacy of secularism turned out to be a campaign for 'soft Hindutva' as several acute observers noted. In spite of its 'soft Hindutva' campaign, the party lost even the seats that it had won in the previous elections. This 'soft Hindutva' posture is, however, not new for Congress—Rajiv Gandhi launched his party's campaign in the General Elections of 1989 from the Ayodhya town to gain the support of the Hindu voters.

The VHP's campaign of Hindutva is not only directed against Islam but also against Christianity. The VHP and the Bajrang Dal have been violently opposing missionary activities especially in the tribal areas. They were involved in violent skirmishes with the Christian organisations and the missionaries the most infamous being the brutal killing of the Missionary Staines and his sons by setting fire to the jeep in which they were sleeping in the night. The VHP is now setting up schools and service centres in the tribal areas to preach Hinduism and to indoctrinate children and youth in the Hindutva ideology.

The aggressive Hindutva campaign has created a sense of insecurity among the Muslims and Christians. Fearing the loss of their collective identities they have responded by trying to be better or more pious Muslims or Christians and have been keen on asserting the differences that set them apart. In response to aggressive Hindutva propaganda fundamentalist trends in Islam are gaining popular support. Similar trends are noticed in Christianity as well. As a consequence, religion and religious issues have become amplified in the secular realm of politics as well. It is not only the Congress party that has become sensitive to popular religious sentiments by adopting a 'soft Hindutva' stand; even left secular parties have changed their world views drastically. Far from being hostile to religious sentiments, they display a new respect for religious sensibilities even when they may clash with progressive, rational trends. The BJP propaganda on Hindutva succeeded so much that even the left parties did not come to the support of their beleaguered secular sympathisers when they were attacked for denigrating the divine pair of Sita and Rama by depicting them as siblings as mentioned in a Jaina interpretation of Ramayan to highlight the variety interpretations of tradition that form the Indian heritage. Progressive and secular parties in the country today are careful not to allow themselves to be depicted as opposed to Hinduism in their zealous articulation of secular ideals and in their condemnation of the BJP/VHP ideologies. Hence, pro-Hindutva organisations such as the Bajrang Dal and Shiv Sena have now gained the social space to send a mere handful of members of their cadres to dig up cricket pitches, ransack libraries and art galleries in broad daylight to avenge their imagined wrongs on their Hindutva sensibilities and interests. These organisations take on the role of moral police by openly using force and threatening urban college-going youth from celebrating Valentine Day. It is astonishing that political parties choose to remain silent spectators of such blatant violation of law, let alone challenge such vulgar displays of terror tactics.

Having yielded space to the Hindutva forces, the only way they can recover some lost ground with the minorities is to pander to the interests of reactionary groups among them. Thus in November 2003 the left front government of West Bengal banned the Bangladeshi author Taslima Haider's book *Dwikhondita* because it is alleged to have hurt the sentiments of the Muslims.

For social scientists, the rise of Hindutva and right wing ideologies in general and the Gujarat riots in particular pose a formidable new challenge. The challenge is in accounting for the sudden right ward swing in the social, cultural and political processes that Hindutva ideology has caused. It is important to grasp the legitimacy that the religious idiom has gained in politics and secular social life. The flip side of this issue is the erosion of credibility of secular and progressive ideas and ideologies in South Asia. I make an attempt here to investigate the internal societal dynamics and the effects of globalisation to obtain a fuller and clearer picture of processes of social change in South Asia.