Just What Would BJP Rule Mean For Hinduism?
Category : July 1996
Published by Anonymous on Jul. 02, 1996

Just What Would BJP Rule Mean For Hinduism?

Well, to no one's great surprise, the BJP resigned before its sure loss of a May 29th confidence vote in India's parliament. But what if the first party in Indian history to be elected on a platform of "Hindutva" actually managed to rule India for a year or more? What difference would it really make for Hindus and Hinduism? In a nation as large and complex as India, the ruling party could hardly devote much of its time to religious concerns, and precious few issues of government have a specific religious dimension. To get some sense of the popular sentiment on the question of BJP rule, we asked our correspondents in Delhi, Bombay, Bangalore, Ujjain and Cochin to inquire: "If the BJP government holds, what do you think will be the impact on Hindus, Hindu institutions, the Hindu religion and interreligious relations within India?"

The resulting collection of opinions--some taken before and some after May 29th--is representative of those found across India. Our correspondents noted that the group we especially asked them to question--Hindureligious leaders, priests, scholars, politicians, etc.--are by and large pro-BJP. Yet, Bangalore correspondent Choodi Shivaram observed, "A Hindu awareness has strengthened which cuts across party affiliations. After speaking to so many people from all walks of life, I gathered that they were looking for a change. Everyone expressed the need for upliftment of Hindu ideals and values."

The following opinions are in no particular order, except for the first, that of Janata Dal leader Shri Mahendra Yadav. His strong statement is a summary of the anti-BJP arguments made in India's parliament prior to the scheduled vote of confidence. It should perhaps be considered for now as the "majority" opinion of Indians, as the BJP garnered only 23% of the total vote and could not gain sufficient allies to form a government. Many, but not all, of the other opinions collected are more favorably disposed to the BJP. More will be shared next month.

Shri Mahendra Yadav, 45, Janata Dal leader of Delhi

"If BJP would have continued in power even for a few months, it would have led to chaotic conditions in the country. They would try to impose Hinduism and Hindi on the people which is against the spirit of the Indian constitution. We are a secular nation and everything must be done with the involvement of all sections of the society. But I am sure the BJP would have tried to impose Hinduism through the school textbooks by the sheer might of its government. It would have done all this to appease its Hindu vote bank. BJP is a fascist party. If it is such a principled party as it claims to be, then why did it put issues like article 370 [regarding the status of Kashmir], uniform civil code and construction of Ram Mandir in the background for seeking the support of other parties to win the vote of confidence? I tell you these people do double talking. They have 'Ram Nam' in their mouths and a knife in their hand. Their only aim now is to come to power by hook or crook and for attaining this goal they are wooing a minority within the majority. If just by the construction of Ram Mandir all the problems of this country are going to be solved, then why not construct thousands of temples all around the country and solve them?"

Sri Satguru Sant Keshavadas, Temple of Cosmic Religion, Bangalore
"For many years, Hinduism has suffered and Hindus have had no voice in this country. A BJP government can now revive the lost glory of this religion and give Hindus a chance to hold their heads high. Confucius, the Chinese philosopher, said, 'If you want to destroy a country, make its children forget its traditions. If you want to build a country and let it prosper, maintain its traditional and culture values.'"

Rahul and friends,"Ultramodern" college students, Bangalore
"Hindus being the majority in this country, we must get what we rightfully deserve. Only the BJP has the courage and conviction to do this. The minorities have long been pampered, and we Hindus have been sidelined. Contrary to what people say, there will be better understanding with other religions and casteism will go. Moral values in society will be enhanced."

Swami Murugananda Saraswathi,Thiruvannamalai, Tamil Nadu
"Under their rule nobody will suffer. Vajpayee is not an aggressive person. Joshi, the new home minister, is not an aggressive person. It is a fight for principle, not for person. The previous government said they were protecting the minorities. Actually, they followed the divide and rule policy of the British."

Swami Ranganathacharya,31, Chief Priest, Laxmi Venkatesh Temple, Ujjain
"The government will help the sadhus construct Ram Mandir at Ayodhya. Later on the Kashi and Mathura dispute will be taken under consideration."

Mrs. Anju Bhargava,42, Mayor of Ujjain (on BJP ticket)
"There will be no harm to other religions because a Hindu does not like to harm. The BJP is not against the other religions, but to talk about Hinduism elaborately is my birthright."

Anjani Kumar Sharma,26, law student, Madhav College, Ujjain
"The BJP will have to respect all religions equally, because as long as the secular constitution exists in India, the Prime Minister is constitutionally bound to behave impartially with all religions. As to Hindu institutions, people will have to wait until the court verdicts, because almost all the cases regarding disputed institutions are under the legal procedure."

Shri Jagdish Singh Gehlot,60, advocate, Delhi
"It is true that in the BJP-ruled states, there have been less incidents of communal riots. Interreligious relations did not improve. The minorities were suppressed and laying low."

Mr. Mahesh Pujari,46, priest, Mahakaleshwar Temple, Ujjain
"Almost all important temples have been taken over by the government under a particular act of the constitution. The income of the temples goes directly to the government. The BJP will certainly look after Hindu temples better than any other party."

Shri N.D. Pancholi,46, human rights activist, Delhi
"I feel that the relations between Hindus and Muslims could deteriorate in the BJP rule. The BJP has two types of elements, liberals and hardliners--it depends which would dominate. If

you clearly analyze it, the BJP people are not very religious."

Madan Gopal,26, producer of TV programs, Delhi
"Issues before the country today are very, very complex, and I do not think that the BJP could solve these even if it got a five-year term. For instance, issues like construction of the Ram temple at Ayodhya and a uniform civil code cannot be solved without taking the Muslims in confidence. We are a multicultural nation and any party which represents just one religion cannot take the entire nation behind it."

Sonal Walia,19, class 12 Student, Delhi
"The youth which have the voting power are keenly watching the changing political scenario in India. Though I belong to a family of Congressmen, I am not adverse to the BJP being given a fair chance to run this country in a secular manner. There would be a positive impact on Hindus."

Lakshminarayan Shastri, 45, Priest, Birla Mandir, New Delhi
"BJP rule will not only be good for Hindus, it will be good for all Indians. The BJP's dream is of a united India, where there will be one law for people of all religions, a uniform civil code. I am sure Hindu-Muslim relations would improve under a BJP government because they want to end the disputes in the spirit of give and take. BJP people have character. RSS men are, again, men of character."

Ashok Kumar Chodda, civil servant, New Delhi

"As a party, BJP is definitely a political party which is pro-Hindu, although they define Hindu or Hindutva as a way of life. But at the core of their hearts, they are for Hindus, Hindu philosophy and Hindu religion. This is the main reason they are opposed by all other parties."

Narasimha Joshi,All-India Joint Secretary, Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Bombay

"The increase in support for the BJP shows an increasing awareness among Hindus. This would help in the sublimation of the inferiority complex among Hindus and teach them to assert themselves. Once this is achieved, it would also help decrease the incidence of conversion to other religions. Hindutva is a wide and all-encompassing term which includes age-old Vaidik Dharma, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism and other minor sects. All through these years, Hinduism has been secular and tolerant towards other religions. A BJP government would boost the morale of Hindu organizations and their activists. We hope they pass a bill to deter coercive methods of conversion to other religions. In many other countries, people are banned to follow a religion other than the official one. Growing awareness among Hindus is a hopeful sign."

Sri Ram Swarup, 76, social thinker and philosopher, Delhi

"Recent elections have shown a trend, which is very welcome and important. They have given a message that Hindus are important and cannot be taken for granted anymore. Previously, it was the Muslims who mattered. Now the Congress and other parties have realized that they have lost in the elections because they have lost the confidence of Hindus. A cold, anti-Hindu approach will not do anymore.

"This is an irreversible trend. The BJP is the beneficiary of the

new awakening amongst Hindus. Strictly speaking, it is not its initiator. They have never had a Hindu agenda as such. It is a good nationalistic and patriotic party. Let us name no names, but some leaders of the BJP are defining Hinduism itself very differently. They say it is a geo-cultural concept. Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo had taught us that the center of Hinduism is spirituality and Hinduism would rise for and through Sanatana Dharma. In this new geo-cultural definition of BJP leaders, we miss that dimension of spirituality visualized by Aurobindo and Vivekananda."

Interview reports by Rajiv Malik and M.P. Mohanty, New Delhi; Choodie Shivaram, Bangalore; R.G. Zawar, Bombay; Ashok Kumar Sharma, Ujjain and Vrindavanam Gopalakrishnan, Cochin.

Sidebar: Press, Politics, Religion & Secularism-East and West

There are two notable peculiarities about the way the press, both inside and outside India, report on certain key issues. First, they seem to automatically condemn the concept of an Indian political party with a religious leaning, while not bothering about other democratic countries where parties have official or unofficial affiliation with a specific religion. For example, the Christian Democratic Party with its close ties to the Catholic Church has often dominated recent Italian politics. The Christian Democratic Union has ruled Germany for most of the years since World War II. Reporters and editors are even more aghast at the thought India might be declared "a Hindu nation," never mind that it already is a Hindu nation. Journalists remain unconcerned that many countries have state religions [see next paragraph], and the ruling party has specific responsibilities and duties with regard to that religion.

For example, the British Parliament has the authority to pass legislation on Church of England affairs and funds all church schools, and the 26 elder bishops of the church sit in the House of Lords.

Approximately one-half of the world's nations have an official state religion. They are:

* 1 Hindu:Nepal

* 1 Jewish:Israel

* 4 Buddhist:Bhutan, Sikkim, Sri Lanka and Thailand.

* 23 Islamic:Algeria, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Brunei, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Malaysia, Maldives, Morocco, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and North Yemen.

* 44 Christian:Andorra, Argentina, Bolivia, Channel Islands, Columbia, Costa Rica, Denmark, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Faeroe Islands, Finland, Greenland, Guatemala, Haiti, Holy See, Honduras, Iceland, Ireland, Isle of Man, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Macao, Malta, Monaco, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Pitcairn Islands, Portugal, St. Helena, Samoa, Spain, Spanish North Africa, Svalbard and Jan Mayen Island, Sweden, Tonga, United Kingdom, Vanuatu, and Venezuela.

* 28 Unspecified "Religious":Barbados, Belgium, Bermuda, Brazil, Germany, Ghana, Guyana, Indonesia, Johnston Island, Lebanon, Namibia, Nauru, Philippines, Rwanda, South Africa, Switzerland, and Zaire.

* 92 nations are Secular * 30 are declared Atheistic

Differing Definitions of Secularism

A second favorite football of the press is "secularism." Read by a Western person, secularmeans "separation of church and state." But this is not what happens in India. Consider just this partial list of facts: 1) Nearly all Hindu temples--tens of thousands--are owned and run by the government, often by a non-religious official. Hindu temples not already owned by the government can be summarily taken over, as Vaishno Devi in Jammu was a few years ago [see page 32]. Muslim and Christian places of worship are not owned or run by the government, nor can they be taken over--rights guaranteed to the minority religions (only) under the Indian Constitution. 2) Hindu schools which receive government funds (nearly all of them) cannot teach Hinduism, whereas non-Hindu schools which receive government funds can teach their religion. Hindu schools started by Hindu organizations can be and often are taken over by the government. 3) Income of Hindu temples is taxed. Temple endowments are often usurped. However, in the West, government non-interference in religion and a common civil code are considered defining hallmarks of secularism.

The related issue of preferential treatment of minorities in India is usually expressed in the Western press as "needed protection" or some such term, which fanatical Hindus are about to take away. The very same issue, known as "affirmative action" is a hotly contested matter in the West. The State of California, for example, just recently canceled all its programs of minority quotas for schools, state jobs and government contracts.

What Western Readers Read About the Elections

The Western press was generally quite level-headed about the elections, contrary to their anti-Hindu and frequently inaccurate reporting during the destruction of the Babri Masjid and succeeding riots. The Associated Press, Reuters and the Wall Street Journalgave simple, matter-of-fact reports with reasonable accurate facts--though they all lack a clear grasp of just what this dispute over "secularism" is in India. The Journal headlined its story, "Even if Political Winds Shift, Open Market Seems Safe." On the other hand, we read in the London Sunday Timesthat,"The 'saffron stormtroopers' of extreme Hindu nationalism arrived at the gates of power in Delhi yesterday. These are the people who threatened India's 120 million Muslims with ethnic cleansing." Journalism or gibberish? Listen to veteran Hindu-basher and senior New York Times editor A.M. Rosenthal, "Vajpayee and his party cannot long survive except in the extremist sewer in which they dwell. [The BJP is backed] not with cuddly moderates but killers and pro-Nazis. These people are Hindu-first and Hindu-only--which would wipe out the concept of unity between the Hindu majority of 700 million and the Muslim minority of 120 million and Christians and Sikhs."