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Rajiv Gandhi's Death Stirs Sentiments as Hindu Holy Men Blaze the Election Trail

It was a clear, blue-bright day in Karnataka, South India, last fall when a cheerful Rajiv Gandhi counseled with the Shankaracharya of the Sringeri Mutt. Gandhi, the ex-prime minister of India, sought the blessings of the orange-clad monk. The future looked good for his return to the prime ministership.

Seven months later, in the heat and passion of India's most violent campaign elections, the Shankaracharya of the Kanchi Mutt faxed Rajiv Gandhi that astrological readings were dangerously negative for his campaign tour in South India. Gandhi - like John F. Kennedy who disregarded psychic Jean Dixon's warning about Dallas in 1963 - flew his plane south on May 21st. Skipping a stop at Kanchipuram, he went to a death destiny in Sriperambudur. The Kennedy clan karma resonated with the Nehru clan. Rajiv was assassinated in 1991. His mother Indira Gandhi fell to Sikh extremist bullets in 1984.

Gandhi's 20-year-old son Rahul lit his father's funeral pyre, the last Hindu rite for a man who was not known as a devout Hindu, but who was suddenly flung into modern Hindu history when his mother died and he became India's prime minister. While Indira Gandhi worshiped Siva and Hanuman and privately visited their temples in New Delhi, Rajiv respected the Hindu temple heritage but did not surrender into devotion. And while his mother practiced daily hatha yoga asanas, Rajiv encouraged the science but didn't do asanas himself.

The grandson was more like the grandfather Nehru, acceptable to all religious and social groups. In short, a Hindu with a universal vision. He loved India, and celebrated its cultural achievements. Hindus with a modern outlook and opposed to the orthodoxy of the faith liked him a great deal, as they saw in him a person who could take India into the 21st century. It is a measure of his eminence and stature that his loss is being felt equally strongly by the Hindus and Muslims. His ashes were thrown to the high winds and holy atmosphere of the Himalayas.

As Gandhi's ashes blended into rock and snow, a number of swamis - including several women - were plotting their election strategy like seasoned political pros. They are a new breed of politician, with one foot in world renunciation and the other on a speaking platform rallying the voters for a Hindu India. They are polar opposites to the slain Gandhi's ideal of a harmonious religious plurality in secular India.

Their objective is "preventing the politicians from either denigrating Hinduism or exploiting it to satisfy their lust for power." Most of these saints represent the views of those who fear that the future of Hinduism is at stake today because of the "appeasement" of minorities - particularly Muslims - for political purposes. While the swami candidates have their admirers, they are being criticized for neglecting their responsibilities to educate people in the cultural and Spiritual heritage. Some are being charged with promoting the political interest of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) nationalist organization which is unleashing its considerable manpower and organization talents to bring the Bharatiya Jananta Party (BJP) to power, Most of the spiritual candidates are contesting from BJP platforms. Others are aligning with the Janata Dal and Congress parties, creating a weird scene of opposing swamis engaged in splenetic political debate.

The decision to launch holy men and women into the political fracas - much like Pat Robertson's short-lived bid for the US presidency in 1988 - was made at a colossal VHP rally of saints and followers on April 2nd in New Delhi. Three hundred and fifty loudspeakers were powered up for the event, known as a Dharm Samsad, "parliament of dharma." The Samsad restated the VHP goal of building a Rama temple at the God-hero's birthplace in Ayodha where an unused mosque now exists. Swamis-for-parliament came out of this overall strategy to mobilise public opinion toward the controversy flammable Rama temple. Among the swamis hitting the campaign trail under the lotus insignia of the BJP are Mahant Aavidyanath (contesting from Gorakhpur), Swami Chinmayanand (Badayun), Swami Sureshanand (Etah), Swami Tapanand Maharaj (Aasansol), Sadhvi Uma Bharati (Khajuraho), Swami Yoganand Saraswati (Bhind), and Swami Vinay Katihar

(Faizabad). Beside these spiritual candidates, crowds of sadhus and sadhvis are out canvassing support for their swamis. These included such notables as Sadvi Rithumbhara, Swami Kailashananda, Swami Parmanand, Dr. Ram Vilas Vedanti, Swami Jagadguru Divyananda Maharaj and others,

On the other side of the election battle lines is Swami Agnivesh, spiritual firebrand of the Arya Samaj, running under the banner of the Janata Dal party. He contested in Bhopal - famous for the Union Carbide chemical plant toxic cloud leak. He is a bitter opponent of the leaders of the Dharm Samsad and says they are politicizing Hinduism and want to destroy the ideal of secularism practiced in India since 1950. One of the supporters of Swami Agnivesh told HINDUISM TODAY, "He was not on the mission of spreading Ram bhakti but on that of instilling a sense of security among the minorities."

Another saint opposed to the BJP Juggernaut was Swami Pawan Diwan, sponsored by the Congress Party in Mahasamund of Madhya Pradesh state. He is also known as "Sant Kavi," meaning "poet saint." Often clad in only a short saffron knee-length dhoti, he keeps his massive chest bare, adorned only by garlands from his disciples and admirers. He told his audience, "Ram is everywhere. Do you have to go to Ayodhya to worship him?" The poetic swami lives in a sprawling but simple ashram in a village near Mahasamund. Out campaigning he moves from village to village warning people against what he calls the "communal designs" of the BJP and VHP. His oratorical style appeals to the election-fevered crowds and they were magnetized to his rallies like iron filings. Unable to counter his influence, the BJP called him a "sarkari sant," government saint.

Strong resistance to the BJP and VHP forces was given by the well known and outspoken Shankarachariya Swaroopananda of the Dwarka Mutt. Taking sides with the Congress (I) party - not as a candidate - he accused the VHP of not sincerely working for the erection of the Ayodhya Rama temple. Critics charge that he has been financed by the Congress party to galvanize wide support for the Rama project among Hindus. The Shankarachariya has repeatedly claimed that it is he who is destined to build the Rama temple. Rajiv Gandhi counted him among his spiritual allies and they were close.

The swami candidates fielded by the VHP Dharm Samsad harvested huge swathes of votes in the May partial elections. In building up this support a very important role was played by a young and energetic sadvi named Rithumbhara. In less than

four months her hot pepper speeches made her so popular that thousands wait for hours to listen to her. Capitalizing on her drawing power, the VHP positioned her to counter the Muslims' chief spokespersons. She told HINDUISM TODAY in New Delhi: "My task is to place Hinduism on the high pedestal it once occupied."

Sadhvi Uma Bharati is another woman fire-spitter for the VHP, crisscrossing several states of India and running her own campaign out of Khajuraho. She says, "My only wish is to ensure the building of a Sri Ram temple at the site of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. Earlier I had shaved my head for this task and now I am ready to have my head cut off if necessary," According to her, the choice before the people is between Rama and Babbar, between Ram Rajya and Imman Rajya. She became a sannyasini when she was 16 years old and is devoted to both Krishna and Rama. With her all the time is an image of Krishna. "I am attached to him. I even sleep with him. I love him like a sister loves a brother." She warns that if the "Ram bhaktas" lost the election, they would not be able to pardon themselves for another 500 years.

The most influential saint contesting the election was Mahant Avaidyanath. He is the head of the 700-year-old Gorakhnath ashram/temple complex and president of the Ram Janambhoomi Mukti Morcha. Among all the candidates, he is the only incumbent, winning a seat to the lower house of parliament. Out on the dusty bylanes of his district he spent 12 hours a day going door to door to press for support. The coffers of his ashram were poured in the direction of the campaign, picking up the tab on such logistics as 500 vehicles. It is estimated he presides over property worth US\$50 million. In his previous election contest the Mahant was on the Hindu Mahasabha ticket, but this year switched to the BJP.

Swami Chinmayanand who contested from Badayun in Uttara Pradesh was another spiritual politician who changed the historical pattern of the election. His district is normally dominated by the Congress party's appeal to the backward castes. But all those votes swung his to the swami, becoming popular by spearheading a Rama temple liberation organization. He told HINDUISM TODAY, "It is the battle of the Ram Bhaktas for the establishment of Ram Rajya (country of Rama)."

What shape India's politics and society will take with these holy personages entering its parliament in July will be watched with interest by the people of this country, and by neighboring nations as well.

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