

## ABSTRACT

Out of Saffron Ashes: Revival of Hindutva in India

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In early 2014, citizens of the largest democratic nation on the planet turned up in record-breaking numbers to vote in India's sixteenth Lok Sabha elections. This election was particularly monumental for several reasons: firstly, it broke records with the largest voter turnout in Indian history, and secondly, it resulted a landslide victory for the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), delivering the long-standing Congress party its largest defeat in history. The 2014 victory of the BJP is the latest high point in the recent revival of Hindu nationalism(Hindutva) in Indian politics. In this thesis, I trace the Hindutva movement to its pre-independence roots, analyze the causes of its revival through the BJP in the 1990s and examine its future role in the Indian political system.

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OUT OF SAFFRON ASHES: REVIVAL OF HINDUTVA IN INDIA

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By  
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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction to Hindutva

In early 2014, citizens of the largest democratic nation on the planet turned up in record-breaking numbers to vote in India's sixteenth Lok Sabha<sup>1</sup> elections. This election was particularly monumental for several reasons: firstly, it broke records of the largest voter turnout in Indian history, and secondly, it resulted a landslide victory for the rightwing Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), delivering the long-standing Indian National Congress (INC) party its largest defeat in history (Varshney 2014). While many in the national and international media applauded the meteoric rise of the BJP and then Prime Ministerial candidate Narendra Modi, others familiar with Mr. Modi's far-right ideological affiliation with the Hindutva movement and track record with communal violence watched the election unfold with some apprehension. Some saw the election as a win for democracy and economic development. Sri Lanka's *Daily News* applauded "the Indian people's desire for a leadership that lives by the credo of CAN-DO" while Pakistan's *Express Tribune* said "Pakistan has a lot to learn from India, and from its execution of this paramount exercise of democracy, seamlessly and without blame and allegations" (Rowlatt 2014). Others could not look past Mr. Modi's past history with anti-Muslim violence under his watch as Chief Minister of Gujarat; his consequent US visa ban was frequently mentioned during the election as was the fact that the BJP and its supporters were often affiliated with communal violence against religious minorities in

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<sup>1</sup> The Lok Sabha is the lower house of the Indian Parliament.

India. One editorial in the UK's *Independent* said "Any man who refuses to answer questions about his involvement in the Gujarat massacre of 2002, where he was chief minister, and who says he thinks of Muslim suffering much as he'd think of a puppy run over by a car, is betraying the legacy of India's founding fathers" (Rowlatt 2014).

Communalism has long been associated with the Hindutva movement and is a particularly personal issue for me as one of the major incidents of Hindutva-led violence took place in my home state of Orissa, when Hindu radicals destroyed homes and villages and killed many Christians in 2008. During the riots some rioters, upon learning the Christian inclinations of my family attempted to burn down our family's home in Orissa's capital city of Bhubaneswar, the ground floor of which housed a Christian non-profit organization. Because of this personal encounter with the BJP and its ideological affiliates in India, I found it surprising that citizens of an ethnically plural and constitutionally secular state would take to the polls and support a political party with such a divisive ideology a negative track record with religious minorities, especially when the party had been on the fringes until very recently. This thesis explores the answers to this main question. This chapter will provide an overview of the Hindutva ideology of exclusionist and militant nationalism, from which the BJP derives its beliefs. Chapter 2 explains the rise of the BJP in the context of the Indian political system and the changes the party made to the Hindutva ideological base in their pursuit for national power. In Chapter 3, I analyze the role of communal violence in the BJP's strategy to gain power. Finally, I will conclude with projections for the future of the BJP in Indian politics.

*Hindutva: an exclusionary and militant nationalism*

The BJP is the political branch of a family of organizations known as the “Sangh Parivar,” a conglomeration of political and social organizations which espouse the philosophy of Hindutva. To understand the BJP’s political platform today, it is useful to examine the origins of Hindutva and its evolution over the past several decades. The Hindutva movement is commonly characterized as Hindu nationalist movement, a phrase which to the casual reader connotes that it is a right-wing, religious movement. To some scholars of Hindutva however, the phrase is somewhat of an oxymoron. What makes Hindutva a unique concept as compared to other forms of religious nationalism is that it is centered around a pluralistic, polytheistic religion. Hinduism is often difficult to classify as a whole; it has often been referred a “federation of faiths” and a “conglomeration of sects” rather than a single unified religion (Bhagrava 2012). This definition seems apt when accounting for the fact that within India, Hindus have incredible diversity in beliefs and practices further complicated by the linguistic, caste and cultural differences in the country: different regions and subgroups chose to worship different gods and give preference to different religious texts. Consequently, religious festivals differ from state to state, region to region, even village to village. This plurality within Hinduism raises the question, what is the common ground for Hindu nationalism?

Though the history of Hindutva dates back to the mid-1800s, for the purposes of this thesis, we will consider the ideologies of those individuals and organizations that the BJP directly derives its beliefs from. The BJP’s official party platform provides some insight to answer the questions of what modern Hindutva ideology comprises of and how

it seeks to unify the diversity within Hinduism in India. The BJP attributes its beliefs to several prominent Hindu nationalist and reformist figures including Swami Dayananda and Swami Vivekananda, the founders of the “Arya Samaj”; and Dr. K.B. Hedgewar and M.S. Golwalkar, the founders of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) (BJP 2014). Additionally, Vinayak Damodar (V.D.) Savarkar who coined the term Hindutva, played an important role in defining the Hindutva movement. In the following pages, we will trace the ideologies of these founding members of Hindutva.

The Arya Samaj though not directly related to the official Hindutva movement, was a precursor to some of the ideologies it would propagate. Translated as “the Noble Society”, the Arya Samaj centered around the concept of a superior Aryan identity. The Vedas, one of the main Hindu religious texts, allude to a group of noble, fair-skinned warrior class called the arya, who invaded, defeated and ruled the darker-skinned *dasas*<sup>2</sup> and *mleccha*<sup>3</sup> (Prentiss 2003). The idea of a fair-skinned superior race is not one unique to the Arya Samaj; many European scholars in the late 19th and early 20th century made claims about such a pure race however scholars disagreed on the roots of the race. During Hitler’s Nazi regime, he pursued ethnic cleansing to produce a pure Aryan race, whom he thought to be Europeans (Bhatt 2001). Swami Dayananda, founder of the Arya Samaj who held the Vedas in high regard and claimed to be the expert on its interpretation, espoused the belief that the Hindu people in India, not Europeans, were the actual superior Aryan race. He claimed that the Aryans had originally come from the area now known as Tibet, subjugated the lesser races in the south, and ruled India. Therefore, all

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<sup>2</sup> The enslaved people

<sup>3</sup> The foreign speaking people



Hindus living within the geographical confines of the Indian subcontinent, from the Himalayas in the north to the Indus and Ganges River on the west and northeast, and the Indian ocean and the Bay of Bengal in the south and east), were of the superior Arya race. He qualifies this argument of ethnic and racial superiority of the Arya people by asserting that the Indian people had withstood many onslaughts of foreign invasions (the Muslims, Buddhists, and British) without weakening as only a superior race could. Dayananda's arguments, though religiously colored, were at the core ethno-nationalist and eventually became the foundation of Hindu nationalism, that would make a claim for an Indian independence on the basis of forming a Hindu nation for the Arya people (Bhatt 2001).

The term Hindutva was formally coined by a revolutionary of the pre-independence era, Vinayak Damodar (V.D.) Savarkar. An antithesis of Gandhian non-violence, Savarkar played an influential role in garnering support for militaristic independence movement in India. While studying and practicing law in England, he was heavily involved in revolutionary, anti-British organizations. Savarkar was arrested and imprisoned in the Andaman Islands from 1910-1922 and later in Ratnagiri, Maharashtra from 1922-37 for crimes against the King of England (Bhatt 2001). Like so many iconic authors and revolutionaries, it was during his imprisonment that Savarkar wrote his landmark books that would later serve as a foundation for the Hindutva movement. Prior to his arrest, Savarkar had published two texts: a translation of Italian nationalist Giuseppe Mazzini whose philosophy had a profound influence on Savarkar, and an original book *The Indian War of Independence, 1857*, outlining the process of starting a successful revolution. These early efforts were focused primarily on nationalism and

independence movement in India; in his first book he even supports the cooperation of Hindus and Muslims in the fight against their common enemy, the British occupiers (McKean 1996). After his imprisonment however, Savarkar's work begins to take a turn towards a more exclusive and divisive nationalism.

In 1928, Savarkar published what is arguably his most influential work, *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu*, in which he delineates his definition of the ideology. In this text, he makes a particular distinction between Hindutva and Hinduism, the later term which Savarkar rejects as an inaccurate Western conception of the religion of the Indian people. Hindutva, on the other hand, is defined by Savarkar as applying to those with who considered Bharat (India) their *pithrubhumi*<sup>4</sup> as well as the *punyabhumi*<sup>5</sup> (Savarkar 1969, McKean 1996). Practically, Savarkar's guidelines are inclusive of Hindus as well as Sikhs, Jains, and Buddhists, all of whom adhered to religions that can trace their origins to the Indian geographically, making India their holy land. On one hand, this can be seen as a clear attempt at developing a solid nationalist identity from the diverse populations of India, in order to have a strong claim to independence. Savarkar attempted to create stronger basis for the Hindutva identity by delineating idea of a catholic (or universal) Hinduism, a simplified version of Hinduism that unified the beliefs, practices, and festivals of Hindus across India. A standardized form of Hinduism providing a common framework for all Hindus, and encouraging national unity was created with the intent of making the religion accessible to all, especially to rural inhabitants, for 'reconversion' of Indians who had been converted to foreign religions (McKean 1996, Hansen 1999).

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<sup>4</sup> Fatherland: Someone who is born in India

<sup>5</sup> Holy land: One whose religion has its foundations in India

A big problem with this definition of Hindutva is that it categorically excludes Muslims and Christians, those who adhere to “foreign” religions that have their origins and holy lands in other countries outside India. The concept of a threatening foreign influence is one of the cornerstones of Hindutva. One of the primary motivations behind the Hindutva ideology was to fight back against the increasing influence of such foreign influences in India, including the British. Savarkar and his contemporaries also feared a takeover by the minorities. In one of his popular speeches, Savarkar laments that only 82% of Indians are truly Hindus; he goads followers to fight back against outside influences until 100% of Indians identify as Hindu (Hansen 1999). It is for this reason that Hindutva is sometimes termed as drawing upon an “imagined identity,” being less of definition of a people group but rather a negative identity that “affirms itself by negating the other” (Anand 2011). Furthermore, Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar, a Hindutva leader, says this of foreign presence in India,

“The foreign races in Hindustan [India] must ... adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and hold in reverence the Hindu religion, must entertain no ideas but those of the glorification of the Hindu race and culture ... [and] may [only] stay in the country wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing ... not even citizen’s rights” (Golwalker 1939).

Even though “outsiders” may be allowed to stay in India, the Hindutva camp demands that they be lesser than the Hindus. Much of the communal problems associated with Hindutva later on can be traced back to this sense of Hindu superiority and with putting foreigners in their proper place.

In addition to being exclusionist, one of the core tenets of Hindutva was also militant nationalism. In another one of his speeches, Savarkar called upon supporters to “Hinduize all politics and militarize all Hindudom” (McKean 1996). One of the primary vehicles of this form of militant Hindutva is the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh<sup>6</sup> (RSS) founded in 1925 by Dr. K.B. Hedgewar. Though technically a non-political volunteer organization committed to social service, the RSS has now become the cornerstone of the Hindutva movement, both on a grassroots level through civil society as well as on the national and state level through close political ties with the BJP. The RSS held beliefs of ethnic and religious superiority similar to the ones espoused by the Arya Samaj. Golwalkar, the successor to Dr. Hedgewar, in fact publically supported Hitler’s ambitions to seek racial purity. Ironically, he was also a supporter of Zionism and the creation of a Jewish state. Reacting to the threat of the outsiders, RSS spearheaded many social welfare projects, especially for the scheduled and backwards castes<sup>7</sup> in rural parts of India. It was on this front that many Christian missionaries had previously made headway in converting Indians; the RSS sought to counter these influences by educating and providing services to the same population. An RSS education included a full indoctrination in Hindutva ideologies including religious ideas and concepts of racial superiority, as well as physical exercises to prepare young men to defend their country when the time came. With the support of Hindutva leaders, the RSS led militaristic

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<sup>6</sup> Translated as the National Volunteer Corps

<sup>7</sup> The Indian government defines backwards or scheduled castes and tribes as those who experience “extreme social, education and economic backwardness arising out of the traditional practice of untouchability” (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment). They are sometimes referred to as Dalits.

actions against British during the independence movement and promoted the idea of sacrificing oneself for the cause (Bhatt 2001).

### *Conflicting Nationalisms*

These exclusionist and militant beliefs were of course contrary to Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of *ahimsa* (non-violence)<sup>8</sup> during independence and were equally in opposition to Jawaharlal Nehru and the secular Indian National Congress (Congress or INC), that took over the task of governing after independence. Nehru and the INC espoused a very different type of nationalism than Hindutva. The "Nehruvian consensus" as it was later termed, was based on religious and ethnic plurality, secularism, democratic and socialist economic ideals. Though the Hindutva movement had some regional support, it was this Nehruvian consensus that was most popular and most powerful in the decades after India's independence (Hibbard 2010). The RSS was banned from operation from 1948-1950 due to its violent activities and its suspected affiliation with Gandhi's death. As many as 20,000 RSS members were arrested during these years and many other leaders took their operations underground (Hansen 1999). After being reinstated, the RSS, a considerably weakened organization, continued to grow with multiple offshoot organizations such as the Rashtra Sevika Samiti<sup>9</sup>, Akhil Bharatiya Vidyathri Parishad<sup>10</sup> (ABVP), the Vishwa Hindu Parishad<sup>11</sup> (VHP), and the Jana Sangh (JS); these organizations collectively came to be known as the Sangh Parivar (Bhatt 2001). Under

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<sup>8</sup> Gandhi's assassin, Nathuram Godse, was an RSS volunteer.

<sup>9</sup> Translated as Organization of Indian Women

<sup>10</sup> Translated All-India Student's Council

<sup>11</sup> Translated as World Hindu Council

the leadership of Golwarkar, who did not want the RSS to be involved in politics, the organization took a less militant stance, focusing rather on shaping society around the principles of Hinduism.

In pursuit of a truly secular democracy the ideals of Hindutva were tossed to the wayside for several decades. The legislature was dominated by Prime Minister Nehru and the secular Congress party which shunned the Hindutva movement. As we will see in the next chapter, the Jana Sangh, an RSS-based political party which began in 1951, barely made a dent in the Congress party's electoral prowess (Hansen 1999). It seemed for the time being that Hindutva had run its course and no longer had a place in the new secular democratic ideal India was now striving to be. This all changed however when the BJP reintroduced the Hindutva political banner to Indian politics in the late 1980s and 1990s.

### *Literature Review*

After several decades of remaining on the fringes of political power, the Hindutva movement made a comeback in the early 1990s as a major player in Indian politics. This return to the political center stage has been the topic of discussion for many scholars of Indian politics, and scholars have taken to differing approaches to explain its place in Indian politics today. A large amount of scholarship surrounding the BJP and Hindutva places the ideology in the context of radical religious nationalism. In a book on religious nationalism and globalism in India, Catarina Kinnavall explains the rise of both Hindu nationalism and Sikh nationalism in India as a result of globalism. She argues that due to the destabilizing effect of globalism, the political environment becomes more open for

extremist organizations such as the BJP to come to power (Kinnavall 2006). Following a similar line of thought many scholars equate the resurgence of Hindutva with the resurgence of radical Islamic regimes in the Middle East. Scott Hibbard's *Religious Politics and Secular States* places the political mobilization of conservative Muslims in Egypt and conservative Christians in the United States to the resurgence of Hindutva in India in a trend of resurging religious politics globally (Hibbard 2010). While these cross-national comparisons of religious nationalisms bring out some relevant points about Hindutva in India, they also miss some important political and economic realities in India that contributed to shaping the Hindutva movement, and bringing the BJP to power.

Another frequently cited cause for the resurgence of Hindu nationalism is the increased threat from minority groups in the 1980s and 1990s that resulted in a surge in Hindu identity and pride. Scholars point to several incidents in particular that would have led to an increased Hindu nationalistic support. First, the forced conversion of several hundred Hindus into Islam in Meenakshipuram in 1981 led to a legitimization of the Islamic threat in India (Juergensmeyer 1993, Malik & Singh 1994). Second was the militancy of Sikh separatist movement in Punjab. Led by Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, the Sikh separatist movement became violent in 1984 when the separatists took over the Golden Temple in Amritsar and were eventually killed when Indira Gandhi ordered troops to eradicate them from the temple. Gandhi's assassination by her Sikh bodyguards as retaliation for her order to attack this holy site and the consequent anti-Sikh riots stoked Hindu nationalist fervor (Malik & Singh 1994, Kinnavall 2006). Recurring separatist movements in Kashmir stoked similar anti-Muslim and anti-Pakistan sentiments. (Malik & Singh 1994) Finally, the Ramjanmabhoomi movement to reclaim

the Babri mosque in Ayodhya and restore it as a temple is cited by nearly all scholars as a primary causal factor in the rise of the BJP (Juergensmeyer 1993, Malik & Singh 1994, Van der Veer 1994, Hansen 1999, Kinnavall 2006, Anand 2011).

Alternatively, some scholars minimize the religious aspect of Hindutva, focusing rather on the changes in the overall political system. These explanations are equally diverse as well. The decline of the Congress party over the 1970s and 1980s has been identified as a pivotal cause; the power vacuum created by this failing party was just waiting to be filled by a worthy opposition (Malik & Singh 1994, Chhibber 1999). Kanchan Chandra forgoes the religious wording altogether and refers to Hindutva as an ethno-nationalist group in his book, *Why Ethnic Parties Succeed*, where he argues that the BJP as well as other ethnic parties in India are successful because of political patronage. He defines India as a patronage-democracy in which political patronage takes precedence in elections over actual policy and explains the BJP's rise to power as a result of its ability to better cater to political elites (Chandra 2004). Pradeep Chhibber, in his book *Democracy Without Associations* similarly places the BJP as becoming more adept at providing elites with patronage. Chhibber's work also identifies a shift in India politics from a catch-all party system under the Congress Party, to a cleavage-based party system under parties like the BJP due to political factionalization within the Congress party (Chhibber 1999).

Overall the existing literature on the Hindutva movement has focused on a diverse number of causal factors behind its resurgence in the 1990s. While some of the factors identified in the literature were true in the short-term, not all of them have held true over time. In the following chapters, I will highlight what I believe to be the most salient



short-term factors identified by the scholars above such as the decline of the Congress party and the increase in communal tensions as contributing factors behind the political success of Hindu nationalism. Additionally, I identify the BJP's economic policies as a long-term defining characteristic of the party's success and political identity.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Political and Economic Analysis of the Rise of the BJP in India

#### *Nature of religiosity in India*

Over the past decades, as India has modernized, Westernized and urbanized, there has been an observable trend of secularization in the general population. According to the World Values Survey conducted over the past several decades, only half of the population identified as holding religion as an important aspect of their lives and there is a gradual decline in the percentage of people who see themselves as adhering to religious values (Hindu and minority religions combined). Additionally, the percentage of people actively participating in political or religious organizations based on their faith is very low (Chhibber 1999). Furthermore, a study on Hindu institutions asserted that the nature of Hindu organizations by default make them less politically useful than the other religious institutions. Since worship in temples is usually a personal act and does not require much collective community rituals as other religions, Hindu religious leaders do not have platforms to preach sermons like imams or pastors, therefore a majority of

Hindus are not heavily influenced by the political leanings of religious leaders. fact, surveys show that Muslims in India have more confidence in the political teachings from their religious leaders than their Hindu counterparts<sup>12</sup>. The only social group that has a more influential role in political life in India are Christians in Bible study groups (Chhibber & Sekhon 2015). With simply a religious criterion in mind, it seems surprising to see the rise of a powerful Hindu nationalist party while there is a downward trend of religiosity in India. It can be concluded then that the rise of the BJP is not connected to significant changes in religious practices or beliefs, but rather changes in the political and economic arena. The following chapter follows the decline of the Congress party as a creating a political environment conducive to the introduction of an opposition party and explores the role of economic policy in creating an inclusive voter base for the BJP.

### *“The Congress System”*

Staying true to the ideals of the secular and socialist Nehruvian consensus, the INC maintained a nearly unrivaled control over politics from India’s first democratic elections in 1952 until the mid-1990s when the BJP entered the political stage as a legitimate opposition party. Scholars often dubbed pre-1990s India as being a “one-party dominant” model, under Congress’ rule (Kothari 1970, Sartori 1976). The presence of a single political party for so long in a diverse and pluralistic nation such as India is an

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<sup>12</sup> Due to the communal nature of Muslim institutions and worship practices, Muslims attending mosque regularly are more likely to be have their political beliefs influenced by religious leaders. Mosque-attending Muslims are also more likely to be politically active than non-practicing Muslims. No such correlation has been made of the political activeness of Hindus that regularly to the temple. Imams in India have been so politically influential that they are often appointed by political leadership. Both the colonial British government and the Congress party co-opted imams to win Muslim support and maintain power (Chhibber & Sekhon 2015).

anomaly. India is one of the most culturally and ethnically fragmented societies in the world, ranking number two in Asia for having the most fractionalization<sup>13</sup> (Fearon 2003). Many of these social differences have been institutionalized in various ways. For example, many Indian states were formed on the basis of linguistic differences (Brass, 1990). Furthermore, there are a growing number of regional state and caste based parties in Indian politics and more often than not, voters vote along caste and regional lines. Even in recent polls, over 60% of Indian voters identify themselves as more loyal to their region than the nation as a whole and nearly 40% identify themselves as voting based on caste (Lokniti 2004). It is unusual therefore to see a single party rule for so long in the midst of such diversity.

The key to this paradox lies in the fact that INC is not a single party but rather a catch-all party that catered to a broad base of voters by creating coalitions of local and state parties maintained through systems of patronage. Because of the sheer number of ethnic, caste, linguistic and religious groups within India, no single ethnic or caste group has nearly enough political power to gain power nationally. In order to gain a politically salient majority large enough to make a difference with policy decisions, regional factions are forced to form coalitions despite their varying and sometime conflicting interests. For most of India's history since independence, the Congress party has been the only political party strong enough nationally for these subgroups to latch onto to create winning coalitions (Chhibber 1999). Patronage had been described as the "oil that

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<sup>13</sup> James Fearon's research rates India as having an 0.811 ethnic fractionalization and 0.667 cultural fractionalization.

greased the machine” of the Congress party for so many years (Heitzman & Worden 1996).

Due to the structure of the Indian political system, while state and local governments play an important role in India, control over money, resources, and consequently policy lies with the central government. In fact, the INC, particularly under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi’s tenure, rather than devolving power as intended in the Constitution, created policies and patronage links that concentrated power more strongly in the hands of the Central government. Despite the presence of local government structures such as village *panchayats* and district *zilla parishads*, Congress had control over these structures. Anyone needing anything from admission to a school or additional allocation of funds towards a project would need the assistance of Congress party members. The party was the common man’s only link to the complex government structures (Chhibber 1999).

#### *Party Factionalization and the anti-Congress vote*

Opposition parties did not arise for another 12 years in India until after Prime Minister Nehru’s death in 1964. Nehru, who had been an iconic figure in the independence movement and in constructing the government after independence was a powerful politically unifying force during his time. After the death of their charismatic leader, the many factions within Congress started vying for power. A group of intraparty leaders called the Syndicate brought a sense of unity back to the party when they selected Lal Bahadur Shastri to replace Nehru as Prime Minister. Following his sudden death in

1966, infighting flared up once again within Congress, but the Syndicate once again selected Nehru's daughter, Indira Gandhi to lead the party as the Prime Ministerial candidate in the 1967 election. The choice of Mrs. Gandhi as the next Prime Minister did not sit well with everyone in Congress however; some party leaders such as Moraji Desai believed she was inexperienced and lacked the popularity necessary to win the general elections (Heitzman & Worden 1996, Hibbard 2010). This early presence of intraparty tensions is a telling sign of how tenuous the unity of the party was.

Despite of the political clout of Mrs. Gandhi and her political family's legacy, the 1967 election saw a large drop in Congress' vote share<sup>14</sup> as other regional parties began to stand up against Congress (Heitzman & Worden 1996, Hibbard 2010). Yet opposition parties in India at the time were simply that; an opposition to check the Congress' power, to make bring it back into line and to force it to broaden its base and be more inclusive of minority interests (Bhatt 2001). After coming into power, Mrs. Gandhi led a group that split the INC into two parties, Congress (O<sup>15</sup>) comprised of the Syndicate members led by Moraji Desai, and the Congress (R<sup>16</sup>) with Mrs. Gandhi and her loyal supporters. During her tenure, Mrs. Gandhi consolidated more and more power at the center and in her own hands. After breaking from the INC, she did away with the internal democratic procedures of selecting leaders and began to remove and appoint state chief ministers, cabinet members and other Congress leaders based on their loyalty to her (Chhibber 1999).

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<sup>14</sup> Congress won 54% of the vote in the 1967 election. Before that year, the lowest percentage of votes Congress had won was 73%.

<sup>15</sup> Congress (O) stood for Congress Organization

<sup>16</sup> Congress (R) stood for Congress Requisition

No opposition party had the hope to win an election in India until after the “Emergency”<sup>17</sup> period declared by Mrs. Gandhi in 1975. In the early 1970s an economic crisis took over India; the costs of a war with Pakistan in 1971, compounded by widespread crop failures in 1972 and the global oil crisis in 1973-74 caused unrest among the populace. The interventionist policies of the Congress government were ineffective in improving the economic fall and Gandhi’s campaign promises of “*Garibi Hatao*” (eradicate poverty) were a failure as well (Heitzman & Worden 1996). Further compounding the national instability, a ruling from the High Court found electoral irregularities in the 1971 elections that called into question the government’s legitimacy. Though Mrs. Gandhi was cleared of serious allegations of election fraud, the court found her guilty of not following proper procedures; her rights as an MP were revoked while the court allowed her to remain prime minister. Following this verdict, growing tensions and threats from opposition parties calling the 1971 election a fraud led the prime minister to declare an Emergency to prevent a coup d’état. During this time, an estimated 110,000 opposition members were arrested and imprisoned, including RSS members and the organization was banned once again (Bhatt 2001, Hibbard 2010). Additionally, the government undertook some unsavory practices which included coerced sterilizations to reduce poverty and the eviction of slum residents in New Delhi in an attempt to “beautify” the city. The Emergency was ended abruptly in 1977 when Gandhi announced elections would be held in March of the year (Heitzman & Worden 1996).

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<sup>17</sup> Emergency refers to the two-year period from 1975-1977 when democratic practices were

Incensed and threatened by this misuse of power during the Emergency, the Hindutva movement combined with Janata Alliance led by the Bharat Jana Sangh<sup>18</sup> for the 1977, election seeking to restore a balance of power to the nation. The Alliance was built up primarily of political groups that united with the purpose of dethroning the Congress party and decentralizing power from what some described as a hegemonic party (Bhatt 2001). The results of the 1977 elections was clearly an anti-Congress vote in response to the Emergency. Once the Alliance gained power however, the anti-Congress sentiment that had brought these sometimes opposing groups together, disappeared as the Alliance could not agree on policy issues. The INC regained its hold on the political system in by winning the 1980 election and continued to win elections with almost the same monopolistic pattern until the early 1990s.

That being said, Congress' hold on votes became more and more precarious and its base more fluid after 1977. Myron Weiner comments, "The Congress Party that won in 1980 was not the Congress party that had governed India in the 1950s and 1960s, or even the early 1970s. The party was organizationally weak and the electoral victory was primarily Mrs. Gandhi's rather than the party's" (Weiner quoted in Heitzman & Worden 1996). The precarious nature of the INC became clear as intraparty fragmentation within the INC became more and more pronounced in the 1980s and 1990s, when minority parties and newly founded regional parties became aware of their power to oppose Congress began growing and moving away to form their own coalitions. Congress' previous ability to co-opt factions waned as it struggled under the unwieldy responsibility to maintain all of its coalitions with diverse groups, while regional parties become more

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<sup>18</sup> The BJS was the political wing of the RSS at the time and the precursor to the BJP.



adept at providing patronage than Congress. It was only a matter of time and the right circumstances before a viable national opposition party would emerge in the political system.

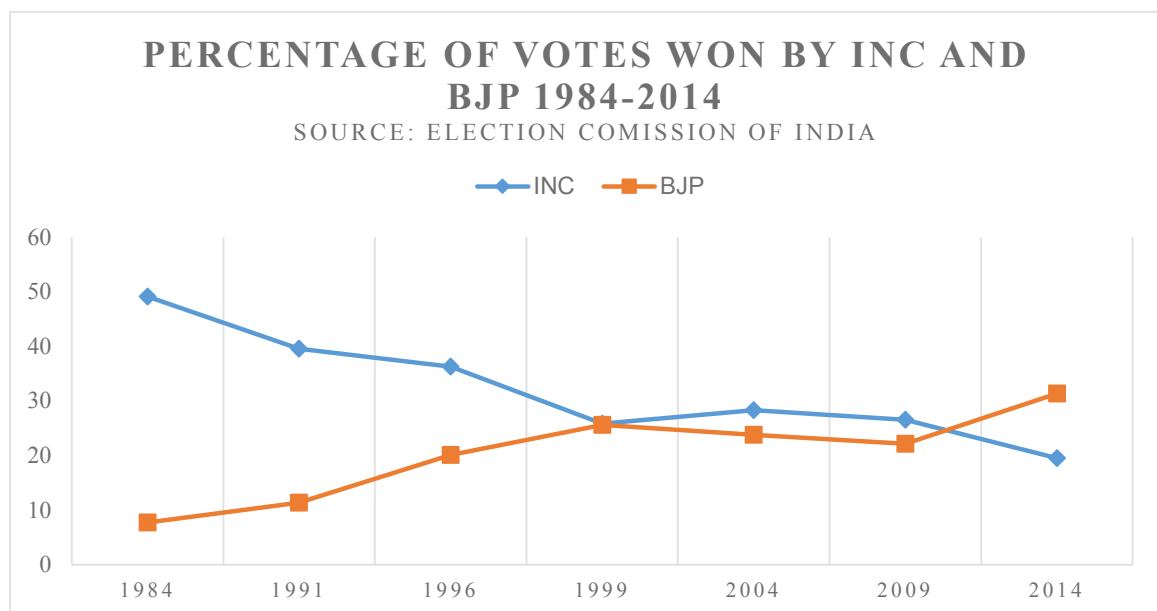
### *Economic Liberalization: An Inclusive Party Identity*

The success of the Janata Alliance in dethroning Congress in 1977 was a ray of hope for opposition parties attempting to counter the power of the Congress system. Although the Janata Party fell apart in 1979 just before Congress won the 1980 election, this failure did not stop the Hindutva movement's political ambitions. In April of 1980 past members of the Janata Party came together to form the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). While the Janata Party had somewhat moderated its support of Hindutva ideologies in its pursuit to rule with the Janata Alliance, the BJP was meant to move even further away from the divisive policies associated with the movement in order to capture a larger vote base and compete with Congress for national power (Bhatt 2001).

With moderate Atal Behari Vajpayee as its first president, the BJP initially stayed away from divisive communal politics, focusing rather on issues such as morality and government corruption. Its five core tenets at the time of inception are as follows: (1) nationalism and national integration; (2) democracy; (3) positive secularism; (4) Gandhian socialism; and (5) value-based politics. A central part of this moralizing plan included advocating for Gandhian socialism as a replacement for the socialist economic policies of Congress. This new economic policy essentially took the concepts of Hindu superiority and applied them to the economy:

“Unlike socialism based on Marxism, which uses a materialistic interpretation of history foreign to Indian cultural traditions, many believe Gandhian socialism fits the Indian cultural milieu better because it is based upon the spiritual heritage of India. A scheme of economic distribution to prevent exploitation of human by human should not be value-neutral or scientific as Marxism claims; rather it should be based on ethical and moral principles” (Malik & Singh 1994).

Though much effort was made on the BJP’s part to differentiate itself from the militant Hindutva ideology, this new moderate platform seemed to be neither here nor there. In 1984, the BJP won a mere 7% of votes and two seats in the Lok Sabha. Its morality centered political approach was not religious enough to garner the right-wing support nor was its economic policy seen as distinct enough from Congress to steal their vote base.



Following this disappointing electoral result, Vajpayee stepped down as president of the BJP and was replaced by Lal Krishna Advani in 1986. Advani left behind the moderation advocated by Vajpayee during his tenure, instead forging strong alliances with the VHP and RSS by supporting the Ramjanmabhoomi movement in Ayodhya and by demanding a bold policy of economic liberalization (Bhatt 2001). Advani as well as others in the BJP leadership worked towards a goal of creating a distinct identity and policy platform that would make the BJP a viable alternative to Congress. Though the party's renewed militant and divisive ideology played a hugely important part in gaining votes in the short run, as will be discussed in chapter 3, the political benefits from communalism in Ayodhya and elsewhere were short lived. Since communalism alone could not garner enough votes, the BJP needed a policy platform that could attract a diverse amount of voters while maintaining a unique identity. Its policies of economic liberalization and minimal state control developed in the early 1990s became one of the defining characteristics of the party and put it on the map as an opposition to Congress.

In the lead-up to the 1991 election, the BJP broke from its prior support of Gandhian socialism and pitted itself against Congress primarily by attacking the bureaucracy and corruption that prevented economic growth. Due to the decline and eventual collapse of the USSR in 1991, socialism had become a decreasingly popular idea in India while support continued to grow around economic liberalization (Malik & Singh 1994). Under the Congress' rule, the government started to gradually eliminate some levels of bureaucratic control such as excessive permitting requirements, but dissent from within the socialist factions within the party limited the effectiveness of reforms. In the 1991 campaign the BJP promised to "liberate the economy from the clutches of

government control” and “debureacratise the industry, and cut down the plethora of controls which have mushroomed over the years which breed corruption and dampen enterprise” (Chhibber 1999). This was the first time any political party had taken such a strong stance against government controls of the economy and proposed an economic policy other than socialism.

The timing could not have been more perfect, as prior to the 1991 election the Indian economy had seen a downturn as well as the assassination of Congress leader Rajiv Gandhi. Dissatisfaction with the Congress government’s economic policies had been growing particularly among the growing middle class that did not benefit from the government’s protectionist policies. Price change and political instability topped the list of most important election issues<sup>19</sup> (Juergensmeyer 1993n). While the BJP had only won 2 seats in the previous election, in 1991 it was able to capture 85 seats and 11% of the popular vote. Though upper classes traditionally supported Hindutva parties, it was the disconcerted middle class vote that provided the most gains for the BJP during this election. A post-election survey taken in 1991 showed that while religiosity was a weak indicator of support for the BJP, caste and occupation were strong indicators of voter support for the party with upper and middle class comprising most of the party’s support base (Chhibber 1991). Momentum from the BJP’s economic policies continued throughout the 1990s as the BJP overtook the Congress in 1999, winning 182 seats to Congress’ 141 seats (Election Commission of India 1999). By adopting a distinct economic policy that broke from the tradition of socialism, the BJP was able to create a

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<sup>19</sup> The Ayodhya issue came in as #3 in most important issues of the election.

unique identity that set itself apart from the status quo and began to establish itself as a legitimate opposition party to Congress.

Over the years, the BJP's economic policy has become one of its most defining characteristics<sup>20</sup> that plays a central role for voters; economic policy has been a boon to the party but also its own worst enemy. After the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) had been in power a successful term from 1999 to 2004, the NDA suffered a surprising loss to the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) in the 2004 national elections. This loss came as a surprise to many because during the NDA's tenure, India's economy had experienced significant growth. India's GDP growth rate had seen a rise from 4.15% in the 1999-2000 fiscal year to 7.07% in the 2004-05 fiscal year. Approximately 59 million jobs were created, many of which were in the agricultural sector and a third of which were taken by women, while the services sector also saw considerable growth rates as well (Saikia 2014). Consequently, during the 2004 election, the BJP's campaign slogan, "India Shining" was meant to underscore the economic success the country had seen under NDA rule. The ruling party's victory was referred to as a "foregone conclusion" due to economic prosperity and high approval ratings as well as Congress' apparent lack of organization in the campaign (Oxford Analytica 2004). Yet voters surprised analysts when the Congress party won the general election. Political science professor Ashutosh Varshney commented "The margin of NDA's defeat is truly stunning. The odds that the Congress could so soon become the largest party of India were certainly very low. It is a most surprising result." (Biswas 2004).

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<sup>20</sup> Communalism is by default a defining characteristic of the BJP but it is one that, as Chapter 3 will discuss, the party has increasingly attempted to downplay.

Post-election analysis showed that the economic policies of the BJP that were attributed to its success were the very reason for its defeat in 2004. While the party campaigned on its overall economic success, this appeal was only effective on the upper and to some extent the middle classes who were actually enjoying economic prosperity. Varshney notes, “There is no doubt that the Indian economy has done very well of late, but the primary beneficiaries have been the rich and urban middle class. The less privileged outnumber the middle classes by a big margin” (Biswas 2004). Though the overall macroeconomic aggregates indicated growth, they overlooked the poor populations in India who had been suffering wage stagnation. The rate of real wage growth had been decreasing from an average of 5% in the 1980s to 2% in the 1990s. By the first years of 2000s, real wages had completely stagnated in the sector and while the overall economy was seeing growth, there was very little perceptible growth in the agricultural sector. In fact, many villages reported negative incomes (as high as 36% of households in certain villages in Andhra Pradesh) and as a result farmer suicides became a common occurrence (Saika 2014). Thus the BJP’s “India Shining” campaign was ineffective and to some extent offensive to the large lower classes whose plight had been smoothed over by aggregate growth rates. This election highlighted a glaring problem in the BJP’s appeal to the general public.

A decade later, the BJP’s economic policy once again took center-stage in Narendra Modi’s 2014 national campaign. Just as in the 1991 election, the Indian economy was once again in the throes of an economic recession and polls showed the economy was a central issue in voters’ minds. Modi’s campaign for power fits in the overall trend of the BJP downplaying its communally divisive identity and highlighting

its economic ability. Throughout his entire campaign, Modi was careful to avoid divisive rhetoric, particularly due to the negative backlash tied to his tenure as Gujarat's Chief Minister during the deadly riots in 2002. The general population was very quick to overlook this angle of Modi and the BJP in light of its economic success in the past. Part of Modi's appeal to voters was his rags to riches story; starting as a "chai-wala" (tea server) on the train stations in Gujarat, his hard work earned him leadership within RSS and eventually led him to the seat of chief Minister of Gujarat. Modi also identified himself as an Other Backward Caste (OBC) member, which gained him the support of scheduled and backward castes, a demographic which was previously considered to vote exclusively for Congress (Jaffrelot 2015). Furthermore, Modi's campaign promises of economic development hinged largely on his successful economic turnaround of Gujarat during his time as Chief Minister. Modi claimed the Gujarat-model of development could be applied to all of India and lead to dramatic development for all. Due to his low class background and economic success in Gujarat, Modi was able to fill in the previously identified gaps in the BJP's support base, leading to its landslide victory in 2014.

#### *Conclusion:*

In the 1990s, the BJP emerged as the first long-term opposition party to break the Congress Party's long reign under the "one-party dominant" model. While the Hindutva movement had struggled against Congress' dominance and the monopoly of secular politics in India, the BJP was able to revive the movement by modifying its primary identity to be more inclusive. With economic policy being a new defining characteristic

of the BJP, the party has been able to gather more votes than with simply Hindutva policy platforms.



## CHAPTER THREE

### Hindutva and Communal Violence in India

In late November of 2015, acclaimed Indian actor, director and social activist Aamir Khan reignited a national debate after commenting on the rising intolerance in India. Being of Muslim decent, Khan brought to light the sentiments of many that the policies of the BJP after coming to power had caused many Muslims and other minorities in India to feel more threatened (BBC 2016). Prominent authors and poets also brought this issue to light by returning their literary prizes in protest to the apparent rise in communal violence under the recent administration (Ansari & Sharma 2015). These activists were met with fervent opposition by others in the art industry and political arena as well. Actress and BJP MP from Chandigarh, Kirron Kher delivered a rousing speech in the Lok Sabha in which she detailed the history of intolerance against religious and other minorities in India, both under Congress and BJP power, implying that politics has no link to the underlying hatred between the religious communities in India (Phukan 2015). These comments resurrected discussions about the occurrences of riots and communal

violence that are unfortunately common. While many have attributed communal violence, particularly against religious groups, to Hindutva political organizations such as the RSS and BJP, others like MP Kher refute the claim by describing communal violence as an unfortunate reality of religious diversity in India.

Communal violence between Hindus and Muslims occurs with frightening normalcy in India, described as “epileptic seizures”, which arise intermittently and are without cure (Eckert 2009). Scholars have pointed to a myriad of causal factors behind communal violence in India and rightly so; the causal factors behind communal violence are complex and interrelated, often making it hard to distinguish causality from correlation. Some of the common reasons given to explain communal violence are the notion that Hindus and Muslims are naturally at odds with each other, that unemployment and economic competition for increased violence, or that the lack of civil society makes violence more likely. While these factors are often simultaneously present during incidents of riots, the main focus of this chapter will be the political utility of instigating communal riots. In this chapter I will discuss two cases of communal violence most commonly tied with Hindu nationalist organizations and analyze to what extent communal violence is politically beneficial to the BJP.

*Communal Violence: the status quo or a political utility?)*

Perhaps the most common colloquial reason cited to explain riots is the primordialist argument; the assumption that Hindus and Muslims are age old enemies that are existential threats to one another (Van Der Veer 1994). The main problem with this

line of thought lies in the inconsistency of Hindu-Muslim riots in India. While India has seen some particularly bloody incidents of communal violence, the bloodshed is not continuous but rather comes and goes. Furthermore, while the literature on Indian communal violence focuses largely on the incidents of violence between Hindus and Muslims, as this chapter later illustrates, there have been many instances where riots have not taken place even when the conditions were ripe for it even in “riot-prone” areas (Varshney 2002, Wilkinson 2004). This indicates that the incidence of communal violence in India is not simply the natural outpouring of anti-Muslim or anti-Hindu sentiment, but is influenced by other factors. That being said, the primordialist argument is rooted into the narrative of society and politics. Right from the get-go, before Indian independence was secure, the Muslim League demanded a separate nation because it believed Hindus and Muslims could not coexist in a secular democracy (Bhatt 2001). Though Nehru, Gandhi and other leaders have tried to combat this religiously divisive narrative by focusing on secularism, it continues to be an influential narrative utilized by politicians today to incite division and even violence.

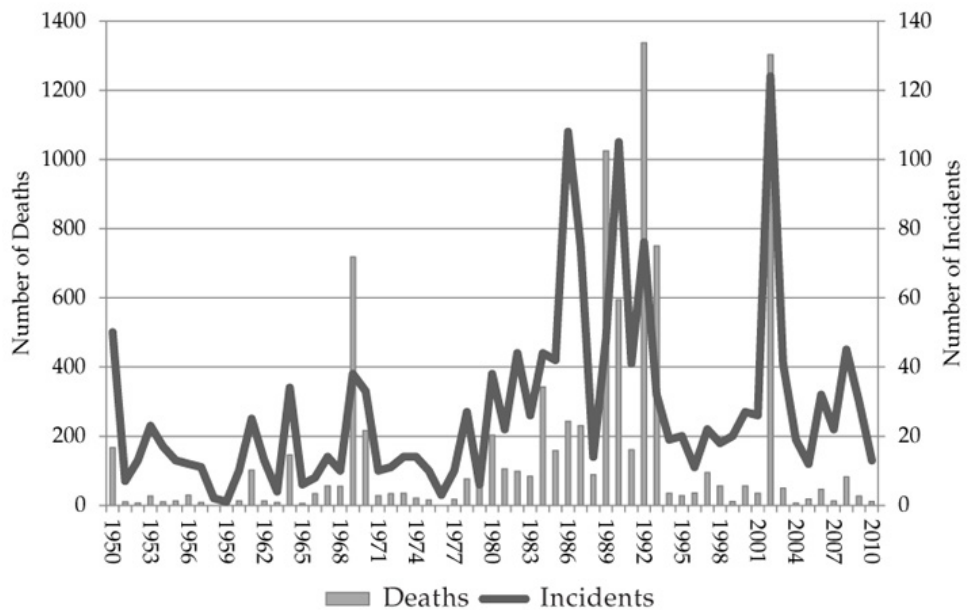
Communal violence can also be viewed through a structuralist lens as a useful political tool that politicians use to create or bolster certain identities based on social cleavages that can in turn be turned into vote banks<sup>21</sup>. Because of the militant roots of the ideology, Hindutva political organizations, RSS, VHP and even the BJP have been notorious for instigating anti-Muslim sentiments in order to strengthen a unified Hindu identity against the perceived existential threat of the Muslims in India. This has proved

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<sup>21</sup> Vote banks are blocs of citizens, usually of the same community, that consistently vote together for the same party or candidate.

to be an effective way to arouse religious nationalism and churn out votes for Hindu nationalism parties. For example, the Hindu wave of support that came on the heels of the demolition of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya was a major contributing factor to the rise of the BJP in the mid-1990s (Hansen 1999). On the other hand, parties such as Congress that rely on the votes of multiple religious and ethnic groups, lose votes when incidents of communal violence divide constituencies along communal lines, driving citizens to vote for cleavage-based parties. Therefore, such parties are proactive in preventing outright conflict when communal tensions threaten to spill over. While this is a rule of thumb usually observed in India, it is worth noting that there have been instances when Hindutva parties have benefited from preventing riots and Congress has incited violence. Therefore, party affiliation alone cannot be an accurate indicator of the outbreak of communal violence (Wilkinson 2004).

Figure 1 Trends in Hindu-Muslim Violence 1950-2010 (Source: Varshney 2015)



In his book, *Votes and Violence*, Steven Wilkinson takes this constructivist approach to communal violence by arguing that the incidence of communal violence can be explained by the level of electoral competition. He observes that in states with higher levels of electoral competition (three or more effective parties), political parties need to rely on coalitions with minority parties and groups in order to stay in power. Therefore it is in the state government's best interest to do everything in their power to control riots and protect minorities from harm. Alternatively, in states with lower levels of electoral competitions (two or fewer effective parties), parties benefit from creating social cleavages, particularly when the cleavages pit the majority against the minority (Wilkinson 2004). While Wilkinson's work focuses on state level analysis, in the remainder of this chapter, I build on his premise to explain that there is a change in the political utility of communal violence for the BJP as it grows from a fringe party to a nationally competitive opposition party due to increased political competition. To do so, I present the cases of the two deadliest incidents of communal violence in India since its independence: riots following the demolition of the Babri masjid in Ayodhya in 1992, Uttar Pradesh and the riots following the burning of the Sabramati Express in Gujarat in 2004.

#### *Babri Mosque, Ayodhya 1992*

Ayodhya has long been the site of a great religious conflict between Hindus and Muslims and today the name is synonymous with riots, violence and destruction. According to Hindu texts, Ayodhya was the birthplace of the lord Ram, one of the heroic gods depicted in the Hindu epic *Ramayana*. To mark his birthplace, a temple had

supposedly been built in Ayodhya but was later destroyed in 1528 by the Mughal emperor Babar who built a mosque (the Babri Mosque) in its stead (Van Der Veer 1994). Because the location was the site of so much religious contention, the mosque was locked up in 1947, yet both Hindu and Muslim leaders have tried to lay claim to it since. For instance, in 1949 figures of Lord Ram had been found inside the mosque, most likely placed there by Hindus attempting to feign a miracle. In 1984, the VHP began the Ramjanmabhoomi<sup>22</sup> movement to reclaim the site and by 1986 the courts gave in and opened the site to the public, leading to strong protests from Muslims. The VHP 's campaign to build a temple at the site continued with some fervor throughout the next few years. For example, the organization purchased a plot of land adjacent to the mosque and began building foundations for a temple. When rioters did some damage to the mosque, the Prime Minister intervened to protect the site from total demolition.

The VHP's success in reviving the Ramjanmabhoomi campaign was largely due to the support and attention provided by prominent BJP leaders. After its disheartening showing in the 1984 elections, the new President L.K. Advani hoped a more militant tone would be effective in rallying the Hindu vote (Bhatt 2001). Most notably was the *ratha yatras*<sup>23</sup> undertaken by Advani in 1990; he was supposed to lead from the Somnath temple in Gujarat to Ayodhya, however his procession was stopped in Bihar when he was arrested by Chief Minister Laloo Prasad Yadav<sup>24</sup>. Yet the procession of *kar sevaks*<sup>25</sup> continued onto to Ayodhya when the volunteers partially destroyed the mosque in an unsuccessful attempt to raise saffron flags atop the mosque. In 1991, the BJP won

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<sup>22</sup> Translated: Land of Ram's birth

<sup>23</sup> Long distance religious processions

<sup>24</sup> Yadav is part of the Rashtriya Janata Dal party, which is largely dependent on Muslim support in Bihar.

<sup>25</sup> Hindu volunteers

state elections in Uttar Pradesh leading to a stronger push from Hindutva organizations for the demolition of the Babri mosque. In late 1992, their wishes came to fruition when a large mob of Hindu worshipers attacked the mosque and illegally demolished it. The following months saw one of the deadliest and most widespread Hindu-Muslim riots, during which an estimated 2,000 people (mostly Muslims) were killed (Hansen 1999).

The timing of the temple demolition is important in considering the political purpose communal violence plays. While campaigning for state power, the BJP supported replacing the Babri mosque with a temple; upon winning the 1991 state election, Chief Minister Kalyan Singh even went as far as saying the Babri mosque issue was the reason the BJP had come to power in Uttar Pradesh. After taking office however, when the BJP government realized the complex legal problems associated with going forward with the demolition, the issue was symbolically placed on the back burner. Simultaneously, RSS along with other local Hindutva groups kept calling for action. With its hands tied, the state BJP government made weak efforts to calm the building fervor. In the days prior to the demolition, BJP leaders left the state for New Delhi; an action some claim was to avoid blame for what they knew was about to occur. Meanwhile, local RSS leaders were allowed to organize a rally of several thousand *kar sevaks* for the day of demolition. Furthermore, BJP leaders such as Advani and BJP activist Uma Bharati were present at the site, goading on the *kar sevaks* to take down the mosque (Hansen 1999). As would be seen later in Gujarat, a handful of carefully selected police monitored the incident, with instructions not to interfere with the demolition (Wilkinson 2004).

In its aftermath, the Ayodhya event produced mixed results for the BJP. It is clear from the party's official actions after coming to power in Uttar Pradesh that the BJP

realized it was in their best interest to officially distance itself from communally divisive issues like the Ramjanmabhoomi movement. These fears proved to be well founded as then-Prime Minister Narasimha Rao dismissed the BJP-led government in Uttar Pradesh as well as in Himachal Pradesh and Rajasthan states where BJP controlled the state government. The central government also placed a ban on the RSS and VHP and some arrests including Advani, though those arrested were largely let out on bail. The repercussions of the Ayodhya incident were taken somewhat lightly in part because many people seemed to support the temple demolition. Politically, the event was successful in creating an increase in BJP support in the short run by creating a “saffron wave”, a sudden upsurge in Hindu pride and Hindu identity (Hansen 1999). In the short term, the violence in Ayodhya proved to have some short-term electoral benefits for the BJP. However, in the long term, these benefits faded away. State elections in four BJP governed states were held in 1993. Riding on the saffron wave, the BJP made the Ayodhya issue central to its campaign, a tactic which backfired. The party lost a large number of seats in Himachal Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, where voters saw issues of corruption and job reservations as more important than the religious issues. Even in Uttar Pradesh, though the party won the most seats, a coalition of two parties drawing support from the lower castes won control of the government. Rajasthan was the only state where the BJP retained its majority. As a result of these elections, the BJP began to distance itself from religiously divisive issues and shifted its focus to economic policies that were the focus of the lower castes. Though the VHP attempted to continue its Ayodhya success by campaigning to “liberate” other religious sites in Mathura and Varanasi with mosques



on them, the BJP did not continue its support of the VHP's cause (Van Der Veer 1994, Hansen 1999).

### *Gujarat Riots 2002*

During the 2014 general election, communal violence once again took the stage as the 2002 riots in Gujarat, became the center of attention, and not for a good reason. As the chief minister of the BJP government ruling Gujrat at the time, Narendra Modi faced much criticism for his management of the violence and the issue haunted his campaign. While the BJP and Mr. Modi denied any responsibility in facilitating or furthering the violence, evidence gathered after the riots indicate otherwise. In late February 2002, a train fire on the Sabarmati Express near Godhra, a city in eastern Gujarat, led to the death of 58 passengers, many of whom were Hindus returning from pilgrimage to the Ayodhya temple. Though the actual cause of the fire was never settled on, due to the religious aspect of these deaths, many blamed the fire on Muslims. In the days following, the state erupted into anti-Muslim violence that would last for three months. An estimated 1,054 people died during the riots while an additional 2,500 were reported to be injured and over 200,000 displaced (Berenhot 2011).

While the BJP state government painted the violence as a natural response to what they believed to be an act of violence against the Hindu pilgrims of the train, deeper investigation shows evidence that the riots were in fact pre-planned and instigated for the benefit of BJP politicians for the upcoming elections. A comparative study of two neighborhoods in Ahmedabad, a major city in Gujarat that saw significant anti-Muslim

violence, showed the impact of political organizations on the amount of violence committed. The study compared violence in two demographically similar neighborhoods of Isanpur<sup>26</sup> and Ram-Rahim Nagar that lie within three kilometers of each other; both areas have low income residents with mixed Hindu dalit<sup>27</sup> and Muslim populations, conditions that make both neighborhoods ripe for violence. However, while Isanpur saw significant violence and a total of 29 deaths, Ram-Rahim Nagar had nearly no incidents of communal violence. The difference between these two neighborhoods was that Isanpur had a strong presence by Hindutva political workers while Ram-Rahim Nagar had close affiliation with the Congress party. Though both communities might have been poised for inter-religious tensions, the study finds the political patronage networks to be the most influential in inciting violence or keeping peace (Berenhot 2011).

In Isanpur, BJP politicians and other Hindutva political workers had a prominent presence and played a key role in the lives of the residents. The days and weeks before the rioting started, Hindutva workers were reported to be using their influence and power in the neighborhood to rile up susceptible men against Muslims. A resident recounts the techniques they used:

People from the RSS, Bajrang Dal, Durga Vahini [Hindu-nationalist organizations] roam around in the area first, and they get hold of people, they find out the people who drink and who are in need of money. They contact such people through two different groups. One group does the work of giving money and the other group instigates them... there are

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<sup>26</sup> The name of this neighborhood was changed to ensure the anonymity of those interviewed

<sup>27</sup> Those of the “untouchable” Hindu caste

some naïve boys, about 25–50 people; these workers give them weapons, they give them money. They feed them *masala* [tobacco]. They make them drink alcohol. Then they move around in the area saying, “Those people [Muslims] will come, they will kill us, they will do this, they will do that!” (Berenchot 2011).

The instigation was not only isolated to poor drunks; another Isanpur resident recalled VHP workers having informal meetings with Hindus in the community over tea, to discuss the threat Muslims posed to Hindus in India:” [They say that] in our Hindustan our sisters and daughter are harassed [by Muslims], that they eat the meat of cows, etc. They reside in Hindustan at our expense and are pressurizing us.” (Berenchot 2011). In Isanpur, as well as throughout major cities in Gujarat, the VHP had been rigorously recruiting, particularly for their youth volunteer organization, the Bajarang Dal, and equipping them with weapons, and even at times printed lists from municipal records of Muslim residential areas to target, the Hindutva workers in Ahmedabad certainly premeditated the anti-Muslim riots (Setalvad 2005, Wilkinson 2012).

On top of the groundwork before the train fire, the inadequate response from authorities to the riots in Gujrat enabled the violence to rage on. For example, the police forces were ineffective in controlling the violence. It was widely circulated among Hindu neighborhoods that the police were on the side of the rioters and that they were immune from punishment by the government. VHP and Bajarang Dal recruits recall being given ID cards and told that it would literally be their “get-out-of-jail-free” card if they were arrested in anti-Muslim riots (Setalvad 2005). In Isanpur, residents reported that the police not only failed to arrest rioters but joined in the violence (Berenchot 2011). Higher

up, state level politicians were reported to be giving police orders to let the violence occur without hindrance and even relocating police that took action against rioters (Wilkinson 2004, 2012). Some even reported that CM Modi condoned the attacks, saying police should “allow the Hindus to vent their anger” (Human Rights Watch (HRW) 2012). After the riots, VHP and BJP members worked with police to release those rioters who had been arrested. Two thousand cases brought against rioters were dropped due to a “lack of evidence” even though there were eyewitnesses willing to testify against many. After the Supreme Court ordered the dropped cases to be re-opened in 2004, more arrests were made and investigations were opened into police involvement. In 2011, nine years after the riots, a mere thirty-one people were found guilty in the murder (HRW 2012). It is clear in light of these facts that both local and state government played a deliberate role in creating an environment conducive to communal violence.

After the 2002 riots, the BJP saw a significant increase in support in the areas of Gujarat where the violence had been the worst, while it saw a drop in support in the more peaceful areas. A quarter of those who voted for BJP in the following state election cited the riots as a primary reason for their support of the party. While it might be argued that the areas where violence took place already had high BJP support, an evaluation of the swing votes and Congress votes shows how the riots indeed improved the BJP’s vote share. Due to the violence, many Muslim voters, nearly 100% of whom had voted for Congress in the 1998 election, were either displaced and therefore unable to vote or were intimidated from voting because many polling places were in Hindu-dominant neighborhoods. Furthermore, of the 11% the swing voters in the state, the BJP won 56% of their votes while Congress only won 24% (Wilkinson 2012).

In contrast to the violence and deaths in most of Gujarat, though the neighborhood of Ram-Rahim Nagar in Ahmedabad has a mixed dalit and Muslim population like Isanpur, it saw almost no violence and had no deaths during the 2002 riots. All religious and caste lines had been dissolved in this slum when the community unified to fight against the tyranny of a local slumlord in the 1970s. After overthrowing the slumlord, the residents named the region Ram-Rahim Nagar, combining the name of a Hindu god (Ram) and a Muslim name for God (Rahim) (Berenhot 2011). A community organization, the Ram-Rahim Nagar Dhupadavasi Mandal (RDM) was formed in 1973 with equally represented Hindu and Muslim leaders and has had a significant influence ever since, peacefully guiding the community through several riots that overtook Ahmedabad since (Pandey 2002). Because of its influence over votes of the community, the RDM used its power to establish strong patronage ties with Congress, exchanging votes and support for running water, electricity and so on. In a region with growing BJP support, Ram-Rahim Nagar was one of the regions that kept Congress in power for many years in the region (Berenhot 2011).

When the rioting started in February 2002, both Hindu and Muslim RDM members sought to preserve their unity. Youth were sent to guard the entrance of the slums and instructed not to let strangers enter without approval from the RDM. Leaders and elders made rounds in the neighborhood to keep the peace, staying up throughout the night and mediating the slightest disturbances in the community and making speeches about unity and mutual respect. RSS and VHP members living in the slum were particularly warned that if they incited any violence, they would be dealt with severely. For the most part, the vigilance and unified action of the RDM kept the peace in Ram-

Rahim Nagar. The only violence the community saw was during several scuffles between VHP members and the guarding youth at the entrance when trying to enter the slum. In an attempt to rile up the residents, the VHP members called the Hindus cowards for not retaliating against Muslims and even sent bangles to the men to highlight the lack of manly violence in the area. Despite the provocation, there were no outbursts of violence or any deaths (Berenchot 2011). Furthermore, the slum acted as a refuge for nearly 300 Muslims attacked in a neighboring mosque, with community members providing shelter and food to the victims (Pandey 2002). In July of 2002, Ram-Rahim Nagar was even awarded the Indira Gandhi Award for National Integration for the peacekeeping efforts within the community in 2002 as well as in previous Hindu-Muslim riots (Berenchot 2011).

Though Gujarat is infamous for its riots in the aftermath of the train fire, violent backlash from the Hindu nationalist organizations was not restricted to the state but spread to other regions in North India. As in Gujarat, many of these states also had Hindutva political organizers working on the ground to rile up anti-Muslim sentiment in Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, Bihar, Maharashtra, Karnataka and West Bengal. Yet the riots in these states did not take off as severely as in Gujarat. The difference between the violence in these states and Gujarat was that the state governments did everything in their power to stop the violence. These states were all either controlled by Congress governments, or by BJP governments that were in coalition with other minority state parties, creating incentives to keep the peace between various religious communities. Police were sent to enforce curfews in areas prone to Hindu-Muslim tensions, militants attempting to spark riots were promptly arrested, and the

police were instructed to use all means necessary to ensure rioting did not continue (Wilkinson 2004, 2012).

In the long run, though the BJP saw electoral success in Gujarat, the 2002 riots became a detrimental issue for the party. Unlike Ayodhya where a majority of voters supported the Ramjanmabhoomi movement, in a survey taken after the riots only 37% of respondents agreed that riots were an apt response to the Godhra train fire. Moreover, as word spread about the BJP politicians' involvement in the riots, Gujaratis actually blamed the BJP government and Modi himself for not putting an end to the riots. Polls showed that "overwhelmingly people felt insecure in Gujarat and blamed Modi for not doing enough to quell the riots...recent evidence suggests that the benefits from the riots have reached diminishing returns" (Shah 2002). Furthermore, backlash from the international human rights community was detrimental to the party. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom moved to add India to a watchlist of countries of particular concern following the riots and the State Department revoked Modi's U.S. visa over accusations of his involvement in the riots (USCIRF 2005). Throughout the next few years, the BJP would have difficulty shaking off the dark shadows left by its involvement with the Gujarat riots.

### *Conclusion*

Though the BJP has been rewarded in the past for encouraging (either directly or indirectly) anti-Muslim violence, as the party gains more and more momentum on the national level, the effect of such violence is beginning to fade. While the party received

positive electoral results from the Babri mosque demolition throughout elections in the mid-1990s, the effect of the “saffron wave” has long faded. This is evidenced by the serious backlash faced by Narendra Modi both in 2002 and perhaps even more so in 2014. Rather than being a rallying force, communal violence has proven to be detrimental to the party, and as it has grown nationally and faced competition from other regional parties. As shown in chapter 2, economics has proved to be a far more effective political tool for the BJP and it has begun to distance itself more and more from the rhetoric of violence. Prior to the 2014 election, Mr. Modi’s campaign was careful to avoid topics of communalism and even criticized those who campaigned on such premises (Wallace 2015). One can only hope that the trend of moderation of militant Hindutva ideology will continue.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### Forecast on the Future of Hindutva and BJP

During the last election, Modi's charismatic appeal to voters was often compared to that of Indira Gandhi. These days, the Gandhi-Modi comparison continues to be made, but for entirely different reasons. As student protesters fill the streets of New Delhi after the arrest of the student body president of Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) on sedition charges for anti-national comments, some recall a similar atmosphere from the time of Indira Gandhi's Emergency, when academics were among those arrested for their dissenting opinions against the government (Gopal 2016). With protests such as these growing in number, nearly two years after Modi's landslide victory, the BJP's prospects are not quite as optimistic as they were in 2014. The BJP government's Hindutva-based policies such as the beef ban, increased censorship, and crackdown on "anti-nationalists" have been met with violent protest throughout the country. Modi has yet to deliver on significant economic growth promised during his campaign. In 2015, the BJP lost a major state legislature election in Bihar, which united former rival politicians into an anti-BJP

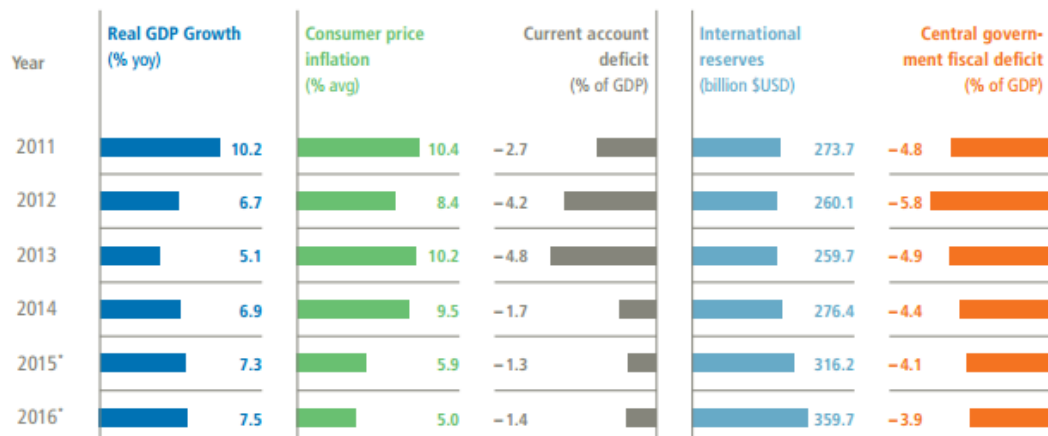
coalition, the Janata Dal. With more state legislature elections coming up in 2016, the BJP might have reason to doubt its hold on power. So what happens next? What is the future of the BJP? This is the question this chapter seeks to answer.

In the last three chapters, we have traced the changes in ideology of the Hindutva movement from a fringe ideology in the pre-Independence days right up to the national victory of Modi in 2014. Chapter two discussed the role of economic development in gaining votes and chapter three discussed the role of communal violence as a means of gaining electoral support. Using these two sub-topics as a guideline, this final chapter will discuss a several major current events in India since the Modi government has come into power such as the Jat protests, the JNU protests, the Bihar and Delhi elections, and make predictions of where the party might be headed in the future. A thorough analysis of these events will show the BJP at a crossroads between implementing strong economic liberalization policies and Hindutva-based social policies, or moderating in order to accommodate a larger, broader electorate.

### *Economic Liberalization vs. Political Patronage*

The biggest selling point of the BJP's platform in 2014 was economic growth and development. After nearly two years in office, the government's policies have provided at best only a modest amount of economic growth. This is not for a lack in effort; the Modi government has followed through on many of its campaign promises to liberalize the market and stimulate the economy. Picking up the pieces of a crumbling economy that in

Figure 2 India's Macroeconomic Trajectory (Source: Vaishnav 2015)



2013 was labeled a part of the “Fragile Five”<sup>28</sup> world economies, the BJP has nursed the depreciating rupee back to health and maintained a high growth rate that has fluctuated around 7% since the beginning of the administration. Inflation rates were projected to half by the end of 2015, as compared to 2013. In September of 2015, the IMF announced that India had surpassed China as the world’s fastest growing economy. After taking office Prime Minister Modi personally flew all over the globe in an effort to improve foreign relations and increase the amount of foreign direct investment (Vaishnav 2015). The popular “Make in India” campaign was launched in 2014 as a means of attracting manufacturing jobs and to date has garnered \$222 billion in pledged<sup>29</sup> investments for the manufacturing sector (Rasgotra 2016). As promised, the administration has relaxed stringent regulations on certain industries: diesel prices have been deregulated and the mining industries have been partially privatized. The caps on foreign direct investment were lifted in various sectors including defense, insurance and railway sectors. A land

<sup>28</sup> The “Fragile Five” was a term coined by analysts at Morgan Stanley, who projected India to be one of the five economies which were too dependent on foreign aid and would be hardest hit when the U.S. Federal Reserve withdrew its stimulus funds.

<sup>29</sup> Though this amount has been promised, there is no guarantee that this amount will actually be invested.

reform bill aimed at easing the process of buying land was proposed but failed to pass in the legislature. Other reforms to further deregulate the financial sector and to reduce trade barriers (Goods and Service Tax) are in the works but will take a while before they go into effect (Vaishnav 2015).

Back in 2014, shortly after taking office Mr. Modi tempered his campaign promises of growth with a warning: "I need to take some harsh decisions and administer some bitter medicine in order to resuscitate this patient. The medicine may hurt some of you but I ask for your support at this time" (Times of India 2014). While India's GDP growth rate has been fluctuating at a whopping 7-8%<sup>30</sup>, economists such as Rajeev Malik observe, "There's a certain disconnect between what the official GDP numbers say and what the ground reality is" (Rasgotra 2016). The BJP's policies, while promising have been termed as "incremental" and "gradualist" (Vaishnav 2015). Analysts might believe that a gradual approach is a more economically sound than shocking the economy with radical reforms, but the impact is apparently not being felt strongly enough among the populace, particularly by the poor and rural populations that the BJP has historically struggled with. Due to the income inequality present in India, while the economy overall has seen massive growth, the income per capita remains remarkably low, particularly among rural and low caste populations (OECD 2015). This poses a big problem for the BJP going into the future.

One of the biggest problems with the Modi administration's incremental process of economic liberalization lies with the discord among these low caste and rural

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<sup>30</sup> While this growth rate seems high at face value, there are concerns behind how this growth rate is calculated. For more see Rasgotra 2016.

populations. As discussed in chapter two, the Indian political system, especially under the Congress party, was strongly based on systems of patronage including quotas and reservations for lower castes. The BJP's opposition to reservations for public sector jobs and education has been a key selling point for the middle class that had been growing as a result of modernization. On the flip side of the coin, modernization has also led to a decrease in the profitability in agriculture, which harms the rural and low castes. Part of the reason the 2014 elections were so successful for the BJP because they were able to win over support from these rural populations (conventionally Congress vote banks) who were counting on Modi's promises of "development for all". However, the rural populations have been benefitting from reservations and government aid for the better part two decades now and even though they voted for the BJP and his plans for development, the effects of the "bitter medicine" of economic liberalization and less government strikes these groups the hardest.

One recent example of this effect is the Jat protest in northern India that took place in February 2016. The Jats, a dominant upper class in the state of Harayana, along with other dominant upper castes in Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra, staged deadly protests in early 2016 in an effort to be included in a list of "Other Backwards Castes" (OBCs) in order to get job reservations. Christophe Jaffrelot explains this counterintuitive phenomenon as a result of urbanization and a decreasing profitability in the rural economy. The Jats and their counterparts in northern India have been forced from their once prosperous jobs in agriculture into low-skilled and low-wage urban jobs. There is an uproar to increase reservations for these kinds of castes to enable them to get better paying and more secure government jobs (Jaffrelot 2016). And if the impact of

urbanization is being felt so strongly among the more privileged in rural India, the effect is even stronger on the lower classes. Droughts and crop failures have made it hard for farmers to even break even let alone make profits from their work. There are an increasing number of farmers who find themselves in heavy debts, and in a growing epidemic, many of these farmers are committing suicide to escape their plight. The Modi government, despite its commitment to decreasing government deficit, has pledged relief packages to rural farmers. Still farmers feel these promises are empty words. "The budget may give you an illusion the government has tried to address the problems faced by farmers," one food analyst commented, but in reality farmers do not report receiving any significant aid (Karla and MacAskill 2016).

One commentary succinctly summarizes the economic situation that the Modi government faces today, "The challenge for Modi, therefore, is to use his considerable political capital to convince the electorate—not to mention skeptics within his own party—that pro-poor and pro-market are two sides of the same coin" (Vaishnav 2016). The BJP finds itself in a precarious position to administer the bitter medicine of pro-market reforms while trying to hang onto the support of a diverse nation with varying economic needs. In a country like India with approximately two-thirds of its population being rural and impoverished, a party cannot risk seeming anti-poor. Yet it must deliver on its promises of economic liberalizations if it is to keep its middle class voter base happy. Its incremental policy moves reflect the fact that it is aware of this precarious balancing act it must fulfill. At the end of the day, the average Indian voter will make choices based not on the GDP growth rate published in government documents but based on the realities that he/she faces, as they did in the 2004 elections. The party's future

hangs in the balance of how quickly the government's policies will have an impact on the ground reality.

### *Communal Tensions*

The second primary issue before the BJP government is that of communal tensions. As we saw previous chapters, the issue of communal violence against minorities has been one of the largest criticisms of the BJP by the INC and other leftist politicians in India. In chapter three we saw how the benefits of stoking communal tensions for the BJP has decreased over time as they have moved up the ladder of government. Today, the BJP finds itself in somewhat of a catch-22 when it comes to communal tensions. The party is understandably under pressure from Sangh Parivar organizations like the RSS and VHP that helped mobilize many voters in the past election to push Hindutva-based government actions. But also faces the threat of backlash and desertion from moderate and liberal supporters who do not necessarily believe strongly in conservative Hindutva ideology. While the trend of moderation continues to be observed in the current BJP government in many ways, the Hindutva ideology has predictably reared its ugly head in several different ways over the past two years.

One of the most obvious examples of this is the beef ban that was signed into law in Maharashtra in last year. The Maharashtra Animal Preservation (Amendment) Act, which was initially passed in 1996 prohibits the sale and consumption of beef in the state had been collecting dust for the better part of two decades, awaiting a formal signature by the President. Having promised to reverse the “pink revolution” of rising beef exports in

India<sup>31</sup>, the BJP revived the act and pushed for the signing of the law in March 2014<sup>32</sup>, consequently arousing communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims. Senior VHP official Vyankatesh Abedo applauded the passing of the legislation saying, “This is a Hindu nation. In Hindu society, we see the cow as our mother. Its killing or the killing of its progeny is intolerable” (Bearak 2015). The religious complexity of this increases even further when one considers the fact that the beef industry in Maharashtra is largely run by the Muslim Qureshi community, who are suffering massive economic losses now that their livelihood has been taken away from them<sup>33</sup>. “This is work we have done for centuries,” lamented Mohammed Ali Qureshi, “We are experts in this. We don’t know how to do anything else” (Bearak 2015). In addition to this economic disadvantage, the ban has led to a surge in Hindu nationalist and anti-Muslim sentiment throughout India. Several highly placed BJP officials came out in defense of implementing a national beef ban while making highly inflammatory comments against Muslims who are the primary consumers of beef in India, inevitably dividing the community into an “us” versus “them” mentality. In some cases, politicians even suggested a death penalty for breaking the beef ban. In the aftermath of the law being passed, three Muslims were killed by radical Hindu mobs in three separate instances for serving, consuming or selling beef. Mr. Modi eventually spoke out against these acts of violence, calling for Hindus and Muslims to

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<sup>31</sup> India is the second largest exporter of beef in the world, after Brazil. However, it is estimated that 95% of the beef comes from buffaloes rather than cows (*The Economist* 2015). Still, it is viewed as a shameful reality particularly among Hindu conservatives, who consider the cow a sacred animal.

<sup>32</sup> It is worth noting that most Indian states have some form of ban on the slaughter of healthy cows, though many of these laws have a provision that allows for the slaughter of old and sick cows. The law passed in Maharashtra has stronger restrictions, banning all cows from being slaughtered.

<sup>33</sup> In addition to the Qureshi’s suffering economic losses, many Hindu farmers would earn money by selling cows used for farming to the slaughterhouses when they got too old for work, so that they could afford to buy new cows. The ban worsens the already dire economic situation of these farmers as well, who find themselves further and further in debt (Bearak 2015).



cooperate with one another, but his remarks were regarded by some as too little too late (Barstow 2015).

Another contentious ongoing social phenomenon is the attacks against so-called “anti-nationalists.” I have previously alluded to this phenomenon in the case of Amir Khan and his comments regarding rising religious intolerance in India. In the days after Mr. Khan expressed his discontent, Hindu nationalists were quick to label him and his sympathizers as unpatriotic and anti-national. Even more recently, in an equally divisive incident, several students at JNU were arrested after expressing anti-national sentiments. JNU student union president Kanhiya Kumar was arrested in late February after he hosted an on-campus even commemorating the death of Kashmiri-separatist Afzal Guru, who was arrested and hanged for his suspected involvement on a planned attack on the Indian Parliament in 2001. Mr. Kumar was arrested on sedition charges because of claims that he as well as others at the even in question had voiced anti-national comments that supported the independence of Kashmir from India.

Though freedom of speech has been the primary concern in this case, the bigger picture that this case reflects is the kind of repression a divisive ideology in power can engender in its citizens. Large scale communal violence breaking out is detrimental to the economic progress Modi is striving for and would also affirm the qualms the left had about Modi’s record in Gujarat with rioting. Thus, it is likely that the central government will attempt for the most part to keep the peace (Varshney 2014). Regardless, these kinds of small scale, innocuous incidents are a way for the government to allow its Hindutva base to feel empowered by having the BJP in power. A student activist at JNU provided the following opinion regarding her classmates’ arrest, "Right-wing students want to

increase their foothold in the university and that is why they got him [Mr. Kumar] arrested. They feel bolstered because the right-wing BJP party is in power at the Centre," she says (BBC 2016). It is this sentiment of empowerment and impunity felt by right-wing Hindu nationalists on the local level, as opposed to the politicians like Modi that are in power, that poses the greatest threat of communal tensions in India today. It is the same sentiment that we observed in Gujarat when the mobs were reassured that the police were on their side. It is a sentiment that goaded the mobs to kill Muslims that were allegedly defying the beef ban. And it is a sentiment that will continue to provoke these small-scale incidents of violence unless deliberately and forcefully countered.

*Conclusion:*

The Hindutva movement has come a long way from when it was first coined by Savarkar in the early 1900s. Over the past few decades it has evolved from being a fringe ideology suppressed by the secular Congress ideology. In a country with a diverse Hindu population, it is not surprising that there is a group of Hindu nationalists that agree wholeheartedly with the right-wing Hindutva ideology. This bloc of voters had a large role in bringing the BJP to power in the 1990s, when the party engaged in communal politics to gain votes in the Hindi belt in north India. But the primary factor making the BJP into national opposition party in the late 1990s was its economic policies. It was the policies of economic liberalization that set up the BJP as a viable opposition party on a national level.

Going forward, the BJP finds itself in a tough position. On an economic front, only time can prove the effectiveness of the BJP's pro-market policies. In the short-term, the lack of effective measures to assuage rural populations' fears may prove harmful to the party's hold on power. If the party manages to hold on to power long enough however, and is able to produce significant economic development, they may have a shot becoming the next Congress party with a long-dynastic rule. But the more likely outcome is that power will switch back and forth between the BJP and Congress as a new two-party system becomes the norm. On an ideological front, the BJP had moderated its position to quite some extent, at least on a national level, in order to garner a diversity of votes. The public's response to events like the beef ban and the crackdown on "anti-nationalists" may work against the party as well. As long as its economic policies have not set in, it would be in the party's best interest to continue to moderate its position by speaking out more strongly against those who commit acts of communal violence and by not infringing on citizens' right to dissent. In 2015, the party lost two major local elections, Bihar and New Delhi because the BJP's policies were simply not cutting it. This year, it faces elections in Assam, West Bengal, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu, the first two of which are highly contested. If the BJP has a poor showing in state elections this year as well, it may be in for a tough fight come the next national election.

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