

# Re-branding India? Globalization, *Hindutva* and the 2004 Elections

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## Abstract

The 2004 Elections resulted in a surprise defeat for the ruling coalition in India, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). Despite a booming economy registering growth rates of up to 8% p.a. and the prospects of an elusive peace with Pakistan, voters chose to reject the vision of a 'shining' India as outlined by the outgoing Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in favour of a 'return' to a Indian National Congress (INC) government headed by a member of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty. Although the INC leader, Sonia Gandhi, declined the office of Prime Minister in favour of former finance Minister and INC deputy leader, Manmohan Singh, her election victory represented, for many, a victory for the Nehruvian principles upon which the federal, secular, sovereign and socialist republic of India was founded and a rejection of the BJP's attempt to re-brand India as an exclusively *Hindu* polity according to its ideology of *Hindutva*. However, it remains uncertain whether the Congress and its allies on the Left can reconcile fundamental differences on the key question of economic globalization which has resulted in greater prosperity for the urban middle classes, most of whom are from higher caste Hindu backgrounds, at the expense of the majority of India's, mainly rural, poor.

## Introduction

THE BJP is committed to the concept of "One Nation, One People and One Culture" (BJP Election Manifesto 2004)

National identity is a form of story telling, a public narration of tales about who 'we'

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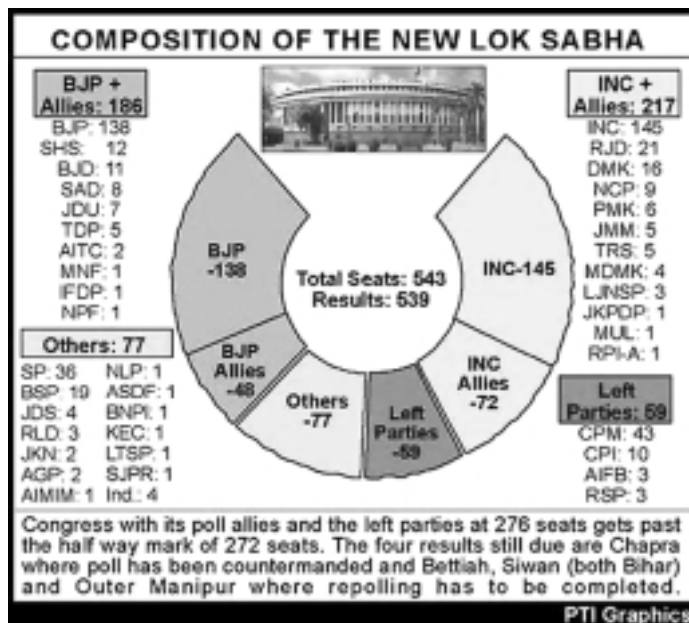
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are, and such identities are remade to suit current tastes and requirements. (Khilnani 2004)

On May 13<sup>th</sup> 2004, the world's largest democracy swapped the new for the old.<sup>1</sup> Offered a choice between the 'shining' new India of the ruling BJP, a glitzy, feel-good militarized 'Hindu' IT superpower willing to flex its muscles on the international stage, and that of the old India of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty, 387 million Indians voted to turn back the clock. To many analysts surprise, the Indian National Congress (INC) emerged as the largest single party following elections to the *Lok Sabha*, the Indian National Assembly. The INC and its allies captured 217 out of 539 with four results still to be declared. In comparison the governing National Democratic Alliance (NDA) secured 186 seats. Congress also supplanted the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of outgoing Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee as the largest single party with 145 to 138 seats (see Figure I below).

**Figure I: Composition of Lok Sabha after May 2004 Election**



Source: The *Tribune* 15/5/2004

[<http://www.tribuneindia.com/2004/20040515/main1.htm>] (Retrieved: 15/5/2004)

1. Paper prepared for Session Two, National Identities in Contemporary Asia, *The Eighth Asian Studies Conference Japan.*, Sophia University, Tokyo, Japan, June 19, 2004.

The result was widely, seen as a victory for the INC and its leader, Sonia Gandhi. Despite her 'foreign' origins which seemingly discounted her from being India's Prime Minister, Italian-born Sonia Gandhi, widow of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi represented continuity with India's past. Three generations of the Nehru-Gandhi family have ruled India through the Congress party for 35 of 57 years since independence. With Sonia's son, Rahul, winning a seat in a constituency previously held by his father and installed as Congress General Secretary, a new generation of Gandhis has emerged. The India imagined by Rahul's great- grandfather, Jawaharlal Nehru, was a secular, socialist democracy which would be, in the words of India's post-war Prime Minister, Clement Atlee, 'the light of Asia', a beacon of freedom in an ocean of colonialism and totalitarianism. However, the changing international climate has made a return to 'socialism' difficult and the actions of both Nehru's daughter, Indira Gandhi, and her son – Sonia's late husband— Rajiv, did much to tarnish Congress's secular credentials.

In recent years, the Nehruvian legacy has been challenged by the rise of Hindu cultural nationalism as espoused by the BJP. The India imagined by the BJP is one re-branded as a centralized, economically and military powerful nation-state with a unitary culture based on *Hindutva*. *Hindutva* is described as a 'unifying principle which alone can preserve the unity and integrity' of India and 're-energize' its soul in order to build a 'strong and prosperous nation' (BJP 1996:6). In 2004, the BJP reaffirmed its commitment to *Hindutva* by claiming that it could 'trigger a higher level of patriotism that can transform the country to greater levels of efficiency and performance' and thus make 'India a global economic power' (BJP 2004). *Hindutva*, in other words, is conducive to economic growth, and its ethics are the 'spirit of Indian capitalism' (Hansen 1998). The markets seem to agree and they greeted the news of the BJP's defeat— and the likely presence of Communists in the governing coalition— with shock. The Sensex was in freefall as the Bombay Stock Exchange plummeted by 786.89 points, forcing trading to be suspended.<sup>2</sup> Order, however, was restored with the appointment of Dr Manmohan Singh as Prime Minister. Dr Singh, a former Finance Minister, is widely credited with launching the economic reforms that helped 'liberalize' the economy by burying the Nehruvian legacy of centralized planning.

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2. Times of India, 'Bloodbath on Dalal Street', May 15<sup>th</sup> 2004  
[<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/679912.cms>] (Retrieved: 14/6/2004).

It will be argued that the economic reforms which Dr Manmohan Singh initiated as Finance Minister in Narasimha Rao's government paved the way for the transformation of the Indian economy and society in such a way as to empower both the upper-caste urban elites who dominate national politics and the agricultural elites who dominate local politics at the expense of the urban and rural poor.<sup>3</sup> Globalization, in the form of economic liberalization, privatization and structural adjustment, has resulted in increased dislocation and uncertainty for many people in South Asia (Kinvall 2002). This has led to a search for meaning which is frequently found in membership of ethno-religious communities (Castells 1997). In India, globalization has contributed to the emergence of first Sikh ethno-nationalism in the aftermath of the Green Revolution (Purewal 2000) and subsequently Hindu cultural nationalism as advocated by the BJP. Hindu nationalism may be seen as an elite project of cultural homogenization (Appadurai 1996) that seeks to replace the inclusive, secular Nehruvian idea of India (Khilnani 1997) with a unified, homogenous Hindu political identity. Since 1991, the BJP has demonstrated an ability to win the support of and mobilize large masses of the Hindu population through the mobilization of ethno-religious symbols which have contributed to the further 'communalisation' of Indian politics. Its emergence as the hegemonic force in Indian politics prior to the recent elections has coincided with increased communal attacks by Hindus upon Muslims, Dalits<sup>4</sup> and other religious and caste minorities. The increased tactical awareness of minority voters, its neglect of its traditional support-base, its poor choice of electoral allies and, most importantly of all, the effects of its neo-liberal economic policies upon the rural masses who make up 80% of India's population, ultimately led to its defeat. However, the BJP's project of re-branding India as an explicitly *Hindu* military and economic super-power, however, remains very much alive.

## **The Idea of India**

The Nehruvian 'idea of India' (Khilnani 1997) involved both a continuation and

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3. See Pasha (1996:649-55) for an account of the effects of globalisation on poverty in South Asia. According to Pasha, the burden of cuts in public expenditure has hit social programmes that benefit the poor. Pasha cites the examples of the reduction in subsidies on food items, transportation, utility charges and fertilizers which have adversely, if unevenly, affected the urban and rural poor (Pasha 1996:655).

4. *Dalits* is the name preferred by members of India's 'untouchable' caste.

rejection of colonial modernity (Brass 1994). By articulating India's demand for *swaraj* (self-rule) using a conceptual vocabulary derived from the legitimising ideology of colonialism, Nehru committed India to modernity, but it would be a *different* modernity (Prakash 1999) from that of the West, or rather a different modernity from that which the colonisers had hitherto imposed upon the colonised through the colonial state. The main administrative functions of the state, the collection of revenue and the maintenance of law and order, were to be kept but its role was to be transformed. India was, henceforth, to be a 'sovereign, socialist, secular democratic republic' committed to securing for its citizens social economic and political justice; liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; and equality of status and opportunity (Government of India 1949).

Although, as Ashis Nandy has pointed out, modern colonialism won its major victories not so much through its military and technological prowess as through its ability to create secular hierarchies incompatible with the traditional order (Nandy 1998), these secular hierarchies, based upon the ideology of liberalism, were compromised by the promotion of 'communal' identities based upon religion and ethnicity through 'the rule of colonial difference' (Metcalf 1995; Chatterjee 1994). The colonial state was, furthermore, never hegemonic in the sense that the relationship it enjoyed with the society over which it ruled, and with the indigenous bourgeoisie in particular, was characterized by coercion not consent (Kaviraj 1994). This was in part because the colonial state did not develop organically out of the internal logic of Indian society, as some have suggested<sup>5</sup>, but was imposed upon it by colonizers ineradicably alienated from the people it ruled by markers of racial difference (Chatterjee 1994:18-25). In Europe, the transition to capitalism was a gradual process, encompassing first an agricultural and then industrial revolution, which facilitated the emergence of a indigenous class, the bourgeoisie, whose ownership of the means of production and exchange in the private sphere was translated into a hegemony (Gramsci 1991) expressed in the public sphere through the establishment of a state. In India, however, the establishment of a colonial state preceded and gave direction to capitalist transformation. Modern colonialism was the historical condition in which capitalism came to dominate South Asia without effecting a democratic transformation in social relationships of power and authority. It resulted in capitalism but without capitalist hierarchies, a capitalist dominance without a

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5. Christopher Bayly, for example, has argued that the *Raj* was merely a continuation of pre-colonial forms of governance. For a critique of Bayly, and other members of the 'Cambridge School', see Chatterjee (1994:27-32).

hegemonic capitalist culture- or, in Guha's famous term, 'dominance without hegemony' (Guha 1997: 97-98).

Nehru sought to effect the democratic transformation of India society that colonial rule had failed, or rather been unwilling, to accomplish. The state was to become the major instrument with which to accomplish the 'delayed nationalisation of society': the articulation of a diverse and highly unequal people into what Balibar terms a 'fictive ethnicity' (Balibar 1991:92). Nehru's vision of India entailed a commitment to a modern, secular society where the state would seek to keep 'communal passions' in check (Nehru 1944). Ashis Nandy has claimed that the Nehruvian elite sought to implement 'the same civilising mission that the colonial state had once taken upon itself vis-à-vis the ancient faiths of the subcontinent' (Nandy 1998:323). Vital differences, however, existed between colonial and elite-nationalist rule. The British colonial authorities had previously recognized and institutionalized religious and cultural differences between Hindus and Muslims in the subcontinent through the principle of separate electorates and quotas on recruitment to administrative positions. The Nehruvian state abolished these in favour of a 'first past the post system,' introduced universal adult suffrage and enshrined the principle of equal rights irrespective of religion in the Indian constitution.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, although the Constitution of India was to be federal, states would not be created or reorganized on the basis of religion.

However, the Indian state was never secular in a western sense. Secularism in the West developed in the context of the sixteenth century inter-sectarian wars in early modern Europe. As worked out from the time of the Peace of Westphalia onwards, secularism involves three distinct but interrelated relations concerning state, religion and the individual. The first relation concerns individuals and their religion from which the state is excluded. This is guaranteed by constitutional rights which guarantee the individual freedom of worship and expression. The second relations concerns that between individuals and the state from which religion is excluded. Citizens in secular societies are granted equal rights irrespective of religious affiliation. Finally, secularism entails the mutual exclusion of state and society, so that the state does not interfere in the spiritual and religion does not encroach on the temporal domain (Smith 1963). Secularism in the western sense refers, therefore, to the strict separation of religion and state in order to guarantee individual citizens equal rights to religious freedom.

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6. Article 25 (1) of the Constitution gives all persons 'the right to profess, propagate and practice their religion' (Government of India 1949).

The Indian variant of secularism, *sarva dharma sambhava* (let all religions flourish), does not attempt to banish religion from the public sphere but sees it as an integral part of India's democracy. Although the post-colonial Indian state abolished separate electorates, it continued to uphold the colonial distinction between majority and minority religious communities, most particularly in the realm of personal and civil law. At the time of the framing of the Constitution of India, Hinduism was seen as the religion of the majority and a Committee on the Rights of Minorities was established to identify the cultural and political rights of religious minorities. According to one of its more recent defenders, secularism in India was neither intended to exclude religious practice or institutions from the domain of politics nor to guarantee state non-interference in religious affairs, but merely to entail equal respect or consideration of all religions (Bhagarva 1998). Equal respect, however, does not *necessarily* imply equal treatment. Indeed, in order to promote equal respect for all religions, it has been argued that the state has, in some cases, been forced to treat different religious communities differently<sup>7</sup> (Bhagarva 1998: 531). This contextual interpretation of secularism, which Bhagarva terms 'principled distance', allows the state to intervene or refrain from intervening in the religious affairs of a community depending on whether the proposed intervention would promote religious liberty and equality of citizenship. Hence, in Bhagarva's view, the Indian state was justified in introducing temple-rights to Dalits as, by allowing higher caste Hindus to continue to refuse Dalits entry into Hindu temples, the state was denying Dalits their constitutional right to freedom of worship.

However, the state's attempt to regulate Hinduism by granting Dalits entry into Hindu places of worship, making polygamy and child marriage illegal, and introducing the right to divorce, are clear examples of state interference in the private sphere of religious affairs. The fact that a Hindu Code Act established a uniform civil code for all 'Hindus' in the country (including Sikhs), while leaving Muslims with their own Personal Law, furthermore, compromises the state's claim to be secular. On the one hand, state intervention in 'Hindu' and not Muslim religious affairs gave rise to charges of 'minorityism' from militant Hindu upper castes, eager to preserve their rights and privileges. The Indian state is regarded by these groups as 'pseudo-secular' in that its secular character obscures the fact that it actively promotes the interests of atheists and religious minorities.

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7. Bhagarva likens the state to a teacher forced to make a distinction between good and bad scripts in order to treat all answer scripts with equal respect and therefore, uphold the principle of neutrality (Bhagarva 1998:503).

On the other, the state's interest in the religious affairs of one community and not the other upholds the colonial distinction between majority and minority religious communities, paving the way for the equation of 'Hindu' with 'Indian' in the popular imagination. The adoption, furthermore, of Hindi as the official 'national' language and bans on cow slaughter in most states implemented by a 'secular' governing party, has led some commentators to see a close correspondence between Congress secularism and Hindu majoritarianism<sup>8</sup> (Embree 1990; Upadaha 1992; Singh 2000).

### **Economic Liberalization in India**

Although economic globalization in South Asia may be traced to the colonial policies which coercively opened her up to metropolitan capital, the contemporary era of globalization in India starts with the introduction of wide-ranging economic liberalization measures. These coincided both with the end of the Cold War and of the Sikh militant challenge to the 'secular' Indian state. The fact that the architect of the reform programme was both a Sikh and a member of the Congress Party was also significant for future developments in the Punjab. No longer able to count on the continued economic support of the Soviet Union and the markets of Eastern Bloc countries, Dr Singh arguably had no alternative but to seek an IMF stand-by loan when confronted by an acute balance of payments crisis in August 1991.

The Indian economy had hitherto followed a policy of import-substitution and state socialism since independence which was seen as necessary in order to remedy the legacies of colonial rule: backwardness and poverty. On the eve of independence, India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, made a 'tryst with destiny' which included a commitment to 'the ending of poverty and ignorance and disease and the inequality of opportunity.'<sup>9</sup> India, in Nehru's words, must 'break with the dead wood of the past and not allow it to dominate the present' (Nehru [1945] 2003: 509). Science offered a way forward since it 'opened up innumerable avenues for the growth of knowledge and added to the power of man to such an extent that for the first time it was possible to conceive that man could triumph over and shape his physical environment' (Nehru [1945] 2003: 511). In achieving mastery over nature

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8. Majoritarianism is understood here as a political idiom in which secularism is subordinated to the interests of the majority community (Upadaha 1992:816).

9. Jawaharlal Nehru, Speech to the Constituent Assembly, New Delhi, 14 August 1947; cited in Sen and Drèze (1999:1).



with the application of modern scientific techniques to the economy, Indians would cast off their narrow outlooks and act as a people. The appalling poverty and rural misery that India was faced with at present were attributed to colonial *policies* not with the instruments of governmentality they had introduced. Nehru argued against Gandhi, that there was nothing quintessentially *western* about modernity; modernity was universal. The state, although an instrument of oppression and exploitation under colonial rule, would behave differently once independence had been achieved. It would become a vehicle for national liberation and rejuvenation, bringing tangible, material rewards for the 'sons of the soil'. However, by tying the legitimacy of the new national state to its ability to meet the needs of its citizens, Nehru created opportunities for challenges, by 'communal' organizations, to the state's authority in times of economic decline or hardship.

Planning was central to the achievement the task of development. The establishment of the Planning Commission in 1950 enabled the state to direct India's economy through a series of Five Year Plans. As a result of state intervention in the economy, India was able to record high rates of growth in the early years of independence. The 1950s and 1960s saw rates of industrial growth of around 7% per annum (Corbridge and Harriss 1999:60). However, although economic development and the alleviation of poverty were stated government goals, India was unable to match the success of her neighbours in East Asian states in the years that followed. Between 1970 and 1982, India recorded a growth rate of just 4.3% per annum (Corbridge and Harriss 1999: 78). Neo-liberals have long contrasted the success of the export-led strategies of the East Asian 'Tiger Economies' with the import-substitution strategies adopted by states in Latin America and India. According to one of the architects of India's present policy of economic liberalization, Jagdish Bhagwati, 'the energy, talents, and worldly ambitions of India's many millions...need merely an appropriate policy framework to produce the economic magic that Jawaharlal Nehru wished for his compatriots but which, like many well-meaning intellectuals of his time, he mistakenly sought in now discredited economic doctrines' (Bhagwati 1993: 98). However, India fared poorly not only in comparison to the 'Tiger Economies' but also to the People's Republic of China (PRC) and other socialist societies. Drèze and Sen make the point that India has been left behind by societies that have pursued a variety of different economic policies, from market-oriented capitalism to communist-led socialism (Sen and Drèze 1999:2). Despite no major famine occurring in India since independence (Sen and Drèze 1999:181), rural and urban poverty remained endemic with almost half the population were living below the poverty line in 1960-1 (Corbridge and Harriss 1999:62).

It is suggested here that, in contrast to the conventional neo-liberal wisdom, the failure of India to realize Nehru's 'tryst with destiny', was not primarily economic but political. The state elite, led by Nehru, that had inherited power from the British enjoyed an unprecedented degree of legitimacy, having led India to Independence during the freedom struggle and presided over the adoption of a Constitution which proclaimed India's commitment to a democratic socialist path. However, in order to achieve its developmental goals, the Nehruvian leadership of the Congress party had to enter into alliances with regional power-brokers who managed to blunt the radical thrust of the policies of the central government. Pranab Bardhan has identified three dominant classes: the industrial capitalist class or bourgeoisie, the rich farmers or *kulaks*<sup>10</sup> and the public-sector professionals or bureaucrats (Bardhan 1984:54). These classes were drawn from different sections of India's diverse population and by no means had developed a common ideological framework by the time of Independence. Indeed, the conflict of interests between the urban and industrial classes on the one hand and the *kulak* class on the other has become more acute in recent years and has continued to frustrate the government's attempts to reform the economy. For Corbridge and Harriss, the economic dominance of this numerically small class of rich peasants which controls a large share of the land, is bound up with the 'reproduction of the pervasive poverty which is overwhelmingly characteristic of India' (Corbridge and Harriss 1999:83).

The onset of economic liberalization, however, has disproportionately benefited the dominant classes, giving rise to even greater inequality between an expanding high income, predominantly Hindu middle-class and the urban and rural poor. The implementation of SAPs have led to the deregulations of the economy and privatization; reduced public expenditure; devaluation and an increase in foreign direct investment. Since 1991 numerous measures have been adopted to remove restrictions on the role of private enterprise in India and export-led growth has become a major thrust of India's strategy. As a result of these economic reforms, India's manufacturing industries have witnessed dramatic growth of between 6 and 7% per annum<sup>11</sup> leading to the accumulation of huge foreign exchange resources. The dismantling of the infamous 'licensing and permit Raj', whereby every company seeking to invest in India needed to obtain a

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10. The Russian term *kulak*, meaning fist, is used to describe a class of rich, capitalist farmers whose economic interests extend over agricultural production and trade (Corbridge and Harriss 2000:81).

11. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit, growth is forecast at around 6% in the fiscal year 2003-4 (Economist Intelligence Unit 2003).

permit from the government, led to an increase in foreign direct investment as important fields, which were earlier closed to foreign investors like mining, oil exploration, transport, telecommunications were opened. Foreign direct investment grew from \$200 million in 1991 to a peak of \$3.6 billion in 1997. Of particular importance, has been India's entry into the field of Information Technology. Table 1 looks at Internet growth in India which has become a major player in the IT revolution as a major source of cheap, skilled software engineers. Although Internet penetration in India remains low in comparison to the PRC and developed countries, India has the highest subscriber growth rate (44%) in the Asia-Pacific region. By January 2001 there were over 5.5 million Internet users, up from only 10,000 in August 1995. If Internet penetration continues at the same rate, India is expected to have over 21.3 million subscribers by 2005 (see Table 1 below).

**Table 1: Internet Growth in India**

Date	Internet Connections	Internet Users
August 15, 1995	2,000	10,000
March 31, 1996	50,000	250,000
March 31, 1997	90,000	450,000
March 31, 1998	140,000	700,000
March 31, 1999	280,000	1,400,000
March 31, 2000	900,000	2,800,000
August 31, 2000	1,600,000	4,800,000
January, 2001	1,800,000	5,500,000

Source: National Association of Software and Service Companies (NAASCOM): [<http://www.nasscom.org>] (Retrieved: 31 March 2003)

However, the globalization process in South Asia has focused on integrating markets without improving the condition of the vast majority of South Asians (Mahub Ul Haq HDC 2001; Pasha 1996). Greater economic integration has yet to translate into sustained growth for a majority of countries in South Asia although the impact of structural reforms on economic growth has been generally positive, at least in India where high growth rates have been recorded in recent years. The uneven nature of globalization in South Asia has inflicted a high social cost. For most South Asians the outcomes of globalization have been higher prices, fewer employment opportunities, increased disparities in income and higher incidence of poverty (Mahub Ul Haq HDC 2001:17). Existing low levels of expenditure on

health, poverty alleviation programs and education has either been maintained or are declining whilst military spending shows no sign of decreasing. The *Human Development in South Asia 2001 Report* estimates that about *half a billion* people have experienced a decline in their incomes in South Asia during the globalization phase (Mahub Ul Haq HDC 2001:2). Although the authors of the Report claim that the eventually everyone will gain from economic liberalization, the benefits of economic growth have been confined to a small minority of the educated urban population whilst the poor have borne the heaviest burden of the costs of structural adjustment (Mahub Ul Haq HDC 2001:2-3). This trend seems set to continue in India at least. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit, the budget for the fiscal year 2003-4 included substantial tax-cuts for the middle-class support base of the ruling BJP coalition, as well as for businesses and farmers (EIU 2003:8) but did little for the poor. Meanwhile 34.7% of India's population lives on less than \$1 a day, 24% are undernourished and 42% of India's population unable to read or write (see Table 2 below).

**Table 2: Regional Development Indicators South Asia 2000-3**

South Asia	HDI Rank (2003)	Population living below US \$1 (%) (2001)	Under-nourished People (as % of total population) (2001)	Life Expectancy (years) (2001)	Adult Literacy Rate (%) (2001)	GDP (US \$ bn) (2002)	GDP per head (US\$ at PPP) (2002)
Afghanistan	-	-	70	-	-	-	-
Bangladesh	139	36	35	60.5	40.6	46.9	1,463
India	127	34.7	24	63.3	58	485.2	2,489
Nepal <sup>12</sup>	143	37.7	19	59.1	42.9	5.6	1,310
Pakistan	144	13.4	19	60.4	44	59.7	1,913
Sri Lanka	99	6.6	23	72.3	81.9	15.8	3,015

Source: Adapted from Human Development Report (2003:199) and Economist Intelligence Unit (2002:18).

12. 2001 Figures for Nepal (UNDP 2003:199)

## **Re-branding India: The Challenge of Hindu Nationalism**

According to the hegemonic neo-liberal variant of modernization theory, economic globalization, or the expansion of capitalism, inevitably leads to the dissemination of liberal ideas about rights and radically alters the relationship between the individual and community. This in turn leads to the separation of the religious and the political spheres and the strengthening of liberal-democratic structures. In South Asia, however, the onset of economic globalization has transformed the political landscape resulting in an ethno-religious revival which challenged the secular foundations of the Indian state.<sup>13</sup> Globalization, in the forms of marketization, privatization and structural adjustment, has resulted in a decreased role for the state in the economic sphere and increased dislocation and uncertainty for many people in South Asia (Kinvall 2000). This has led to a search for meaning and the politicization of ethno-religious identity (Castells 1997).

In India, globalization has contributed to the emergence of a Hindu cultural nationalism as advocated by the BJP. Hindu nationalism may be seen as a middle class, high caste project of 'cultural homogenization' (Appadurai 1996) that seeks to create a unified, homogenous Hindu political identity by subsuming regional differences and caste hierarchies under the general category of 'Hindu'. Hindu nationalists maintain that in a modern, democratic polity, the culture of the majority should prevail in the public domain. Hinduism, for Hindu nationalists, because of its innate tolerance for diversity, permits minority cultures to flourish and is constitutive of an Indian national culture. Hence the BJP's Election Manifesto refers to India's 'unique cultural and social diversity' which it believes has been 'woven into a larger civilizational fabric by thousands of years of common living ...shared values, beliefs, customs, struggles, joy and sorrow' (BJP 2004).

As Gurpreet Mahajan has pointed out, the agenda of Hindu cultural majoritarianism rests upon two assumptions. Firstly, Hindu nationalists believe that nation-states can only be built around a shared cultural identity. Secondly, Hindu nationalists maintain that Hinduism is not a religion per se but a 'way of life' that is, and should be, the basis of a shared cultural and national identity (Mahajan 2002: 47). This assumption is borne out by an examination of the experience of most 'secular' nation-states in the West. Diverse religious traditions are tolerated in the modern West and rights to freedom of worship are

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13. It should be pointed out that India under the BJP remained a functioning liberal democracy.

guaranteed, but the West, with the possible exception of ultra-secular France and the United States, continues to be defined with reference to Christian and post-Christian values.<sup>14</sup> By 'secularizing' Hinduism, Hindu nationalists claim that it is the shared identity of *all* peoples of India, irrespective of which *religion* an individual chooses to profess. The transformation of Hinduism into the shared identity of the people of India erases the differences between ethno-religious communities expressed in the Constitution.

The origins of Hindu nationalism lie in the Hindu revivalist movements of the colonial era, specifically the *Arya Samaj* in the Punjab and *Brahmo Samaj* in Bengal. Both movements attempted to redefine the Hinduism as a religious tradition, intelligible to the colonial authorities and the proselytizing Christian missionaries. According to Chetan Bhatt, '[t]he idea of revelation and the literal word of God embodied in a text (accurately speaking, itself foreign to Hinduism), the infallibility of sacred books, a singular already written truth and one organizational structure ('the Vedic Church') were seemingly borrowed from the "semitic" religions. (Bhatt 2001:18). The politicization of Hindu identity dates to the First All India (*Akhil Bharatiya*) *Hindu Mahasabha* Conference held in 1914. The *Hindu Mahasabha* became the main organization for the articulation of a Hindu political identity in the colonial period and retained an uneasy relationship with the nominally secular Indian National Congress (INC) during the independence movement.

Central to the Hindu nationalist project is the concept of *Hindutva* which stood in sharp contrast to the secular nationalism of the Indian National Congress (INC). Associated with work of Veer Savarkar (1883-1966) who led the *Hindu Mahasabha*, the term *Hindutva* refers to an *ethnicized* Hindu identity. Hinduism refers to a socio-religious philosophy based on the *Vedas* which is indigenous to India. 'Hindutva' refers not only to the religious aspect of the Hindu people but 'comprehends even their cultural, linguistic, social and political aspects as well' (Savarkar 1998:115). The imagined community of the 'Hindus' is thus imagined as both a religious and ethnic community and, in Savarkar's writings assumes an almost racial dimension. For Savarkar, the Hindus 'are not only a nation but a *jati* (race), a born brotherhood' (Savarkar 1923: 89). *All* Indians, including those professing other religions, are considered Hindus with the exception of Muslims and Christians:

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14. Both Weber and more recently Huntington refer to the Christian, and specifically Protestant, origins of western modernity. See Weber (1978) and Huntington (1996).

Every person is a Hindu who regards...this land from the Indus to the seas, as his fatherland as well as his holyland – i.e., the land of the origin of his religion, the cradle of his faith. (Savarkar 1998: 115)

Muslim and Christians however, were regarded as ‘foreigners, since ‘Hindustan’<sup>15</sup> is not to them a holyland... [T]heir holyland is far off in Arabia or Palestine’ (Savarkar 1998:113). The hostility towards religious minorities, as seen in the recent attacks on Christians and periodic pogroms against Muslims, is coupled with a defence of the hegemony of the higher castes. For Savarkar, ‘all the caste system has done is to regulate its noble blood on lines believed...by our saintly law-givers and kings to contribute most to fertilise all that was barren and poor, without famishing all that was flourishing and nobly endowed’ (1989:86).

Created by a resolution of the *Hindu Mahasabha* in 1932, the *Rashtriya Swayamamsevak Sangh* (RSS) provides the institutional infrastructure for the articulation of this Hindu Nationalist ideology. Although the RSS was briefly banned following the assassination of Gandhi by an ex-RSS member in 1948, today it can claim to be the largest voluntary organizations in the world after decades of disciplined, well-managed organizational and ideological expansion. Others have seen it as a more sinister organization. Chetan Bhatt has claimed that ‘it is the largest voluntary, private, paramilitary body existing in any nation’ (Bhatt 2001:113). The RSS’s second leader, Golwalkar (1906-1973), is credited with playing a vital role in the development of Hindu nationalism by linking Savarkar’s conception of *Hindutva* with an ‘ideology of xenophobic racism’ (Bhatt 2001:126). The RSS considers itself the parents of the ‘family’ of affiliated organizations and movements: the *Sangh Parivar*. In 1964, the RSS formed the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* (VHP) to mobilize Hindus throughout the world and in 1980 the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP), the political wing of the RSS, was formed out of the *Jana Sangh*.

The *Jana Sangh*<sup>16</sup> had been part of the governing *Janata Dal* coalition but its share of the vote had declined to 7.4% in the 1977 election, from 9.4% in 1967. Although the BJP won only 2 seats in the 1984 Lok Sabha election (7.4%) it has steadily increased its share of the vote in every election it has contested whilst adopting a distinct Hindu identity and advocating policies of economic liberalization. Corbridge and Harriss (1999) have seen this as the beginnings of what they term an ‘elite revolt’ against the Nehruvian consensus of secularism

15. Hindustan literally refers to the ‘land of the Hindus’.

16. See Graham (1990) for an account of the development of the *Bharatiya Janata Sangh*.

and state socialism. In the 1989 General election, the BJP campaigned on militant *Hindutva* agenda based upon building of a temple to Lord *Ram*<sup>17</sup> in Ayodhya, scrapping article 370 of the constitution which granted Kashmir exceptional status in comparison with other states. It correspondingly increased its representation to 86 seats in the Lok Sabha (11.5% of the vote) and became part of VP Singh's National front Coalition. However, its opposition to the 1990 decision to implement the 1980 Mandal Commission report which recommended quotas for public sector jobs for the lower castes led to collapse of coalition government. The BJP leader Lal Krishna Advani the embarked on a *rath yatra*, a mass procession through North India in a Toyota jeep decorated as Ram's chariot and in the 1991 election the BJP campaigned on slogan "Toward *Ram Rajya*"<sup>18</sup> winning 120 seats in the *Lok Sabha* and 20.1% of the popular vote capturing the states of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh and Rajasthan. Its 1996 Election Manifesto, committed the BJP to *Hindutva* as 'a unifying principle which alone can preserve the unity and integrity' of India and of building a temple to Ram in Ayodhya where the *Babri Masjid* once stood. Consequently, the BJP increased its share of seats to 161 in the 1996 elections and formed a government for two weeks before losing a vote of no-confidence. By 1998, the BJP had emerged as the largest political party in India's governing coalition and winning 25.6% of the vote and its leader, Atal Behari Vajpayee, was India's Prime Minister from October 1999 to May 2004.

Although the BJP has appeared to dilute its *Hindutva* ideology since Vajpayee became leader in 1992, the rise of Hindu Nationalism as articulated, amongst other organizations, by the BJP has been accompanied by a rise in communal violence between the different religious communities of South Asia. Perhaps the most notorious example was the 1992 destruction of the *Babri Masjid* by RSS *kar sevaks* (volunteers) which led to the dismissal of BJP controlled state governments by the Congress controlled central government. Hindu nationalists had long believed that the *Babri Masjid* mosque in Ayodhya in the heart of the 'Hindi belt' had been built on the site of a temple to *Ram*. Indeed, a lot of recent government 'scholarship' has attempted to scientifically prove this to be the case. The destruction of the mosque was followed by an unprecedented

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17. *Ram* is one of the most important Hindu gods.

18. Literally 'Ram's rule'. Advani's procession through the Hindi belt (the Hindi speaking states of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Bihar) was laden with symbolism and was designed to exploit the phenomenal success of the televised version of the *Ramayana*, the epic tale of Lord Ram, which was televised throughout India by the national broadcaster *Doordorshan* in the 1980s and early 1990s.



attack upon Muslim communities in late 1992 and early 1993 throughout India (Bhatt 2001:196). In Bombay, *Shiv Sena*, a regional party based in Maharashtra espousing a particularly virulent form of Hindu nationalism under the leadership of Bal Thackeray, systematically planned mob attacks upon Muslim individuals and businesses in India's financial capital: Mumbai.

Once in power, the BJP sought to distance itself from its more extreme supporters in the *Sangh Parivar*. However, the communal carnage in Gujarat party's led to allegations of the state government's alleged complicity in the violence. The burning of 59 Hindus in the Sabarmati Express train at Godhra on Feb 27, 2002 led to a pogrom of Muslims in Gujarat. Over 2,500 were brutally murdered by Hindu mobs and 200,000 families displaced as the BJP-led state government refused to intervene (EIU 2003a:12). Some have considered it 'genocide' given the systematic and planned nature of the killings.<sup>19</sup> Certainly there were mass killings and rapes on grounds of religion. Muslims were sought out not because of any even imagined complicity in the precipitating event at Godhra, but simply because they were Muslims. Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest a degree of state complicity if not involvement.<sup>20</sup> Despite refusing to condemn the mass murder of his some of his constituents, the Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi was duly re-elected six months after the atrocities and he appeared to derive political capital from the events. Similarly, the Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee seemed to be condoning the massacre by telling the BJP Party Congress in Goa shortly after that 'had a conspiracy had not been hatched to burn alive the innocent passengers of the Sabarmati Express, then the subsequent tragedy in Gujarat could have been averted'.<sup>21</sup>

The coexistence of extreme wealth and poverty unleashed by economic liberalization undoubtedly played a role in exacerbating communal tensions, particularly as it tends to reinforce the religious divide. Although India remains an overwhelmingly Hindu society, it is also the world's second most populous Muslim nation after Indonesia and there has been a continuous Muslim presence in South Asia for over 1,000 years. Although in Hindu nationalist discourse Muslims are represented as foreign invaders, the majority of South Asia's Muslims were converts from lower-caste backgrounds. In 1991, Muslims accounted for 14% of the total Indian population of over one billion and despite fifty years of state sponsored 'secularism,' Muslims remain underrepresented in

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19. See Nussbaum (2003) and Bhargava (2003) for a discussion of 'genocide' in Gujarat.

20. See the contributions to *Communalism Combat*, March-April 2002.

21. Vajpayee cited in Nussbaum (2003).

both the public and private sector, in further education and levels of literacy. Conversely, Muslims have a higher or far higher than proportionate representation in terms of poverty, illiteracy and unemployment (Bhatt 2001:197). The Muslim community in Gujarat, however, was one of the prosperous in the country and there is evidence to suggest that the economic motives lay behind the killings there as Muslim businesses, factories and farms were targeted by Hindu mobs.<sup>22</sup> The post September 11<sup>th</sup> international climate combined with the periodic attacks by Islamic insurgents in Kashmir and the manipulation of Partition memories by Hindu nationalists has created a climate in which indiscriminate murder of Muslims, defined once again as the 'threatening Other' can both take place and be condoned by India's leaders.

### **Why the BJP lost the 2004 Lok Sabha elections**

Despite having a clear vision of where it wanted to take India—of how to *re-brand* India—the BJP lost the 2004 Lok Sabha elections. The elections had been brought forward to capitalise on the 'feel-good factor' which had swept the nation as reflected in the 2003 State Assembly elections, which the BJP won, and was captured in the BJP slogan: India 'shining'. Generally speaking, we can isolate four main explanations for the BJP election defeat.

The first explanation sees the defeat as a clear repudiation of the BJP's vision of India as a specifically 'Hindu' economic and political superpower. Evidence suggests that Muslims and other minorities voted tactically against BJP candidates in states such as Gujarat, which had seen the worst cases of BJP inspired communal violence. A majority of the electorate voted against the BJP, although not necessarily for Congress. Can then the UPA's election victory be read as a victory for secularism against communalism? Research carried out by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) in New Delhi suggests otherwise. Opinions in India, it claims, remain very much divided along 'communal lines'. For example, responses to questions relating to responsibility for the Gujarat 'massacres' continue to be perceived through a communal lens. A majority of Hindus thought that only Hindus got killed in Godhra and, conveniently forgetting the post-Godhra riots, assigned blame on 'Muslim extremists'. Muslims, on the other hand, blamed the Government and, to a lesser degree, Hindu extremists for the ethnic-cleansing in Gujarat with considerable

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22. See 'Economic Decimation', *Communalism Combat*, March-April 2002.

justification whilst ignoring the original incident in Godhra which sparked the riots off. Significantly, those Hindus who think that only Muslims were killed in the post-Godhra riots are to be found more among the upper and middle classes. This indicates that the RSS propaganda may have succeeded among the lower castes and classes. However, Abhay Datar concludes, somewhat paradoxically, that, on the whole, the election did result in a triumph of secularism, as 'the voters preferred to think of their mundane and material interests disregarding a call to stick to religious identity' (Datar 2004).

Furthermore, the imperatives of electoral politics in a quasi-federal, multi-religious, multi-*national* and poly-ethnic society such as India meant that BJP was reliant upon the support of regional coalition partners outside of their traditional heart-land of the Hindi-speaking belt of Northern India. This led to a contradiction which the BJP leadership under Vajpayee, despite its renowned coalition-building skills, ultimately failed to reconcile. On the one hand, the BJP needed to play down the *Hindutva* rhetoric in order to appeal to its coalition partners in the NDA, particularly in the South of India. On the other hand, any attempt to 'water down' its *Hindutva* ideology ran the risk of alienating its hard-core supporters in the Hindi-belt of Northern India. Indeed, the RSS criticised the BJP for neglecting its ideological commitment to *Hindutva* and considered this to be a primary reason for the BJP's defeat. Certainly, the BJP itself may be considered a victim of its own complacency with regard to its traditional supporters. Many *kar sevaks* may well have campaigned less vociferously for the BJP this election or even stayed at home, since the polls had consistently shown the BJP in the lead. Staying at home or abstaining from campaigning may well have been a way for the rank and file members of the RSS to show displeasure at the government's 'inclusive' policies and may have cost the BJP 44 seats.

Another, perhaps more convincing, explanation attributes the BJP's failure to hold on to power to its choice of election partners. Although the BJP performed poorly in the election, its election partners in the NDA performed worse (Price 2004:1). The NDA lost 51 seats in two states alone, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, both of which lay outside the Hindi belt in the supposedly 'shining' South. In Andhra Pradesh, the Telugu Desam Party (TDP), headed by arguably the 'poster-boy' of the new 'shining' India, Chandrababu Naidu, lost 24 seats. Although not formally part of the NDA, the TDP had lent its support to the NDA and its Chief Minister, Naidu, had been internationally lauded as a modern state leader, by succeeding in attracting much needed foreign direct investment in the key IT sector of India's 'shining' economy. The fact that Chief Minister Naidu was

the victim of a failed assassination attempt makes it all the more surprising that the TDP failed. Similarly, the BJP's decision to align itself with the All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) in Tamil Nadu, after the withdrawal of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) from the NDA coalition over comments by the BJP President Venkaiah Naidu, cost the NDA dear. Despite winning a larger share of the popular vote than any other party in Tamil Nadu, the AIADMK lost ten seats and failed to win a single seat in the wake of the DMK decision to join the Congress-led UPA. Congress, the DMK and the smaller Communist parties, gained seats at the AIADMK's expense.

However, this begs the question of *why* the TDP and, to a lesser extent, the AIADMK performed so poorly. Were the reasons purely regional or can we see the rejection of key NDA allies as part of a *national* trend against the NDA? Although regional factors may have been uppermost in the minds of the electorate in Andhra Pradesh, the 2004 election can be read as a verdict against the pro-growth and anti-poor policies of the NDA. The main beneficiaries of the BJP's failure to meet the basic needs of India's poor have been the Communist dominated Left parties which captured 59 seats. The General Secretary of the CPI (M), the largest Communist party with 43 votes, Harkishen Singh Surjeet, was in a position to demand a reversal of India's privatization policies in return for his party's support for Mrs. Gandhi. The prospect of this happening was enough to send shares in the Bombay stock exchange plummeting to a new four year low. However, it would be premature to consider the election results a verdict against globalization per se particularly as the new Prime Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh, is the architect of India's liberalization policy. As Finance Minister in Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's government, Dr Singh is widely credited with having dismantled the infamous 'license and permit' *Raj* and opened up the Indian economy to much needed foreign investment.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the 2004 Elections marked a significant defeat for the BJP project to re-brand India. It has been argued that this project entailed a commitment to both economic liberalization and a Hindu nationalist ideology that disproportionately benefited higher caste and upper-class Hindus at the expense of religious minorities and the poor. Whether this is a temporary setback or a fundamental change in Indian democracy remains to be seen. Yogendra Yadav has argued that the 2004 election signals a 'democratic upsurge' by the

marginalised social groups and points to the possibility of the formation of an alternative social bloc which could challenge the hegemony of the higher castes in Indian society (Yadav 2004). However, the UPA coalition remains fragile and racked by deep divisions over the need for further liberalization. Furthermore, the fact that the UPA is dominated by INC and that that latter continues to be held together by the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty hardly suggests a 'democratic upsurge' but merely a rejection of *one* 'elite project' in favour of another. The Indian electorate were not presented with a choice between two alternative 'social blocs' but between two elitist visions of India: one a 'shining' Hindu superpower, the other a more tolerant, 'secular' republic. If the vote for Congress and its allies on the Left was not necessarily a vote in favour of Nehruvian secularism and socialism, it was at least a vote against communalism and the BJP-RSS attempt to re-brand India as a market leader in Hindu religious fanaticism and uneven growth. A Sikh Prime Minister, installed by a Muslim President, APJ Abdul Kalam, is the perfect antidote to the chauvinism of Ayodhya and Godhra.

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