



## DEMOCRACY IN INDIA: VICTIM OF THE POLITICS OF VOTE BANK

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**ABSTRACT**

This article has examines the political function of religion in elections. It has tried to answer the following questions: How has the electoral function of religion been in contemporary India? Which political groups or parties in India have made an effective use of and gained an advantage of the political function of religion in elections? For this purpose, the function of parties and politicians during elections in pre and post independence India has been regarded. The findings shows that using the religious motions in politics during post independence until the early 21st century has continued and in comparison with pre-independence it has been enhanced, though being a secular state.

**KEYWORDS :** Elections, Religion, Congress, Muslim League, BJPVote Bank**INTRODUCTION**

The studies of party systems reveal that religion has retained as a remarkable factor in fixing voting alignments. In the other words, 'religious groups may form political communities, shaping and mobilizing their members' electoral activities as they react to the candidates, parties and issues within the campaign' (Moyser, 1991, 7). Religion, whether in traditional or modern society has a major effect on elections, although in different way. In traditional society and among peasants, whenever their religious figures recommend voting, most of them participate and vote for that candidate. Politicians have recognized the necessity of pious faith in winning high political office. Such necessities in other countries especially third world ones are more remarkable for politicians. On the other hand, religion strengthens conservatism. For example, its antagonism towards the left parties has been responsible for the large-scale electoral support of the people to the conservative parties in most parts of the world. Thus, in formulating electoral campaign strategies religion is not ignored. The influence of religion in traditional societies and its role in politics including elections is more remarkable than modern ones. India, with a still traditional society and variety of religion, is one of these societies where the electoral function of religion can be considerable. So, this article tries to clarify how the religion has been used in elections in pre independence period was not important as post independence but the evidences show the roots of the electoral function as other functions of religion.

**A) The Electoral Function of Religion in Post-independence India**

The Constitution of 1949 abolished the system of communal electorates. Nevertheless, politicians depend on votes, and the electoral process almost forces them to exploit the religious divisions in society (Van Der Veer, 2006, 261). Political leaders can use identity loyalties to mobilize voters and parties intensify religious cleavage, as other cleavages to rally support. According to Chakrabarty, after independence also, 'caste, religion and language were the only three distinct categories of communities that figured prominently in its deliberations. They continue to remain probably the most effective factors in political mobilization. Hence, many candidates of various parties use communal strategies and tactics in Indian election studies have mentioned the end of the so-called "Congress system" in India, and the rise of communal voting patterns based on caste and religion. The upper-caste-dominated parties, because of their challenges tried to highlight the threat posed by Muslims and anti-Muslim wedge issues. For example, Muslims' alleged slaughter of cows, the renaming of a town with a Muslim origin name with an 'authentic Indian' (i.e., Hindu) name, taking a Hindu procession route through a Muslim neighborhood, or disputing the status of a plot of land claimed or occupied by

Muslims etc.. These wedge issues allowed the parties to potentially rally a large proportion of Hindus to their side, while entailing no economic cost for the party's existing upper-caste supporters. Some cases of the electoral function of religion during post independence are mentioned.

**1) Vote Banks Based On Religion**

During the post independence period communally divisive 'vote bank politics' and 'pampering' the minorities in order to get their votes have sometimes been seen (Kumar, 2007, 67). This politics is "the practice of creating and maintaining vote banks through divisive policies. This brand of politics encourages voters to vote on the basis of narrow communal considerations often against their better judgement". Congress among Muslim and other minorities and BJP among Hindus have tried to create vote banks. For example, the Muslims were hostile to the emergency in 1975, though the Muslim League supported the Emergency. In elections 1977, the Muslims in northern India didn't support the Congress government. So, Indira Gandhi tried to woo them back so that 'Without their support, Congress could not have won in 1980, and with their support, it probably would have won in 1977'. In 1984, she used the minorities' support while sought power on the plank of 'national security' on the strength of the vote of the majority community. After her assassination, Rajiv Gandhi also, followed her politics. Although the Congress attention to Minorities led to the defeat of BJP in the 1984 Lok Sabha elections, it helped Sangh Parivar in creating a Hindu vote bank in their favor and polarizing the society. Eventually, the Ayodhya movement consolidated the Hindu majority vote bank and the BJP increased its seats in Parliament from two in 1984 to 182 in the 1999.

**2) Religion In Electoral Politics Of Jana Sangh**

Although the movements like Shila Pujan, Rath Yatra and the Ayodhya launched by Hindu organizations prepared a context in which the BJP contested the Lok Sabha elections of 1991, but it was not the first time that the Sangh family had mobilized Hindus around Hindu cultural symbols for political gains during the elections. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) had mobilized large number of Hindu saints in 1967 and they had demonstrated in Delhi in support of their demand for a ban on 'cow slaughter' in India. At that time, Indira Gandhi confronted the Sangh and the priests by alleging that their religion-based political mobilization is a great threat to secular and culturally plural India. Sankhdher mentioned a case of Jana Sangh's use of religion in elections as following:

The Jana Sangh in Delhi made cow protection an election issue. It may be surmised that the followers of the Goraksha movement should have voted for Jana Sangh candidates. In one case, especially that of Rain Gopal Shalwale, Jana Sangh

candidate from Chandni Chowk (scene of daily arrest of agitators for cow protection), himself a staunch cow-protectionist, the vote (Hindu largely) must have gone in the favour. It is possible that the Sadhus' indulgence, in what was so apparently a political activity and was tantamount to political blackmail, earned little support of the thinking people, who, after all, so few. Tied up with emotion and legend, the issue had several lures for the common-man. Deen Dayal Upadhyaya, Jana Sangh General Secretary, made an offer to the Congress to select any one constituency anywhere even if it were the Prime Minister's own, where the election could be fought on anti-cow slaughter issue alone. Whether or not the confidence was justified, the Jana Sangh knew that the issue was worth exploiting for votes. Though the Samiti had failed in getting its objective fulfilled, the Jana Sangh succeeded in the political objectives.

### 3) Religion in Congress-I Electoral Politics

The Congress has often selected candidates on the basis of their community. And it has also entered into an election alliance with some communal and regional parties such as Muslim league and J & K National Conference (Kumar, 1990, 103). Besides, since the pre-independence period, it has had a political alliance with orthodox Muslims specifically Jamiyyat-ul-Ulama, a Muslim clerics' organization. It has been a political bargain in which the clerics have given their support on the assumption that the Muslim Personal Law would be maintained, as would endowments, mosques and other institutions and aspects of Muslim culture. However, the secular approach of the Congress leadership toward the Muslims drew to the Congress the most secular, liberal and often Marxist Muslim politicians as well. Although the Congress-I (Indira Gandhi) has always depended on the support of Muslims and other minorities, but the party and its leaders especially Indira and Rajiv Gandhi, when they have had to win elections, made alliances and mobilized campaigns on communal lines, though Congress is a secular party (Ludden, 2006, 13). Nevertheless, in comparison to the BJP politics of militant and aggressive Hindutva, according to Bhambhri, the Congress practiced 'soft Hindutva'.

According to Gupta some of social activists used the 'Hindu backlash or Hindu assertion' theory for supporting Congress (I) in 1980s. The Congress and Mrs. Gandhi used it for national unity against the threat of disintegrative and inimical forces internal and external. The Hindu backlash apparently in the wake of Indira Gandhi's murder gave Rajiv Gandhi the biggest mandate. Thus, Hindu assertion has been on the cards. In this regard, he mentioned that: [Social activists urged] the people to support the government of Mr. Rajiv Gandhi—subsequently disowned both by the BJP and the RSS—also appealed to many who were wedded to the politics—of the Hindu ethos.

They began to consider the Congress (I) to be the Centre of the Hindu elms. Consequently, parties who had earlier claimed to be Hindu nationalists were stripped of their garments and left shivering in the cold. For, when a Hindu backlash takes place, it is these parties who are first shorn of their traditional votes as happened in Jammu in the Assembly election and to a lesser extent, in the Delhi Metropolitan Council elections. So, the defensiveness and assertiveness of contemporary Hindu have been a sentiment used by political leaders. Indira Gandhi believed that by catalyzing communalist sentiments, by becoming the main mouthpiece for Hindu communalism, she was protecting India from the dangers of it. In the early 1980s, she adopted themes that have traditionally belonged to the Hindu right because the main threat was seen from the right. Therefore, they tried to undermine the parties that stood to the right of the Congress (I) – mainly the BJP. Besides, in 1982 the Congress-I leaders recognized that a confrontational posture towards the overwhelmingly

### 4) Hindutva as an Electoral Agenda: BJP and Using Religion in Electoral Politics

As in India, communalism clearly depends on religion, Bharatya Janata Party (BJP) has raised Hindutva-related issues to make an appeal to Hindus to vote along religious lines. As part of its 'communal' agenda, the BJP has allegedly organized and incited communal violence, and raised divisive issues, such as 'Islamic terrorism', uniform civil code, and Christian conversions. The BJP grew out of RSS and most of its leaders shared an RSS background and ideology, but its responsibility was different. It was to operate primarily in the sphere of electoral politics and so it needed to pursue a more broad-based and pragmatic rhetorical strategy. So, one of the main BJP strategies was religious mobilization. Wherever possible, the party identified local themes or issues, often related to communal identity and Hindu nationalist agendas. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the party used these strategies to overcome intra-Hindu caste differences. Although the agitations organized in these times temporarily failed and the party suffered numerous defeats, but it succeeded in the following years.

#### a) BJP and Ayodhya Issue

In the two succeeding national elections in 1989 and 1991, the BJP by using the Ayodhya issue brought Hindu electoral consolidation to a higher level of unity in north India. The demolition of the Babri mosque in this pilgrimage town enhanced the support of the BJP among militant Hindus and has been followed by intensified efforts on the part of its leadership to consolidate the Hindu vote with a view to capturing power in the country in the next elections. The BJP targeted the Muslim community which was made responsible for the construction of a Babri Mosque over Ram Temple by Mughal Emperor Babar. In the elections 1991, the BJP profited from upper-caste backlash against 'Mandal', a reservations policy recommendation for backward castes in public sector jobs by the Janata Party government in 1979, which it linked to its campaign around the temple in Ayodhya (Basu, 2006, 59). In Brass' opinion, V. P. Singh's decision to go ahead with Mandal, appeared to undermine the BJP drive to consolidate the Hindu vote in the country under its own banner and instead to divide it and make use of Hindu divisions and Muslim support to isolate it. The Mandal decision forced the party leadership to prepare for a new election and to seek to strengthen its base in UP and Bihar with its only strong weapon, the demand to build a new temple to Ram on the existing site of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya.

This movement brought religion and mass ritual explicitly into the political arena. Through this, the BJP could mobilize other backward castes also. According to Mason, the BJP knew that 'the birthplace of Ram' movement was a single issue that could enable them to capture the attention of the Indian electorate chiefly by drawing the voters' attention to it, emotively. Its politico-religious processions converted Indian public space as Hindu space and conveying the basic script of Hindutva discourse. Through the various media, they naturalized Hindutva ideology and created a popular and accessible political idiom. These activities peaked in 1992 with the destruction of the Babri mosque. However, the BJP and Sangh family practiced the strategy of Hindu mobilization on the issue of God Rama birthplace. The instrumentalization of the Ayodhya issue and the related communal riots that polarized the electorate along religious lines helped the BJP make progress election after election. Before the election 1989, BJP under the impulse of Advani passed an important resolution to join the Ayodhya campaign in June 1989. The BJP benefited from this Hindu mobilization in and the polarization of the electorate through violence. The party won 88 seats and became part of the coalition supporting the V. P. Singh government.

The BJP, which was struggling to become a national party and

an alternative to the Congress, adopted the above-mentioned resolution to build a temple of Rama in Ayodhya. In June 1990, Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) declared that they would go ahead with the building of the temple at Ayodha and BJP announced that its leader L.K Advani would take a Rama Rath (chariot) procession through the length and breadth of the country, mobilizing support for the temple. In September 1990, the BJP, responding to its own complex electoral calculations, decided to join the procession, fundamentally altering the scope and complexion of the mobilization. In same time, Advani announced his decision to launch his 'Rath Yatra' from the Somnath temple in Gujarat to However, polarizing the electorate through the call of religious mobilization strategy and even participated in the processions provided the BJP with a Hindu 'vote bank' (Basu, 2006, 56). In the Lok Sabha elections 1991, riding on the wave produced by the Rath yatra and Ayodhya movement, the BJP achieved its greatest electoral victory since its formation and emerged as the second largest party in parliament with 119 seats (ibid., 87). The BJP made the greatest electoral effort in its history during this election, in which it exploited fully the Ayodhya issue, anti-Muslim hostilities which its leaders and workers had themselves done so much to inculcate in the upper caste Hindu population, particularly in north India and the Hindu-Muslim riots which Ayodhya, through the Hindi-speaking heartland and went on the 10,000 Km Rath Yatra (journey by chariot) to promise the construction of a temple of Rama. But he was stopped before entering Uttar Pradesh. Therefore, Advani became as a hero in 1991. In the meantime, the BJP stepped up its campaign for the building of a temple at the disputed site in Ayodhya.

In 1992, the BJP state government in U.P helped the Sangh to succeed in Ayodhya. Lord Rama and his epic, Ramayana, had become political icons. Hindu nationalism and Communalism Indian politics, media, and popular culture. When its own government in the state, its mobilization reached a peak. State government of Uttar Pradesh, headed by Kalyan Singh of BJP had almost pledged total support for the VHP's activists. Although after demolishing the Babri Mosque on 6 December 1992, the BJP governments in UP and some other states were dismissed, but this polarized people along religious lines. As a result, the BJP emerged as a mainstream party. Most of the Indian researchers have confirmed religious mobilization by BJP and its role in Ayodhya events. However, until recent times this problem and use of religious slogan has been continued. The proceedings of the Ayodhya events and Liberhan Ayodhya Commission of Inquiry in the Rajya Sabha, India's Upper House, after almost 17 years in 2009, led to a scuffle between a few Samajwadi Party (SP) and BJP members. In this time BJP's members raised the slogan 'Jai Shri Ram' and in reply of them SP's members shouted a counter-slogan,.

#### **b) Towards Power: Continuity of Religious Mobilization and Coalition Politics**

The backward-caste was located in the above-mentioned district and BJP needed substantial support of them to win the upcoming assembly elections. So, the hope was that a campaign built around Krishna would win over large numbers of backward castes suspicious of the BJP's upper-caste image. As one Hindu nationalist leader put it, "As of now, the Yadav as, almost to a man, are with the Samajwadi Party led by Mulayam Singh Yadav. But when the call of a Yadava god comes, can they remain indifferent?". They have also mentioned that in 1995, for electoral gain, the BJP launched hate campaigns against Muslims. Thousands of leaflets, posters and pamphlets, videos, audio cassettes and public speeches of the Sangh Parivar activists reinforced stereotypes of Muslims. In this regard, Basu mentioned an example that shows how BJP used religious messages through media in elections:

#### **c) After Capturing Power**

Through Ayodhya campaign, as a massive political success for the Sangh Family, caste versus caste politics was replaced by religion versus religion politics and it propelled the BJP and the Sangh to national prominence and extended their mass support broadly. After coming to power, also, some BJP leaders used the different Hindu symbols and communal stance to legitimize their political aims. For example, in Gujarat, according to Shah, Narendra Modi, who had worked as an organizer for the Rath Yatra in 1989, 'managed to carve out his image as Hindu Hriday Samrat, the King of Hindu hearts'. In the Lok Sabha as well as the Vidhan Sabha (State Legislative Assembly) and local government elections, though the main focus of the campaign of Modi, chief minister of Gujarat, was development, his Hindutva plank was also well entrenched. During the 2000 communal problems and the subsequent elections, his anti-Muslim posture was blatant in his phases, idioms and illustrations. He repeatedly talked about Hindutva, Hindu ethos, tolerance and magnanimity of Hindus and their glorious past and Muslims were regarded as backward that they try to increase their population to become a majority According to him, Islam and Christianity are the "real roots" of terrorism in India. Through such claims and slogans, he established himself as the champion of Hindus. However, the BJP has sought to use the gulf between the Hindu majority community and the religious minorities as a political strategy so that its agenda also targeted other minorities.

#### **5) Religious Violence for Electoral Goals**

Some authors like Brass believe and some implication of this has already been mentioned, political elites have had effect on the creation of hostilities between religious groups especially nHindus and Muslims. In this regard, Shakir believed that 'earlier, the riots were a 2-3-day affair. But now the riots continue for weeks together. This shows that there is what may be called systematic and organized madness. They are pre-planned and politically-oriented, accompanied by identical means of rousing religious passions and followed by desired results conducive to the growth of anti-secular politics'.

#### **CONCLUSION**

Although in pre-independence India, the elections were not significant as well as post independence, but the electoral function of religion stemmed from the beginning of electoral system in India. Although during this period religious forces, especially among Muslims, applied the electoral function of religion, but it was not confined to only religious parties or politicians. Using religion became a common practice in mobilizing people for political and electoral purposes. The Muslim leaders appealed communal electorates as through this they could win elections by appealing to the interests and loyalties of the Muslims. Among parties, Muslim League more than others used the electoral function of religion. The political function of religion in post independence India has mostly been confined to the electoral aspect. Although it may not be acceptable from an ethical point of view, however, from a political point of view, religion has been used as an instrument in the hand of politicians and organizations. Although the contest and conflict between Muslim and Hindu have not been as significant as in the pre independence period and Hindus have their rights intact, but most of the parties have used religion for political and electoral gains. The abolition of the system of communal electorate has made the contest between the two communities more effective.

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