

## **India's National Elections and US Foreign Policy Interests**

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India is holding its 14<sup>th</sup> Parliamentary elections in April and May of this year in multiple stages. This is the largest ever-democratic exercise in the world with almost half a billion people taking part. Under the current political situation, India is facing an uncertain future and the nation in the cross roads once again.

The last time India was in the cross roads was in 1947.

India, just having realized her independence from the British rule and having adopted a democratic structure for its government along with substantial poverty levels and lack of infrastructure, struggled with its internal and external problems.

Today almost half a century later, the idea of India as envisioned by the founding fathers as a democratic, pluralist society, is being put to test, and a serious one in that. The ongoing elections in India will redefine the idea of India, for the rest of the world one more time

The election results, to be announced soon, will once again determine which direction the country is heading at least for the next few years. Notoriously unreliable exit polls in India is adding further confusion in the voters. Whichever direction India heads, it will have enormous implications not only to the people of India but also to her neighbors and to the rest of the world.

### **Christians in India:**

Christianity came to India through one of the Apostles of Christ, Thomas, in the year AD 52. Thomas took the Good News of Christ to the house of Israel which had established a base in the western shores of India from even before King Solomon's time.

Christians, Jews, and lately the Muslims, like all other religious groups, have always lived in relative peace in India with their Hindu neighbors. There were occasional violence against them but it was not in any organized manner.

There are over 40 – 80 million Christians in India by some count though the official numbers puts them at around 25 to 30 million. It is because many Dalit or low caste Christians do not wish to identify themselves as Christians officially, since they would automatically become ineligible for government quota on employment and other benefits reserved for the low caste and tribal populations. (A recent ruling in a landmark case by the Supreme Court of India has the potential to challenge that policy).

As Prof. Richard Bonney of the University of Leicester, UK says, that there has been developments in India in the past few years which challenge the very spirit and existence of the church in India. In his book, “The Harvest of Hate” he enumerates the organized hate campaign being carried out by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) run state apparatus not only in the state of Gujarat but also in other parts of India.

Dr. Kamal Aaron Chenoy, the professor and columnist from New Delhi India says that this party is leading a campaign that would greatly undermine the very social fabric of India’s pluralist society and has the potential to destabilize the region.

Today, I would like to analyze the implications of political situation in India, to the US interests, at a time when the country is holding its national general elections.

### **Major Political Parties:**

The two main national political parties in India are the Indian National Congress Party (INC) and the Barathiya Janata Party (BJP). These two parties have formed their own coalitions to face each other off in this elections.

The Indian National Congress Party, (INC) was floated by the leaders of India at a time when India was going through another important phase in her history. The Indian nationalist leaders during the British Raj wanted to take the political power out of the hands of the colonial rulers. Mahatma Gandhi, a Barrister by training came along, to lead that movement using a powerful weapon – non-violence and civil disobedience.

Gandhi and the leaders of his party wanted a free and democratic India, which would essentially be a pluralist society. Gandhi disapproved of the partition of the country on religious grounds; but it was not within his power to stop that from happening. He had envisioned a nation rich in culture, diverse in her faiths and democratic in her politics.

The fragmentation of the Indus valley into India and Pakistan in 1947 infuriated a group of high caste Hindus in central parts of India. These high caste men formed a fringe group called the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS) meaning National Voluntary Corps. They did not like the idea of India being a multi religious, multi ethnic nation. They wanted to something about the idea of India promoted by Gandhi and his disciples. These groups attributed the problems of India to the “others” namely the non-Hindus mainly the Muslims in India. In their opinion the Indus valley is the home of the Hindus and they wanted a *Hindu Rashtra* (Hindu Nation) in their homeland. Instead, under Gandhi’s leadership, they got their motherland fragmented and they lost a good portion of the country to the “enemies of Hindus – the Muslims”.

They dreamed of a greater India made of a homogenized society, strong and proud but not so much a pluralist state. As a result, its members sympathetic to the cause of RSS saw Gandhi as a hurdle to their dream of a *Hindu Rashtra* and so one of them shot and killed Gandhi. The then government of India categorized RSS as a fascist organization, arrested some of its leaders and prosecuted those who pulled the trigger.

As the public opinion turned against the RSS, the leaders of the organization disowned the assassins and claimed that the assassin and his associates were

not the members of their organization. (RSS does not have registration formalities and does not maintain any form of membership lists and thus it was difficult to prove formal membership/affiliation in a court of law).

Dr. Marzia Casolari, an Italian research scholar, who researched the RSS extensively, points out in her paper that some of the leaders of RSS studying and traveling in Europe in the 20s and 30s, came across the idea of pure races. She has documented some of these leaders like Mr. Moonje meeting with Mussolini in Italy and other high ranking SS officials in Germany. (to read the text of Dr. Marzia Cassolari's article published in the Economic and Political Weekly, please visit [www.fiacona.org](http://www.fiacona.org) ).

Few of these upper caste Hindu men like Mr. Moonje, Mr. Golwalker and Mr. Savarkar floated the RSS in 1920s with a dream of establishing a *Hindu Rashtra*. RSS is a voluntary ideological group. RSS is not a political organization. According to its leaders, it is a cultural organization.

Mr. M.S. Golwalker rationalizes the policies of SS and the Nazis in his book "Bunch of Thoughts". He argues that it was "the perfect solution" to the problems of a great civilization (in Germany) in the 20s and 30s that was plagued by those 'external elements' - the Jews. He wrote, "the Hindus must learn from what Hitler did in Germany to safeguard the purity of Hindu race (sic)". Mr. Golwalker did not like the idea of a pluralist society and peaceful co-existence with the "others". He and his colleagues were so impressed by the Nazi ideology, the "One Nation, One People and One culture", that he and his colleagues translated it as "Hindu, Hindi Hindustan".

From time to time the leaders of the RSS also sets up multiple organizations for different tasks and then depute one of their senior leaders to lead each such organization. One such organization, created by the RSS, is their political wing called the *Jan Sangh* which later became the *Barathiya Janata Party* (BJP). The leaders of BJP are deputed from the RSS. BJP was launched by the RSS to field their candidates to political offices since they saw the benefits of having their own elected officials in the local and national government.

After having spent decades in the opposition benches, some BJP leaders including Mr. Vajpayee, finally tasted the power briefly in 70s when Mr. Morarji Desai became the Prime Minister. And then in 1998 with the help of Communist Party of India, the BJP formed a national government, for a brief period of time. Later in 2000, BJP formed a more stable coalition government in New Delhi with the help of over 26 small political parties who were too eager to be in the government.

After the on going election the BJP is again expected to form the government. It is only fitting for us today to come together and discuss this issue to study the potential implications this process could have on the US foreign policy interests.

### **Violence Against Christians:**

Lately, Christian organizations have become the target of many BJP-RSS affiliated groups in their quest for a Hindu homeland. Members of RSS and its affiliated organizations have been on the fore front of violence against the Christian mission organizations and social institutions. This spate of violence against Christians started in the December of 1998. Number of churches in remote villages were burnt down by the activists of this rightwing extremist Hindu party. Number of local and foreign missionaries were given marching orders and those who dared to continue to work were beaten or killed. The BJP government claimed that the violence against the Christians as “sporadic criminal incidents” - in which their party workers did not take part. The local officials absolved many RSS-BJP members caught in the violence against the Christians of any responsibilities. The BJP-RSS combine see the Christians and the Muslims as a threat to the creation of a *Hindu Rashtra* !

BJP and RSS is very clear on their ultimate goals. They want a Hindu society for the Hindus in a Hindu land !

### **BJP/RSS and Jewish Organizations:**

What surprises me the most today is the eagerness on the part of some highly respected American Jewish organizations and the state of Israel, for their rather cuddly relationship with these groups which collaborated with the enemies of the Jewish people during and after the horrible events of holocaust. Mr. Ami Eden of *Forward*, a Jewish magazine published in NY, questioned the reception accorded to the leaders of this extremist group by well known American Jewish organizations, in June 23rd edition last year. I guess the economic interest and short term gains often times over-ride the basic morality and the memory of the victims of Nazis during the Second World War!

It is my own concern that the American Jewish community that has such a good relationship with the American Christian churches - especially the evangelical churches, the community which appreciates all that the American churches have done to shield them from various forces at home and abroad, is only happy to join hands with a group that is determined to work against the interest of the defenseless church in India. The blood letting caused by these right wing political groups in India are not the ones, one could be proud of being associated with.

I think it is time for not only the American Jewish organizations but also the US policy making bodies to take a hard look at what our long term goals are in that region? What are our interests in that region? How can we really help develop a diverse, plural democracy in that region that would be complementary to our own ideals and values?

### **RSS/BJP and Washington:**

The Federation of Indian American Christian Organizations of North America (an advocacy group and not a religious organization) of which I am a member, is very disturbed when our President meets these RSS leaders at the White House, congratulating them saying, "India is on the right path" instead of asking them about the hand they are playing in the killings of hundreds of

missionaries and burning number of churches in Gujarat and elsewhere in India. The President should be asking them about their designs to restrict the rights of the non-Hindu population by passing legislations instead of congratulating them. If I am the leader of the rightwing extremist Hindu party, I would be extremely happy that my extremist agenda is being rewarded by none other than the President of the United States!

I am saddened by the kind of advice the President is getting. I like our President as a person. He is a man of kind and gentler heart. But should his advisors have him to say such things that would amount to insulting the memory of those Christian missionaries and nuns who have given their lives in such cruel way in the hands of these very rightwing extremists?

It is not just the Christians that are being killed and beaten. One must also remember over two thousand Muslims who were systematically murdered and tens of thousands more who were driven out of their homes in early 2002 in just a matter of few days in Gujarat in a highly orchestrated effort by the Hindu rightwing government. BJP government justified the pogroms saying that it was a natural reaction to the loss of lives in an arson attack on a train in the city of *Godhra*. (Some of those who died in the arson attack were the rightwing extremist party volunteers. I went to see the remains of the fire damaged train and to speak with the local officials and police at the train station. What I learnt there was more disturbing than the riots itself. It is a different subject for a whole new discussion.) A team of Congressional leaders headed by Rep. Joseph Pitts (R-PA) visited Gujarat in January of this year were horrified at the level of hate campaign organized by the BJP in their quest to form a *Hindu Rashtra*.

Once an official from the Administration was trying to justify the rather cozy relationship that exists between themselves and the rightwing extremist party leaders in India. He said, there is a reason for the Administration to be soft on the Hindu rightwing party. They say that they are dealing with the BJP in India because; 1. It is a democratically elected party to govern India, 2. US needs a friendlier government for trade and cooperation. 3. US needs a friendlier government to provide cooperation in the war against terrorism. 4.

US needs a strong government that could deal with its internal problems effectively to provide a stable government in India and provide stability in the region. The Administration's justification is that the Hindu rightwing party, the BJP, is able to provide all the above.

I would like to examine these points one by one.

### **Democratically Elected Party:**

One may not agree with the ideology of a particular party but if they come to power in a democratic election then we must accept them to be the legitimate party that has the right to govern a nation. It is up to the people of India to elect a party to power; US does not have the luxury of deciding who should the people of India elect to form their own government or not to work with a government that was democratically elected. I agree. But I must tell a story.

A well respected Professor of Political Science and an authority on Rightwing Extremist Parties in Europe (ERPs), Dr. Piero Ignazi once asked me a very difficult question. I went to see him in the city of Milan, Italy. We were discussing the rise of ERPs in France, Austria, Belgium, Italy and also in many other Eastern European countries. After about couple of hours of a very productive discussion, he asked me, if he could ask me one unrelated question. He said it was not directly related to the rise of ERPs in Europe – the purpose of my visiting with him.

He said, "There was a huge reaction in the world especially in Europe and in the US when Mr. Heider's party won the elections in Austria. It was a very legitimate, open and democratic election. His party is considered as an Extreme Rightwing Party. Immediately the international community objected to the election results. They said, Heider, one of the leaders of the party considers Adolph Hitler as a visionary. Neither Adolph Hitler nor those who think he had a right policy for Germany should be given any form of approval for his policies. It was a very appropriate reaction from the world community; and it must have been that way. But when a similar but a much radicalized group, which also traces its philosophical origins to the Nazi Germany and

Mussolini, came to power in India, no nation including the US objected. Why?" In that two hours of discussion that evening for the first time, I was lost for words. I had nothing to tell him. I wonder why the world community is still trying to justify their approval of a rightwing extremist party in India? Is this the kind of signal we must be sending to other rightwing extremist elements in other parts of the world also? It may be Hitler in Germany, Mussolini in Italy or Heider in Austria .....One Nation, One People, One Culture...the message is the same .... For BJP in India it is *Hindu, Hindi, Hindustan!!!*

Of course Heider also won democratic elections in Austria but the international community, including the US, told the Austrians that they can't have him!

### **Trade and Cooperation:**

The support and access the rightwing Hindu fundamentalist party enjoys now in Washington is extraordinary. No Indian leader have ever had this much access and influence in Washington ever.

Some officials in the Administration say, the Indian National Congress Party (INC) which ruled the better part of independent India failed to see the things the way Washington saw. It is argued that the INC was always friendlier to the former Soviet Union; Lead the non-aligned movement; and adopted a mixed economy in the beginning though the party came around to discard those policies and laid the foundation to open up the economy fully for private investment and international market. The economic liberalization policies in India were introduced by the late Prime Minister, Mr. Rajiv Gandhi long before BJP ever came to power. It would not be fair to say that the liberalization of economic policy is an invention of the rightwing Hindu party.

The INC preferred to trade with Eastern countries and the former Soviet Union until early 90s.

So, the question they ask is, if there is a group in a country that is willing to work now with the US at least for the time being, why should we refuse especially when the other party has deliberately stayed away from Washington for so long?

The Administration is absolutely right. During the unfortunate years of cold war, every nation took positions and India was no exception. India still has a strategic interest in Kashmir as does Pakistan. As Pakistan was courted by Washington, in the game of geo politics, India took the help from the former Soviet Union for its own self interest. There were no other alternate political parties at the national level in India at that time, except the communist parties - which of course always locked horns with the INC.

Most importantly, the reality was that neither the communists nor the BJP ever had a chance to form the government at the national level to make any kind of government policies affecting Washington's interest until after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Now the current reality is that the Soviet Union has disappeared and Russia is an ally of the US. The cold war is over and long gone. Today's world has changed so dramatically. But for some reason, some of our friends in Washington are still stuck in a time machine. They are reasoning like they did during the cold war era.

Now the real question is, are we willing to work with any party that comes to power in India or anywhere else, regardless of what they believe in or where they come from?

We need our US policies be based on long term vision to spread the fundamental values we so cherish such as freedom of religion, market economy, rights of individuals, life liberty and the pursuit of happiness for all men. Creating such societies and not the fundamentalist radical societies help the interest of the open and progressive societies like ours in the long term. They are the ones who will be our true allies for trade and cooperation who will help us promote free and pluralist democratic societies elsewhere.

### **Territorial Integrity and Regional Stability:**

Yes, the US has a very strong interest in having stable governments in South Asia. Extremist elements in Pakistan and in Afghanistan have created so much grief in the world. Their dream for a puritanical society within a certain form of Islamic thought for their country has resulted in instability turmoil. Unfortunately the US policy makers thought the support extended to fundamentalist or extremist religious groups of any particular faith there, who are willing to carryout our short term strategic goals, would create strong and stable governments. The history has proved that they are wrong.

If we are going to face secession problems in India either in the north, in Kashmir or in east, in Nagaland, it would be good neither for the national nor for the regional stability.

BJP's policies to preserve the unity and integrity of India is much different from that of the INC. The INC's over dependence on Moscow to protect India's interests in Kashmir is not a solution to the problem.

BJP's approach to this problem on its face value looks like the perfect solution. BJP believes that religion and culture are the only two unifying forces in India. They argue, 'letting foreign 'invaders' to convert Indians to their religions have resulted in the fragmentation of the Hindu motherland in 1947. Later, allowing the Christian missionaries in north eastern parts of India to preach the Gospel has resulted in Nagaland (today more than 90% Christians) demanding secession' from the union of India. So, the BJP claim that the only way to keep the country in one piece, to provide stability in the country and in the region, is by homogenizing the society, by ending religious conversions of the Hindus and by creating a *Hindu Rashtra*.

This, they say, will ensure the unity of India besides providing a stable government in the subcontinent and serve the US interest!

Those experts, who thought radicalizing Iran by Islamic thought or arming the *Mujahideens* to checkmate the ungodly Soviets, are now rationalizing saying

that if we support the rightwing Hindu fundamentalist party in India it could offset the Islamic radicalism in that region! These very same officials also rationalize that India is a Hindu majority country and so a Hindu government should be suitable for the people of India. They assume, once again, that it will bring long term stability in the region.

I disagree.

India is a diverse nation. India is not only home to over 40 million Christians but as Senator Biden (D-DE) points out, it is also home to the largest Muslim population in the world besides the home for millions of Sikhs, Buddhists, Parsis and Jains.

It is a multi religious, multi ethnic, multi racial and multi linguistic country. Neither the problems of Christian majority Nagaland, nor the Muslim majority Kashmir could be solved by a strong Hindu government in Delhi. In fact, neither would want to be a part of an official Hindu nation. The former Prime Minister of India, Mr. V.P. Singh told a press conference in Delhi recently that the BJP's brand of stability was harmful to the unity and cohesiveness of the country.

A drive to homogenize the society might trigger problems even in the south as the Dravidian majority in the South may not be so happy with a Brahmin dominated Hindu fundamentalist party imposing their brand of Hindu nationalism and culture on them.

The only result of BJP's policies could be more instability in the region besides tension and turmoil within India. The integrity and stability in the region will be severely damaged as a result. I do not think that it would be a welcome news for any government in the world.

### **Cooperation in the War on Terrorism:**

The United States needs a friendlier government in Delhi to fight the global war on terrorism. The BJP is more than willing to accommodate the needs of

Washington on these matters. In return Washington is more than willing to provide the help the BJP needs. Cooperation with Washington on the war on terrorism also provides BJP the access and influence to people and institutions in Washington.

The war on terrorism, like in many countries, is seen as a war on Islam. The extreme Hindu radicals are only too happy to join the band wagon to fight against a faith which they think is a hurdle to the creation of a *Hindu Rashtra*. But how long will this cooperation last? Is this cooperation rooted in the ideals and beliefs of these two democracies? Could we in fact ally with and start strengthening the party that does not believe in pluralist liberal democracy? What happens when the BJP feels politically strong enough at home? Will they turn against us for any reason under any circumstances?

One may ask, why should the BJP turn against the US?

There are number of reason why a rightwing extremist group would turn against the US. One main reason is that ours is a open and free society. All fundamentalist parties want to establish a closed and restricted society and BJP is no exception. These two political philosophies are contradicting to each other. They are fundamentally different.

The fundamental force that gives the life to BJP is the creation of a *Hindu Rashtra* – the vision of its parent organization the RSS. BJP has to adhere to the vision of the RSS because the RSS gives the support base for BJP. Without the RSS, the BJP will become irrelevant as a political force.

Even with all these various factors making its impact, the BJP leaders put up a very friendly face when they visit Washington. The main reason why BJP is compelled to pose a friendlier attitude to Washington is because they need the legitimacy in the international stage which Washington could provide. BJP certainly do not want to end up like Heider in Austria. So, they want to be seen as friends of the United States. The problem starts only when the leaders of such extremist parties think that they have created an image of legitimacy and that they are politically strong enough at home. You know that my

argument here is not out of touch with the reality. I could sight a number of precedence where this has replicated in a similar fashion.

By making unholy alliances to fight the war on terrorism today, we might be creating many more trouble for the future in other fronts. Our policies driven by short term gains does cost us heavily in the long term.

There are many Indian American organizations in Washington. Most of them work like the agents of BJP in Washington. Some of them may be funded in dubious ways. But we must understand that the rightwing Hindu extremist ideology is not appealing to all Hindus. Certainly not to most Hindus in America. But unfortunately the silent majority are not the ones who drive the policy. The US policy towards India is aided by a handful of rightwing party activists who are very close to the BJP leadership in India.

I do not support one party against another in any country. But I simply do not support any political group which can cause potential damage to the civil society at large. I could not stress enough the point that our (America's) support and policies in aligning with any rightwing extremist group for any short term strategic gains will cost us pretty heavily in the long run.

### **Concerns of Indian American Christians:**

The Federation of Indian American Christian Organizations of North America, remembered those who were murdered by the members of the rightwing Hindu extremist groups, in a prayer service held all across the US on March 27th. In that prayer service Rev. Johnson Raju, one of the Indian American Pastors in Washington area pointed out the following:

The RSS-BJP combine has formulated a new policy according to some highly placed individuals within the party. The RSS-BJP leaders want to restrict, rapidly increasing number of Christian churches and organizations starting from the village levels all across India. They want no more than one church or Christian organization be allowed to operate from any village regardless of the population in that village. RSS-BJP leaders have already advocated a

“*Desi Church*” or “National Church” similar to the one in China with all controls in the hands of the government. According to them this church will focus on ending conversions of Hindus to other faiths.

Though implementation of such regulations could not eliminate the churches in India, it would certainly weaken the church organization. Independent churches will be forced out. BJP believe that such weaker church will not be a threat to them and their control over the society.

### **Media Control:**

Violence against Christians is as intense as ever. Almost every time, the perpetrators of violence are affiliated to the ruling rightwing party. The violence against Christians are not isolated incidents as the BJP government repeats like a parrot. They definitely want the international community to believe that the violence against the Christians are isolated, non-coordinated accidents. The news media in India was very active in reporting such violence against Christians at least in the past. My inquiry in various parts of the country revealed that violence against the Christians does continue almost at the same intensity though every incidents do not lead to bloodshed and not all violence produces a dead body. Hate and violence are being institutionalized at a macro level by a government in power. It is a climate of hostility and intimidation mostly fueled by the ideology of the ruling party for wanting to create a *Hindu Rashtra*.

I started to wonder, if the violence is still continuing with same intensity, why then do I not see reports of such incidents in the news media. The answer came to me from an editor of one of India’s popular English dailies.

I met this editor over coffee in Delhi recently. He said he is planning to resign from the newspaper. I asked him why so. He said if he did not resign he would be fired by the management because his boss is under pressure from certain leaders of the ruling BJP to fire him. The reason is, he publishes stories of violence against Christians prominently in the news paper. The BJP did not

like that kind of reporting since it brings bad name to the ruling party not only within India but also overseas. This editor is a Hindu himself.

Perplexed, I asked him if this is just him or is it a pattern. His one line answer was more revealing than I expected. He asked me, “How many stories of violence against Christians have you read in any newspaper in India in the past six months?”

I will leave it at that for you to make your own conclusion from the story.

**Conclusion:**

US administration for some unknown reason seems to think this rightwing party should be our trusted friend and a partner in India. Let me tell you with great sadness in my heart, the legitimization of extremist rightwing groups not just in India but also in other parts of the world would be immoral, short sighted, shallow and will definitely cost us very dearly in the long term both financially and other wise.

We must be careful not to confuse India’s right wing political parties with the people of India. The people of India do deserve the friendship, cooperation and support the international community can give. After all they are the largest pluralist democracy so far. US and other international governments must be very careful not to be seen as friends of extremist groups. We should certainly encourage pluralist, liberal democratic parties in India!