

# Clash of the Paladins: India's Hindu-nationalism in decline?



**SIEGFRIED O. WOLF**

‘We are not giving any soft corner to anybody!’ This remarkable announcement made by an important spokesman of one of the two India’s main socio-political forces in the context of corruption charges against its top politician could mark another turningpoint in the country’s political development. This scenario is a further clear indicator of a major force in a critical state namely Hindu-Nationalism. The remarkable rise of Hindu-Nationalists in the parliamentary sphere – from 3 (1951/52) to 182 (1999) seats in the Lok Sabha (national parliament) was an increase from 3,1 per cent to 23,8 per cent. Hindu-Nationalism is generally portrayed by most observers as the largest threat to India’s democracy. This is because they closely associate this phenomenon, with an increase of atrocities within India’s political cultural; especially regarding violent excesses against religious minorities is by these critics closely associated with an enforced change in India’s political culture featuring violent excesses against religious minorities (communal violence). Furthermore Hindu-Nationalist attempts to erode essential constitutional principles such as secularism. In addition this political movement has several radical and extremist socio-political demands on its agenda, which inevitably and fundamentally stands in conflict with the model of ‘peaceful consensus’ and India’s vision ‘unity and diversity’, which are both cornerstones of India’s political system, the state and society.

Having this in mind, Hindu-Nationalism must be understood as a social and political movement, supported by a widespread network consisting of various organisations; the so called Sangh Parivar or Sangh Family. It is an alliance of numerous parliamentary and extra-parliamentary organisations which obliged to the so called Hindutva-concept. But it is significant to emphasise that Hindu-Nationalism is not a monolithic-block. In fact, its organizations differ substantially regarding structures, behavioural patterns, membership (from full-time worker to part-time activist), aims, and spheres of action. In the center of the Sangh family stands a work-sharing triumvirate, consisting of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS, National Volunteer Organization). Which functions as an organisational and ideological backbone, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP, World Hindu Council) which covers all kinds of (Hindu) religious matters, e.g. reconstruction of Hindu-temples, and attempts to function as an umbrella

organization of the countless streams and sects among Hinduism, as well as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, Indian People’s Party), which assumed the task to represent the movement in the political-parliamentary sphere. Despite all the programmatic and institutional differentiations, the common Hindutva-ties nevertheless create a bond. At least in the past the Sangh organisations could clearly be identified as a cohesive social and political movement.

In this context one has to state that Hindutva served as the ‘kit & glue’ of the different ‘movement’s organisations’. The fundamental conception of this collective, national identity project is the vision to transform Indian society as well as its political-institutional structures from a secular into a theocratic Hindu state. In the past this persistently led to massive violent clashes, especially between Hindus and Muslims. The confrontation between both ‘groups’ found its most dramatic flashpoint in the 2002 Gujarat riots in which militant Hindu-Nationalists were responsible for the killing of more than 1000 people. In addition, 520 places of worship were damaged, mainly mosques besides a few Hindu temples and Christian churches, and more than 70.000 people were turned into IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons) and over 35.500 people were arrested, creating intense communal unrests in many parts of the Gujarat state and a civil war like scenario in the provincial capital Ahmadabad.

However, the calculations of the militant hardliners within the Sangh movement to gain political capital by attacking Muslims and Christians did not add up. The Indian electorate reacted harshly. The population was not only shocked by the massive human rights violations and brutality, but also by the failure of the (BJP controlled) state institutions in stopping the violence immediately. With these images still fresh and an eroding economy to cope with, the Indian electorate penalised the Hindu-Nationalist in the following general elections in 2004 and 2009. Since then the BJP has been involved in numerous, frequently surfacing struggles over its leadership and agenda setting. The most recent example is the on-going conflict between Gujarat’s BJP Chief Minister Narendra Modi and BJP president Nitin Gadkari.

But before one sheds more light on this issue one has to emphasise that these party in fights are for obvious reasons driven by the media and political adversaries. They never-

theless indicate that the BJP suffers doubtless indicating that the BJP suffers from serious, deconstructive factionalism which not only challenges their own unity but also the cohesiveness of the whole Hindu-Nationalist movement.

In this context, it seems that even within the RSS, which is more known for its strict hierarchical order, discipline and loyalty than for pluralism. In its attempts to maintain the ‘pretence of homogeneity’ and to keep the ranks of the BJP closed in downplaying the struggle between Modi and Gadkari as

consensus for the next general elections in 2014, it will have a tremendous impact on the lower level ranks, especially on the social base, i.e. fulltime workers (Pracharaks), activists (kar sevaks), and sympathisers of the movement) leaving confusions, disruption and lack of trust in the national leadership behind.

However, the turmoil within the parliamentary wing and the attempts to restore its control over the BJP indicates that there is no clear chain of command as well as a lack of cohesive central leadership within the Hindu-nationalist movement

they want to attract the political mainstream in order to broaden the social base they get trapped in a dilemma. To be able to do this successfully, one has to dilute the originally (mostly radical) vision and ideology, which consequently leads to a certain degree of incoherence within its own political agenda and tensions between the different parts of the movement. The movement gets torn between its desired cultural orientated ambitions, meaning the norm and value orientated aims and purposes of the movement, and the necessary power-ori-

more than 20 parties (National Democratic Alliance/NDA) involved they discovered that it is not possible to combine cultural and power-orientated aims and purposes. In other words, you can’t rule India and try to establish a theocratic Hindu State (Hindu Rashtra). This marks a phenomenon which is still not accepted by significant parts of the Sangh Parivar leadership making them unable to deal adequately with this antagonism. Subsequently, the movement finds itself in a persistent personal and institutional struggle over the right approach on how to overcome this existential crisis.

Against this backdrop, the ongoing conflict is only a continuation of a series of confrontations which accompanied the Hindu-Nationalists movement since it entered the parliamentary floor. Most noteworthy was the internal tussle over the use of aggressive communal politics, not only in the context of Gujarat. A couple of years before, inspired and backed by radical elements within the movement (RSS/VHP), Advani initiated an agitation, the Ram Janmabhoomi (birthplace of Hindu God Rama) movement which not only led to the destruction of the Babri Mosque in the town of Ayodhya but also to the forced resignation of the first Hindu-Nationalist government after only 13 days in power in 1996. In consequence, the BJP under the leadership of Atal Bihari Vajpayee decided to ‘freeze’ most of the radical demands from the RSS and VHP like building the Ram Janmabhoomi Mandir (on the ruins of the Babri Mosque), enacting a uniform civil code applicable to adherents of all religions, and removal of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution which granted Kashmir a special status in order remain an attractive, responsible and credible political actor/player for the electorate as well as for potential coalition partners, to This of course disappointed especially the VHP, who saw the BJP departing from its core Hindutva agenda, thus betraying the main interests of the movement. This accusation divided the front organisations of the Hindu-Nationalists. Not only the parliamentary and non-parliamentary wing were split into a radical and moderate pole. This finds its expression in the increasing fragmentation of its leadership which was particularly enforced by the two BJP led governments (1998 to 2004) and the challenge of the appearance of new cross-cutting cleavages like the introductions of liberal economic reforms; namely, the con-

frontation between supporters of India’s integration into the global economy in order to attract investment and to build-up a strong Hindu-Nation and opponents of free-market policies who see these as threats to the indigenous economy.

To sum up, it is obvious that the BJP sees power as a necessary instrument, but the radical, non-parliamentary pool of the movement headed by the RSS and VHP developed a very ambiguous, ‘uneasy’ relationship towards power. Especially processes of achieving and maintaining political power are perceived as some kind of ‘dirty work’ and in contrast to its own habitus. A phenomenon which is particularly confirmed by increasing (alleged) cases of corruption within the BJP, as latest Gadkari, as well as the ‘high-handed’ and non-consensus orientated leadership style of certain BJP politicians, especially Modi. The deconstructive rivalries between the second ranked leaders like Rajnath Singh, Sushma Swaraj, Arun Jaitley are enhancing the RSS’ antipathy towards politicians. Nevertheless, being convinced of the merits of a functional and loyal political representation – especially when it comes to gaining political, parliamentary protection of the institution as such – the RSS continues to informally exercise informal, indirect political influence. Therefore, it seems that the RSS is not willing to grant much ‘institutional autonomy’ to the BJP, which was a quite reluctant ally and useless tool regarding the ‘saffronisation’ of the political landscape by the Sangh family in the last 15 years. But in trying to regain control over its ‘black sheep’ and keeping it on a short leash, the RSS sets its political wing back to the time of the BJP predecessor Jana Sangh, a radicalised, unsuccessful political organisation, which was everything but attractive to the dynamic electorate of India. Finally, taking into account the obsolescence of the RSS structures and the tremendous aging processes of its human resources, and the ‘stickiness’ towards Hindutva, it is not surprising that the RSS has enormous problems in not only recruiting new, qualified members in general but also in maintaining its layers within the Indian youth in particular. To sum up, the Hindu-Nationalists are ‘Nomads of the Past’.

The writer is a lecturer of Political Science and International Relations as well as a senior research fellow in the Department of Political Science, South Asia Institute, Heidelberg University



an internal as well as ‘low key affair’ it appears that the RSS is also affected by the ‘internal fractious elements syndrome’. There are occasions in which certain sections of its senior members indicate that they are not willing to support the official RSS line in rallying behind Gadkari as the sole protégé for party presidency and future Prime Ministerial candidate of the BJP. For example, the demand by veteran RSS ideologue M.G. Vaidya that the BJP president Gadkari should resign and rather support Modi as the next BJP ‘top poster boy’ can be seen as an indication that power struggle is also well alive within the RSS.

Therefore one can state that the whole Modi-Gadkari split portrays that neither the BJP nor the RSS or the whole movement function as a ‘well-knit and homogenous family’. Even if the leadership is able to find a new

at the moment. Recognising this, one must state that the ‘Modi-Gadkari clash’ is not only about personal animosities, a decision about a certain policy line, or who is in charge of a political party, it is much more about what is the central authority of the Hindu-Nationalist movement, the RSS or the BJP. In other words, both sides have their eyes on the grand prize.

However, for observers of the Sang family as well as analysts of similar anti-secular, nationalist movements the process of disintegration is not a surprising and/or an unknown phenomenon. Societal groups always have to face this essential challenge. Not only the access but also the maintenance of political power through elections demands a wide-scale accommodation of interests that are also likely to be divergent. Consequently, as soon as

entation focusing on the strategies and resources to implement these aims and purposes. In brief, the basic problem of Hindu-Nationalism is that all its organisations have to realise that they will not be able to push their program of cultural transformation without political power, but too much cultural orientation will prohibit the accumulation of power to a certain degree or even the access to power. This is because radical agendas are identified as anti-systemic forces and either passively neglected by the electorates or actively forbidden by the state in order to protect its constitution and political-institutional setup. Both can be seen as defence mechanisms of a consolidated and resilient democracy, like India.

As a result, since the BJP had the opportunity to take over political responsibilities and had to lead (ruling) coalitions with