

# “A Victory for Secular India”? Hindu Nationalism in the 2004 Election

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**Abstract:** At least since the last decade of the 20th century, there has been strong scholarly interest in a perceived global wave of religious nationalism. Critical to that movement was the most important recent development in Indian politics, the rise of the Hindu right. Commentators lamented a fundamental change in the Indian body politic, the demise of India’s celebrated secularism. However, others predicted that the Hindu nationalists would be forced to move to the center to gain votes, jettisoning much of their peculiar ideology in the process. The 2004 national parliamentary election was a crucial test of these contending interpretations. Would the Bharatiya Janata Party rely on its established arsenal of communally controversial issues? Would it emphasize themes designed to appeal to a broader audience? Analyzing reports published in national newspapers and news magazines, I will reach the surprising conclusion that the answer to both of these questions is yes.

Weighing in at 17 and a half pounds, the five volumes produced by the Fundamentalism Project massively document the interest in a perceived global intersection between radically conservative religion and politics in *fin de millénaire* Religious Studies (Marty and Appleby 1991; 1993a; 1993b; 1994; 1995). It has been argued that the inclusion of Hinduism was critical to this documentary hippopotamus, seeming to establish that there was something going on in religion and politics that was indeed global, and not just a parochial concern in Christian and Islamic studies (Llewellyn 1996, 84). Certainly the most important development in Indian politics in the last two decades of the 20th century was the rise to prominence of Hindu nationalism. And this was a phenomenon that attracted the attention not only of political scientists, but of students

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of religion as well, including Gerald Larson (1995) and Mark Juergensmeyer (1993; 2003; 2008). Although neither Larson nor Juergensmeyer would attach the label “Hindu fundamentalism” to recent developments in India, their work is still proof that specialists in religion were paying attention to the rise of the Hindu right.<sup>1</sup>

More evidence of this attention is provided by a recent book, Jeffrey D. Long’s *A Vision for Hinduism: Beyond Hindu Nationalism*. Long opens by identifying himself as a convert to Hinduism, who is going to argue in favor of a certain kind of Hindu pluralism, drawing not only on that tradition, but also on Jainism, and even process theology. As an exercise in constructive theology, I certainly would not claim the competence to judge Long’s book. It is worth noting that he doesn’t draw much on scholarship about Hindu nationalism. Yet Hindu nationalism plays an important part in the book rhetorically, since it is the kind of “hateful and bigoted” ideology, the “spiritually bankrupt form of political manipulation” against which he poses his Hindu pluralism (Long 2007, 51, 27). At the very least, the book helps to establish the ongoing interest in this “political” movement among scholars of religion.

Contemporary Hindu nationalist groups trace their origins back to the 1920s, but they did not have a substantial impact on elections in India until the late 1980s, finally taking over the national government a decade later. Scholars and political commentators have sometimes lamented the rise of the Hindu right as effecting a fundamental change in the Indian body politic. Minorities had been mobilized on the basis of appeals to religion for decades, but a successful attempt to mobilize the Hindu *majority* was taken as a harbinger of the demise of India’s celebrated secularism. Perhaps as a multireligious, multiethnic, multilingual democracy on a subcontinental scale India was an experiment that was failing. Others argued that the Hindu nationalists, who were not so radical to begin with, would be forced to move to the center to gain votes, jettisoning much of their peculiar ideology in the process.

The 2004 national parliamentary election was a crucial test of these contending interpretations of the role of Hindu nationalism in Indian politics. A coalition led by the main Hindu nationalist political party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), was coming up for reelection. Would they rely on their established arsenal of communally controversial issues? Would they emphasize themes designed to appeal to a broader audience? These were questions upon which the future of religious nationalism hinged, and not only in India. Relying largely on an analysis of reports published in national newspapers and news magazines, I will reach the surprising conclusion that the answer to both of these questions is yes.

In *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics*, Christophe Jaffrelot describes how Hindu nationalists at least since the 1960s have “oscillated” between “radical” and “moderate” positions. The radical approach is “based on a strategy of identity-building through the stigmatisation and emulation of the Other, ethno-religious mobilisation and the development of a network of activists.” The moderate mode “relied on an ideological rapprochement with Hindu traditionalists, mobilisation on socio-economic, populist issues and cooption of notables” (Jaffrelot 1999, 10). The author writes that the Hindu right “oscillated” between moderate and radical strategies, because in the history that he recounts that these two rose and fell inversely, with radicals in the ascendance in the early 1980s and again in the early 1990s, only to be outshone by moderates in the later part of both decades. To a certain extent, in *The Hindu Nationalist Movement*, the cleavage between moderates and radicals is institutional, as the BJP has been liable to urge moderation over the protests of groups like the Rasthriya Swayamsevak Sangh and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad. However, Jaffrelot argues that it might be better to think of the divide between the two strategies as more “horizontal” than “vertical.” The national leaders found their efforts at accommodation to the larger political culture strongly opposed by the local activists even within their own organizations (Jaffrelot 1999, 231–238).

Although I do not have the data to confirm that there was a tension between the BJP’s leadership and the grass roots in 2004, this essay certainly cites evidence that the tug of war between the party and other Hindu nationalist groups continued. It could be argued that this struggle was a political liability during the campaign, but it could also be construed as an advantage, allowing the BJP to be all things to all people, at once moderate and radical, although this strategy, if that is what it was, in the end was not successful.

Spring 2004 was a season of political surprises in India. On its front page on 11 May 2004, *The Times of India*, one of the largest circulation English-language daily newspapers in the country, reported on exit poll results of the parliamentary election concluded the day before. Specifically, of the five media organizations cited, all had predicted that the winner of the vote would be the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), the ruling coalition led by the BJP, although only two reported a total number of seats over the magic 272 required for a simple majority in the Parliament (“Exit Voters, Enter Fixers: Hungama: No Clear Winner, Kiss-ka Number Aayega?” 2004, 1). However, within a few days it was

clear that the polls had been wrong. The Congress had won the election, with its parliamentary representation increasing from 114 to 145, while the BJP's had dropped from 182 to 138 ("Changing Colours of India." 2004, 12). By 17 May, *The Times of India* was reporting that Sonia Gandhi, the Congress Party leader, had managed to put together about 320 parliamentarians who were members of her coalition, which by then was being called the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), or who were supporting it from the outside ("She Has 320 on Her Side." 2004, 1). Delhiites woke to a new political surprise two days later when it was reported that Gandhi had turned down the job of prime minister in favor of former finance minister Dr. Manmohan Singh.

To make a long story short, the BJP and its allies were ousted from power over the central government, with control swinging back to India's erstwhile perennial favorite, the Congress. The Congress's Web site celebrated, "Congratulations to Smt [that is, Mrs.] Sonia Gandhi for Leading the Congress Party to Victory in the Lok Sabha Elections 2004." And then the Web site went on to explain the meaning of this event: "This is not only a Victory for Secular India but also a resounding defeat for the Forces of Communalism" (Indian National Congress 2004a). This interpretation reflects the persistent claim of the Congress that it was defending India's historic secular policy from the attacks of the communalist BJP. Whether the election was a referendum on communalism or whether the BJP is even communalist, is debatable, and was debated during the 2004 election campaign. Analyzing that debate will be the task of this essay.

## HINDU NATIONALISM IN THE 2004 ELECTION

Repeatedly during the 2004 parliamentary election campaign, leaders of the BJP insisted that their emphasis was on economic development and good government, and not on Hindu nationalism. The party's platform, as stated in its *Vision Document*, read: "According to the BJP, the two main issues of Election 2004 are: good governance and accelerated, all-round development" (Bharatiya Janata Party 2004). Switching to the Hindi language, this agenda was often referred to as *bijli-pani-sadak*, that is, electricity, water, and streets (Deshpande 2004, 1). This plank was hammered into the common minimum program of all the parties in the BJP-led coalition, the NDA, as "Responding to the aspirations and expectations of the people, the NDA has made 'Development,' 'Good

Governance,' and 'Peace,' as the main issues for Election 2004" (National Democratic Alliance 2004). Mixed messages about this emphasis on economic development rather than Hindu nationalism were communicated by the prominent campaign event described in the next section.

## A Tale of Two Chariots

As a part of the 2004 campaign, Deputy Prime Minister L. K. Advani undertook what he called a *yatra* or pilgrimage across India. Beginning on 10 March at Kanyakumari on India's southern tip, Advani's trek culminated in Ayodhya on 5 April, having traversed more than three thousand miles.<sup>2</sup> Advani's saga recalled his 1990 *Ram Rath Yatra*, or Ram chariot pilgrimage, undertaken to mobilize support for the construction of a Ram temple at the site of the Babri Masjid. However, in self-conscious repudiation of the agenda of the earlier event, the 2004 sojourn was dubbed the *Bharat Uday Yatra*, or the India rising pilgrimage. In the media, this label was associated with the slogan of the Government of India tourist marketing campaign, "India Shining," touting the country's growing prosperity. That this was a new *yatra* was signaled from the very beginning, as Advani kicked off the event at Kanyakumari saying:

On this stage there is a microcosm of the new India and all that we stand for. We have Muslim stalwarts like the divan of Ajmer Sharif, we have Christian priests from Kerala, we have professionals, artistes and sportsmen. All of them are joining the BJP in great numbers, setting aside differences to make the BJP great so that India is great. (Radhakrishnan 2004, 33)

Although some claimed that even Advani's 2004 pilgrimage was "laden with Hindu symbolism," it downplayed Hindu nationalism enough to irk some other groups in the *Sangh parivar*, the "family" of organizations that developed out of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh ("Most Voters Want Secular Future, Times Poll Finds" 2004, 8). Giriraj Kishore of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) dismissed the *yatra* as a "political gimmick" (Gupta 2004b, 8). There was trouble when Advani's caravan rolled into Nagpur, the city in Maharashtra that is the heart of Hindu nationalism, where the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh was founded and where it is still headquartered. Advani's speech was interrupted by members of the Bajrang Dal, a militant Hindu nationalist youth movement, demonstrating in favor of the construction of Ram's temple in Ayodhya. They shouted, "Clear the way for our beloved Ram," and

“Even if we must endure beatings and bullets, right there we will have the temple built.”<sup>3</sup> In Ayodhya itself, a cool reception was planned for Advani. VHP’s Rajendra Singhji Pankaj explained, “Why should we welcome him? This is a political visit. However, we will remind him of his pledge to build the temple” (Subrahmaniam 2004, 1).

About the construction of a Ram temple in Ayodhya, one newspaper article quoted Advani as having said that he was “confident that a grand Ram temple would be built at Ram’s very birth place,” but he added that this would take place “with the cooperation and support of all” (D’Souza 2004, 16). Although the editorialist quoting this phrase took it as evidence that Advani had not moved the Ram temple to the back burner, it was consistent with the BJP’s *Vision Document*. In it the BJP “reaffirms its commitment to the construction of a Ram temple in Ayodhya,” but then it adds that “the judiciary’s verdict in this matter should be accepted by all” and it suggests that “dialogue, and a negotiated settlement in an atmosphere of mutual trust and goodwill, are the best way of achieving this goal” (Bharatiya Janata Party 2004). In short, the party eschewed direct action in favor of a judicial or negotiated resolution, neither of which seemed to bode any speedy conclusion. To the VHP’s criticism of the *Bharat Uday Yatra*, Advani offered the following cagey reply: “I don’t wish to comment on the VHP. But I have been a *swayam-sevak* [literally a “volunteer,” but in this context a member of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh] from my childhood and the RSS understands that I won’t do anything against its basic philosophy” (Gupta 2004a, 8). Here Advani refuses to take the bait by criticizing the VHP, but appears to be offering reassurance to the Hindu nationalists that he is one of them. The tension between Hindu nationalist groups in the 2004 parliamentary campaign will be analyzed further below.

Other than the apparent de-emphasis on Hindu nationalist themes, the most striking difference between the 1990 *Ram Rath Yatra* and the 2004 *Bharat Uday Yatra* was that the latter was largely a flop. The earlier pilgrimage was greeted by growing crowds in an atmosphere of increasing tension, culminating in Advani’s arrest as he was about to enter Uttar Pradesh in violation of a court order, which sparked Hindu-Muslim riots across India. By contrast, the *Bharat Uday Yatra* was a tepid affair. It should come as no surprise that a Congressman would claim that “turnout was poor,” but there were other press reports that Advani was greeted by the “citizens’ indifference” (“Sibal Ridicules Yatra, Says Turnout is Poor” 2004, 11; Subrahmaniam 2004, 1). After it was clear that the BJP had lost the election, analysts singled out the

pilgrimage as contributing to the party's failure, because it distracted from the economic development message of the overall campaign in favor of Hindu nationalism, and because it distracted attention from the party's standard bearer Prime Minister A. B. Vajpayee in favor of Advani himself. This was all summed up by a title in the news magazine *Outlook*: "Rath Turned Turtle" (2004, 46).

## Rally Round the Family

In 2004, mixed messages were characteristic of the relationship between the BJP and its siblings in the *Sangh parivar*. On 13 March 2004, *The Times of India* reported that the representative assembly of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the Akhil Bharatiya Pratinidhi Sabha, had voted to endorse the BJP ("RSS Throws Weight Behind Vajpayee" 2004, 7). But we have also noted the VHP and Bajrang Dal potshots at L. K. Advani during his *Bharat Uday Yatra*, particularly over the construction of a Ram temple in Ayodhya. A similar sentiment was expressed in another context by the VHP's Praveen Togadia. Responding to the attempt by the BJP to exploit the feel good factor fueled by India's new prosperity, Togadia groused that "there could be no 'feel good' without the Ram temple in Ayodhya" (Deshpande and Iyer 2004, 20).

Later in the campaign, a statement by the same VHP "firebrand leader," Praveen Togadia, on the same issue is noteworthy ("Ayodhya in Manifesto Not Good Enough for VHP" 2004, 8). In its common minimum program, the BJP's coalition adopted language similar to the dominant party on Ayodhya. Specifically, the NDA concluded:

We continue to hold that the judiciary's verdict in this matter should be accepted by all. At the same time, efforts should be intensified for dialogue and a negotiated settlement in an atmosphere of mutual trust and goodwill. (National Democratic Alliance 2004)

For some commentators, this was a historic concession to Hindu nationalism. In previous elections, the common minimum programs had never included Ayodhya, because it was too controversial to get all the coalition partners to agree (Gupta 2004e, 1). However, Togadia was having none of this "negotiated settlement" talk. He said, "We have no hope in negotiations. We have no trust in Muslims as far as the temple is concerned. Talks on the issue will end in Muslim appeasement." Instead, Togadia concluded that "legislation was the 'only way' to resolve the vexed issue"



(“Ayodhya in Manifesto Not Good Enough for VHP” 2004, 8). This would allow the majority in parliament to decide the fate of the Ram temple/Babri Masjid with or without the consent of the Muslim community.

In response to criticism from its *Sangh parivar* siblings that the BJP was repudiating its Hindu nationalist agenda, party leaders offered some reassuring signals. For example, BJP president M. Venkaiah Naidu promised NDA coalition partners that “economic issues will be the focus of NDA,” with no effort to insinuate Hindu nationalist hot button issues into the campaign. “It is not our style to pursue any agenda through [the] backdoor,” he said. But then he added, “Hindutva is not an election issue but a way of life” (“Hindutva Not on Our Agenda: Venkaiah” 2004, 8). Here, it seems to me that the BJP chief is angling to have his cake and to eat it too, by saying at once, “No, we will not force Hindu nationalism onto our coalition partners,” while at the same time affirming, “Yes, we do believe in Hindu nationalism.” A similar note was sounded by no lesser a BJP leader than the prime minister himself. In an interview with the RSS paper, *Panchjanya*, Vajpayee scolded Hindu nationalist groups “mak[ing] accusations” against the party, and he added, “Difference may be there and these can be sharp also. But despite these differences, we should not doubt each other’s intentions. All of us[,] bound by the Sangh ideology, are moving forward” (“Vajpayee Calls for Trust ‘Within’” 2004, 9).

In the post mortem immediately following the defeat of the BJP’s coalition, more than one editorial writer said that, whatever the way forward, there was no going back to the Hindu nationalist agenda for the party (for example, “The New Government...” 2004, 10; “Ideology is Liability in the Era Coalitions” 2004, 14). Some even suggested that it was because the party had *insufficiently distanced itself from Hindu nationalism* that it was defeated (Chawla 2004, 29–30, 31–33; Pratap 2004, 18). But this was not the consensus in the *Sangh parivar*. Rather, Ram Madhav of the RSS opined that “Our cadres were unenthusiastic as they felt that the BJP had diluted its Hindutva ideology.” And the VHP’s Togadia concluded even more bluntly, “Vajpayee and Advani are responsible for the defeat. They betrayed the Hindus” (Das and Aron 2004, 19).

## Modi-in-the-Box

In the tug and pull of Hindu nationalist leaders during and after the 2004 election campaign, a peculiar role must be acknowledged to Narendra Modi. The BJP chief minister of the state of Gujarat, Modi was in



power at the time of the 2002 post-Godhra riots, and has been widely condemned for doing nothing to stop the bloodshed. Surely he was one of the unnamed miscreants tarred in a Supreme Court judgment that spoke of “modern day ‘Neroes,’” who “were looking elsewhere when innocent children and women were burning” (“Feel-Bad Factors: Best Bakery Case and Lucknow Stampede Take the Shine off BJP” 2004, 18). Modi also stands accused of playing on communal tension even after Godhra, in the state assembly election in late 2002, in Gujarat, which the BJP won handily. In its election manifesto, the Congress noted that “The Supreme Court has pulled up the Gujarat government repeatedly for its complicity in the communal carnage” (Indian National Congress 2004b). For many, Narendra Modi is the face of Hindu nationalism as violent communalism.

This background is necessary to understand the image to which the heading of this section gestures. In an editorial in *The Hindustan Times*, Prem Shankar Jha describes with approval the efforts of Vajpayee and Advani “to secularise the BJP.” Even after Godhra, the BJP’s national leadership could not afford to repudiate Narendra Modi, because of his very useful popularity in his home state of Gujarat, but they could and did confine Modi’s extremism. This is why Jha says about Vajpayee and Advani that “they have put Modi firmly back in the Gujarat box and marginalised the VHP” (Jha 2004b, 10). However, in news reports from February to May of 2004, I noted articles that had Modi campaigning not only in Gujarat, but also in Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, and Delhi. Geographically Modi was a jack-in-the-box who sprang out of his Gujarati confinement.

In the aftermath of the BJP’s defeat, Modi was singled out for his personal attacks on Congress standard bearer Sonia Gandhi. The Italian-born Congresswoman was generally pilloried for her “foreign origin.” But the crudest attack on Sonia was launched by Narendra Modi:

The Gujarat chief minister, for instance, plunged to new depths when he said that Sonia (“Italian Begum”) and Rahul were not even qualified for the jobs of a clerk and a driver. Even more tasteless was his remark at a public rally in north Gujarat: “Earlier people used to see the Congress symbol of a cow and a calf and equate it with mother Indira and son Sanjay. Now farmers tell me that a Jersey cow and her hybrid calf have come to contest elections.” (Bhaumik 2004b, 29)

While there is clearly some nationalist xenophobia to these attacks on Sonia Gandhi, there is not much that is *Hindu* nationalist about them. However, it is interesting that Narendra Modi referred to the Congress

leader as an “Italian Begum.” Since a “begum” is a *Muslim* woman of high social standing, the label would have associated this Italian foreigner with the “foreigners” who are the more general objects of Hindu nationalist opprobrium, Muslims. Of course, as a legal matter, almost all Muslims in India are Indian citizens and not foreigners. However, to the extent that Hindu nationalists equate being Indian with being Hindu, they magically transform Muslims into foreigners.

To shift the focus from Sonia back to Narendra Modi, although the BJP managed to hang on to a bare majority of the members of parliament from Gujarat, there was a significant decline. While the number of Congress parliamentarians from that state rose from six to 12, the BJP’s representation plummeted from 20 to 14, out of 26 total (“Mofeat: The Price of Arrogance” 2004, 9). This decline was followed by immediate demands for Modi’s ouster as chief minister of Gujarat. For example, by 18 May 2004, just four days after the results of the election were known, the press was reporting such a demand by the Bharatiya Kisan Sangh (BKS), the *Sangh parivar*’s farmers’ organization (“Sangh Farmers’ Body Says Modi Must Go” 2004, 10). It turns out that there was bad blood between Modi and the BKS even before the election, because of an earlier political fight.<sup>4</sup> The articles that I read about the criticisms of Modi focused on his “style of functioning” (“Mellowed Modi Opens Dialogue with MLAs” 2004, 12). It is difficult to say whether this refers to (1) his association with an aggressive Hindu nationalism, (2) his identification with crude attacks on Sonia Gandhi, or (3) his reputation for playing political hardball in Gujarat. Most likely, the answer is (4) all of the above. Whatever the logic behind these criticisms of Narendra Modi, it must be clear from all of the evidence in this section that he was not conspicuous by his absence in the 2004 campaign. Editorialist Prem Shankar Jha was proven a poor prognosticator when he predicted that Modi would be confined “in the Gujarat box” (Jha 2004b, 10).

### The Suitor Rebuffed

One of the aspects of the BJP’s 2004 effort with which Narendra Modi is said to have been unimpressed was its bid to “woo” Muslims.<sup>5</sup> “The Gujarat chief minister had apparently said that this was a fruitless exercise as the Muslims would never support the BJP,” it was reported after the election (Bhaumik 2004a, 44). Whatever Modi’s reservations may have

been, it was generally acknowledged that 2004 was novel in that the Hindu nationalist party did make greater overtures to Muslims. But this aspect of the campaign was not without its own tensions, which this section is dedicated to analyzing.

On 22 April 2008, Atal Bihari Vajpayee gave a campaign speech in Kishanganj in the state of Bihar, which *The Times of India* characterized as “the only Muslim-majority constituency outside Kashmir” (“Great Scramble for Muslim Vote Begins: BJP Mantra: Blunt Their Hostility If You Can’t Win Them” 2004, 1). There the prime minister reached out to the Muslim community, insisting, “My government has never discriminated against anybody on communal lines.” Vajpayee argued that recent peace talks with Pakistan would lead to a decline in communal conflict within India. “If our relations with neighbouring countries could improve,” he asked, “why could we not live at peace with each other” (Prasad 2004, 13)? A week later in Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh, Vajpayee once more invited Muslims to “come closer to the party.” “If you join hands with us, you will know we are not anti-Muslim,” he pleaded. “We have pushed all contentious issues to the backburner and are now committed to economic development and progress” (Hasan 2004, 7).

About the claim that the “contentious issues” had been moved “to the backburner,” the BJP’s record was mixed, which should come as no surprise by this point in this essay. Let’s take the three most prominent: (1) Ayodhya, (2) the uniform civil code, and (3) Article 370. As noted above, building a temple in Ayodhya was still on the BJP’s agenda in 2004, although its *Vision Document* emphasizes using judicial action and negotiation to achieve that end, rather than forcing the issue through government diktat or street protest. Second, although the *Vision Document* does still demand a uniform civil code, which would replace Muslim personal law, this was reframed as a women’s issue in 2004. “The BJP views Uniform Civil Code primarily as an instrument to promote gender justice.” And, finally, while the party’s platform does call the special constitutional status of Jammu and Kashmir “transient and temporary,” it argues that the focus now should be on “eliminating terrorism” (Bharatiya Janata Party 2004). As in past elections, the uniform civil code and Article 370 were too contentious to be acceptable to the BJP’s coalition partners, so they did not make it into the NDA’s *Agenda*. By contrast, as previously pointed out, the call for a Ram temple in Ayodhya did appear in the NDA’s common minimum program for the first time in 2004.

Whatever the Muslim electorate made of the BJP's political agenda, the press reported that some prominent Muslim leaders did support the party. One of these was Syed Ahmed Bukhari, the imam of what is arguably the most important mosque in Delhi, the Jama Masjid. In an interview in *The Times of India*, Bukhari's attraction to the BJP appears to be motivated substantially by his repulsion from the Congress. "Muslims have always rallied around secular parties, who have used and abused them for their own ends," he said, adding in Hindi, "*Unhon ne Muslims se liya hai, diya kuch nahin,*" that is, "They have taken from Muslims, but not given them anything." According to the imam, groups such as the Congress had driven a wedge between the BJP and the Muslim community. To the question, "Would you advise Muslims to forget Gujarat?" Bukhari replied, "Muslims cannot forget Gujarat just as they cannot forget thousands of riots when Congress was in power." And he added about the BJP that "there has been a softening of their stance," and "on Gujarat the PM himself called it a *kalank*," or blot. It should be noted that the imam concludes his interview with "Employment, education and justice is what we expect, not mere rhetoric" (Khan 2004b, 14). The election platforms of both the BJP and the NDA included an emphasis on economic development for "minorities."

Another Muslim BJP supporter, dismissively labeled by the press as the party's "mascot", was Arif Mohammad Khan.<sup>6</sup> A former Union aviation minister, Arif was the BJP's candidate for the Lok Sabha from the Kaiserganj constituency in Uttar Pradesh. After the 2002 Hindu-Muslim riots in Gujarat, Arif condemned the party in power, saying "People will see to it that BJP is relegated to the status of a Parliament leper." But by 2004 he had changed his tune. "We need to change tactics and strategy to fight communalism," he explained, not by condemning the BJP, but by joining hands with it. We have noted that Syed Ahmed Bukhari blamed Muslim hostility toward the Hindu nationalist party on the Congress. Arif made a slightly different argument, that BJP hostility toward Muslims was because of the Congress: "The uneasiness in our relationship with BJP and Sangh Parivar is because they feel Muslims support Congress only to defeat BJP. And it creates a sense of animosity" (Khan 2004a, 8). Implicitly, the way for Muslim voters to gain the friendship of not only the BJP, but also the rest of the *Sangha parivar*, would be to get behind them.

Not all of the BJP *Sangh parivar* siblings returned Arif Mohammad Khan's embrace. Giriraj Kishore, senior vice-president of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, was reported as expressing "displeasure with BJP's

efforts to woo Muslims, saying it will not help” (“VHP Softens Line on BJP” 2004, 12). And we have already noted that the VHP’s Praveen Togadia rejected the BJP’s emphasis on a judicial or negotiated resolution to the Ayodhya impasse as an example of “Muslim appeasement.”

While there were some Muslim leaders plumping for the BJP, there were others campaigning for the Congress. In an interview in *The Times of India*, Syed Shahabuddin is identified as convenor of All-India Babri Masjid Coordination Committee, but he was also a prominent figure in the Shah Bano controversy in the 1980s. His endorsement of the Congress seems to have been motivated not by his love for the “secular” party, but by his antipathy to the BJP, whose outreach to Muslims he decried as a siren song designed to effect their “religious assimilation and cultural submergence, to become Mohamadiya Hindus.” Asked if he had “forgiven the [Congress] party for its inability to protect the Babri masjid,” Shahabuddin brought up “the genocide in Gujarat 10 years later.” About the Babri Masjid/Ram temple, Shahabuddin said Sonia Gandhi had apologized with the words, “I feel the agony of the Muslims; the demolition should never have happened” (Gupta 2004d, 12). So, just as Syed Ahmed Bukhari forgave the BJP for Gujarat after its leaders expressed regret, but did not note any Congress apology, even so Shahabuddin forgave the Congress for Ayodhya.

In this complicated account of competing Muslim politicians and religious figures, it should be noted that they expressed criticism not only of the parties they were lined up against, but also of each other. In the interview already cited, when Syed Shahabuddin was asked if the pro-BJP Arif Mohammed Khan represented one of “two streams of thinking in the Muslim community,” his reply was dismissive: “Arif Mohammed Khan doesn’t represent the Muslim community — he has been universally abused in the Urdu press for his opportunism and lack of principles” (Gupta 2004d, 12).

Nowhere was the BJP’s campaign for the Muslim vote more consequential than in Uttar Pradesh, a state with a Muslim minority large enough to affect its fractured politics. In the 2002 state assembly election in Uttar Pradesh (UP), the largest share of the vote went to the Samajwadi Party (SP), a regional and caste-based party headed by the redoubtable Mulayam Singh Yadav. But with only 25.37 percent of the vote, the SP narrowly beat another regional and caste-based party, the Bahujan Samaj Party, with 23.06 per cent, and the BJP, with 20.8 percent. The Congress’s 8.96 percent meant that it finished a distant fourth (Joshi

2004, 10). Since Muslims make-up at least 15 percent of the population of UP, it was easy to imagine that their votes could swing the election in that state.<sup>7</sup>

The BJP used normal campaign methods to appeal to the Muslim voters of UP. For example, we have noted that Prime Minister Vajpayee gave a speech directed at the Muslim community in the city of Aligarh in that state. In another event, the prime minister flagged off a Muslim *yatra* to drum up support for his party, departing from Delhi, but bound for UP (“BJP, Cong BJP, Cong Claim Maharashtra” 2004, 13). So the BJP used normal campaign techniques to appeal to Muslims, but also some creative ones as well. On 20 April 2004, *The Times of India* reported a strong reaction to the general secretary of the SP, Amar Singh, against a claim by Vajpayee that “there were no ideological differences between the SP and the BJP.” Singh insisted that the SP would not join the NDA coalition, even if it was able to form a government after the 2004 election. As to the prime minister’s motivation, Singh said, “Vajpayee’s statement was likely to create unnecessary confusion among a particular section (Muslim) of society” (“No Post-Poll Pact with NDA: SP.” 2004, 1). The “Muslim” is apparently an editorial insertion here to clarify the “particular section of society” to which Singh was referring.

One possible interpretation of the prime minister’s strategy is that he hoped to draw Muslim supporters of the SP to the BJP, with the claim that they were similar. It is difficult to sustain this reading of a later speech, in which Vajpayee confessed that “he was unable to understand why minorities were turning away from Uttar Pradesh CM [chief minister] Mulayam Singh Yadav” (“PM Worried By Minority Drift to Cong.” 2004, 15). It appears that the statement is designed to keep Muslims supporting the SP. However, an article in *The Times of India* speculated that the intended effect was exactly the opposite, with Muslims who would otherwise embrace the SP driven from it by its association with the hated BJP. Of course, those Muslims would be unlikely to gravitate to the BJP itself, but would most likely swing to the Congress, or even to the Bahujan Samaj Party. Why would this work to the Hindu nationalists’ advantage? The theory is that Vajpayee was angling to split the Muslim vote. If the Muslims, who would have supported the SP, switched to the Congress (which again made a poor showing in 2002), that might just create an opening for the BJP to grab the largest share of the vote in some constituencies. With these machinations in mind, the reader can understand the title of the article interpreting the prime minister’s action: “Vajpayee Bowls Mulayam A Googly” (2004, 1). A “googly” is a cricket pitch

that is difficult to hit because it has an unusual backwards spin. In American baseball terms, Vajpayee was throwing Mulayam a curve ball.

Whether the BJP's strategy in "wooing" Muslims was a curve ball or a fat one right over the plate, it does not appear to have been successful, at least in UP. The regional parties were the big winners, with the Samajwadi's parliamentary delegation increasing from 26 to 35, and the Bahujan Samaj from 14 to 19, while the BJP plummeted from 25 to 10 ("It was Atally, Bitterly UP" 2004, 9). While Congress lost one parliamentarian from the state (from 10 to nine), the SP chief Mulayam quickly announced that he would join the Congress's national coalition (Chatterjee 2004b, 1). And among the BJP candidates defeated was their Muslim "mascot" Arif Mohammad Khan ("Mascot Arif Fails to Create Magic for BJP" 2004, 7). After the election, party president M. Venkaiah Naidu did not take exception to an interviewer's assertion that the BJP's "big effort to win over Muslims" "didn't work." In the future, he said, "We must make greater efforts ... but," he added, "it will be with the framework of 'justice for all, appeasement of none'" (Gupta 2004f, 16). Since Hindu nationalists often accused the Congress of appeasement toward the Muslim community, this endorsement could only sound ambivalent at best.

### **Taking the Secular High Ground**

The complex record of the BJP was reduced to a simple story by its opponent. When Sonia Gandhi unveiled to the press the election manifesto of her party, she contrasted the Congress's "secular, all-inclusive nationalism" with the "narrow, bigoted, parochial nationalism" of the BJP (Roy 2004, 9). The manifesto itself defines the secularism of the Congress as including "full freedom and respect for all religions," but adds that it also "means firm opposition to communalism of all kinds." It goes on to attack those "self-appointed guardians of their own faith," who "stoke envy and jealousy and hatred between communities" (Indian National Congress 2004b). The BJP in the past has claimed that it is the real guarantor of secularism in Indian politics, holding fast to the equal treatment of all religious communities, in the face of the Congress's pseudo-secular favoritism toward religious minorities. In fact, the party's *Vision Document* claims that it "firmly upholds secularism" (Bharatiya Janata Party 2004). But the BJP's opponent's manifesto gives the reader only two choices, either the secularism of the Congress



or the communalism of the BJP. “This is the real battleground for secularism,” the manifesto concludes (Indian National Congress 2004b).

The Congress’s coalition was briefly referred to as the Secular Progressive Alliance, before it became finally known as the UPA (Cong, Left to Check into SPA: Sonia Set to Stake Claim on Monday” 2004 1). When the UPA published its agenda for governing, it started by saying, “The people of India have voted decisively in the 14th Lok Sabha elections for secular, progressive forces.” And one of its “six basic principles for governance” was “To preserve, protect and promote social harmony and to enforce the law without fear or favour to deal with all obscurantist and fundamentalist elements who seek to disturb social amity and peace” (United Progressive Alliance 2004). Clearly support for secularism and opposition to communalism was going to continue to be a part of the governing coalition’s rhetoric going forward.

### “A VICTORY FOR SECULAR INDIA”?

As noted at the outset of this essay, on its website the Congress proclaimed the outcome of the election “a Victory for Secular India,” by which I think that the party also meant that this was a victory for secularism itself. On the basis of the evidence presented here, how credible is this claim? It is interesting to note that the Congress’s homepage presents a corollary to the triumph of secularism, the discomfiture of communalism. The full sentence read, “This is not only a Victory for Secular India but also a resounding defeat for the Forces of Communalism” (Indian National Congress 2004a). Since there was little explicit campaigning on the subject of secularism by the Congress or its coalition partners, the question that is the title of this essay must turn on the corollary. Here, we will be asking ourselves not “Was the victory of the Congress a victory for secularism?,” but “Was the defeat of the BJP a defeat for communalism?”

Of the spectrum of editorial opinions that I encountered in spring 2004 on the relationship between the BJP and Hindu nationalism, the two extremes were expressed by one and the same author, Prem Shankar Jha. In an article published on the editorial page of *The Hindustan Times*, Jha describes with approval the efforts of Atal Bihari Vajpayee and L. K. Advani “to secularise the BJP.” The author says these efforts were undertaken “in the teeth of a second rung leadership that is openly anti-Muslim and openly authoritarian.” Although Jha admits

that the pressures of coalition politics on the BJP “forced it towards the centre” of the political spectrum, he also gives Vajpayee and Advani credit that they could “sense that India has changed in fundamental ways.”

In fact, Jha’s apologia for Advani extends to well before the 2004 parliamentary election. During the agitation for the Ram temple in the 1980s, the editorial says that Advani asked “Muslim organisations to make a gift of the site to the Hindus and agree to shift the *masjid*, brick by brick, to another, mutually determined site.” Then Jha adds:

Had the leaders of various Muslim organisations accepted this plan, the history of the country would have been very different. But when they rejected it, they set the stage for a confrontation between Hindus and Muslims that the Sangh parivar was only too pleased to take advantage of.

What is extraordinary about this reading of history is that it seems to shift the blame for the escalating conflict over the Babri Masjid/Ram temple off the Hindu nationalists and onto the Muslim community. This exoneration of Advani extends even to the 1990 *Ram Rath Yatra*, which did so much to exacerbate the Ayodhya struggle. Advani promised that he would be able to control the Hindu nationalist demonstrators who were massing in that town. About this Jha says, “We will never know whether he meant his offer (made to [then prime minister] V. P. Singh) seriously, for he was arrested at the UP border.”<sup>8</sup> In this history, Advani is transformed from a part of the problem in the conflict over Ayodhya into a part of the solution.

So this is the benign face of the BJP. Perhaps it had never been as responsible for communal violence as its cultured despisers claimed. And even if it had, by 2004 the party had joined the mainstream, due to coalition compromises, but also because of a transformation of the Indian electorate such that the old politics wouldn’t work anymore. This represents the positive end of the spectrum of opinions about Hindu nationalism and the BJP.

At the other end of the spectrum was an earlier article by the selfsame author, Prem Shankar Jha. In an opinion column published in the news magazine, *Outlook*, on 9 February 2004, Jha remarks on a kind of canonization of A. B. Vajpayee. “Today, Vajpayee is seen not as politician but as a statesman who has risen above party politics in his devotion to the nation.” As in his other editorial, here, too, Jha notes that the prime minister has used this political capital “to move his party even further away

from communal and sectarian politics.” And yet he warns that “Vaypayee is not the BJP.” For the reader who would like to see the future, Jha suggests that “What the BJP will do when it feels that it has a sufficiently secure grip on power is reflected by its education system.” Jha accuses then Union Human Resources Development Minister Murlī Manohar Joshi of working “to virtually eliminate the Muslim period of Indian history” from secondary school textbooks, adding that he “packed educational oversight bodies” with “his own party ideologues.” At the same time, “goon squads of the Sangh parivar” threatened “world-renowned scholars like Romila Thapar and Irfan Habib.” According to Jha, this represents “the systematic brainwashing of the youth of this country,” a conspiracy that might take “10–15 years,” but which is bound to “turn an otherwise gentle and industrious people into beasts” (Jha 2004a, 18).

The *Sangh parivar* in general and the BJP specifically have occasionally been labeled fascist. A number of more or less sinister analogies with the German Nazi movement are implied, everything from a similar cadre-based organizational structure (especially for the *Sangh parivar* in the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh itself) to a comparable tactic of mobilizing support by demonizing a religious minority. Jha’s description of a 10 to 15 year conspiracy to brainwash Indian youth might evoke the Nazis’ strategy in Weimar Germany of taking advantage of elections to seize control, but then dispensing with democracy once in power. By the same token, once its systematic campaign of debasing the youth had borne fruit, Jha suggests, then the BJP would be in a position to throw off its secular mask and reveal its true “communal and sectarian” face.

In the editorial considered first in this section, despite what he says about the party’s “second rung leadership,” Prem Shankar Jha seems to be convinced that the BJP is not as Hindu nationalist as its detractors make out, and may never have been. But in the article considered second, Jha argues that the BJP’s compromises of its Hindu nationalist agenda were only temporary expedients, a ruse which would no longer be necessary once the party was firmly in control of Indian politics. To the extent that the second interpretation is a kind of conspiracy theory, based on a secret master plan, then it would be hard to disprove using the public record. Any evidence that appeared to indicate the BJP was not so Hindu nationalist on the surface might be read in exactly the opposite way, confirming the bait phase of the party’s bait-and-switch con game.

Even without resorting to conspiracy theories about secret master plans, there is evidence in this essay that could be used to prove that the BJP had moved away from Hindu nationalism and evidence that could be used to prove that it hadn't. Party leaders affirmed that the 2004 election was about economic development, and those issues like Ayodhya, the uniform civil code, and the Article 370 had been moved "to the backburner." Yet those same leaders also affirmed their lifelong allegiance to the Hindu nationalist ideology. And, in fact, the Ram temple enjoyed a place in the NDA's *Agenda* that was unprecedented. On the one hand, both A. B. Vajpayee and L. K. Advani confessed that the post-Godhra riots in Gujarat were a "blot" on the record of the BJP. On the other hand, Narendra Modi actively campaigned for the party in 2004, and not only in his own state. At the outset of this essay I noted Christophe Jaffrelot's distinction between "radical" and "moderate" tendencies in Hindu nationalism. Both tendencies were at play in 2004.

In accounting for the BJP's defeat in 2004, plumbing the depths of its Hindu nationalism may be beside the point. Some analysts claimed that the voters took the party at its word, that this was an election about economic development. The BJP had banked on all the talk of economic growth and new prosperity to carry it to victory. But an editorial in *The Times of India* concluded that "the 'India Shining' and 'feel good' slogans" smacked of "hubris" when "unemployment, poverty and the lack of physical and social infrastructures are still pervasive."<sup>9</sup> Similarly, an article in *Outlook* characterized the BJP's touting "of roads built, of loans sanctioned, of forex reserves amassed" as a "gross miscalculation," when the average person was struggling with "rural roads, slums, drinking water and sanitation" (Shastri 2004, 28). So perhaps the voters did set aside questions of Hindu nationalism and judged the BJP on its performance, which they found wanting.

It is difficult to predict the future of religious nationalism more generally on the basis of this election case study. It is possible to imagine that the mainstreaming of an extremist group could make it less radical, as leaders adjust their tactics to gain popularity, but determining whether this actually has happened in any given case would necessarily involve a debatable synthetic judgment. The BJP's electoral successes have always been a glass half-full, half-empty, with some decrying the debasement of Indian politics while others insist that the sky is not falling. Since political parties are complex agents, perhaps this must be ever so.

## NOTES

1. On the misgivings about the marriage of “fundamentalism” with Hinduism, see Larson 321, note 41, and Juergensmeyer 1995.
2. The *Times of India* reported that the *yatra* had covered 4,300 kilometers through 73 parliamentary constituencies by the end of its first half in Amritsar (Gupta 2004a, 11).
3. This is my translation of the newspaper’s “‘*Ram Lalla ke waste, khali kardo raste*’ and ‘*Lathi, goli khayenge, mandir wahin banayenge*’” (Bhagwat 2004, 9).
4. Mahurkar 2004, 45. Ghanshyam Shah also notes Modi’s “arrogance, over-confidence and authoritarian outlook” (Shah 2007, 176).
5. This was the ubiquitous label the press used for the BJP’s attempt to appeal to Muslim voters. See, for example, Chatterjee 2004a, 15; and “Green Saffron: Wooing Minorities, PM Confuses Muslims with Pakistan” 2004, 14.
6. For the “mascot” sobriquet, see Misra 2004, 6 and “Mascot Arif Fails to Create Magic for BJP” 2004, 7.
7. In separate articles, *The Times of India* gave the percentage of UPs Muslims as 17, 16, and 15. Joshi 2004, 10; Gupta 2004c, 6; and Chandra 2004, 10.
8. Jha 2004b, 10. It should be noted that this is the same article cited earlier which spoke of Narendra “Modi firmly back in the Gujarat box.”
9. Padgaonkar 2004, 14. The same sentiment is expressed in a book analyzing the 2004 election, whose introduction is entitled “India Shining Trumped by Poverty” (Wallace 2004, 1–6).

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