The Anatomy of the Modi Phenomenon – How Should Pakistan Deal With It?

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Abstract

The 16th Lok Sabha elections in India resulted in Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), led by Narendra Modi, forming a strong Union government, thereby putting an end to three decades of coalition governments. This development resulted in enhanced interest around the world in Modi's personality. A massive publicity blitz portraying him as an iron man, who had risen from a humble background, and a hope for the future of India helped Modi win the confidence of Indian masses to the extent of even forgetting his role in Gujarat pogrom where thousands of Muslims lost their lives under his watch. For others, his rise to power would mean rise of religious extremism. Pakistan for its part has its own concerns. His repeated pronouncements during the election campaign that India would adopt a muscular policy towards Pakistan if he was elected to power did not present a rosy picture. It is, however, hoped that the realisation that dialogue is the only way forward would make Modi's India move in the right direction vis-à-vis its relations with Pakistan.

Key words: Modi, Bharatiya Janata Party, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, India, Pakistan

Introduction

Following the 16th Lok Sabha elections, Indian political landscape witnessed a drastic change as the Bharatia Janta Party (BJP) emerged as the single largest party, winning 285 out of 543 seats. With this victory, the BJP was able to put an end not only to coalition politics, but also to a decade-long rule by the Indian National Congress (INC). The BJP's victory, many analysts feared, would also give rise to Hindutva and

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therefore endanger the secular nature of Indian society. The BJP's success is largely attributed to Narendra Modi. Yet, he is considered a highly polarising figure in India due to his association with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and 2002 riots in Gujarat. Hence, the debate on the wisdom of nominating him as prime ministerial candidate by the BJP has continued. For his critics, he is an extremist who has divided the society along religious lines. His supporters, on the other hand, believe that he is the only hope for India to become a major economic power.

While this debate goes on in India, Modi's rise and his strong rhetoric against Pakistan throughout the election campaign have raised concerns in Pakistan with regard to the future of India-Pakistan relations. In order to put these concerns in perspective, this paper will first trace the political career of Modi and his rise to power. It will then discuss India's relations with Pakistan under Modi and the prospects of better relations between the two neighbours.

Hindutva – The Ideological Connection between the BJP and RSS

Hindutva is the ideology of a group of militant anti-minority Hindu organisations that want to establish a Hindu Rashtra (Hindu State or Hindu Nation) in India. The origins of this ideology date back to the 19th century when many revivalist and nationalist movements had emerged in India. This concept was first propounded by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar. Some believe that Savarkar's ideas were actually a revolt against the Khilafat Movement and had stemmed from his strong hostility towards Islam. Savarkar believed that Hindus were the native people of India and the religious minorities were outsiders and hence they should adhere to Hindu symbols, which represented India's national culture. He insisted that minorities, particularly Muslims and Christians, should pay allegiance to the Hindu religion in public, though they may practice their own religion in private. Sikhs, Buddhists and Jains were excluded from these conditions as these, according to Sarvarkar, were sects closely related to Hinduism.[1]

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[1] Yasir Masood Khan, "The BJP's Track to Triumph: A Critical Analysis," *Focus*, vol. xxviii, no. 3 (2014): 6, http://irs.org.pk/focus3-14.pdf

Hindutva thus emerges as an exclusivist racial concept that accepts only those religious communities of India whose origins could be traced to the Indian soil. Today, groups like RSS, the BJP, Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Bajrang Dal, Shiv Sena and some smaller regional groups are following the concept of Hindutva.[2] These groups are collectively known as "Sangh Parivar."

RSS was formed in 1925 at Nagpur by Keshav Baliram Hedgewar as a pro-Hindu social movement but with quasi–military undertones. It was the time when different communities in colonial India were trying to protect their religious and cultural identities. RSS was founded in imitation of European fascist movements. Its members were required to perform daily parades, drills and militaristic salutes. The practice was aimed at creating a corps of dedicated paramilitary zealots who were supposed to form "the basis of a revival of a golden age of national strength and racial purity." [3] Madhav Golwalkar drafted the RSS constitution, taking inspiration from the Nazism, especially Hitler's treatment of religious minorities. In Golwalkar's view:

> the foreign races in Hindustan must either adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and hold in reverence the Hindu religion, must entertain no ideas but those of glorification of the Hindu race and culture….or may stay in the country wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment – not even citizen's right.[4]

RSS is also believed to have committed the worst kind of atrocities against Muslims during the partition of the sub-continent in 1947. It was a former swayamsevak who assassinated Mohanlal Gandhi on January 30, 1948, accusing him of being too soft on Muslims.[5] The assassination

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[2] Ibid., 8.
[3] William Dalrymple, "Narendra Modi: Man of the Masses," *NewStatesman,* May 12, 2014, http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2014/05/narendra-modi-man-masses
[4] Ibid.
[5] "Narendra Modi and the New Face of India," *Guardian*, May 16, 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/may/16/what-next-india-pankaj-mishra

of Gandhi forced Prime Minister Nehru to ban the organisation on February 4, 1948. The ban was lifted after almost 15 months on July 11, 1949.[6] RSS maintained a low political profile during the early decades of independence.

Subsequently, however, it started gaining strength. By the early 1990s, RSS had become a significant power in India. However, it was once again banned following the demolition of Babri Mosque in 1992. Today, RSS has around 40 million members, organised under 40,000 district centres across India.[7] The growing strength of RSS has placed it in lead position in the Sangh Parivar. Repeated bans on the organisation forced its leaders to look for alternatives to ensure its political representation to advance its agenda. This first led to the creation of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS) and later the BJP under the leadership of Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

The BJP is political wing of RSS. The opponents of the BJP believe that the "BJP is a *rightist* party, which represents a wider political coalition called the *Sangh-Parivar*."[8] The BJP is controlled by RSS through organising secretaries who are nominated by RSS.[9] Most of its cadres and top leadership have been RSS members. In fact, around 60 per cent of BJP's office holders are either former *Pracharaks* or full time RSS workers or, at least, have close connections with RSS.[10] Also, RSS provides support to BJP candidates during elections.

Unlike the BJS, which was a Hindu revivalist and ultra-right wing party, the BJP propounded the idea of "Gandhian Socialism" and

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6   A.G. Noorani, "Into the sunset," *FrontLine*, vol. 26, issue 19, September 12-25, 2009, http://www.frontline.in/static/html/fl2619/stories/20090925261912600.htm

7   William Dalrymple, "Narendra Modi: Man of the Masses."

8   Hilal Ahmad, "What is BJP's Ideology?," *Economic and Political Weekly*, February 3, 2014, http://www.epw.in/blog/hilal-ahmed/what-bjp%E2%80%99s-ideology.html

9   Ram Puniyani, "Modi, Advani and Sangh's Agenda," *Counter Currents. ORG*, June 27, 2013, http://www.countercurrents.org/puniyani270613.htm

10   Khan, "The BJP's Track to Triumph: A Critical Analysis," 55.

network, was successful in wooing voters in large numbers.[14] By that time, the then Gujarat Chief Minister Keshubhai Patel had lost his place in the party due to the charges of rampant corruption and abuse of power and the party leadership was looking for his alternative.[15] The search finally ended on Modi.

Modi first came to power as Chief Minister of Gujarat in October 2001.[16] Within few months of his assuming power, Gujarat saw one of its worst communal riots. Mobs of Hindu militants went on rampage, brutally killing Muslims and burning their properties to ashes with impunity to avenge the death of 58 Hindu devotees allegedly burned in a train by Muslims. [17] Even worse, when the victims sought police protection or any other help, they were informed that there were "no orders to save you."[18] Many rioters were caught on camera claiming that "He (Modi) had given us three days to do whatever we could." [19] According to official figures, 850 people, mostly Muslims, lost their lives in these riots, whereas the unofficial figures put the death toll at around 2,000. In addition, some 150,000 people were forced to take refuge in camps in order to save their lives.[20]

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[14] V. Venkatesan, "A Pracharak as Chief Minister," *FrontLine,* vol.18, issue 21, October 13-26, 2001, http://www.frontline.in/static/html/fl1821/18210310.htm

[15] Ibid.

[16] "Modi: From Tea Boy to India's Leader," *Al Jazeera*, May 27, 2014, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia/2014/05/modi-from-tea-boy-india-pm-20145139742599119.html

[17] Raoof Mir, "Decoding Modi of India's Ambitious Desires," *Foreign Policy Journal,* April 23, 2014, *http://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2014/04/23/decoding-modi-of-indias-ambitious-desires/*

[18] "We have No Orders to Save You ─ State Participation and Complicity in Communal Violence in Gujarat," *Human Rights Watch*, vol.14, no. 3 (C), (April 2002):5, http://pantheon.hrw.org/reports/2002/india/gujarat.pdf

[19] "Ahead of Polls, Gujarat Riots Haunt Modi," *Times of India*, October 26, 2007, http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Ahead-of-polls-Gujarat-riots-haunt-Modi/articleshow/2491416.cms

[20] Khan, "The BJP's Track to Triumph: A Critical Analysis," 25.

expanding economic relations in infrastructure, IT, pharma, agriculture and manufacturing.[43] This clearly shows that trade and economics will hold central place in Indo-China bilateral relationship.

Modi has given special attention to India's neighbourhood, partially with the aim of countering growing Chinese influence in the region. It was the small neighbouring country, Bhutan that Modi made his first destination after assuming power. His visit to Bhutan was followed by the visits to Nepal and Sri Lanka. It is also worth mentioning that this was the first visit by any Indian Prime Minister to Nepal in the last seventeen years.[44] The recent conclusion of Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) with Bangladesh would serve as a milestone in Indo-Bangladesh relations.

India – Pakistan Relations: The Way Forward

Since assuming power in 2013, Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has, on numerous occasions, expressed his desire to have friendly relations with India. As India was going to elect a new government, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif reiterated his government's resolve to work with whoever came to power in India. He even attended Modi's swearing-in ceremony and met Modi, the new Indian Prime Minister. This informal meeting, however, failed to break ice between India and Pakistan. However, the two leaders asked their foreign secretaries to explore opportunities for further engagements.[45]

Unfortunately, the momentum thus generated suffered a setback when India called off a meeting between foreign secretaries on August 19, 2014, following a meeting between Pakistani High Commissioner and

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[43] "Takeaways from Modi's China visit," *Hindu,* May 15, 2015, http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/bilateral-agreements-signed-during-modis-china-visit/article7210595.ece

[44] Khan, "The BJP's Track to Triumph: A Critical Analysis," 51.

[45] "India PM Narendra Modi Presses Pakistan's Sharif on Militants," *BBC News*, May 27, 2014, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-27583677