THE ELECTORAL FUNCTION OF RELIGION IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

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ABSTRACT

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

Keywords: Elections, Religion, Congress, Muslim League, BJP.

INTRODUCTION

The study of world political history shows that religion has had various political functions that with the emergence of voting systems, the electoral function became one of the most important. Religion is a factor that can potentially influence voting patterns and the choices made on Election Day. According to Johnstone, both religious affiliation and indices of religiosity have fairly strong correlations with certain voting patterns (Johnstone, 1975, 195). Indeed, the important part of power emanates from the mass populace that religion has influence among them. The studies of party systems reveal that religion has retained as a remarkable factor in fixing voting alignments. In the other words, ‘religious groups may form political communities, shaping and mobilizing their members’ electoral activities as they react to the candidates, parties and issues within the campaign’ (Moyser, 1991, 7).

Religion, whether in traditional or modern society has a major effect on elections, although in different way. In traditional society and among peasants, whenever their religious figures recommend voting, most of them participate and vote for that candidate. Religion has also this influence in most of modern societies. Indeed, use of differences among religions and attracting the various groups by political parties for voting and using of their vote is very common in many countries (See: Eversole, 2008). In U.S.A, for example, political speeches to religious congregations have become as important and strategic as other traditional venues. Many political
candidates, too, nowadays realize that ‘communicating religion to the masses can aid to success and culling support at polls’ (Martin, 2010). In most presidential elections of U.S., various religious groups support one of parties and its candidate (For some examples see: Johnstone, 1975, 197; Eversole, 2008; Gill, 2001). Eversole mentions that the rise of the religious right since the 1980s has created a sense that religious affiliation has become a significant force in politics as ethnic, gender, and racial preferences. So that regular church attendance can indicate a tendency to vote Republican as opposed to Democrat, although much depends on the issues at a given time and election (Eversole, 2008). Hence, as Martin has mentioned the American politicians have recognized the necessity of pious faith in winning high political office (Martin, 2010). Such necessities in other countries especially third world ones are more remarkable for politicians. On the other hand, religion strengthens conservatism. For example, its antagonism towards the left parties has been responsible for the large-scale electoral support of the people to the conservative parties in most parts of the world. Thus, in formulating electoral campaign strategies religion is not ignored (Shakir, 1986a, 131-2).

However, as mentioned, according to the influence of religion in traditional societies, its role in politics including elections is more remarkable than modern ones. India, with a still traditional society and variety of religion, is one of these societies where the electoral function of religion can be considerable. So, this article try to clarify how the religion has been used in elections. On this line, the effect of two important religions in India, Hinduism and Islam, has been considered. Although the elections in pre independence period was not important as post independence but the evidences show the roots of the electoral function as other functions of religion, backed to that period. After a short glance of that period of Indian political history, the post-independence period are broadly examined.

A) Religion in Elections in Pre-independence India

In British India, as a traditional society with high influence of religion, in elections the politicians and various parties used the electoral functions of religion. Before act 1909, according to Weiner, the Muslim League leadership opposed the electoral process because of both their religious and class origins. Muslim leaders regarded elections as an instrument by which the Hindu majority would dominate the Muslim minority. Through the Morley-Minto reforms the system of communal electorates was introduced and the Act of 1909 thus freed Muslim leaders from dependence on Hindu votes. Thereafter, by this system of political dualism, neither Hindu nor Muslim politicians needed the support of the other community. The social cleavages were institutionalized and each religious community could choose its own representatives. It assured Muslim leaders that they could win elections solely by appealing to the interests and loyalties of the Muslims (Weiner, 2006, 120-2). So, almost from the beginning, according to Shakir, ‘the exploitation of the element of religion became a common practice in mobilizing the people for electoral and political purposes. The appeal issued by the Bulletin of Bombay Satyagraha Committee of 11 June 1930 is an example in point’ (Shakir, 1986b, 170). Here two other cases are mentioned:

First: At the time of the General Elections to the Legislative Assembly and the Provincial Councils, 1926, according to Kaura, the Congress suffered because malicious propaganda was spread by the Hindu Mahasabha against Motilal Nehru who was denounced as a “beef-eater and
destroyer of cows, an opponent of prohibition, of music before the mosque and one man responsible for stoppage of the Ramlila procession in Allahabad”. Although in Bengal and Madras Congress had emerged victorious, the election results showed that in Bombay and Central Provinces, it fared badly. The U.P. results were bad with only one seat. In the Punjab, it had lost all the seats as Lajpat Rai commanded great influence over the Hindu population. ‘This was the price paid by the Congress for condemning the activities of the Hindu Mahasabha’ (Kaura, 1977, 27 & 28).

Second: Before the elections of 1937, the Muslim League had raised the cry, 'Islam in danger,' and propagated that 'the Congress was trying to divide the Muslims in its bid to establish Hindu-raj throughout the country' (Mathur, 1994, 29). In the 1946 elections, its election campaign was based on the issue of Pakistan and the league propagated that if the Muslims voted in its favor, it asks for Pakistan without any further investigation or plebiscite. In Punjab, Muslim League leaders were reported to have drawn on the religious sentiments of the Muslim voters by underlining that 'the question a voter is called on to answer is - are you a true believer or an infidel and a traitor' (Chakrabarty, 2008, 18). As the poll outcome revealed, this election was a referendum for the League. So within nine years, from 1937 to 1946, it became the only representative of the Muslims by polling in most cases close to its maximum natural strength. This was a remarkable achievement for the League and emerged as a stronger party in its negotiations with the British in the last phase of the transfer of power (ibid.).

B) The Electoral Function of Religion in Post-independence India

In India, as Shakir has mentioned, electoral politics has accentuated the process of communalism in almost every state (Shakir, 1986a, 184). According to Arora, ‘almost all political parties are, in one way or the other, guilty of using religion-related issues for narrow political gains and even the hands of religious leaders are not clean. This is perhaps because religion is a source of identity and a bonding factor in the lives of people, mainly in developing societies like India’ (Arora, 2008). This is why religion becomes a very important factor in electoral policies.

The Constitution of 1949 abolished the system of communal electorates (Weiner, 2006, 126). Nevertheless, politicians depend on votes, and the electoral process almost forces them to exploit the religious divisions in society (Van Der Veer, 2006, 261). Political leaders can use identity loyalties to mobilize voters and parties intensify religious cleavage, as other cleavages to rally support (Weiner, 2006, 137). According to Chakrabarty, after independence also, ‘caste, religion and language were the only three distinct categories of communities that figured prominently in its deliberations. They continue to remain probably the most effective factors in political mobilization’ (Chakrabarty, 2008, 38). Hence, many candidates of various parties use communal strategies and tactics.

During the post-independence period also, numerous variations on Gandhi's techniques of mass mobilization have been applied. The symbols were manipulated for ‘competitive demagogy and the sole purpose of building a political following in win an election’(Brass, 1994, 24). Traditional religious ceremonies and processions institutionally privileges over others forms of mobilization. ‘A favorite strategy of Hindu party leaders who calculate that they will gain electorally from polarization around a Hindu identity is to organize unusually large religious
processions that take new routes through minority neighborhoods, to hoist the national flag over a disputed site, or to sponsor processions to celebrate national anniversaries’ (Wilkinson, 2004, 23-4). At election time until 1990s, for instance, the politicians strived to persuade the voters that the threat from Pakistan or from secessionists in Punjab and Kashmir or the construction of a temple to Ram in Ayodhya, are what really should matter to them (Brass, 1994, 99).

Against the initial decades of post-independence, that the dominant political discourse was secular, since the mid-1980s, the dominant political discourse increasingly became consistent with a communal, sectarian, and caste-based cultural reservoir. The political parties transformed this reservoir into electoral capital (Kumar, 2007, 69). Consequently, between 1970 and 1990, the Congress party faced greater opposition. In the next transition by the mid-1990s, the multiparty competition was emerged (Ravishankar, 2009). Religion, especially as an instrument in the hands of the opposition of Congress, has had important role in these transformations. Therefore, Indian election studies have mentioned the demise of the so-called “Congress system” in India, and the rise of communal voting patterns based on caste and religion (Choi, 2009). The upper-caste-dominated parties, because of their challenges tried to highlight the threat posed by Muslims and anti-Muslim wedge issues. For example, Muslims' alleged slaughter of cows, the renaming of a town with a Muslim origin name with an ‘authentic Indian’ (i.e., Hindu) name, taking a Hindu procession route through a Muslim neighborhood, or disputing the status of a plot of land claimed or occupied by Muslims etc.. These wedge issues allowed the parties to potentially rally a large proportion of Hindus to their side, while entailing no economic cost for the party's existing upper-caste supporters (Wilkinson, 2004, 23). Here, some cases of the electoral function of religion during post independence are mentioned.

1) **Vote Banks Based on Religion**

During the post independence period communally divisive 'vote bank politics' and 'pampering' the minorities in order to get their votes have sometimes been seen (Kumar, 2007, 67). This politics is “the practice of creating and maintaining vote banks through divisive policies. This brand of politics encourages voters to vote on the basis of narrow communal considerations often against their better judgement” (Vanaik, 2006, 197). Congress among Muslim and other minorities and BJP among Hindus have tried to create vote banks.

For example, the Muslims were hostile to the emergency in 1975, though the Muslim League supported the Emergency. In elections 1977, the Muslims in northern India didn’t support the Congress government. So, Indira Gandhi tried to woo them back so that 'Without their support, Congress could not have won in 1980, and with their support, it probably would have won in 1977’ (Noorani, 2003, 13-14). In 1984, she used the minorities’ support while sought power on the plank of 'national security' on the strength of the vote of the majority community. After her assassination, Rajiv Gandhi also, followed her politics (ibid., 14). Although the Congress attention to Minorities let to the defeat of BJP in the 1984 Lok Sabha elections, it helped Sangh Parivar in creating a Hindu vote bank in their favor and polarizing the society (Jindal, 1995, 12-3). Eventually, the Ayodhya movement consolidated the Hindu majority vote bank and the BJP increased its seats in Parliament from two in 1984 to 182 in the 1999 (Kumar, 2007, 68).
2) Religion in Electoral Politics of Jana Sangh

Although the movements like Shila Pujan, Rath Yatra and the Ayodhya launched by Hindu organizations prepared a context in which the BJP contested the Lok Sabha elections of 1991, but it was not the first time that the Sangh family had mobilized Hindus around Hindu cultural symbols for political gains during the elections. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) had mobilized large number of Hindu saints in 1967 and they had demonstrated in Delhi in support of their demand for a ban on ‘cow slaughter’ in India. At that time, Indira Gandhi confronted the Sangh and the priests by alleging that their religion-based political mobilization is a great threat to secular and culturally plural India (Bhambhri, 2007, 186). Sankhdher mentioned a case of Jana Sangh’s use of religion in elections as following:

[…] The Jana Sangh in Delhi made cow protection an election issue. It may be surmised that the followers of the Goraksha movement should have voted for Jana Sangh candidates. In one case, especially that of Rain Gopal Shalwale, Jana Sangh candidate from Chandni Chowk (scene of daily arrest of agitators for cow protection), himself a staunch cow-protectionist, the vote (Hindu largely) must have gone in the favour. It is possible that the Sadhus' indulgence, in what was so apparently a political activity and was tantamount to political blackmail, earned little support of the thinking people, who, after all, so few. Tied up with emotion and legend, the issue had several lures for the common-man. Deen Dayal Upadhyaya, Jana Sangh General Secretary, made an offer to the Congress to select any one constituency anywhere even if it were the Prime Minister's own, where the election could be fought on anti-cow slaughter issue alone. Whether or not the confidence was justified, the Jana Sangh knew that the issue was worth exploiting for getting votes. Though the Samiti had failed in getting its objective fulfilled, the Jana Sangh succeeded in the political objectives (Sankhdher, 1973, 270 – 1).

3) Religion in Congress-I Electoral Politics

The Congress has often selected candidates on the basis of their community. And it has also entered into an election alliance with some communal and regional parties such as Muslim league and J & K National Conference (Kumar, 1990, 103). Besides, since the pre-independence period, it has had a political alliance with orthodox Muslims specifically Jamiiyat-ul-Ulama, a Muslim clerics’ organization. It has been a political bargain in which the clerics have given their support on the assumption that the Muslim Personal Law would be maintained, as would endowments, mosques and other institutions and aspects of Muslim culture. However, the secular approach of the Congress leadership toward the Muslims drew to the Congress the most secular, liberal and often Marxist Muslim politicians as well (Brass, 1994, 231-3).

Although the Congress-I (Indira Gandhi) has always depended on the support of Muslims and other minorities, but the party and its leaders especially Indira and Rajiv Gandhi, when they have had to win elections, made alliances and mobilized campaigns on communal lines, though Congress is a secular party (Ludden, 2006, 13). Nevertheless, in comparison to the BJP politics of militant and aggressive Hindutva, according to Bhambhrri, the Congress practiced 'soft Hindutva' (Bhambhri, 2007, 224).
According to Gupta some of social activists used the ‘Hindu backlash or Hindu assertion’ theory for supporting Congress (I) in 1980s. The Congress and Mrs. Gandhi used it for national unity against the threat of disintegrative and inimical forces internal and external. The Hindu backlash apparently in the wake of Indira Gandhi’s murder gave Rajiv Gandhi the biggest mandate. Thus, Hindu assertion has been on the cards (Gupta, 1985, 73 & 76). In this regard, he mentioned that:

[Social activists urged] the people to support the government of Mr. Rajiv Gandhi—subsequently disowned both by the BJP and the RSS—also appealed to many who were wedded to the politics—of the Hindu ethos. They began to consider the Congress (I) to be the Centre of the Hindu elms. Consequently, parties who had earlier claimed to be Hindu nationalists were stripped of their garments and left shivering in the cold. For, when a Hindu backlash takes place, it is these parties who are first shorn of their traditional votes as happened in Jammu in the Assembly election and to a lesser extent, in the Delhi Metropolitan Council elections (ibid., 73).

So, the defensiveness and assertiveness of contemporary Hindu have been a sentiment used by political leaders. Indira Gandhi believed that by catalyzing communalist sentiments, by becoming the main mouthpiece for Hindu communalism, she was protecting India from the dangers of it. In the early 1980s, she adopted themes that have traditionally belonged to the Hindu right because the main threat was seen from the right. Therefore, they tried to undermine the parties that stood to the right of the Congress (I) – mainly the BJP. Besides, in 1982 the Congress-I leaders recognized that a confrontational posture towards the overwhelmingly Muslim National Conference party in Kashmir and the Sikh extremists in Punjab might gain them the support of many Hindu in the Kashmir and Delhi elections. Because of this tactic, numerous activists of the RSS deserted the BJP to support Congress-I candidates in those elections (Manor, 1998., 111-4). This remained the strategy of Congress-I leaders right through the election of 1984.

In addition, Rajiv Gandhi refused to criticize the RSS, which at every previous election had supported the Jana Sangh/BJP, but which swung heavily, and in some cases openly, behind the congress-I on this occasion. The Prime Minister further refused to reject RSS support, as in mid-1983 in Kerala the Congress-I received RSS backing. So, Congress-I used a large number of RSS activists during the 1984 election (ibid., 110-2). By the support of the RSS for the first time in post-Independence elections, the Congress party won a majority of votes among caste Hindus in northern India (Weiner, 1998, 480).

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

As in India, communalism clearly depends on religion (Fox, 2006, 238), Bharatya Janata Party (BJP) has raised Hindutva-related issues to make an appeal to Hindus to vote along religious lines. As part of its ‘communal’ agenda, the BJP has allegedly organized and incited communal violence, and raised divisive issues, such as ‘Islamic terrorism’, uniform civil code, and Christian conversions (Arora, 2008). The BJP grew out of RSS and most of its leaders shared an RSS background and ideology, but its responsibility was different. It was to operate primarily in the sphere of electoral politics and so it needed to pursue a more broad-based and pragmatic rhetorical strategy (Davis, 2006, 42). So, one of the main BJP strategies was religious mobilization. Wherever possible, the party identified local themes or issues, often related to
communal identity and Hindu nationalist agendas. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the party used these strategies to overcome intra-Hindu caste differences. Although the agitations organized in these times temporarily failed and the party suffered numerous defeats, but it succeeded in the following years (Thachil, 2011).

a) BJP and Ayodhya Issue

In the two succeeding national elections in 1989 and 1991, the BJP by using the Ayodhya issue brought Hindu electoral consolidation to a higher level of unity in north India. The demolition of the Babri mosque in this pilgrimage town enhanced ‘the support of the BJP among militant Hindus and has been followed by intensified efforts on the part of its leadership to consolidate the Hindu vote with a view to capturing power in the country in the next elections’ (Brass, 1994, 15).

The BJP targeted the Muslim community which was made responsible for the construction of a Babri Mosque over Ram Temple by Mughal Emperor Babar (Bhambhri, 2007, 210). In the elections 1991, the BJP profited from upper-caste backlash against ‘Mandal’, a reservations policy recommendation for backward castes in public section jobs by the Janata Party government in 1979, which it linked to its campaign around the temple in Ayodhya (Basu, 2006, 59). In Brass’ opinion, V. P. Singh’s decision to go ahead with Mandal, appeared to undermine the BJP drive to consolidate the Hindu vote in the country under its own banner and instead to divide it and make use of Hindu divisions and Muslim support to isolate it. The Mandal decision forced the party leadership to prepare for a new election and to seek to strengthen its base in UP and Bihar with its only strong weapon, the demand to build a new temple to Ram on the existing site of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya (Brass, 1994, 243).

This movement brought religion and mass ritual explicitly into the political arena. Through this, the BJP could mobilize other backward castes also (Bhambhri, 2007, 197). According to Mason, the BJP knew that ‘the birthplace of Ram’ movement was a single issue that could enable them to capture the attention of the Indian electorate chiefly by drawing the voters’ attention to it, emotively. Its politico-religious processions converted Indian public space as Hindu space and conveying the basic script of Hindutva discourse. Through the various media, they naturalized Hindutva ideology and created a popular and accessible political idiom. These activities peaked in 1992 with the destruction of the Babri mosque (Mason, 2007, 304).

However, the BJP and Sangh familly practiced the strategy of Hindu mobilization on the issue of God Rama birthplace (Davis, 2006, 49). The instrumentalization of the Ayodhya issue and the related communal riots that polarized the electorate along religious lines helped the BJP make progress election after election. Before the election 1989, BJP under the impulse of Advani passed an important resolution to join the Ayodhya campaign in June 1989. The BJP benefited from this Hindu mobilization in and the polarization of the electorate through violence. The party won 88 seats and became part of the coalition supporting the V. P. Singh government (1989-90) (Jaffrelot, 2007, 280-1).

The BJP, which was struggling to become a national party and an alternative to the Congress, adopted the above-mentioned resolution to build a temple of Rama in Ayodhya. In June 1990,
Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) declared that they would go ahead with the building of the temple at Ayodhya and BJP announced that its leader L.K. Advani would take a Rama Rath (chariot) procession through the length and breadth of the country, mobilizing support for the temple. In September 1990, the BJP, responding to its own complex electoral calculations, decided to join in the procession, fundamentally altering the scope and complexion of the mobilization. In same time, Advani announced his decision to launch his ‘Rath Yatra’ from the Somnath temple in Gujarat to Ayodhya, through the Hindi-speaking heartland and went on the 10,000 Km Rath Yatra (journey by chariot) to promise the construction of a temple of Rama. But he was stopped before entering Uttar Pradesh. Therefore, Advani became as a hero in 1991. In the meantime, the BJP stepped up its campaign for the building of a temple at the disputed site in Ayodhya. In June 1991, BJP had won the state elections in U.P, the largest state in India, on this issue (Arora, 2008; Davis, 2006, 42; Brass, 1994, 243; Jaffrelot, 2007, 20; Chatterjee, 1998, 35 &37).

However, polarizing the electorate through the call of religious mobilization strategy and even participated in the processions provided the BJP with a Hindu ‘vote bank’ (Basu, 2006, 56). In the Lok Sabha elections 1991, riding on the wave produced by the Rath yatra and Ayodhya movement, the BJP achieved its greatest electoral victory since its formation and emerged as the second largest party in parliament with 119 seats (ibid., 87). The BJP made the greatest electoral effort in its history during this election, in which it exploited fully the Ayodhya issue, anti-Muslim hostilities which its leaders and workers had themselves done so much to inculcate in the upper caste Hindu population, particularly in north India and the Hindu-Muslim riots which occurred before and during the election campaign (Brass, 1994, 243). These issues transformed the BJP from a peripheral party to a powerful electoral force and the primary national opposition to the declining Congress party (Davis, 2006, 30). In continuation of the process, the BJP focused on the Ayodhya issue to take office at the Center soon. Indeed, as Davis has mentioned, many commentators and political analysts have argued that:

This fabric of religious imagery was merely a cover, a cynical exploitation of the religious sentiments of Indian people for political ends. Even Advani seems to have shared this view some of time, as when he spoke of turning Rama devotion into state power. And, indeed, the BJP electoral calculations seem prescient, at least in the short run, for their promotion of the Ayodhya issue did earn them significant electoral gains (Davis, 2006, 51-2).

In July 1992, L.K. Advani, as the leader of the opposition in the Lok Sabha (House of the People), reportedly told the House, “You must recognize the fact that from two seats in parliament in 1985, we have come to 117 seats in 1991. This has happened primarily because we took up this issue (Ayodhya)” (Arora, 2008). Before that also, Advani in an interview in 1991 mentioned that issue of Ayodhya is main issue in the coming elections of 1991 (See: Jaffrelot, 2007, 282).

In 1992, the BJP state government in U.P. helped the Sangh to succeed in Ayodhya. Lord Rama and his epic, Ramayana, had become political icons. Hindu nationalism and communalism permeated Indian politics, media, and popular culture (Ludden, 2006, 17). With its own government in the state, its mobilization reached a peak. State government of Uttar Pradesh, headed by Kalyan Singh of BJP had almost pledged total support for the VHP’s activists (Jindal, 1995, 3). Although after demolishing the Babri Mosque on 6 December 1992, the BJP
governments in UP and some other states were dismissed, but this polarized people along religious lines. As a result, the BJP emerged as a mainstream party (Chatterjee, 1998, 37; Arora, 2008).

Most of the Indian researchers have confirmed religious mobilization by BJP and its role in Ayodhya events. So that, Wilkinson cites that in 1993 Neeraj Chatunedi, an MLA, was frank ‘when he told a journalist that Hindu-Muslim riots sparked by a procession of his BJP supporters would polarize Hindu voters in his favor’ (Wilkinson, 2004, 47). Van Der Veer also by narrating destruction of Babri mosque has shown the role of BJP (See: Van Der Veer, 2006, 253-4).

However, until recent times this problem and use of religious slogan has been continued. The proceedings of the Ayodhya events and Liberhan Ayodhya Commission of Inquiry in the Rajya Sabha, India’s Upper House, after almost 17 years in 2009 (news.bbc.co.uk), led to a scuffle between a few Samajwadi Party (SP) and BJP members. In this time BJP’s members raised the slogan ‘Jai Shri Ram’ (‘victory to Lord Rama’, the icon of Hindu nationalist politics) and in reply of them SP’s members shouted a counter-slogan, ‘Ya Ali’ (Mitra, 2011).

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

After demolition of Babri mosque, rioting spread instantly into many regions of India and the Indian government banned the RSS, VHP, Bajrang Dal and two Islamic parties (the Islamic Sevak Sangh and the Jamaat-e-Islami Hind). So, in 1993 and 1994, the BJP did not do as well at the polls, though the VHP continued to operate widely in India despite the ban. It even lost in U.P. to a coalition on non-Congress parties based on the support of lower caste groups. But in 1995, the BJP won state elections in Gujarat and formed a government in the state of Maharashtra in alliance with the Shiv Sena (Ludden, 2006, 17). The Sangh Parivar played a major role in the general elections of mid-1996 and forming the next Indian government. Consequently, the BJP emerged as the single largest party in Parliament (Chatterjee, 1998, 38).

At this stage also, the BJP used the Hindu organization in electoral process. The indirect role of the VHP and its campaigns led to the electoral successes of BJP. Religious leaders have enormous followings and acceptability in India. Not only the people, but also the politicians seek their “blessings”. There are many Hindu gurus who are known for their overt support to the BJP’s Hindu nationalist agenda, such as Sadhvi Ritambhara, Morari Bapu, Asaram Bapu, Vasudevananad Saraswati, and Swami Satyamitrnanand Giri (Van Der Veer, 2002; Arora, 2008). However, by mobilizing a large segment of Hindus around anti-minority issues as it had done in 1989-91, the BJP could once again secure an overall majority in the UP assembly. In August 1995, according to Wilkinson, the BJP and the VHP paid attention to religious offering to the Hindu god Vishnu and a circumambulation around it where there has been a dispute between the Hindu Keshav Das temple and Shahi Masjid Idgah and it is a site for anti Muslim mobilization in Uttar Pradesh. The VHP timed the Parikrama to coincide with the religious festival of Janamashthami, which draws thousands of Hindus to Mathura, one of the most important Hindu religious sites in north India, every year. It planned the Yagine for a Friday, when it would coincide with large numbers of Muslim worshipers offering their afternoon prayers at the nearby Idgah (Wilkinson, 2004, 166).
Moreover, the backward-caste was located in the above-mentioned district and BJP needed substantial support of them to win the upcoming assembly elections. So, the hope was that a campaign built around Krishna would win over large numbers of backward castes suspicious of the BJP's upper-caste image. As one Hindu nationalist leader put it, "As of now, the Yadavas, almost to a man, are with the S.P. (Samajwadi Party) led by Mulayam Singh Yadav. But when the call of a Yadava god comes, can they remain indifferent?" (ibid., 167).

Lobo and Das has narrated other examples as following:

In villages, also, some reasons have been identified for unusual and intense spread of riots to a sustained anti-Muslim propaganda by the BJP, VHP and the RSS combine, and activities carried out by a variety of religious and quasi-religious organizations. In tribal areas, where traditionally the Congress had a stronghold, Muslims were targeted as external to the Hindus and by extension to the Indian society and thereby anti-social as well as anti-national elements. In many such villages, the Muslim shopkeepers-cum-moneylenders got projected as exploiters. This helped the Sangh Parivar in weakening the hold of Congress in some tribal pockets. […] In some other villages specific pockets like that of the Dangs, such forces were however able to create an antagonism channelized through a Hindu vs. Christian opposition - something that had facilitated the assertion of Hindutva elements across specific areas within a short time (Lobo and Das, 2006, 152).

They have also mentioned that in 1995, for electoral gain, the BJP launched hate campaigns against Muslims. Thousands of leaflets, posters and pamphlets, videos, audio cassettes and public speeches of the Sangh Parivar activists reinforced stereotypes of Muslims (ibid., 80). In this regard, Basu mentioned an example that shows how BJP used religious messages through media in elections:

In an election the BJP’s use of both print and audiovisual media especially cassette tapes is remarkably well suited to its project of creating an imagined Hindu community. The messages have been designed to nationalize anti-Muslim sentiment. In many towns in which riots occurred, people reported hearing terrifying screams from rooftops. These voices were in fact a cassette recording blasted over loudspeakers. The recording begins by invoking Allah (Allaho Akbar!) to indicate that Muslim is crying out. It then invokes the Hindu god Rama (Jai Shri Rama!) presumably a Hindu cry. Cries Follow: “Beat them! Beat them!” and, in the voices of women and children screaming, “Help, help!” this particular recording, played countless times, apparently had its desired effects (Basu, 2006, 64).

Although the electoral success of the BJP in national elections has often been attributed to the rise of Hindu religious sentiments, but its ability to forge a coalition between religious groups and the middle classes, also, had an important effect on the BJP’s success especially after 1996. The electoral success of the BJP in the late 1990s hence lay in both religious mobilizing and its ability to put together a viable coalition between religious Hindus and those disaffected by excessive political intervention in the economy (Chhibber, 1997). BJP’s coalition was chiefly on the basis of Hinduism and Hindu culture. The growing importance of coalition politics have struck at the very foundation of Hindu nationalism. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) was largely 'cultural' on 'the non-threatening image of Hindutva' (Chakrabarty, 2008, 81).
c) **After Capturing Power**

Through Ayodhya campaign, as a massive political success for the Sangh Family, caste versus caste politics was replaced by religion versus religion politics and it propelled the BJP and the Sangh to national prominence and extended their mass support broadly (Vanaik, 2006, 188 & 191; Bhambhri, 2007, 122). After coming to power, also, some BJP leaders used the different Hindu symbols and communal stance to legitimize their political aims. For example, in Gujarat, according to Shah, Narendra Damodardas Modi, who had worked as an organizer for the Rath Yatra in 1989, ‘managed to carve out his image as Hindu Hriday Samrat, the King of Hindu hearts’ (Shah, 2011, 167 & 172). In the Lok Sabha as well as the Vidhan Sabha (State Legislative Assembly) and local government elections, though the main focus of the campaign of Modi, chief minister of Gujarat, was development, his Hindutva plank was also well entrenched. During the 2002 communal problems and the subsequent elections, his anti-Muslim posture was blatant in his phases, idioms and illustrations. He repeatedly talked about Hindutva, Hindu ethos, tolerance and magnanimity of Hindus and their glorious past and Muslims were regarded as backward that they try to increase their population to become a majority. According to him, Islam and Christianity are the “real roots” of terrorism in India. Through such claims and slogans, he established himself as the champion of Hindus:

To reinforce the image, the public relations officer of the Government of Gujarat (GOG) projected him as a "God with a beard." On the eve of the Assembly elections, Modi was portrayed as charioteer Krishna, carrying Sudarshan Chakra and guiding State Energy Minister Saurbha Patel shown as Arjun. The famous sloka (stanza) from Bhagwad Gita, "Yada Yada Hi Dharmasya…" was painted just above Modi, showing him as the savior of Dharma (ibid., 172).

In the election campaign for the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation in 2005, also, Modi equated the sitting Congress Mayor, a Muslim woman to a Mughal period begum. He announced, "We have decided to free the people of Karnavati [Ahmedabad] from the shackles of Mughal rule where begum Sahebas and Badshahs are in control." He asked the voters "to free the people of Ahmedabad from Mughal rule" (ibid., 183). He frequently accused the Congress of playing vote bank politics by appeasing minorities, particularly Muslims. BJP’s advertisements were: "Congress will sell the country for votes? … Reservation on religious basis for votes ... Removed POTA [Prevention of Terrorist Activities Act] for votes, protect terrorism for votes, protecting mafias for vote BJP has disclosed this hypocrisy ... BJP will win" (Quoted by: ibid.).

Apart from the above issues, religion has been used and it has also had impact on BJP’s politics in various parts of India. In eastern India, the BJP as a Hindu party presented itself as the natural oppositional party to both Congress and the CPI (M) Left Front government in West Bengal. In Assam, it represented the Muslim migrants from Bangladesh as foreigners and therefore, as the enemy (McGuire, 2007, 3-4). In Mumbai, 2001, it had the both pragmatic politics, in the case of the Dalits, and the ideological premises of Hindutva, in the case of the Muslims. For instance, ‘in the remembrance by Muslims of the destruction of the Babri mosque and the memorial celebration by Dalits of the death of their leader, B.R. Ambedkar, the city authorities handled each event differently, with the Dalits being privileged over the Muslims’ (ibid., 5). In the municipal elections in 2002, also, in rural Maharashtra, through the VHP, BJP generated
increased communal hostility. Eventually, as the result of election, the Shiv Sena/BJP alliance was victorious and it won a majority of seats. Therefore, the political alliance between the BJP and the Shiv Sena, the ideological premises of Hindutva and pragmatism have shaped the politics in this region. In the western India, it has been mentioned that the negative impact of the attack on Muslims in Gujarat, where Modi was accused of facilitating the killing of Muslims in that state was a key factor in the significant loss of seats for the NDA allies led by BJP in Gujarat (McGuire, 2007, 5-7).

However, the BJP has sought to use the gulf between the Hindu majority community and the religious minorities as a political strategy so that its agenda also targeted other minorities. In the late 1990s the Hindu right wing in many states switched strategies and began polarizing Hindu voters against Christians rather than Muslims, especially, since 1998, when Sonia Gandhi, an Italy-born Catholic and wife of late former Prime Minister of India, Rajiv Gandhi, became the president of the Congress party. In his first campaign speech for the Vidhan Sabha polls 2002, Modi mentioned changing the design of the new two-rupee coin, replacing the map of India with a cross, a veiled reference to Sonia Gandhi’s religious background as a Christian (Arora, 2008). In Parkhand, also, through the socio-cultural network of the Sangh Parivar, BJP sought ‘to mobilize support among the tribals by means of Hindutva ideology and by constructing those tribals who were Christians as the Other’ (McGuire, 2007, 3). In this regard, Wilkinson has mentioned an example that:

Dara Singh, the leader of the Bajrang Dal in the state of Orissa, reportedly organized attacks on missionaries in that state in the run-up to the 1999 parliamentary elections. Electorally, this strategy carries many of the benefits of the anti-Muslim strategy (with Christians, like Muslims, often being portrayed as tools of foreign powers bent on converting allegedly defenseless minis and lower castes) and few of the electoral costs, because Christians are a much smaller proportion of the electorate (Wilkinson, 2004, 170).

5) Religious Violence for Electoral Goals

Some authors like Brass believe and some implication of this has already been mentioned, political elites have had effect on the creation of hostilities between religious groups especially Hindus and Muslims. In this regard, Shakir believed that ‘earlier, the riots were a 2-3-day affair. But now the riots continue for weeks together. This shows that there is what may be called systematic and organized madness. They are pre-planned and politically-oriented, accompanied by identical means of rousing religious passions and followed by desired results conducive to the growth of anti-secular politics’ (Shakir, 1983, 47).

As mentioned, political elites have set out to arouse Hindu consciousness and feelings concerning the holy places to direct them to a specific site, to promote Hindu-Muslim antagonism for political purposes and to define the Hindu community as a political entity (Brass, 1994, 247). Apart from the previous issues that have been mentioned, especially the Ayodhya problem, there have been other communal violence which were orchestrated for political gains or they had impact on it. Many politicians and parties have used this issue to improve their electoral prospects. Wilkinson has narrated some communal riots related to the electoral ends in various places in India (See: Wilkinson, 2004, 47). For example, in his opinion, the electorally motivated
riots in Uttar Pradesh has often been ‘an organized Hindu nationalist attempt to disrupt a Muslim procession, to hold an anti-Muslim public meeting, or to raise the fears that Muslims were just about to turn upon Hindus’ (ibid.). The outcome of this polarization in U.P. was in favor of the BJP on polling day. It had more vote share in riot-affected towns than those not affected. He has mentioned that:

In the towns affected by Hindu-Muslim riots in the above-mentioned period, BJP vote went up by an average of 24%, from 19% to 43%, while in the average town its BJP vote went up only 7%, from 29% to 36%. The vote was also more polarized in riot-hit towns than in towns in general. The two major parties in riot-affected towns securing a combined average 69% share of the vote compared with 64% in the average town. This had a dramatic effect on the electoral outcomes and boosted the BJP’s votes significantly. It defeated incumbents from the middle-caste, Muslim-supported Janata Dal in all but two of the riot-affected towns and in eight towns its share of the vote rose to around 50%. So, many Hindu voters, alarmed by the riots, switched their votes from the Janata Dal Party to the BJP in order to keep out the Muslim-supported parties (ibid., 50).

As an example in the recent years, the effect of religious violence between Muslim and Hindus on BJP electoral success in Gujarat can be mentioned that ‘helped the BJP to come back to power in the elections in 2002 and then in 2007’ (Arora, 2008). Another example in this regard is related to the Christian-Hindu Conflicts, as some political analysts believe that the VHP’s attacks on Christians especially in Orissa in 2007 were the BJP’s strategy to polarize voters in state assembly elections (ibid.).

Hence, such kind of violent politics throughout the post-independence period and the effective electoral strategies on the basis of religious identities have been polarizing the electorate. According to the above discussion, religious violence from time to time has improved the electoral performance of some parties, especially that of the BJP.

CONCLUSION

Although in pre-independence India, the elections were not significant as well as post-independence, but the electoral function of religion stemmed from the beginning of electoral system in India. Although during this period religious forces, especially among Muslims, applied the electoral function of religion, but it was not confined to only religious parties or politicians. Using religion became a common practice in mobilizing people for political and electoral purposes. The Muslim leaders appealed communal electorates as through this they could win elections by appealing to the interests and loyalties of the Muslims. Among parties, Muslim League more than others used the electoral function of religion.

The political function of religion in post independence India has mostly been confined to the electoral aspect. Although it may not be acceptable from an ethical point of view, however, from a political point of view, religion has been used as an instrument in the hand of politicians and organizations. Although the contest and conflict between Muslim and Hindu have not been as significant as in the pre independence period and Hindus have their rights intact, but most of the
parties have used religion for political and electoral gains. The abolition of the system of communal electorate has made the contest between the two communities more effective. However, some vote banks have continued to remain confined to various religious groups. The Muslim parties’ activities have been confined to Muslim communities, the secular parties opened themselves to all communities and Hindu parties have stayed among some of the Hindus. The Hindu parties have used the anti minority mobilization, traditional religious ceremonies and polarizing around Hindu identity and holly places. Especially since the mid 1980s, the dominant political discourse increasingly became consistent with communal and sectarian reservoir and political parties transformed it into electoral capital. Many candidates have used communal strategies and tactics and the communal voting patterns based on caste and religion have been utilized in some cases. Among all the parties, BJP has made maximum number of appeals to Hindus to vote along religious lines. Religion has also had function in alliance before elections. Thus, there has been an increase in the electoral function of religion. It has been an important decisive factor for parties and politicians in elections in post-independence India.

According to the findings of this study, those leaders and political parties, which have known their traditional society well and were aware of the influence of religion on the masses have had a deeper understanding of religion’s functions and taken the greatest advantage of it during both the pre and post independence period. If in the pre independence period Muslim League used religion in elections to win among Muslim, after independence the BJP repeated this experience among Hindus at a larger scale. Indeed, the electoral function of religion in post independence has been more than pre independence.

REFERENCES


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