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## BJP: The crisis of identity

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**by R. Upadhyay**

The BJP is facing a crisis of identity. Its cadres are confused. They find an ideological drift from its earlier legacy of Hindu nationalism and value based politics. Absence of good and credible governance has further exasperated the cadres now.

Whatsoever be the claim of the present leadership of the BJP about the party, a general impression is gaining ground that the three years of governance at centre has adversely affected its identity as a Hindu nationalist party. It was BJP that took the benefit of Hindutva to project itself as a national alternative and succeeded in achieving the position of the single largest party in Lok-Sabha. But its power centric approach and failure to prove as a credible alternative have created an ideological confusion among the party cadres and supporters. The ugly face of coalition government has affected the image of the government having an impact on the party itself.

The result of a Lok-Sabha bye-election in Uttar Pradesh was also alarming for the BJP as it was placed in fourth position against its rivals Samajwadi Party, Congress and Bahujan Samaj Party in the State. The statement of Vajpayee asking the party cadres to accept the performance of the party as a warning signal is quite significant. This is an admission on the part of the Prime minister that the popularity of the BJP is sliding. But he has apparently not given any indication as how to halt the decline in its popularity. Keeping in view the forthcoming assembly election in Uttar Pradesh, which may be held any time between October this year and March next year the party leadership is alarmed as its result may influence the stability of Vajpayee Government, itself.

To understand the present confusion relating to the identity of the party, we may go back to the circumstances under which the Bhartiya Jana Sangh (BJS) and its immediate descendent the BJP were launched in 1951 and 1980 respectively. Early Hindu nationalist leaders of

freedom movement and their disciples in post-independence as well as in contemporary Indian politics considered the pan-Indian cultural identity and common civilisational values as a unifying force in a continental-size Hindu society. For them, fragmentation of Hindu society was a result of the repeated foreign invasions and their rule over this country by alien cultures. The RSS was formed in 1925 with a sole aim to unite the fragmented Hindu society through a Hindu cultural revivalist movement, and to undo the wrongs of the Islamic rulers of medieval period and British imperialism of modern India.

After independence political power came into the hands of the western educated Indian elites led by Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru. Since Nehru was afraid of the forces of Hindutva particularly after partition of the country and was strongly opposed to Hindu nationalism, he and his followers sought to distance themselves from the cultural heritage of Hindus. He accepted Indian nationalism, which was based on the western concept of socialism and secularism. The European version of nationalism therefore, became their dominant political ideology.

Considering the Nehruvian concept of Indian nationalism as anti-Hindu, which was designed to appease the Muslims, the Hindu nationalists launched the Bhartiya Jana Sangh (BJS) in 1951. To them the concept of Indian national identity was indistinguishable from Hindu identity. Its main objective was to challenge the western secularist version of Indian nationalism. The BJS, according to Deen Dayal Upadhyay, a senior ideologue of the party was not merely a political body but it was a movement to fight against the challenges of the western concept of modernisation at the hands of Indian nationalists. Rejecting the Nehruvian model of economic development, Upadhyay propounded the philosophy of integral humanism, as opposed to unbridled consumerism. The formation of the BJS was therefore for an ideological objective of transforming the Indian polity into Hindu nationalism against the Indian nationalism of Nehruvian Congress.

Since the political power is the master key to unlock all the problems (Ambedkar), the primary goal of the parties is to capture power. This was only possible if the BJS adopted a pragmatic approach in joining hands with the non-Congress parties. Accordingly, it teamed up with anti-Congress forces, which defeated the Congress governments right from West Bengal to Punjab in 1967 assembly elections. The BJS also shared power in coalition governments in some of the states. In 1977 the BJS merged with Janata Party but even after diluting its identity, its leaders maintained a link with their parent organisation, the RSS. They also worked in Janata Party as a distinct cohesive group and the performance of their three ministers namely A.B.Vajpayee, L.K.Aadvani and Brij Lal Verma was also rated as very high.

Following the collapse of Janata Party Government, the Hindu nationalists came out of it and the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) was re-born in 1980 as an immediate descendent of the BJS. A.B.Vajpayee became its founder president. Vajpayee however, tried to lead the party in a way, which was divergent from the BJS ideology of Hindu nationalism. With his charismatic personality and powerful oratorical ability he could convince even the reluctant members of the new party and incorporated Gandhian socialism as its new political ideology, though it did not fit in the frame-work of Hindu nationalism.

Vajpayee took care of the value based politics of the RSS and integral humanism of Deen Dayal Upadhyay, when he said in his inaugural address, ***“I believe that the country’s crisis is essentially a moral crisis. The biggest curse of our public life is that moral values have given way to self-seeking and power-lust, and politics has become a pure power game.”***

He also called upon the party to ***“mobilise the poor peasantry, the workers, the Harijans, the tribals and other exploited section of population.”*** (Presidential address of Vajpayee at the first national convention of the BJP in Bombay, December 28-30,1980). In fact Vajpayee tried to transform the BJP from the Hindu nationalism of the BJS to the Gandhian concept of nationalism which was more influenced by the Bhakti- cult of medieval India, which merged and blended the values of both the Hindu and Muslim religions. Despite the fact that this new line of Vajpayee was a tactical move to broaden the electoral base of the party and capture power, the puritans among the Hindu nationalists were not convinced with the Gandhian version of Indian nationalism.

The period of eighties in India was an era of Hindu upsurge. Rath Yatras by Vishva Hindu Parishad, Ekatmata Yajna and TV serials like Ramayana, Mahabharat and Chanakya provided unprecedented support to an emotional upsurge of Hindu pride. Even Indira Gandhi was found associating herself with some of the Hindu programmes to derive political mileage but Vajpayee failed to exploit this opportunity for political gains. Vajpayee's line of Gandhian socialism in fact created confusion in the party and it was not endorsed by the RSS. The BJP had to pay a price for it, when it suffered a humiliating defeat in 1984 Lok Sabha elections. No one will dispute that the massive victory of Congress was mainly due to sympathy wave following the assassination of Indira Gandhi, but it is also a fact that the RSS cadres were indifferent to the BJP during the election due to ideological drift of Vajpayee. Not only the BJP's strength in the Lok Sabha was reduced to two but even Vajpayee himself lost his Gwalior seat, considered to be a strong constituency of the BJP.

To examine the cause of defeat, the BJP set up a committee led by K.L.Sharma. Though, Vajpayee himself accepted moral responsibility for the defeat of the party, Sharma's report did not indict him for obvious reasons. The report maintained that “it is ideology alone, which sparks enthusiasm in party workers and reinforces their commitments to idealism. Also an ideology is needed to establish a political party a distinct individuality.” This observation in the report was an indirect attack on Vajpayee's line, which had created ideological confusion in the party.

In 1986 L.K.Advani took over the presidentship of the BJP and the party returned to the legacy of the BJS. Hindutva again became the “ideological mascot” of the BJP. It declared that the party was dedicated to building the Indian polity, which conformed to Indian culture and tradition. The Supreme Court judgement in Shabano case and legislation by Rajiv Gandhi government to undo it also helped the BJP to accelerate the process of emotional upsurge of Hindu pride prevailing in the country.

Keeping the Gandhian socialism of Vajpayee in back burner, the Hindu agenda like Ram Temple issue, Uniform Civil Code and scrapping of article 370 of the Indian constitution took the front seat in the party. With a resolution on Ram temple adopted by the party in its National Executive meeting at Palampur in Himachal Pradesh the BJP launched an aggressive campaign on this issue. Besides, the Pakistan sponsored Muslim militancy also gave some credence to the slogans of “ **Garv se kaho hum Hindu hain**” and “**Jo Hindu hit ki baat karega wahi desh par raj karega**”. Such Hindutva related developments gradually helped the BJP to regain its vigour and strength and by the closing decade of twentieth century it increased its strength in the Lok Sabha and got the status of a single largest party. These developments therefore, shows that Hindu agenda of the BJP was the main factor for the rise of the Party.

Contrary to the expectation of the people, the BJP led coalition Government at centre also took up the politics like a trade and industry and opened its door for everyone, which included even unreliable and corrupt leaders of various parties. The BJP's preference to capture power by ignoring its ideological commitment to value based politics adversely affected its image “as a party with a difference.” In the absence of any ideology-centric national agenda the support base of the party therefore, remained soft. The party leadership due to their involvement in power-centric politics did not make any effort to build a nationwide support base. Bangaru Laxman, a Dalit president of the party did not take any initiative to convert the members of the scheduled caste, scheduled tribe and socially and economically backward castes among the Hindus to the Hindutva ideology of the party. He rather wasted his time and energy to appease the Muslims. Instead of making attempt to adjust both its ideology and electoral strategy and unify the fragmented Hindu society, the party leadership tried to project their secular image in Nehruvian style. This was another drift of the party leadership from the known ideological stand of Hindu nationalism.

The economic policy of Vajpayee Government was another important factor, which created ideological confusion among the party cadres. The Hindu nationalists were in favour of nation-centric economic policy and was against the Marxian concept of nationalisation of industries. They favoured economic liberalisation and were not against privatisation. In 1991 Congress Government led by Narsimha Rao adopted the new economic policy, which was similar to the economic policy of the BJP. But when this policy opened the door for the multi-nationals under the provision of the WTO, the then BJP leaders felt embarrassed. They welcomed the economic policy of the Congress Government led by Narsimha Rao but the National Executive Committee meeting (May 1992) of the party adopted a Swadeshi alternative to check the entry of multi-nationals in consumer goods sector. They favoured the entry of multi-nationals only in high-tech areas. Accordingly, the party circulated a document in 1992 and stressed on the need of the Swadeshi concept of economy. Since then the BJP continued its attack on the new economic policy of Narsimha Rao government till it formed a coalition Government in 1998.

Contrary to the expectation of the forces of Hindutva, Vajpayee drifted from the known Swadesi concept of the BJP, which created another ideological confusion among the cadres of the Sangh Parivar. The RSS leadership in general and its labour front Bhartiya Majdoor Sangh in particular strongly criticised the Vajpayee Government for its ideological deviation from its stand on Swadeshi economic policy.

The Hindu nationalists always maintained that only proactive policy against Pakistan could be a viable solution for Kashmir issue. But

Vajpayee,s Lahore bus – journey, cease fire in Kashmir and invitation to Parwez Musharraf, created a general impression among the party cadres that Vajpayee was more concerned for his international image than the interest of the nation. This was also a drift from the known stand of the BJP on Pakistan.

Another failure of the BJP Government was that it could not utilise its political power to build stable linkages with local and regional elites, who have strong regional roots and influence in their respective castes and community by patronising them. In the absence of such strong regional leaders in the party, the BJP is not able to broaden its social base for the expansion of the political ideology of Hindu nationalism.

The BJP Government in its three years of rule and quest to retain power has made a deliberate attempt to distance itself from the legacy of Hindu nationalism and value based politics causing confusion in the party. In its attempt to buy the trust of its junior partners in the coalition, it gradually distanced itself from the party's well defined national agenda and failed to take any initiative to develop the country on the basis of reform oriented Bhartiya culture as envisaged by the Hindu nationalist leaders of freedom movement and their disciples in contemporary Indian politics.

The party and its cadres are thus in the cross road of an ideological confusion – to go for Hindu nationalist ideals and return to its pristine Hindu nationalism or compromise with ideology for continuing in power.

( *The analysis is based on the personal perception of the writer. E-mail [ramashray60@yahoo.com](mailto:ramashray60@yahoo.com)<sup>[1]</sup> )*

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