

## **Indian Politics: Towards communal consensus?**

Prem Singh

While outrightly opposing the hard-line Hindutva of the RSS/BJP, scholars of the secular camp refer to the soft Hindutva of secular parties, as if the use of soft Hindutva to grab political power is a constitutional secular practice. They, without hesitation, place their bets on the soft Hindutva political parties/leaders who, in their view, can prevent the hard-line Hindutva RSS/BJP from coming into power in the elections. It seems not to matter even if that party/leader is a part of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA).

Two results emerge from this political behaviour: First, secular parties get a certificate for practicing soft Hindutva or being a part of the BJP-led alliance, they can remain constitutionalists even while practicing Hindutva, and they can plead without any hesitation to save the Constitution from the evil eye of the RSS/BJP. Secondly, the political power of the BJP, the political arm of the RSS, keeps rising and its ideology continues to spread throughout the country; its aim of making Indian politics Hinduism-centric instead of Constitution-centric is thereby easily fulfilled. Needless to say, the BJP is also okay with as much constitution as is required for running the elections and governments after gaining power. It will remain so in the future as well. Other theocratic states of the world too have constitutions, which have some provisions for democracy and civil rights.

The soft Hindutva parties/leaders in their political rhetoric claim that the RSS/BJP alone does not have the patent of Hindu religion. The RSS/BJP on the other hand has little objection to such a claim because by saying this, soft Hindutva parties only help in achieving their aim. When the soft Hindutva leaders, while claiming their right on Hindu religion, argue before the public that they are the 'priests' of good Hindu religiosity as opposed to the bad Hindu religiosity of the RSS/BJP, then also the ideology of the RSS/BJP benefits.

It may be noted that before the rise of Narendra Modi in Gujarat, the RSS/BJP also remained confined within the politics of soft Hindutva. Atal Bihari Vajpayee, in the first national conference held in Bombay in December 1980 after the formation of BJP, had strongly described the commitment of the new party towards the principles of Gandhian socialism along with democracy and secularism. Vajpayee, in search for the Prime Minister's office of the country, used to go to Muslim meetings wearing a green turban although he also used to

threaten the Muslims that the BJP could come to power even without their support. Narendra Modi proved this threat to be true, first in Gujarat, and then three times at the Center.

The soft Hindutva parties keep quarrelling among themselves on the very plank of Hindutva. All of them try to woo the majority Hindus from the RSS/BJP camp to shift over to their side. While doing so, they play in a bizarre manner on the RSS/BJP pitch. Their leaders try to portray themselves as 'more' Hindu than the other. Most non-BJP parties and leaders consider the minorities, especially the Muslims, as their own. This ownership yields votes for them, and there is cut-throat competition among them to harvest it. Needless to say, the plea forever given is to save the secular Constitution. The funny thing is that the crop of minority votes is itself eager to be plundered by them. At this point, the camp of secular scholars comes forward to say that the burden of saving constitutional secularism lies upon the shoulders of the minorities, and upon those whom non-BJP party/leader to vote for.

This art of deception in the name of the Constitution benefits the leaders and scholars. But what does this tendency to be deceived actually brings to the minorities, is a complex question.

The latest example is the Delhi Assembly elections (5 February 2025). The Left Front fielded its five candidates in the election fray. But there was no discussion about them among the minority Muslims. Nor was there any show of interest in the candidate of a small party outside mainstream politics or an independent candidate, even though they might have really believed in the value of constitutional secularism. Initially, there was some confusion about the Congress. But they soon got rid of that confusion and united behind 'Hanuman-bhakt' Arvind Kejriwal to defeat the BJP. All the same, Muslim voters were fairly confused about the candidates fielded by the All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) in two Muslim-dominated constituencies.

Owaisi is trying to create a separate patch of minority communalism in politics. It remains to be seen whether this style of minority politics will run on the basis of soft Islam-atva, hard-line Islam-atva or will create a mixture of both. Many more Owaisis can come up on this patch in the future. There will also be competition among them. But all this will happen in sync with the expansion of communal politics in the country.

What I want to say is that the majority communalism continues to nurture minority communalism in its favour. The politics of soft Hindutva is an integral part of the politics of majoritarianism for which the RSS/BJP is cursed. Hard-line and soft Hindutva are two sides of the same coin.

Just as there is a near consensus on neoliberalism among the political and intellectual elite in India, there is more or less a similar consensus on communalism. The neoliberal consensus is against the socialist value of the Constitution, and the communal consensus is against the secular value of the Constitution. It can be called a great success of the RSS/BJP that they have put the Indian society along with the Indian Republic into communal mode. It should not come as a surprise if the legislature, the executive and the judiciary also walk into the grip of communalism. Just as the space for advocating the constitutional value of equality has almost vanished from the media, the space for the value of secularism is also vanishing.

In fact, the use of the terms like hard-line Hindutva and soft Hindutva is deceptive, and their usage should be stopped. To address this version of political practice employed by parties/leaders, it would be better to use the terms hard-line communalism and soft-line communalism. This would help the new generations to remove the veil of deception and realize that there is ample consensus on communal politics in the country and most leaders and scholars who are claimants of secularism are in fact companions of communal politics.

*(The writer associated with the socialist movement is a former teacher of Delhi University and a fellow of Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla)*