PART I

The Hindu Nationalist Power Quest

HINDUTVA AND POPULISM

AS IN MANY COUNTRIES, including France and the United States, two ideas of the nation have been competing in India for more than a century, one universalist, the other more ethnic. The dominant idea following the country's independence in 1947, even shaping its Constitution, was democratic, federal, and "secularist" in nature.[1] Attention will be focused here solely on the latter term due to its multiple meanings, the other two being more immediately comprehensible. It does not imply *secularization* but—on the contrary—refers to equal recognition of all religions in the public sphere, in contrast to *laïcité*.[2] The Indian state not only does not recognize any official religion, but it also guarantees freedom of conscience and of worship, which were enshrined in the Constitution of 1950. Article 15 prohibits any discrimination on religious grounds; Article 16 applies this rule to civil service recruitment and Article 29 to admission to public school or those receiving state subsidies; Article 25 stipulates, "Subject to public order, morality and health . . . all persons are equally entitled . . . freely to profess, practice and propagate religion." The Indian secular Constitution, while it bans religious teaching in public schools, stipulates that "all minorities, whether based on religion or language, shall have the right to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice."

India thus fulfills the essential criteria of secularism that Charles Taylor laid out: (1) everyone can freely exercise his or her religion, (2) every religion—whether of the majority or the minority—is considered on equal footing in the public sphere, and (3) "all spiritual families must be heard."[3] Indian secularism reflects a conception of the nation that, rather than being based on a separation of the religious and the political sphere (or even on the secularization of society), is instead founded on the official recognition of religious communities that all enjoy the same rights. Jawaharlal Nehru, Indian prime minister from 1947 to 1964, stated as much in 1961: "We talk about a secular state in India. It is perhaps not very easy even to find a good word in Hindi for 'secular.' Some people think it means something opposed to religion. That obviously is not correct. What it means is that it is the state which honours all faiths equally and gives them equal opportunities."[4] Around the same time, the president of the Indian republic, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, further refined Nehru's thinking by pointing out that "when India is said to be a secular state, it does not mean we reject the reality of an unseen spirit or the relevance of religion to life or that we exalt irreligion. It does not mean that Secularism itself becomes a positive religion or that the state assumes divine prerogatives. Though faith in the Supreme is the basic principle of the Indian tradition, the Indian State will not identify itself with or be controlled by any particular religion."[5]

Indian secularism is in fact rooted in a centuries-old civilization in which a wide variety of religions have cohabited on Indian soil. Some of its political leaders have written fine chapters in the story of this civilization, including Ashoka, the first Buddhist emperor, and the Mughal emperor Akbar the Great, who established a dialogue between Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity. In contemporary history, the most prestigious political figure to have inherited this legacy is none other than Mahatma Gandhi. His first (and only) book, *Hind Swaraj*, published in 1909, championed a conception of the Indian nation that excluded any sort of identification with any particular religion but recognized all creeds on par: "If the Hindus believe that India should be peopled only by Hindus, they are living in dreamland. The Hindus, the Mahomedans, the Parsis and the Christians who have made India their country are

fellow countrymen, and they will have to live in unity, if only for their own interest. In no part of the world are one nationality and one religion synonymous terms; nor has it ever been so in India."[6] This definition of the Indian nation—not individualist, but rather based on a pool of communities; that is, universalist—came into conflict early on with another approach that considered religious communities as potentially full-fledged nations. This approach gave birth to the notion of "communalism." Among Muslims, this perspective spawned a separatist movement that led to the formation of Pakistan.[7] Among Hindus, it gave rise to a form of ethnic nationalism that assimilates the Hindu majority to the Indian nation, putting forth the argument—like so many other xenophobic "sons of the soil" movements throughout the world—that it was first to occupy a territory that its ideologues even considered—and still consider—"sacred."

1

Hindu Nationalism

A DIFFERENT IDEA OF INDIA

HINDU NATIONALISM IS ROOTED in a vast array of allegedly apolitical movements whose sole mission is to reform society. These *socioreligious reform movements*, as they are known, came in reaction to the arrival of Europeans in India, especially missionaries. To resist their proselytism and denigration of Hinduism (accused of idolatry, superstition, and inhumanity due to its treatment of women and lower castes), Hindu reformers in the nineteenth century invented a golden age for their religion to which such criticism could not apply, as they attributed a sober (almost Protestant) mode of worship and egalitarian values to their ancestors. The reformers took this golden age back to the Vedas, Sanskrit texts the oldest of which probably date to 2000 B.C. and which, given their highly abstract nature, lend themselves to all sorts of interpretations. Arya Samaj, a movement that began in 1875, went so far as to present the Hindus as descending from the Aryans, the first people to appear on earth. This claim to fame helped Hindu reformers shift from a defensive attitude to a revivalist repertoire better able to combat Western arrogance. One of the figureheads of this transition, Swami Vivekananda, presented India as a land of spirituality, in contrast with the West, which was sinking into materialism. This was the gist of his address to the World Parliament of Religions in 1893, one of the first

instances of Hinduism taking revenge on the West. But in the twentieth century, Hindu nationalism was to be, more than anything, structured in opposition to Islam.

Hindutva: What It Means to Be a Hindu

As an ideology, Hindu nationalism was largely born in reaction to the pan-Islamic inclinations of India's Muslims, real or imagined. This tendency culminated at the beginning of the twentieth century, especially when some Indian Muslims mobilized in 1919 to defend the Caliphate of Constantinople, which was being threatened by the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire during the peace talks following the First World War. The movement degenerated into anti-Hindu riots on a number of occasions.[1] Among some members of the Hindu intelligentsia, this bred a sense of vulnerability that paradoxically even took on a sort of inferiority complex, given that Hindus made up more than 70 percent of India's population according to the 1911 census. This "majoritarian inferiority complex"[2] was rooted in a lack of self-esteem that had been induced by a nineteenth-century colonial stereotype making Hindus out to be a "puny race."[3] It was also fostered by caste and sectarian divisions, two weaknesses that became obsessive in the Hindu nationalist discourse. This sentiment of vulnerability was sustained by the dread of a population decline, measured by decennial censuses showing the proportion of Hindus to have dropped from 74.3 percent in 1881 to 68.2 percent in 1931.[4] These figures prompted some Hindu nationalist ideologues to describe their community as a "dying race."[5]

It was in this context that V. D. Savarkar codified the Hindu nationalist ideology in a book published in 1923, *Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?*, outlining the basic features of the identity to be defended. This ideological construction is based primarily on an ethnic myth defining the Hindus—in the wake of the Arya Samaj—as descendants of the first Aryans to have inhabited the subcontinent.[6] Savarkar even claimed that Hindus "have in their veins the blood of the mighty race incorporated with and descended from the Vedic fathers."[7] This ethnic nationalism is territorial as well, given that Vedic India is indissociable from the sacred

land where the holy rivers flow (starting with the Ganges) and on which only the traditional rituals are effective.[8] In the prestige of this antiquity, Savarkar also found a common language, Sanskrit, established by Hindu nationalists as the "mother of all languages," an idea that British and German Orientalists were partly responsible for. Savarkar only cited Hindu culture as the fourth criterion of national belonging, after race, territory, and language. And he viewed religion only as a secondary attribute of culture, not having practiced Hinduism with any regularity and hardly observing Hindu rites. His thinking falls in line with a subset of ethnic nationalism that Anthony Smith defined as that of a "chosen people." Like Zionists, who are more interested in the Jewish people and their golden age (a blend of history and mythology), sacred land, and mission in the world than in Judaism as a religion, Hindu nationalists place more emphasis on ethnic historical-cultural traits than on spirituality and Hindu rites.[9] Savarkar himself makes the comparison when he writes: "No people in the world can more justly claim to be recognized as a racial unit than the Hindus and perhaps the Jews."[10] The fact that Hindu nationalism emphasizes ethnoracial traits and defines the Hindus as a people—and not only as a community of believers—is evident from the way Savarkar describes Muslims: they might be considered part of the nation not only if they looked at India as their *punyabhoomi* (sacred land) but also if they were to marry Hindus and have children.[11]

Savarkar considered Hindu civilization as embodying and epitomizing an Indian identity to which Muslims posed a threat. Not only was their contribution to Indian culture totally disregarded, but since the start of the Khilafat movement, they were perceived as swearing allegiance to the Middle Eastern holy places of Islam rather than the sacred Hindu territory. Savarkar's priority was to organize the vulnerable majority that formed the Hindus, against the Muslims.[12]

In this regard, his ideological contribution was supplemented in the 1930s by another book aiming to define the Hindu nation, *We, or Our Nationhood Defined*, which is attributed to another champion of Hindutva, M. S. Golwalkar.[13] His target was not only the Muslim or Christian Other but also the Gandhi-led Congress and its "amazing theory . . . that the Nation is composed of all those who, for one reason or the

other happen to live, at the time in the country."[14] He uses Czechoslovakia's failure as a multinational state as an argument justifying the views "of many political scholars, regarding the wisdom of heaping together in one State, elements conflicting with the National life."[15] Golwalkar's model is Germany and its "political writers" who concocted an ethnic definition of nationhood. He believed Muslims had to either submit or leave: "[They] must either adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and hold in reverence Hindu religion, must entertain no idea but those of the 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 rights."[16] The choice was thus between assimilation and a status not even worthy of second-class citizens. The first option meant that Muslims could continue to practice Islam as a faith, in private, but that they had to pay allegiance to Hinduism in society.

The RSS, or How to Build Up Hindus Physically and Mentally

To defend the Hindus and to ensure their domination over the Indian nation, one of Savarkar's followers, K. B. Hedgewar (soon assisted by Golwalkar), founded a movement in Nagpur, central India, called the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS, National Volunteer Association) in 1925. The very structure of the RSS—which, like its ideology, has scarcely changed over the years—reflects its ambition to be the crucible of a new Hindu nation. Each day in its local units, *shakha* (lit. "branches"), children, adolescents, and adults gather for calisthenics and other physical exercises (or games for the younger ones) as well as ideological training sessions in which the same exemplary deeds and glorious feats dating back to the Vedic era—or at least to the kingdoms that predated the Muslim invasions and later resisted them—have been evoked for nearly a century now. Although the movement was initiated by Brahmins in Maharashtra, who have led it almost systematically ever since Hedgewar's day, the shakha have a mission to recruit new members without distinction of caste, as will be seen below. The shakha are

the framework for social and psychological reform on which the Hindu nation is supposed to be built, in the form of a "brotherhood in saffron,"[17] the color of Hinduism. The RSS intends to drill into its members not only the physical strength Hindus supposedly lack, according to the British stereotype mentioned previously, but also a nationalist conscience and a sense of solidarity to overcome caste and sectarian divisions that Hindu nationalists have always viewed as a weakness compared to Muslims, whom they believe to be strongly united.

Founded to overcome this sense of vulnerability and lack of self-esteem so as to better resist the Muslim threat, the RSS was in fact supposed to enable Hindus to assimilate the qualities perceived as contributing to Muslim strength, starting with their intense sense of community. This process of assimilating the cultural traits that, allegedly, make the Other superior—which I have theorized as a form of "strategic syncretism" or "strategic emulation"[18]—was expressed in an attempt at socio-psychological reform, the main purpose of which was not only to abolish "nation-dividing castes" (for instance, by establishing "pan-Hindu temples") but also to increase the Hindus' physical strength. In the 1920s, K. B. Hedgewar's mentor, B. S. Moonje, urged the Hindus to imitate the way in which Muslims resorted to "organized violence." He claimed to appreciate "the Muslims for the virile vigilance with which they protect their racial interests . . . , which, alas, is visibly lacking in the present-day Hindu race."[19] Moonje even went as far as eating meat—thus transgressing the vegetarian diet his Brahmin caste adhered to—better to rival with the Muslims.[20] The majoritarian inferiority complex Hindu nationalists thus expressed toward Muslims does not only have to do with divisions within Hindu society itself and their physical weakness but also Hindu isolation compared to a Muslim minority perceived as being able to count on ties of pan-Islamic solidarity throughout Arab and Gulf countries.

The RSS leaders' aim to fashion the movement as the matrix of a homogeneous Hindu nation immediately made theirs a long-term project. Its mission was to cover the entire country with a network of shakha radiating out from the organization's birthplace in central India: Nagpur, Maharashtra. In 1947, the RSS already had 600,000 branches.[21] These shakha were usually led by RSS cadres who had followed a special

training course. Hedgewar created the first Officers' Training Camps in 1927 that would train *pracharak* (full-time preachers and organizers). This elite corps was the spearhead for the RSS, which set out to form new shakha throughout all of India. They were—and still are—young activists who showed an aptitude for organization work and were willing to give up a career and family life for an itinerant lifestyle, even though they were often studying for a university degree or had already finished it. They worked as volunteers, the organization supporting them with the help of local notables. Their renunciation of life's pleasures and, more generally speaking, of anything that satisfies the ego (a cardinal value in Hinduism inherited from Buddhism) was a major source of their prestige among young Hindus they were tasked with recruiting into the shakha and initiating into Hindutva. These pracharak trained by the RSS to help develop the organization were sent throughout the country to expand the network of shakha or transferred to various branches of the RSS when these began to be established after 1947.

From the RSS to Sangh Parivar, or How to Cover the Social Space

The RSS mission of covering the social space took on a new dimension in the aftermath of independence, when the movement began setting up specialized affiliates. It began by combating the communists, who were increasingly active in the 1940s and 1950s, to the point of becoming the main parliamentary opposition force after the 1951–1952 general elections. The RSS first established a student union in 1948, the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP, Indian Student Association), and then in 1955 a trade union, the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS, Indian Workers' Association). Other more sector-based organizations also came into being in the 1950s, such as the Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram (VKA, Ashram for Tribal Welfare), instituted in 1952 primarily to counter the influence of Christian missions among India's aboriginals (or tribals), the conversion of whom was perceived as a process of "denationalization."[22] Hindu nationalists once again imitated a so-called threatening Other, all the better to resist him. In 1964, the conversion

issue even justified the establishment of yet another affiliate, the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP, World Council of Hindus). This body was tasked with grouping as many heads of Hindu sects as possible to set up a sort of consistory. The founding of this new structure once again proceeded from strategic emulation: as the proselytizing practiced by the international Christian network was arousing an ever-greater sense of vulnerability, RSS leaders undertook to import its structure, perceived as a model of efficiency, and endow Hinduism with a church.[23] In 1979, a new organization, Seva Bharti (Indian Service), was added to the "RSS family." Its aim was to work against untouchability and provide aid to the most destitute populations. Seva Bharti sometimes provides health care but is mainly involved in education.[24] This line of action, however, overlaps with the Sarasvati Shishu Mandir (temples for students of Sarasvati—the goddess of knowledge), which since 1950 has built up a network of schools with a highly ideological and Sanskritized curriculum that was federated in the 1970s by an umbrella organization, Vidya Bharti (Indian Knowledge).

One of the newest of all these affiliates, the Bajrang Dal, is also among the largest of them. It came into being in the 1980s as a youth movement under the VHP, for which it handled security and provided shock troops on occasion, as will be discussed in greater detail further on.

These myriad affiliates prompted the network to describe itself as of the 1950s as a "family,"[25] the Sangh Parivar (the Sangh family), with the RSS forming its matrix.[26] Despite the diversity of backgrounds in which these subsidiaries moved, their unity was ensured by the origin of their cadres: all came from the RSS, the "parent organization," which rotated them from one organization to another and one region to another—as do some state bureaucracies—to prevent them from identifying too closely with specific issues and places.[27]

Sangh Parivar and Politics

The main reason that the RSS went into politics in the early 1950s is closely tied in with circumstances, as it was related to the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. His murderer, Nathuram Godse, was a close

associate of Savarkar's and allegedly an active RSS member.[28] During his trial, he moreover explained his act by echoing the organization's favorite themes, starting with the Mahatma's weak stance toward Muslims in general and partisans of Pakistan in particular.[29] In response to this act, which provoked widespread outrage throughout the entire nation of India, Nehru and Vallabhbhai Patel, deputy prime minister, who was also minister of home affairs, had 20,000 *swayamsevaks* arrested and decided to outlaw the RSS, forcing many of its cadres underground. Golwalkar thus gauged the extent of his isolation in a political system that was dominated, at least in the highest offices of the state, by Nehru's idea of India. Indeed, the prime minister viewed the RSS as the Indian embodiment of fascism. Despite his prejudice against the political sphere and politicians, Golwalkar thus approved the formation of a new party in 1951, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS, Indian People's Association), better known as the Jana Sangh.[30] Golwalkar seconded a number of pracharak to structure this new organization but established a clear dividing line between the two organizations, whose hierarchies were entirely separate.

For many years, the BJS was caught in a vice by the "Congress system":[31] on one hand, the party in power had a number of conservative notables within its ranks, "Hindu traditionalists"[32] who were, in practice if not outspokenly, against Nehru in the name of cow protection, the promotion of Hindi as the national language, and so on, thereby depriving the Jana Sangh of arguments in the public debate, at least at the local level; on the other hand, the country's leadership, embodied by Nehru and later by his daughter Indira Gandhi, championed strictly secularist positions and did not hesitate to wage campaigns against the Jana Sangh and the RSS, even to the point of banning some of its shakha.

In the late 1960s, the BJS resolved to conceal certain ideological aspects inherited from the RSS in attempt to gain more acceptance from other opposition parties, whether the socialists, peasant parties, or those born out of splits from Congress, such as the Congress (Organization) formed in 1969. The state of emergency declared by Indira Gandhi in 1975 precipitated this evolution, which ultimately led to the Jana Sangh's merging into the coalition of anti-Congress forces that

came together in the Janata Party (People's Party). In 1977, the Jana Sangh provided this new party with the largest contingent of MPs, allowing it to win a majority in the elections. The underlying logic for this strategy of integration clearly consisted in shaping the political system from within.[33] The aim was to promote a political culture that combined a somewhat diluted version of Hindu nationalism with the Hindu "traditionalism" of former members of the Congress (Organization) whose leader, Morarji Desai, had become prime minister.

Hindu nationalist influence within the new government was reflected in three types of measures indicative of the resonance of ideological categories inherited from the RSS. The group of former Jana Sanghis first backed a bill aiming to ban cow slaughter, as minorities—primarily Muslims—were accused by champions of Hindutva of consuming beef and even of offering cows in sacrifice. Second, former Jana Sangh members introduced a bill aiming to curb religious conversions, which they viewed as often having been done in exchange for payment or the result of pressure from Christian churches. This determination to intervene "from on high," which mainly targeted missionaries in tribal areas, reflected a fear of Hindu demographic decline that is indissociable from the majoritarian inferiority complex mentioned previously. It was a largely irrational fear given that, according to the 1971 census, Hindus made up 82.7 percent of the population—compared to 84.1 percent in 1951 and 83.45 percent in 1961. The third Hindu nationalist measure involved a campaign to revise history textbooks, which they felt had been written by the Marxist-leaning intelligentsia and did not do enough to highlight the Hindu princes of yesteryear and their fight against the Muslim invaders.

These measures and projects, hardly compatible with the constitutional framework, helped to sideline the ex-Jana Sanghis within the Janata Party and then served as a pretense for ousting them in 1980. In March that year, they left the party to form the BJP (Indian People's Party). This setback prompted the RSS to change its strategy. Even before the split in 1980, the troubles that Hindu nationalists encountered in their relations with other components of the Janata Party had led Balasaheb Deoras, who had taken over for Golwalkar in 1973 as head of

the RSS, to revisit the strategy of diluting its ideological discourse that was supposed to enable the Sangh Parivar to strike up alliances with other opposition forces. At a VHP conference in 1979, he argued, "Hindus must now awaken themselves to such an extent that even from the elections' point of view the politicians will have to respect the Hindu sentiments and change their policy accordingly."[34] As the BJP, now the RSS's political front organization, pursued a strategy of playing mainstream party politics by considerably moderating its Hindu nationalism, the VHP was tasked within the Sangh Parivar with spearheading the campaign that was to produce this "Hindu awakening."

The Ayodhya Movement and the BJP's Rise to Power

The VHP decided to focus its agitation on the demand to rebuild the temple that stood on the alleged birthplace of the god Ram, one of Vishnu's avatars, in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh. The building is said to have been replaced by a mosque in the sixteenth century after the Mughal dynasty came to power. It was these rulers who gave the mosque its name, Babri Masjid, after the first Mughal emperor, Babur. But in 1949, a Ram idol mysteriously appeared in the mosque—actually placed there by Hindu nationalists[35]—arousing such expressions of fervor that the authorities placed seals on the place of worship.[36] A few decades later, this issue, even though it had receded into the background, remained as compelling as ever, given the immense popularity of Ram, especially in northern India.[37]

In the mid-1980s, the VHP therefore reactivated the Ayodhya movement, which significantly came to a head in another election year, 1989. The BJP, finally convinced of the strategic relevance of the agitation, then became actively involved in it. The BJP's popularity increased as a result, and the party went from two seats in 1984 to eighty-five in 1989, as shown in table 1.1.

Immediately after the 1989 election, the BJP decided to back V. P. Singh, a Congress dissident who had caused a split in the party and campaigned against Rajiv Gandhi in the name of fighting corruption at the highest level of the state. (Rajiv was accused at the time of taking

TABLE 1.1. BJP performance in general elections, 1984–2009 (seats and % of the vote)

1984 BJP	1989 BJP	1991 BJP	1996 BJP	1998 BJP	1999 BJP	2004 BJP	2009 BJP
2 (7.4)	85 (11.4)	119 (20.1)	160 (20.29)	178 (25.59)	182 (23.75)	138 (22.16)	116 (18.84)

Source: Election Commission of India.

kickbacks from a Swedish arms manufacturer, Bofors.) V. P. Singh's party, the Janata Dal, had won the most votes but did not have a majority in parliament. To help it defeat Congress, the BJP had to take part in a very disparate parliamentary coalition (alongside communists from the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)]) that enabled V. P. Singh to become prime minister. But that did not induce it to dilute its ideology any more than in 1977–1979. In 1990, BJP president L. K. Advani even launched a huge "chariot procession" (Rath Yatra) throughout India that aimed to mobilize Hindus in support of the (re)construction of a temple in Ayodhya, despite a Supreme Court ruling that defended the status quo.[38] This Rath Yatra degenerated into communal rioting in several towns and cities. Advani was arrested before reaching Ayodhya, his final destination, but some of his supporters managed to storm the Babri Masjid. The police crackdown resulted in about a dozen deaths, giving the Hindu nationalist movement its first martyrs. Their ashes were paraded throughout India—provoking more riots. The BJP withdrew its support for the V. P. Singh government as soon as Advani was arrested, precipitating early elections in 1991 in which the party went from 85 to 119 seats.

This radical phase culminated with the demolition of the Babri Masjid by Hindu nationalist extremists on December 6, 1992. The BJP leadership claimed the episode was an instance of spontaneous activism, whereas the report by the commission of inquiry—the conclusions of which only became known owing to leaks—shows that the BJP, which governed Uttar Pradesh at the time, had taken part in orchestrating the destruction.[39]

Having made unprecedented gains on the strength of its radical stance, the BJP moderated its discourse as of 1996 for other reasons.

That year, the BJP won the general elections with 160 seats in the Lok Sabha, but A. B. Vajpayee, the most popular of its leaders, was unable to cobble together a majority coalition when called on to form a government. L. K. Advani would later recall that moment as a turning point: "Though we were the largest party, we failed to form a government. It was felt that on an ideological basis we couldn't go further. So we embarked on the course of alliance-based coalitions."[40] The BJP's partners within coalitions led by that party—in power and in the opposition as of 1998—were largely responsible for toning down its discourse.

The BJP's Forced Moderation (1998–2014)

The BJP clearly shifted toward a more moderate stance as of 1998 when the party, in the wake of early elections, again assumed first place with 178 seats. This time, its leaders took pains to reassure their potential partners in order to form the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), a coalition comprising about a dozen regional parties, some of which had no desire to alienate their Muslim voters. The BJP and its partners thus drew up a "National Agenda for Government" on the basis of which Vajpayee was able to form a government in March 1998. Mainstays of the BJP platform were deleted from this road map, foremost among them the idea of (re)building a temple in Ayodhya. It also abandoned the idea of abolishing article 370 of the Constitution, which granted a degree of autonomy to Jammu and Kashmir and which the BJP considered a cause of separatism, and of introducing a uniform civil code by which the shariat would cease to be a source of law. Keen to minimize the Hindu nationalist dimension of the BJP, Advani emphasized the aim of "good governance" that any ideology could adapt to: "A large area of governance has little to do with ideology—any ideology—except the overriding principle of national interests. Indeed, good governance in most spheres of national life becomes possible only when it is de-ideologized and de-politicized."[41]

In 1999, on the occasion of new early elections due to the defection of an NDA component, the BJP gave up the idea of having a separate election manifesto. The one established together with their NDA partners

contained none of the contentious issues mentioned above, and the Vaj-payee government did not try to revisit them.[42] After the BJP's defeat at the polls in 2004, the party strove to further its coalition policy and thereby preserve the NDA's cohesion. But with the approach of the 2014 elections, the main issue facing the BJP was precisely that of alliances. On one hand, Advani—who had shifted to the center after Vajpayee's retirement left a gap—continued to argue that the BJP needed allies and that it had to dilute its ideology to secure them. On the other, the RSS and most of the party cadres—who moreover came from this organization—were prepared to lose partners for the sake of mobilizing the Hindu majority. This strategy ended up taking the fore and explains how Narendra Modi came to be chosen as BJP candidate for prime minister, in particular owing to the Sangh Parivar's desire to overcome the sociological limits of the Hindu nationalist electoral base by playing the populist card.

The Social Profile of Hindu Nationalism

From the very start, the Hindu nationalist movement has been borne by the upper castes due to the social conservatism it promotes. Indeed, while in theory it aims to abolish the "nation-dividing" caste system, such an ambition does not rule out a strong adherence to Brahminical values and the Hindu traditional social order. Deendayal Upadhyaya, the most prominent postindependence Hindu nationalist ideologue, claimed that the original caste system, known as the *varna vyavastha*, needed to be restored in its pristine form. In his book *Integral Humanism*, published in 1965, he argues that "society is 'self-born'" and forms an "organic unity" inherited from a caste-based antiquarian arrangement that should not be disturbed: "In our concept of four castes, they are thought of as an analogous to the different limbs of Virat-Purusha.[43] . . . These limbs are not only complementary to one another, but even further, there is individuality, unity. There is a complete identity of interest, identity of belonging."[44] This social harmony is necessarily hierarchical, as evident from the metaphor of the body inherent in the Virat-Purusha (where the Brahmin comes from the mouth whereas the Shudra was born from the feet), but it should not be disturbed by outside forces—at least,

not by the state, a traditionally weak institution for Upadhyaya.[45] Attached as they are to the social status quo, Hindu nationalists could only be hostile to positive discrimination. They found these measures particularly irritating when such efforts set castes against one another, as during the mobilization brought about by the implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations, thereby hampering the Sangh Parivar's efforts to unite the Hindu majority behind a common cause.

Resisting Positive Discrimination toward Lower Castes

When on August 7, 1990, Prime Minister V. P. Singh announced he would implement the recommendations of the Mandal Commission, the RSS reacted vehemently. Its English-language weekly magazine, *The Organiser*, called it a reactivation of the "caste war" that was a source of division in a nation that the Sangh was striving to unify over and above caste and class differences. One editorialist even wrote: "The havoc the politics of reservation is playing with the social fabric is unimaginable. It provides a premium for mediocrity, encourages brain drain[46] and sharpens caste-divide."[47] *The Organiser* then came to embrace the cause of the upper castes. Another columnist, for instance, wrote of "an urgent need to build up moral and spiritual forces to counter any fall-out from an expected Shudra revolution."[48] The RSS high command naturally followed the same line. In 1993, the secretary-general of the movement, H. V. Seshadri, in a blend of threats and paternalism, pronounced that

> in any confrontation with the rest of the society, the weaker sections always stand to lose. It is only with the goodwill and cooperation of the entire society that they can get the necessary opportunities to raise themselves up. . . . And this is possible only when the society becomes imbued with a spirit of oneness and harmony among all sections just as a weak limb can get strengthened only when the entire bodily life-force is quite active and ensures that the body goes out to continuously nurture that limb. This is exactly how the Hindutva works in the case of our society.[49]

As mentioned above, a social welfare mission aiming to defuse lower-caste demands had already been entrusted to one of the more recent Sangh Parivar branches, Seva Bharti, which gained momentum and exploited the desire for Sanskritization among certain low castes.[50] M. N. Srinivas has defined "Sanskritization" as "the process in which a 'low' Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual, ideology and way of life in the direction of a high, and frequently, 'twice-born' caste that is the Brahmins, but also the Kshatriyas or even the Vaishyas."[51] But many Dalits and OBCs wanted more than to imitate Brahmins: in the late twentieth century, symbols were no longer enough. What they were more interested in were jobs and elected representatives defending their cause in parliament.

The BJP, which could no longer disregard OBCs, who made up 52 percent of the population and therefore of the electorate, was faced with a dilemma: if it did nothing for them, it was destined to remain in the opposition; if it defended quotas, it would lose a large portion of its traditional base made up of upper castes. Paralyzed, BJP leaders did not dare attack openly V. P. Singh's decision to implement the recommendations of the Mandal Commission so as not to alienate OBC voters. They instead discreetly backed students demonstrating against Mandal.[52] Then, the party experimented with three strategies, sometimes in succession, sometimes simultaneously. It first suggested replacing caste-based quotas by others based on income.[53] Second, in autumn 1990, the BJP attempted to divert lower-caste attention to quota policies by relaunching the Ayodhya movement. BJP president L. K. Advani himself led the Rath Yatra, mentioned previously, to unify Hindus of all castes behind the issue of Lord Ram's birthplace on which the Babri Masjid supposedly stood. The BJP thus hoped to put caste divisions aside and encourage the OBCs to view themselves as Hindus first and foremost. If the aim of the Rath Yatra was thus to defuse caste tensions, in practice it was also the moment that many upper-caste Hindus would choose to get behind the BJP—on the pretense of defending their religion but also because they saw it as a party that was against quotas for the lower castes. But upper-caste support was nowhere sufficient, not even in the North, where they were in greater numbers, to ensure the BJP a majority.

Hence the third strand of the party strategy, which was to orient its discourse to a more favorable stance on the quotas recommended by the Mandal Commission, after the 1993 regional elections, at which time the party's association with upper-caste Hindus proved to be crippling. In 1993, the BJP lost the elections in Uttar Pradesh and in Madhya Pradesh—which it had governed since the early 1990s—to an alliance of lower-caste parties (the Samajwadi Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party), in the first instance, and to the Congress, in the second instance. A debate immediately ensued between BJP leaders in favor of opening the party to the lower castes and those who remained true to the RSS organicist (and therefore hierarchical) ideal, a stance in which there was no room for positive discrimination. The chief advocate of the first strategy, K. N. Govindacharya, called the policy to which caste was to be the principal application "social engineering." He was instantly criticized by other BJP leaders who objected on principle to any artificial transformation of a social order that they described as potentially harmonious. According to them, Govindacharya's approach had the same "casteist" drift as the Mandal Report. A prominent figure of this group, Murli Manohar Joshi, a former BJP president, came out against "social engineering" in general—even for the SCs—viewing it as a factor of economic stagnation.[54] Lower-caste leaders were nevertheless co-opted into the party apparatus in the wake of the 1993 elections. Hukumdev Narain Yadav (an Ahir [OBC]) was thus appointed to the National Executive in January 1994, and Uma Bharti (a Lodhi [OBC]) was made head of the Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha (the BJP youth wing). The BJP nevertheless remained a party of upper castes from the standpoint of the social background of both its cadres and its elected officials. The proportion of BJP OBC MPs from the Hindi belt dropped back down from 20 percent in 1998 to 15 percent in 2004, whereas the proportion of upper-caste MPs remained high, at 41 percent. And while the portion of upper-caste BJP leaders in the National Executive dropped from 72 percent in 1991 to 55 percent in 1998, they remained a majority.[55] Similarly, although the BJP had become more responsive to OBC demands, it still was unable to attract large numbers of OBC voters, compared to upper-caste voters, as shown in table 1.2.

TABLE 1.2. Castes and tribes among BJS and BJP voters, 1971–2009

Castes and tribes	% of population*	1971	1980	1996**	1998**	1999		2004		2009	
Upper castes	17.6	6.7	17.1	23.6	38.5	46		38		34	
Intermediate castes		***	***	***	***	30		26		15	
OBCs	52	3.5	10	23.6	34.6	Lower OBC	Upper OBC	Lower OBC	Upper OBC	Lower OBC	Upper OBC
						19	21	24	22	22	22
Scheduled Castes	15.05	2.1	14.3	14.4	20.9	12		13		12	
Scheduled Tribes	7.51	4.1	5.4	19	25.6	19		28		23	

Sources: For 1971–1998, "CSDS Data Unit" surveys cited in S. K. Mitra and V. B. Singh, *Democracy and Social Change in India: A Cross-Sectional Analysis of the National Electorate* (New Delhi: Sage, 1999), 135–37; for 1999, Y. Yadav, with S. Kumar and O. Heath, "The BJP's New Social Bloc," *Frontline*, November 19, 1999, 32 (https://frontline.thehindu.com/politics /article30159297.ece); for 2004 and 2009, Y. Yadav and S. Palshikar, "Between Fortuna and Virtu: Explaining the Congress' Ambiguous Victory in 2009," *Economic and Political Weekly* 44, no. 39 (September 26, 2009): 41.

* These figures are taken from the Mandal Commission Report.

** The BJP and its allies.

*** For 1971, 1980, 1996, and 1998, intermediate castes and upper castes are bracketed together.

While the BJP's electoral allies helped it top the symbolic mark of 30 percent of OBC voters in 1998, the percentage of OBCs who voted for the party fell back down to slightly over 20 percent in 1999 and remained at this level throughout the first decade of the 2000s. The proportion of SC voters hovered around 12–13 percent. With such scores, the party could not hope to rule alone. The defeats it suffered in 2004 and 2009 represented even greater challenges for the Sangh Parivar as the winning coalition, the United Progressive Alliance led by the Congress, conducted policies that tended to upset the social status quo. Thus in 2006, the Central Educational Institutions (Reservation in Admission) Act allocated a 27 percent reservation for OBCs in public institutions of higher education, including the Indian Institutes of Technology and Indian Institutes of Management. In June 2006, *The Organiser* vigorously opposed this plan, in vain:

> In this competitive age, reservation cannot but be a retrograde step. Primary education is our right, but higher education cannot be so. It

has to be achieved. . . . The Congress-led-UPA government at the Centre is bent upon destroying the last bastion of merit in the country by introducing the extended reservation system to allow the students of socially disadvantaged groups to get admission in our institutions of excellence like the IITs, IIMs, etc., not on the basis of merit but on the strength of quota.[56]

Upper-caste politicians opposed to positive discrimination have systematically argued that they were not against reservations but to the way those reservations undermined the value of merit.[57]

The historical trajectory of Hindu nationalism over nearly a century that has just been outlined leads to certain conclusions that will be buttressed in the following chapters. This introductory section has defined Hindutva and its ideological underpinnings. It is a form of ethnoreligious nationalism that in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries came as a reaction to a perceived threat to the majority community, in the eyes of certain Hindu elites, and which was embodied by Christian missionaries and Muslims. Their majoritarian inferiority complex triggered an ideological construction process in which Hindus who felt vulnerable sought to emulate the cultural features they saw as contributing to the Others' strength. This strategic emulation, combining stigmatization and mimicry, is typical of a variety of nationalism that is based on resentment.[58] It confirms the malleability of identities when they become politicized. Hindutva values certain aspects of Hinduism at the expense of others, an indication that a political culture can harbor a variety of repertoires: the nationalism propounded by Gandhi—which also partly claimed to be an expression of Hinduism—thus puts value on nonviolence, which Hindu nationalists condemn, and places all Indians on equal footing, whatever community they belong to, whereas adherents of Hindutva have constantly tried to bring descendants of converts to Christianity and Islam back into the fold of their religion.

Hence a first conclusion: the mechanisms at work in the crystallization phase of Hindu nationalism were repeated each time circumstances enabled their champions to weaponize a sense of vulnerability, whether

it was Partition or the 1980s, a decade during which the Congress government yielded to Muslim pressures in the Shah Bano affair, when Rajiv Gandhi tried to pacify Muslim opinion leaders by reasserting the role of the shariat as the personal law of their community.[59] The idea—propagated by the BJP—that Congress's "pseudo-secularism" resulted in "minorityism" at the expense of Hindus, who were second-class citizens in their own country, helped the party to mobilize support in its Ayodhya campaigns.

Second, Hindutva is promoted by a tentacular organization that is exceptional for its longevity and its reach. The RSS came into being nearly a century ago and has developed continuously since then, both from an organic standpoint—by multiplying the number of shakha—and by establishing specialized affiliates. One of them, its political party, the BJS and later the BJP, is evidence of its interest in politics, even in the state, but the long-term endeavor that the RSS is attempting to accomplish pertains much more to society as a whole. Its aim is to reform minds to make each Hindu aware of his or her history, the threats to its civilization, and the need to shape a united social and political body—its hobbyhorse—the Hindu Rashtra, to resist the Other, principally the Muslim. The active ingredient of this unity can be found in the fundamental anti-individualism of RSS ideologues who have set out to make their organization a miniature Hindu Rashtra by disciplining the personality of its swayamsevak.

The third conclusion that can be drawn is that this anti-individualism has strong affinities with the caste system, a form of societal organization that the RSS wanted to rehabilitate in the 1950s and 1960s via a reform of the system of *varna*, viewed as the source for creating a potentially harmonious social whole. In the 1970s, Balasaheb Deoras challenged such references as being far too elitist. But the notion that the unity of the social body had to be achieved by spreading Brahminical values remained preponderant. To unite it beyond caste divisions and thus bring about a Hindu Rashtra, Sanskritization continued to be the preferred mechanism. The fact that the RSS does not acknowledge the various Hindu cultures, starting with that practiced by the Dalits, who have developed their specific identity, limits the appeal of Hindu nationalists for the

lower castes. Not only have they generally spurned the Sangh Parivar, but they have also called for ever more quotas in the framework of positive discrimination policies perceived by Hindu nationalists as a divisive factor for the Hindus as a community and by voters as a danger. As of the 1990s, the BJP in fact became a haven for social elites in danger of losing their status owing to the rise of the OBCs and even the Dalits. While the party thus—in spite of some "social engineering"—strengthened its core of traditional support, it also took on an elitist image that cut it off from the majority of the electorate that alone could hand it a victory.

After the BJP was defeated in 2004, and even more in 2009, it became urgent to hone a strategy that would enable it to conquer power and prevent the deepening of social policies that went against the Hindu nationalist ideology and the interests of its base. It was in this context that Narendra Modi was picked as the man of the moment, owing to his ability to transcend caste barriers, wielding a variety of Hindu nationalist populism that he had already fine-tuned in Gujarat.