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Bharatiya Jan Sangh at 75

From fringe to centre stage of a political theatre

by Somen Sengupta

To understand ways to combat the Hindu nationalist majoritarianism of the present day BJP, it is important that we know of its history. This article has been published to offer a chronicle on how the party came to enact political vision of Hindu nationalism within the structure of democracy. - Ed.

In India's political history, Akhil Bharatiya Jan Sangh, the first major ultra-national political party founded after independence, occupies a place of paramount importance. It goes down in history with the rare distinction of being a political entity which was active for only 26 years but was reborn under a different name with almost the same legacy to turn around India's theatre of political power. Bharatiya Jana Sangh, or BJS, was born out of the political agenda of a non-political organization, the personal ambition of a high-profile politician, and of course the collective anger and aspiration of a section of common people who had seen their social, religious, and economic positions deprived under the newly formed Congress Government of free India.

On 30th January 1948, a Hindu Maratha named Nathuram Godse, who had a strong social and political connection with RSS and Hindu Mahasabha, assassinated Mahatma Gandhi, backed by his own decision.

The killing of an icon like Gandhi changed the direction of Indian politics. It on one hand cemented Gandhi as one of the tallest icons in the history of mankind and at the same time it ruined the prospect of Hindu nationalistic politics in India which had huge potential to challenge the Nehru Government.

Thanks to the adverse public sentiment following the conduct of Godse and what the government termed as necessary action, the Nehru Government went on to ban RSS with large-scale arrests and detention, three important political personas found themselves devastated. Vinayak Savarkar of Hindu Mahasabha and Madhav S. Golwalkar were both arrested under suspicion of involvement in this murder. The person who was in the most embarrassing and suffocating situation was Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee, a HMS leader who was then a cabinet member in Nehru's Government.

Savarkar, who was once an inspiration to many nationalists and later became associated with Hindu nationalism, was arrested under suspicion of direct involvement in the Gandhi assassination case. He was old, sick, and by then almost withdrawn from active politics, with no ambition left. He by then had strong differences with Golwalkar and also with Dr. Mookerjee on many accounts. Savarkar after his arrest put all his effort into clearing himself from the case, and he indeed was acquitted in 1949. Golwalkar, the second Sarasanghachalak of RSS, an organization claiming no connection with politics, was devastated most to find himself in jail and seeing his organization under the claws of the Government. In the early 1940s, his dream of seeing India as a Hindu Rashtra did not materialize with HMS under Savarkar, thanks to the vast gap in their ideological thoughts.

Though Golwalkar possessed organizational capacity and communication skills in Hindi, Marathi, Bengali, and English, he, due to his RSS background, was never at par with Savarkar in the public domain. Savarkar, who kept himself away from many superstitions, found himself misfit to blend with Golwalkar's spiritual and radical thoughts of Hindu nationalism. Thus the marriage of RSS and HMS was never possible till the time Savarkar was heading the latter.

Dr. Mookerjee, who took over the presidency of HMS from Savarkar, was a noted educationist from Calcutta and took up the cause of Bengali Hindus suffering from various atrocities of the Muslim League before partition and in East Pakistan after partition. He was a known face in national politics from Bengal after Netaji Bose, and by mid-1947 he was recommended by none other than Mahatma Gandhi to be a part of Jawaharlal Nehru's first cabinet. When Gandhi was killed, Mookerjee was still in HMS and, seeing the drastically adverse sentiment of public and media, he silently left the party by the end of 1948.

However, he kept on fighting with the Government for partition-ravaged Hindus of Punjab, Bengal, and Assam. Even when a member of Nehru's cabinet, he was often vocal for Hindus and never felt shy to castigate Nehru's Muslim appeasement policies. It was very clear that Dr. Mookerjee had his own political agenda against the Congress Government, and sooner or later he would play his right card to launch himself against Nehru. Dr. Mookerjee was one of the members of the first Nehru cabinet.

Golwalkar meanwhile managed to set himself free from jail with an unofficial declaration to the Government that RSS would never involve itself in politics. By the time he came out of jail, his dream of becoming an apostle of Hindu Rashtra, where he would be a mentor of key policies without holding a Government office, was reduced to dust, and like Dr. Mookerjee he was also waiting for a perfect moment to strike back.

Dr. Mookerjee, after a stormy debate, resigned from Nehru's cabinet in April 1950 in protest of the Delhi Pact signed between India and Pakistan in the context of protecting minorities in their respective countries. Dr. Mookerjee, who had advocated for a complete exchange of population in the case of Bengal in line with Punjab, found this agreement suicidal for Hindus living in East Pakistan. Dr. Mookerjee, after resigning, came back to Calcutta where he was given a reception in many places. It was clear to India that a new era was slowly unfolding in Indian politics.

As Savarkar's HMS failed to come together with Golwalkar's RSS, the resignation of Dr. Mookerjee had reasons to cheer up many Hindu nationalists.

Golwalkar and Dr. Mookerjee soon met at the 3rd floor of an old building situated at Calcutta's 26 Cornwallis Street, where the idea of forming a new political party was born. In that meeting, Dr. Mookerjee was requested by Golwalkar to form a political party to protect Hindu interest, and every possible support in building an organizational network was promised by RSS. At this meeting, Golwalkar offered four swyamsevaks to Mookerjee to build the party. They were Deen Dayal Upadhyay, Nanaji Deshmukh, and Sunder Singh Bhandari. As Dr. Mookerjee was not proficient in Hindi, he was given a personal secretary to handle his office communications. He was Atal Behari Vajpayee.

Dr. Mookerjee personally contacted all his friend politicians in other parties like Congress, Praja Socialist Party, HMS, etc., and got a response. He and RSS workers toured the entire country to make enough provisions for organizational machinery and funds. Initially, the name of the party was thought to be All India People's Party or Young India Party, but RSS wanted an Indian name that sounded very different from English names like Congress, Communists, or Socialists. Finally, after much debate, Bharatiya Jan Sangh was finalized.

Akhil Bhartiya Jan Sangh Formed

DR. S. P. MOOKERJEE ELECTED PRESIDENT

From Our Staff Correspondent

NEW DELHI, October 21. THE Akhil Bhartiya Jan Sangh was brought into existence in New Delhi on Sunday by a resolution of the Jan Sangh Convention. Following the decision to form an All-India Party, Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee was elected its first president.

The proceedings opened with the singing of the Vande Mataram and the chanting of Vedic Mantras. The open session of the Convention, which was attended by over 500 delegates from all parts of the country, unanimously ratified the decision of the Subject Committee to form an All-India political organisation.

In the course of his presidential address, Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee stoutly denied Mr. Nehru's charge that the new party was communal in character.

There was deep-rooted discontent and frustration among the people and instead of trying to fix its cause and remove it, the Nehru Government was seeking to gag all those who sought to ventilate the people's grievances. The Congress had lost the support of the people and was therefore attempting to perpetuate its rule by stifling all opposition.

The drift today towards dictatorship was further facilitated by the absence of a well-organised opposition party. Dr. Mookerjee had no doubt that the Sangh would fill that vacuum in national life. He was sure that the new Party would soon emerge as the main opposition party.

Reverting to the issue of communalism, Dr. Mookerjee said membership of the party would be open to all Indians irrespective of caste and creed. The party would strive to ensure full protection and equal rights of citizenship to all minorities. Special care would be taken to advance the interests of the backward and down-trodden sections of the Indian people. He also emphasised that their concept of Indian culture was a dynamic one and did not seek to shut out new ideas.

INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT The Sangh President then referred to the economic chaos prevalent in the country and outlined the Party's programme to restore economic order. He held out the assurance that the question of land reforms and re-organisation of the agricultural sector of our economy would receive special emphasis at the hands of the Party.

He also stressed the need for an integrated plan of industrial development, which would give sufficient scope to cottage industries. The Party was strongly opposed to the concentration of wealth in a few hands and would take vigorous measures to discourage such a development. It also recognised the necessity of private property. Though, on the whole the Sangh would pursue a policy of progressive decentralisation, it would not shrink to retain or impose controls whenever national welfare demanded such action.

The best interests of the Indian and Pakistani peoples demanded the attainment of partition. That should be achieved through peaceful means. In the meantime, the present policy of appeasement must be abandoned. Also, the Government of India was honour-bound to see to it that the minorities in Pakistan got a square deal.

Referring to the Kashmir question, Dr. Mookerjee said that the issue must be withdrawn from the U. N. The State was an integral part of India and as such the question of holding a plebiscite to determine its future did not arise. He demanded the liberation of the Kashmir territory which had been occupied by "Pakistan". He opposed the partition plan advocated by Dr. Ambedkar.

News of formation of BJS, 1951

From April to October 1951, many states like Rajasthan, Punjab, Bengal, UP, Delhi, etc., formed state-level BJS parties, and from the beginning Nehru and other Congress leaders started labelling it as a communal organization even without knowing its policy and objectives. Finally, on 21st October 1951, at Raghomal Arya Kanya High School of Delhi, in the presence of 2000 people and 500 active members from many corners of India, the first Hindu nationalistic party of independent India was officially launched. Lala Balraj Bhalla proposed the name of Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee as its founder President.

Dr. Mookerjee delivered his presidential speech in Hindi and avowed that this new party would become a clear alternative to Nehru-led Congress, which was now a subject of deep-rooted discontent and frustration among people. As reported by *The Times of India* dated 22nd October, Mookerjee charged that the "Nehru Government was seeking to gag all those who sought to ventilate the people's grievances. The Congress had lost the support of the people and was therefore attempting to perpetuate its rule by stifling all opposition."

Dr. Mookerjee did not mention any agenda of Hindu Rashtra; rather, he clearly said that the door of the party was open to all Indians irrespective of their religion, caste, and creed. The party would stand for equal rights of all minorities, and special interest would be taken to protect all backward and downtrodden sections. He praised Nehru as a human being and statesman and alerted all members of BJS not to make any personal attack on him.

He mentioned that BJS is against concentration of wealth in few hands. It believes in integrated industrial development with enough scope for cottage industries. The party opposed the Kashmir policy of India and demanded unconditional integration of the state with the Indian nation.

Dr. Mookerjee hoped that soon BJS would become the main opposition party. However, in the first election of 1952, BJS fared badly. It got 3.06% of the vote with just three seats. Dr. Mookerjee himself was elected from the South Calcutta seat. Out of its three seats, 2 came from Bengal and 1 from Rajasthan. Surprisingly enough, states like Gujarat, UP, Delhi, Maharashtra, which are now strong centres of Hindu nationalistic politics, did not elect a single BJS candidate. Dr. Mookerjee unofficially became the main opposition leader in Parliament. He engaged in debates castigating the Nehru Government. In Parliament, he became known to many young members.

Dr. Mookerjee died in custody in Srinagar in June 1953. His death created reaction in the country, and in Calcutta his funeral procession saw significant turnout. However, with his death, the influence of BJS in Bengal was totally wiped out and CPI became the main voice of opposition against the ruling Congress party.

Golwalkar was never strong enough to influence Dr. Mookerjee, and the same happened with the next President, Mauli Chandra Sharma, who also resigned in frustration on 3rd November 1954, showing acute differences with RSS.

BJS had Premnath Dogra, a Jammu-based politician, and Acharya Deb Prasad Ghosh, a Math professor of Calcutta's Rippon College, as the next two Presidents. Both were non-RSS men, and Golwalkar did not disturb them much to capture the party. But from this time till 1965, three RSS men—Balraj Madhok, Deendayal Upadhyay, and Atal Behari Vajpayee—became the key figures behind the President.

From 1965, as soon as Madhok and Upadhyay both became President at a short gap, BJS practically became an extension of RSS with no direct onus on Nagpur. Deen Dayal died on 11th February 1968 in an accident on a train. After that, Vajpayee took over. His lobby expelled Madhok from BJS in 1973. In the same year, Golwalkar died. Vajpayee took BJS partly out of RSS grip with the help of LK Advani, Jagannath Rao Joshi, Brijlal Verma, Bhairon Singh Shekhawat, etc.

Meanwhile, in the 1957 election, BJS got only four seats while CPI got 27 and Praja Socialist Party got 19 seats. Congress stormed back to power with 371 seats.

In the 1962 election, held before the India–China war, BJS got 14 seats with 6.44% of the vote. All of its seats came from the Hindi-speaking region of UP, MP, Delhi, Rajasthan, and that part of Punjab which later became Haryana. It performed best in the 1967 election with 35 seats and nearly 9% of the vote. Congress under Indira won 283 seats, the thinnest ever for Congress. By the end of the 1960s, BJS had become stronger in the Hindi belt but was still a marginal force in Maharashtra, Bengal, Assam, and Gujarat.

BJS failed to establish a presence in any South Indian state, though it organized three national conventions in the south between 1957 and 1967.

Indira Gandhi was back to power with a higher majority in 1971, and BJS was reduced to only 22 seats.

From 1973, LK Advani took over the party as President. It was a time when the spectrum of Indian politics started changing with the end of Congress monopoly to enjoy power. With the imposition of Emergency in June 1975, the state machinery of Indira Gandhi led many to believe that the Indian democratic system was in crisis and there was a need for a united opposition force to dethrone her.

Thus, Janata Party was formed with almost all anti-Congress parties except the Left. There was serious objection from many leaders to including BJS for its advocacy of Hindutva, strongly backed by RSS. However, Jay Prakash Narayan, who was critical of RSS earlier, allowed BJS to join Janata Party. There was a demand for BJS leaders to give up membership of RSS.

At this point, BJS leaders did a strange thing. They all kept RSS membership but dissolved BJS itself on 23rd January 1977 to merge into Janata Party. So officially, Bharatiya Jan Sangh, a party formed by Syama Prasad Mookerjee and Golwalkar in 1951, finally ended under LK Advani and Vajpayee in 1977.

The election of 1977 threw Indira Gandhi out of power.

Janata Party got 295 seats, out of which 93 were won by people associated with BJS and RSS. Morarji Desai invited three former BJS members (all former RSS members too) to join his cabinet. For the first time, individuals aligned with the political vision of Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee and Madhav Golwalkar became part of the power corridor of Delhi, though not in full form.

The Janata Party Government collapsed in 1979, and in the election of 1980 Indira Gandhi returned to power. Janata Party won only 31 seats, and out of those, 16 were won by members of BJS-RSS origin.

As this created insecurity inside the Janata Party, leaders like Jagjivan Ram, Chandra Shekhar, etc., again demanded the discarding of RSS membership by all former BJS leaders.

From 1968 itself, BJS was slowly coming out of the RSS shadow, and RSS's new Sarasanghachalak, Balasaheb Deoras, was pushing his organizational ideology more towards the newly formed Vishva Hindu Parishad than BJS. Still, in 1980, former BJS leaders in Janata Party refused to give up their RSS membership.

Rather, they left Janata Party to bring about a re-emergence of BJS in a new political party.

On 6th April 1980, with many new members, BJS was reborn as Bharatiya Janata Party. The old name BJS was rejected by most of the members.

BJP had its first national conference in Bombay in December 1980. The new party, headed by Atal Behari Vajpayee, adopted a Gandhian school of socialism as its objective, which was castigated by many members like Rajmata Vijayraje Scindia and Kailash Narang. Such disagreement was created in the meeting that BJP had to explain that its socialism was not in line with Marx but with Deendayal. The party officially kept a distance from hardcore, radical Hindutva and, to signal this shift, decorated its centre stage with photos of both Dr. Mookerjee, Deen Dayal, and Jayaprakash Narayan. It invited several Muslim citizens to join the party, along with professionals in other fields. The party publicly accepted the secular credentials of the Indian constitution without discarding its old demands like a uniform civil code, abolishment of Article 370, etc. In a nutshell, BJS was reborn as BJP with its vintage legacy but under a different approach to Hindu nationalism.

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