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ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL WEEKLY

Founder-Editor: Sachin Chaudhuri

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284 Shahid Bhagatsingh Road, Bombay 400 038
Phones 2616072/73 Grams Econweekly
Editor Krishna Raj
Senior Assistant Editor Padma Prakash
Assistant Editor Rustam Singh
Editorial Staff Cleatus Antony, Prabha Pillai
Gautam Navlakha (Delhi)
Circulation A S Shetty, B S Sharma
Advertisement Manager S G S Subramanian
Manager K Vijayakumar

EPW RESEARCH FOUNDATION
C 212, Akurli Industrial Estate, Kandivli (East).
Bombay 400 101 Phone 8887482
Director
S L Shetty

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Irresponsible

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Rajput Hindutva

Constructing parallel and complementary versions of Hindutva is not an easy project by any means. But the BJP's performance in the Rajasthan assembly elections in 1993 indicates that this was precisely the factor which contributed to its success. Bhairon Singh Shekawat was able to transform the basis of rajput Hinduism into a movement for rajput Hindutva, not by harping on the destruction of the Ram mandir but by appealing to the cultural sensibilities of the electorate. 635

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Where the BJP Survived

Rajasthan Assembly Elections, 1993

Rob Jenkins

BJP's success in Rajasthan is largely attributable to Shekhawat's ability to translate the essence of Hindutva into Rajasthan's unique political idiom. Instead of harping on the destruction of the Ram mandir, he played on the cultural sensibilities of the electorate to transform that basis of rajput Hinduism into a movement for a 'rajput Hindutva'.

Bhairon Singh [Shekhawat] talks like a socialist, functions like a Congressman, and uses the RSS network to counter his hardline opponents in the BJP. You may have noticed: whether they like him or not, everyone in Rajasthan's political establishment is in awe of him.

—A senior IAS officer (Rajasthan cadre)

A MOOD of optimism pervaded the Rajasthan Congress going into last November's assembly election. It persisted throughout most of the campaign. As it happened the party leaders' confidence was misplaced. The problem was that it was based on at least three faulty premises. First, that the influx of jat leaders into the party, a side-effect of the Janata Dal's slow disintegration over the previous three years, could bring the party back to power. Second, that in the absence of any perceptible Ram 'lehar' the BJP's support in a politically quiescent state like Rajasthan would be revealed as extremely shallow. And third, that the prospect of coming to power combined with judicious political management from the high command in Delhi would engender at least a temporary truce among the party's warring factions. With the benefit of hindsight, all these seem patently false, even a bit sad in their naivete. But to make sense of what this failure of judgment says about the nature and future of politics in Rajasthan, we must examine the genesis and consequences of each assumption from a slightly longer-term perspective.

FLAWED PREMISES

Let us begin with the results themselves. The clearest outcome is that both of the state's main parties improved over their 1990 performances. Congress went from 50 seats and 33.3 per cent of the vote to 76 seats and a 38.1 per cent vote share. The BJP, contesting all 199 seats up for grabs—it ran only 128 candidates in 1990—increased its strength in the house from 85 to 95, and its share of the popular vote from 25.5 per cent to 38.7 per cent. The other gainer was the 'independent' column, which grew from eight seats to 21, though most of these—between 13 and 18, depending on how you count—were disgruntled Congressmen. The main loser of course was the

Janata Dal, which plummeted from 56 seats to just six, and from 22.3 per cent of the vote to a meagre 6.6 per cent.

Any attempt to analyse electoral data by breaking the state into its constituent regions will be slightly arbitrary. Using historical entities—Marwar, Mewar, Shekhawati, Bharatpur, Hadaoti, etc—conceals important political and economic changes that have taken place since independence. Similarly, to simply divide the state into the six divisions used in state administration—i.e., Ajmer, Bikaner, Jaipur, Jodhpur, Kota, and Udaipur—also fails to take proper account of complex historical and social realities. What we can say, however, is that the political map of Rajasthan has been altered substantially since 1990, when the eastern plains and southern plateau were with the BJP, and the arid western portion of the state, the newly irrigated north, and parts of the eastern highlands were split between the Janata Dal and the Congress. What the 1993 elections produced is a highly variegated two-coloured patchwork. Still, one crucial macro-trend is evident. While the Congress for the most part inherited the Janata Dal's base in northern and western Rajasthan, it could not keep the BJP from establishing impressive pockets of influence in these areas. The BJP won all three seats in Sirohi district, captured four seats to the Congress' three in Pali, and three to the Congress' two in Jalore.

The Congress could have lived with these BJP inroads, however, if it had been able to fully dominate Rajasthan's jat belt, the arc that runs from Barmer in the south-west to Bharatpur in the east, with its crest somewhere in the lower reaches of Ganganagar district. This was considered ripe for a Congress sweep. While the Congress shut the BJP out in Jhunjhunu, and took five seats in Sikar to the BJP's one, the victory rang a little hollow. A total of four independents won in these two districts, the heart of Shekhawati, where for centuries jats suffered under perhaps the most oppressive system of 'jagirdari' land tenure in Rajasthan. Congress candidates ran strident campaigns, likening the reign of chief minister Bhairon Singh Shekhawat, a rajput, to the period of exploitation under the 'jagirdars'. The expected landslide never

materialised. In Bharatpur district, the site of the erstwhile jat-ruled princely state, the Congress' margin over the BJP was just one seat (four to three), with one seat going to the Janata Dal and another to a BJP-backed independent. The BJP even managed to win two seats in Nagaur, the stronghold of jat supremo Nathuram Mirdha, who defected to the Congress from the Janata Dal in 1991 and whose stature and massive kisan rally in Jaipur in September had led the Congress to place such faith in the electoral magic of this peasant community. The story was repeated in Jodhpur—where the BJP won four seats to the Congress' five—and got even uglier in Barmer, where the BJP bested the Congress two to one.

As for northern Rajasthan, the BJP was only edged out by one seat in Ganganagar, and achieved a four-to-four split in Churu. These may be small numbers in absolute terms, but they are significant in that they represent a recognisable diffusion of BJP support. But it was in neighbouring Bikaner district, where neither the BJP nor the Jan Sangh had ever won a single seat, that the Congress' dismal fate was most starkly illustrated. The BJP won three of the district's four seats, the other going to the Congress. Since both the campaign and the outcome in Bikaner present a sort of microcosm of the election, it is worth examining them in some depth.

On a tour through two of the three constituencies the BJP won—Kolayat and Bikaner city—it became very clear to this writer that something was terribly wrong with the Congress organisation's functioning. In Bikaner, the electoral arithmetic of Congress candidate B D Kalla, a party general secretary, former minister and camp follower of former chief minister Harideo Joshi, simply did not tally with reality. His campaign aides said that in 1990 Kalla, a pushkarna brahmin, received roughly 40 per cent of the brahmin vote, 60 per cent of the Muslim vote, and 70-80 per cent of the scheduled caste vote. Their campaign strategy was to replicate this formula.¹

Conversations with voters in most of the city's mohallas offered little evidence of such a strategy succeeding. The problem was not with the brahmin vote, even though

Kalla's two main opponents, Nand Lal Vyas of the BJP and Makkhan Joshi of the Janata Dal, were also pushkarna brahmins. It was the other two vote banks that were going to be difficult. The support expressed for Makkhan Joshi by scheduled castes, particularly by municipal employees, was emphatic. Many were former Congress voters, but complained that Kalla had become complacent, inaccessible, and too dependent on his brother, Janardhan, a local strongman whose name was uttered in hushed tones. The few that planned to vote for Kalla said openly that they would do so only out of habit. Vyas, the BJP candidate, appeared to be receiving a surprising level of support, especially among the meghwal community, which is better organised than many others. Even Kalla workers admitted this, though they could not believe that it would translate into votes on polling day.

Kalla may have been right when he told me that Bikaner generally maintained a cool political temperature and that there was no great popular passion for Ram Rajya.² But he was clearly wrong when he added that the lack of communal violence in Bikaner following the destruction of the Babri masjid would preserve his strong support base among Muslims. Muslims went out of their way to make it clear that they were furious over Ayodhya, and that they held the Congress primarily if not solely responsible. Many spoke of a recent series of local meetings in which community leaders and ordinary citizens stood up to advocate voting *en bloc* for the Janata Dal candidate. Both rich and poor Muslims informed me that they would vote for the BJP, but others said that anyone Muslim who voiced support for the BJP was just making a point. In the end, Makkhan Joshi, whose own campaign workers admitted that he was unlikely to corner much of the pushkarna brahmin vote, managed a very good showing. Scheduled castes and Muslims are likely to have constituted the bulk of his 20.2 per cent vote share. Had Kalla been able to win over three-fourths of Joshi's supporters, Congress would have retained this seat.

Two points emerge from this analysis of the Congress' defeat in Bikaner. First, Kalla's assessment that the lack of a Hindutva wave would ensure his victory, echoing public statements of party leaders about the Congress' prospects in the state as a whole, was badly mistaken. There was more to this than simply Muslim anger and consequent vote splitting, and we shall return to this crucial question later. The second point is that the Rajasthan Congress is no longer able to rely on scheduled caste voters, traditionally one of its die-hard bases of support. This holds true even in the absence of any serious Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) presence in the state;

the BSP received just 0.4 per cent of the vote. It is not just Janata Dal forces they need to fear on this score, either. BJP's Nand Lal Vyas was able to appeal to large segments of scheduled caste voters, especially those that tend to strive assertively for upward mobility. Throughout the state, in fact, the BJP showed itself quite capable of winning in areas with high proportions of scheduled castes. Of the 12 constituencies with a scheduled caste population over 23.4 per cent, the BJP won nine. Of the 31 constituencies reserved for scheduled castes, the BJP captured a remarkable 23, including Bikaner district's Nokha constituency. The Congress could manage just five, while independents took three. It is hard to imagine that the Rajasthan Congress' failure to initiate any kind of coherent programme during president's rule for the economic and social betterment of the state's scheduled castes—or even to articulate a credible election promise during the campaign—was not at least partially responsible for its declining support among this crucial constituency. It is, moreover, just as difficult to believe that this failure itself did not flow from a misplaced confidence that the jat vote would deliver the Congress back to power.

The BJP's victory in the neighbouring Kolayat constituency also offers a revealing glimpse into the flawed premises on which Congress' pre-poll optimism was based. The implicit assumption behind the party's faith in the jat influx was a belief that the Congress organisation was uniquely suited to absorbing new entrants, in this case those from the Janata Dal. This turned out not to be the case. While heavyweights like Nathuram Mirdha, who was an MP and union minister in the National Front government, had little trouble getting elected, the former Janata Dal MLAs who joined the Congress fold were on the whole not so successful. Of the 14 that contested from the same constituencies as in 1990, only one was elected. This compares poorly to the four-for-13 performance of the BJP. To the BJP tally must be added two former independent MLAs who contested and won as BJP candidates, as well as the case of Ganga Ram Chaudhary, who defected from the Janata Dal to the Congress only to be denied a ticket thanks to Pradesh Congress Committee (PCC) president Parasram Maderna's fear of a strong jat rival within the party in the Jodhpur region. Chaudhary was supported as an independent by the BJP from Barmer constituency and won easily. Kolayat was one of the four constituencies where Janata Dal converts contested and won on the BJP symbol. The candidate himself, Devi Singh Bhati, a minister in Shekhawat's 1990-92 government who has again received a cabinet

berth, is living proof that the BJP has few scruples about bringing disreputable elements into its ranks.

A tour through Kolayat quickly reveals that Bhati and his henchmen exert a weighty influence on public life in the constituency. The extreme reluctance of voters to discuss their political preferences was in marked contrast to the forthright opinions expressed by their counterparts in neighbouring Lunkaransar or Bikaner. Even BJP workers, themselves hesitant to talk, admitted the reason was fear. It is not just the rural voter who feels the victim of Bhati's intimidation. A frequently recounted story in Rajasthan is how Bhati once slapped the face of the state revenue secretary for refusing to transfer some of his favourite patwaris and other officials to lucrative posts. The point is that Shekhawat knew a winner when he saw one and despite Bhati's unsavoury past was able to accommodate him without fomenting debilitating factionalism within the party. The Congress can hardly take the moral highground when it comes to letting in anti-social elements. But the fact is that the party is no longer as well-equipped to translate new entrants—whether fair or foul—into seats in the assembly. The man who ran against Bhati is himself an example of the less-than-saintly figures the Congress is capable of accommodating. Though not a newcomer to the party, his candidacy does help to illustrate the third fallacy on which the Congress' optimism was based, namely, that judicious central intervention could keep factionalism within reasonable bounds.

Hukma Ram Bishnoi was selected to represent the party in Kolayat partly because he had the money and muscle power to match Devi Singh Bhati, but more importantly because he was a protege of Haryana boss Bhajan Lal. While Bishnoi himself may not have cost the party this seat—Bhati was pretty well ensconced—Bhajan Lal's influence in the state as a whole, ostensibly in the role of peacemaker, was responsible for unravelling virtually all of the carefully constructed arrangements brokered during the late summer months by the All India Congress Committee (AICC) general secretary in charge of Rajasthan affairs, Ahmed Patel. Patel, it is widely acknowledged, had achieved a modicum of stability in the faction-ridden party. This is what provided the illusion of unity and therefore a belief that intervention from the central party had taken a benign turn. But no sooner was the process of preparing lists of party nominees underway, this facade was stripped off to reveal intense struggle for pre-eminence in the party.

By far, the most egregious example of alleged peacemakers turned would-be kingmakers was the large-scale distribu-

of party tickets to family members of political bosses whose power emanates from Delhi. Buta Singh, who is not native to Rajasthan but holds a Lok Sabha seat from the state, procured a ticket for his son, Lovely. Balram Jakhar, also an outlier MP, got two of his nephews accommodated. These three were defeated, as were the relatives of several union ministers who are actually from Rajasthan, but whose inflated influence in the ticket-distribution process was mainly due to their proximity to the prime ministerial camp. These include Abrar Ahmed and Rajesh Pilot, both of whom managed tickets for their wives. Both lost. But the 'kith-and-kin factor', as it came to be known, was just the most visible symbol of a deeper malaise, a side show to a dazzling display of sabotage, convoluted alliances, sour, and unprecedented levels of campaign expenditure.

Most importantly, the failure of the Congress to overcome its internal divisions during ticket distribution and the campaign was intimately bound up with the recent history of the state party's relationship with the powers that be in Delhi. Madan Patel's handiwork had spread only a thin veneer over years of enmity. By the time the elections were in sight, each of the state's two factions, led by former chief minister and Congress Legislature Party (CLP) leader Harideo Joshi and PCC president Parasram Maderna, as well as smaller satellite groups revolving around people like Nathuram Mirdha, Ashok Pilot and Rajesh Pilot, had multiple grievances to settle. Their deep-seated grievances were as much with the central party leadership, born of slights both real and imagined, as with one another.

SUICIDAL CAMPAIGN

The Congress in Rajasthan had been in an advanced state of decay for at least five years prior to the campaign. The decline was particularly rapid after the entrance to the party of Nathuram Mirdha and his formation of the Janata Dal in mid-1991. This was followed by the Congress' impressive 'comeback' in the 1991 Lok Sabha elections, when it led in 95 assembly segments, a major improvement over the 50 it had in 1990. The party's rising expectations had raised the stakes of the leadership game. What ensued was a breath-takingly incompetent series of efforts by the central party to 'manage' the resulting factionalism. It was these interventions, and the predictable charges of favouritism which each one produced, that sowed the seeds of discontent and set the stage for a suicidal campaign.

Ironically, it was the attempt to introduce democracy into the Congress in late

1991 and early 1992, after a lapse of two decades, that precipitated the most destructive wave of interventions from the high command. The first phase of the elections, to booth and block-level committees, was a prelude to the rough-going ahead. Charges and counter-charges were flying hot and heavy. Faction leaders were accused of stacking membership rosters with bogus members and inciting block returning officers to selectively announce the times and places of local party meetings in order to favour one or another faction. In Ganganagar district one group obtained a judicial stay on further elections. Amid the furore, the high command felt compelled to postpone elections to the remaining 40 blocks for three weeks. This failure to let democracy, even a flawed version, run its course was the beginning of the trouble, for, when the central leadership began its exercise in damage limitation, things only got worse.

After the Joshi group's major gains in the first phase of the elections, alarm bells had rung in Delhi. The fear was that the Joshi followers would corner all the key posts and dominate the state party unit. The result might be a split. With the high command eager to avoid such a prospect, union agriculture minister Balram Jakhar, a Maderna ally, used his connections to convince party managers to reverse an earlier decision that those who entered the party after January 15, 1991 would not be permitted to participate in the elections.³ These were mainly Jat leaders like Nathuram Mirdha and Vishwendra Singh, a scion of the royal family of Bharatpur. (This was while Nathuram and his followers were still supporting fellow Jat Maderna; he later became a tactical ally of Joshi.) Also at the behest of Jakhar, and then union minister for communications Rajesh Pilot, 10 district returning officers were replaced in the midst of the elections. These were regions where followers of Joshi and his ally Nawal Kishore Sharma had triumphed in the booth committee elections.

These interventions, and the resultant howls of protest from the Joshi-Sharma group, opened the door for other 'peacemakers': H K L Bhagat offered his services to 'rescue' the situation. He was coldly rebuffed by all sides. The central 'appellate' committee then appointed an eight-person panel to settle disputes within the state. As faction leaders and central mediators, including Pradesh returning officer Hari Singh Balmiki of UP, met in a Jaipur hotel to discuss their differences, the police had to be called in to quell a fracas that began in the street below when a Maderna follower allegedly struck someone from the Joshi camp. Joshi stormed out of the meeting, saying that his efforts

at organising grass roots workers were being rewarded with meddling by party bosses to favour the losing side, namely, the Maderna group.⁴

The high command stepped in again, bringing in none other than the universally distrusted Bhagat as part of a new three-person committee of party leaders to find consensus candidates and avoid further conflict.⁵ The very installation of the committee was widely considered a victory for Maderna, since the Joshi-Sharma combine had captured the organisation at all levels and was in a good position to win in a contest of numbers. By this time the pattern of crisis followed by central intervention was firmly established, and most state leaders realised the 'necessity' of camping in Delhi. By early May, five months after the process had begun, the mess had yet to be sorted out. While Maderna had retained his job as PCC chief, the PCC executive had not been constituted. The centre had deputed yet another broker in the person of Jaffer Sharief, at the time embroiled in the ABB railway procurement allegations and unable to give the matter his full attention. No progress was made. Flush from his success at the AICC meeting in Tirupati, the prime minister intervened. The scene again shifted to Delhi. Maderna was said to have had no reply when Narasimha Rao asked him to spell out his programme for activating the party at the district-level and below during the following three months.⁶ The prime minister criticised him for neglecting the party's interests in favour of consolidating his hold on the organisation. There was some hope that this dressing down, in addition to Nawal Kishore Sharma's elevation to the post of AICC general secretary, would convince the Joshi camp that the centre remained unbiased. Instead it egged his followers on, and resulted in more frantic lobbying in Delhi.

By September 1992 it was Maderna's turn to complain. His followers felt that the nominations for the state party's vice presidents and general secretaries had favoured followers of Joshi, Ashok Ghelot and Rajesh Pilot. In response, he refused to convene a meeting of the party executive. Joshi's followers then claimed to have been sidelined during the co-operative elections in favour of Maderna's Jat lobby. What came next was the logical culmination of the centre's pattern of growing interference, which by this point had caused such trouble that more interference was actually justified. The central observers virtually emasculated the powers of the newly 'elected' party organisation by installing a parallel structure of centrally appointed block and district co-ordinating committees, which

would report to centrally appointed 'divisional convenors', each responsible for one of Rajasthan's six administrative divisions. Co-ordinating the co-ordinators were state-level central observers, who in turn answered to the prime minister. Through this expediency, the high command managed to alienate itself from practically the entire state party unit, even several from the Joshi camp who should have been elated that Maderna would be subjected to another check on his authority as PCC president.

Both before and during the assembly campaign, party managers repeatedly failed to apprehend that its mediators had agendas of their own which would doom their missions. These included union minister for parliamentary affairs and water resources V C Shukla, who headed the 10-member 'co-ordinating committee'. His desire to settle scores with Balram Jakhar undermined his position, and the committee got quickly bogged down in recriminations over its legitimacy. Following close on Shukla's failure was Balram Singh Yadav, who chaired a three-person panel whose other members were lieutenants of Joshi and Maderna. Yadav, who holds the union mines portfolio, had a special interest in augmenting his network of political contacts in mineral-rich Rajasthan. The transparency of his motives undermined whatever small trust the faction leaders may have been inclined to extend.

The instability that followed this extended charade meant that no major organisational work was accomplished during the entire year of president's rule. Being outsiders, the Rajasthan governors during this period, Chenna Reddy and Baliram Bhagat, only added a new dimension to the remote control battle being waged from Delhi. Like the reliance on the jat factor, the party's actions during president's rule betrayed a quick-fix mentality. Instead of using the opportunity to rebuild the party's image as a catalyst of development, Bhagat, presumably on advice from central and state party leaders, orchestrated the transfer of over 400 officers in the state administration. The elevation of a handful of IAS officers from backward and minority communities to high-profile posts, such as home secretary and member of the public service commission, was seen as a way of demonstrating the Congress' commitment to vulnerable groups. Yet, the dismal failure of the CLP effectively to attack the BJP government on such issues during its three years in power made these appointments appear just what they were—token gestures. Even worse, the state's star backward and Muslim campaigners, Rajesh Pilot (a gujar leader) and Abrar Ahmed, were tied down to the losing constituencies of their wives. Because they were so sure of Congress success, they devoted their energies to stacking the candi-

date lists with their supporters, and in the end were unable to engage in the type of vigorous campaigning that might have brought the party victory.

The Congress campaign itself was a lacklustre affair. After years of stage-managing of party affairs from Delhi, suddenly there was little co-ordination. This belated and probably unintended display of decentralisation seriously harmed the chances of candidates in the tribal districts of southern Rajasthan, where a frail Harideo Joshi was unable to pull his weight except in his own and a few nearby constituencies in Banswara. In stark contrast to the BJP, financing of Congress candidates was extremely centralised. As for issues, the Congress manifesto, predictably enough, harped on the non-performance of the Shekhawat government, citing as examples the closure of more than 5000 schools created by the previous Congress regime. In fact, the vast majority of these were not real schools at all, but rather informal educational centres that were underfunded and often corrupt to begin with. Unlike in Madhya Pradesh, where criticism of the BJP government's anti-tribal tendu leaf policy struck a chord among the electorate, in Rajasthan the Congress charges just would not stick.

BUILDING BRIDGES

Why was this? Arguably, the BJP's successes, both organisationally as well as in terms of its performance in office, were just as important as the Congress' shortcomings. The most striking thing about the BJP in Rajasthan is that it has avoided the quick-fix mentality that has bedevilled the Congress. A case in point is the BJP's inroads in the jat belt, which were not just a result of Congress infighting. The carefully orchestrated campaign to woo this community began, fittingly enough for a rajput party, with a 'royal', Krishendra Kaur of the Bharatpur royal family. Kaur was one of six jats among the 14 former Janata Dal MLAs that were integrated into party in early 1992. At the end of the same year, following the dismissal of his government, Shekhawat began his signature campaign on the Mandir issue in jat-dominated Jodhpur. A number of deals were reportedly struck during this period with second- and third-tier jat leaders. Shekhawat also drafted national BJP leaders to tour jat areas during February 1993: L K Advani covered Churu and Sikar; Murli Manohar Joshi, Jodhpur, and Atal Behari Vajpayee, Nagaur. Shrewdly, Shekhawat wanted to use them as vote catchers. But he also used the opportunity to convince them that these areas held some potential for the party, and that Lalit Kishore Chaturvedi's arguments that the Janata Dal newcomers would undermine the ideologi-

cal purity of the party were pessimistic nonsense. Once Shekhawat had won this argument, he embarked upon a tour of the state and managed to persuade several non-BJP sarpanches to join the party. And his public meetings attracted good numbers of jats.⁷ Shekhawat aimed particularly to attract younger, more educated jats.⁸ The ultimate objective was to exploit divisions between the jat and brahmin lobbies in the Congress. These have been in conflict since the formation of Rajasthan and its merger into the Indian union, a process in which the two segments of the pre-independence nationalist movement—the jattled Kisan Sabhas and the brahmin-dominated Praja Mandals—were integrated into a unified Congress Party.⁹

But precisely because the BJP's expansion and consolidation of its electoral base rested on slow, painstaking mobilisation of its cadre—including their integration into development works¹⁰—and actions taken while in power, we must look beyond the run-up to the campaign. During his tenure as chief minister, Bhairon Singh Shekhawat managed to draw into his political circle a handful of Congress MLAs. Men like Zubair Khan of Rangarh constituency, a strident critic of the BJP government in its early months, toned down their attacks once it was clear that Shekhawat was willing and able to deliver benefits to their constituencies. By building bridges to a select group of Congressmen, such as Janardhan Singh Gehlot, a senior PCC functionary, Praduman Singh, Rajesh Pilot,¹¹ and even Harideo Joshi himself, Shekhawat actively fomented discord within the Congress ranks. He had learned this game at the knees of long-serving Congress chief minister Mohanlal Sukhadia. In contrast, the Sundarlal Patwale BJP government in Madhya Pradesh was either unable or unwilling to operate along these lines. The result was that Madhya Pradesh Congressmen were shut out completely from the spoils of office. They were hungrier, and this clearly helped them to overcome their differences and win the election.

During his nearly three years in office, Shekhawat ran a substantially less corrupt administration than the Congress government that preceded him. The primary reason for this, according to IAS officers in a variety of posts, was that Shekhawat centralised patronage powers in his own hands.¹² During the reigns of Harideo Joshi and Shiv Charan Mathur, all manner of ministers and party bosses were in the habit of ringing up senior bureaucrats demanding favours for their friends. During the BJP government, however, bureaucrats could safely ignore the requests of almost everyone but Shekhawat,¹³ because they knew that he would be more than pleased to learn that it was only his word that brought action. Paradoxically, it was because the BJP na-

tional executive did not seek to centralise power in Delhi that the chief minister was able to construct such a centralised system of control. The Congress high command's penchant for intervening in state affairs during the Congress' time in power served to encourage rather than stamp out dissidence. This left bureaucrats uncertain of who would be calling the shots in the near future, and therefore led many to oblige the requests of ministers. No such compulsions governed the actions or inactions of officers under the BJP government, and the result was a more autonomous and efficient administration.

As for its dealings with specific interest groups, the Shekhawat government also performed rather more efficaciously than did its Congress predecessor. The Rajasthan industrial policy introduced in 1990, a year before Manmohan Singh presented his reform package, was heartily welcomed by most industrialists within Rajasthan as well as the substantial number of non-resident Rajasthani businessmen who had begun to take a greater interest in their native state. The new policy provided an array of capital investment, sales tax, interest-rate and other subsidies to investors in a variety of industries. By promoting such a strategy, Shekhawat was among the first chief ministers to recognise that market-oriented reform need not undermine a state government's capacity to oblige important constituencies. Shekhawat also managed to win favour among prosperous farming communities in the irrigated regions of Rajasthan as well as cultivators in areas dependent on rain-fed agriculture. The former group benefited from the shrewd actions taken by the agriculture directorate and the Rajasthan State Agricultural Co-operative Marketing Federation, which cushioned the blow of the fertiliser-subsidy reductions effected by the central government. In fact, Rajasthan was the only state to actually increase its consumption of di-ammonium Phosphate (DAP) fertilisers after the price increases that followed decontrol in August 1992. Dryland farmers benefited when the government fulfilled its election promise to abolish the tax on unirrigated land, which had been a long-standing grievance.

But not only was Shekhawat able to adopt Congress' tactics of co-optation, and provide a relatively competent administration, the BJP as an election-fighting machine succeeded where the Congress failed. For one, the BJP's central leadership did not impose its will on the state party unit in the distribution of tickets. As a result, the BJP was able to make much better use of the intelligence gathered by local and district party units, for instance, by replacing potentially losing incumbents with fresh faces. From among constituencies where its sitting MLAs were not fielded, the Congress

won four and lost four. Where BJP incumbents were replaced, the party won 14 and lost five, a very respectable performance. The BJP may not be quite the 'disciplined' party it claims to be. As we have seen, it increasingly absorbs politicians with little regard for their ideological suitability. But the party's national executive is disciplined enough to know that undercutting successful state-level leaders is self-destructive. Party elder S S Bhandari, for instance, was sent packing after his anti-Shekhawat campaign began to encourage dissidents in the Rajasthan BJP to destabilise the government.

This is a significant and frequently overlooked point. A consistent determination to allow state party battles to run their own course without undue interference from the central leadership is the main reason why the ugly incidents of factionalism in the Rajasthan BJP during the distribution of tickets did not snowball into the bloodbath witnessed in the Congress ranks. It need not have turned out so well for the BJP. Party leaders had been gheraoed outside the party office in Jaipur by disappointed ticket aspirants. Rumours spread that the RSS lobby, led by Lalit Kishore Chaturvedi and assembly speaker Hari Shankar Bhabhra, long suspicious of Shekhawat's pragmatism and lack of commitment to 'movement' ideology, would refuse to work for the official candidates. By letting unsavoury opportunities into the party, and engaging in internecine warfare, the BJP was beginning to look a lot like the faction-ridden, forever-compromising Congress, people began to say. But now that the election has been won, who among these early critics will admit that while the BJP may have inherited many faults of the 'Congress culture', it has also adopted the techniques which an earlier generation of Congress leaders used so effectively to overcome them? Post-election press reports often quote figures of the sitting MLAs defeated in the BJP ranks, while mentioning one or two vanquished titans in the Congress, such as former chief ministers Heeralal Devpura and Jagannath Pahadia. A closer look, however, reveals that while the Congress could get only half its incumbents who contested from the same seats re-elected (21 of 42), the BJP figure was 58 per cent (38 of 65).

Looking at the election as a whole, then, it is clear that the BJP has broadened its base into rural areas, among a new range of social groups, and beyond the eastern and southern regions of the state. It is also apparent that sharp divisions within the Congress were mainly responsible for its defeat. Not only were more than a dozen Congress rebels elected, in a further eight constituencies rebels siphoned off enough

votes to cost the official party nominee the election. In the post-election period, as both parties tried to attract enough independent and/or Janata Dal MLAs to form a government, Congress leaders learned the hard way that the allegiance of a rebel is not worth as much as an elected party member. Moreover, the jockeying for position among chief ministerial aspirants in the Congress made it even more difficult to win over wavering independents. From the point of view of the entrepreneurial independent MLA, a promise of a ministership must have carried a lot more weight coming from Shekhawat—the undisputed leader of his party—than it did from any one of the many Congress bosses in the running for the chief ministership.

RAJPUT HINDUTVA

How can we put the 'election event' into a larger perspective? The short and simple answer is that we cannot. Elections are a combination of elements mundane and fantastic. They are extraordinary, in the world's most literal sense. Analytical rigour dictates that we resist the temptation to generalise from what are necessarily temporary phenomena—the historian's 'conjunctural forces'. But precisely because elections are extraordinary, they offer a glimpse into what is otherwise obscured by 'politics as usual'. To neglect such an opportunity would be wasteful. So the short and complicated answer is that we must try to draw lessons from elections, even as their lasting significance continues to elude us. It is in this spirit that we must seek answers to three interrelated questions: What do the dynamics of the election process tell us about the potential social bases of political support in the state? How relevant are political trends in other states to an understanding of Rajasthan? And what implications may Rajasthan's experience have for other parts of India?

In no other state have the social bases of electoral support been as consistently oversimplified by political analysts as in Rajasthan. For example, the potential of unity among the two dominant sections of rural society—jats and rajputs—has occupied the imaginations of political scientists since independence, mostly because such an occurrence would make Rajasthan resemble other Indian states, and therefore facilitate the creation of models of political development.¹⁴ Yet the significance of high-level political alignments is almost always exaggerated. In the wake of the Congress' rout in the 1989 Lok Sabha and 1990 assembly elections, journalists and political commentators made much of the 'historic' jat-rajput alliance represented by the electoral understanding between the Janata Dal and the BJP. Subsequent events, however, demonstrated that the

supposed convergence of social forces was in fact a temporary anti-Congress marriage of convenience between two individual political leaders, a jat (Nathuram Mircha) and a rajput (Bhairon Singh Shekhawat).¹⁵ Nevertheless, the Congress comeback in the 1991 Lok Sabha polls was explained in terms of the disintegration of the jat-rajput combine of 1989-90, which allegedly "dealt a blow" to the BJP.¹⁶ Yet clearly the much-heralded 'return of the jats' to the Congress fold was not enough to bring it back to power in 1993. The standard reply that intra-Congress dissension was to blame does not fully answer this important analytical puzzle.

In fact, the Congress' electoral failure poses a very uncomfortable question for the party: Did the loud proclamations by jat leaders that one of their number would be the next chief minister if Congress was returned to power frighten subordinate castes and catalyse a backlash that benefited the BJP? The fear that something along these lines might happen had been a point of much speculation in Congress circles prior to polling.¹⁷ A definitive answer is of course impossible. Reflecting on this question is part of the larger project of defining and building a durable social base. And this is where the question of the relevance of other states' experience to Rajasthan comes in.

One political analyst has argued consistently that the most urgent task facing political parties in India is to pare down their social bases to a manageable size.¹⁸ While this advice may apply to states in which social and economic tensions have reached the point where containing mutually antagonistic elements within broad-based umbrella parties is unrealistic, it may not hold for a state like Rajasthan, where social groups are far less assertive than elsewhere in India. Similarly, while a Bangarappa might dream of replicating Mulayam Singh Yadav's OBC-dalit-Muslim formula in Karnataka, such an option is not readily available to strategists in Rajasthan's political parties. There is no dalit movement to speak of. The state's tribal population, though large, is for historical reasons politically different from what one finds elsewhere in India. Muslims are not only found in small numbers, but are also divided into distinct communities. The Mandal issue registers but faintly on the political radar, and then only when jats revive their demands for OBC status.

In addition to these difficulties, the Congress must cope with the fact that the OBC population in Rajasthan is even more fragmented and regionally localised than in other states. This is similar to the situation prevailing in Maharashtra.¹⁹ Yadavs, for instance, are concentrated mostly in Alwar district. Malis are found in large numbers only in the Jodhpur region. Gujjars are important only in selected pockets of east-

ern Rajasthan. Despite the lack of assertiveness among Rajasthan's subaltern communities, there is little evidence that a jat-led coalition—even, or perhaps especially, with brahmins as arbitrators—is any more a possibility in Rajasthan than it has been in UP.

Rajasthan may be an 'exceptional' case. But by the same logic so are most other states in India. Treating India's regions as unique political entities is in fact something at which the Congress used to excel. But doing so means leaving states to sort out their own affairs. Successive incarnations of the high command have been unwilling to do this because the only way to do so—allowing PCCs and CLPs to elect their own leaders through genuinely democratic elections—carries the risk of tearing them apart. The result, according to this view, would be a strengthening of the enemy. But in Rajasthan, and in UP, Bihar, West Bengal, and Tamil Nadu, the enemy is not only

in power, but is clearly the dominant force. Arguably, the BJP has begun to best the Congress at its own game on this score as well and, again, not only in the sense that Shekhawat has adopted Sukhadian methods of manipulation.

Despite BJP statements that the assembly elections demonstrated a consolidation of the party's base—its increased vote share in UP is frequently cited in this connection—the fact remains that Rajasthan was the only state to return a dismissed BJP government to power. The BJP's success in Rajasthan, I would argue, is largely attributable to Shekhawat's ability to translate the essence of Hindutva into Rajasthan's unique political idiom. In the most complete and penetrating study of Rajasthan politics available, Iqbal Narain and P C Mathur marshal an impressive array of historical evidence to argue that Rajasthan's pattern of socio-political dominance contrasts so sharply with that found in both south India and the 'Aryan

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heartland' as to constitute a distinct model. They have termed it 'rajput Hinduism'.²⁰ Their argument is that, historically, low-status groups in Rajasthan have not tended to emulate brahmanical practices as a route to social mobility. This is supported by numerous examples of shudra, tribal, harijan, Muslim, and Christian communities that claim rajput descent or close historical links to rajput rulers. The ideal values are associated with the martial acumen and rulership attributes of the rajputs. This state of affairs was both a consequence and a cause of the autonomy that rajput rulers traditionally enjoyed from brahmins. Narain and Mathur stress that brahmins were not completely marginalised in Rajasthan; land grants to brahmins and temple patronage were quite common. It is simply that rajput leaders did not feel compelled to enlist brahmin religious authority to confer legitimacy on their claim to rule.

So instead of stressing the destruction of the Ram mandir, Shekhawat has played on the cultural sensibilities of the Rajasthan electorate to transform that basis of rajput Hinduism into a movement for a sort of 'rajput Hindutva'. In this sense he is as casteist a politician as Laloo Prasad Yadav, and given Laloo's failure to deliver the goods during his campaign tours in UP, perhaps just as much a captive of his home state. Crucial in this process has been Shekhawat's status as a member of the bhomia, or non-aristocratic, segment of the rajput community. Neither landlord nor peasant nor urban nationalist, this community occupied a strange niche during the 25 years of pre-independence political activity in Rajasthan, isolated from the most important currents of the time. Shekhawat has taken advantage of this ambiguous status—neither fish nor fowl—to develop an extremely widespread base of support that is uniquely adapted to the task of grafting the Hindutva movement onto the social realities of Rajasthan.

The significance of this interpretation of the BJP's success in Rajasthan is that the logic underlying it may be replicable in other states, if not in detail, then at least in spirit. Whether this actually takes place remains to be seen. But the whole notion of fostering the emergence of regional versions of Hindutva—which is, after all, a political expression of an 'ethos'²¹—has the potential to solve many of the political problems facing the BJP. It can for instance help to bridge the gap between 'moderates' and 'hardliners', in that it is a pragmatic strategy that need not unduly dilute the essence of the party's ideological programme. Adapting its political message and means to regional contexts also allows the BJP to both contrast itself with the centralised Congress and blunt the edge of regional outfits like the Shiv Sena or whatever Bangarappa cobbles together. Perhaps most importantly, it helps to immunise the BJP from the charge

that, while deriding its critics as 'pseudo-secularists', its leaders are behaving like 'pseudo-nationalists', attempting to deny India's diversity by superimposing a false conception of a monolithic cultural ethos.

Constructing parallel and complementary versions of Hindutva is not an easy project by any means. What Hinduism means, or has meant, in the cultural fabric of any linguistic region, and how its tenets and historical evolution have contributed to the political or economic dominance of specific groups, is a matter of great debate among scholars. And individual BJP leaders will undoubtedly have their own views as to which version best serves the party's and their own interests. But it is something those who would like to make sense of Indian politics should think about carefully and watch closely during the run-up to assembly elections in Gujarat and Karnataka, two states where there is at least scattered evidence that the BJP may be attempting something along these lines and where its prospects of spreading beyond the Hindi belt are deemed most bright. Above all, thinking in these terms helps us to transcend thought-suppressing conceptual dichotomies—such as whether the BJP is shifting from 'communal' to 'casteist' politics, or substituting a 'moderate' for a 'hardline' approach. This is important—not merely because the old terms have become tiresome, but because they have failed conspicuously to enhance our understanding of where the Hindu right is or may be going.

Notes

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- 1 Interview with senior Kalla campaign aides, Bikaner, October 25, 1993.
- 2 Interview with B D Kalla, Bikaner, October 25, 1993.
- 3 *Hindustan Times*, January 14, 1992.
- 4 *Hindustan Times*, January 18, 1992.
- 5 The other two members were Tarun Gogoi and S B Chavan.
- 6 *Rajasthan Patrika*, April 28, 1992.
- 7 *Hindustan Times*, March 3, 1993.
- 8 This was the view of Sunil Sethi. See his column in *The Pioneer*, October 10, 1993.
- 9 For the most complete and analytically coherent account of this process, see Richard Sisson, *The Congress Party in Rajasthan*,

University of California Press, Berkeley, 1972.

- 10 *Hindustan Times*, May 20, 1992.
- 11 Senior members of the BJP are of the opinion that Shekhawat intentionally allowed Rajesh Pilot to win the 1991 Lok Sabha election so as to extend his influence in the Congress. The view taken is that had he given the ticket to a reasonably strong candidate from the tribal meena community, instead of a weak candidate from Pilot's gujjar community (i.e. Nathu Singh), then Pilot would have lost. Interview with a senior BJP member, Jaipur, December 9, 1993.
- 12 The argument in this paragraph is based on interviews with three senior IAS officers in Jaipur: November 1, 9, and 12, 1993.
- 13 The most notable exception is that of his principal rival in the state BJP, Lalit Kishore Chaturvedi, who was given a free hand in the ministries under his charge.
- 14 See, for instance, Lawrence L Shrader, 'Rajasthan' in Myron Weiner (ed), *State Politics in India*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1968. "Although a jat-rajput alliance is not a reality, it is a possibility. If such an alliance could be formed, the nucleus of an organised and co-ordinated rural movement would exist. By successfully challenging the Sukhadia leadership, a pattern more similar to that which has emerged in other states such as Maharashtra and Madras would be created."
- 15 This was not the first exaggerated report of jat-rajput political unity in Rajasthan's electoral history. The alliance between disillusioned jat Congressman Kumbha Ram Arya and Rajput leader Harish Chandra prior to the 1967 general election was also hailed as a major realignment of socio-political forces, as was the Lok Dal-Jan Sangh tie-up following the Emergency. Both dissolved within a short time.
- 16 *India Today*, July 15, 1991.
- 17 The question was put most bluntly by a self-described 'party intellectual', Interview, Jaipur, October 20, 1993.
- 18 See James Manor, 'Blurring the Lines between Parties and Social Bases: Gundu Rao and the Emergence of a Janata Government in Karnataka' in John R Wood (ed), *State Politics in Contemporary India: Crisis or Continuity*, Westview, Boulder, 1984; and J Manor, 'The Political Sustainability of Economic Reform in India', paper presented at a conference on 'The Future of Economic Reform in India', at Queen Elizabeth House, Oxford University, June 1993.
- 19 As Rajdeep Sardesai has argued in the context of Maharashtra, a major dilemma facing Sharad Pawar as he tries to extend Maharashtra's tradition of accommodative politics by offering a more substantial stake in power to OBCs and dalits while not jeopardising his maratha base is "that there is no equivalent in Maharashtra of the yadavs of UP". 'Wooing the Backwards': Mr Pawar's Balancing Act', *The Times of India*, January 10, 1993 (Bombay edition).
- 20 Iqbal Narain and P C Mathur, 'The Thousand Year Raj: Regional Isolation and Rajput Hinduism Before and After 1947' in Francine R Frankel and M S A Rao (eds), *Dominance and State Power in Modern India: Decline of a Social Order*, Vol II, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1990.
- 21 L K Advani, 'BJP is Unequivocally Committed to Secularism', *Indian Express*, December 27, 1992.