

THE PARTY OF NEHRU AND GANDHI WINS BIG IN INDIA

By Nick Gier

When I arrived in India for my first sabbatical in 1992, I noticed something odd when I went to change money. A portion of my dollars (I forget how much) was changed at a different rate. I chocked this up to all the other strange things I was experiencing in this rich and ornate culture. I finally figured out what was going on. The Indian government was testing to see if the rupee, completely controlled by the central bank since 1947, could compete in the world's currency markets.

The experiment, one of many new policies to liberalize an economy ruined by state socialism, worked. Over the past five years the economy has grown an average 8.5 percent and today its foreign currency reserves have reached 256 billion, the fifth largest in the world. While following the free market in many areas, the government kept the banking system under tight controls. Of the nation's 69 banks, 28, holding 70 percent of banking assets, are still under state control. As a result capital reserves are very high, more than enough to cover any bad loans.

In 1992 the government was led by a very weak Congress Party, the heirs of Jawaharlal Nehru, his daughter Indira Gandhia, and her son Rajiv Gandhi. (They are not related to Mahatma Gandhi.) Congress lost the 1996 election to the Hindu nationalist Bharatyya Janata Party (BJP), which continued the economic liberalization started by Congress, but disappointed its religious right-wingers by not pressing the cultural war against Muslims and Christians.

A rough parallel could be made between the BJP--liberal on the economy but socially conservative--and our own Republican Party. (Congress also resembles the Democrats in seeing its huge majorities in the 1960s and 1970s dwindle dramatically.) In the 2008 US election the Religious Right lost credibility,

especially among younger voters, with its fear campaign directed at homosexuals and Muslims.

States ruled by the BJP have passed anti-conversion laws that call for two years imprisonment for anyone who converts from Hinduism to another religion. In 2008 alone 300 Christian homes have been burned, 130 churches destroyed, and 40 Christians killed.

A BJP co-founder K. L. Advani started his career as a member of "The Army of Shiva," a Hindu militant service group, whose founder once proclaimed: "I am a great admirer of Hitler and I am not ashamed to say so." Mahatma's Gandhi assassin was a Hindu nationalist of this sort.

In the early 1990s Advani led a campaign against the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya. For decades Hindus claimed that it had been built on the birthplace of the Hindu god Rama. On December 6, 1992, 150,000 Hindu fanatics, with nothing but pick axes and bare hands, destroyed the Babri Mosque. For three months riots in major Indian cities took the lives of over 3,000 people.

On India's Day of Infamy I was visiting a small Muslim village in the Punjab. As a research fellow in Gandhian Studies at Punjab University, I had joined six graduate students (four Hindus and two Sikhs) on the outing. Every week they gave English or Hindi lessons to the village children. When I returned home that evening to the tragic news, I realized that the violence I saw on TV was the exception and not the norm. Gandhi's India was alive and well in the countryside where 864 million people still live, sharing many of the same religious holidays and living in relative peace.

In 2002 the BJP prime minister Narendra Modi of Gandhi's home state of Gujarat did nothing to stop Hindus, many of them his own police, from killing about 2,000 Muslims because of a false rumor that Muslims had set fire to a train car full of Hindu pilgrims. After many unnecessary delays India's Supreme Court

is finally investigating Modi's roll in the massacres. The U.S. has already put him on notice that he would not be allowed in for a visit.

Hindu militants are protesting the celebration of Valentine's Day, which has become very popular among India's young people. In 2007 a man was badly beaten by members of the Shiva Army outside a restaurant where he had taken his girlfriend for a Valentine Day's dinner. Hindu fanatics have also attacked bars and other venues where young couples meet. Early this year 40 men raided a bar in Mangalore and women were slapped and dragged around by their hair because of their "indecent behavior." The militant group called "The Army of Lord Rama" took responsibility for the assault and its leader stated: "We are the citizens of this nation, and I feel it is our duty to discipline indecent behavior. It is out of this sense of duty that we feel the need to safeguard our culture."

Calling them the Hindu Taliban, one Indian journalist pointed out the irony of radical Hindus becoming "the spitting image of Islamist fundamentalism." Religious fundamentalist around the world--including Christians and Sri Lankan Buddhists--share a similar intolerance to other religions and promote the same dangerous identity of religion and nation. For more see my column at www.home.roadrunner.com/~nickgier/parallels.htm.

In 2004 an over confident BJP called for an election and it lost to Congress. Under the leadership of a Muslim president (succeeded by a Hindu woman in 2007), a Sikh prime minister, and a Roman Catholic Congress Party leader, it deftly negotiated rough political, cultural, and economic waters to win re-election this month.

Sonia Gandhi, Italian-born widow of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, has led the Congress Party well, even though she initially wished to have nothing to do with politics. In 2004 she could have become prime minister but, in a humble but masterful stroke, she appointed Manmohan Singh, a mild-mannered economist and former finance minister instead. This act of political self-sacrifice

avoided a constitutional battle over Gandhi's foreign birth and charges that she was a political novice.

The BJP thought that it could win votes by criticizing the government's lack of preparation and poor response to a Muslim militant attack in Mumbai last November. The BJP also thought that it could convince voters that it could do better with the economy. But the BJP lost seats and now has only 114 in Parliament, while Congress now has 206 seats for its best result in 25 years. Together with its allies it has 261 seats with in easy reach of gaining additional support to have a majority in the 547-seat body.

The Congress can now form a government without the four Communist parties, which lost seats even in their strongholds in Kerala and West Bengal. The Communists were a thorn in Singh's side on freeing up the economy and negotiating a nuclear energy pact with the U.S. As *The Economist* reports: "The Communists, who in 2004 won 62 seats, their best result ever, won 24 seats, their worst since 1952."

The other big loser was the charismatic Behen Mayawati, the prime minister of Uttar Pradesh, India's largest state of 192 million people. Her followers admire her as a woman and a Dalit (the politically correct term for "untouchable"), but her rise to power has gone to her head and has led to cronyism and corruption. Recently she has been criticized for erecting life-size statues to herself instead of distributing the money to the poor. Some commentators predicted that India's 300 million desperately poor would rise up and make Mayawati prime minister. Congress, however, won most of their votes. The government had worked hard to increase social, health, and education spending, and it also waived repayment of loans for 43 million farmers, thousands of whom have committed suicide because of their debts.

Another big winner was Sonia's son Rahul Gandhi, who was re-elected to his seat in Parliament and will soon be given a post in Singh's cabinet. Raul

received his B.A. under a pseudonym from Rollins College in Florida and has a master's degree from Cambridge. Rahul and his sister Priyanka have attained rock star status, and they draw huge crowds everywhere they go. There is no doubt in anyone's mind that Rahul will one day become prime minister and continue the resurgent Gandhi dynasty.

Over 60 percent of India's 714 million voters went to the polls this month. This electorate is twice as large as one that will soon vote for the European Union Parliament. Except for Indira Gandhi's ill-advised state of emergency (1975-76), during which she jailed her entire opposition, a country with six major religions, 9 major political parties, and 18 official languages has proved to be history's most remarkable example of robust but sometimes chaotic democratic government.

Nick Gier taught philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years. He has spent a total of one year in India spread out over four tourist and research visits. See also Gier's "The Wonder That Was--and Still Is--India" at www.class.uidaho.edu/ngier/wonderlong.htm.