



## Religions and Development Research Programme

# Religious Political Parties and their Welfare Work: Relations between the RSS, the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Vidya Bharati schools in India

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Religious forces that attempt to gain political power may establish political parties, often leading to conflicts in states based on secular principles, such as India. Some of the main religious political parties in South Asia are also engaged in the provision of welfare services. Their reasons for doing so are often suspect, although evidence on their motives and strategies is scarce. As part of a larger study of the welfare wings of religious political parties, this research examined the Indian context.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which as head of a coalition has held power at the national level and in several states, is not a religious political party as such. However, it has strong historical and ideological bonds with the self-proclaimed 'social organization', the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS), which pursues a *Hindutva* agenda and has established a large network of affiliates, many involved in social welfare activities.

Based on existing sources and extensive interviews with key informants in Madhya Pradesh, where the BJP was in power at the time of the study, and Uttar Pradesh, where it had been ousted some years previously, it seeks to understand why the BJP and RSS have a compelling need for each other and to what extent the BJP, as the political offspring of the RSS, is influenced by it. In addition, it examines the relationships between the BJP and Vidya Bharati Akhil Bharatiya Shiksha Sansthan (VBABSS), the educational affiliate of RSS, in order to obtain a better insight into the BJP's role in furthering RSS's *Hindutva* agenda.

The study found that

- The RSS promotes the idea of a Hindu religious nation through its use of the cultural concept of *Hindutva*, a doctrine that holds that the Indian identity and nation is

defined by Hindu culture, which is closely linked to the Hindu religion. It reflects the aspirations of a section of the Hindu community by responding to perceived threats to Hindu culture and seeking to sustain the supremacy of the Hindu upper castes.

- Some of the RSS's organizational offshoots (the *Sangh Parivar* network) have adopted militant and communally exclusive tactics, but many are involved in the provision of social welfare services, including the Vidya Bharati, which has developed a vast network of schools – both the RSS itself and these affiliates are faith-inspired.
- The BJP and Vidya Bharati are two of several organizations through which the RSS promotes the idea of a Hindu *Rashtra* (nation).
- The BJP was formed to advance the political ambitions of some RSS members and has acquired access to power at the national level through its coalition strategy. Today it has an ideological but somewhat fractious relationship with the RSS: the latter seeks political power to push its agenda of cultural nationalism, whereas the BJP is willing to dilute some aspects of that doctrine to widen its political support base and has become less dependent on RSS members.
- There is a familial kinship between the BJP and the Vidya Bharati, whose schools seek to groom young minds towards the concept of a Hindu nation. For BJP members, links with Vidya Bharati are a means of reinforcing their ideological moorings and gaining acceptance for the BJP in the larger *Sangh Parivar*, although some in VB fear that some members of the BJP do not adhere to the core *Hindutva* ideology.

Some implications of these findings are that

- The BJP will have to address the contradictions that arise from its relationship



with the RSS and the place of the *Hindutva* agenda in its political platform, in order to maintain its political support and win office.

- The national and state ministries dealing with education must deal with the pressure to 'saffronize' the curriculum to reflect Hindutva ideology (including a re-writing of Indian history), in both government and Vidya Bharati's schools, many of which are registered with the central and state education boards.

- The relationships between the organizations studied are fragile and, while the RSS and Vidya Bharati's determination to achieve their goals will continue to reinforce their desire to work together, the BJP may find itself having to part ways with them or to re-invent itself.

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