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Marg Darshak Mandal Produces a Five-Part Manifesto Meant to End Disregard of Majority Hindu Interests in India

From the days entire kingdoms would flip-flop over to the religion just adopted by the maharaja. Hinduism and the state have been inextricably intertwined. Even today in secular India this is true. Eighty percent of India's 700 million people are Hindu - an overwhelming majority. So when elections take place in India, all Hindus, wherever their home, are inevitably affected.

Unlike the U.S. where neither majority nor minority religions are hindered nor advanced by the state, India's constitution gives right to the minority religions - Christianity and Islam - that are denied to the majority - Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism.

Elections in India catalyze much vocalization and canvassing on this issue. This year's elections did so more than ever and now, Hindu monks have entered the fray with unprecedented force. Our Special Report explores this growing phenomena.

With assassinated Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's ashes strewn like snowflakes over the Himalayas and the traditional mourning period completed, Rajiv Gandhi, son of Mrs. Gandhi and appointed Prime Minister, let the clutch out and India's 1985 national elections were revving into gear. That was in mid-November with the polls called for December 24th.

While a record-shattering 5312 candidates were courting and cajoling 370 million voters for 508 seats in India's federal parliament, fifty three saffron-clad Hindu

monks hurriedly met in New Delhi on December 1st and 2nd to hammer out a "who-to-vote-for" guideline.

The assembled monks formed a majority of the Central Marg Darshak Mandal, the ecclesiastical policy-setting body of the Vishva Hindu Parishad, the largest and most powerful Hindu renaissance organization inside and outside of India. Representing a geographical cross section of India, the monks are all heads of Hindu monasteries and eminent leaders in the Sankara, Vaishnav, Saiva and Natha Sampradayas (teaching order/lineages).

At the helm, as usual, was the volcanic Swami Chinmayananda, of Chinmaya Mission, who has spent much of 1984 mobilizing Hindu monastic leaders on the Hindu vote issue. Notably missing from the meeting were the Shankaracharya Jagadgurus who are members of the Mandal.

The whirlwind New Delhi meeting came together just two months after the Mandal's last meeting in early October, which resolved to propagate an 18-point Code of Conduct for politicians and urged all monastic leaders to galvanise public opinion. That was 24 days before Indira Gandhi was gunned down, precipitating fast and agile scrambling for everyone - including the usually sedate Mandal.

With the elections three weeks away, the monks discussed and wrangled for two days on key Hindu issues, searching for a platform they could all back and take home to their locales. The result was a 5-part message from the Dharmacharyas (honorific title for the monks meaning teachers of dharma), a concise but weighty manifesto with all the power and clout of the Hindu clergy hierarchy behind it. It was targeted both to the candidates and the voters. And it was calculated to deflate a commonly-held notion that the "dal-eating Hindus" are pushovers who won't fight back.

Decree: From the monk's decree: "Dharmacharyas of Marg Darshak Mandal are of the opinion that the main reason for ignoring Hindu interests is the lack of demonstrating our strength in a collective and organised manner...In the present situation, we, Dharmacharyas, direct all Hindus to rise to this occasion leaving aside all petty considerations and in the larger interests they should support only those candidates who will work for the protection of Hindu interests."

The Dharmacharyas' 5 points were trenchant. First: ban cow slaughter. They noted that India's Constitution was originally framed with a provision for banning cow slaughter, but has never been enacted - due to the administrations' currying Muslim vote support. The Muslims run and man the slaughter houses which provide beef for indigenous consumption (including many Hindus) and export. The Dharmacharyas as cited that from 1974 to 1980 the export of beef increased from 2,000 tons to 42,000 tons, and the sale of leather goods increased from 280 million rupees to 4.25 billion between 1966 and 1980.

Second: return usurped Hindu holy sites. From 1200 to 1700 A.D., the Muslims often erected Mosques on conquered Hindu temple sites. Drawing on legal precedent, the Dharmacharyas established that even by Muslim law, Hindu society has a right to reclaim its temple property. The monks stated that the government has reneged on its promised obligation since Independence to arrange for reconstruction of one Saivite and two Vaishnavite temples on their original grounds.

Third: ban on conversion of Hindus. Christian and Islamic forces are taking advantage of the vulnerability of poverty level Hindus and rigid caste prejudice, which the Mandal admits is a self-created weakness of Hindu society.

Fourth: ban foreign conversion monies. Ostensibly educational, social and medical monies from Western and Middle Eastern countries are covertly going into conversion campaigns. In 1977, 73 billion rupees flowed into India from foreign religious concerns.

Fifth: Equalize majority Hindu rights to minority Islam and Christian rights. The 80% Hindu majority in India constitutionally do not receive the same religious rights as the minority religions. Muslim and Christian institutions can receive grants from the government without any bureaucratic management interference. Hindu institutions are overseen by the government.

Minority educational institutions cannot be taken over by the government and they are allowed to present religious teachings in them. Hindu schools and universities can be government controlled and no allowance for religious teachings is provided. Church/mosques are immune from government interference. A majority of the most

wealthy and popular temples in South India are government controlled. Minority religious trusts are tax exempt. Hindu trusts, with few exceptions, are not. Minorities have a grievance commission to investigate injustices. The majority do not.

The voter guide done, the Mandal formulated a massive mid-December demonstration plan involving 10 million Hindus in 25,000 locations pledging themselves to the liberation of three temple sites held by Muslims and the government. Along with the plan tough warnings were given to the government of relay fasts and other measures if action was not forthcoming. And finally, they voiced a plea for unity within the Hindu/Sikh brotherhood, condemning the Punjab-secession-from-India drive, the mob violence after Indira Gandhi's assassination and promising their sampradaya's protection of the Sikhs if they should be imperiled.

Unlike Christian politics in the U.S.A., no party or individual endorsements were given by the Mandal. Just a very general guideline, a roadmap for Hindu dharma in India's political zone. The conference concluded, they returned to their bastions of Hindu dharma and started firing into the thick of the election battle.

Hindu Mandate?: By December 29th, after what many analysts described as a vitriolic, gut-jabbing, semi-high-tech media mongering and totally predictable campaign, 40 year-old Rajiv Gandhi and his late mother's Congress (I) (I is for Indira) party had been swept into office by an avalanche. The Opposition parties were decimated, and the traditional Hindu, Sikh, Muslim voting patterns had shorted out, often reversing themselves. The Sikh and a fearful Muslim vote went to the Opposition, with huge defections of normally Opposition-voting Hindus to Congress (I).

No analyst can absolutely say what accounted for the Rajiv Gandhi mandate, a mandate that is predominantly Hindu backed. The election dynamics were an incredibly complex alchemy: Sikh Punjab secessionism; the army attack of the Golden Temple; Mrs. Gandhi's assassination; the New Delhi riots; a gigantic sympathy for the youthful Rajiv; and the so-called Hindu backlash looking for preserving India's union and protecting Hindu interests.

In Kashmir, Dr. Karan Singh, the leading spokesman for Hindu renaissance was defeated in his independent candidacy for parliament. He has sat in parliament before, and being from royal lineage, he had hoped his popularity would carry him alongside the dominant Muslim party.

With the election dust settled, the Dharmacharyas are waiting and watching to see what concrete positions and actions the government is going to take in respect to their grievances. When the honeymoon period of the newly elected is over, and if the government remains apathetic, the first 1985 Marg Darshak Mandal may convene with a show of force in mind.

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