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## Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee and the Role of Bharatiya Jana Sangh in Indian Politics

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### Abstract:

The Bharatiya Jana Sangh was founded by one of the renowned political figures of Bengal, Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee in the year 1951, was one of the significant political parties of post-independent India which was active in the preservation of the elements of *Hindutva*. It was actually the political branch of the Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the RSS leadership was pretty active in the policy making and the organization of the Jana Sangh. Sometimes, this intervention from the RSS leadership proved harmful to the ambitions of the Jana Sangh, which for the political gain often lose its principle and objectives. In this research article, the role of Bharatiya Jana Sangh in Indian politics is highlighted and how it was able to safeguard the elements of *Hindutva* and its challenges is discussed.

**Keywords:** Hindu nationalism, *Hindutva*, Partition of India, coalition politics, West Bengal

The Bharatiya Jana Sangh, which is today popularly known as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), was established by Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee in the year 1951. The Bharatiya Jana Sangh was an Indian right-wing political party that existed from 1951 to 1977 and it was the political arm of Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a Hindu nationalist volunteer organization. In 1977, it merged with other parties who were opposed to the Indian National Congress and founded the Janata Party. In 1980, Jana Sangh faction broke away from the Janata Party over the issue of dual membership of political Janata Party and the social organization RSS and formed the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Unlike many other political parties in India, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh was neither an ideological nor an organizational offshoot of the Congress Party. It came into being because it represented the cultural urges of certain sections of Indian society and fulfilled some of the psychological aspirations of these sections. Because of these urges and aspirations, the party went on increasing its popularity among the masses and in many states; its presence was clearly being noticed.

After independence, the right wing Hindu nationalist RSS began to contemplate the formation of a political party to continue their work which was started during the days of the British hegemony over India and take their ideology further. Around the same time, Shyama Prasad Mukherjee left the Hindu Mahasabha political party that he had once led because of a disagreement with that party over permitting non-Hindu membership. The BJS was subsequently started by Mukherjee on 21 October 1951 in Delhi with the collaboration of the RSS as a 'nationalist alternative' to the Congress Party.

The Bharatiya Jana Sangh actually appeared as a joint venture by Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee and the RSS. Established in 1925 the RSS had already developed strict principles for regenerating Hindu culture, however, more or less maintained distance from active politics in pre independence days. After independence RSS found in Dr. Mukherjee, the most suitable ally, both Mukherjee and the RSS protected BJS as Hindu revivalist nationalist organization with the primary objective of rebuilding India on the ideal of Hindu nationalism. For the beginning, BJS laid highest emphasis on party discipline; however, strict disciplinary programmes often restricted the party building process in a wider picture. No doubt Mukherjee was the guiding spirit behind the BJS, the actual control of the party machinery was vested on the RSS leadership. Dr. Mukherjee was the central figure in the development as his presence in BJS was too much significant for support mobilization because of his all India popularity and reputation as a Hindu nationalist but in terms of dominating the party machinery, RSS leaders were more vocal and authoritative. Such distinction into the party building process had lots of connotations and it conditioned BJS's success at a wider level. In case of the Indian states, what was required was a link between the local RSS activists and the traditional Hindu leaders who could contribute from the BJS organizations at a local level.

Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee had a confidence that RSS would help him to mobilize the non Congress, non Communist segment of the population. And from the beginning, he wanted to act in cooperation with other parties with common missions. BJS put the highest significance on the planned rehabilitation of refugees in West Bengal with a demand for suitable compensation from Pakistan, readjustments of boundaries of West Bengal. It took significant resolutions on Cooch Behar problem and Orissa refugees. All of these issues were of prime importance to the new government in West Bengal. Dr. Mukherjee appealed all political organizations with similar objectives to work together against the Congress in the coming election but what was partly true in case of Punjab, Uttar Pradesh or Himachal Pradesh, did not happen in Bengal. Bengal Hindu Mahasabha, even if a weak one, made a shadowy distance from the Jana Sangh and the RSS. Even though Shyama Prasad Mukherjee was confident about the progress of Jana Sangh in West Bengal in mid 1951, the actual picture was a bit different. It was a fact that the efforts of the Jana Sangh required an electoral understanding with all likeminded parties in different provinces: Bengal Hindu Mahasabha was yet to realize the need for a national organization with a more sophisticated version of *Hindutva*. The Jana Sangh utilized the *Hindutva* agenda through non communal democratic programmes and tried to promote the national culture and heritage as an invisible agenda of glorifying the Hindu past. Dr. Mukherjee showed numbers of reasons to declare Jana Sangh the only political party to have a special

approach to the problems peculiar to Bengal. The Jana Sangh successfully promoted the problems of Bengal into the national scene and chalked its special programmes for the support of East Bengal Hindu refugees, land reforms, scheme for addressing the unemployment and increasing industrial production in Bengal. S. P. Mukherjee was desperately in search of living space for the poor refugees. He appealed the Assamese to come out of their anti-Hindu attitude and make room for the refugees. He wished that Bihar and Orissa also would come to the help of the refugees. He also asked for territorial readjustment of West Bengal by extending its boundary to the Bengali speaking areas of adjoining states like Bihar and Assam. He suggested the Government to send the refugees to the Andaman where, he thought, refugee settlement would be done in the best possible way.

All of the measures adopted by the Jana Sangh might be seen as part of its electoral propagandas against the Congress, however, Jana Sangh for the first time acknowledged the need for protecting the minorities who were still in Pakistan. No political party, not even the Congress had showed any sincere attempt to take the refugee question into the national platform because of the fear that any single attempt to protect the Hindu minorities might have backfire. However, Jana Sangh opened its membership to all minorities who were prepared to accept the policy of one nation and one culture even though it had never withdrawn from the cause of Hindu refugees in India and Hindu minorities in Pakistan. Whatever the challenges and difficulties were faced by Dr. Mukherjee in formulating his policies and programmes for a new all India Party in early 1950s, the 1952 election emerged as a setback for the BJS and for Hindu politics in general. The Bharatiya Jana Sangh was created in 1951, and the first general election it contested was in 1951–52, in which it won only three Lok Sabha seats, in line with the four seats won by Hindu Mahasabha and three seats won by Ram Rajya Parishad. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee and Durga Charan Banerjee were elected from Bengal and Uma Shankar Trivedi from Rajasthan. All the like-minded parties formed a block in the Parliament, led by Shyama Prasad Mukherjee.

Although, the BJS started its journey in view of its being less exclusive and more modern than the Hindu Mahasabha, its over exposed sympathy for Hindu traditionalists ideas in early 1950s put the party into the centre of criticism in liberal and secular circles where Hindu nationalist ideas were considered to be communalist and conservative. In fact, the BJS had two divergent elements- one opted for a liberal party, capable of working within the parliamentary system, another was in favour of a more militant policies motivated by antagonisms against Pakistan. The poor performance of the party in the general elections of 1951-52 indeed geared up the non constitutional forces and the constitutional elements within the party started getting weakened. The idea of positive secularism could have been described as more reacting than Congress brand of secularism because the BJS believed special treatment of religious minorities was as good as appeasement of religious minorities. BJS belief on Gandhian Socialism and at a time its emphasis on integral humanism opened up some questions on the actual ideological standpoint of BJS and its subsequent impacts on politics.

As long as Dr. Mukherjee was active on the political front, the party successfully promoted its ideological visions. After his death the party started forging alliance with the principal opposition groups especially after the election of 1967. After the death of Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, a new chapter in the history of the BJS began. Factional dispute, leadership problems emerged clearly into the rank of the party and the BJS tried to get rid of its communal stigma with more democratic and liberal policies. For the RSS too, the Jana Sangh gave them the experience of active politics and they started thinking fresh into the political realm. In order to remove the stigmas of political untouchability, the BJS took a more power oriented approach in late 1960s and 1970s. The Jana Sangh even opted in favour of a coalition with the CPI in Bihar and in a way suppressed its Hindu nationalist endeavour when the coalition party was promoting projects which went against its principles. Therefore, the coalition politics, taken up by the BJS in 1970s might have been viewed as a departure from its previous ideology oriented politics and the state wise breakup of the vote share would help to understand the real nature of Hindu nationalist politics into the spectrum of coalition politics. In the 1967 general election, the party did well and the vote share of the party increased due to the unity in non Congress vote. It won 35 seats in total. The party did very well in north and north western states, while West Bengal, Kerala, Tripura, Andhra Pradesh and a few others had shown the poor performance of the BJS.

The Bharatiya Jana Sangh had a brief political career. But in this short period, it had significant presence in northern, central and western India. In the late 1960s when the BJS entered into alliances with anti Congress socialist parties, its previous position of political isolation had changed. It is to be acknowledged at this point that BJS's electoral alliance with the socialist parties had tremendous impact over the urban political scenario including on the agrarian social strata but the major ideological differences between both of the parties did not go well with the possibilities of a long lasting relationship. The propaganda networks of party building did not work in those states where RSS lacked the actual political strength. Therefore, the BJS gradually turned its party building activities towards a more democratic framework. However, at the core of the party RSS activists and its allied support system stood strong and worked for the expansion of the party's social base. Outside of this, there were local influential people, mostly the person with landholding interests who helped the BJS to win the election on virtue of their personal contacts. However, soon after election the party entered coalition with opposition parties in northern states and masked some sections of its ideology for the sake of power. It must be noted in this regard that the BJS had never ever solely concentrated on socio economic issues or on populist mode of politics. Even though Dr. Mukherjee put highest efforts in establishing an all India national party which would compete with Congress, BJS emerged not more than a party of exclusive interests, castes, community and areas. Jana Sangh's close relation with the Hindi speaking belt and its over emphasis on north Indian political issues remained crucial for its failure. However, the party suffered mostly due to its distance from the rural electorate. The party tried to fulfill the socio cultural needs of urban Hindu bourgeoisie but in absence of any hardcore economic and political agenda, the socio political needs of the middle classes were hardly addressed.

Although, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh lasted for a short period, but it was generally successful in its objective of regeneration of Hindu culture and the preservation of Hindutva. There is no doubt that Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee was the principle actor in the formulation and guidance of the BJS principles and objectives. His sole purpose was to safeguard the elements of *Hindutva*. After his death, the BJS involvement in the coalition politics somehow shallow its objectives and it was more concerned about the electoral gains. This resulted in the shifting of policy of the Jana Sangh envisaged by its founders. The Sangh continued to follow its objective of *Hindutva*, even after the merger with other political parties in the year 1977, and one of the major reasons for the creation of the breakaway Bharatiya Janata Party in 1980 was to give importance to its objective of preserving the elements of *Hindutva*.

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