

THE PLAN OF A 'RIGHT OF WAY' IN SOUTH INDIA

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A BJP rally at Chikmagalur in Karnataka. | Photo Credit: PTI

When the [Ayodhya movement](#) led to the dramatic rise in the [Bharatiya Janata Party](#) (BJP)'s Lok Sabha seat tally — two in 1984 and 85 seats in 1989 — it was explained away as a largely North Indian story. The BJP, it was further argued, would not be able to replicate these results in the south because of its distinct history. By 2008, with the formation of the BJP government in Karnataka, the argument turned out to be wrong.

Clearly, the south is neither invincible nor impenetrable for the Hindu Right, though it does offer some challenges that are of a different kind when compared to the other regions of India. Ever since 2014, when the BJP came to power at the Centre, the party has unleashed an aggressive campaign at multiple levels to win over the rest of the south.

While it is hard to predict when the BJP could emerge to be electorally hegemonic in the south, the right is showing great determination to mobilise voters in every southern State.

In September 2022 and in February this year, the Madras High Court had directed the Tamil Nadu police and passed an order, respectively, allowing the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) to conduct its marches in Tamil Nadu — the RSS conducts such marches quite regularly. Elsewhere, where these are conducted, there have been conflicts between RSS cadres and cadres of rival secular parties, such as the Left and the Congress in Kerala. Karnataka, particularly its coastal region, has seen a massive rise of Islamophobia.

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The [Popular Front of India \(PFI\)](#) is alleged to have contributed to the radicalisation of Muslims in the region for many years, leading to [its banning in September 2022 by the Ministry of Home Affairs](#). Prime Minister Narendra Modi, on the other hand, has been calling for a BJP outreach to Pasmamda Muslims.

In the wider context of the churn in India's polity, the politics of religious polarisation across Hindu-Muslim lines in India's south is steadily becoming the name of the game.

Islam arrived in the south as early as the Eighth or Ninth century. According to historian Susan Bayly, Islam in the south expanded by means of Sufi traditions and Arab settlers through trade.

By the 13th and 14th centuries, it began to spread in the hinterland. Social stratifications in the south have also been quite distinct from that in the north. For instance, in Tamil Nadu, Muslims of Arab origin are known as Marakkayars and the local converts are called Labbais.

Social relationships among Hindus and Muslims in the south are also deeper and more nuanced. In vast parts of Tamil Nadu, the Muslim Allah was and still is referred as Allah Swami. In Tiruchirapalli, Muslims and people of the Kammalan caste address each other as mani, or paternal uncle. Likewise, Muslims address people of the Pallan caste as grandson and granddaughter, and in turn, Muslims were called grandfather.

Such deeply intertwined cultural and religious practices between Hindus and Muslims should stand in the way of the right's politics of polarisation, but that does not seem to be the case. Strategies such as a weaponisation of history (like that of Tipu Sultan or the hijab controversy) that are very similar to strategies that brought the right's dominance in the north are now being unleashed in the south. The Asaduddin Owaisi-led All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) is being attacked as a party of razakkars by the BJP — though secular parties have been attacking the AIMIM as the BJP's B team. In the offensive that the right has been unleashing, an incredibly rich Sufi history of Muslims in the south is becoming fragile and vulnerable.

In making Muslim identity as the south's native identity, the Dravidian movement (specifically, Periyar's leadership), played a decisive role. The force and the rationale for his campaign for Tamil Muslims as integral to Dravidian identity was so persuasive that even Mohammad Ali Jinnah has to concede to it. In the 1940 Lahore resolution, Jinnah famously argued Hindus and Muslims to be separate nations; but a year later, in April 1941 in Chennai, at the 28th annual session of the All India Muslim League, Jinnah said, "In this land of ours, there is another nation Dravidstan. This land is really Dravidstan... I shall do all I can to establish Dravidstan and we Muslims will stretch our hand of friendship and live with you on lines of equality, justice and fair play."

It has been argued that given the distinct brand of politics that regional parties stand for, the BJP cannot expand in the south. But the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam have had political alliances with the BJP at various times since the 1990s.

It is true that regional parties have defeated the BJP in many States — in Telangana, and Andhra Pradesh, for instance. While this sounds persuasive, it may not hold true for ever. The BJP has been able to weaken regional parties by using state agencies and backdoor machinations, examples being the cases of the Aam Aadmi Party in Delhi or the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra. Given such strategies, one is not too sure how long regional parties will be able to sustain their struggle. Given this scenario, there is a fair opportunity for the right's expansion in the south, thus creating a new set of challenges for its minorities, particularly Muslims.

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