Hindu nationalism, as represented in politics by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been influential since the late 1980s. The party advocates cultural nationalism, aiming to redefine India according to its Hindu cultural legacy. Many approaches to the BJP have analysed its role during the Ayodhya movement, which reached its culmination between 1989 to 1992, and its six-year tenure as governing party at the national level, from 1998 to 2004.\(^1\) In this chapter, I will focus on the years falling in between these two periods. This was a period in which the BJP underwent several important changes and was transformed into a national party, which eventually assumed power. This transformation was in many ways a result of the BJP’s abilities to take lessons from its involvement in the Ayodhya movement and also respond adequately to important structural changes taking place in Indian politics. These changes are mainly connected to the increasing regionalization of Indian politics as well as the introduction of alliance politics. These tendencies seen together have made the relationship between the central level and the state levels more complex, and in order to fully grasp the workings of India’s democracy, one needs to take into account the plurality of regional political cultures without losing sight of the aggregate level at the centre. For a national party such as the BJP, which also has a clear national vision, this development implied that it had to regionalize its own strategies without undermining its key message of Hindu cultural unity.\(^2\)

Furthermore, I approach the BJP through the prism of identity politics, by paying attention to the party’s employment of various strategies in order to mobilize India’s Hindus – by virtue of being Hindus. This also involves how the BJP defined

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2. See the introductory essay in this Volume for an elaborate discussion on the different levels characterizing Indian democracy.
and promoted the very content of Hindu identity through its political activities. And most certainly, the BJP has promoted its version of Hindu identity within a great number of arenas, such as the educational system, religious festivals, and different welfare programmes. I have chosen to focus on one particular political campaign, Lal Krishna Advani’s Swarna Jayanti RathYatra in 1997. Advani has, since the foundation of the BJP in 1980, been one of its main leaders, and he is particularly known for his large-scale political campaigns. The yatra can best be described as a political pilgrimage, and characteristic of these yatras is the way in which Advani tends to fuse certain conceptions of Hindu culture and Indian history with more traditional political appeals. As such, this chapter seeks to address the relationship between identity politics and political entrepreneurship.

The main challenge to the Hindu nationalists has always been to define and advocate Hindu identity in heterogeneous India, divided along the lines of caste, language, region and to some extent religion. In other words, the party has had to find the right balance between the core Hindu identity, on the one hand and the existence of sub-identities, on the other. I propose that the concept of ‘symbolic engineering’ might shed light on how the BJP has sought to respond to this challenge, and that it also illuminates some key features of Advani’s yatra. This concept is inspired by Christophe Jaffrelot’s usage of the term ‘social engineering’, which denotes the BJP’s conscious attempt to incorporate low-castes into its party apparatus in order to widen its social base. The concept of symbolic engineering seeks to explain a similar and parallel development, insofar as the efforts to widen its social and geographical base also implied that the BJP had to promote Hindu identity according to local contexts. As I will show, Advani’s yatra in 1997 represents a fine example of symbolic engineering. Advani employed a wide range of local symbols in his political agitation, and it was through these local characters that his national vision emerged.

The challenge facing the BJP takes as its point of departure that national identity is a singular category. However, this does not necessarily imply that a national Hindu identity needs to be invoked in the same manner throughout India. The anthology Cultural Entrenchment of Hindutva (2011) underlines the need to ana-

4. Thomas Blom Hansen has referred to this process as the vernacularization of Hindutva. Hansen uses this concept to show how Hindu nationalists have used local interpreters to promote pan-Indian themes. Hansen, ‘The Vernacularization of Hindutva: The BJP and Shiv Sena in Rural Maharashtra’, Contributions to Indian Sociology, vol. 30, no. 2. 1996, pp. 177–214.
lyse Hindu nationalism in its multi-faceted versions, as it is constantly influenced by and adaptive to different local contexts.\(^5\) Similarly, Peggy Froerer has examined the expansion of various (RSS) activities, such as educational schemes and welfare programmes among Adivasis in Chhattisgarh.\(^6\) Although there are good reasons to assume that the BJP benefits politically from such grass roots activities, I am more concerned with the level of party politics and election campaigns. As such, Badri Narayan’s detailed study of the BJP’s appeals to Dalit identity in Uttar Pradesh is worth noting. Narayan focuses on the way in which the BJP has appropriated Dalit icons and reinterpreted them within a Hindu nationalist framework. Furthermore, these reinterpreted icons are the ones utilized by the party when it seeks to attract Dalit voters.\(^7\)

For the most part, my approach follows and partly incorporates Michael Gillan’s arguments concerning the ways in which the BJP has responded to regional diversity.\(^8\) With regard to West Bengal, Gillan delineates how the party has appropriated regional icons and histories. Through this attempt, the BJP has sought to inscribe important aspects of the Bengali cultural legacy into its Hindu nationalist universe.\(^9\) Although Gillan notes that this appropriation has been going on for several decades, he also pays specific attention to the challenges facing the BJP in the 1990s. Before turning to the Swarna Jayanti Rath Yatra (SJRY), I wish to briefly outline the one issue that brought the BJP into the centre stage of Indian politics: the Ayodhya issue. I will mainly focus on Lal Krishna Advani’s contributions to this campaign, namely, his Ram Rath Yatra in 1990.

**RAM RATH YATRA**

In 1990, Advani launched his Ram Rath Yatra, with the aim of mobilizing support for the Ayodhya movement. At the core of this controversial yatra was the Babri

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Mosque in the city of Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh. Hindu nationalists claimed that the Mughal emperor Babur had ordered the destruction of a Hindu temple – dedicated to the god Ram – and raised a mosque on its ruins. Against this background, Hindu nationalists demanded that a Ram temple ought to be raised on the disputed spot. They also asserted that this particular temple being razed was only one of many examples of Muslims destroying Hindu temples. Hence, the symbolic aspects of this issue were significant, insofar as Hindu nationalists argued that Muslims had to make amends in order to end the collective suffering of India’s Hindus. The BJP was not involved in the controversy when it began to gain ground in the early 1980s. However, when the party eventually joined the temple movement in 1989, it threw in its full support and has since then been associated with this issue.

Advani’s yatra set off from Somnath in September 1990 and planned to reach Ayodhya one month later. However, Advani was arrested upon his entry into Bihar, accused for escalating communal violence. There are several aspects worth noting with regard to how Advani and the BJP propagated Hindu identity during this campaign. Advani projected himself as representing a victimized and homogeneous Hindu community, denied the opportunity to worship Ram by the so-called divide and rule policy of the government. To a large degree, Hindu identity was defined with reference to the alleged importance of Ram to most Hindus. Advani stated that ‘Maryada Purushottam Chakravarti Raja Ram is a National Hero, representing the spirit of the nation.’ In a similar manner, Advani argued that ‘Ram is connected with the tradition, history, culture, geography and sociology of this “Hindu” nation’. In other words, Ram encapsulated the very essence of Hindu India. According to Richard Davis, who has examined the iconography of this yatra, the BJP also utilized images from the immensely popular TV serial Ramayana. The physical design of Advani’s vehicle closely resembled Arjun’s chariot from the TV serial. The Hindu concept dharma or the universal law was also often invoked as a unitary symbol during the Ayodhya campaign, and Ram was presented as its protector. The utilization of Ram during Advani’s Ram Rath

11. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
16. Flåten, op. cit.
Yatra confirms what Thomas Hylland Eriksen holds to be one of the general features of identity politics. He argues that "at the level of ideology, cultural similarity overrules social equality". Eriksen also relates the emphasis on cultural similarity to an under-communication of internal differences. This cultural similarity was, as noted previously, structured around the importance of Ram to all Hindus. Moreover, the notion of Hindu homogeneity also has to be understood with reference to the social and political context at the time of the yatra. This context was characterized by social tensions, many of them relating to caste divisions.

Hence, Advani’s yatra defined what might be termed the similarity aspects of identity with reference to Ram. However, identity is also a relational concept and as such brings to the fore notions of difference. Identity, as constituted of both similarity and difference, is reflected in what Eriksen refers to as the distinction between ‘we-hood’ and ‘us-hood’. Eriksen writes that ‘Being us, people are loyal and socially integrated in relation to the other; through competition, enmity, symbiosis or the contrastive use of stereotypes and boundary symbols. Being we on the other hand, entails being integrated because of shared activities within the collectivity’.

Most certainly, the BJP’s Ayodhya campaign was also characterized by its preoccupation with the ‘us’ aspects of Hindu identity. Calls for Hindu solidarity were to a large degree promoted in contrast to Muslims. Advani asserted that ‘Sri Ram is our Rashtrapurusha. He is connected with our tradition, history and culture and not Babur who was an invader’. Another contrast was framed within notions of Hindu tolerance as opposed to Muslim intolerance. The Hindu-Muslim dichotomy also took more radical and violent forms, perhaps most evident in the many riots following in the wake of Advani’s yatra.

Returning to the similarity aspects, Michael Gillan notes that the Ram Rath Yatra did not receive substantial support outside the north Indian Hindi-belt. Moreover, he described the Ayodhya campaign in terms of ‘carefully packaged appeals to upper caste voters in northern India’.

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18. Ibid.
19. Advani decided to launch his yatra after the V.P. Singh government decided to implement the proposals presented by the Mandal Commission, concerning reservations for the so-called Other Backward Classes (OBC).
BJP’s campaign did not take the complexities associated with Ram into account, and it did not reflect that there are many different versions of the *Ramayana*. These arguments suggest that although the BJP utilized an image of Ram that was rather vague and abstract, it still defined Hindu identity according to the preferences of upper-castes in northern India. Furthermore, this identity also had a rather singular character, since Ram was its sole defining feature.

According to Thomas Hylland Eriksen, the most important aspect of identity politics is that political symbols and rhetoric manage to evoke personal experiences. There are, of course, many reasons why the Ayodhya issue did not become popular in eastern and southern India. One reason might be that it appeared unfamiliar and distant to too many people. In the remainder of this chapter I will show that in order to mobilize new groups the BJP seemed to adapt a strategy of conveying its messages through the active use of local idioms and notions of regional pride.

**TRANSITIONS**

Advani’s yatra did generate a lot of enthusiasm in northern and western India, however, the communal violence that followed in the wake of Advani’s yatra and after the destruction of the Babri mosque in 1992, seemed to backfire on the BJP. The historian K.N. Panikkar suggested that the anti-Muslim rhetoric could not generate support over time, and that the image of the Muslim enemy ‘had run out of steam’. In the assembly elections of 1993, the BJP experienced electoral set-

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26. Gillan, op. cit., 2003, p. 383. The argument concerning the Ayodhya campaign as being designed according to the preferences of upper castes might be contested. The campaign was mainly concerned with devotional aspects of Hinduism, which are popular among a majority of Hindus. According to Arvind Rajagopal, people belonging to the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) constituted the majority of the so-called *kar sevaks*, or religious volunteers. See *Frontline*, ‘Hindutva at play’, interview with Arvind Rajagopal, vol. 17, no. 2, 2000. In addition, Richard Davis remarks that upon the yatra’s visit in Delhi and later in Madras, he spoke to several upper castes who dismissed the yatra as ‘Toyota Hinduism’. Davis, op. cit., p. 29.
backs in Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, all states prioritized by the BJP. It was evident that the BJP’s appeal had both geographical and social limitations, and it was in this context that the party adopted the strategy of social engineering as mentioned above.

The increasing regionalization of Indian politics, which was intensified throughout the 1990s, had created an overly complex political climate. For the BJP, advocating a national Hindu identity, the growth of regional parties represented an obvious challenge. Furthermore, the regionalization of Indian politics also introduced the logic of alliance politics, which still characterizes the political scene of India today. The importance of the latter aspect was a decisive factor for the BJP in the Lok Sabha elections in 1996. Although the BJP emerged as the largest party in the Lok Sabha, it garnered support only from its ideological affiliates in the Shiv Sena. In order to attract alliance partners, the BJP was more or less forced to tone down its Hindutva agenda and its anti-Muslim rhetoric.

All these factors coalesced in Advani’s SJRY in 1997. This yatra was a nationwide campaign, celebrating India’s fiftieth anniversary as an independent state. The SJRY was not directly part of any election campaign, as the eleventh Lok Sabha was elected the previous year. However, this election resulted in a hung parliament, and the political situation was clearly unstable. The so-called National Front, supported from outside by the Congress party, assumed power and was initially led by Deve Gowda. After a year, he was replaced by his party colleague, I.K. Gujral. Advani, reflecting on the political instability on the occasion of launching his yatra, asserted that he expected mid-term polls in the near future. Thus, the SJRY may be construed as part of an election campaign.

Michael Gillan has described the BJP’s main challenge in this period in terms of constructing ‘a coherent ideology and nationalist narrative in the face of regional diversity’. This challenge became apparent since Advani chose to spend much time and energy in the southern and eastern states of India, areas in which the BJP had experienced limited electoral success. There are several factors

worth noting in the party’s attempt to overcome this challenge. Gillan refers to the important role of the Sangh Parivar in terms of normalizing Hindutva through its many grassroots activities. In addition, he emphasizes that the BJP utilized several sub-themes in order to expand its electoral success, such as “political violence” (Kerala and West Bengal), developmental “neglect” (the states of the northeast), and “farmers’ concerns” (Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka).

The remainder of this chapter focuses on the ways in which Advani’s yatra may be construed as an effort to accommodate regional diversity. This effort also implied that the very content of Hindu identity had to be redefined and applied according to regional variations. I propose that the concept ‘symbolic engineering’ illuminates the ways in which Advani sought to mediate between the regional and the national, in order to reduce the symbolic distance between them. Although the yatra had a national message, this was conveyed to the audiences in different ways, tailored to suit each context, and as such, Advani seemed to utilize the existence of local historical and political imaginations. In this regards, I approach nation as a symbolic entity on the imaginative level. By doing so, I also take into account the multi-vocality of symbols, in the sense that they might stand for many things. Symbols, Anthony Cohen argues, ‘are effective because they are imprecise’. As a consequence, Cohen states, the symbol ‘allows its adherents to attach their own meanings to it’.

In the context of the yatra, I will show that Advani invoked the nation as a symbol and that he encouraged his audiences to invest it with meaning according to their local contexts. As such, Advani sought to convey that there were high degrees of congruence between the local and the national. Next, I will outline the common national framework of the yatra, before discussing how it was applied in different localities.

THE NATIONAL FRAMEWORK

The SJRY shared one important aspect with Advani’s earlier Ram Rath Yatra, insofar as it conflated cultural and national unity mainly through the promotion of certain conceptualizations of the past. The way in which Advani made sense of his yatra within the framework of the freedom struggle revolved around the relation-

35. Ibid., p. 47.
37. Cohen, ibid., p. 15.
ship between unity and diversity. The BJP released a booklet called ‘BJP’s Comment on Fiftieth Anniversary’, which was distributed along the yatra’s route throughout India. This booklet contained two statements, which at first sight appear inconsistent. The BJP here asserted that ‘India is one country, one people and one culture’. However, the booklet also reproduced a statement put forth by its leader Atal Behari Vajpayee: ‘My party and I not only recognize but celebrate the plural, multi-religious, multi-regional, multi-lingual and multi-ethnic character of India.’ This unity seemed to be defined deliberately vague, in order to appear relevant throughout India.

According to Advani, ‘no nation in the world has either attained freedom or realized its full developmental potential as a free country without first discovering its true national identity.’ He added that ‘The identity of India was, is and forever will be her integrative cultural principle that nurtures her diversities and yet unifies them in a common community.’ Moreover, Advani asserted that this national identity, or the cultural ethos of India, was understood by all the great leaders during the freedom struggle, and was the key to its success.

Compared to the extensive emphasis on Ram during the Ayodhya controversy, concepts such as ‘integrative cultural principle’ would barely alienate anyone. Furthermore, Advani also referred to concepts such as ‘Hindutva’, ‘Hindu ethos’, ‘Bharatiya’ and ‘Indianness’, without defining their content.

Similar conceptions were also reflected in the visual imagery of the yatra. The panels of the truck carrying Advani around India were decorated with paintings of heroic freedom fighters, together making up a pantheon. The list included: Lokmanya Tilak, Sardar Patel, Dr Ambedkar, Rani Laxmibai, Veer pandyan Kattaboman, Subhas Chandra Bose, Veer Savarkar, Ashfaquealla Khan, Chandrasekhar Azad, Bhagat Singh and Dr Hedgewar. This pantheon represented a very diverse list of figures, belonging to different religions and castes. It also included people of different political persuasions, as well as some important regional heroes. By using such a list of figures, Advani invoked a glorified picture of the national past, where people from all sorts of backgrounds joined a unified move-

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38. As Heierstad and Ruud note in the introductory essay to this Volume, this may perhaps only be a riddle in the aggregate.
40. Lal Krishna Advani, ‘Swarna Jayanti Rath Yatra: To Commemorate the Fiftieth Year of India’s Independence’, Press Release by President Lal Krishna Advani, New Delhi, 16 July 1997, p. 2
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid.
43. The Rediff Special, ‘Swarna Jayanti Rath Yatra: “It is the People who have to Bring the Change, and not Individuals”, Advani’, 11 June 1997.
ment. Furthermore, Advani seemed to project the freedom struggle in symbolic and abstract terms, as a singular event. The yatra had no room for the complexities of the freedom struggle, its various ups and downs, or the fact that the different leaders of the movement had contradictory opinions on how to attain independence. The freedom struggle denoted a unified Indian society, expressing its common national identity.

This message of cultural nationalism was intimately connected to what Advani referred to as Samajik Samarasata, or social harmony. Advani stated in a press release that the promotion of social harmony was one of the main aims of his yatra. Advani remarked that ‘The BJP believes that the people of India voluntarily dissolve divisive tendencies and identities in society when a higher unifying identity and a nobler national cause is placed before them. India’s national liberation was one such cause’. Advani continued by asserting that India’s national reconstruction would arouse a common identity. Moreover, he also framed his yatra as a ‘national renaissance’. The term renaissance, as well as Advani’s extensive emphasis on unity and social harmony, suggested that these virtues were now absent, and that India had left the path established by the proud and glorious freedom movement. Advani blamed the Congress for this development, saying that ‘Unfortunately, after Independence the Congress leadership began to negate this truth [that cultural nationalism represented the glue of the freedom struggle] as much under the influence of a false view of secularism as due to considerations of vote-bank politics’.

Hence, the mission of Advani’s yatra was to remind Indians of the profound and fundamental unity that existed between them. This unity had existed during the freedom struggle, and the BJP was the main vehicle in its re-establishment. Thus, Advani did not ignore the diversity of India, but he opposed the politicians, who in his words, deliberately tried to benefit politically from these differences and thereby, destroy the unifying bonds. Advani’s yatra, therefore, may be construed as an attempt to reverse these tendencies.

I have limited my discussion to Advani’s campaigns in West Bengal, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. In these states, the BJP had received minimal political support. Common to the two former states is that communist ideology had become deeply entrenched, whereas the latter two are characterized by the
Influence of regional movements, which to a certain extent are defined in opposition to Hindu nationalism.

DEALING WITH COMMUNISM: WEST BENGAL AND KERALA

Michael Gillan has examined the Hindu nationalist appropriation of Bengali icons, both prior to and during the SJRY. According to Gillan, already during the Ayodhya controversy, the BJP had decided to arrange several theatre performances of the Ramayana in Bengal. In these performances CPI(M) played the part of Ravana, who had abducted Sita or Bengal, whereas the BJP represented the dharmic liberator, Ram.49 During the SJRY in 1997, however, Advani and the BJP seemed to pursue new strategies. Since the yatra celebrated the freedom struggle, Advani paid most attention to patriotic characters from this period, and during his five days in the state, Advani hailed the contributions of several Bengali icons. In his autobiography, Advani recalls his campaign in West Bengal, thus, ‘On June 23, I participated in a special meeting in Calcutta to mark the martyrdom of Dr Syama Prasad Mookerjee, the founder of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh.’ Advani also emphasized that Mookerjee had been the youngest Vice Chancellor of Calcutta University.50 Mookerjee’s alleged martyrdom was here incorporated into the larger framework of the freedom struggle, and as such this reference also emphasized the contributions of Hindu nationalists in this regard. Advani’s comment may also be construed in terms of underlining the Bengali roots of Hindu nationalism. Drawing attention to the Bengali background of one of the main Hindu nationalist ideologues represented one way of emphasizing this congruence. The other was to incorporate more traditional regional icons within a Hindu nationalist framework. In his autobiography, Advani noted,

In all my speeches, I invoked Bengal’s incomparable contribution to India’s freedom movement – the enduring message of social reformers and philosophers like Ramakrishna Parahamsa, Swami Vivekananda and Maharshi Aurobindo, the eternal appeal of Vande Mataram by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, the soaring patriotism of Netaji Subas Chandra Bose, and the inspiring martyrdom of Khudiram Bose.51

51. Ibid.
Similarly, Michael Gillan argues that ‘the campaign honoured and associated itself with a plethora of Bengali nationalist icons. Included among them were Rabindranath Tagore, Subhas Chandra Bose, the Anushilan Samiti, Vivekananda, Aurobindo, and Syama Prasad Mookerjee’.52 Michael Gillan pays particular attention to how this appropriation of Bengali icons tended to converge Hindu nationalism with Bengali cultural legacy.53 Moreover, Gillan notes that this appropriation represents a rather selective reading of these icons, perhaps most visible with regard to Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Swami Vivekananda.54 One such example, offered by Gillan, is telling, ‘national leaders such as Advani claimed an affinity between the outlook of the BJP and Vivekananda on the subject of religion and society’.55 The characters listed by Advani were all subject to a great deal of regional pride. This is a fine example of what I refer to as symbolic engineering. Advani’s utilization of such figures, therefore, may be understood as an attempt to mediate between his version of Hindu identity and the regional Bengali identity. Advani did not push the unitary symbol of Ram from above, as was characteristic of the Ayodhya campaign. Instead he seemed to take advantage of a strong regional identity, which was then redefined and incorporated into his national framework. It was these redefined regional icons that Advani invoked in his speeches. Such a strategy appears strikingly similar to how Badri Narayan has conceptualized the way in which the BJP utilized Dalit icons in Uttar Pradesh.56

Michael Gillan also emphasizes that such an appropriation was subject to much political controversy.57 Particularly so, since the Bengali cultural legacy has often been associated with the so-called bhadraloks, a group of well educated, ‘respectable people’. This group has promoted a modern and secular outlook, and has tended to support the left parties in the state.58 At the time of the yatra, West Bengal had been governed by the so-called Left Front, dominated by the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPI(M), for 20 years. Hence, the Hindu nationalist appropriation of this cultural legacy obviously collided with the way in which it was conceptualized by the bhadraloks. This discursive struggle was also visible in Advani’s rhetoric. The yatra, devoted as it was to nationalist themes, seemed to

53. Ibid.
54. Ibid., pp. 387–90.
55. Ibid., p. 386.
represent an excellent opportunity for Advani to reframe the freedom struggle into an expression of cultural nationalism. Advani asserted that,

No other ideological-political stream, barring the Muslim League, has caused so much harm to the cause of Indian nationalism as communism. Influenced by false and foreign-inspired notions of secularism and nationhood, Marxists have sought to erase India’s very identity of Cultural Nationalism. Their contempt for religion and spirituality, their opposition to *Vande Mataram*, scrapping of Article 370 of the Constitution, Ram Janmabhoomi movement, and their cheerleader’s support to the failed ploy to delegitimize the BJP under the pretext of separating politics from religion – all these are proof of Indian communists’ un-Indian, divisive and disruptive character.\(^{59}\)

This list of severe accusations brought up one of the main aspects of the yatra, i.e. Advani’s preoccupation with the so-called divisive politics of his opponents. According to Advani, the communists were guilty of undermining the very soul of India, its cultural unity. It is noteworthy that Advani referred to how the communists opposed the hymn *Vande Mataram*, which was authored by the Bengali poet Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. Thus, Advani turned this Bengali icon against the governing party of West Bengal. Such an image was even more explicitly invoked in another of Advani’s speeches in the state.

The communists have now invented a new demon: the BJP. Indeed, both the communists and the Congress have become allies in the politics of anti-BJPism. I am confident that the people of Bengal will see through this game. India’s march to becoming a great nation will not gain momentum unless Bengal returns to its nationalistic roots.\(^{60}\)

In this statement, Advani clearly asserts that the communists had led Bengal away from its roots. In this way, Advani once more conveyed that there was no difference between the BJP’s national visions and the cultural legacy of Bengal. Advani obviously considered the BJP’s role in terms of reminding the people of Bengal their own proud legacy within a national framework.

As I will show later, this aspect of symbolic engineering was also visible in other states visited by Advani. He seemed to consciously inscribe symbols of local


\(^{60}\) Advani, op. cit., 2008, p. 512.
cultural and political legacies into his own national visions, and turned them against his political adversaries in the respective states.

Kerala is another state where the CPI(M) has been influential for several decades. Advani claimed that Kerala and West Bengal were the two states in which his yatra received the most enthusiastic response. In terms of rhetoric, Advani’s campaign in Kerala shared several features with the one in West Bengal. In his autobiography Advani recalls his visits to Kerala in 1997, thus,

In my speeches, I sought to emphasize Kerala’s contribution to Indian nationalism as the land of Adi Shankaracharya, who travelled on foot all over India and spread the message of spiritual unity more than a thousand years ago; and Narayan Guru, the great social reformer who campaigned against caste discrimination by invoking the basic Vedic principle of oneness of all creation. I also referred to the patriotic warrior-king, Palasi Raja, who organized tribals for a guerrilla battle against British rule well before 1857. I said that both the communist and the Muslim League, another important force in the state’s politics, were playing a divisive role since they neither accepted nor respected the cultural basis of India’s nationalism.

There are several aspects of this excerpt that need to be scrutinized. First, the reference to the local patriot fighting the British well before 1857 is interesting to note. 1857 was the year of the uprisings in northern India, which is often referred to as the First War of Independence. Advani here seemed to take the north-south dimension into account. By acknowledging that this local king fought the British prior to the uprisings in the north, Advani also invoked a great deal of pride in these contributions. The references to Adi Shankaracharya and Narayan Guru illuminate Advani’s strategy of conveying his political messages by appropriating local characters. In the cases of both Narayan Guru and Adi Shankaracharya, Advani’s message was one of cultural unity, which was also the underlying theme of his yatra. The references to these two reformers also highlighted an important aspect of symbolic engineering, insofar as Advani underlined that the visions propagated by the BJP were not external to the political culture of Kerala. To the contrary, they had allegedly been promoted by locals for centuries. Moreover, the symbolic entrepreneurship of Advani may be understood in terms of emphasizing social harmony within a particular state, as well as high degrees of congruence between the regional and the national. Indeed, this example resonates with

61. Ibid., p. 498.
Thomas Hylland Eriksen’s argument that identity political movements tend to under-communicate internal differences and emphasize cultural similarity.

Furthermore, parallel to the previous example from West Bengal, these images of social harmony and cultural unity were contrasted to the main political parties in the state, namely, the communists and the Muslim League. Apparently, culturally defined nationalism represented the very antithesis of divisive politics, and Advani seemed to suggest that these parties were responsible for breaking up the unity that previously had existed in Kerala. Thus, Advani construed these parties as alien to the very cultural ethos of Kerala. Hence, in both West Bengal and Kerala, Advani highlighted that the values promoted by these local characters were in perfect accordance with the visions of the BJP, and this image was further strengthened through the externalization of the dominant parties in these states.63

REACHING OUT TO THE SOUTH

Advani spent much time in the southern states of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, both with strong and deep-rooted regional identities. In Andhra Pradesh, Advani’s yatra had received a bomb threat from Naxalites. However, Advani refused to yield and completed the yatra according to plan.64 Advani recalls his speech in the city of Vijayawada,

Here I paid tribute to Alluri Sitarama Raju (1897–1924), a legendary freedom fighter who mobilized tribals in the struggle against the British. Baba Prithvisingh Azad, the great Ghadar revolutionary from Punjab, had been imprisoned by the British in a jail in distant Rajahmundry town in eastern Andhra Pradesh. When Raju learnt of this, he vowed to free Azad. In the process he was caught by a British officer, tied to a tree and shot dead. The youth wing of the BJP presented me a torch, called Alluri Sitarama Raju Jyothi, which they had brought from Rajahmundry.65

This statement suggests that patriotism transcended social and regional differences. First, Advani highlighted the contributions of tribals to the freedom struggle, and also the willingness of Raju to lay down his life for a person from the distant region

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63. This particular aspect seems to echo Michael Gillan’s argument concerning how the BJP engaged in opposition politics ‘against various entrenched political regimes’. See Gillan, op. cit., 2007, p. 47.
65. Ibid.
of Punjab. As such, Advani’s speech resonated with the general framework of the yatra, which highlighted a unified national movement. In terms of symbolic engineering, it is important to note this congruence between a local hero and the national visions of the BJP. In this case, the role of the BJP – paying respect to the heroic acts of this local character and promoting the values of the freedom struggle in a contemporary context – was firmly established through the involvement of its youth wing.

Advani’s other speeches invoked similar images. In Nellore, Advani hailed the contributions of several freedom fighters from the district. Moreover, he stated,

Why have their dreams of a New India remained unfulfilled even after fifty years of freedom? What would all the patriots and martyrs of the freedom struggle think if they were to see India of today, her polity steeped in corruption and her society reeling under poverty and social disharmony? The freedom fighters discharged their duty in their time. Now we have to do our duty.

This statement again highlighted the key message of the yatra. Its intention was to celebrate the freedom struggle, and through that remind contemporary Indians of the need to re-establish the unity that existed fifty years earlier. In Andhra Pradesh, Advani celebrated the freedom struggle by highlighting the contributions of several Congress leaders, ‘At Ponnooru, I garlanded the statue of N.G. Ranga, yet another illustrious Congress leader who was a dedicated peasant leader, able parliamentarian (he was indeed the longest-serving MP) and crusader against untouchability’. Analysed together, these two excerpts seemed to promote certain views concerning the legacy of the Congress. In Andhra Pradesh, the Congress party has for long been one of the two main parties, the other being the Telugu Desam Party (TDP). Why then, did Advani so often refer to Congress leaders from Andhra Pradesh? As I noted above, Advani accused the Congress leadership in the years after Independence of pursuing false secularism and vote-bank politics. He invoked a similar image in Andhra Pradesh, and by doing so, he turned the proud legacy of the Congress against its modern version. Without saying so explicitly, Advani seemed to promote the BJP as the true heir to this legacy. Following my argument concerning symbolic engineering, it was significant that Advani conveyed such a message through the appropriation of local Congressmen.

66. Ibid.
67. Ibid.
68. Ibid., p. 504.
69. Advani also paid tribute to Tanguturi Prakasam Pantulu, the first chief minister of Andhra Pradesh, ibid., p. 503.
Advani also brought up another issue that has been the subject of much controversy in recent years – the demand to carve out of Andhra Pradesh a separate state of Telangana. This issue has been advocated by the TDP, and Advani made it clear that the BJP supported this demand.\(^{70}\) Such a statement may be understood as a conscious move in order to forge an alliance with the TDP. With the benefit of hindsight, the TDP also joined the NDA in 1998. However, it may also be viewed in light of the BJP’s approach to regional identities in general. During his visit to Andhra Pradesh, Advani also paid tribute to the local leader, Potti Shriramulu. Advani noted that Shriramulu, ‘whose fifty-two-day fast, culminating in his self-immolation in December 1952, forced Pandit Nehru to accede to the demand for the reorganization of states on linguistic lines in 1956’.\(^{71}\) By paying tribute to Shriramulu, Advani also embraced the existence of regional identities, and through that reassured the audiences that the BJP posed no threat to such loyalties. As I will turn to in my discussion of Advani’s visit to Tamil Nadu, the significance of such statements relates to the traditional image of the BJP as defining national identity according to the preferences of north Indians.

Tamil Nadu has for decades been dominated by parties originating from the cultural nationalist Dravidian movement, namely, the DMK and AIADMK. This regional nationalism has been expressed through Tamil language, bhakti poetry, and in recent decades, through Tamil cinema. The larger movement, from which these parties emerged, was also characterized by a large degree of scepticism towards north Indian dominance, Hindi language, Sanskrit culture and caste hierarchies.\(^{72}\) This legacy has made it extremely difficult for the BJP to establish a foothold in Tamil Nadu, since the BJP has traditionally been understood as a north Indian party representing the views of the upper castes.\(^{73}\)

Advani was of course conscious of this historical legacy, and while campaigning in the state, he paid particular attention to regional pride and social harmony between different castes. And he clearly sought to overcome the north-south division. In his autobiography, Advani notes that in Ettayapuram, he referred to the Tamil poet Rashtravaki Subramania Bharati, who according to Advani was also a nationalist.\(^{74}\) In the words of Advani,

\(^{70}\) Ibid., p. 504.
\(^{71}\) Ibid., p. 503.
\(^{73}\) Jaffrelot, op. cit., p. 439.
\(^{74}\) Advani, op. cit., p. 500.
In a popular poem *En Thai* (My Mother), Bharati wrote: ‘My Mother has thirty crore faces, but their body and soul is one. She speaks in eighteen languages, but the thought she expresses is one.’ I reminded the audience in my speech that Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee had recited this poem – in Tamil first and then in Hindi translation – during his celebrated confidence-motion speech in Parliament in May 1996.75

This poem goes right to the core of the message promoted by Advani during this yatra, and also illustrates my argument concerning symbolic engineering. Advani here emphasized that India’s diversity did not undermine its fundamental cultural unity. Instead of constantly invoking Ram as a symbol of Hindu unity, as the BJP had done during the Ayodhya controversy – Advani here promoted the notion of unity from below by paying more attention to the many local manifestations of this unity. By referring to Vajpayee’s speech, Advani also conveyed that the BJP respected Tamil identity.

With regard to the freedom struggle, Advani apologized for the way people from the north often ignored Tamil Nadu’s contributions. In a speech Advani asserted that, ‘The tendency is to refer to the 1857 Battle as the First War of Independence. But long before the North woke up to British imperialism and fought the foreign rulers, here in this land, you had Veer Pandiya Kattabomman’.76 Advani also added that his yatra vehicle had a picture of Kattabomman.77 This was not the only occasion Advani emphasized the role of the legendary Kattabomman. The following excerpt is from *The Hindu*’s coverage of Advani’s visit to Tamil Nadu,

Recalling his visit to the Panchalankurichi fort earlier in the day, the BJP leader said he saw there the statue of Veerpandia Kattabomman flanked on either side by the statues of Veeran Sundaralingam and Vellaiya Thevan. While one was a Dalit the other belonged to a higher caste but they never had such feelings and fought together to free the country from colonial yoke.78

In yet another speech, Advani apologized for not having intimate knowledge about Tamil films. Advani continued, ‘But a long time back I saw a Tamil film by

75. Ibid.
77. Ibid.
the name *Kattabomman*. Sivaji Ganesan’s portrayal of the local folk hero was superb. 79

By referring to the regional hero Kattabomman, Advani incorporated his heroic acts in the larger, national framework of the freedom struggle. Advani clearly utilized the existence of a regional, Tamil identity, perhaps most visible in his references to Tamil films, in order to communicate with his audience. While referring to Kattabomman, Advani also commented on the existence of caste tensions in the state. As briefly suggested above, Advani seemed to convey that such tensions did not exist during the freedom struggle. Thus, he reminded the audience that caste cleavages could be overcome by rediscovering the underlying sense of unity. Social harmony was, as noted above, a key message of Advani’s yatra, and in a press release, Advani asserted that his calls for Dalit-Thevar solidarity had only received positive response. 80 This again brings to the fore Advani’s conviction that the Indian population did not approve of social tensions, and that they were created by divisive politics. This aspect was elaborated by a local BJP activist in an interesting manner, ‘Mind you, the Meenakshipuram conversions took place only miles from here, and yet he did not make any reference to the same’. 81 This incident was a regular feature of the BJP repertoire in the 1980s. During the SJRY however, there was no need for Advani to refer to this contentious issue. It related to both Hindu-Muslim enmity, as well as caste discrimination. Attention to such topics would only undermine the key messages of the yatra. Advani’s lack of reference to these conversions rather seemed to suggest that he was sensitive to the local political context.

Kattabomman was not the only regional character emphasized by Advani. He referred to the local political hero Kumarasari Kamaraj, who also took part in the freedom struggle, and stated that Kamaraj’s image was to be found on his truck, alongside pictures of other important leaders such as Gandhi, Patel, Ambedkar and Savarkar. 82 It is interesting to note that Savarkar also belonged to this pantheon of leaders. As it turned out, in a speech in the town of Tuticorin, Advani highlighted that Savarkar had mentioned the contributions of Vanchi, a local martyr of the freedom struggle, in his book, *Kaala Paani*. 83 One should perhaps not read too much into this small comment. However, Advani’s comment was probably not accidental, and may be understood in terms of familiarizing the local audi-

82. Ibid.
83. Ibid.
ence with one of the founding fathers of the Hindu nationalist movement. At least, Advani suggested that Savarkar was well aware of the patriotic contributions of Tamils during the freedom struggle.

Advani’s rhetoric, which to a large extent revolved around local heroes, seemed to represent a conscious strategy with the aims of communicating with the local population through the employment of well known idioms. Hence, this strategy resonates with my argument concerning symbolic engineering, as well as what Thomas Hylland Eriksen regards to be an important feature of identity politics – the ability to make the political message appear familiar.

These local characters functioned as mediators, through which Advani emphasized the congruence between a regional, Tamil identity, and the core Hindu identity. Advani’s rhetoric also sought to invoke pride. The pride in these local heroes was converted into a national framework, through the promotion of common cultural bonds and a unified freedom struggle. Advani also tried to convey that Hindu nationalism as it was promoted by the BJP did not represent a threat to Tamil identity. To the contrary, the BJP was aware of the contributions Tamils had made to the nation. Moreover, Advani promoted the BJP as the vehicle in re-establishing the ethos of the freedom struggle. The existence of caste cleavages in Tamil Nadu were only due to divisive politics, and would disappear as soon as this ethos was re-established.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ADVANI’S YATRA

In this chapter, I have taken as a point of departure, the challenges facing the BJP in the aftermath of its Ayodhya campaign. This challenge was one of widening its social and geographical base, a matter which became all the more urgent due to the regionalization of Indian politics, and the need to forge alliances in order to assume power at the national level. During the Ayodhya campaign the BJP invoked Hindu identity by focusing on both similarity and difference. With regard to the notion of similarity, Hindu identity was promoted as a singular category, which was defined according to Ram. The notion of difference came to the fore insofar as Hindu identity was construed through its contrast to the Muslim other. Both aspects had obvious limitations. BJP’s anti-Muslim image alienated potential alliance partners, whereas the strict focus on Ram proved largely ineffective outside the Hindi-belt of northern India.

It is important to underline that there were several similarities between the Ram Rath Yatra and the SJRY. Both had explicit intentions of promoting a national and
culturally defined unity. Common to both yatras was also Advani’s promotion of the BJP as the main vehicle in establishing this unity in order to counter so-called divisive tendencies. The main difference between the two yatras was the way in which Advani disseminated these messages. One apparent advantage of the SJRY was its main theme. By emphasizing the independence struggle, Advani could incorporate a wide range of local heroes and histories within a national framework, and this framework was also rather vague in comparison to the Ram-centred Ayodhya campaign. One of the main limitations of the Ayodhya movement, at least in northern and eastern India, might be explained with reference to the distance between the Hindu identity, on the one hand and the variety of local contexts on the other.

The concept of symbolic engineering sheds light on what appears to be a conscious strategy on part of the BJP. With regard to Advani’s yatra, it seeks to explain how Advani tried to mediate between a national Hindu identity and the various regional identities. Through this attempt, Advani tried to open up a symbolic space at the local level for his own political visions. One might argue that Advani actually utilized the diversity of Indian society as it enabled him to reach down and communicate with different local audiences. Advani employed a great number of local characters and presented them as local manifestations of Hindu unity. On other occasions, he referred to these local characters as representatives of the same values as those promoted by the BJP. As a consequence, Advani’s message appeared more familiar to the local audiences, and in several speeches he conveyed that the visions of the BJP were not new. They had been promoted by local leaders and heroes during the freedom struggle and sometimes long before that. Employing this kind of appropriation, Advani invoked regional pride and attempted to convert it into a sense of pride in belonging to a national Hindu community. And this particular aspect brings out the differences between the two yatras clearly. The Ayodhya campaign sought to promote a singular and monolithic Hindu identity from above. The SJRY, on the other hand, was mainly concerned with conveying Hindu unity in different ways – by showing a greater deal of contextual sensitivity and by invoking national identity through political imaginations at the local level. Hence, the nation as a symbolic entity was invested with meaning in multiple ways.

The different characters referred to by Advani during his yatra mainly belonged to two categories. Advani highlighted well-known Hindu nationalists, such as Savarkar and Mookerjee, for their contributions to the Independence movement, both in speeches and through the visual imagery in his vehicle. These Hindu nationalists were also regionalized as Advani emphasized their significance in a
local context. For the most part, however, Advani’s speeches represented a selective appropriation of important regional icons. Advani consciously emphasized those aspects concurring with the views of the BJP, in particular, that of cultural unity. Both categories more or less conveyed the same message – the congruence between the core Hindu identity and regional identities.

A second aspect of this symbolic engineering was visible in Kerala, West Bengal and to some extent in Andhra Pradesh. Here, Advani incorporated local characters, and local, cultural and political legacies into his national framework, and turned them against the dominant parties in the respective states. This aspect also related to the relationship between unity and diversity, which was a key theme of the yatra. Advani acknowledged the existence of diversity, but he severely opposed those, who in his mind, deliberately tried to destroy the fundamental, underlying unity. These opponents were guilty of promoting difference, and by so doing, they opposed the legacy of the Independence movement, which Advani claimed to represent. Hence, Advani sought to accommodate diversity by appropriating its various manifestations, in this case within a framework of national patriotism.

Finally, the yatra needs to be viewed in light of the BJP’s attempts to attract alliance partners. This concern might explain why anti-Muslim rhetoric was not a prominent feature of this yatra. Demonization of Muslims during the Ayodhya movement had alienated many potential allies. This lack might also be explained in terms of a higher degree of local sensitivity on the part of the BJP. Appeals to Hindu solidarity through the depiction of a common Muslim enemy had not generated much support in the states under study.

Advani was probably well aware that the BJP would not stand much of a chance in West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh or Tamil Nadu in the forthcoming elections. Advani’s choice to spend so much time in these states may have been with the intention of establishing the presence of the BJP in order to underscore its national ambitions. With the benefit of hindsight, such a strategy might have proven successful. In West Bengal, the regional party Trinamool Congress joined the BJP’s National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in 1998 and again in 1999. Advani’s utilization of regional heroes in Tamil Nadu may be understood in a similar manner, as a means to promote itself as a reliable alliance partner to the regional parties in the state. In 1998, the AIADMK joined the NDA, and the year after, when the AIADMK left the NDA, the other main Tamil party, the DMK, became the BJP’s ally. I am not suggesting that this was due to Advani’s yatra. Nonetheless, his yatra

84. For an elaborate discussion of BJP’s performance in several of these states, see Gillan, op. cit., 2007, pp. 47–54.
seemed to reflect a conscious strategy with the aim of gaining the support of one of the two main Tamil parties.\(^{85}\) As briefly noted earlier, the TDP in Andhra Pradesh also joined BJP’s alliance. Advani’s motives for campaigning in Kerala are perhaps more difficult to grasp. His activities in the state never succeeded, neither in terms of increased support nor with regard to gaining influential alliance partners. One possible motif could perhaps be related to the party structure in this state, which has been dominated by the CPI(M), the Congress, and the Muslim League. The BJP had always framed its political visions in contrast to these parties, so its presence in Kerala may be due to ideological considerations.

It is difficult to assess whether Advani’s yatra contributed to the electoral successes of the BJP in 1998 and 1999. Nevertheless, both the yatra and the elections indicate that the party placed a great deal of emphasis on its regional presence throughout India.\(^{86}\) The BJP was able to assume power at the centre mainly due to its ability to forge a majority alliance with a wide range of regional parties. Thus, Advani’s yatra also illustrates that regionalization of Indian politics does not only involve the introduction of a wide range of state-based parties. Due to the impact of coalition politics, the BJP, as a national party, needed to regionalize its own strategies, and find new ways of mediating between the national, the regional and the local. The symbolic engineering characterizing Advani’s yatra has to be understood in this particular context.

REFERENCES


\(^{85}\) These two parties are bitter enemies and have never been in the same coalition.

\(^{86}\) In retrospect, Advani’s campaign in Orissa is also a case in point, since the BJP managed to forge an alliance with Biju Janata Dal. Advani’s message in this state, which has a considerable adivasi population, was social harmony. In the words of Advani, ‘One of the recurring messages in my speech was that of social harmony (samajik samarasata) between tribals and non-tribals of different castes, for which I invoked a popular aphorism: Na jaat na paat/Jagannath ka bhaat/jag pasare haath (The blessings of Lord Jagannath are available to the entire humanity, irrespective of caste or creed distinctions).’ Lord Jagannath is a popular deity in Orissa.


The Rediff Special, ‘Swarna Jyanti Rath Yatra: “It is the people who have to bring the change, and not individuals”, Advani’, 11 June 1997.