Indian Secular Nationalism Vs Hindu Nationalism in the 2004 General Elections and the Coverage of the struggle in the political cartoons.

Multicultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious India in anthropological sense has never been ethno-national unity. In political terms, however, for one hundred years it is the country of Indians and it is the nation. Indian nationalism as political anti-colonial movement emerged as the mixture of intellectual anti-British struggle and middle-class patriotic movement. The strongest Indian nationalists at the start of movement were ardent Bengali and Marathi patriots as well and were mostly Hindus, Muslims and Parsees by origin. They shared religious loyalty and the language loyalty with pan-Indian patriotism as far as they did not contradict each other. The main factor in this initial patriotism was anti-British feeling. It is interesting that it is the English language that united Indian patriots against the English rule. Sometimes, the question rises, if not the British, would the Indians develop into the single nation?

I will allow to myself a long quotation from the seminal book of Sunil Khilnani: ‘The puzzle of India’a unity and of Indianness raised a variety of contending responses within the nationalist movement that brought India to independence. Nehru’s was only one among these, and it was in no sense typical of nationalism as a whole. ‘Indian nationalism’ is a somewhat misleading shorthand phrase to describe a remarkable era of
intellectual and cultural ferment and experimentation inaugurated in the late nineteenth century. The various, often oblique, currents that constituted this phase extended well beyond the confines of a political movement such as the Congress, with its high political, bilingual discourse. The possible basis for a common community was argued with ingenuity and imagination in the vernacular languages, especially in regions like Bengal and Maharashtra that had been exposed longest to the British… (Khilnanin, 153).

When the movement matured, it received, however, some characteristics of classical nationalism. At certain point Hindu and Muslim Indian nationalists started considering each other as ‘alien’. Further development of this trend led to the rise of Muslim separatism, Sikh Separatism and Hindu Nationalism. The break up of India in 1947 led to the creation of secular but Hindu-dominated India and Pakistan, the state of Indian Muslims.

In secular India authorities fostered a sort of official nationalism, something of a sort of centrally sponsored patriotism. Partly as the reaction to it the Hindu Nationalism grew. In both cases of Indian Nationalism and Hindu Nationalism the terms are used slightly differently from the tradition of the western study of Nationalism. Yet, both terms in the Indian context became the tradition themselves. At present, the use of the term is wide and often but the meaning is different in different writings. As Ayesha Jalal notes in her article on Nationalism in South Asia, Indian nationalism as an idea and a historical force and a challenge to Western colonialism. It has both similarities and differences from the Western model of nationalism developed on European material.

Indian nationalism generally refers to the movement for Independence of India, and afterwards it is considered as the basis for the secular state ideology of the present-
day Republic of India. One of the problems with this movement, however, lies in the absence of the single Indian nation as ethnological reality. It is rather complex mixture of dozens of peoples, thousands of ethno-religious communities, castes plus 636 officially recognized tribes. Though religious and cultural links and linguistic proximity bind many regions together, there are significant centrifugal movements in western, southern and north-eastern parts of the Indian subcontinent. Several huge empires, the Maurya Empire (3-2 c. B.C.), the Gupta Empire (5 c. A.D.), the Kanauj Empire under Harshavardhana (7 c. A.D.), the Delhi Sultanate at its heyday (12-14 c.) and the Mughal Empire (15-18 c. A.D.) formally controlled most of the Indian subcontinent but failed to take into their grips small units like principalities and the jagirs (fiefs). The 18th century conglomerate of principalities known as the Maratha Confederation instead of reunited imperial bonds ruined the old links by introducing the series of taxes (‘Chauth’ etc.) and periodical plunder of the lands of India. As the result, the British found it easy to conquer the whole South Asia mostly by hands of Asians.

The British not only managed to unite hundreds of Indian principalities but were able to expel their French opponents and neutralize the Dutch and the Portuguese and other Europeans who had their presence on Indian soil. The Mutiny of 1857-58, known in the Indian historiography as the First Indian War for Independence, united Hindus and Muslims against the common enemy represented by the British. Ironically, the British more clearly recognized the Muslim danger for them and ignored the Hindu mobilization by preferring the latter as the core of the colonial administration at basic level. Thus the Hindus formed the core of the new educated class of Indians who were dreaming of getting rid of their masters.
Though it were the British who supported the formation of the new Indian intellectual class, they became the main subject of the hatred of the South Asian population. The British were hated as both ‘suppressors’ and the ‘foreigners’. The rise of the anti-British sentiments led to the claims for self-administration of the British India. Though local patriotism of the Bengalis and the Marathas provoked them of praising their ‘Golden Bengal’ and ‘The Maha Rashtra’, their influence and ambitions grew over their ethnic territories and this led them to speak in pan-Indian terms. Local anti-British organizations like the Bengal Association and the newspapers in English and vernacular languages like the ‘Amrita Bazaar Patrika’, ‘Maharatta’ and ‘Kesari’ helped to mould the public opinion about the existence of the Indian Nation. Their organizational efforts resulted in the formation in 1885 of the Indian National Congress, the first Indian national political party. The first years of its existence (1885-1905) were the period of its loyalty to the British crown, but the party turned into anti-British position during the anti-Partition (of Bengal) movement in 1905-1906. With Gandhi as its leader the Indian National Congress since 1915 became the largest pan-Indian organization of opposition to the British colonial administration. Though Mahatma Gandhi was in favor of the use of vernacular languages, the Indian National Congress accepted English as the language understandable for the majority of its members. Thus the English provided Indians with the idea and the language of unity. At the same time, two rival models of mobilization emerged in India in early 20th century, i.e. Hindu and Muslim communal movements. In 1906 two rival organizations emerged known as the Hindu Mahasabha and the Muslim League. Both organizations had nationalist slogans as well as communal ones, but in fact they spoke of the two different Indias and two different nationalisms. Hindu Nationalism
grew with Indian secular nationalism. Hindu nationalists of the Arya Samaj and the Hindu Mahasabha, particularly, M.M. Malaviya, and Rajendra Prasad were also influential members of the Indian National Congress. Muslim nationalism developed into a separate force due to frustration of Indian Muslims over the economic weakness of their co-religionists and their dissatisfaction with what they called ‘the Brahman dominance’ in the Indian National Congress. It has both anti-Hindu and anti-colonial sides. Depending on the situation Indian Muslims sought either Indian Nationalist support or the British protection. The decision of the British Labor government in 1946 to grant India independence led Muslim nationalists to the direct struggle for their independent state called Pakistan (‘the country of the pure’, or abbreviation from words Punjab, Kashmir and Pushtuni-stan).

As Ayesha Jalal rightfully observed, ‘A challenge to Western colonialism reflecting the aspirations of a subjugated and diverse populace, nationalism as the idea and a historical force in South Asia has remained fiercely contested terrain’ (Jalal, 2001, p. 737.). Indian nationalism has both characteristics of classical nationalisms and peculiarities of its own. At the same time the problem of Indian nationalists is that they speak on behalf of the united nation in the country where nation is divided. They can not speak even on behalf of the majority. As Anton Pelinka observes, The nature of Indian democracy is characterized not simply by the rule of a ‘natural’ majority of Hindus. Instead, it is the fact that in India a majority that includes minorities…. Above all, the reality of the castes destroys the notion of a given Hindu majority. The specificity of the castes makes of the concept ‘Hindus’ a multitude of partial concepts, such that one could even argue there is no majority in India ….’ (Pelinka A. P.212.).
Hindu Nationalism has features of the nationalism and the communal movement. It also grasped the banner of the opposition ideology when the Indian secular nationalism became the ruling ideology of the independent Indian state. Proponents of the Hindu Nationalism claimed that it is not ‘Indian’, the English term, but ‘the Hindu’ that is right term for the members of the Indian Nation. Having expressed strong anti-Muslim and anti-Christian feelings, Hindu nationalists stress the foreign character of Islam and Christianity in India. At the same time safe place is allocated in their ideology for the ‘protected’ local religions of Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. Linguistic, caste and class differences among the Hindus are downplayed by the Hindu nationalists, though they failed to overcome hostility of the Hindus in the south towards Northern Indian Brahmins. In many ways Hindu Nationalism is indeed more a nationalist rather than communalist movement. The founder of the movement Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, a Marathi Chitpavan Brahman, educated in London and the admirer of Mazzini, wrote a seminal history of the 1857-58 Indian Uprising (known also as the Mutiny and the Sepoy Revolt) in which he claimed the main aim of Indians as the fight for Independence. Importantly, the Savarkar’s book was titled ‘The Indian War of Independence’. In the book Savarkar called for Hindu-Muslim unity. He later changed his mind, may be for his personal sufferings from the hands of the Pushtoon guards in the prison where he was sent for his revolutionary activity. In 1923 Savarkar wrote the book ‘Hindutva’, claiming that Hindutva or indu-ness is the real identity of Indians. Savarkar wrote that Hinduism was only part of Hindutva, and Hindutva was a history, a historical heritage of people in India. I allow myself another quote from Khilnani: ‘In Savarkar’s genealogical equation between the Hindu and the Indian, members of the Indian political community were
united by geographical origin, racial connection (rather ambiguously specified), and a shared culture based on Sanskrit languages and ‘common laws and rites’. Those who shared these traits formed the core, ‘majority’ community. Those who did not – Muslims, who constituted a quarter of pre-Partition India’s population, ‘tribals’, Christians – were relegated to awkward, secondary positions. The special frission of Savarkar’s ideas lay in their translation of Brahmanical culture into the terms of an ethnic nationalism drawn from his reading of Western history. This created an evocative, exclusivist and recognizably modern definition of Indianness, with rich potentials to sustain future political projects and to induce direct political effects. It was contact with these ideas that in 1925 led another Brahmin, K.B. Hedgewar, to found the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS- Association of National Volunteers), to this day the backbone of Hindu nationalist organization, and it also inspired the Hindu mahasabha, until 1950 the main party of Hindu nationalism. The Gandhian Congress adroitly marginalized the Savarkarite conception of Indian history and Indianness, but its presuppositions were never erased: many nationalists outside Congress, and even some within it, shared them’ (Khilnani. P. 161).

The assassination of Mahatma Gandhi on 30th January 1948 by Hindu nationalists caused the ban of some Hindu nationalist organizations and the limitations on the activity of the others. Yet, in 1951 Hindu communalist Jan Sangh participated in the General Elections in India. It later transformed into the Bharatiya Jan Sangh, the Janata Party and in 1990s – into the Bharatiya Janata Party or the India’s Nation (or People’s) Party. In 1996 for 13 days it became the ruling party. In 1998 it repeated its success due to the failure of the Indian National Congress to win the majority in the hung Parliament. In
1999 the BJP became the ruling party. In 2004 it called for earlier elections being sure of its new victory. Yet, it lost the victory to the Indian National Congress and its allies. Secular Nationalism appeared more appropriate ruling party for the multi-religious and multi-ethnic India. Now we are turning to the second part of the presentation arranged as the slide-show and devoted to the political cartoons and the coverage of the 2004 general elections in India.

India has a long history of political journalism and the political cartoons. Traditionally its origins are linked with the developments of cartoons in the metropoly. The Punch, the famous British magazine, played an important role in popularizing graphic humor and influencing Indian cartoonists, the educated Indian with the knowledge of English became an addict to Punch and its brand humor. The British established in British India first institutions of democracy that developed into present-day parliaments. They also introduced the satirical tradition of mocking those in power not known previously in India. Indian freedom movement with the advent of Gandhi gave a great impetus to Indian satirical sensibilities. Nehru and other leaders as well as British authorities did not escape mocking. When the British left, as Laxman observed, they left India to the most caricaturable characters in the world. Topping the list was Gandhiji with his eccentric habits of dress, bald head, floppy ears and puckish toothless smile. Jinnah in a quite opposite way, thin as a bean in a four-piece suit, sporting a cigarette in a long ivory holder. As Laxman notes, the others like Maulana Kalam Azad, Govind Vallabh Pant, Acharya Kripalani and Sarojini Naidu all seemed to have born to oblige the cartoonist. Soon after the Independence, cartoons and humorous pieces of writing became
a regular item of newspapers and periodicals. Nehru became the cartoonists’ favorite depicted either as the idealist boy as the tired old man attacked by the problems.
After Nehru it is the ordinary Babu or the Indian National Congress functionary that became the main subject of political cartoons. The independent India welcomed cartoons in leading newspapers as signs of democracy and openness. Though not necessarily friendly towards politicians including Nehru, they enjoyed relative freedom due to Nehru’s perception of freedom of expression as important banner of democracy. The Nehru’s vision was inherited by his followers, though Indira Gandhi’s rule in time of emergency was characterized by ban on many articles not to speak of cartoons criticizing her. Yet, the legendary cartoonist Laxman both in Nehru’s and Indira’s time of rule produced hundreds of satirical pictures giving ‘simple man’s ‘ vision of political game.

As famous Indian cartoonist R.K. Laxman observes, “a humorist regales the community in a satirical way picking up the issues from the trivial social events to the larger national concerns like political upheavals, ideological conflicts, economic policies etc. He continues : Inevitably satirical cartooning by its very nature is an art of disapproval and complaint. It thrives best in adversity and a cartoonist treats his subjects with good humored ridicule. Stupidity and greed of politicians, inability of the authorities to fulfill their promises are usual matter of cartoons in Indian newspapers. Of special importance cartoons are in time of elections, especially because significant part of India’s population is illiterate. In politician’s and in cartoonist’s eyes during the elections India changes completely. Elections to the legislatures in the major states had shown major subjects of ridicule. General Elections of 2004 received special coverage of cartoonists. The 2004 parliamentary elections were particularly heated. The most loved person of the elections Atal Bihari Vajpayee also received much of the critique. Even if his personal virtue is not in doubt, his name was so intensively used by the Bharatiya Janata Party and
its Parivar (family) of parties, that he became a subject of ridicule. Other party leaders like Mr. Naidu and L.K.Advani remained in the shadow of A.B.Vajpayee. Vajpayee himself was mocked for his illusions over real situation in India. The greatest political contest of the 2004 general elections was that between the Bharatiya Janata Party and its National Democratic Alliance on one side and the Indian National Congress and its alliance of parties on the other side. Both parties had significant business and media backing. Thus they were able to arrange a whole war of cartoons on the pages of leading Indian newspapers like the Hindu, Times of India, Indian Express etc. The newspapers in vernaculars echoed this war. The cartoons in both English-speaking and vernacular language newspapers are often the main subject of discussion among the illiterate people who often happen at least to look into newspapers and ask their literate friends or relatives for comments. Among the most popular topics of the cartoon coverage of election campaigns by parties were the dirtiness of politics and political games, the corrupted nature of politicians, the unwillingness of the Indian National Congress to share power with its allies, the blindness of the BhJP’s ‘India shining slogan’. It is interesting to note that in general the incumbent parties got more criticism and if analysts would charge from the cartoons and not from opinion polls they would more rightfully predict the INC-led coalition victory due to anti-incumbency factor working against the BhJP and its allies.
Cartoonists also employ symbols of political parties as themes to ridicule. Particularly vulnerable to their jokes is the elephant of the Bahaujan Samaj Party, the heir to the Republican Party of B.R.Ambedkar, the namesake of the American Republican Party. American cartoonists, as we know, have a long tradition of mocking Republican elephant. Failure of politicians to look smart also attracted cartoonists. BJP and INC compared are often personified by their leaders A.B.Vajpayee and Sonia Gandhi accordingly. Vajpayee’s vision of India as shining one and Advani’s preoccupation with the Hindutva agenda were of particular attention of the cartoonists.
All the opinion polls predicted Vajpayee’s victory. Vajpayee was praised for successes in economy and peace-making. The Congress had been experiencing the split of its state organizations. Yet, the winner was Sonja Ji. Sonia Gandhi managed to unite allies, who also became the subject of cartoons. The big story of the 2004 elections personified was, of course, ‘the dynasty’. Other issues are the ‘foreign’ origin of Sonia Gandhi and difficulties to deal with the Congress. The allies of the Congress often were ‘polluted’ by scandals or divided over different issues, even ‘foreign origin’ question itself. Yet, the BJP and its allies got much more criticism. Characters of the Hindu epic well suited the theme of mocking Hindu communalist party. AIDMK’s leader Jayalalita was ridiculed as the despot among her parrot-like ministers and assistants. Some images
are quite cautious. The cartoonists were aware of the colleague’s Thakeray’s ability to respond adequately. Of special fun for cartoonist were ‘yatras’. Whitewashing’ of ‘dirty’ politics and connection with the underworld. Dissenters and deserters were subject of cartoonists as well. The attitude of politicians to voters as stupid ‘monkeys’ did not escape cartoonist’s attention either.

Many Bolliwood stars and the rest of Indian filmdom are ready to showcase their talent for political theater and make-believe. Virtually every day the Bharatiya Janata Party, the Congress and some other political parties have been springing their catches on the media and a presumably eager electorate. The big cinema people turned politicians are the traditional thing in the South. Let us see: C.N.Annadurai, M. Karunanidhi, M.G.Ramachandran, M.T.Rama Rao, Jayalalitha, Rajnikanth and so on. It became norm in the politics in India during the elections.

To conclude, the electorate has decisively rejected the Atal Bihari-led National Democratic Alliance and voted in a Congress-led coalition spearheaded by Sonia Gandhi. On its own the Congress has emerged as the largest single party, with 145 seats under the belt. Along with the left parties (62 seats), the Congress coalition (with 216 seats) secured majority. Fears over left parties’ influence over the new government today led to a historic crash in the stock markets. The Congress –led government. Managed, however, to settle things and has successfully ruled for the last five years under the prime-minister Manmohan Singh.

Indian Secular Nationalism won the elections with the help of the regional parties that were afraid of the Hindu and Hindi-oriented BJP. This resulted in the re-introduction of the dull and shallow official ideology of Indian Nationalism. Unfortunately, it also
resulted in the quality of political cartoons. They became more dull, less lively, resembling more pragmatic and economical style of the present ruling coalition.
References:

