

The Formation of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh and Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee's Political Legacy: Ideology, Nation-Building, and the Evolution of Indian Conservatism

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Abstract: *The formation of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS) in 1951 marked a significant moment in the political history of independent India. Established under the leadership of Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, the party emerged as an alternative political force representing a distinctive vision of nationalism, cultural identity, economic development, and national integration. At a time when the Indian National Congress dominated political life, the Jana Sangh sought to provide a platform for those who believed that India's civilizational heritage should occupy a central position in the country's political discourse. This article examines the origins of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, the ideological foundations of its formation, Dr. Mukherjee's political philosophy, and his enduring legacy in Indian public life. It argues that Mukherjee's contribution extended beyond the creation of a political party; he helped shape a long-term ideological movement that influenced the development of Indian politics in the decades that followed.*

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Introduction: The early years of independent India were characterized by political transformation, institutional experimentation, and debates over the meaning of nationhood. Following independence in 1947, India faced enormous challenges, including the integration of princely states, rehabilitation of refugees, economic reconstruction, and the creation of democratic institutions. The Indian National Congress, which had led the freedom movement, naturally became the dominant political organization in the newly independent state. However, the political landscape was not without competing visions regarding India's identity, governance, and future direction. In this environment, Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee emerged as an important political figure who challenged the prevailing political consensus. A scholar, educationist, administrator, and former Union Minister, Mukherjee believed that independent India required a political movement rooted in national unity, cultural continuity, and democratic principles. His dissatisfaction with certain policies of the Congress government, particularly regarding national integration and refugee issues, contributed to the formation of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh in 1951.

The Jana Sangh represented a new political current in India. Although initially a small organization with limited electoral influence, it gradually expanded its social and political base. Its ideological framework later

became an important foundation for the formation and growth of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Understanding the Jana Sangh's origins and Mukherjee's political thought is therefore essential for understanding the evolution of contemporary Indian politics. This study examines the historical origins of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, the intellectual background of its formation, and Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee's contribution to shaping its political identity.

Historical Background: Indian Politics after Independence: The period immediately after independence was marked by competing approaches to nation-building. The leadership of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru emphasized secular democracy, scientific development, socialist-oriented economic planning, and a modern institutional framework. At the same time, other political groups argued that India's ancient cultural traditions should have a more visible role in shaping the new nation. The partition of India in 1947 had created profound social and political consequences. Millions of refugees crossed borders, communal tensions remained high, and questions regarding citizenship, minority rights, and national identity became central concerns. Different political organizations offered different responses to these challenges. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), founded in 1925, had developed a network focused on social organization and cultural nationalism. However, it did not initially function as a political party. The need for a political organization that could represent similar ideological concerns in the parliamentary system contributed to discussions about forming a new political platform. Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee became the central figure in transforming these discussions into a political reality.

Research Objectives and Methodology: This article has three major objectives: To examine the historical conditions that contributed to the formation of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh in 1951.

To analyze Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee's political ideas and leadership role in establishing the organization.

To evaluate the early ideological foundations of the Jana Sangh within the broader framework of post-independence Indian politics.

The study follows a historical and analytical methodology. It draws upon secondary literature, political biographies, academic studies on Indian nationalism, parliamentary records, and historical interpretations of post-independence political developments. The approach combines political history with ideological analysis to understand both institutional formation and intellectual evolution.

Literature Review: The political history of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh has attracted considerable scholarly attention, particularly because of its connection with the broader development of Hindu nationalist politics in India. Scholars have examined the party from different ideological and historical perspectives, producing diverse interpretations of its origins and significance.

Bruce Graham's study, *Hindu Nationalism and Indian Politics: The Origins and Development of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh*, remains one of the foundational works on the subject. Graham examines the emergence of the Jana Sangh within the context of post-independence political competition and argues that the party represented an organized attempt to translate cultural nationalist ideas into parliamentary politics. His work highlights the relationship between ideology, organization, and electoral strategy.

Walter K. Andersen and Shridhar D. Damle, in *The Brotherhood in Saffron: The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and Hindu Revivalism*, provide an important analysis of the relationship between the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and political organizations influenced by its worldview. Their research emphasizes the organizational networks and ideological foundations that contributed to the growth of Hindu nationalist politics.

Christophe Jaffrelot's writings on Hindu nationalism examine the wider ideological development of the movement. Jaffrelot places the Jana Sangh within a longer historical trajectory, connecting it with earlier debates on nationalism, identity, and political mobilization. His analysis focuses on how cultural and religious ideas were transformed into political programs.

Yogendra K. Malik and V. B. Singh have studied the rise of Hindu nationalist political forces and the transformation from the Jana Sangh to the Bharatiya Janata Party. Their work examines the electoral expansion and organizational adaptation of the movement within India's democratic system.

Biographical studies of Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee provide another important perspective. These works emphasize his background as an educationist, his administrative experience, his role in the Union Cabinet, and his decision to leave government after differences with the Congress leadership. They portray Mukherjee as a leader whose political ideas were shaped by concerns regarding national unity, cultural identity, and constitutional integration.

While scholars differ in their evaluations of the Jana Sangh's ideological orientation, there is broad agreement that its formation represented a major development in the plural political environment of independent India. The party introduced a new framework of political discourse that challenged the Congress monopoly and contributed to the expansion of ideological competition in Indian democracy.

Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee: Early Life and Political Development

Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee was born on 6 July 1901 in Kolkata. Coming from an influential Bengali family, he demonstrated exceptional academic ability from an early age. His father, Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee, was a renowned educationist and served as Vice-Chancellor of the University of Calcutta. Following in his father's footsteps, Shyama Prasad developed a strong connection with education and public service. Mukherjee became one of the youngest Vice-Chancellors of the University of Calcutta, where he promoted academic reforms and emphasized Indian cultural studies. His intellectual background shaped his later political approach, which combined modern education with a strong belief in India's civilizational heritage. His entry into politics occurred during the colonial period. He served as a member of the Bengal Legislative Council and later became associated with the Hindu Mahasabha. During World War II, he served as Finance Minister of Bengal in the government led by Fazlul Haq. After independence, he joined Prime Minister Nehru's cabinet as Minister for Industry and Supply. However, differences emerged between Mukherjee and the Congress leadership over several issues, including the handling of relations with Pakistan, refugee concerns, and policies related to national integration. In 1950, he resigned from the Union Cabinet, marking the beginning of a new phase in his political career.

Historical Context: India after Independence: The establishment of the Republic of India in 1950 created a new political environment. The adoption of the Constitution provided a democratic framework based on universal adult franchise, fundamental rights, parliamentary institutions, and federal governance. However, the practical challenges facing the young nation were immense. The Partition of India created one of the largest population movements in modern history. Millions of Hindus and Sikhs migrated from Pakistan to India, while millions of Muslims moved in the opposite direction. The humanitarian crisis created strong political debates regarding refugee rehabilitation, citizenship, and the responsibilities of the Indian state.

In Bengal and Punjab particularly, refugee issues became major political concerns. Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, who had a deep connection with Bengal, criticized the government's approach toward displaced communities. He believed that the concerns of refugees required stronger political attention and administrative action. Another major challenge was the integration of princely states. While most princely states joined the Indian Union after independence, certain regions generated complex political debates.

Jammu and Kashmir became one of the most controversial issues because of its accession to India, special constitutional arrangements, and continuing tensions with Pakistan. The political atmosphere of the early 1950s therefore contained competing visions of Indian nationhood. The Congress emphasized a secular democratic state that sought to accommodate India's religious and linguistic diversity. Other political groups argued that Indian nationalism should be more explicitly connected with the country's historical civilization and cultural heritage.

Formation of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh: The Bharatiya Jana Sangh was formally established on 21 October 1951 in New Delhi. Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee became its first president. The formation of the party was influenced by the belief that Indian democracy required ideological diversity and a political alternative to the Congress. The Jana Sangh aimed to participate in parliamentary democracy while promoting a vision of nationalism based on cultural unity and national sovereignty. The party's early leaders argued that India's political development should not ignore the country's historical and cultural foundations.

The party adopted the principle of "integral nationalism," emphasizing that India was not merely a geographical entity but a cultural civilization with a shared historical identity. The Jana Sangh also focused on issues such as: National unity and territorial integrity, Economic self-reliance, Protection of cultural traditions, Strong national defence, A decentralized political and economic structure. The first major electoral test for the Jana Sangh came during the first general elections of 1951–52. Although the party won only a limited number of seats, it succeeded in establishing itself as a recognized political force. The Bharatiya Jana Sangh was formally established on 21 October 1951 in New Delhi. Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee was elected as its first president. The formation occurred shortly before India's first general elections, making it both an ideological and electoral initiative.

The establishment of the Jana Sangh was based on the belief that Indian democracy required genuine political alternatives. Mukherjee argued that a single-party dominated political system could weaken democratic competition and that citizens should have access to different political perspectives. The party sought to represent individuals and groups who believed that India's cultural heritage should play an important role in national life. It emphasized national unity, cultural identity, economic self-reliance, and strong governance. The Jana Sangh's organizational development was also influenced by the support of activists associated with the RSS. While the RSS itself remained a cultural organization, many of its members contributed to building the Jana Sangh's grassroots network. The party contested the first general elections of 1951–52. Although it achieved limited electoral success compared with the Congress, it succeeded in establishing itself as a recognized political organization. More importantly, it created an institutional foundation for a political movement that would expand in later decades.

Ideological Foundations of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh: The ideology of the Jana Sangh developed around several interconnected themes.

Cultural Nationalism: A central idea of the Jana Sangh was cultural nationalism. Its leaders argued that Indian nationalism was rooted in the country's ancient civilization and cultural traditions. They rejected the idea that national identity should be defined only through modern political institutions. According to this perspective, India's unity existed before the establishment of the modern nation-state. Religion, language, customs, historical experiences, and cultural practices were viewed as important elements contributing to national consciousness.

National Integration: National integration was one of Mukherjee's most important political concerns. He strongly opposed any arrangement that, in his view, weakened India's unity. His campaign regarding Jammu and Kashmir became a defining aspect of his political legacy. Mukherjee opposed the special constitutional arrangements associated with Jammu and Kashmir and advocated complete integration of the state with

India. His famous slogan, “Ek Vidhan, Ek Nishan, Ek Pradhan” (One Constitution, One Flag, One Head), reflected his demand for greater uniformity in national governance.

Economic Vision: The Jana Sangh criticized both unrestricted capitalism and excessive state control. It advocated an economic approach that encouraged entrepreneurship while protecting national interests. Later thinkers associated with the movement developed the concept of “Integral Humanism,” which emphasized balanced development combining individual welfare, social responsibility, and cultural values.

Dr. Mukherjee’s Role in National Integration: The issue of Jammu and Kashmir became one of the most significant aspects of Mukherjee’s political career. After independence, Jammu and Kashmir had a unique constitutional relationship with India. Mukherjee believed that this arrangement created inequality among Indian citizens and threatened national unity. In 1953, he entered Jammu and Kashmir in protest against the permit system that restricted entry into the state. He was arrested and detained in Srinagar. On 23 June 1953, he died while in custody. His death generated widespread political debate and strengthened support for the Jana Sangh among many sections of Indian society. For his supporters, Mukherjee became a symbol of national unity and political dedication.

Political Legacy of Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee

Founder of an Alternative Political Tradition: Mukherjee played a crucial role in creating an organized political alternative during the early decades of Indian democracy. Although the Jana Sangh remained a smaller party compared with the Congress, it provided representation to a different ideological perspective. His efforts demonstrated that Indian democracy could accommodate multiple approaches to nationalism and governance.

Influence on the Growth of the Bharatiya Janata Party: The Jana Sangh was dissolved in 1977 when it merged with several opposition groups to form the Janata Party after the Emergency period. Following internal conflicts, former Jana Sangh members established the Bharatiya Janata Party in 1980. The BJP inherited many organizational networks and ideological themes associated with the Jana Sangh. Therefore, Mukherjee is often regarded as an important intellectual and organizational predecessor of the BJP’s political tradition.

Symbol of Political Commitment: Among his supporters, Mukherjee is remembered for his commitment to principles and willingness to sacrifice political office for ideological beliefs. His resignation from the cabinet and his actions regarding Kashmir contributed to his image as a leader who prioritized national issues over personal advancement.

Historical Assessment and Debate

The assessment of Mukherjee’s political legacy remains a subject of scholarly debate. Supporters view him as a visionary leader who defended national unity, cultural identity, and democratic pluralism. They emphasize his role in creating a political movement that eventually became a major force in Indian politics. Critics, however, have questioned aspects of the Jana Sangh’s ideological approach, particularly regarding its understanding of nationalism, minority relations, and cultural identity. Some scholars argue that the movement’s emphasis on cultural nationalism created debates about the relationship between majority traditions and India’s constitutional commitment to secularism. These differing interpretations demonstrate the complexity of Mukherjee’s role in Indian political history. His importance lies not only in the organization he founded but also in the debates about nationhood and identity that continue to shape Indian democracy.

Conclusion: The formation of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh represented a significant development in the evolution of Indian political thought after independence. Under the leadership of Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, the party introduced a political vision that emphasized cultural nationalism, national integration, and an alternative approach to governance. Although the Jana Sangh began as a relatively small political organization, its ideas influenced the broader trajectory of Indian politics. Mukherjee's legacy continued through the organizations and political movements that followed, particularly the Bharatiya Janata Party. His life reflects the challenges of building a democratic nation with diverse ideological traditions. Whether viewed as a nationalist leader, political organizer, or ideological thinker, Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee remains an important figure in the history of modern India. His contribution to the formation of the Jana Sangh and the debates surrounding Indian identity continues to influence political discussions in the twenty-first century.

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