

Motherland, Religion and Community

There are two public faces of Narendra Modi. The first, always in evidence at official functions, is of an immaculately turned-out Modi addressing issues of governance with solemnity and with single-mindedness. With an eye for detail and always well prepared, he comes across as a politician of vision who also has a firm grip on administration. Rarely rhetorical but always passionate, his speeches invariably convey his sense of commitment to both the subject and the occasion. This is Modi in his prime ministerial avatar.

There is a very different Modi in evidence at political rallies, especially during election campaigns. Always aggressive and polemical, and with a penchant for sarcasm and mockery, this Modi is unsparing of his opponents. Cheered on by his dotting fan club, forever ready to work themselves into a frenzy chanting ‘Modi, Modi’, he works the crowds, combining national themes with local issues. His eloquence is often mesmerizing and cuts across language barriers, especially when he invokes victimhood to full political advantage, pitting his humble origins against the arrogance of an ancien régime, bloated with its sense of entitlement. Atal Bihari Vajpayee used long pauses and wordplay to weave his oratorical magic; Modi relies on passionate eloquence.

Modi’s conclusions are always characteristically robust. He leads the crowds into lusty and full-throated chants of *Vande Mataram*, the chant that has defined Indian nationalism since the beginning of the twentieth century. When the crowds are sufficiently large and worked up, Modi does a variation: he says ‘Vande’ and the audience replies ‘Mataram’. The effects are electrifying.

During the movement for freedom from British rule, *Vande Mataram* and the associated chant of ‘Bharat Mata ki Jai’ (Victory to Mother India) was associated with the Congress, although not exclusively. *Vande Mataram* was written by the Bengali writer Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay in 1875 and included in 1881 in his novel *Anandamath* as the motivational song of the sannyasi rebels taking on Muslim conquerors. It was set to music and first sung at the 1896 session of the Indian National Congress (INC) by the poet Rabindranath Tagore. The iconic cry acquired mass popularity throughout India in the wake of the swadeshi movement that accompanied the protests against Lord Curzon’s Partition of Bengal in 1905. Popularized by the early nationalists, particularly Aurobindo Ghose and Bipin Chandra Pal, this ode to the motherland rapidly became India’s foremost nationalist anthem. Nationalist meetings invariably began with the singing of *Vande Mataram* and protestors walked the streets and courted arrest with cries of *Vande Mataram*. Aurobindo attached great mystical significance to the discovery of *Vande Mataram* and equated it to a revelation, ‘a sudden moment of awakening from long delusions’.¹

Yet, on 24 January 1950, by a ruling of the president of the Constituent Assembly—and therefore not subject to either debate or voting—‘Jana-Gana-Mana’, a composition by Rabindranath Tagore

was selected as independent India's national anthem. It was announced that *Vande Mataram*, 'which has played a historic part in the struggle for Indian freedom, shall be honoured equally with Jana-Gana-Mana and shall have equal status with it'.² Moreover, on the few official functions—such as the final day of a session of Parliament—where *Vande Mataram* is sung, it is never the full version—just the first two stanzas.

In the annals of Hindu nationalism, the story of *Vande Mataram* from being the icon of the national movement to becoming an extra—something which couldn't be repudiated but which was at the same time awkward and embarrassing—epitomized betrayal and a distortion of nationhood. For all those associated with the RSS parivar and the BJP, continuing attachment to *Vande Mataram*—without, at the same time, undermining the importance of the national anthem—has become an article of faith. It has become customary for nearly all public functions associated with the RSS to begin with the singing of *Vande Mataram*—the full song and not merely the truncated, official version. Among the more boisterous sections of the saffron fraternity, a favourite slogan is: '*Hindustan me rehena hoga, Vande Mataram kehena hoga* (If you want to live in Hindustan, saying *Vande Mataram* is obligatory).'

The combativeness over *Vande Mataram*, particularly since Independence, is inextricably linked to larger questions of nationhood. For a start, Bankimchandra envisaged India as the Mother and then proceeded to define the imagery:

. . . O Mother, thou art love and faith,
it is thy image we raise in every temple.
For thou art Durga holding her ten weapons of war,
Kamala at play in the lotuses
and Speech, the goddess, giver of all lore,
to thee I bow!³

Subsequently, portraits of the Mother Goddess astride a lion with a map of India as the backdrop was popularized as the personification of Bharat Mata. This portrait of Mother India, inspired by *Vande Mataram*, soon became a central feature of nationalist iconography. There were alternative versions such as Abanindranath Tagore's 1905 painting *Bharatmata* that visualized the Mother as a saffron-robed sadhvi but serene and without weapons. Predictably, this depiction did not correspond to the mood of the times. It was also in sharp conflict with Bankimchandra's explicit invocation of power and militancy:

Terrible with the clamorous shouts of seventy million throats,
and the sharpness of swords raised in twice seventy million hands,
who sayeth to thee, Mother, that thou art weak?
Holder of multitudinous strength,
I bow to her who saves,
to her who drives from her the armies of her foemen,
the Mother!

The imagery of Bharat Mata stemming from *Vande Mataram* was also complemented by the patriotic poetry of the times, particularly in Bengal. In later life, Tagore was to embrace universalism and shun

the aggression of nationalism. However, during the swadeshi movement, he too equated the Mother Goddess with Shakti:

From the heart of Bangladesh spontaneously
You have emerged with such breathtaking beauty, Mother.
In your right hand flashes the scimitar, your left hand dispels fear
Your two eyes radiate a loving smile, the third eye on your
Forehead is a fiery glow.⁴

Equally robust was the Bengali writer Dwijendralal Roy's celebration of Bharat Mata:

The day you arose from the blue ocean, Mother Bharatavarsha,
The world erupted in such a joyful clamour, such devotion,
Mother, and so much laughter.⁵

On his part, Aurobindo left no scope for ambiguity. 'Nationalism is a religion,' he wrote in 1907, 'that has come from God.' He was subsequently to equate it with the Sanatan Dharma and devotion to the Goddess.⁶

The encapsulation of nationalism in Bharat Mata, the 'sacred nation', became a definitive facet of Hindu nationalist thought, and which has endured till today. The idea was not confined to Bengal. It touched the nationalist movement throughout India and became inextricably associated with the Congress. Indeed, *Vande Mataram* and the worship of Bharat Mata served to connect the earlier 'extremist' phase of the national movement with the Gandhian movements that set the tone after 1920. It also linked the critics of Mahatma Gandhi with the mainstream of nationalism. At least on this count, those committed to revolutionary violence were one with the votaries of non-violence and passive resistance.

The association of the motherland with the sacred was a central feature of the RSS, established in 1925 in Nagpur, by Dr K.B. Hedgewar. In 1940, the RSS, now undergoing a phase of steady expansion outside Maharashtra, adopted a prayer to the bhagwa dhvaj (saffron flag) that epitomized a timeless Bharat. The Sanskrit prayer was recited at the beginning of all RSS morning and evening shakhas and has continued unchanged to this day.

Forever I bow to thee, O Loving Motherland! O Motherland of us Hindus, Thou hast brought me up in happiness. May my life, O great and blessed Holy Land, be laid down in Thy Cause. I bow to Thee again and again.

We the children of the Hindu Nation bow to Thee in reverence, O Almighty God. We have girded up our loins to carry on Thy work. Give us Thy holy blessings for its fulfilment. O Lord! Grant us such might as no power on earth can ever challenge, such purity of character as would command the respect of the whole world and such knowledge as would make easy the thorny path that we have voluntarily chosen.

May we be inspired with the spirit of stern heroism, that is the sole and ultimate means of attaining the highest spiritual bliss with the greatest temporal prosperity. May intense and everlasting devotion to our ideal ever enthuse our hearts. May our victorious organised power of action, by Thy Grace, be wholly capable of protecting our dharma and leading this nation of ours to the highest pinnacle of glory.⁷

While the prayer introduced themes of moral resolve and uprightness, there was a corresponding commitment to the sacredness of Mother India, a belief that originated with *Vande Mataram*. Even

Tagore, otherwise harshly critical of the inherent exceptionalism that nationalism promoted, was infected by it. 'Each country,' he said in a speech in Santiniketan as late as September 1932, 'has its own inner geography where her spirit dwells and where physical force can never conquer even an inch of ground.' He repeated this a week later while paying birthday tributes to Mahatma Gandhi: 'India is not merely a geographical entity but is a living truth which they [Indians] live, move and have their being.'⁸

The scholar Radhakumud Mookerji traced the notion of sacred geography to the shastras. Contesting the notion that India was a manufactured construct brought about by British rule, he cited Vedic and subsequent texts such as *Manusmriti*, not to mention the tradition of religious pilgrimages, to show that 'All the conditions that make for the growth of a sense of nationhood were fully developed and long known in ancient India.'⁹ Hindus, he wrote, 'in their heart of hearts believe that theirs is a chosen land, where men must be worthy of final salvation. This represents the national belief...'¹⁰

Yet, the appeal of *Vande Mataram* and the sacredness of Bharat Mata was contested. A large section of India's Muslims were never at ease with its explicitly Hindu symbolism and opposed its identification with Indian nationalism. Its context was seen as 'anti-Muslim' and its imagery 'idolatrous' and, therefore, anathema to Islam. The Muslim League, in particular, made the repudiation of *Vande Mataram* a prestige issue and saw the Congress's attachment to it as evidence of its exclusive identification with Hindus. In the words of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the foremost leader of the Muslim League, *Vande Mataram* 'is not only idolatrous but in its origin and substance a hymn to spread hatred for the Musalmans'.¹¹ He made it clear Muslims would never accept *Vande Mataram* 'or any expurgated edition of the anti-Muslim song as a binding National Anthem'.¹²

The fierce opposition of the Muslim community to *Vande Mataram* put the nationalist leadership in a quandary. Always anxious to counter the British claim that India's nationalism was essentially an exclusively Hindu phenomenon, it was hamstrung by the fact that for the foot soldiers of the nationalist cause, the idea of a free India reclaiming its destiny and *Vande Mataram* were inseparable. *Vande Mataram* was a sentiment and however much it sought to make the national movement all-inclusive, it could not really go against the popular tide. Mahatma Gandhi's anguish over a controversy that assaulted the fundamentals of everything Indian nationalism had stood for was indicative of the helplessness of the nationalist leadership:

It never occurred to me that it [*Vande Mataram*] was a Hindu song or meant only for Hindus. Unfortunately now we have fallen on evil days. All that was pure gold has become base metal today. In such times it is wisdom not to market pure gold and let it be sold as base metal. I would not risk a single quarrel over singing *Vande Mataram* at a mixed gathering. It will never suffer from disuse. It is enthroned in the hearts of millions.¹³

Eventually, after elaborate consultations that involved the entire Congress leadership and prominent individuals such as Rabindranath Tagore, the party decided that the first two stanzas of the song were 'unobjectionable' but, in any case, singing *Vande Mataram* should involve no compulsion.¹⁴

The concession to Muslim misgivings to *Vande Mataram* didn't succeed in preventing the Muslim League securing a huge endorsement for Pakistan in the 1946 election. However, the controversy

proved successful in preventing even a truncated version of *Vande Mataram* from becoming India's national anthem. In time, the commitment to a composite, inclusive nationalism saw even the chant being gradually substituted by Jai Hind, popularized by Subhas Chandra Bose and his Indian National Army.

The furore over *Vande Mataram* that set the political fault lines in the run-up to Independence hasn't surfaced in a significant way after 1950. Yet, the relegation of this defining symbol of the freedom struggle to history had a definite political consequence. Under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, the post-Independence Congress slowly attempted to become more consciously 'secular' and shed explicit identification with Hindu imagery. In the process, it vacated a space that was gleefully appropriated by Hindu nationalism as its very own. More important, the present-day detachment of the secularists from an older tradition of nationalism, facilitated the linkage between past and contemporary Hindu nationalism. As the Congress became more and more associated with the fortunes of one family, important nationalist icons of the past such as Aurobindo, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Bipin Chandra Pal, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, and Rajendra Prasad, to mention only a few, came to be incorporated in the pantheon of the Hindu right. Till the lifetime of Indira Gandhi at least, the Congress—despite many secular adjustments—broadly represented the mainstream of Indian nationalism. However, as it progressively vacated the old ground and simultaneously lost its overwhelming political dominance, traditional Indian nationalism increasingly came to be identified with forces that had hitherto been on the fringes. The slow transition of *Vande Mataram* and Bharat Mata from being a mainstay of the Congress to becoming identified with the BJP epitomized the shift.

Since Independence, but particularly after the term 'secular' was inserted into the Preamble of the Indian Constitution without any meaningful debate at the height of the Emergency in 1976, there has been a temptation to read history backwards and underplay—if not entirely gloss over—the 'Hindu' dimensions of the national movement. There is an implicit suggestion that the leadership of the Congress by Mahatma Gandhi and, subsequently, Jawaharlal Nehru ensured that the ideology which guided the struggle for freedom was accommodative and inclusive and not mired in narrow Hindu sectarianism and bigotry.

That the nationalist leadership tried to speak for the entire nation and were deeply conscious of the need to involve the religious minorities in the struggle is undeniable. Gandhi, in particular, while being devoutly religious and regarded as a saint by his followers, took exceptional care to be respectful of all faiths. On his part, Nehru believed that religious divisions could be overcome by a common economic agenda that was loosely socialist.

The grass-roots reality was, however, a little more awkward. 'In the building of a mass movement,' wrote historian William Gould in his study of Congress mobilization in Uttar Pradesh in the 1930s and 1940s, 'religion helped to provide the necessary framework, space, discipline and mobilisation, and in the process the political meaning of "Hinduism" was redefined as an idea. In the varied contexts, the Hindu people were represented as being coterminous with the Indian nation.'¹⁵ What Partha Chatterjee concluded about the peasant disturbances in Bengal in the decade after 1926 may well be valid for the nationalist mobilization in the rest of India.

It is hardly surprising to discover that the ideology which shaped and gave meaning to the various collective acts of the peasantry was fundamentally religious. The very nature of peasant consciousness, the apparently consistent unification of an entire set of beliefs about nature and about men in the collective and active mind of a peasantry, is religious. Religion to such a community provides an ontology, an epistemology as well as a practical code of ethics, including political ethics. When this community acts politically, the symbolic meaning of particular acts . . . must be found in religious terms.¹⁶

From revolutionary nationalists taking the oath on the Bhagavadgita to activists twinning gau mata with Bharat Mata, upholding a way of life and the honour of the nation were inextricably connected.¹⁷

The protection of the cow and the abhorrence of beef eating formed an important element of modern nationalist consciousness. Throughout much of the nineteenth century, aggressive Christian missionaries had mocked the Hindu reverence for the cow and the social stigma attached to the eating of the ‘forbidden’ meat. This, in turn, had fostered a reaction in ‘native’ society against educated Indians who equated modernity with a repudiation of all Hindu norms and customs. The adherents of the Young Bengal movement who were enamoured of the idea of shocking Bengali society by flaunting their attachment to beef were treated harshly and often hounded out of society.

Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, who emerged as one of the most articulate upholders of the Hindu inheritance against attacks by Christian evangelists and others, was particularly savage in his repudiation of the British-promoted beef culture. ‘And what shall I say,’ he wrote in *Letters on Hinduism*, ‘of that weakest of human beings, the half-educated anglicised and brutalised Bengali babu, who congratulates himself on his capacity to dine off a plate of beef as if this act of gluttony constituted in itself unimpeachable evidence of a perfectly cultivated intellect?’¹⁸ Even the widespread respect for the literary talents of Michael Madhusudan Dutt couldn’t stop the stalwarts of society decrying the poet’s conversion to Christianity. Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay, for example, could never reconcile himself to ‘Madhu [sudan]’s despicable inclination to imitate’.¹⁹ Even Ramakrishna Paramahansa who showed an inclination to familiarize himself with the fundamentals of other faiths was known to stiffen at the mention of Dutt.²⁰

However, the contempt that much of bhadralok society felt at those who colluded in the undermining of Hindu society (and the food economy) did not lead to assertive opposition to cow slaughter. That was left to the Arya Samaj in Punjab and the Gau-Rakshini Sabhas that mushroomed all over Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, particularly the Bhojpuri belt, from the 1880s. These movements went beyond the landowners and rich traders that funded the gaushalas. They found a responsive audience among the intermediate castes such as Kurmis, Koeris and Ahirs, then involved in improving their ritual status—a direct consequence of the census operations that defined caste hierarchies.²¹ It was the participation of these ‘backward’ castes in the cow protection movements that gave the early expressions of nationalism a popular and populist touch.²² The Congress that evolved after the 1920s incorporated the traditions of the Gau-Rakshini Sabhas and cow protection became an associated feature of nationalist mobilization. ‘As nationalism and communal competition stimulated the search for categories of mutual identity and for definitions of nationality, the cow took on symbolic meaning.’²³ The process, quite inevitably, led to vicious rioting as Muslims often retaliated to cow rescue operations with demonstrative slaughter.

The consequences of the cow protection movements in northern and central India were twofold. First, the defence of the cow became a key feature of the Hindu identity, overriding other social and political differences. It became, like the sacredness of the River Ganga, a facet of Hindu ‘common sense’. Secondly, despite all attempts by important political leaders to gloss over its polarizing effects, cow protection was woven into the central fabric of Indian nationalism, and its fierce champions included Mahatma Gandhi. This was to persist after Independence when, following its incorporation in the Directive Principles of the Constitution, Congress governments in many states enacted legislation to ban cow slaughter.

For at least two decades after Independence, attempts by the Hindu right—notably the Jana Sangh and the lesser-known Ram Rajya Parishad—to initiate agitations for a national ban on cow slaughter made limited headway. There were two reasons for this.

First, despite the indifference—verging on contempt—of Prime Minister Nehru to the issue, a large number of Congress leaders, particularly in the Hindi heartland, were passionately committed to cow protection, although they hesitated to impose their views on other states where eating beef by non-Hindus didn’t carry a similar measure of social opprobrium. Consequently, attempts to portray the Congress as insensitive to Hindu interests didn’t make too much headway. It was the police firing, leading to eight deaths, on a demonstration of sadhus before Parliament House in Delhi on 7 November 1966 that created a divide between the cow protection activists and the Congress. The prolonged fast of the Shankaracharya of Puri demanding a total ban on cow slaughter did certainly influence devout Hindus all over the country.²⁴ Cow protection could be said to have had some adverse impact against the Congress in the 1967 general election, though the headway made by the Jana Sangh in Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh also owed to its strident advocacy of Hindi as the sole official language.

Over the decades, the Congress’s commitment to cow protection as a national issue worthy of serious political attention has waned enormously even to the point of hostility. The party’s promise to establish gaushalas in Madhya Pradesh in the 2018 assembly election, for example, invited charges that it was trying to emulate the BJP. This retreat can be explained partly by the Congress’s overdependence on the Muslim vote after 1989 and partly to accommodate a rising tide of Dalit assertiveness where beef eating is proudly flaunted as a badge of anti-caste politics. Yet, regardless of the occasional rediscovery of its heritage, the Congress can be said to have vacated the cow protection space almost entirely to the BJP. As with *Vande Mataram*, a redefinition of national priorities and the attachment to ‘secular’ politics has seen the BJP claiming facets of the old nationalist mantle for itself.

The inheritance has not been without its share of political troubles. During its tenure, the Modi government has had to bear the political liabilities of aggressive cow vigilante squads—in most cases acting without political sanction—that have targeted beef traders. The incidents of lynching of Muslims suspected of possessing beef have provoked adverse reactions globally and made the BJP vulnerable to charges of intolerance. Given its strong identification with India’s recent history of cow protection politics, the Hindu right has often found it difficult to balance the average Hindu’s genuine

abhorrence of cow slaughter with their distaste for the overzealousness and violent methods of self-appointed vigilantes.

One of the consequences of prolonged servitude and loss of national sovereignty is the loss of collective self-confidence of a nation. Whether India lost its powers of sovereign decision making with the Islamic conquests or British colonial rule is a subject of passionate dispute that often spills over into public life. In his legendary ‘tryst with destiny’ speech on the occasion of Independence at midnight on 15 August 1947, Jawaharlal Nehru referred to the ‘period of ill fortune’ and the lost ‘soul of a nation long suppressed’.²⁵ However, he did not get into specifics. Narendra Modi was different. In one of his first interventions in the Lok Sabha on 11 June 2014, he left no scope for ambiguity: ‘*Barah sau saal ki gulami ki maansikta humein pareshan kar rahi hai. Bahut baar humse thoda ooncha vyakti mile, to sar ooncha karke baat karne ki humari taaqat nahin hoti hai* (The slave mentality of 1200 years is troubling us. Often, when we meet a person of high stature, we fail to muster the strength to speak up).’²⁶

Modi was referring to the diffidence that has often been said to be characteristic of colonized peoples, especially in their dealings with the cosmopolitan world. He probably had in mind the tendency of Hindus to be embarrassed by their own traditions, their gods and goddesses, and their associated rituals that had, in the eyes of the ‘enlightened’ world, ‘consecrated and encouraged every conceivable form of licentiousness, falsehood, injustice, cruelty, robbery, murder . . . Its sublimest spiritual states have been but the reflex of physiological conditions in disease.’²⁷ He may also have had in mind the tendency of India’s intellectuals to mould the country’s public discourse according to prevailing global fashions and to see nationhood—the so-called ‘Idea of India’—in narrow juridical terms, bereft of culture and history. Modi’s was an outburst against national self-flagellation.

Ever since Nehru secured total control of the Congress after the deaths of Mahatma Gandhi and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, India’s dominant left-liberal ecosystem has regarded itself as both intellectually and aesthetically superior. Their electoral dominance was matched by their stranglehold over the centres of intellectual power, institutions where contrarian thinking and challenges to prevailing fashions were, if not regulated, actively discouraged.²⁸ Although the Swatantra Party managed to carve out a small niche for itself thanks to the personal reputation of its founder C. Rajagopalachari and the modest patronage of some Mumbai-based corporate houses, conventional wisdom deemed that there was no real future for right-wing politics in a country such as India.²⁹ The harshest treatment was reserved for the Hindu nationalists. Apart from being stigmatized for their supposed associations with the assassins of Mahatma Gandhi, they were cast as crude bigots, social reactionaries, and insular Hindi chauvinists. There was some personal regard for Atal Bihari Vajpayee’s abilities as a parliamentarian but, by and large, the RSS and BJP were viewed as both lacking in intellectual depth and being anti-intellectual.³⁰ The perception did not change with the BJP’s rising influence and its spate of election victories after 1991. The writer Aatish Taseer’s snide description of the participants of a retreat hosted by a pro-BJP foundation in 2014 was representative of the dismissive scorn that was reserved for the new rulers:

It was a ragtag coalition that collected at a sprawling resort, with a golf course and a swimming pool overlooking the Arabian Sea. In addition to the senior leaders of the B.J.P., there were right-wing Twitter personalities who had taken to social media because of what they described as the ‘inherent bias’ of the traditional news media; there were American Vedic experts who railed against a secular state that rejected its Hindu past; there were Muslim baiters; there were pseudo-historians who have rewritten Indian history to fit the political needs of the present.

What all these people had in common was an immense sense of grievance against an establishment they had vanquished electorally, but whose ideas still defined them.³¹

In the run-up to the 2014 general election and subsequently, Modi was denounced for being an affront to the very ‘Idea of India’.³² In power, the BJP was mocked for being devoid of ideas altogether and for being a jumble of prejudices. Describing the Modi era as ‘The Age of Cretinism’, Pratap Bhanu Mehta wrote, ‘There is no doubt that India is in a full blown reactionary moment. It is hard to grasp the nature of this reaction because it wears the garb of deep democratic legitimacy; it is an admission of despair described as the politics of hope. All the attributes of a reactionary politics are now gathered in one coherent form.’³³

The condescension of intellectuals is not a new experience for political formations on the right. The Conservative Party in the UK has often been described as the ‘stupid party’ and even the ‘nasty party’ for its views on law and order and immigration. More than anything else, this disdain has stemmed from the general disinclination of those who consider themselves wedded to tradition to reduce their beliefs and convictions to either theoretical constructs or dogma. Indeed, the right has often been distinguished by its quasi-spiritual vagueness. In the preface to historian Arthur Bryant’s tract on conservatism published in 1932, celebrated Scottish novelist Colonel John Buchan argued strongly against reducing conservatism to a dogma: ‘Conservatism is above all things a spirit . . . and the fruits of that spirit are continuity and unity . . . It believes that the state is an organic not a mechanical thing, and that there should be no violent disruption in growth. It conserves what is still alive but it ruthlessly lops off the dead boughs.’³⁴

On his part, the British parliamentarian Edmund Burke, often regarded as the father of modern conservatism for his opposition to the French Revolution, expressed his distaste for ‘abstraction’ because he was always mindful of ‘human frailty and the particular circumstances of an age and nation’.³⁵ To philosopher Roger Scruton, the inability of conservatism to ‘announce itself in maxims, formulae or aims’ wasn’t evidence of any intellectual shortcoming. It stemmed ‘from an awareness of the complexity of human things, and from an attachment to values which cannot be understood with the abstract clarity of utopian theory’.³⁶ Burke was quite explicit about not rejecting ‘prejudice’ out of hand. ‘The individual is foolish, but the species is wise; prejudices and prescriptions are the instruments which the wisdom of the species employs to safeguard man against his own passions and appetites.’³⁷ Consequently, apart from fascists who remain committed to radical ruptures, the traditional right has acted on the belief ‘that a living society can only change healthily when it changes naturally—that is, in accordance with its acquired and inherited character, and at a given rate’.³⁸

The emphasis on the context of human experiences and attitudes clearly indicates that the scope for right-wing and conservative universalism is limited. The nineteenth-century British prime minister Benjamin Disraeli’s assertion that ‘the Conservative Party is national or it is nothing’ still holds.³⁹ This is despite attempts by right-wing think tanks to suggest that adherence to globalization, free

trade, entrepreneurship, and fiscal prudence can be a universal bond among non-socialist formations. Within the EU, particularly in Germany and some Scandinavian countries, there is also a trend among conservative parties to discover global commonalities centred on human rights and shared sovereignty. The extent to which these post-national impulses in Europe stem from the bitter experiences of two world wars and an abhorrence of the fascist inheritance is worth considering. A study of the complex relationship between culture and politics in nineteenth-century Germany has, for example, suggested that ‘cosmopolitanism quite often became a refuge for those who could not but stay aloof from national culture’.⁴⁰

Right-wing nationalist movements are invariably rooted in specific social formations and cultures. They tend to be vastly dissimilar. Yet, there are broad common strands.

First, what distinguishes national movements with a conservative orientation against liberal tendencies is the primacy attached to community wisdom over individual choices. ‘The condition of mankind,’ wrote Scruton, ‘requires that individuals, while they exist and act as autonomous beings, do so only because they can first identify themselves as something greater—as members of a society, group, class, state or nation, of some arrangement to which they may not attach a name but which they recognise instinctively as home.’⁴¹ The aim of politics is to ensure that rampant individualism does not come into conflict with community interests and endanger civil order.

The community, in turn, is defined by historical memory. In explaining Burke’s resolute defence of ‘native’ society over the depredations of the East India Company, the chronicler of conservative thought Russel Kirk argued that: ‘He had defended those liberties not because they were innovations discovered in the Age of Reason, but because they were ancient prerogatives, guaranteed by immemorial usage. Burke was liberal because he was conservative.’⁴² To Burke, only a small fraction of human knowledge was formally codified, with the greater part captured in instinct, common usage, customs and tradition. This may explain the recurrence in the English imagination of the idea of the ‘ancient Constitution’, celebrating ancestral rights that predated the Norman conquest.

Even when these myths are shown to have tenuous links to history, they serve a valuable social purpose. Political philosopher David Miller identified at least two functions: ‘. . .they provide reassurance that the national community of which one now forms part is solidly based in history, that it embodies a real continuity between generations; and they perform a moralising role by holding up before us the virtues of our ancestors and encouraging us to live up to them’.⁴³

In practical terms, this translates into respect for what the British Conservative politician David Willets has described as the ‘unreflective but deeply felt values of the normal citizen’,⁴⁴ and the celebration of what Scruton described as ‘ordinary prohibitions and decencies’.⁴⁵ Indeed, ordinariness has been a powerful idea when taking on an arrogant establishment committed to changing society in its own image.

Secondly, conservative nationalists, as we have seen earlier, have attached great importance to the sacred in maintaining national life. There have been attempts to rework conservatism as a secular, rational approach, but as the American conservative writer Irving Kristol quipped in 1956, ‘conservative disposition is real enough but without the religious dimension, it is thin gruel’.⁴⁶ As late as 1959, in a tract for the Conservative Party for the British general election, Lord Hailsham argued

that: ‘There can be no genuine conservatism which is not founded upon a religious view of the basis of civil obligation, and there can be no true religion where the basis of civil obligation is treated as purely secular.’⁴⁷

Over the years, this commitment to Christian doctrines has eroded throughout Europe—although there is a spirited fightback in countries such as Poland and Hungary. The post-Christian consensus centred on secularism, according to conservative nationalists, has undermined national unity. In the words of Cambridge historian Maurice Cowling, the ‘loss of the Church’s psychological reassurance’ introduced ‘uncertainty in the historic English personality which has made coherent feeling difficult to maintain’. Cowling attributed this transformation and collapse to liberalism which, after the late 1960s, came to be equated with ‘any decent moral opinion’. In a scathing attack, he described the emergent liberalism as ‘a movement for spreading what can only, with unavoidable vagueness, call “niceness”. Liberals hated anything that might cause pain or stress . . . One liberalism or another operating in this idiom picked up a hostility to everything from punishment to meat, from sexual repression to academic testing.’⁴⁸

Thirdly, while there is no uniform pattern in how nationalists view the state and its role, the tendency in conservatism is to circumscribe the authority of the state by the will of society. There is a view, at least among conservatives in the West, that the state should not impose any preconceived version of the good on a reluctant society. In the words of David Miller, conservative governments should aspire to create ‘an environment in which the culture can develop spontaneously rather than being eroded by economically self-interested action on the part of particular individuals’.⁴⁹

A more radical view suggests that the state should desist from intrusive involvement in the management of the economy. In Scruton’s view, ‘The state’s relation to the citizen is not, and cannot be, contractual. It is therefore not the relation of employer and employee. The state has the authority, the responsibility, and the despotism of parenthood. If it loses those attributes, then it must perish, and society along with it. The state must therefore withdraw from every economic arrangement which puts it at the mercy of individual citizens.’⁵⁰ Needless to say, this purist view is not widely shared.

Finally, nationalist conservatism perceives itself as the embodiment of national identity. A conservative is much more than just a patriot; he is simultaneously a nationalist, with a primary commitment to the nation state. Although this may often imply an adherence to cultural homogeneity, the reality isn’t entirely black and white. David Miller’s sympathetic view of national identity in the modern context seems closer to reality: ‘If we think of national cultures not as implying complete uniformity but as a set of overlapping cultural characteristics—beliefs, practices, sensibilities—which different members exhibit in different combinations and to different degrees, then . . . it is reasonably clear that distinct national cultures do exist.’⁵¹ However, national identity naturally involves a large measure of genuflection to authority. Going by Scruton’s stark formulation, the price of a national community involves ‘sanctity, intolerance, exclusion and a sense that life’s meaning depends upon obedience and also on vigilance against the enemy’.⁵²

Such an espousal of national identity is naturally at odds with the multiculturalist view that sees the acknowledgement and even institutionalization of group differences as a compelling necessity. Apart from the old liberal desire to promote civic values to bind people, there are influential voices seeking

to decouple the majority culture from the wider political culture and separate the nation from the state.⁵³ The tensions involving the EU and countries such as Hungary and Poland are a consequence.

In recent years, the notion of ‘constitutional patriotism’—a phrase coined by the German intellectual Jürgen Habermas—has been put forward as an alternative to national identity, possibly to overcome potential internal conflicts involving nationhood. The idea originated in post-war Germany and was an attempt to create a completely new political identity that carried nothing of the troubled baggage of the past and was based entirely on rights and procedures. Since then, the idea has evolved into a prescription for post-national goals and constitutes an attempt to ensure that ‘the nation-state becomes denuded of cultural content’.⁵⁴

Adherence and commitment to a constitution is an important facet of a political democracy. It, at best, demarcates both the liberal and the conservatives from ultra-right fascists and ultra-left communists seeking the violent overthrow of the existing order. But, as David Miller has argued, ‘It does not provide the kind of political identity that nationality provides. In particular, it does not explain why the boundaries of the political community should fall here rather than there; nor does it give you any sense of the historical identity of the community, the links that bind present-day politics to decisions made and actions performed in the past.’⁵⁵ Nor does it help to relegate national identity to a ‘private set of cultural values’. Important as these undoubtedly are, they cannot serve as substitutes for a ‘public understanding of the terms on which we are going to carry on our collective life’.⁵⁶

This brief survey of the ideas and principles that govern nationalist conservative thought, particularly in the Anglophone democracies, may serve as pointers in locating India’s nationalist conservative politics in a wider context. But two caveats are in order.

First, both English and American conservatism emerged in self-governing states with democracies that evolved and matured over centuries. India, however, had lost its sovereign status and was a subject nation until the middle of the twentieth century, this despite islands of independence and patchy bids to regain sovereignty. The manifestations of nationalist conservatism were, under the circumstances, likely to be different. In pre-Independence India there was a larger focus on custom, culture, religion and national pride than on political and state institutions.

Secondly, there is a problem posed by translation. Many of the doctrinal shorthands that emerged in Europe and America had, in many cases, no equivalents, either linguistically or conceptually, in the Indian languages. In his study of the Indian liberal tradition, Christopher Bayly referred to the unsatisfactory translation of ‘liberal’ as *udarvadi*.⁵⁷ Similar difficulties are encountered in attempting to capture the essence of ‘conservatism’ in Indian languages. A possible way out is to view conservatism in oppositional terms:⁵⁸

- as the opposite of liberalism: *anudar panth*
- as that opposed to progressivism: *rudhivad*
- as anti-revolution: *kranti virodh*
- as anti-egalitarianism: *asamantavad*
- as opposed to state controls: *vaishvikta*

None of these appear entirely satisfactory, and it is a possible reason why conservatism suffers from non-usage in the Indian languages. In political discourse, it is used synonymously with *dakshin panth* (right wing) or even *pratikriyasheel* (reactionary). Even in English-language usage, the use of conservative/conservatism as implying a political orientation, rather than a set of attitudes, is rare. The expression ‘Hindu right’ and the deeply unsatisfactory ‘Hindu fundamentalism’ are the preferred choices in the media. In part this is an expression of political preference but it may also be explained by the larger unfamiliarity with the literature on the subject.

The spectacular influence of Western political thought—particularly John Stuart Mill, Jeremy Bentham, Auguste Comte, and subsequently, Karl Marx—on Indian intellectuals professing either liberalism or socialism, has been exhaustively studied and documented. By contrast, the roots of India’s conservative traditions, being largely indigenous, have been less scrutinized. While some scholars have detected European influences—conscious or otherwise—on Indian political thought, the indigenous knowledge systems that shaped the minds of those stalwarts that don’t fit easily into the ‘progressive’ mould have been relatively less explored. The study of India’s conservative nationalism is still at a nascent stage.⁵⁹

As has been noticed with the *Vande Mataram* and cow slaughter issues, there was never any clear divide between Hindu nationalism and the Congress variants of nationalism. Both overlapped and fed on each other. Recent misunderstandings on the subject have entirely to do with the assumption that the rise in nationalist consciousness from the late nineteenth century was a direct consequence of English education and Western political thought. Subsequent historical research has revealed that while English-educated Indians assumed prominence and occupied the national stage, there were other indigenous influences that were just as important. Historian C.A. Bayly, for example, has argued that ‘the Indian national movement which emerged in the 1870s and 1880s drew upon and recast some patterns of social relations, sentiments, doctrines and embodied memories which had come into existence before British rule was established . . .’⁶⁰ Ties of nationality forged by pilgrimages, notions of territoriality, emergence of cross-caste solidarities, and even an emotional alienation from the state after the establishment of Muslim rule helped forge a notion of what Bayly has described as a ‘sacred landscape’. Particularly significant was the contribution of Shivaji and his successors. ‘The Marathas saw themselves, not as usurpers of Mughal rule, but as the protectors of the boundaries of Hindustan.’⁶¹

The importance that many Indians, particularly those living outside Calcutta and Bombay, attached to indigenous cultural forms were not eroded with the advent of colonial rule. ‘Patriotism, in a distorted form, could coexist with loyalism, even pathetic dependence on the British government. It could also co-exist with a form of Hindu assertion.’⁶² Consequently, there was no rigid demarcation between liberalism and conservatism.’ They were, as Bayly noted, ‘joined at the hip from birth’.⁶³

The blurring of lines between who was ‘progressive’ or traditionalist and ‘reactionary’ is best highlighted in the lives of two nineteenth-century Bengal stalwarts: Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820–91) and Raja Radhakanta Deb (1784–1867).

Vidyasagar, a distinguished principal of Sanskrit College, Calcutta, is viewed in the popular imagination as an enlightened social reformer who fought Hindu orthodoxy. The reputation owes significantly to the leading role he played in legitimizing Hindu widow remarriage, a measure that is seen as the next forward from the outlawing of sati during the tenure of Governor General Lord William Bentinck. While Vidyasagar's stellar role in bringing the plight of widows—especially young girls given away in marriage to much older men—was quite audacious, it is also significant that he joined hands with 'respectable' Bengali society in opposing the Age of Consent Act that raised the minimum age of marriage for girls to twelve years. Both his endorsement of widow remarriage and his resolute opposition to the colonial state tinkering with Hindu marriage customs were based on a reading of the shastras and not from secular concerns.⁶⁴

Likewise, while seeking 'a renewal of common Hindu sensibility'⁶⁵ Vidyasagar did not disavow all existing social norms altogether, even when they were at odds with his reading of the shastras. As principal of Sanskrit College, he endorsed a scheme for the admission of Kayastha students—along with Brahmin and Baidya students who were admitted right from the inception of the College—but opposed allowing access to Sanskrit learning to Sudras, including the prosperous Subarnabanik caste. His argument was that they were 'at present lacking respectability' and their ritual status was 'very low'.⁶⁶

Vidyasagar, it has been suggested, 'sought to influence the religious instincts of his people by explaining to them, in a new light, the scriptural texts of their own honoured and sacred authorities. It was an endeavour to initiate social reforms on the very grounds of conformity to established religion.'⁶⁷ He never sought upheaval in Hindu society.

Raja Radhakanta Deb, a contemporary of both Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Vidyasagar, has often been caricatured as the epitome of orthodoxy and bigotry for his opposition to the legislation banning sati. In hindsight, the opposition seems akin to endorsing an inhuman practice on the ground of tradition. However, there was a specific context to his opposition. In 1829, Deb, partnered the creation of the Dharma Sabha, that sought to bring Hindus with different ritual traditions under a common umbrella, not least to be vigilant against attempts by the British government to interfere in the customs of its Hindu subjects. Interestingly, even Vidyasagar had misgivings over relying on alien rulers to usher change, but justified it on grounds of expediency and a misplaced—but not novel—belief that the 'sole object of their [British] conquest is to bring about all-round welfare of the country'.⁶⁸

Despite his opposition to the sati legislation, there is a common thread running through the public lives of Deb and Vidyasagar. Deb, for example, served as the director of Hindu College for nearly three decades. He was also an important functionary of the Calcutta School Society and the Calcutta School Book Society. He had a special interest in women's education and co-authored a manual on women's education. According to a historical assessment, Deb 'tried to drive a wedge between English education and English ideas. The first in his view was functionally useful and the second socially unsettling.'⁶⁹ This was not very dissimilar from Vidyasagar's insistence that the teaching of Western philosophy and the Hindu shastras should be kept firmly apart.⁷⁰

Among the reasons why the application of the modern-day liberal–conservative schism was problematic in pre-Independence India was the broadly similar concerns over colonial rule. When Clive defeated Siraj-ud-Daulah at Plassey in 1757 and acquired control over Bengal, the Indian merchants of Calcutta are said to have celebrated. Despite the severe hiccups of ‘dual government’ and the commercial depredations of the East India Company before the Crown stepped in, there was broad consensus in Bengali Hindu society that British rule was a marked improvement over what had prevailed earlier. Bankimchandra, in particular, believed that British rule had rescued Bengal from the disorders of Muslim rule, a theme that found reflection in *Anandamath*.⁷¹ In the 1890s, the writer Chandranath Basu—who coined the term ‘Hindutva’ for the title of his book in 1892—admonished the poet Nabinchandra Sen for upholding the glories of Siraj in Palashir yuddha: ‘Why is the Hindu so remorseful if the Muslim should lose Bengal? And why may I ask, does Mohanlal lament? Is it because he is only a servant of the Muslim? And as a Hindu should you not be upset at this?’⁷²

The antipathy to Muslim rule was also quite marked in the consciousness of the Maratha territories. The poet Ramdas (1608–81), the spiritual guru of Shivaji, for example, lamented: ‘Many people have now become Mahomedans; some have fallen on the field of battle; many have lost touch with their native language, and have become proficient in foreign tongues. The bounds of Maharashtra have been constrained.’⁷³ During the riots in Benares in 1809 and 1811, involving local Hindus and Muslim weavers, the petitions to the British authorities from Hindus provided ‘evidence of an articulate history of grievance and victimhood . . . (The) petitioners argued that they had suffered discrimination under the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb and his local officers, but had been too weak to act. Now, with the waning of Muslim power in India, they could reassert their ancient rights and block the pretension of the Muslim weavers on their sacred space.’⁷⁴

The belief in British rule as deliverance waned outside the metropolitan cities of Calcutta and Bombay. It was mixed among the Brahmins that were the mainstay of Peshwa rule which, despite its many imperfections, was centred on the notions of regional pride and Hindu glory. Bayly has noted that ‘the strongest resistance [to British rule] came apparently from middling or aspiring groups in society and not necessarily from the established oligarchy or upper bureaucrats, many of whom compromised with the British to retain their office and perquisites . . . Men brought up in the regional homelands and committed to their cultural and religious institutions were stubborn in their resistance than rootless aristocrats and itinerant pens men.’⁷⁵

Yet, despite groups that rejected British rule and all forms of Western cultural influences completely, the complete political dominance of the Raj ruled out anything but qualified assertions of nationality. Consequently, loyalty to the government and fierce pride in Indianness, particularly India’s heritage, existed simultaneously. The cultural self-assertion ranged from discoveries of common Aryan ancestry to believing that the core of all scientific knowledge could be discovered in ancient Sanskrit texts.⁷⁶

There was always a realization that India had become a subject nation and lost its sovereign status. The racial discrimination and the racist slurs most Indians experienced drove home the realities of being a conquered people. The shame this generated, along with the anger over the rhetoric of Christian missionaries and suspicion of the government’s cultural engineering, ensured that loyalism

was never unequivocal, despite the over-abundance of flattery—some comic—for the rulers. Historian Tapan Raychaudhuri has described the convoluted and contradictory responses to British rule in nineteenth-century Bengal as ‘neurotic’.⁷⁷

‘Neurotic’ or not, from the 1830s, different parts of India witnessed an intellectual churning triggered by the encounter with colonial rule. In his study of Indian liberalism, Bayly has detected ‘a broad and internally contested range of thought and practice directed to the pursuit of political and social liberty. Its common features were a desire to re-empower India’s people with personal freedom in the face of the despotic government of the foreigners, embodied traditional authority and supposedly corrupt domestic or religious practices’.⁷⁸ At the same time, there were parallel currents that sought to preserve, strengthen, and reform indigenous institutions, blend it with the larger community reawakening processes and generate a resurgent India. Predictably, there were internal differences over how much to conserve and how much to adapt to outside influences. These differences were relatively less in evidence till Independence but formed the basis of political schisms subsequently.

In assessing why India had become a subject nation and what could be done to recover national self-esteem, there was broad agreement over the absence of national feeling—a commonality of purpose the British were seen to possess in abundance. Writing in 1901, the educationist and one-time vice chancellor of Bombay University, R.G. Bhandarkar, was explicit that: ‘A regard for national interest must grow up amongst us . . . In our history as Hindus as a whole we have shown no concern for national or corporate interests, or were not actuated by the national spirit or sentiment or consequently allowed ourselves to be conquered by foreigners.’⁷⁹ Lala Lajpat Rai similarly asked in 1907: ‘A question has often haunted us . . . as to why is it that notwithstanding the presence among us of great, vigorous and elevating truths, and of the very highest conception of morality, we [Hindus] have been a subject race, held down for so many centuries by sets of people who were neither physically nor spiritually nor even intellectually so superior to us . . . to demand our subjection.’⁸⁰ Like Bhandarkar, he too concluded that ‘individual selfishness, greed and calculation’ had prevented national unity. The political answer, he felt, was to inculcate ‘a sense of social responsibility which requires each and every member of the organization to place the interests of the community or the nation above those of his own’.⁸¹

Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay (1827–1894), an early conservative who grappled with the issues of what to conserve and what to modify,⁸² complimented the British for ‘their will power, skills and mutual sympathy, the results of observing codes appropriate for their country and their faith’.⁸³ He felt that the British conquest of India ‘was also divine dispensation: for Indians divided against themselves on the basis of race and language would now learn patriotism from the British whose love for their country transcended even their moral sense’.⁸⁴ Nor was this admiration of Britain’s national character confined to the presidencies. The Hindi writer Harishchandra felt that a ‘pious worldly religion and a free press working in a national language had consolidated a strong patriotism and made Britain a world power’. By contrast, India was like a train with separate first-, second- and third-class carriages but no engine to move it.⁸⁵

Both the sneaking and explicit admiration of British character was inevitably contrasted with India's own shortcomings, particularly the distortions that had undermined Hindu traditions. Bankimchandra often contrasted British worldliness with the Hindu penchant for asceticism, abstruse philosophical speculation, and the corresponding failure to master the world of nature.

‘Knowledge is power’: that is the slogan of Western civilisation. ‘Knowledge is salvation’ is the slogan of Hindu civilisation . . . Europeans are devotees of power. That is the key to their advancement. We are negligent towards power: that is the key to our downfall. Europeans pursue a goal which they must reach in this world: they are victorious on earth. We pursue a goal which lies in the world beyond, which is why we have failed to win on earth. Whether we will win in the life beyond is a question on which there are differences of opinion.⁸⁶

The absence of any worthwhile tradition of science and technical education was a perennial lament of India's nationalists, and India's failure was often contrasted with Japan's success. However, unlike the nineteenth century that had witnessed a rush to absorb every European idea and trend, the rise of political nationalism saw a demand for the Indianization of education. In 1911, Sir Rashbehari Ghosh, once the president of a Congress session, asked for ‘Hindu ethics and metaphysics’ to be given a ‘foremost place’ in the curriculum. S. Srinivasa Iyengar claimed at a conference in Madras in 1921 that the education system had ‘ignored India's racial psychology, history, literature and religion, and patriotic ideals and aspiration’.⁸⁷ It was to meet some of these concerns, but without repudiating the West altogether that initiatives such as the Dayanand Anglo-Vedic colleges and the Banaras Hindu University were undertaken. Rabindranath Tagore's Viswa-Bharati in Santiniketan was altogether a very different initiative, although the cultural dimensions of nationalism were fully accommodated.

The issue of grappling with the realities of political power and evolving theories of statecraft were also issues that concerned the nationalists. Predictably, Shivaji was held up as an ideal and his ability to craft a Hindu state was widely celebrated, sometimes with a rash of European parallels. In 1934, for example, Professor S.R. Sharma, formerly of Fergusson College, Poona, published *The Founding of Maratha Freedom* where he claimed:

Shivaji was a titanic creator in the realms of politics and nation-building. He had the vision of Mazzini, the dash of Garibaldi, the diplomacy of Cavour, and the patriotism, perseverance and intrepidity of William of Orange. He did for Maharashtra what Fredrick the Great achieved for Germany or Alexander the Great for Macedonia.

Such hyperbolic histories were denounced by Sir Jadunath Sarkar as ‘pure nationalist brag and moonshine’: ‘We make ourselves ridiculous when we read the ideals and thoughts of the 20th century English educated nationalists into the lives of the sectarian or clannish champions of the 17th and 18th centuries.’⁸⁸

On a more serious note, however, history was an important instrument in the hands of nationalists to highlight the importance of charitra (character) in the life of a nation. The genre of popular historical plays in Marathi contributed immeasurably to public awareness of uprightness in national life. Between 1860 and 1900 some sixty historical plays were written in Marathi; about 100 more were added by 1930, and another 170 more by 1960.⁸⁹ Many of these plays centred on the personality and deeds of Shivaji. According to a study by historian Prachi Deshpande, Shivaji was ‘lionised as an important political figure and his life story was constructed as the ideal blend of tradition and

modernity. In these representations, he embodied a moderate individualism that preached the necessity of individual action and enterprise but also maintained a healthy respect for religious and social tradition.’ This was unlike Sambhaji who was portrayed as ill-tempered and blessed with bad habits and dodgy associates.⁹⁰

The importance of charitra in the making of a people, or for that matter, empires, was mirrored in the writings of Sir Jadunath Sarkar, a historian of the Mughals and Marathas, whose writings exercised a tremendous influence till the 1970s. To Sarkar, ‘what mediated between the “destiny” of a people and the contingency of their empirical reality was something called “character”, the sheer capacity in humans for leadership, discipline, effort, mastering passions and self-cultivation. It was what separated destiny from fate and left the former open to multiple possibilities. Take away the question of character and the revealed greater purpose in human history remains unfulfilled.’⁹¹

Sarkar believed that British rule was a valuable, indeed, indispensable element of character building that would prepare India for self-rule. Like other admirers of British rule before him, he too believed that the way forward did not lie ‘copying the externals of European civilisation’ and ‘plume herself in the borrowed feathers of European civilisation’. To produce a renaissance involved ‘undergoing a new birth of spirit’.⁹²

The idea of a cemented religion forging a resurgent Indian nationality held out a great attraction to conservative nationalists. Bal Gangadhar Tilak, in particular, attempted ‘a populist reconfiguration of Hindu devotionalism and Hindu regional nationalism’.⁹³ Speaking at the Bharat Dharma Mahamandala in Benares on 3 January 1906, he was categorical that:

Religion is an element in nationality . . . During Vedic times, India was a self-contained country. It was united as a great nation. That unity has disappeared bringing great degradation and it becomes the duty of the leaders to revive that union. A Hindu of this place is as much a Hindu as one from Madras or Bombay. The study of the Gita, Ramayana and Mahabharata produce the same ideas throughout the country. Are not these—common allegiance to the Vedas, Gita and Ramayana—our common heritage? If we lay stress on it forgetting all the minor differences that exist between different sects, then by the grace of Providence we shall ere long be able to consolidate all the different sects into a mighty Hindu nation. This ought to be the ambition of every Hindu.⁹⁴

Swami Vivekananda, who, in recent times, has often been portrayed as merely a mystic with a universal message, had earlier echoed Tilak and asserted that only religion could rescue the ‘Hindu nation’ that had become ‘wretchedly jealous of one another’ and ‘gone to pieces’.

The problems in India are more complicated, more momentous, than the problems in any other country. Race, religion, language, government—all these together make a nation. The one common ground that we have is our sacred tradition, our religion. That is the only common ground, and upon that we shall have to build . . . The unity in religion, therefore, is absolutely necessary as the first condition of the future of India. There must be the recognition of one religion throughout the length and breadth of this land . . . National union in India must be a gathering up of its scattered spiritual forces. A Nation in India must be a union of those whose hearts beat to the same spiritual tune.⁹⁵

Vivekananda was particularly concerned with asserting India’s cultural sovereignty.

We Hindus . . . have been clamouring here for getting political rights and many other things . . . Rights and privileges . . . can only be expected between two equals. When one of the parties is a beggar, what friendship can there be? . . . So I must call upon you to go out to England and America, not as beggars but as teachers of religion.⁹⁶

In asserting India's soft power in the West, Vivekananda hoped that the mental squeamishness of India's own Western-educated gentlemen over their own inheritance would give way to cultural pride. That certainly was the impact of his interventions at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, an event that is still commemorated in India.

While belief in the centrality of a unified Hindu identity in the framework of nationhood was a common thread running through nationalist thought till the 1920s—when alternatives such as socialism and the Constitution entered the arena—there was less agreement over how this could be brought about.

For Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay, upholding the essence of the Hindu inheritance involved adhering unflinchingly to the ritually prescribed code laid down by the shastras and upholding the family. In his view, these prescriptions, which he adhered to as a Brahmin, gave society a cohesiveness and discipline. 'In his study of Europe and contact with Europeans, he failed to discover anything which could compensate for the loss of ideals by which his forebears had lived. He saw these as still a vital, if threatened component of national life.'⁹⁷

As opposed to Bhudeb who fell back almost entirely on inherited ritualism, Bankimchandra felt that 'the actual enemy was not some force external to oneself but one's own selfishness, sentimentalism and cowardice'.⁹⁸ He was particularly harsh on popular superstitions and the enhanced ritualism—he called it a 'monstrous fantasy'—that had come to define the Hindu faiths and felt they were the reasons for India's decline.⁹⁹ Although an upholder—for understandable reasons given his role as a high functionary of the government—of what he described as 'non-political patriotism' Bankimchandra sought to move away from the Hindu preoccupation with metaphysical abstractions and the afterlife, and link individual salvation with social cohesion—as the likes of Aurobindo and Vivekananda were to do subsequently. In a bid to construct a modern nationhood, he felt that freedom was likely to be imperfect without the people being liberated socially and intellectually. Political assertion, Bankimchandra felt, had to be preceded by the 'cultural self-discovery of a people'.¹⁰⁰ 'The ancients,' he wrote, 'had made a mistake by submerging patriotism into the higher love of all created things and the balance had to be redressed.'¹⁰¹

Like Bankimchandra, Vivekananda believed in the centrality of religion in reinvigorating India. However, while Bankimchandra attached greater reliance on bhakti and the Puranic traditions, Vivekananda looked to India's spiritual traditions, particularly Vedanta for guidance. He believed that a man's true potential could be unearthed by intense spiritualism. In that sense, his approach was different from his spiritual guru Ramakrishna Paramahansa's path of bhakti and personal communion with the Deity.¹⁰² In his discourses, Ramakrishna spoke in earthy parables while Vivekananda was attached to high philosophy.

However, what distinguished Vivekananda in late-nineteenth-century India was not merely his erudition in religious matters but his ability to link his spiritual mission with a larger nation-building purpose. He was perhaps the first religious figure—one who was perceived as a monk in saffron robes—who countered the highly individualistic notion of personal salvation taking priority over a larger commitment to society.¹⁰³ He extended the notion of unity of God and man into Practical Vedanta—a commitment to daridranarayan, the belief that service to God implied service to India's

poor. 'And may I be born again and again,' he wrote to an American disciple in 1897, 'and suffer thousands of miseries, so that I may worship the only God that exists, the only God I believe in, the sum total of all souls. And above all, my God the wicked, my God the miserable, my God the poor of all races, of all species, is the especial object of my worship.'¹⁰⁴ He attempted to guilt-trip the educated classes into looking beyond their immediate world and acknowledging the pitiable state of India. But most important, he believed that the 'common people have suffered oppression. For thousands of years—suffered it without murmur, and as a result have got wonderful fortitude. They have suffered eternal misery, which has given them unflinching vitality . . .' The future of India, he felt, belonged to them.¹⁰⁵

Vivekananda created his monastic order not merely to strengthen Hinduism but to serve the poor, the backbone of national life. His 'schemes of social service were more modestly conceived and also perhaps less radical in their results when compared to Gandhian programmes but the beginning nevertheless had been made. Vivekananda anticipated Gandhi in probably two respects: one of which surely is the attack on untouchability and human oppression in the name of caste; and the other, the idea of voluntary movements and restoring the dignity of human labour.'¹⁰⁶ He inspired and continues to inspire generations of Indians who took to public life inspired by his message.

The belief that the caste prejudice and oppression was dragging India down was an important feature of the Hindu nationalist movement. The role of Swami Dayanand Saraswati and the Arya Samaj, in this context, was seminal, particularly in northern India.

Dayanand was outright in his rejection of the entire range of popular Hinduism which he described as 'historical degradation'. He harked back to the authenticity of a pure Vedic religion that was simple, pure and, above all, free from Brahmanical distortions.¹⁰⁷ Lala Lajpat Rai, an Arya Samaj stalwart and a leading nationalist figure in Punjab, traced the demise of the Hindu nation to the period after the decline of Buddhism when 'the genius of a jealous and perverted, sometimes corrupt and selfish priesthood built a vast and superstructure of conventionalities and formalities, with an almost interminable labyrinth of rituals and ceremonies'.¹⁰⁸ This was echoed by another leading light of the Arya Samaj, Swami Shraddhanand in his *Hindu Sangathan*, written in 1924: 'The great Aryan nation is said, at the present moment to be a dying race not because its numbers are dwindling but because it is completely disorganised. Individually, man to man, second to none on earth in terms of intellect and physique, possessing a code of morality unapproachable by any other race of humanity, the Hindu nation is still helpless on account of its manifold divisions and selfishness.'¹⁰⁹

In practical terms, the Arya Samaj undertook two programmes to restore the vitality of Hindu society. The first, in debunking the caste system, it attempted to integrate the 'untouchables' into mainstream Hindu society. Secondly, and far more controversially, it initiated a shuddhi movement to reconvert Christians and Muslims back into the Hindu fold. Many Hindu leaders in the past had flagged their concerns over conversions, particularly by Christian missionaries, but the worry had been accompanied by mere anger and helplessness. The shuddhi innovation was the response. Regardless of how many Hindu organizations were involved in reconversions, the initiative enjoyed a huge measure of passive support and has persisted in patches after Independence.

There were important differences in the approach of individuals and organizations that believed in a revitalized Hindu identity for national regeneration. However, there were important points of convergence. By far the most important of these was the disavowal of individualism in the larger project of corporate citizenship, an approach that goes against the fundamentals of liberalism.

It is this theme that has resonated strongly in the RSS. The RSS, founded by K.B. Hedgewar in Nagpur in 1925, has steered clear of choosing between Hindu belief systems and modes of worship in upholding Hindu nationhood. Instead, it has attached prime importance to moulding the character of Hindus by the implantation of worthwhile samskaras (values) in its swayamsevaks. Among the values it has consciously cherished is discipline. According to M.S. Golwalkar, the second—and by far the most influential—head of the organization, ‘all our great authorities on mental discipline have ordained us not to succumb to overflow of emotions and weep in the name of God but to apply ourselves to a strict discipline of day-to-day penance. Effusion of emotions will only shatter the nerves and make the person weaker than before, leaving him a moral wreck.’¹¹⁰ He was very disdainful of individualism:

It is natural that the persons in the Sangh imbued with the correct national perspective react spontaneously to the various national problems that arise from time to time in the same manner. To mistake it for mental regimentation is to call the spirit of nationalism itself as an instrument of regimentation! It is the undigested modern ideas like ‘freedom of thought’, ‘freedom of speech’, etc, that are playing havoc in the minds of our young men who look upon freedom as licence and self-restraint as mental regimentation.¹¹¹

Deendayal Upadhyaya, whose theory of Integral Humanism is held by the BJP to be its guiding principle, wasn’t quite as brutal in his repudiation of individualism. But in his mind too, the individual was subordinated to society and dharma. While society, in his view, was a living organism with a defined *chiti* (ethos) that ‘protected’ the national soul, dharma was the ‘innate law’ that sustained individuals in a society. The power of dharma, in turn, was exemplified ‘in the ideal of the family’.¹¹²

The Swatantra Party has often been held out as an example of a ‘secular’ right-wing tradition in India that was subsumed by the greater appeal of the Hindu right. While there is no doubt that the Swatantra Party showed a greater attachment to the free market, unlike the Jana Sangh and BJP that was often partial to state-sponsored redistributive programmes, the belief that it disavowed the religious underpinnings of conservatism is a myth.

The leading light of the Swatantra Party was unquestionably Chakravarti Rajagopalachari or Rajaji, as he popularly known. A veteran Congressman and close associate of Mahatma Gandhi with a reputation for intellectual sharpness and independent thinking, Rajaji fell out with Nehru on the question of excessive state involvement in the economy. However, outside the realms of day-to-day politics, Rajaji was an archetypal traditionalist in the mould of an earlier generation of conservative thinkers.

To Rajaji, the ‘loosening of the religious impulse is the worst of the disservices rendered by the Congress to the nation. We must organise a new force and movement to replace the greed and the class hatred of Congress materialism with a renovated spiritual outlook emphasising the restraints of good conduct as of greater importance than the triumphs of organised covetousness.’ The restraint

was, to him, born of dharma that would facilitate ‘an organic growth which it is our duty to respect and which we should not treat as mere Indian superstition or eccentricity’. He venerated the joint family and decried ‘the cult of individuality’ and ‘perverted social movements’. He believed that Hindu thought was ‘scientific’ and based ‘as a search for truth and not as a matter of dogma’. If ‘our 400 million strike out religion from their lives, India will be wiped out’.¹¹³

Rajaji’s colleague in the Swatantra Party was K.M. Munshi, another former Congressman best known for his role in facilitating the rebuilding of the Somnath Temple in Gujarat, an example that inspired those who sought the construction of a grand Ram temple on the site of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. Munshi’s other great contribution was the establishment of the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan that sought to give dynamic expression to the idea of Bharatiya shiksha. ‘The ultimate aim of Bharatiya shiksha,’ claimed the Bhavan’s statement of principles, ‘is to teach the younger generation to appreciate and live up to the permanent values of Bharatiya vidya which flowing from the supreme act of creative life-energy as represented by Shri Ramachandra, Shri Krishna, Vyasa, Buddha and Mahavira have expressed themselves in modern times in the life of Shri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Swami Dayanand Saraswati and Swami Vivekananda, Shri Aurobindo and Mahatma Gandhi.’¹¹⁴

In hindsight, it can be gauged that the Indian right was characterized by a huge measure of continuity that extended from the middle of the nineteenth century. The themes that preoccupied conservative thinkers quietly resisting colonial encroachments are no doubt important as history. But many of these preoccupations did not die out with the onset of Independence and the recovery of national sovereignty. They have persisted as guiding forces in contemporary India. The idea of national resurgence is as important in a globalized twenty-first century setting as it was in the India of the mid-nineteenth century. The ideas that drove Indians of an earlier age have persisted in one form or another in shaping contemporary politics. The quest for a New India has invariably involved the rediscovery of an Old India.