THE IDEA OF INDIA

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The Idea of India

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Who is an Indian?

Four hundred million separate individual men and women, each differing from
the other, each living in a private universe of thought and feeling.

NEHRU, 1946

Unity cannot be brought about by enacting a law that all shall be one.

TAGORE, 1902

Towards the end of 1989 the attention of many Indians was
focused upon a collection of 167,000 bricks piled up in the
northern pilgrimage town of Ayodhya. These were not ordinary
bricks. They were Ram shilas, ‘Ram’s bricks’, collected from places
across the country and outside India. Each was inscribed with
its place of origin, and among the most proudly displayed were
those dispatched by emigrant communities in the United States,
Canada, South Africa and the Caribbean. The bricks had travelled
to Ayodhya, in the state of Uttar Pradesh, in ceremonial and
often violent processions organized by the ‘Sangh Parivar’ – a
cluster of militant Hindu organizations associated with the BJP.
They were to be used, it was claimed, to construct a gigantic
temple to mark the cartographically certain spot where Ram, a
god central to the worship of many Hindus, was believed to
have been born, and where a mosque – the Babri Masjid – had
stood since the sixteenth century. The foundation stone of this
temple, which Hindu leaders saw as part of the transformation
of sleepy Ayodhya into a ‘Hindu Vatican’, was to be laid at a
shilanyas, or foundation ceremony. In a bizarre choreography
of the singular rituals of Hindu worship, it was announced that
at 1.35 p.m. on that day all Hindus, everywhere, should face
Ayodhya and make an offering.

But the shilanyas was not about worship. It was a political
performance oblivious to the rhythms of the sacred calendar and
timed to coincide with the electoral one. For the BJP, dedicated
to what it called ‘Indianization’ – its manifestos saw this as
the forging of ‘one nation, one people, one culture’ – it was a
further step in a long campaign for electoral success, which by
the end of the 1980s had hauled the party to the threshold of
political power. The project of Indianization drew upon an
historical imagination at odds with the definition of Indianness
the nationalist elite had aspired to install after 1947. To Hindu
nationalists, Ayodhya telescoped into a single narrative other-
wise quite unrelated events: the birth of Ram ‘nine lakh [900,000]
years ago’, the entry of the Mughals into India in 1526, and – to
a rather different cue – the rise of the BJP as the chosen party
to right immemorial wrongs and put modern India in direct
touch with its glorious past. As the subsequent destruction of
the Babri Masjid in 1992 by kar sevaks, special volunteers of
Hindu militant organizations armed with pick axes and shovels,
confirmed, Ayodhya had become the site of the most piercing
assault ever faced by the Indian state, one that shook its basic
political identity.

Not that the fundamental matter of India’s selfhood has ever
been settled. The truncated colonial territories inherited by the
Indian state after 1947 still left it in control of a population
of incomparable differences: a multitude of Hindu castes and
outcastes, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Buddhists, Jains and
tribes; speakers of more than a dozen major languages (and
thousands of dialects); myriad ethnic and cultural communities.
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This discordant material was not the stuff of which nation states are made; it suggested no common identity or basis of unity that could be reconciled within a modern state. Nor was there a compelling ideological doctrine or symbol, a ‘socialism’ or an emperor, around which to unite. For a few parenthetic decades after independence, Nehru’s improvised conception of a tolerable, common Indianness seemed to suggest a basis for India’s sense of itself. It was an explicitly political conception, and to sustain itself, it had constantly to persuade. That conception has given way, corroded by more exclusivist ideas of India and of political community. By the 1990s, definitions of Indianness were in fierce contest once again: Hindu nationalists struggled to capture the state and to purge the nationalist imagination, leaving it homogenous, exclusive and Hindu; others fought to escape the Indian state altogether and to create their own smaller, homogenous and equally exclusive communities.

The uncertainties that surrounded definitions of the Indian political community had settled symbolically on the town of Ayodhya, a place with no resonances of colonial humiliation or trace of futuristic monuments, but a stage where a quite different historical drama could be re-enacted. The wrecked site itself poses Indians with a practical dilemma. What should be done with it? Should a new Ram temple be built, as Hindu nationalists urged, and as the armed police assigned to guard the site were only too eager to assure visitors would indeed happen? Or should the destroyed mosque be restored? Or should it become, as some proposed, the ground for a civic monument to the Indian state’s secular identity?

Who is an Indian?

The puzzle of India’s unity and of Indianness raised a variety of contending responses within the nationalist movement that brought India to independence. Nehru’s was only one among these, and it was in no sense typical of nationalism as a whole. ‘Indian nationalism’ is a somewhat misleading shorthand phrase to describe a remarkable era of intellectual and cultural ferment and experimentation inaugurated in the late nineteenth century. The various, often oblique, currents that constituted this phase extended well beyond the confines of a political movement such as the Congress, with its high political, bilingual discourse. The possible basis for a common community was argued with ingenuity and imagination in the vernacular languages, especially in regions like Bengal and Maharashtra that had been exposed longest to the British, where a sense of regional identity only came into being as people tried to define a larger ‘Indian’ community. The belief that Indian nationalism had subsequently to unite and subordinate these regional identities is thus a curious misreading of the relationship between nation and region in India. In fact, a sense of region and nation emerged together, through parallel self-definitions — and this point is essential to any understanding of the distinctive, layered character of Indianness. The content and styles of these diverse explorations of a common community were neither uniform nor consistent, and the picture painted by nationalist historiographers of independent India, of a rising arc of nationalist self-consciousness from the ‘Renaissance’ in nineteenth-century Bengal to a culmination in 1947, is at best sentimental.

Similarly, to reduce these wide-ranging intellectual and political inquiries to a simple description of ‘nationalism’ is to conflate the differing projects of anti-colonialism, patriotism and nationalism, conveniently forgetting just how widespread and
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enduring were forms of patriotic loyalism that sang the glories of both the Motherland and the Empress Victoria. (In 1911, Gandhi, who only two years earlier had written his mauling indictment of the West, Hind Swaraj – an iconic work of Indian nationalism – was himself advising Indians to tender loyalty to their new king at George V’s coronation.) Yet if there was one intention threading together these projects, it was to rebut the humiliation inflicted by colonial views, epitomized in John Strachey’s lofty declaration, ‘there is not, and never was an India, nor ever any country of India, possessing according to European ideas, any sort of unity, physical, political, social or religious; no nation, no “people of India” of which we hear so much’. By the 1920s, at least three distinct lines of reply to this goad had emerged. Nationalist Hindus asserted that Indian unity could be found in its common culture derived from religion; Gandhi, too, settled on religion as a source of interconnection among Indians, but manufactured his own eclectic and pluralist morality from different religious traditions; others, for whom Nehru became the most effective spokesman, turned away from religion and discovered a basis for unity both in a shared historical past of cultural mixing, and a future project of common development.

Nehru no doubt exaggerated the cultural interconnections, and his own picture of the Indian past inevitably was coloured by the image of the future India he desired. Like all nationalists, he was inclined to forget the historical infamy of the wished-for object. After all, before the nineteenth century, no residents of the subcontinent would have identified themselves as Indian. There existed intricate, ramified vocabularies of common understanding, which classified people by communities of lineage, locality and sect; but ‘Indian’ would not have figured among its terms. Subcontinental society was hardly static, yet most people never ventured beyond their own or neighbouring localities. They knew little about each other and were uninterested in learning more, preferring to remain distant strangers in a land peopled in their imagination by marvellous and absurd ‘others’. Inhabitants of the land called India had been of interest only to outsiders: to the Greeks, who first named the land Indica, to travellers, traders and invaders, and then most comprehensively to the British, who in their train-spotting way darted across the subcontinent mapping, tabulating and classifying the territory and people that gradually came into their possession. What made possible the self-invention of a national community was the fact of alien conquest and colonial subjection. It was the British interest in determining geographical boundaries that by an Act of Parliament in 1899 converted ‘India’ from the name of a cultural region into a precise, pink territory. But to the British, that was all it was. Lord Curzon, for instance, scorned the suggestion that India had ‘natural frontiers’- to him, there was no Indian nationality to coincide with nature. The arbitrary precisions of colonial administrative techniques thus brought forth an historical novelty, a unified and bounded space named India.

Yet it is too simple to see India as pure invention, a complicitous by-product of the opportunities presented by the British Raj and the interests of an aspiring nationalist elite. It is less radically novel. The dissimilar agrarian regions of pre-colonial India did share intelligible, common cultural forms, derived from both Brahminic traditions and non-Brahminic sources. The storehouse of shared narrative structures embodied in epics, myths and folk stories, and the family resemblance in styles of art, architecture and religious motifs – if not ritual practices – testify to a civilizational bond, that in fact extended well beyond the territorial borders of contemporary India: to Persia in the west and Indonesia in the east. Across the subcontinent, the single trait that overwhelmingly struck all outsiders was the orders of caste, which imposed themselves on incomers (except the British) and absorbed them into the productive relations of the society. Though hardly suggestive of a political unity, these characteristics—mythic narratives, aesthetic and ritual motifs, the typology

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of caste – did bestow a certain unified coherence on lives in the subcontinent.

Equally significant was India’s archive of images of political community, which related culture to polity. In the Brahminic traditions, for instance, the Puranic literature expresses a sense of the subcontinent’s natural geographical frontiers, reflected in a sacred geography mapped out by tirthas, pilgrimage points scattered across the land, and encompassed by the idea of mythic realms like Aryavarta or Bharatavarsha. In later periods, during the central Asian invasions from the eleventh to the fourteenth century, epics like the Ramayana were infused with political significance and were used by regional kings and courts to represent the political community. These narratives became a key by which one could read contemporary events: the characters were revised and the story rewritten to divinize particular kings and demonize ethnically strange invaders. And of the period immediately preceding the rule of the British, some historians have begun to speak of an ‘old patriotism of the homelands’ in certain regions – the strongest version being the Maratha kingdoms of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with their acute sense of territoriality, veneration for the land, and a vision of community that transcended bounds of caste and drew upon non-Brahminic traditions such as Bhakti devotional cults. The comparatively brief episodes of subcontinental empire suggested a still different conception of political community – based not on a common culture but encompassing different religious groups, which imperial patterns of power allowed to live in insulated adjacency, requiring simply that they acknowledge the paramountcy of political authority and punctually yield revenue; religious and social habits were left unmolested.

This varied, amorphous historical inheritance was at once a spur and caution to the imagining of a national Indian past. It carried no single message. On the one hand, it was evident that nothing like regional nationalities or nations had emerged on the subcontinent. The gradualness with which first Islam, and then Britain entered India meant that different regions were conquered and incorporated in dissimilar ways, without inciting effective dissent along regional lines. If India was weakly united, it was also weakly divided: there were no politically significant regional identities that could either obstruct unification or direct it – no subcontinental Prussia or Piedmont. On the other hand, it was uncomfortably clear that the moments of actual unification in India’s past were achieved under the yoke of imperial rule. Both colonial historians and nationalists, hungrily searching for precedents for their antagonistic projects, seized upon these exceptional historical scraps and gratefully turned them into the essence of India’s past.

But past imperial dynasties, no matter how benign or tolerant, could hardly provide much assistance to the nationalist idea of a future India united in freedom. Nor was caste, the greatest cultural continuity across the subcontinent, convenient for this purpose: practically, it divided, and morally no nationalist was inclined to justify it. Race and language were equally useless: the idea of an original people subject to invasion was flimsy, since there had been so many ‘invasions’ that, despite some intrepid efforts, it was impossible to separate out the ur- from the new; and while Sanskrit (and then English) gave the elite a common tongue, they could scarcely use either to rouse the masses.

This quandary – the tantalizing possibility of a principle of unity but its evident empirical lack – led some to summon up a common historical past through explicit fantasy: to write, as the Bengali Bhudev Mukhopadhyay did, the history of India as it came to him in a dream. But to bestow upon themselves this gift of an unpossessed past, these intellectuals depended on British histories of India even as they undermined, defied and mangled them. The impulses and interests of colonial histories had shifted widely over time, depending on metropolitan cultural and
political exigencies. There is a large distance, for example, between the late-eighteenth-century British discovery of Hinduism by deists like William Jones, who revelled in India’s myths and legends as historical sources and who insisted on an original, valuable internal coherence to its civilization, and the distinctly less enthusiastic reactions of nineteenth-century evangelical reformers.

A distillation of these colonial histories of India, the most influential, and by some way the most laborious, was James Mill’s *History of British India*. Cavalierly external in its viewpoint (‘a man . . . may obtain more knowledge of India in one year in his closet in England, than he could obtain during the course of the longest life, by the use of his eyes and ears in India’), this utilitarian epic dispensed with the resources of language, myth or culture for narrating the Indian past. Instead of fables, Mill curated a history of fact, intended to reveal why Indian civilization was best served by its subjugation to the British. To Mill, dwelling on the antiquity of Indian civilization, or on the fancy that it was once great, was irrelevant to the more pressing governmental problem of calculating the current utility of Indian institutions or laws, and the costs of reform. There are no interpretational prizes to be won for seeing Mill’s *History* as an instance of promiscuous, bad-mannered European Orientalism. But it gave Indians new opportunities. By portraying India as susceptible to change and reform, it gave the past a plasticity, and prompted Indians to invent their own alternatives. Stories such as Mill’s reinserted India into a single historical narrative of progress, something ruled out by Hegelian and even Marxist philosophical histories, for example, which pictured a static, amorphous India set outside of the march of universal reason.

The exteriority of Mill’s vision, his incautious refusal to allow the existence of any internal principle of Indian unity, and his heavy assault on the Hindu past, were sufficient provocation to many. The subjects of the British imperium began to reverse the presumptions of their masters’ historical voice, to dispute its validity, and to substitute their own stories, which recounted the adventures of a common ‘we’. This urge to write their own history could be bent to blatantly self-regarding ends: the historical genre was used, for instance, to whip up a spate of traditional *jati* genealogies as ‘caste histories’, supplications by caste elites in terms they thought guaranteed to win boons from the British government. But others were transforming the scope and meaning of elusive terms like *jati*, using it to encompass a larger community of shared beliefs and interests: the hesitancies and spirals of this complicated manoeuvre and these difficult choices in the cultural politics of colonial India have been beautifully and definitively traced in recent studies. ‘We must have a history’, the Bengali intellectual Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay urged, and within fifty or so years, by the 1920s, the ambition of history writing had seized the nationalist intellectual imagination – scholars, politicians, dilettantes, would-be terrorists, all dutifully turned their hand to it. But inevitably the writing of history also confounded and divided nationalism. The substance of the Indian past was so diverse, so discontinuous, and often so downright contradictory that present desire, far from an embarrassing intrusion, was actually essential to discerning a pattern and order that could show it to be a ‘history’. Future political conflicts among the different elements of the nationalist imagination were rehearsèd in the histories it chose for itself.

In this search for an internal principle of unity to the past, religion was given a foundational position by both orthodox and reformist Brahmin intellectuals. In Bengal, a Hindu conception of the Indian past was devised and diffused both in subtle literary essays and in more rough-hewn textbooks. India’s history was sliced into Hindu, Muslim and British periods. The originating, defining historical moment was discovered in an ancient Hindu India, the ‘classical era’ of Vedic culture, and in periods such as the Gupta empire from the fourth to the seventh centuries.
Decline, these histories agreed, thereafter set in and led to the
'Muslim Period', a dark age that corrupted the society from the
eleventh century onwards and left it prey to British conquest,
a vast stretch of the Indian past that remained un-integrated, a
millennial aberration styled as a period of brave but ultimately
foundering Hindu resistance against tyrannical and cunning
invaders. But even appeals to Hindu religion failed to provide
a simple and unambiguous principle of unity: the fact of caste,
and the bewildering internal pluralism of Hindu beliefs,
thwarted such ambitions. The idea of Hinduism therefore had
to be ingeniously tailored to emphasize territorial origin and
broad cultural commonalities rather than ritual practices, caste
exclusivities or particular gods. Any fixation upon such traits,
or solely on Brahminic traditions threatened to lose not only
Buddhists and Jains, but also the millions of outcastes.

The most arresting political figure in this search for a seamless
Hindu past was Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, from whose writings
the BJP would later take their mantric prosody, *Hindutva*.
A Maharashtrian Brahmin belonging to the Chitpavan caste, and
of the same historical generation as Nehru, Savarkar was himself
a non-believer. Self-schooled in the history of European nationalism
and an admirer of Mazzini – he translated the Italian’s
autobiography into Marathi – Savarkar founded a secret society
modelled on Young Italy: its members learned bomb-making
from a Russian revolutionary in Paris and schemed to assassinate
Lord Curzon. And he wrote history: a counter-narrative of what
the British termed the Mutiny of 1857, which Savarkar recounted
as The Indian War of Independence, 1857; and, in 1923, *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?*

‘Hindutva is not a word but a history,’ Savarkar expounded.
‘Not only a spiritual or religious history ... but history in full.
Hinduism is only a derivative, a fraction, a part of Hindutva’,
and he used this history to resolve to his satisfaction the indeter-
minacies that troubled all definitions of Indians and India. In

Savarkar’s genealogical equation between the Hindu and the
Indian, members of the Indian political community were united
by geographical origin, racial connection (rather ambiguously
specified), and a shared culture based on Sanskritic languages
and ‘common laws and rites’. Those who shared these traits
formed the core, ‘majority’ community. Those who did not –
Muslims, who constituted a quarter of pre-Partition India’s pop-
ulation, ‘tribals’, Christians – were relegated to awkward, second-
ary positions. The special frisson of Savarkar’s ideas lay in their
translation of Brahminical culture into the terms of an ethnic
nationalism drawn from his reading of Western history. This
created an evocative, exclusivist and recognizably modern
definition of Indianess, with rich potentials to sustain future
political projects and to induce direct political effects. It was
contact with these ideas that in 1925 led another Brahmin, K. B.
Hedgewar, to found the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS –
Association of National Volunteers), to this day the backbone
of Hindu nationalist organization, and it also inspired the Hindu
Mahasabha, until 1950 the main party of Hindu nationalism.
The Gandhian Congress adroitly marginalized the Savarkarite con-
ception of Indian history and Indianess, but its presuppositions
were never erased: many nationalists outside Congress, and even
some within it, shared them.

The undertow of this modernist Brahminic imagination of the
Indian nation, outlined around the turn of the twentieth century
and systematized by men like Savarkar, has moulded India’s
political history more deeply than is usually acknowledged. The
official ideology of the post-1947 Indian state effaced it from the
histories of nationalism it sponsored; and as a political organ-
ization, Hindu nationalism perfected an astonishing ability to
mismanage its own self-declared destiny. But its definition of an
Indian nation was an ever-present imaginative magnet, the pole
against which men like Gandhi and Nehru constantly had to act.
Hindu nationalism was a real mover in the agitation for Partition,
both directly through the organization and action of Hindu communalists, and through its influence within Congress. Secular and Hindu nationalisms have invariably assigned primary responsibility for Partition to Muslim ‘communalism’ and separatism. Yet recent historical research has complicated the conventions of this picture. It is true that a Muslim argument for a homogenous Muslim nation, which presumed a different interpretation of the historical past, was made at different times over the past century; this was the view Muhammad Ali Jinnah expressed in his famous speech in Lahore in 1940: ‘We know that the history of the last twelve hundred years has failed to achieve unity and has witnessed, during the ages, India always divided between Hindu India and Muslim India’. But this did not amount to a coherent impulse towards an independent nation state for all Muslims on the subcontinent.

The twists by which this came about were heavily contingent on the attitudes and actions of the Hindu majority, as well as those of Congress. The Muslims of British India did not form a monolithic community with a single ‘communal’ identity or interest any more than the Hindus did. Class and region divided as much as religion might unite, and beliefs about community and interest varied between provinces where Muslims were in a majority and those where they were not. (The terminology of ‘majority’ and ‘minority’ was itself an inescapable imposition of the political accountancy of the Raj.) Muslim politics had significant secular voices, most notably Jinnah’s own. It is perfectly plausible to construe Jinnah’s political project as intended not to bifurcate India and create two territorial nation states, but to safeguard the interests of Muslims in provinces where they formed minorities, an intention which, as it turned out, he failed entirely to realize. In this respect, his fears about democracy in a large state with an undivided electorate and one religious community holding a numerical – and potentially permanent political – majority, has its parallels with anxieties that have surfaced in India’s regions during the past decade, when many have become mistrustful of the ability of India’s large democracy to represent their interests.

Jinnah saw the Muslims as forming a single community, or ‘nation’, but he envisaged an existence for them alongside a ‘Hindu nation’ within a united, confederal India. The core of his disagreement with Congress concerned the structure of this future state. Jinnah was determined to prevent the creation of a unitary central state with procedures of political representation that threatened to put it in the hands of a numerically dominant religious community. As such, this was a perfectly secular ambition. But the contingencies of politics and the convenient availability of powerful lines of social difference pushed it in a quite contrary direction. The Muslim insistence on a separate state crystallized only in the decade before 1947, and there is real force to the point that practical experience of Congress rule in the Indian provinces after the elections of 1937 was instrumental in encouraging Muslim political alienation. Congress governments, subject in many cases to the influence of nationalist Hindus, lost the trust of Muslims and so helped to kindle support for the Muslim League. It was this erosion of trust that fanned a desire to redescribe a ‘minority’ within British India as a separate ‘nation’, and to take it outside the boundaries of India. The political and intellectual weight of the Hindu nationalist imagination, with its desire for a clear definition of Indianness based on an exclusive sense of culture and of an historical past, was decisive in imposing an artificial cohesion to the diverse local Muslim identities on the subcontinent: indeed, Jinnah himself protested that the idea of Pakistan was foisted upon him by Hindu public opinion. The instabilities of Muslim nationalism on the subcontinent became dramatically apparent more recently in the secession of East from West Pakistan in 1971 and the creation of Bangladesh, when a Bengali identity was defended against what the Bengalis saw as the domination of
the Pakistani state by a Punjabi elite; the instabilities continue in Pakistan's politics, restated in the daily attrition and conflict that has bled the provinces of Sind and Baluchistan.

But Hindu and Muslim nationalisms in India did not exhaust the possible uses of religion to define inclusion or exclusion from the nation's political community. Gandhi refused to separate religion from politics, as modernists and secularists insisted, and strove to refute the colonial charge that religion must ultimately keep India divided. Equally, however, he recoiled from the vision of nationalist Hindus. Where they harped upon an image of Hindus as oppressed, terrorized and victimized both by the colonial present and by past Muslim rule, and promised a remedy in a martial patriotism, a khaki-shorted veneration of the Fatherland, Gandhi deftly inverted this image: he resurrected an older language of feminized patriotism (which men like Savarkar had sought to infuse with virility) and made his life and body, his habits and posture, a demonstration of the message that strength was with the victims of history. Gandhi rejected the idea that past history was a source for defining future possibilities or orienting present action. The British fascination with historical dissertations was expressive of their desire to dominate; history was used to justify colonial rule and to show that past dissensions prohibited the possibility of future unity for India. It was only by kicking this British 'habit of writing history' that Indians could release themselves from the cultural harassments of their rulers: 'I look upon Gibbon and Motley as inferior editions of the Mahabharata.'

But, lest that suggest any fondness for epic Hindu histories, Gandhi made it equally clear that the mimic narratives of religious nationalists had also to be abandoned. 'I believe,' he wrote, 'that a nation is happy that has no history', and in contrast to nationalists who sought to construct a reliable future out of a selected past, Gandhi expressed profound distrust for the historical genre. He turned to legends and stories from India's popular religious traditions, preferring their lessons to the supposed ones of history. The fact that so many on the subcontinent found these fables accessible, and recognized their predicaments and symbols, itself testified to a shared civilizational bond. In place of an Indian unity based on a common historical past, Gandhi substituted a religious morality that assembled elements from folk and Bhakti traditions as well as from Christian morality.

Gandhi refused the ubiquitous ground of all nationalisms, the discourse of history, and created a distinctive definition of Indian identity. With unique sensitivity, he evoked a patriotic symbolism that allowed him to be visualized not merely as an all-Indian leader among the nationalist elite but as a local saint in the different regions and communities of India. His appeal to pre-existing local beliefs and identities in order to create a larger, Indian one was tied to an idea of swadeshti, a patriotism based on a respect for the everyday material world inhabited by most on the subcontinent. His adoption of cloth as a symbol of interconnection exemplified this esteem of the everyday. By spinning and weaving their own cloth, through literal self-production, Indians would regain the economic control and cultural self-respect that colonialism had usurped and battered. They would become linked by common forms of production, and the wearing of khadi would unite Indians by removing the distinguishing marks of caste proclaimed in the precise sartorial signatures of traditional dress. This ambition for a self-producing community was strongly moralizing, and dispensed entirely with the idea of a territorial nation state. 'Both India and Pakistan are my country,' Gandhi insisted as Partition approached. 'I am not going to take out a passport for going to Pakistan.'
The influence of the Gandhian vision receded with surprising speed during the 1940s, submerged by the swell of Hindu and Muslim nationalisms. In the aftermath of Partition and Gandhi’s assassination by Nathuram Godse, a nationalist Brahmin from Maharashtra with links to the RSS, the Gandhian idea was literally effaced. Gandhi’s ‘anarcho-communitarianism’, the non-statist idiom in which he expressed his pluralist definition of Indianness, and his faith in the everyday tolerances of ordinary people, was helpless in the face of the communal mayhem that threatened to sweep the subcontinent following the withdrawal of the Raj’s police powers. The new Indian state had to act quickly; and that state was in the hands of a nationalist elite over which Nehru came ultimately to preside. Amidst perilous political balances and lethal religious divisions, Nehru had to devise a workable response to the question of an Indian identity, one that the state could sustain and enforce. His acquisition of the levers of state was fortuitous, and certainly did not represent an ideological victory for his idea of India, nor even a broad consensus over it. Yet he was able to install an intricate, pluralist definition of Indianness that gave, for a time, an illusion of permanence. Nehru’s skill in endowing the contingent with a sense of grand historical necessity, and in making his definition of Indianness seem the only possible one, nurtured this illusion. He relied on a compelling, if imaginary, story of the Indian past, told as a tale of cultural mixing and fusion, a civilizational tendency towards unification that would realize itself within the frame of a modern nation state. He located this story of an internal impulse towards Indian unity within a larger story of the movement of world history, a narrative of diverse peoples coming to determine their own futures and to participate in the benefits of economic progress.

Nehru’s political practice after 1947 has come to be regarded as the mere application of intellectual arguments that he developed in the pre-independence period. Yet this misses the real originality of his answer to the question of an Indian identity. The definition that he tried to install after 1947 was more shaded and nuanced than anything one might reconstruct from his intellectual statements of the 1930s and 40s. It was also more continuous with the pattern of the Indian past than any of its rivals, then or now. Nehru’s idea of Indianness emerged through improvised responses to constrained circumstances: its strength was not its ideological intensity, but its ability to steer towards an Indianness seen as layered, adjustable, imagined, not as a fixed property. While Nehru was attracted by the political and economic examples of the modern West, he was far less taken by its cultural models. It was fundamental to him that Indian nationalism could not fashion itself after European examples. In contrast to the academic analysts who see nationalism as the diffusion of a standard form devised in the industrialized West – whether in the Gallic version of a community of common citizenship or the volkisch idea of a shared ethnic or cultural origin – Nehru self-consciously rejected the idea that Indian nationalism was compelled to make itself in one or other of these images. To that extent Nehru agreed with the two men whose influence he acknowledged as most important to his thinking about this matter, Tagore and Gandhi. But unlike Tagore and Gandhi, for whom the state was a dispensable nuisance, Nehru believed that an Indian identity could emerge only within the territorial and institutional frame of a state. A specifically Indian compromise was needed, and he saw strengths in this. That compromise was outlined in the practical adaptation, after 1947, of the state into a distinctive model shaped by Nehru’s understanding of the Indian past: a model committed to protecting cultural and religious difference rather than imposing a uniform ‘Indianness’.
Nehru's intellectual response to the perturbations of India's unity and of a shared Indianness was stated with some subtlety in *The Discovery of India* (1946), written in prison on the eve of independence. The title announced India as an indubitable presence, but also wryly acknowledged that it could not be taken for granted by people of Nehru's class and background – its contours had to be actively plotted. For a man who carried with him the burden of an anglicized past, who answered to the name of Joe until his mid-twenties, it was not an easy book to write. Like Tagore and like Gandhi, like all nationalists, Nehru had to make himself Indian. *The Discovery*, even more so than his *Autobiography* (1936), was such a work of self-making – a slow, laborious transformation of the alien critic into an Indian, one who could recognize and embrace the complexity of India's past. *The Discovery* is correctly read as an expression of the nationalist imagination, but a highly unusual one, capacious, accepting, and with no trace of a desire for purification or hardening of boundaries.

Where Tagore reworked the poetic language and Gandhi turned to religious traditions to make their Indian selves, Nehru discovered India and himself through the medium of history. Temporarily, he saw the world historically: a perspective that at once defined his sense of political possibility and made him vigilant about attending to how the future would look back on his own actions. But his turn to history in *The Discovery* was also spurred by a specific insight into Indian culture: that to Indians the past was as valuable as language or religion; they valued it themselves and saw the world through it. His book was an elaboration of this insight, and there was little evidence of the Marxian and sometimes didactic historical scaffold that had buttressed his two earlier narratives, *Glimpses of World History* (1934) and the *Autobiography*. In telling his story of the Indian past, Nehru relied on the 'Orientalist' histories the British had written; but he entirely reworked them to suit his own purposes.

British histories showed India as a society of self-enclosed communities, always potentially – and, in the absence of an imperial state, actually – in gruesome conflict with one another. Tagore, in his great essay 'The Message of Indian History' (1902), had called this 'foreigner's history':

The history of India that we read in schools and memorize to pass our examinations is the account of a horrible dream – a nightmare through which India has passed. It tells of unknown people from no one knows where entering India; bloody wars breaking out; father fighting son and brother killing brother to snatch at the throne; one set of marauders passing away with another coming in to take its place; Pathan and Mughal, Portuguese, French and English – all helping to add to the nightmarish confusion.

Nehru seized upon Tagore's allusive evocation of what he saw as the authentic message of India's past and elaborated it into an Indian history that defied both the British and the Hindu nationalists' uses of history. Nehru produced for the first time an epic of India's past in which it appeared neither as a meaningless dust-storm nor as a glorified Hindu pageant, but as moved by a logic of accommodation and acceptance. In his imagination, India appeared as a space of ceaseless cultural mixing, its history a celebration of the soiling effects of cultural miscegenation and accretion, 'an ancient palimpsest on which layer upon layer of thought and reverie had been inscribed, and yet no succeeding layer had completely hidden or erased what had been written previously'.

Nehru romanticized the past. He recognized the allure – 'that old witchery' – of his feminized Motherland. He saw too that he was engaged not in a 'meticulous chronicle of facts' but in producing 'living history', an enabling fiction that had to bind together the 'multitudinous past of innumerable successions of human beings' into the shared history of a single political community. But his essential point was not off-beam: that the
residents of the subcontinent were at once distinct and shared a family resemblance. Nehru's sense of the differences encompassed within the artificially precise territorial boundaries of India was not the outcome of purely textual or intellectual encounters: it was arrived at literally through politics, the outcome of the gruelling election campaigns of 1936-7, which he saw as his pilgrimage across the country. These electoral peregrinations left him with his own Indian album, a repertoire of turning images. It led him also to recognize that every Indian possessed his or her own portfolio:

If my mind was full of pictures from recorded history and more-or-less ascertained fact, I realized that even the illiterate peasant had a picture gallery in his mind, though this was largely drawn from myth and tradition and epic heroes and heroines, and only very little from history. Nevertheless it was vivid enough.

The experience gave him what today would be fashionably called a de-centred view of Indian culture, it substantiated a point he had made in the Autobiography: just as India had never had a single dominant or capital city, so too 'Indian culture was so widespread all over India that no part of the country could be called the heart of that culture'.

The Discovery signalled Nehru's homecoming, not to a single culture but to this profusion. It settled some of the anxieties that had wracked him in the late 1930s and that had pervaded the Autobiography: the sense of being 'lonely and homeless ... India, to whom I had given my love and for whom I had laboured, seemed a strange and bewildering land'. But to know one's home, one had also to know the world, to find a place on that wider stage. Unlike many other nationalists who had come to a sense of their Indianness through the detour of the West, there is no trace in Nehru of that inwardly turned rage of an Aurobindo or Vivekananda, political intellectuals who strove to purge themselves of what they came to regard as a defiling encounter with the modern West - an encounter that had in the first place planted in them the urge to be Indian.

Isaiah Berlin has written of Tagore that 'he never showed his wisdom more clearly than in choosing the difficult middle path, drifting neither to the Scylla of radical modernism, nor to the Charybdis of proud and gloomy traditionalism', and Nehru too had that capacity to keep to the centre, to find a cultural poise that allowed him to accept the presence of his Englishness as one more layer to his Indian self. There was, for Nehru, no return to a past purity, no possibility of historical cleansing. Colonialism was a humiliation, but it also carried the aroma of modernity. And that modernity too would have to infiltrate and leave its trace on the palimpsest. To that extent, the discovery of India was a forward movement through as yet undescribed and unmade history. Mere recovery of the past could not make Indians self-sufficient: the necessary veneration of a rich and unusual history had to coexist with a modernist, more self-critical idiom that acknowledged the immense failings of that past.

The acceptance of modernity as integral to the definition of free India implied the need to turn this grand, complex nationalist imagination into a state form. In The Discovery, Nehru arrived at an historical image of the link between culture and political power in India that was at odds with the standard conceptions. It avoided the liberal presumption that individuals could transcend their cultural inheritance and remake themselves however they - or their state - happened to see fit: a view that placed abstracted individual rationality before any sense of cultural identity. Equally, he steered away from the perception of cultures as self-enclosed wholes, hermetic communities of language or belief, a perception which could nurture either a conservative idea of the state as an instrument at the community's disposal, available for its own aggressive ends, or a more benign view of the state as curator of cultural exhibits, responsible for protecting and preserving communities. Nehru saw cultures as overlapping
forms of activity that had commerce with one another, mutually altering and reshaping each other. India was a society neither of liberal individuals nor of exclusive communities or nationalities, but of interconnected differences. That insight or – to the more sceptical – belief guided his practice after 1947. Given the environment in which he had to act, it is particularly striking that he could maintain this distinctive conception. Partition had given currency to a simple logic: since a Muslim state had been created in Pakistan, India should now define itself as the state of a Hindu ‘majority’ and make itself the agent of religious preferences.

Half a century later it is easy to miss the sheer novelty of what was attempted in the two decades after independence. Today the idea of multiculturalism is a familiar if vague one, surrounded by sophisticated and unworldly philosophical and legal arguments. Yet in the late 1940s, it was certainly not a standard way to envisage the construction of a new state. There were few models, from either European or any other history, that could be used to help focus India’s assorted diversities into a political structure founded upon a democratic principle. This had to be invented through practice. The minimal precondition for any kind of Indian identity after 1947 was a state, an agency that could in practice enforce a constitutionally defined identity, and this was quickly consolidated. The new Indian state had to rely largely on its inheritance of military and bureaucratic capacities from the Raj. After 1947 these colonial legacies were the sole instruments with effective capacities to impose a political identity over the whole territory. The Congress Party was the only authentically Indian organization that reached across the country; but unlike many anti-colonial nationalist organizations that subsequently emerged elsewhere, it never had the capacity to impose its definition of a nationalist identity. It lacked a military arm, which in so many cases anti-colonial movements turned not only against their colonial enemies but also against their ‘own’ peoples in order to impose nationhood – think of Algeria, Indonesia, Vietnam. The army and the civil service gave the Indian state a professional class recruited from an all-Indian base, able to operate and move easily across the country – an elite of ‘functionary Indians’. To these inherited instruments, now turned to forging a common political identity, was added the institution of economic planning: essential, in Nehru’s conception, to impart cohesion, drawing Indians into a shared project of development. Besides these centripetal elements of the state, the multiplicity of cultural and political voices in the society demanded recognition. No attempt was made to impose a single or uniform ‘Indian’ identity upon the new nation. This, seen as a potential weakness from the perspective of the Western theories of nationalism which guided the thinking of nationalist Hindus, was actually the most remarkable achievement.

Citizenship was defined by civic and universalist rather than ethnic criteria, which guaranteed a principle of inclusion in India’s democracy. Although it was the operations of democratic politics that in later decades were to challenge a single conception of India, democracy was also instrumental in sustaining that conception – through its ability to include new political entrants within a common, Indian frame. Democracy was intended to recognize the claims of Indians as individuals. In practice, it was led also to recognize the claims of groups, and this certainly scattered seeds of future tension. But the claims of Indians as members of particular communities did require some sort of recognition and accommodation.

Language and religion, those elementary markers that are generally used to ease any awkwardness of fit between individual and nation, were not given this assignment in India: neither was adopted as an effortless badge of Indianness. The issue of whether or not India should embrace a single national language provoked some of the longest, certainly the most bitter debates in the Constituent Assembly during 1948–9: at times they threatened to split it irrevocably. In the pre-Independence
period, in defiance of the mixed administrative units of colonial rule, Gandhi had reorganized Congress into linguistic units, and encouraged the use of provincial languages within them. This initiative made political discussions locally comprehensible and so helped to turn Congress into a mass movement. English continued as the language of the national leadership, but everyone agreed that this was a temporary expedient which in the future would be superseded by a common Indian language. The most likely candidate was Hindustani, a mongrel of two already hybrid languages, Hindi and Urdu – which could be written in either Urdu or Devnagari scripts. Even this, however, was spoken only by a little over two-fifths of the population, all concentrated in northern India. English therefore remained the only tongue that linked the elites in the north with those in the south.

After Partition, the Hindi-speakers – the largest single language group in the country – began to press for the adoption of Hindi as the national language. Their spokesmen in the Assembly, claiming to represent a majority, demanded a purge of Urdu words and English technical terms from the Hindi language (including, with ironically misplaced zeal, what they thought of as ‘Arabic’ numerals, which are in fact derived from Sanskrit), and the introduction of a standardized, purified and sanskritized Hindi as the national language. People were symbolically and vehemently divided over the issue of what language should be used for the Constitution: chaste English or purified Hindi? Hindi lobbyists produced their own version, brimming with baffling sanskritized neologisms: its advocates optimistically cited the Irish adventure with a Gaelic Constitution. Nehru, however, had to remind them that de Valera had confessed to him that the Irish were finding the Gaelic edition ‘hard going’, and were veering round to English. The constitutional ambitions were rendered in legal English, equally hard going and still well outside the linguistic universe of most Indians.

In the end and in a highly charged atmosphere, Nehru and his supporters managed to secure a more satisfactory compromise on the larger issue. Hindi was recognized as an ‘official’ but not the ‘national’ language, a dozen other regional languages were accorded similar status as ‘officially recognized’ (with the possibility of adding others to the list: an arrangement that could deftly accommodate new claimants without threatening speakers of the languages already recognized). It was agreed that English would continue as the language of state, with the option of gradually phasing it out in the coming decades. Instead of ceding to the linguistic nationalism of a substantial segment of the population, a pluralist compromise was engineered, which recognized the use of different languages at different levels, and for different purposes.

This technique of compromise refused to anchor an Indian identity to a single trait – an option which, had it been chosen, would have suborned regional cultures to majoritarian definitions of a national one. It inscribed as a constitutional principle the practical habit that had made Congress successful as a nationalist movement. Indianness was defined not as a singular or exhaustive identity, but as one which explicitly recognized at least two other aspects. Indian citizens were also members of linguistic and cultural communities: Oriyas or Tamils, Kashmiri or Marathi. India’s federal arrangements were intended to embody this idea of a layered Indianness, an accretion of identities. Nehru’s initial hope had been for India’s regional states to continue as the mixed, multi-lingual administrative units established by the Raj. The precise boundaries of these states were artificial colonial creations, but the principle of mixed linguistic cultures that they embodied was continuous with past Indian historical pattern. Nehru therefore saw no need for internal re-partitioning.

But in the mid-1950s, strong demands were raised within the provincial branches of Congress itself to recognize regional cultural groups by creating linguistic states. Nehru finally came
round to accepting these claims (except in the case of Punjab, where a linguistic state in response to Sikh demands was not granted until 1966). He saw these new states as a step towards rendering the practices of democratic government more comprehensible, rather than as a challenge to or dilution of Indianness. The principle of regional states defined by linguistic boundaries was adopted, and the use of vernacular languages (rather than Hindi or English) in regional administration was also instituted. Such adjustments recognized the principle that the institutional forms of being Indian could within broad limits be revised. Indianness was not a culturally closed or static condition.

The adjustments around the still more vexed issue of religion demonstrated a similar willingness to improvise and risk the unconventional. It is usual to prune Nehru’s complex, changing views on religion into the now withered bush of ‘secularism’. But this imparts a misleading ideological fixity to what was always much more an active precept of political prudence. Nehru had no such doctrine, no worked-out constitutional theory that invested a blind faith in legal consistency. In fact the term ‘secularism’ was inserted into the Constitution only by Mrs Gandhi, during the frenetic amendments of the Emergency period. Rather, he operated with a coherent view about the real and potential political threats of religious identity, now that Indians had their own state. The authority of this new state relied on being able to win the trust of its citizens. Democracy, based on universal suffrage and a single electorate not divided by communities, was the principal means to this end.

But for those who had seen themselves as protected by the segregated electorates of the British Raj, especially India’s Muslim communities, new protections would have to be found under conditions of universal democracy. This was especially so after Partition, when the Indian state struggled to secure the trust of its Muslims. Parallel to the federal recognition of Indians as possessing regional linguistic identities, the law would have to recognize Indians as members of religious communities. In particular, Indians who belonged to smaller religious communities had to be protected against the totalitarian potentials of mass democracy. Indian law had to be sensitive to particularity: communities that were judged numerically weak or subject to past oppression were given explicit protections, effectively made wards of the state, through caste reservations and the provision of customary civil codes of law for different religious communities. But given his views about the changeable, transactional nature of cultures, Nehru expected that these provisions would themselves be subject to change. Communities would in time open themselves up to reform; but they had to retain the right to decide when.

The state did from the early 1950s begin to reform the laws that guided customary Hindu practice. In this, it continued and intensified an interest in social reform among Hindu communities that had originated early in the nineteenth century. The spate of legislation after independence on matters such as the abolition of untouchability, the removal of caste restrictions on entry to temples, the ending of interdictions on inter-caste marriage, the prohibition of polygamy, and the recognition that women had equal rights of inheritance, all was continuous with impulses within earlier nationalism. To be sure, Nehru supported such legislative reforms, but it was hardly the case that he initiated all of them, and in fact the initiatives generally came from practising Hindus themselves. On the other hand, Nehru did oppose the strongly supported demand of Hindu conservatives for a ban on cow slaughter. Ultimately he compromised on this, but not without first ensuring that it was removed from the attention of the central government and relegated to provincial state assemblies. He also insisted that any such ban had to be justified by public, secular arguments, for example, economic ones: it could not be justified merely by invoking religious convictions.

To Nehru, secularism was not a substitute civic religion, still
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less a political project to remoralize society by effacing religion and stamping a secular identity on all Indians. He fully recognized the depth and plurality of religious beliefs in India. It was precisely this that convinced him of the need to keep religious social identities outside the political arena. His energies were directed not towards installing a doctrine of secularism, but against the uses of religion for political purposes, the dangers of what he called ‘communalism’. This involved him in a constant political argument with nationalist and traditionalist Hindus, both within and outside his party, and he successfully quarantined national politics from religious demands.

Indianness was constituted out of internal diversity, but in Nehru’s vision it was equally an international identity, a way of being in the wider world. In contrast to the sometimes narrowly domestic horizons of most in the nationalist movement (only the Indian communists consistently shared with Nehru an appreciation of the significance of international politics, though of course for rather different reasons), Nehru understood independence as an opportunity to establish India as a presence on the world stage. The international profile of states depended on their economic and military prowess, and India obviously could not make its mark in these domains. A new state like India, weak by international standards, would have to pursue its interests by creating its own opportunities and chances. By speaking the language of morality and justice, it might just be able to surprise and unbalance the more powerful, extracting concessions from their sheer embarrassment. Nehru, in this a follower of Gandhi, turned around the language of victimhood: instead of portraying India as a martyr to colonial subjection which had to turn inwards to find and repair itself, he affirmed India’s character as a self-confident actor in international politics. The decision to remain within the Commonwealth, but as a republic, is only one instance of this sensibility, of Nehru’s commitment to an idea of a layered past, and of his refusal to purge or purify historical connections.

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Equally, it showed an unsentimental determination not to be entranced by this past but to adjust it to suit India’s present interests.

The Indianness outlined in the two decades after 1947 was an extemporized performance, trying to hold together divergent considerations and interests. The result was a highly unusual nationalism that resists summary in clear or simple doctrinal statements. It tried to accommodate within the form of a new nation state significant internal diversities; to resist bending to the democratic pressures of religion; and to look outwards. This experimental response to the question of how to be Indian was not a victory of theoretical consistency. It was a contingent acquisition, based on a coherent if disputable picture of India. It did not reassure itself by relying on a settled image of the culture, nor did it try to impose one. That was its most important trait: it did not monopolize or simplify the definition of Indianness. For all the political vexations visited upon it, it could claim success: India, an ungainly, unlikely, inelegant concatenation of differences, after fifty years still exists as a single political unity. This would be unimaginable without Nehru’s improvisation.

Within two decades of Nehru’s death in 1964, India’s layered, plural, political self-definition was in serious difficulties. The extent was apparent from a shift in intellectual climate. India’s Westernized intellectuals, on whose support Nehru could always count, had turned against the state that was acting in his name. The object of their criticism was the elusive notion of secularism. These intellectuals were trying to explain a puzzling fact about India in the 1980s. Four decades after independence and the end of colonialism – which, according to nationalist dogma, had been responsible for ‘communalist’ dissensions – the identities of
religion and caste had started to invade national politics with ferocious energy. Why?

To the self-proclaimed 'Nehruvians', devotees of the 'scientific temper', the fault lay with the society itself, limited in its education and shackled by superstition and obscurantism. Yet fewer and fewer were convinced by this diagnosis. The presence and actions of the state, committed to the project of modernization and 'nation-building', seemed to be responsible. Some intellectuals, searching for a sociological explanation, attacked the ambition of trying to create a secular state and a society of liberal individuals. Oddly, they ascribed this project to Nehru. And they saw it as doomed in India: it was, in the words of one of the country's leading sociologists, 'the dream of a minority which wants to shape the majority in its own image, which wants to impose its will upon history but lacks the power to do so under a democratically organized polity'. Nehru, a hapless straw man in such ruminations, was condemned both for trying to impose his modernist will upon a society of deep religious belief and for not being Kemalist or Leninist enough to push through his secularist ambitions. Given the extent of religious belief in Indian society and given that India was a democracy, such arguments proceeded, it followed that the religious preferences of the majority should rule in the state: 'In an open society the state will reflect the character of the society.' The centrality of religion must be expressed in the Constitution, which should be revised to remove 'anomalies'—protective safeguards for communities and regions—in order to produce a uniform, homogenous legal code. Democracy meant, quite simply, the rule of the majority.

More trenchant arguments pointed to the way that secularism had, since Nehru, become an instrumental ideology of the state. It now functioned as a legitimating cloak for the modernist elite, who used it to mask their grip at the very moment when this was being challenged by the surge of mass democracy. The use of secularism as an ideology of state power had engendered a new monster on the political landscape, a Hindu nationalism remotely linked to religion, which merely used it instrumentally to capture state power. Secularism as a doctrine of state was thus responsible for the corrosion of faith in the society. It had instrumented and corrupted the capacities for inter-religious understanding and social peace which India had possessed in the past. The intellectual argument here resonated with the anti-statism that had animated the thinking of both Tagore and Gandhi; but in the face of the palpable reality of the Indian state, it remained difficult to see what it could imply in practice.

The intellectual unease was a symptom of wider changes sweeping Indian society and its terms of political identity. The axis of connection between state and society since 1947 had been the Congress Party: it had acted as a kind of translation machine, which enabled communication between two distinct worlds, never creating a common sense but at least maintaining a kind of tenuous mutual intelligibility. For around twenty years after 1947, it successfully organized and aggregated the multiplicity of identities within the society. But it was running into difficulties; and because of its centrality, difficulties for Congress meant difficulties for the Indian state. The problems were partly produced by inevitable historical fatigue—Congress could no longer rely on the nationalist heritage by the 1970s—but also by its own actions, in conditions that were certainly not easy to navigate through.

The steady political mobilization instigated by democratic competition was bringing lower and poorer people into politics, many who were organizing themselves into groups defined by legally ascribed public identities: the Backward and Other Backward Classes, the Scheduled Castes and others. They considered their interests framed by local horizons, and from the 1970s began to find a voice in a multiplicity of regional parties and political formations. Social differentiations were increasingly reflected in a range of political groups. The uneven effects of
economic development were meanwhile adding new layers to an already differentiated society. The capacity of Congress to muster and maintain political support across India, to speak for the nation, was in decline. In the era of its dominance, Congress had relied on its internal federalism, and its ability to build support at the national level by means of coalitional bargaining and negotiation between the national and regional leadership. This had successfully restricted the groupings according to caste and religion to local levels. Congress did not appeal directly to the 'nation' or to particular communities that could imagine themselves as national ones. National power was knitted together by its regional party organizations.

But the centralization of power within the party from the early 1970s weakened the regional roots of the party and unleashed disastrous potentials: regional demands were no longer filtered through party channels, but began to be asserted with rising irritation against the central state. In the 1950s the demands had been for cultural recognition in unilingual states; by the end of the 1960s movements in states like Maharashtra were insisting that economic opportunities in each state be reserved for its 'natives'; by the 1980s the demands had escalated to full-fledged regional autonomy and separatism in states like Punjab and Kashmir.

The concentration of power choked the federal layers of Indian identity. The Centre resorted to describing these regional demands as 'anti-national' and as threats to 'national integrity', and used this to justify still further concentration, provoking still more dissent: every move became a further turn of this vicious screw. The populist redefinition of democracy merely made national politics ever more volatile, activated more social identities, and invited them to organize for political ends. To win national elections without the support of the regional 'bosses', Mrs Gandhi had to transform Congress from a federal party into a mass party. This put it in the classic dilemma of every mass political party in a competitive democracy: it claimed to speak for and to govern in the 'national' interest, but to be able to do so it had to appeal directly to people as members of particular communities. The appeal to caste identities had long been accepted as a necessary part of Congress strategy in local and regional politics. But what occurred now was a decisive break with Congress practice. The national leadership had never invoked religious identities for electoral purposes. This taboo fell in the 1980s, and religious and caste sentiments were now routinely invoked in national elections.

The insecurities of different religious minorities were played on: Hindu minorities in Kashmir and Punjab, Muslims in Uttar Pradesh, all were invited to support Congress if they wanted the state's protection and favours. The politics of secularism was interpreted to mean that the state was visibly solicitous of all religions. To prove her ecumenical largesse, Mrs Gandhi 'balanced' her appeals to Muslims by frequenting Hindu places of worship, surrounded herself with Hindu insignia, and welcomed mysterious swamis to her retinue. The implications and scale of this deviation from Congress principle became apparent in the anti-Sikh violence that followed Mrs Gandhi's assassination in 1984, where evidence points to its having been instigated in New Delhi by Congress members. Paradoxically, the ability of Congress to sustain itself as a 'national' party had come to rest on its ability to play with parochial affiliations.

The Indian nationalism of Gandhi and Nehru had not only resisted invoking religion, but had also scrupulously avoided defining the nation in terms of a majority community. But the populist turn in Indian politics redefined democracy as majority rule. The operations of this simplified sense of democracy began to unravel the nationalist imagination. This showed itself in two ways. First, the new forms of democracy alienated those in the regions. During the 1980s national electoral majorities were used to justify implicitly the Centre's isolation and neglect of political
dissatisfaction in the regions. Given the scale of India’s democracy, and the distribution of the electorate and of parliamentary seats across the country (Uttar Pradesh, for instance, sends eighty-five members to the Lok Sabha, the national parliament, while Punjab and Kashmir send, respectively, thirteen and six), national elections could be won by ignoring dissident regions and mustering support elsewhere—so turning democratic procedures into an instrument that left these regions structurally disenfranchised. Secondly, the diffusion of the language of majoritarian democracy gave opportunities to rivals of the Congress in its claim to represent the nation. In particular it began to revive the imagination of the Hindu nationalists. Congress still held title to the nationalist movement and its recognizable symbolic paraphernalia, but the historical immediacy of the nationalist movement was fading and the meanings of its symbolism were less widely shared, especially among a predominantly young electorate. In the 1977 elections, which ended the Emergency and ousted Congress from national power for the first time, three-quarters of the electorate either were born or reached voting age after 1947. The political contest over identities that occupied so much of Indian public life from the 1980s onwards was provoked by the crisis of Congress itself. Centralization and the neglect of federal channels incited strident regionalism; the substitution of a ‘national’ electorate and the redefinition of democracy forced Congress into inviting local identities into the national arena, which worked to the advantage of those who claimed to represent more directly and intimately these groupings of religion and caste.

The crisis of Congress became a crisis of the state itself and hence a crisis in the terms of Indian identity. Congress had functioned as a centrist party, spokesman for no single category or interest, and itscoalitional character enabled individuals and groups throughout India to make a nest in it. Its pragmatic political determination in the two decades after independence had managed to confine the scope of the alternative definitions of Indianness which Hindu nationalists proposed. The later intensification of democratic competition forced it to appeal to more exclusive identities: this broke the old pattern of political representation and created opportunities for rival parties both in the regions and at the Centre.

The logic of this process was rehearsed in miniature in the politics of Uttar Pradesh, India’s most populous regional state and heartland of Congress since the 1920s (the province has provided seven of India’s twelve prime ministers). The party had built its support here through an alliance of upper castes, the lowest in the social order and Muslims. By the 1990s Congress had declined to a sorry rump and the politics of Uttar Pradesh had fragmented. The upper castes had turned to the Hindu nationalists; the intermediate castes—the ‘Backward’ and ‘Other Backward Classes’—in alliance with Muslims formed their own regional parties; and the lowest in the caste order, the Bahujans and Dalits, turned to leaders and parties that kept alive the ideals of Ambedkar, now expressed in new rhetoric. No single group was powerful enough to dominate. By an unexpected inversion, this pattern of regional deadlock and political fragmentation imprinted itself on India’s national politics. General elections in 1991 and then again in 1996 gave the country successive ‘hung’ parliaments, and minority or coalition governments. A single national party could no longer fill all the political space.
A resurgent Hindu nationalism benefited from this opening. Its historical roots are as deep as those of more pluralist Indian nationalisms, and reach back to the late nineteenth-century Brahminic responses to colonial rule. Essential to its rise in the 1980s was a new-found ability to expand beyond its exclusively Brahminic and high-caste membership and to gain imaginative hold over India’s middle classes—to whom it offered a religious idiom tailored for democratic times. But this political Hinduism was deeply untraditional. The definition of Hinduism is an elusive academic quest, but one feature all agree on is its intrinsically decentralized structure. Ritual practices have always been differentiated by caste, by region and by sect, and there has never been a fundamental scripture that all must accept. The emergence, under Brahminic auspices, of more singular and unified definitions of Hinduism during the colonial period was a self-consciously emulative reaction to challenges of Christianity and Islam. In this sense a ‘Hindu’ identity—as distinct from defining oneself as a vaishnav, shavite or shakta—is as decisively modern as a regional or national identity, or as the juridical identities of caste created by Indian law since 1947.

This culturally unfamiliar Hindu self-definition attracted many of India’s expanding and selectively Westernized middle classes. Rising consumerism and the extension of the market during the 1980s did not fuel an individualistic hedonism nor breed liberal individuals. Rather, it was experienced as an opportunity to sample the pleasures of modernity within collective units like the family. (The outstanding hit of the Hindi cinema in the mid-1990s, Hum Aapke Hain Kaun?, was a film with the barest of story lines, a four-hour celebration of domestic consumption, dining and marriage.) For many in India modernity has been adopted through the conservative filters of religious piety, moralism and domestic virtue. This has spawned a novel Hinduism, where holographic gods dangle on well-used keychains and cassettes of devotional ragas are played in traffic jams: instances of a religious sentiment freed from its original defining contexts, from the subtle iconography of materials and the punctual divisions of the day into sacred and mundane time. Besides tapping the sentiments of domesticity and piety, political Hinduism also summons up the energies of the young, many of whom have drifted through India’s colleges and universities (for most, an idle rite of passage rather than an education).

These veins of piety and energy were effectively mined by extremists belonging to the organizations of the ‘Sangh Parivar’, the BJP’s ‘family’. Out of it have surfaced characters like Sadhvi Rithambhara, an extraordinary orator able both to elicit and to incite collective emotion, to reassure and to enrage. Rithambhara’s voice, recorded on cassettes that circulate ‘with the ubiquity of a one-rupee coin in north India’, blends exhortation and argument in a tone that trembles with a sense of Hindu loss and dispossession—of insult, injury and humiliation inflicted upon Hindus by history and now by a state that refused to acknowledge their presence:

As far as the construction of the Ram temple is concerned, some people say Hindus should not fight over a structure of brick and stone. They should not quarrel over a piece of land. I want to ask these people, If someone burns the national flag will you say “Oh, it doesn’t matter, it is only two meters of cloth which is not a great national loss.” The question is not of two meters of cloth but of an insult to the nation. Ram’s birthplace is not a quarrel about a small piece of land. It is a question of national integrity. The Hindu is not fighting for a temple of brick and stone. He is fighting for the preservation of a civilization, for his Indianness, for national consciousness, for the recognition of his true nature.

The idiom of cultural dispossession reverberates deeply in Indian politics. After 1947 it was the preserve of Gandhian socialists like Ram Manohar Lohia and Jayaprakash Narayan, men who in different ways attacked what they saw as the
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neo-colonialism of a notionally Indian state ruled by a modernist, English-speaking elite. With the collapse of these badly directed political projects, this idiom passed into the hands of Hindu nationalists. It was used to great effect in rural north India – a region which in the past had been attracted by Gandhian socialism – and it successfully inducted new groups to its support, allying them to the urban middle classes and the educated young. The aura of cultural injury and martyrdom is a trademark style of the BJP, the most recent incarnation of a Hindu nationalist political party. (It was created in 1980, out of the old Bharatiya Jan Sangh, itself an upgrade of the pre-independence Hindu Mahasabha.) The BJP was a direct beneficiary of Congress decline: it styled itself as the legitimate heir to Congress, and it shared more with the political horizons of the Congress era than with the pattern that began to emerge in the mid-1990s.

But the BJP’s definition of Indian nationalism was precisely the contrary of Nehru’s. It explicitly declared allegiance to the Savarkarite idea of Hindutva, ‘Hinduness’, and celebrated a glorious Hindu past: phrases from Vivekananda – ‘It is out of the past that the future is moulded. It is the past that becomes the future’ – adorned its manifestos. But Hindu nationalism also embraced the armoury of the modern state. Its ambition was to complete the project of achieving an Indian nation state by piloting it towards what it saw as its logical terminus: a culturally and ethnically cleansed homogenous community with a singular Indian citizenship, defended by a state that had both God and nuclear warheads on its side. It was the BJP which kept alive most devotedly the ambition of modernization based on Western experiences of nationalism. The BJP did not propose a return to a traditional Hindu polity, it had no Gandhian picture of a stateless India composed of village republics, nor did it even insist that all Indians must be Hindu. Its ambitions were more purely statist: to eradicate any legal and political recognition of cultural and religious differences. Although it described itself as a positive project of ‘cultural nationalism’, in fact the BJP was committed to a negative programme, designed to efface all the signs of non-Hinduness that are in fact so integral to India.

Nowhere has this been more apparent than in its determination to reform the Constitution, to remove what it describes as its ‘anomalies’ and substitute a uniform legal code. The BJP has focused most closely on Muslim customary law which regulates marriage and divorce; and on the special constitutional provisions regarding the Muslim-majority valley of Kashmir, which include the promise of plebiscitary rights on the question of its accession to the Indian Union, and which prohibit other Indians from acquiring real property in the region. To be sure, these issues do raise considerations that are not easily reconciled: the claims of the rights of women and of individuals, for instance, as against those of cultures and groups. They are legitimate subjects of debate – if not quite in the terms suggested by the BJP. Indeed, the political success of a party like the BJP has relied not merely on its ability to translate the piety of the street and puja room into a populist cultural democracy, but on its fluency in the high discourse of state legality and constitutional reform. In this it is similar to Congress – which has long monopolized this language – and different from regional opposition parties, which are in touch with the popular pulse but only have a primitive command of Indian constitutionalese.

The BJP’s conception of law and of the state’s relation to society is entirely its own, however, and quite alien to anything from India’s past history: it proposes an even bigger historical rupture than that signified by the emergence of the colonial Raj in the nineteenth century or the establishment of an Indian state in the mid twentieth century. The fundamental debate in Indian political and intellectual life during the 1980s and 90s about the crisis of secularism has tended to skirt around the depth of this proposed change and its implications. The pluralistic nationalism
outlined after 1947 was certainly informed by the language of Western constitutional theory; it spoke an impeccable legal language. But its basic intuition about the relationship between political power and the diverse cultural practices of Indian society derived from an insight into the operative principles of the few large-scale political formations of India’s past. It saw that these had been sustained by relatively limited interference in the society’s religious practices. The political proposals of Hindu nationalism veer away from this historical pattern: they hope to bring the array of Indian religious and cultural activities under command of the state, to tidy up the compromises and accommodations that litter Indian life and bring them into a regimented design, presided over by a single legal system.

The Hindu nationalist aspiration to redefine Indianness always presumed the availability of a strong state as the instrument through which to forge an identity. Yet just when it seemed poised to capture the state, many of the latter’s capacities have been dramatically constricted. One of the central legacies of the last period of Congress government, 1991–6, was the restitution of political decision-making powers to the regional governments of the Union. This was not based on a punctilious commitment to the principle of decentralization; rather, it flowed from a canny realization by Narasimha Rao that it was politically wiser to let regional politicians appear responsible for implementing unpopular economic measures linked with liberalization. The reinvigoration of regional politics, often driven by lower-caste, Dalit and rural parties, against the impositions of the Centre was a striking feature of the 1990s – encouraged by economic liberalization, by the opportunities presented by a declining Congress, and by the threat that many in the regions feared in Hindu nationalists capturing central power and wielding it to impose a singular definition of Indian identity. The political momentum of these lower-caste and regional parties is the single most impressive obstacle to nationalist Hindu ambitions.

By definition, the regionalist ideas of India are plural rather than singular or shared, shaped as they are by the legacies of different historical pasts and varied experiences of political rule and economic development. The most spectacular instances of regionalism have been the violent separatist movements of the 1980s and 90s, which proposed a dissolution of the Indian idea. No group turns lightly to the project of separatism, and those who have done so in India have had strong reasons, based on a conviction that the founding principles of the Indian state had lost positive value. Large-scale populist democracy excluded their voice from the Centre. Economic development had failed them: some groups, in poorer states like Assam, claimed it had exploited their resources while leaving them in conditions of deprivation, and demanded more active redistribution; others, in regions that had prospered like Punjab, wanted the government to curtail its redistributive ambitions. And secularism too had failed them: the dalliances of Congress, and the prospect of a government led by Hindu nationalists, were profoundly disturbing to a Muslim in Kashmir, a Sikh in Punjab, a tribal in Assam or a Christian in Nagaland. There is strength to such arguments, and it is hard not to feel that the claims of separatists in Kashmir or Nagaland have the force of justice behind them. But they are remarkably ill-conceived as political projects. The likelihood of practical success for such separatisms is small: the capacity of the Indian state to contain armed insurgency – either through outright suppression or by attrition – and to maintain India’s territorial identity against domestic challengers has never been seriously disturbed – a record inherited from the Raj. The recent histories of Punjab and Kashmir, where armed separatists have taken on the Indian state and their own people, are witness to the tragedy of misjudging this capacity. Further, regions like Punjab, Kashmir and Nagaland are landlocked border territories in geo-politically strategic locations, with no military or economic viability as independent states: exclusion from the economic
markets and resources of the Indian Union would be disastrous for their people.

A second type of regionalist idea of India has acquired prominence since the devolution of some economic powers from the central state. Its leaders are a band of powerful regional politicians (many of whom have spent much or all of their careers outside the Congress Party) who have refused to be dictated to by the central state and who now have real powers to resist it. This new breed, men like Laloo Prasad Yadav, Mulyam Singh Yadav and the former prime minister, H. D. Deve Gowda, are all drawn from outside the upper castes, and each possesses his own distinct regionalist perspective. None would dream of suggesting that the Union be dissolved, but neither do they propose a coherent idea of an Indian identity. This is manifest in their picture of the economy, which they see essentially as a cluster of regional units – each seeking to maximize benefits at the expense of others – rather than as a unified national economy (in his few months as India’s prime minister, Deve Gowda ensured that his home state of Karnataka received a bounty of state and private investment).

For Nehru, the possibility of India depended as much on the project of common development as on the potentialities revealed by past interconnections. Decades of state-directed and regulated development have given India a huge national economy, whose functioning depends on a central supervisory state. That state needs the powers of redistribution to reduce regional inequalities. The unequal effects of liberalization are already clear, as investment is made in regions with more developed infrastructure like Maharashtra, Gujarat and Karnataka, and neglects less developed regions like Bihar, Rajasthan and Orissa. Over the next decade or two, the effects of such market selections will surely place strains on the Union and on the idea of a shared Indian identity. It will require formidable skills and imagination to handle this fundamental issue. Such considerations hold even more forcefully on the subject of a common natural environment in which present and future generations of Indians can hope to exist. It is hardly the case that the Indian state has a distinguished record on environmental matters, but any dissolution of its regulatory powers will certainly create still more hazards, pose even greater difficulties of control, and encourage regional states to act heedlessly.

But potentially the most far-reaching consequences of this new regionalism lie squarely in the cultural realm. India’s regional politicians have essentially parochial views, and they are devoted to cultivating their own vernacular gardens. The implications of this are apparent when considered against the background of India’s large-scale cultural trajectories. In the past decade India has had two prime ministers who entered office with fluency in only one language, English, or in Deve Gowda’s case, the regional language Kannada. (To be fair, one prime minister had command of more than a dozen languages.) The bilingual, bicultural idea of an Indian identity, the idea that animated the nationalist movement, is fragmenting into three cultural segments: a small but powerful anglicized metropolitan elite; a loose, huge group of Hindi-speaking urban middle classes and lower castes; and the vernacular regional cultures. The lines of political connection now run across and among these fragments, and are producing an intricate tessellation of identities. From this, a new image of Indianness may well disclose itself, for what is also striking after fifty years of political freedom is the depth and extent of the commitment to some idea of India. Yet there are good reasons to be sceptical. The developments of the 1990s as an emergent cultural pattern mark a serious rupture with the idea of a layered Indian political identity. And it is hard to see a coherent replacement for it: each cultural fragment is suspicious and resentful of the other, unwilling or unable to learn to speak the other’s language. But there is the example of the prime ministerial Hindi lessons.
‘All the “best” people in India’, Henri Michaux wrote in a cranky feuilleton of his imaginary adventures through India, ‘gave it up, from the beginning, gave up India and the whole earth. The great miracle of the English is that now the Hindus do care about it.’ The ideologues of the British Raj trumpeted the claim that India lacked any natural unity as a territorial state. There were no ‘Indians’ to govern themselves, only subjects of religious belief and imperial rule. But British domination helped to create the opportunities for Indians to acquire a modern self, a political identity guaranteed by a state. In the twentieth century Indians have taken that opportunity and have invented themselves, and they have kept that inventiveness alive. They have shown a kind of care for the idea of India, as well as sometimes an anger.

India, this historical and political artefact, a contingent and fragile conjunction of interlinked, sometimes irritable cultures, has been since 1947 continuously subject to a common political authority. The notions of territorial integrity and national unity, fundamental to both Hindu and Indian nationalism, are, as in all nationalisms everywhere, ideological fictions, fabulous myths – this applies equally to the Indian Union and the idea of Bharatvarsha. But it also applies to the more fragmentary imaginations of those aspired-for lands, Khalistan or Tamil Eelam, Kashmir or Bodoland. The demands of culture, the claims for recognition, are against large federal states, but the pressures of economics are towards interconnection and expansion of scale. The idea of India has been constituted through struggles to balance these contrary pulls in a coherent political project, to respect the diversities of culture with a commitment to a common enterprise of development.

After fifty years of an Indian state, the definition of who is an Indian is as passionately contested as ever. What has kept it in contest is the presence of the state whose access to resources makes it a real prize, and the persistence of democratic politics, which has kept most people in the game for this prize. The contest is over economic opportunities and about cultural recognition: it is a contest for ownership of the state. The intensity of that conflict today can be seen in the dizzying assortment of claims upon that state, claims that have been at once agitated and frustrated by democracy and economic progress. Acceptance of this inherited, proliferating diversity and the capacity to live with it are for Indians pragmatic necessities. India’s history has shown two broad possibilities of dealing with that diversity: a theoretically untidy, improvising, pluralist approach, or a neatly rationalist and purifying exclusivism. India’s history has also, for the first time in all its millennial depth, given the present generation of Indians the responsibility to choose between them. They must decide what they wish to build out of the wreckage of Ayodhya’s Babri Masjid.
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CHAPTER FOUR: WHO IS AN INDIAN?

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