What the Nation Really Needs to Know

The JNU Nationalism Lectures

Edited by
Rohit Azad, Janaki Nair,
Mohinder Singh, Mallarika Sinha Roy

on behalf of
Jawaharlal Nehru University
Teachers’ Association

HarperCollins Publishers India
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ON 12 FEBRUARY 2016, THE ELECTED president of the Jawaharlal Nehru University Students' Union (JNUSU), Kanhaiya Kumar, was picked up by the police from the campus. The arrest of two more students followed. During the three weeks that the arrested students, including Kanhaiya Kumar, remained in jail before securing bail, the JNUSU president, teachers and media persons faced physical attacks and intimidation at the court premises, even in the presence of the police.

All this was perpetuated in the name of 'nationalism'. Some television channels and print media aroused passions by pronouncing judgments against students, faculty and even branded the university as 'anti-national'. With law enforcement agencies remaining mute spectators, teachers were assaulted in different parts of the country by those who had reduced nationalism to sloganeering and to the exclusion of many groups on the basis of identity. The JNU Teachers’ Association (JNUTA) resisted this orchestrated assault on the university and the very idea of critical and independent thinking. The campaign to 'Save JNU' was led and supported by JNU alumni that included many eminent politicians, bureaucrats, police officers, journalists, writers and intellectuals in India and abroad.

Hundreds of academicians and institutions from within and outside the country sent letters of support to JNUTA and organized protests in their campuses in defence of free speech and liberal values.

With each passing day, more and more citizens came out to 'Stand with JNU' to defend the 'freedom of expression' and 'autonomy of academic institutions'. These two became the rallying points for the protest movement that continues in one or another form.
Gandhi’s Nation
Tanika Sarkar
(25 FEBRUARY 2016)

With all the lectures that have gone on so far, all of you are, by now, thoroughly familiar with multiple definitions of nation. We have, for instance, a British variant — Rule Britannia, rule the waves — where nationalism is driving colonization. We have the Nazi kind — my nation above all others, my nation above humanity, reason, morality. There is, moreover, religious nationalism that identifies the nation with the religion of the majority community, and which excludes religious minorities from full entitlement to it. On the other hand, we also have had vast popular upsurges in Asia and Africa fired by anti-colonial, anti-racist nationalism. There is not always a hard and fast line, though, that separates all these different kinds of nationalisms, and often we find a lot of overlap. I will take up just one instance today. I will briefly contrast Gandhi’s national vision with a few alternative or competing concepts that were available among Indians of his times. The contrast is meant to show how Gandhi himself sometimes changed his ideas through open and honest debates with his adversaries. It also helps us to see more clearly the distinctiveness as well as some of the problems in his own understanding.

It has so far been one of the great traditions of this university — or all universities that matter — that we exercise our critical and analytical
faculties openly, even when they problematize figures that we deeply respect ourselves; and I say whatever I say in that spirit. Since we are pressed for time I will dwell on just two interrelated aspects of Gandhi’s perspective on the nation: the place of poverty and caste. I will not discuss the place of Adivasis as there are better people here to do that, or of women in Gandhi’s nation, which I would have loved to discuss had I time for that, nor will I discuss his secular nationalism. Gandhi was so uncompromisingly secular that there is very little to discuss here, though there is of course a lot to learn and remember from that. Gandhi, let me remind ourselves, always acknowledged his moral and spiritual debt to Christianity. He said with unwavering consistency that people of all faiths are equal in the eyes of God and nation. He also said that though he himself worshiped the cow, he would never force the worship on those who do not, nor would he tolerate the violence in the name of cow protection. He said that Hindus must bear the primary responsibility for ensuring communal peace for they are the dominant community, and people of other religions are vulnerable in comparison.

For most nationalists, the nation indicates a single monolithic supranationality that must rank above all other commitments and identities. The problem, however — and this is the critical problem — is that this paramount identity is always undercut by diverse and very deep internal contradictions within national life. What distinguishes one kind of nationalism from another, what sets them apart, is how each manages such internal divisions. V.D. Savarkar, the powerful ideologue of Hindutva, defined the nation in admirably clear terms. Perpetual antagonism against an ‘Other’, in his view, is the basis of the nation: the Other, presumably, is always to be defined by the self-appointed guardians of the nation. Antagonism, he said, creates and consolidates national identity and nothing unites a nation more than the presence of a common enemy. The nation, therefore, actually needs an enemy. The presence of the anti-national, in fact, is the first and also the supreme condition for the existence of the nation. His Indian nation was — and once again he was admirably clear about this — unambiguously Hindu in its cultural essence as he postulated that the faith of all true Indians must be born on the Indian soil. So, immediately, without his having to mention it, this definition excludes Muslims and Christians from full entitlement to the nation.

But was a single Hindu nation possible, imagnable, given its internal contradictions? Here Savarkar had some interesting things to say. He did refer to caste divisions among Hindus. He admitted that upper-caste power is founded on a historical act of conquest of indigenous people. But, having accepted the foundational role of power and violence in the making of caste, he immediately dismissed caste inequality as a problem not worth going any further into. He argued that over centuries the blood of ‘high’ and ‘low’ castes had mingled, creating thereby a shared identity, a single family, whose differences do not matter. His family metaphor was a subtle and powerful one as it both admitted and evaded hierarchy in the same breath. It also made inequality appear as a relationship of intimacy.

Where does Gandhi stand? He organized vast anti-colonial movements, with all possible social classes and categories in India, despite their many mutual conflicts and divisions. Each Gandhian upsurge represented and concretized a single people in miniature. Gandhi used two images to describe his ideal nation, both very far from Savarkar’s insistence on perpetual antagonism. These were trusteeship and Ram Rajya. Both admitted that there are inequalities among Indians, yet both suggested that love and mutual care are still possible between those who have power and those who have none. But this was a hope that was mightily difficult to sustain, except at peak points of anti-colonial upsurges which drowned out all these differences temporarily. It is very important to see how Gandhi tried to come to terms with the intractable problems of social conflict and injustice and we must give it to him that he always struggled with difficulties, he never evaded them. We do not, necessarily, see either total consistency or a clear pattern of evolution. There were different tonalities, jostling with one another in his thinking, but a few strands, I think, did become more and more pronounced over time.

Let us begin with poverty and the class question. He wrote in 1921 and I quote, ‘To a people famishing and idle, the only acceptable form in which God can dare appear is work and promise of food as wages.’ Having acknowledged the pervasiveness and the centrality of Indian poverty, Gandhi then takes a somewhat surprising route. He attributes
it, in *Hind Swaraj*, to a moral failing among the poor. Machine-based production of an infinite number of objects breeds infinite greed, which in turn creates poverty. While everyone shares this craze for modern and useless objects, the poor pay most dearly for it and their poverty is consolidated by their own unworthy aspirations. The poor, therefore, are held responsible for their own plight. The question of class power and class struggle becomes irrelevant, and Gandhi tries to resolve poverty in two ways: one, by asking the poor to be content with what they have and what they do; second, by reorienting the moral vision of their masters. His trusteeship principle asked property owners to regard their property as a trust that they hold for the benefit of the poor. He admitted—and this is a very important admission—that the rich acquire property by ‘exploiting the masses’. At the same time, what allows them to do so, he said, is their greater competence. So they deserve, in a sense, what they have. I quote from him again, ‘Those who are capable wish to acquire more, it is natural.’ The poor, by implication, are less able. So, no structural change in production or property relations, but a change in some of the lifestyle and moral practices of both rich and poor is all that is required. This is where his differences from the Left of those days began.

Trusteeship can be better understood in terms of Tulsidas’s *Ramcharitmanas* whose concept of Ram’s realm or Ram Rajya provided the pattern for Gandhi’s ideals for Swaraj. I quote from him, ‘We call a state Ram Rajya when the relationship between the two [that is between the ruler and his subjects] is as good as that between father and son. The people are not as wise as he (the ruler) is.’ So, once again, ruler and subject are divided on the basis of superior and inferior capabilities. Gandhi, thereby, translates power into hegemony—hегеномия which is built on the active consent and will of the governed—even while the hierarchy between the king and subject remains clear and fixed.

Gandhi sometimes tried to short-circuit a social process by his personal example. His self-sufficient communes and ashrams did not exploit, nor even employed labourers. Inmates were their own cultivators, bakers, cooks, scavengers, sweepers, tailors, shoemakers, etc.—everything that can possibly be needed from labourers—overthrowing distinctions and taboos about ‘clean’ and ‘unclean’ work totally. The example, however, was confined to ashrams, it was not the pattern for society at large. This was very important as an exemplar, but, what Gandhi and his associates did was a matter of personal choice. The poor, in contrast, are forced to live a life of non-possession.

The self-chosen poverty of the great leader did not address or resolve the brutal privations in their life. On the contrary, it morally privileged and aestheticized them. He assumed the leadership of Champaran and Khera satyagrahas in Bihar and Gujarat almost as soon as he returned to India. They powerfully challenged European planters and state appropriation of surplus from peasants. So, the uncomfortable question of Indian oppressors didn’t arise. With these movements Gandhi learnt how to bring social opposites together on the basis of a shared concrete grievance against a state that unifies different classes and castes. This creates unity across classes and avoids social conflict. On the other hand, he almost never allowed the Congress to address or struggle against issues of rent and cess that Indian landlords imposed on tenant cultivators, nor against the exorbitant agrarian interest rates that cultivators were forced to pay to moneylenders, not even in the terrible years of agrarian depression in the mid-1930s when indebted cultivators were evicted from their land for defaulting on interest and rent payments.

Gandhian resolutions for poverty—the homespun, village schools, sanitation—did help the poor peasants to augment their meagre incomes in small but very meaningful ways. But neither did it help those who faced dispossession from land, nor did the rich behave as trustees or protectors as he had hoped. As the moral economy of trusteeship failed to appear, Gandhi reprimanded the peasant or the Adivasi who rebelled, rather than the landlord who failed to discharge his paternal responsibilities. Gandhi, of course, valued the peasant as the perfect satyagrahi, just as he said the woman was one. Both served others without any thought of the self. But in order to be so perfect, both peasant and woman had to provide selfless service endlessly.

So Gandhi knew, and none better, how to speak to the peasant: but he did not always speak for the peasant. At the same time, and this is just as important, Gandhi was the first Indian leader who solicited the peasants’ entry into the political nation, and the role of the peasant satyagrahi in nation-making did create the basis for future democracy in India. It eased in universal adult franchise into our polity without any obvious strife and that is a huge achievement.
Gandhi was always critical of urban life, condemning the urban rich and the urban poor in equal measure. But at the same time, he deplored the strike weapon, denounced class conflict, distrusted collective bargaining through trade unions—once again inhibiting class protests while leaving mill owners to pursue their methods of control and exploitation. But—and this is what I want to emphasize—things changed somewhat, and his vision unravelled tragically towards the end of his life.

His faith in trusteeship was corroded in the dark days of 1946, when he travelled through Bengal villages, trying with his frail body to stop the communal violence. He came to realize, first-hand, how class inequalities were mapped onto communal divisions, and what a terrifying potent brew it was. In June 1947, almost at the end of his life, he suddenly recalled his early attraction towards socialist ideas—class revolution without violence—to which he had never much referred before. He also said that peasants have to struggle for justice for themselves and landlords can help by fleeing. He said that trusteeship had failed and he said that Ram Rajya was really beyond realization. He was big enough to give up on, or admit failure of some of his most cherished, most dear visions.

I come to caste now, via racism. Gandhi, surprisingly, did not characterize racism as an innate property of white-skinned people. He saw it, instead, as unequal distribution of power which exists in different forms in different contexts. I will give you two examples. In his autobiography, he drew a startling analogy between Hindu untouchability and racism. A barber in South Africa had refused to serve him and Gandhi couldn’t be angry, and I quote from him, ‘We do not allow our own brothers to serve our untouchable brothers, the conviction that it was the punishment for our own sins saved me from becoming angry.’ He coupled untouchability and racism together again in the case of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. Referring to General Dyer who gave the order to shoot upon an unarmed crowd in Amritsar in April 1919, and to Michael O’Dwyer, the infamous governor of Punjab, Gandhi wrote immediately after the events in 1921, ‘Has not nemesis taken us for the crime of untouchability, have we not practised Dyerism and O’Dwyerism on our kith and kin? In fact, there is no charge that the pariah cannot fling in our faces, which we do not fling in the faces of Englishmen.’ He described, therefore, the massacre as penance, equating the open violence of colonialism, with the structural violence of untouchability.

In his early life, we all know, Gandhi showed a remarkable irreverence for caste orthodoxy, courting outcasting without penance, the ritual penance, when he went abroad. In South Africa he worked closely with ‘low caste coolies’ and invited untouchables into his home on equal terms. He made his family and associates engage in labour that was considered profoundly polluted—shoemaking, leatherwork, cleaning of toilets. The preoccupation with the cleaning of toilets, one might even say obsession—work most awfully reprehensible to savarna or caste Hindu—persisted all his life. At Durban, a Dalit Christian clerk stayed in his house as a guest. We all know of this famous event, when Gandhi commanded his wife to clean his chamber pot and when she refused, in a fit of rage, Gandhi almost turned her out of the house, although he later repented his rage. Once back in India, a Dalit family joined his ashram in Ahmedabad and his patrons immediately withdrew funds to punish him, and there were rumours of a citywide boycott of Gandhi and the ashram. Gandhi resolved to relocate the ashram in untouchable quarters of the city rather than expel the family from the ashram.

But he had to moderate his activities as he was simultaneously pressured by two contrary forces—orthodox Sanatanis on one hand and emergent non-Brahman and Dalit politics on the other. For quite a long while, he was more eager to persuade the Sanatanis, whom he saw as friendly adversaries, sharing the same religious world view. He, moreover, believed that untouchability could be abolished by moral reasoning—that he could teach good Hindus in time that hereditary caste divisions were part of their faith; true, but untouchability was not.

We must take, I think, one thing, very seriously. Gandhi was a very sincere, very devout Hindu, and Hindu scripture was genuinely sacrosanct to him, to the point of being non-negotiable. He could not play around with them. He, therefore, could not, in all honesty, deny that caste constituted an essential part of dharma. So he worked endlessly around two incompatible poles: his own passionate repugnance to untouchability and his equally strong commitment to varnashram dharma as a religious principle sanctified by scripture. Compromises were inevitable. Pollution taboos were totally abolished in his South African farms and communes. In Indian ashrams, however, their known observance was voluntary, though not mandatory. From 1918, he began to systematically distinguish
between varna and jati. Varnadharma or the fourfold, hereditary, hierarchical division of society and labour forms, he said, was the core of dharma. It was immutable. I quote from him, 'It would be violation from the laws of nature and of God.' Brahmins were higher in status than Shudras, who must do menial work but at the same time, Shudra labour should be valued as selfless service. Jati or multiple subdivisions within a varna, on the other hand, was extraneous and irrelevant to true dharma. Untouchability, however, was beyond both, a horrible perversion of Hindu faith. He said that respect for all forms of labour, however degraded, was a must, but so was the hereditary division of labour. It was a rational social principle and in its absence anarchy will reign.

He also strongly upheld the taboo against inter-varna marriages and dining till the late 1930s or even later. In 1924, he plunged into the Vaikom Satyagraha, which had been started by Ezhavas for temple entry in the Hindu princely state of Travancore. In a very conciliatory mood he told Brahman authorities, and I get this from my late colleague M.S.S. Pandian, that low castes were already penalized by the gods for their misdeeds in past births and man should not add to their sufferings. He therefore, echoed the theological justification of hierarchy that low castes were made 'low' by their own actions in past births. He also described Brahmins as, and I quote again, 'the finest flowers of Hinduism and Humanity. I will do nothing to wither it.'

But the more he defended the varna order as benign and just, the more urgent it became to salvage it from the harshness of untouchability and here lay the problem. He tried out many ways to achieve respect for untouchables. He renamed them Harijan, children of God, which did not please all of them or politicize them. He tried to render them physically cleaner by suggesting that they avoid eating leftover food and carrion or the meat and flesh of dead animals, which are filthy as well as sinful habits; that they should not touch carcases of dead animals, and that they should bathe and change frequently. He believed that it was their handling of physical filth which made them dirty in the eyes of the world and this lay at the root of pollution and avoidance taboos. Once their bodies were cleansed, the stigma would vanish, even though, they would continue to do the same work. But untouchable children told him if they did not consume leftover food or carrion, they would starve, that they did not have access to water to bathe in or clothes to change into. Reform, clearly, was not easy.

In despair, then, he turned to A.S. Altekar, the great scholar of Hinduism, and tried to inquire whether scripture could be reread to provide any usable loopholes. He wrote that he knew that the Smritis did endorse the avoidance rituals taboos and, possibly, also the Vedas. But he hoped that Altekar would be able to translate scripture in such a way that pollution taboos would appear as the consequence of 'external practice' and not of birth. Once again, he tried to attach impurity taboos to impure work. He sought to render them a temporary and not a permanent inherited condition. So work and purity/impurity had to be separated. Work had to be done by the same caste in the same way but impurity should go.

The new Dalit politics, however, severely disturbed his definitions and methods. As Dalit leaders began to negotiate with the state about separate electorates, spurning their Hindu identity, and as they became relentlessly critical of the Congress temporizing on caste, Gandhi's debates with B.R. Ambedkar now began to assume the proportions of an epic confrontation. Ambedkar's threat to defect from the Hindu fold dangerously narrowed down the space for manoeuvre. Ambedkar overthrew Gandhi's distinction between acceptable varna dharma and impermissible untouchability, insisting that the two are integrally connected. He demanded the annihilation of caste itself as social and economic system, as ideology, as ritual practice. He demanded a politics of distribution as well as of recognition but he also said that it was Gandhi who first brought the issue of untouchability to the forefront of national politics and no one could have done it the way he did.

Gandhi's responses to Ambedkar were more complex. Initially, he took Ambedkar to be an upper-caste person because of his educational achievements and social confidence. He was not the typical abject Dalit. His first comments on Ambedkar were somewhat patronizing and I quote, 'He has received a liberal education, he has more than the qualifications of an average educated Indian. His exterior is clean, though his interior is a mystery.' I do not know why he had to refer to Ambedkar's cleanliness as that is not how he described his first acquaintance with others. Obviously, that was the first thought that
occurred to him on meeting a Dalit intellectual. He insisted that untouchables did not need Ambedkar as they had the Congress to lead them. At the second Round Table Conference he went further, and I quote, ‘I, myself, in my own person claim to speak for the whole of untouchables.’ He asked them to forget their own grievances and to serve the nation and the national movement first. In reply, Ambedkar asked him an unforgettable question: do I have a country?

The issue of representation brought about a deadlock as Ambedkar made it clear that the Congress could not represent nor lead untouchables. They have to throw up their own leaders. Gandhi, on the other hand, objected till the mid-1930s to an independent sphere of politics. They should seek neither legal redress nor political autonomy, nor activism on their own. The burden of social transformation should lie with the upper caste alone, they will repent first and then reform society and nation. The burden, however, is actually a privilege. Just as it underlined upper-caste guilt – and underlined it very powerfully and passionately indeed – it also vested political agency solely in them, rendering the Dalit a passive victim. Rejuvenated and redeemed by penitence, upper castes would then rightfully reclaim their trustee status and reform low castes. It was, therefore, a return to hierarchy on a higher plane.

But neither the Sanatnis nor the upper castes showed any signs of relenting or repenting, and this now put his faith, more precious to him than his life, in a state of total crisis. He wrote poignantly in 1933 and I quote, it’s a very moving quote, ‘There is nothing so bad in all the world as untouchability’. Also, ‘My life would be a burden to me if Hinduism failed me, but then I cannot tolerate it with untouchability.’ He now began to say that it was better for untouchables to fight against low-caste svarnas than to live as, and I quote him again, ‘wretched slaves’. And most significant of all for a person like Gandhi, ‘...if this kind of untouchability were an integral part of dharma, that religion has no use for me’.

Gandhi was beginning to change. At the end of his life he became ready to accept a legal, constitutional prohibition of untouchability. Earlier he had never endorsed inter-varna marriages, at the most intra-jati marriages – marriages within the same jati. Now he advised upper-caste girls to marry untouchable men. Previously firmly committed to prohibitions on intermarriage, he now spoke in favour of pratiloma or hypogamous marriages, so very loathsome to Hindu orthodoxy. Ashis Nandy has argued that it was this blow to caste that made him such a dangerous man to his enemies – along, of course, with his defence of equal rights for Indian Muslims and Christians. His assassin, Nathuram Godse was an orthodox Maharashtrian from the purest of Brahman categories.

Gandhian anti-colonial movements prefigured one kind of nation, populated with class- and caste-divided subjects, who, nonetheless, possessed political agency, and hence had democratic entitlements, even if he continued to endorse inequalities till almost the end of his life, prescribing, at most, caste and class with a human face. More strikingly, however, I find, his nation was capable of recognizing its own contradictions and oppressions and feel guilty about them. This capacity for introspection, for recognizing evil within the self, was the most important thing about Gandhi’s nation. A nation that refuses to feel guilty about itself is a nation to fear deeply.

Notes/References/Bibliography

1. Gandhi’s letter to Tagore, Young India, 13 October 1921.
The Past as Seen in Ideologies Claiming to Be Nationalist

Romila Thapar

(6 MARCH 2016)

I AM DELIGHTED TO BE HERE on this occasion, having been invited to participate in the teach-in on nationalism. When I come to JNU these days, I feel a bit like a dinosaur – having been one among the founding generation of teachers. We belong to another age as we were here at the start of JNU. I joined in November 1970. We left the various universities where we were teaching to build the new JNU. Our main concerns were two: one, that it must have an impressive academic quality so that it would be recognized as a centre of academic excellence, as a place for serious study and thoughtful interactions; two, that it must be a place where there is free discussion and debate. Over the years, as I worked in JNU, observing the university and its methods and content of teaching and research, I felt proud of being at JNU. For the last month or so, when the attack on JNU began, I must confess that I have been deeply depressed by what happened on the ninth of February, because I saw this as an attempt to break JNU by those that regard themselves as ‘the authorities’. But I feel much more positive now that I have seen how JNU reacted to defend itself. I just want to say, thank you for being JNU, and I continue to be proud of belonging to this university.
Now, having spoken like a dinosaur, let me come to something that is much more topical and that is the connection between history and nationalism. This is a connection which is very close, and it is particularly so because nationalism has much to do with the question of understanding one's society and identifying as a member of that society. The question of identity is central and history has much to do with arriving at an identity. Eric Hobsbawm has a rather interesting description of the relationship between history and nationalism. He writes that history is to nationalism what the poppy is to the opium addict. What does he mean by that? What he means is that history is a source and history is also that which gives the nation its identity. And it's these two questions that I'm concerning myself with this evening.

Nationalism emerges as a concept or an idea in modern times as a response to historical changes. It is difficult to locate it in pre-modern societies. So, we don't look for nationalism in the centuries-long past, we look for it when society changes to the point where it is required. When it emerged in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it was a time of emerging capitalism and the start of colonialism, both of which were to expand. Together with this came the growth of the middle class and its aspiring to participate in governance through democratic representative systems. Small territories were integrated within larger territories. It brought together many groups and encouraged a secular identity to ensure inclusive unity. This is characteristic of most nationalisms. Defined by a new sense of social awareness and identity, there is in nationalism inevitably an inclusive and overarching identity. History is essential to a national ideology but it has to be a shared history that binds people together. History has to be the bond. It cannot be a history dominated by one identity because nationalism doesn't exist only on one identity. It has to be all-inclusive. National history of course locates a golden age in the past, a utopian age which is the exemplar. It is often the kind of society that is held forth as being the ideal society, not realizing of course that whatever society you take as the Utopia from the past, remains in the past, it belongs to the history of the past.

But what we are dealing with today is in a sense the history of the present which is in some ways a rather different history. National identity supersedes existing identities. If it is inclusive, draws everyone in, it is generally much healthier. But if it is exclusive, and leaves out some sections of society, it can be disastrous. We have had an example of the latter—a very severe example—of exclusive nationalism in the case of Germany in the 1930s. It propagated the theory of the purity of the Aryan race that resulted in the genocide of the Jewish population and the justification for the genocide.

But where it has been inclusive, even if scattered, it has had quite a positive effect. For example, the kind of nationalism that we often refer to, but is pertinent in terms of comparative history to the Indian situation, is African nationalism, sometimes referred to as Negritude. It was propounded in the Caribbean by Aimé Césaire and Léopold Senghor, and it brought together an African consciousness that stretched from Africa to the Caribbean to North America. It was an inclusive nationalism of a very extraordinary kind, and I think we would do well to study it, with both its positive and negative features. If nothing else, it would make us aware of the different varieties of colonialism and how these differences impacted the idea of nationalism.

But let me turn to the Indian situation. The evolution of nationalist ideas in India was tied to colonialism. Therefore, the influence of the colonial interpretation of Indian history is present in all kinds of nationalism to a lesser or a greater degree. In pre-colonial times there were multiple identities of caste, language, religious sects and regions. Political ambitions that caused constant wars kept changing the borders of kingdoms. Patterns of caste that differed from the north to the south, from the east to the west throughout the subcontinent, gave each region a certain kind of identity. Religious identities, I would like to argue, were not based on large monolithic religions but on a range of religious sects. And the religious sect is what we should give much more attention to when we talk about the history of religion in India. In sum, we now recognize that diversity characterized Indian cultures. Up to a point it can be said that modern anti-colonial nationalism drew the diversities together.

But we can't stop there, because if diversity is characteristic, the next question is: How did diverse groups negotiate their space and their relationships? This is a fundamental question where some explore these relationships whereas others project a single identity, argue that it is the
identity of the majority and should therefore have priority. Let’s look at how this came about.

The colonial reading of Indian history denied the diversity of India. The first modern history of India was the well-known one by James Mill, published in the early nineteenth century, *The History of British India* (1818–23). Two theses from this history have been influential in Indian politics and continue to be so. One was periodization. Mill divided Indian history into three periods – the Hindu civilization, the Muslim civilization and the British period. This periodization was based on just one feature – the religion of the ruling dynasties. This feature as a source of periodization is now rejected in current historical research. Mill projected Indian history as that of two nations, and right through the nineteenth century colonial scholarship wrote and spoke about the Hindu nation and the Muslim nation. This was entirely the invention of colonial historiography. It was also said that these two nations were permanently hostile towards each other, therefore it required the intervention of the British to prevent these hostilities.

There were no histories, of course, of India as a unified territory prior to colonial rule. Colonial history tried to tidy up the diversity, not by asking how these diversities related to each other, but by envisioning all religions in India as large monolithic religions and fitting the sects into one or the other, instead of seeing them as autonomous or only partially allied to another religion. Colonial scholars dramatized the confrontation of what they called the Hindu religion and the Muslim religion in order to support the two-nation theory, required by colonial policy. Relationships between religious groups are never so simple. There can be both accommodation as well as conflict between them. The historian has to investigate both and explain the reason, and the reasons can be multiple. But with colonial scholarship the interpretation of Indian history appropriated the two-nation theory, a theory that has been politically so influential and continues to be influential in some ideologies today. From this perspective, Hindu–Muslim antagonism became axiomatic to Indian history.

The two-nation theory persisted and was strengthened by the introduction of the concept of the majority community and minority communities after the British Indian census. It divided Indians and encouraged Indians into thinking about their identity as distinct, consolidated, monolithic religious identities. This suited colonial policy and therefore was encouraged. Nationalist historians writing substantially a century later, the great stalwarts such as H.C. Raychaudhuri, R.C. Majumdar, Nilakanta Sastri, challenged some colonial theories such as Oriental Despotism, but curiously accepted the periodization without questioning it. It was merely updated by calling it ancient, medieval and modern, but the parameters remained the same. I remember many arguments that we had at the start of our courses and syllabi here in JNU as to whether we should keep to these labels because ancient was the old Hindu period, medieval was the old Muslim period and modern was the old British period. The labels had been changed, but the divisions and the reasons for the divisions – the religions of the ruling dynasties – had been questioned. We were questioning them in our structuring of the courses. We kept the boundaries fluid, resulting in the discovery of interesting overlaps.

The two-nation theory was one that came out of colonial scholarship. The other is a more complicated one but nevertheless, has its roots in colonial history and came to be called the theory of Aryan race. We have to keep in mind that what was called ‘race science’ was very influential in Europe at this time. In the mid-nineteenth century, European philology became interested in Vedic Sanskrit and its links with Indo-European languages. Many philologists and Sanskritists, such as Friedrich Max Müller and others, projected the idea that the Vedic corpus, authored by the Aryans was the foundation of Indian civilization. The history of the origin of the Aryans and their innate superiority became an important aspect of colonial scholarship and of nationalist historians. It was popularized, initially by the theosophist, Colonel Olcott. He maintained that not only were the Aryans indigenous to India, but that they also migrated westwards and eventually civilized the West. This was useful in projecting the idea that India has always had a singular history, of which the most important has been that of the ancient Hindus.

Various theories were put about on the origins of the Aryans. Max Müller said they came from Central Asia; Dayanand Saraswati preferred Tibet. Tilak, as we all know, was much more adventurous in suggesting the Arctic regions. When it became fashionable in the 1920s and
'30s to talk about the Aryans being indigenous to India, it was a little embarrassing to have Tilak placing them in the Arctic. So someone had the bright idea of saying that in those days the North Pole was actually located in Bihar. Various Indo-European languages from Sanskrit to Celtic were said to be of the same language family. It was assumed that those who spoke the same language were biologically related.

One may well ask why there was the need to project an indigenous descent for the Aryans. It was important to the theory that there was a direct link between the Aryans and the upper-caste Hindus that followed generation after generation up until present times. Max Mueller in England and Keshab Chandra Sen in India argued that since both the British and the upper-caste Indians were Aryans, they were all eventually kin-related and, therefore, were like 'parted cousins' now coming together.

This theory met with an obstacle in the 1920s with the discovery of the Indus Valley civilization or the Harappa culture as it is also called. This was prior to the Aryans and it was not Vedic. Therefore, this had now to be the foundation of Indian civilization. This naturally created a problem for those who believe that Vedic Aryanism is the foundation. That is one reason why today, some archaeologists and Sanskritists are trying to take the dates of the Vedas back to pre-Harappan times. Newspaper reports have stated that attempts are being made to take it back at least to 7500 bc. But the other problem is the unknown origin of the Harappans and that their language remains undeciphered. It's much simpler now to maintain that the Harappans were also Aryans. There were many archaeological cultures in the subcontinent, so were they all Aryans?

How do these ideas and problems connect to the question of nationalism? By the late nineteenth century, there was an established middle class in India. The colonial economy was tied into British capitalism, and much of the middle class, largely upper caste, had emerged as professionals, managing the administration of the colony and its colonial economy. The idea of nationalism began to emerge from this group. So once again it is the particular historical situation in modern times that leads to the emergence of nationalist ideas. At first, the nationalists requested greater representation in governance and then gradually, as we all know, it grew into a mass movement and the mass movement then finally ended up by demanding an independent nation, which was a logical outcome. Anti-colonial nationalism endorsed the idea of a nation and defined it as a democracy with a secular, egalitarian society. This anti-colonial nationalism maintained that the primary identity of all citizens was being Indian, irrespective of whatever identities they may have claimed prior to this. Being Indian was an overarching and inclusive identity incorporating people of all religions, castes and languages on an equal basis with equal rights, and this is the central component for what was originally projected as secular, anti-colonial Indian nationalism. This was a new identity obviously, and was seen and projected as such.

But given the history that was written by colonial scholarship and taught to the colonials by the colonizer – the fundamentals of which had not been fully challenged – there inevitably arose two kinds of what some people call religious nationalisms and some people prefer to call communalisms – the Hindu and the Muslim – and some may even refer to them as pseudo-nationalisms. Both endorsed the old, British two-nation theory. One aimed at establishing a separate Islamic state and managed to establish Pakistan, the other aimed at uniting the subcontinent under Hindu rule – what was to become the idea of the Hindu Rashtra. Unlike anti-colonial secular nationalism that was inclusive of all as equals, for these communal ideologies those of their own religion had priority, and to that extent these nationalisms were exclusive. They were not anti-colonial – some of them regarding the colonial power as their patron. But their hostility was towards each other.

These views were basic to the two organizations that propagated these ideas: the Muslim League and the Hindu Mahasabha. The latter was gradually superseded by the RSS and later there emerged a conglomeration of organizations referred to as the Sangh Parivar. The ideology that has come to be associated with it is Hindutva. The RSS took shape from the 1930s, as a disciplined organization, its discipline reflecting influences of Italian fascism which it regarded as the exemplar.

As with all nationalisms of all kinds, Hindu religious nationalism also turned to history. But interestingly, it appropriated the two dominant colonial theories – the Aryan foundation of Indian civilization and the two-nation theory. These they now describe as the indigenous history
of India. Ironically, it is claimed that these histories are cleansed of the cultural pollution of Indian historians influenced by Western ideas! That their own ideas are rooted in colonial theories is conveniently ignored.

The core of this ideology is the identity of the Hindu. The Hindu is the only one who can claim the territory of British India as the land of his ancestry – pitrribhumi, and the land of his religion – punyabhumi. Muslims and Christians are described as foreigners since they came from outside the territory of British India and their religions originated in other lands. The ancestors of the Hindu and his religion having been indigenous to India – he therefore, is the primary citizen. The true claimants to the ancient civilization can only be Hindus, descendants of the Aryans, and this is one reason why it has to be proved that the Aryans were indigenous to India, irrespective of whether they were or not. Being indigenous, they are the inheritors of the land. There are, however, glitches in this argument. Those of us who have pointed out the problems get our daily dose of abuse on the internet, and we are described as ignorant JNU professors and worse, even if in fact most are not from JNU.

The history of the Aryans as it stands today, on which much of the basic ideology of Hindutva hinges, has now become extremely complex because it has come to involve many disciplines. Information on the subject comes from specialized studies of texts in Vedic Sanskrit, distinct from classical Sanskrit, the study of which requires a substantial input from linguistics in addition to just the study of language; the archaeology of multiple sites in the north-west of the subcontinent of varying cultures and their contact with adjoining areas; hydrology for information on the rivers that changed the contours of the landscape; and most recently, genetics, to map the population structure of those millennia. DNA samples are being taken by some in the hope of locating the Aryan. It is difficult to convince those supporting a variety of theories that Aryan is not a biological entity but a language category, a shorthand for ‘Aryan-speaking people’. The confusion over biology and language creates its own problems.

The questions that historians of a different ilk are asking have moved away from the obsession of whether the Aryans were indigenous or foreign. Cultures do not grow in isolation, so we need to know which other cultures coexisted, and which contributed to the cultural beginnings of Indian history, and how did this cultural mixture, amalgam, juxtaposition, evolve.

Then we come to the two-nation theory, taking history back to medieval times. This theory is being questioned in various ways by modern historians. The history of religion, as many argue, covers a range of religious sects and social groups with a variety of different relationships between them. Those relationships resulted in some degree of conflict or of accommodation or a mix of both at different levels of society and in different spheres of activity. The history of religion has to be seen as the history of these sects, and not the history of monolithic religions in confrontation, as I have argued earlier.

It is commonly said by people who should know better, but obviously don’t, that for the last one thousand years, Hindus have been enslaved and victimized by the Muslims, and now finally they are free. That is not what history tells us. In the last one thousand years when the status of Hindus in the subcontinent is investigated, there emerge some very interesting ideas, events and personalities. Sanskrit learning continued to thrive at many centres in the subcontinent because Sanskrit learning had spread at the end of the first millennium and this was not discontinued. It had the impressive patronage of maharajas, sultans, and Mughals among royalty, as well as among wealthy landowners. The patronage of Sanskrit and Persian was a sign of being cultured among such groups.

Centres of learning referred themselves to a variety of Hindu and other sects. There were commentaries on and digests of earlier Sanskrit texts such as the Vedas, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and the Dharmastras, all discussing crucial issues pertinent to contemporary times and their mixed society and the situations that emerged. For example, was there a difference in status between the shrotriya brahmana and the priest performing the daily rituals in the temple? Temples in some cases were endowed with money and land, and those associated with their functioning were financing other activities. This resulted in various new categories of functions having to be performed by brahmans other than those traditionally associated with them. Some new rituals of worship had entered religious practice, not unconnected with the new sects. Important questions arose related to forms of worship and who
legitimized the forms, given the multiplicity of sects that were working out their practices.

The scholar Sayana wrote a fascinating commentary on the Rig Veda, which is actually an interesting insight into the medieval mind, and how the medieval mind of the fourteenth century looks back three thousand years on the Rig Veda, and provides a commentary on it. Among texts discussing philosophical schools, one that was highly regarded was the Sarvakaramamangala of Madhavacharya, where the Charvaka philosophy of materialism constitutes the first lengthy chapter. The author explains that although he disagreed with it, but given that it was being discussed by scholars, he thought it necessary to discuss it in this compendium of philosophical schools. This attitude to knowledge and the form of discussion needs to be observed in our time too.

Many books on mathematics and astronomy were written and Indian astronomers and mathematicians, many of whom were Hindu, were praised, discussed and quoted in Arabic texts. Did these mathematicians on both sides know Sanskrit and Arabic? Otherwise, how could they have had these discussions? What happened to that tradition, why isn’t it reported, why don’t we learn about it in school?

There were also compositions of high quality in the regional languages, such as the Tulsi Ramayana and the Bengali Ramayana, not to mention the huge range of highly popular bhajans and dohas, sung by people of all religions who understood the languages in which they were composed. The dohas of Ras Khan in praise of Krishna are sung by classical musicians to this day. The beginnings of Hindustani classical music in the form of Dhrupad was nurtured in this period at the courts of Muslim rulers.

The shape and form taken by Hinduism as we recognize it today draws a great deal from developments during these thousand years. Bhakti sects were becoming more common in parts of north India and bhakti tradition and worship became an extremely important part of what we today call Hinduism. The Shakti-Shakti worship expanded and popular sects such as the Nathpanthis were to be found from Bengal to Hinglaj in Sindh. This is what I sometimes call the Guru-pir religion because it is the religion of the majority of the people who followed it, and still do – the teachings of the gurus and the piris, the sants and the babas – and that is really the religion we should be looking at.

These are not the cultural forms taken by people who have been enslaved and victimized. These are the articulations of a rich and many-faceted civilizational tradition. We need to put these facts into a historical context and see them as part of that historical context and not spend our time only searching for confrontations between Hindus and Muslims. That’s an approach which, apart from being invalid in most instances, does not help in understanding medieval history. We have far more important things to investigate and discuss. There were religious and cultural forms arising out of the characteristic features of the time even in the last one thousand years. As in the previous millennium, it was a time that hosted differences, it had an attitude to all kinds of differences, and they could either coexist, get amalgamated or create new forms, or confront the other. So, there was a range of choice on how sects and differences were played out in the society of the time. This range is what we should be investigating and trying to understand.

And once again we need to see the interactions of the various cultures and explain their mutations, and be sensitive towards the spaces they have created, and observe the emergent identities that came out of them. This can be seen if we don’t restrict the study of religion to texts alone but also explore religions expressed in the oral traditions, because we have to keep in mind that the vast majority of Indians could not read, and oral traditions were their source of belief and their source of social goals. For the historian, religion in pre-modern India is an extremely challenging study precisely because it is not a case of two monolithic religions confronting each other all the time, as we have been made to believe. It makes far more sense to see religion as an array of religious sects that cover the range from the orthodox to the heterodox. The sects have their own relations with each other – some friendly and some not so. The religious sect was also linked to caste, and that remains common to all religions in India. Let me give you a couple of examples of what I mean by this.

Arab traders came in large numbers and over the last twelve hundred years settled along the west coast and established new religious sects, which were an amalgam of Hindu and Muslim ideas and practices. But
each one kept its distinct identity, despite the fact that some of them had common Islamic elements, or had inducted the same Hindu deity. They maintained their separateness largely because they had intermarried into different local castes and adopted local customs. Thus a Gujarati Bohra would not have married a Malayali Mappila, and yet they had some similar origins, but they evolved with different beliefs and custom, living in different geographical areas.

The other striking feature is that all formal religions in India – based on religious books and texts – discriminate against Dalits, even those Dalits that belong to their own religion. Muslims and Christians outside India do not observe this segregation, but in India they do. One cannot study any religion in pre-modern India without studying its links with caste. Those who were always marginalized like the Adivasis and the Dalits and the lower castes, when they were not converted to formal religions, had their own forms of worship and these are rarely commented upon in modern histories of religion.

Sources from early times seldom mention monolithic forms of religion. From Ashoka to Al-Biruni, a period of fifteen hundred years, references to dharma are said to consist of two streams – Brahmanism and Shramanism. Ashoka refers to ‘brahmanam-samamam’, Megasthenes, the Greek visitor to India writes of the Brahmanes and the Sarmanes, Al-Biruni mentions brahanas and samaniyas. The brahanas believed in the gods, in the divine sanction of the Vedas and in the immortality of the soul. The shramanas – such as the Buddhists, Jainas, Ajivikas and such like – rejected all of this and were therefore called by the brahanas as the nastikas / non-believers.

Each of these two dharmas hosted a range of sects covering variants of belief and worship. Some of them were accommodating towards each other, some were confrontational. There are references, for example, to Shaiva sects, more than the others, sometimes being hostile to the Jainas and the Buddhists. But interestingly, Patanjali, the great Sanskrit grammarian of the early centuries AD, also refers to the two dharmas – that of the brahanas and that of the shramanas – and adds that the relationship between the two can be compared to that of the snake and the mongoose. I think that’s a very telling statement.

The point that I am trying to make is that the reading and interpretation of the past requires a trained understanding of the sources and a sensitivity to understanding what has been written. The political requirements of today cannot be imposed on the history of the past. To maintain a generalized statement that the period of the last thousand years was one of the victimization and enslavement of the Hindus by the Muslims is historically unacceptable. This kind of generalization feeds communal nationalism. That is why I am cautioning against it. Unfounded generalizations have to be replaced by analytical history.

At the time of Independence and soon after (when none of you were born!), we had no problems defining nationalism and the definition was widely accepted. Nationalism meant declaring every Indian as an equal citizen of India and upholding the rights of every citizen to that equality. Today, efforts are being made to obfuscate it. Nationalism draws on reliable history and not on the contorted history that feeds communal ideologies. Reliable history demands critical enquiry which, as we all know, is essential to the advancement of knowledge. It is expected of a university to critically enquire into what may publicly be claimed. Nationalism gives an identity to the citizen. The citizen is pre-eminent but no citizen or group of citizens can claim superiority over others as citizens, irrespective of what may be the basis of the claim. Citizenship is founded on the equality of all and the equal rights of all. Incisive debates on this are part of the nationalist enterprise, and this is an ongoing enterprise in the relationship between history and nationalism. Universities are the obvious places for such debates. We in India have had a head start due to our Constitution and with our commitment to making the nation a secular democracy. This is what we are committed to as Indians and what we were committed to when we became independent, and this commitment has to continue as the hallmark of our nationalism.

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Notes/References/Bibliography