

Reemergence of Cultural Nationalism in Indian Politics

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Abstract: The study entitled "Reemergence of Cultural Nationalism in Indian Politics" examines how cultural nationalism has regained momentum and reshaped India's political discourse in the 21st century. Drawing upon historical developments, ideological foundations, and contemporary political practices, this research investigates the factors contributing to the resurgence of cultural-nationalist narratives and their influence on party politics, public policy, social identity, and electoral behavior. Through an analysis of political speeches, manifestos, and media representations, the article highlights how cultural nationalism intertwines with issues of religion, caste, heritage, and national security to mobilize mass support. The findings suggest that cultural nationalism has not only revived as a dominant ideological force but has also transformed democratic participation and redefined the contours of political legitimacy in India. This study contributes to the broader understanding of nationalism in post-colonial democracies while offering insights into the evolving dynamics between culture, identity, and political power.

Keywords: Cultural Nationalism, Indian Politics, Identity, Ideology, Electoral Behavior, National Security, Democracy.

Introduction: Nationalism in India, as an ideological and emotional phenomenon, illustrates a complex trajectory shaped by historical events, social change, and intellectual debates. Scholars variously define nationalism either as a sentiment rooted in collective belonging (Anderson, 1983), a political principle for state legitimacy (Gellner, 1983), or a persistent negotiation of identity through symbols and memory (Smith, 1991). Before 1947, political nationalism was at the core of India's anti-colonial movement. Leaders such as Gandhi, Nehru, and Subhas Chandra Bose articulated visions of national unity that transcended regional, linguistic, and religious divides, with the Indian National Congress fostering a sense of collective identity (Habib, 2017; Basu, 2020; Jaffrelot, 2019). Gandhi's emphasis on satyagraha and mass mobilization exemplified a civic nationalism designed to unite disparate groups, while Nehru's vision championed a secular, democratic state as a means of accommodating diversity (Seth, 1992; Chatterjee, 1986). However, with independence came new forms of identity politics. The Constitution's framers, conscious of India's pluralism, adopted both secularism and federalism to balance unity with diversity (Gupta, 2021). Over time, this political nationalism evolved, giving way to vertical and horizontal fractures—regional, caste-based, and religious movements—which occasionally challenged the unifying ideals set forth by the anti-colonial leadership. In recent decades, cultural nationalism has resurfaced with a renewed intensity, reflecting broader trends in postcolonial democracies where identity assertion challenges the assimilative tendencies of earlier nationalism (Guha, 1982; Chatterjee, 1986). Defined as the cultivation of a shared past and cultural memory through symbols, religion, and heritage, cultural nationalism in India emerges not just as a reaction to internal diversity but also as a response to the pressures of globalization.

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Benedict Anderson's (1983) idea of "imagined communities" finds resonance in the Indian context, illustrating how media, print culture, and public rituals—ranging from mass prayers to commemoration of historical events—construct narratives of shared belonging. Ernest Gellner (1983) further contends that nationalism is fuelled by state-led efforts to create a standardized high culture, often through curriculum reform, language policy, and symbolic acts of renaming places or promoting festivals. Anthony D. Smith (1991) highlights the role of ethno-symbolism, suggesting that myths, sacred spaces, and collective memories are instrumental in mobilizing support for nationalist causes.

Cultural nationalism is now visible in electoral strategies where political parties use religious symbolism and historical revisionism to galvanize support (Basu, 2020). This includes public policy measures such as heritage conservation, education reforms emphasizing ancient history, and promotion of indigenous practices like yoga or Ayurveda in state-sponsored programs (Kumar Ashutosh, 2023).

Globalization, while introducing modern aspirations and telecommunication connectivity, has paradoxically fueled cultural revivalism. The encounter between global culture—Western music, fashion, language—and indigenous traditions often intensifies the appeal of cultural nationalism as an anchor of authenticity (McKinsey Global Institute, 2022; Indian Council for Cultural Relations, 2022). Movements like the "Marathi Manoos" in Maharashtra or "Karaga Festival" in Bangalore exemplify how cultural assertion operates as both resistance to homogenization and adaptation to change.

Cultural nationalism in India offers an ideological anchor that appeals simultaneously to tradition and modern aspirations. It underpins mass mobilization and shapes the language of legitimacy, reflecting Anderson's imagined communities and Gellner's 'high culture' model. Its resurgence provides scholars with a lens to understand identity-based politics and the balancing act between unity and diversity—a defining challenge for postcolonial

Historical Backdrop of Cultural Nationalism in India: The historical backdrop of cultural nationalism in India reveals its evolution through distinct phases marked by political, social, and ideological transformations.

Colonial Era: Cultural nationalism in India took root during the colonial period, particularly as a reaction to British imperial domination which was perceived as undermining India's rich civilizational heritage. The independence struggle was catalyzed not only by political nationalism but also by a revivalist cultural nationalism that emphasized India's spiritual distinctiveness and civilizational unity. Figures like Bal Gangadhar Tilak championed the slogan "Swaraj is my birthright and I shall have it," intertwining political freedom with the assertion of Hindu cultural identity (Banerjee, 2025). Similarly, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee articulated the image of Bharat Mata (Mother India), evoking religious and cultural symbols rooted deep in India's history, to consolidate an emotional base for nationalism (Chatterjee, 1986). These leaders and movements sought to foster pride in India's ancient civilization, portraying it as a unifying force transcending regional and linguistic divisions, thus planting the seeds of cultural nationalism as a mass movement.

Post-independence Decline: After India gained independence in 1947, the new state undertook an ideological shift towards secular nationalism, inspired largely by the vision of leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru and B.R. Ambedkar. Nehruvian modernism emphasized industrialization, scientific temper, and a

secular, inclusive identity that distanced the state from religious affiliations and cultural exclusivism. The Indian Constitution espoused secularism as a foundational principle, seeking to preserve religious pluralism while promoting a developmentalist agenda focused on economic modernization and social integration (Seth, 1992; Basu, 2020). This political nationalism emphasized unity in diversity and constitutional democracy, often suppressing cultural-nationalist expressions to maintain social harmony. Although cultural nationalism did not disappear, it largely remained relegated to the margins of public discourse during this period.

Resurgence (1980s–Present): From the 1980s onward, cultural nationalism reemerged with considerable vigor, epitomized by the Ram Janmabhoomi agitation. This movement to reclaim the alleged birthplace of Lord Ram in Ayodhya evolved into a powerful symbol of Hindu cultural revivalism and political assertion. The Ram Janmabhoomi campaign was not merely a religious movement but an expansive cultural nationalist crusade aimed at reasserting India's civilizational identity and reclaiming political space from what proponents perceived as the previous neglect of Hindu heritage by secular-nationalist governments (Nilsen, 2025; Harikrishnan, 2025). It culminated in the 1992 demolition of the Babri Masjid, sparking widespread communal conflict and forever altering the political landscape.

This resurgence has since crystallized into a dominant ideological force that influences electoral politics, public policy, and national discourse. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), along with its ideological inspiration from organizations like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), positions the construction of the Ram Temple at Ayodhya as a symbol of "cultural nationalism," representing a reclaiming of "Bharat's" heritage and spiritual roots (BJP Official Statements, 2024). This movement integrates religious symbolism, historical revisionism, and cultural preservation as political tools to create a cohesive nationalist narrative. It resonates with theories of ethnonationalism and cultural identity, emphasizing territory, religion, language, and historical memory as core elements (Jefferson, 2024).

The resurgence also intertwines with policy initiatives such as the New Education Policy 2020's emphasis on Indian culture, languages like Sanskrit and Hindi, heritage tourism projects, and global promotion of yoga as a cultural emblem. These efforts collectively represent an attempt to realign India's political identity with a vision of cultural nationalism that appeals simultaneously to tradition and modern governance goals (Government of India Initiatives, 2024).

Thus, from colonial revivalist roots to a subdued post-independence secularism, and now to an assertive cultural nationalism in the 21st century, India's political landscape continues to be shaped by these evolving narratives. This trajectory illustrates how cultural nationalism has reemerged as a powerful mobilizing force, redefining the relationship between religion, heritage, and statecraft in contemporary India, while challenging earlier secular and pluralistic frameworks.

Theoretical Framework: The theoretical framework grounding this paper draws on three major perspectives in nationalism studies: Benedict Anderson's "Imagined Communities," Ernest Gellner's Modernization Approach, and Anthony Smith's Ethno-Symbolism. Together, these frameworks offer a comprehensive lens to understand the reemergence of cultural nationalism in India amid the complex forces of globalization and internal socio-political changes.

Benedict Anderson’s “Imagined Communities”: Benedict Anderson’s seminal work, *Imagined Communities* (1983), revolutionized the understanding of nationalism by arguing that nations are not primordial or natural entities, but rather socially constructed communities imagined by people who perceive themselves as part of a shared collective despite not personally knowing most of their fellow members. Anderson emphasizes that the nation is imagined because its members form a mental image of their communion, even without face-to-face interaction. This conceptualization uncouples nationalism from ethnic or genealogical claims and underlines its roots in cultural and symbolic practices. The rise of print capitalism—newspapers, novels, vernacular literature—was critical in fostering these imagined ties by standardizing language, disseminating shared narratives, and fostering simultaneous consumption of national culture (Anderson, 1983; Britannica Editors, 2025). Anderson’s theory highlights how modern technologies and cultural production enable the creation of cohesive national identities, even in vast and diverse societies like India.

Ernest Gellner’s Modernization Approach: Ernest Gellner (1983) presents nationalism as a product of industrial society’s need for cultural homogeneity to function effectively. According to Gellner, nationalism arises because industrial society requires a standardized culture to ensure effective communication, education, and economic mobility. In traditional, agrarian societies, multiple local cultures coexist without the demand for a unified national culture. However, modern nation-states, driven by political and economic structures, actively promote a common language, history, and heritage to forge unity (Gellner, 1983; Infilibnet, 2009). Applied to India, Gellner’s framework explains how postcolonial state-building efforts emphasized a standardized Hindi language, shared historical narratives, and public rituals to forge national coherence from immense ethnic and linguistic diversity.

Anthony Smith’s Ethno-Symbolism: Anthony D. Smith (1991) critiques modernist accounts by foregrounding the importance of pre-existing cultural myths, memories, and symbols in the persistence and revival of nationalism. His ethno-symbolist approach posits that ancient ethno-cultural core—sacred myths, historical memories, homeland, language—serve as fertile ground for nationalist mobilization. Nations are seen as living continuities rooted in collective memory, rather than just modern political constructs (Smith, 1991). For India, Smith’s theory elucidates how references to Vedic civilization, classical epics like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, and sacred geography provide deep cultural reservoirs that contemporary political actors invoke to legitimize cultural nationalism.

Integrating the Frameworks for the Indian Context: Together, these frameworks explain the reemergence of cultural nationalism in India as a dynamic and multifaceted phenomenon. Anderson’s concept reveals how Indian nationalism is continuously reconstructed through media, political rhetoric, and education—in essence, “imagined” through shared symbols and narratives. Gellner’s perspective delineates the modern state’s role in promoting a unified culture to meet the demands of globalization, economic modernization, and political governance. Smith’s ethno-symbolism emphasizes the rich cultural substratum that nationalist actors mobilize to evoke collective memory and identity.

Amid globalization’s cultural homogenizing impulses, cultural nationalism in India functions as both a defensive anchor preserving a distinct civilizational identity and an assertive political tool to legitimize power. It unites various social groups through shared rituals, language policies, and historical revisionism, while simultaneously consolidating political legitimacy by appealing to deep-seated cultural attachments.

This synthesis helps to understand cultural nationalism as not merely a reactionary force but a complex process of identity-building and meaning-making within a postcolonial democracy navigating global modernity.

Cultural Nationalism and Contemporary Indian Politics

1. **Party Politics:** Political parties increasingly embed civilizational pride, heritage, and religious symbolism in manifestos. Electoral campaigns invoke historical grievances, revival of ancient traditions, and protection of cultural integrity.
2. **Policy Dimensions:** Policies on education, language preservation, heritage conservation, and religious identity reflect cultural-nationalist orientations. Curriculum reforms emphasize cultural history, and symbolic acts such as renaming cities reflect identity politics.
3. **Democratic Mobilization:** Cultural nationalism creates affective bonds, mobilizing masses not only through material incentives but also through ideological belonging. This builds what Gramsci termed “cultural hegemony,” reshaping democratic discourse in India.

The Use of Cultural Symbols in Constitutional Electoral Politics and the Renaissance of Cultural Politics:

The resurgence of cultural politics in modern India has profoundly transformed the dynamics of electoral competition. Political parties are using cultural symbols and weaving narratives from history to establish emotional connections with voters. Unlike merely developmental or class-based appeals, cultural nationalism is effective in mobilizing people around a shared identity of citizenship, heritage, and symbolic representation of the nation.

Temple Politics: Religious sites have become central sites for making political claims. The Ram Janmabhoomi movement and the construction of the Ayodhya Ram Temple are prime examples of the transformation of cultural-religious symbols into a central electoral issue. Political actors present themselves as guardians of tradition and faith, thereby legitimizing majoritarian sentiments. Similarly, the recovery or preservation of other temples and pilgrimage sites has been politically exploited to demonstrate cultural authenticity and political legitimacy. (Thomas, V. et al 2024)

National Symbols: Political mobilization often centers on historical and cultural figures such as Mahatma Gandhi, B.R. Ambedkar, Sardar Patel, Subhas Chandra Bose, and Savarkar. These individuals are reinterpreted according to contemporary political narratives. Patel is adopted and reinterpreted as a symbol of national unity (through the Symbol of Unity project), or Bose as a symbol of resistance against colonial rule. This demonstrates how history is selectively remembered to activate current politics. (The Wire 2018, October 31)

Slogans and Symbolic Narratives: Campaigns are deliberately designed to incorporate culturally resonant slogans such as "Jai Shri Ram," "Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas," and "Bharat Mata Ki Jai." These slogans bring to mind emotional and civilizational unity, which transcends policy discourse. Presenting India as “Sanatan Sanskriti,” or an eternal cultural entity, integrates politics beyond governance or development into a civilizational approach, thus establishing it as a broader civilizational framework woven with the politics of governance or development. (Ashok Kumar 2024)

The Contestation between Secularism and Cultural Nationalism in Governance in India: The revival of cultural politics in India has intensified the competition between secularism, enshrined in the Constitution, and cultural nationalism, which prioritizes a particular civilizational or religious identity in the public and political sphere. Such dynamics operate not only in political discourse but also in governance, policymaking, and state-society relations.

Secularism in India: The model of secularism in India is constitutionally grounded in the principle of equal respect for all religions and the separation between religion and state. Policies regarding minority rights, religious freedoms, and inclusive development are designed to ensure that the state is impartial and that no religious or cultural community is privileged over others. India's secularism has, in fact, historically been conceived and defined as a pluralistic construct. It also encompasses diverse socio-linguistic, religious, and cultural identities. (Bhargava, R. 2014)

Cultural Nationalism and Governance: Cultural nationalism emphasizes the unification of shared civilizations and the creation of an identity, often linked to Hindu traditions, symbols, and historical findings. Political leaders, such as those championing the unifying vision of "Sanatan Bharat," leverage this ideology to garner electoral support, viewing India as an eternally unified civilization, and to legitimize policy decisions. Examples include the promotion of Sanskrit, the construction of temples, Hindutva-inspired educational reforms, and nationalistic cultural programs. In governance, cultural nationalism manifests itself in policy choices that honor majority cultural symbols, sometimes at the expense of minority sensitivities. (Singh, R. 2023).

The Contestation between Secularism and Cultural Nationalism: The discourse of cultural politics emphasizes that governance in India is no longer limited to educational or economic development; it is becoming a struggle for cultural meaning and identity. Striking a balance between constitutional principles and the pressures of cultural nationalism poses a major challenge for policy, the courts, and civil society. This ongoing struggle reflects a broader discourse on the nature of Indian democracy, culture, and the nation in the twenty-first century.

Challenges and Critiques: The reemergence of cultural nationalism in India, while potent for political mobilization, poses significant challenges that warrant critical scholarly attention. These challenges centrally revolve around tensions between pluralism and homogenization, strains on constitutional secularism, and deepening polarization in society.

Pluralism vs. Homogenization: India has long been celebrated as one of the world's most pluralistic societies, encompassing vast religious, linguistic, ethnic, and cultural diversity. This pluralism is enshrined not only in constitutional provisions but also in India's civilizational history, where coexistence and accommodation have been integral (Bajpai, 2022; Bhargava, 2023). However, the rise of cultural nationalism — often centered on a dominant Hindu identity — risks reducing this rich tapestry into a singular, homogenized cultural narrative. Such a reduction is characterized by the marginalization of religious minorities like Muslims and Christians, linguistic minorities, and various tribal and caste groups (Mir, 2020). Policies and social rhetoric invoking "One Nation, One Culture" suppress the complexities and distinctiveness of India's many traditions, risking alienation and exclusion. This form of cultural

homogenization breeds resentment and strengthens identity-based cleavages rather than fostering plural unity (IJCRT, 2020).

Secularism under Strain: India's secularism, codified in its Constitution as a commitment to equal citizenship regardless of religion, faces immense stress as political legitimacy increasingly intertwines with religious-cultural identities (India Foundation, 2025). The reconstruction of national identity around a Hindu cultural core challenges the constitutional vision of a secular state that respects and protects all religions equally. As Hindu nationalism consolidates power, minorities face institutional discrimination, social exclusion, and diminished political representation (Mir, 2020). Legal and bureaucratic mechanisms safeguarding minority rights are often undermined or insufficiently enforced, further straining secular governance. This erosion of secular principles fuels increasing communal tensions and undermines India's democratic ethos of inclusivity.

Polarization and Social Division: Cultural nationalism's instrumental use in electoral politics frequently exacerbates societal polarization. By mobilizing voters through religious symbolism and cultural exclusivism, political parties intensify divides among communities, leading to heightened social tensions, riots, and violent confrontations (Bajpai, 2022; Mir, 2020). Hate speech, vigilante violence, and discriminatory narratives proliferate in political campaigns and public discourse. This polarization weakens the social fabric necessary for democratic cohesion and complicates conflict resolution between diverse groups. Instead of a pluralist democracy grounded in mutual respect, India risks becoming a fragmented society where majoritarian dominance threatens minority survival and exacerbates intergroup hostility (Bajpai, 2022).

Balancing Act for Democracy: The challenges posed by cultural nationalism necessitate a sustained engagement with India's plural traditions and constitutional commitments. Scholars such as Rajeev Bhargava (2023) argue that India's strength lies in its "integrative pluralism," an evolving synthesis that must be defended against homogenizing tendencies. Strengthening secular institutions, promoting interfaith dialogue, and enforcing anti-discrimination laws are critical to preserving democratic inclusion (Mir, 2020). Political leaders, civil society, and citizens must reject exclusive identity politics to safeguard the pluralist vision that has underpinned India's democracy since independence.

Implications for Political Legitimacy and Democracy: The implications of cultural nationalism for political legitimacy and democracy in India are deeply complex, encompassing both unifying potentials and significant risks. This dual nature fundamentally reshapes how political authority is constructed and exercised in a rapidly evolving socio-political context.

- **National Pride and Civic Identity:** Cultural nationalism has the capacity to rejuvenate national pride by invoking shared histories, symbols, and myths that foster a collective sense of belonging. As Calhoun (2007) notes, a common national identity can serve as social glue, binding diverse groups despite conflicting interests and beliefs. This cultural solidarity can translate into greater civic mobilization, heightened political participation, and a cohesive political community that perceives itself as protectors of a civilization's heritage. The emotional appeal of cultural nationalism is evident in mass rituals, public celebrations, education policies, and electoral campaigns that emphasize cultural revival as a patriotic duty (India Foundation, 2020).

- **Exclusionary Tendencies and Democratic Strain:** However, the strengths of cultural nationalism are accompanied by exclusionary tendencies that imperil pluralist democracy. By shifting the basis of political legitimacy away from secular, developmental values toward cultural-symbolic narratives tied to a dominant identity, the political discourse narrows the boundaries of who constitutes ‘the nation’ (Jayal, 2019; Varshney, 2018). This redefinition marginalizes minorities and dissenting voices, undermining the constitutional ideal of equal citizenship. The conflation of cultural nationalism with a singular religious identity—most prominently Hindu nationalism—has led to demands for public displays of loyalty such as chanting "Bharat Mata ki Jai," and has been used to delegitimize those perceived as outsiders or critics (Jayal, 2019).
Autocratization trends have been identified in India, partly reflecting how populist leaders exploit cultural nationalism to consolidate power, curtail dissent, and erode democratic freedoms like free speech, association, and religious liberty. The use of sedition laws, harassment of dissenters, and the labeling of critics as ‘anti-national’ all contribute to democratic backsliding and hollowing out of liberal institutions (Jayal, 2019; Bolsover, 2022). This presents a paradox where democracy remains formally intact, but its normative foundations are weakened.
- **Redefinition of Political Legitimacy:** Historically, political legitimacy in India was anchored in the ideals of secular democracy, inclusive development, and constitutional pluralism. Cultural nationalism, by contrast, defines legitimacy through the prism of cultural identity and historical continuity. As Rameshchandra Shukla (2024) argues, this form of nationalism draws on an organic vision of ‘Dharma’ and civilization to provide a non-voluntary identity that purportedly fosters solidarity but narrows the terms of belonging and governance. Such redefinition prioritizes cultural homogeneity and authenticity over procedural democratic norms and minority protections.
- **Ideological Transformation and Democracy’s Future:** This ideological shift marks a profound transformation in Indian politics. As Ashutosh Varshney (2018) explains, competing visions of Indian nationalism—secular versus cultural—contend for dominance, with the latter gaining prominence under current political regimes. This contest profoundly affects the social contract, citizen-state relations, and democratic practices. While cultural nationalism energizes sections of the population and reinforces national pride, it simultaneously intensifies social cleavages, challenges democratic inclusivity, and threatens the constitutional norms of equality and freedom. India’s democracy is thus at a crossroads, navigating between its pluralist commitments and the assertive reimagining of the nation through cultural nationalism. The resolution of this tension will likely shape India’s democratic trajectory, social cohesion, and global identity in the decades to come.

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