

Constructing Cultural Nationalism: Ideology, Popular Culture, and the Strategic Use of Knowledge and Entertainment

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Abstract: *The article seeks to critically conceptualize and analyse the ways in which cultural nationalism and popular culture are produced, circulated, and sustained within the contemporary socio-political and cultural landscape of Indian society. It examines how these interrelated domains not only reflect prevailing ideological currents but also actively participate in shaping collective identities, political imaginaries, and everyday cultural practices. Situating the discussion within a rigorous theoretical framework, the study engages extensively with the conceptual foundations of cultural nationalism and popular culture, drawing attention to their historical evolution, ideological underpinnings, and modes of representation. By foregrounding these theoretical perspectives, the article elucidates how popular cultural forms function as crucial sites for the articulation, normalisation, and contestation of nationalist discourses in present-day India, thereby revealing the complex interplay between culture, power, and politics in the contemporary social order.*

Key words: *Cultural Nationalism, Ideology, Popular culture, Hegemony.*

Introduction

Nationalism is an ideology that has evolved through the synchronised development of political and cultural dimensions. Consequently, it embodies and integrates both cultural and political ideals within its conceptual framework. Political nationalism has primarily focused on achieving political sovereignty, whereas cultural nationalism emphasises the preservation and expression of cultural identity. In this context, the identity of a nation is conceived not merely as a political entity but as a moral community. Consequently, cultural nationalism naturally underscores the importance of a nation's identity, historical continuity, and ethical foundations. The principal advocates of cultural nationalism were intellectuals and artists, who consistently sought to disseminate and promote their vision of cultural nationalism to broader segments of society. The imperative to articulate and manifest this ideological vision is most acutely experienced during periods of profound social, cultural, and political transformation precipitated by encounters with modernity. Cultural nationalism typically emerges in the formative stages of national movements, often preceding the crystallisation of explicitly political nationalism. Nevertheless, it can reassert itself periodically, even within long-established nation-states, reflecting

enduring anxieties about identity, heritage, and collective consciousness. Nationalism, by its very nature, is a fluid construct shaped by the dynamics of modernity. In the contemporary world, it has become increasingly liquid—constantly evolving, redefined, and frequently misinterpreted—echoing Zygmunt Bauman’s concept of the transition from “solid modernity” to a fluid and uncertain present.¹ Traditional institutions such as lifelong employment, marriage, and the nation-state are gradually losing their permanence and stability. However, within the Indian context, the Hindutva ideological and political forces are attempting to reverse this fluidity by reinforcing fixed institutions, rigid identities, and structured forms of fear. Such efforts signify an aspiration to transform the inherently liquid nature of nationalism into a more monolithic and enduring form, suggesting that India is being prepared for a project of solidified nationalism aimed at long-term consolidation.

Herder to Hroch: Theoretical Foundations of Cultural Nationalism

The concept of cultural nationalism was initially identified and systematically theorised by several European intellectuals, whose work can be traced to the European intellectual and academic milieu. Among these pioneering thinkers, Johann Gottfried Herder occupies a seminal position for advancing a distinctive epistemological framework in understanding cultural nationalism. Herder interrogated the conventional trajectories of nationalist thought by foregrounding how the peasants and marginalised strata of Central and Eastern European societies had already internalised and articulated a proto-national consciousness—a collective cultural psyche—well before the formal articulation of political nationalism.² His intervention thus reoriented the discourse from a state-centred conception of nationalism to one grounded in the organic unity of language, folklore, and cultural memory.

Following Herder’s formulation of a comprehensive theory and programmatic vision of cultural nationalism, Europe witnessed an unprecedented intellectual and cultural efflorescence oriented toward the revitalisation of national identities. This period was marked by an intense preoccupation with reconstructing collective cultural memory, reclaiming vernacular traditions, and institutionalising national consciousness

¹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Polity Press, 2000, pp.7-9.

² Royal J Schmidt, “Cultural Nationalism in Herder”, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1956, p.407.

through literature, philology, folklore, and the arts. Consequently, Europe emerged as the epicentre of a broad-based movement of national revival, in which intellectuals and artists sought to articulate the spiritual and cultural foundations of the nation as a pre-political, organic community. Poets, historians, artists, linguists, architects, and other intellectual practitioners constituted a newly emergent category of professionals that arose as a direct socio-cultural response to the transformative intellectual currents of mid-eighteenth-century Europe. This period, characterised by the accelerated modernisation and epistemic reconfiguration of European societies, witnessed the consolidation of these figures as agents of cultural production and national articulation. Across Europe, they played a pivotal role in the institutionalisation of cultural and intellectual life through the establishment of academies, universities, and cultural societies, which served as centres for the codification, preservation, and dissemination of national culture and knowledge systems. The rapid dissemination of these ideas and practices was facilitated by the increasing density of communication networks in the nineteenth century, which gave rise to the second print revolution. This development substantially expanded the availability and circulation of printed material. Concurrently, the emergence of a growing educated middle class played a pivotal role in this transformation. Exposed to the intellectual climate of the newly established universities, this class became both the principal audience and the active consumers of the emergent discourse of cultural nationalism. Originating in Europe, the ideology of cultural nationalism subsequently diffused beyond its continental boundaries, shaping intellectual and cultural movements across diverse regions. To this may be added the expanding ranks of the educated middle class, who, through their engagement with the intellectual milieu of the newly reformed universities, became deeply influenced by the emergent spirit of cultural nationalism. This social group not only internalised the new cultural ideals but also actively disseminated them by consuming and reproducing the movement's symbolic and material products.

Miroslav Hroch, a Czechoslovak historian and leading scholar in the study of cultural nationalism, made a significant analysis of the theoretical understanding of the phenomenon. In his seminal work *Comparative Studies in Modern European History: Nation, Nationalism and Social Change*, Hroch situates the emergence of nations within a comprehensive theoretical framework. His analysis is fundamentally cultural in orientation, emphasising the processes of cultural awakening and intellectual

mobilisation that precede and ultimately facilitate political consolidation. According to Hroch, cultural nationalism does not represent a spontaneous or purely political phenomenon; rather, it emerges through a gradual, historically conditioned process unfolding across distinct developmental stages.³ His analysis is primarily concerned with comparatively small nations, particularly those situated within the socio-political contexts of Central and Eastern Europe, where the dynamics of national awakening can be more clearly observed as a sequence of cultural, intellectual, and social transformations preceding political mobilisation.

Hroch delineates three distinct stages in the evolution of nationalist movements, identifying the initial phase as foundational, characterised by the awakening of cultural consciousness. This preliminary phase, often conceptualised as cultural nationalism, lays the intellectual and ideological groundwork for later political mobilisation. During this period, a cohort of intellectuals, scholars, and cultural elites undertakes systematic efforts to recover, codify, and valorise the nation's language, folklore, historical traditions, and collective cultural heritage. The central objective of this stage is to forge a cohesive sense of cultural unity and proto-national identity, articulated through the revival of symbolic representations, mythic narratives, and collective historical memory that serve to distinguish the national community from others. Hroch's model underscores that cultural nationalism constitutes the foundational matrix from which subsequent forms of political nationalism emerge. In this initial stage, culture transcends its role as a mere marker of identity and functions instead as a strategic instrument of collective survival and self-assertion. For stateless, marginalised, or subjugated communities, culture becomes the primary domain for articulating and preserving national consciousness, providing an ideological and symbolic refuge in which embryonic forms of nationhood are cultivated and sustained long before they attain explicit political manifestation or institutional expression.

In the Indian context, the embryonic stage of nationalism can be traced to the late nineteenth century, particularly around the 1870s. A seminal moment occurred on 19 February 1873, when the iconography of *Bharat Mata* (Mother India) first emerged within the public domain through the performance of a play at a local *mela*.

³ Miroslav Hroch, *Comparative Studies in Modern European History: Nation, Nationalism and Social Change*, Routledge, 2023, p.16.

Subsequently, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya, in his 1882 Bengali novel *Anandamath*, provided a more explicit articulation of the mother goddess as a potent symbol within nationalist discourse.⁴ Through evocative literary imagery, he delineated three manifestations of the mother—the mother as she was, the mother as she is, and the mother as she will be—thereby sacralising the nation as a divine maternal figure. His composition “Bande Mataram” (“Hail to the mother”) became an anthem of emotive and ideological consolidation for the emergent Indian national consciousness. In contemporary India, right-wing socio-political formations have continued to appropriate and mobilise the symbol of the mother goddess as a central iconographic representation of cultural nationalism, reinforcing the fusion of religio-cultural identity with nationalist sentiment for political mobilisation.

In this context, John Hutchinson’s theoretical interpretation of cultural nationalism is particularly relevant to contemporary India. Hutchinson conceptualises nation formation and sustenance as processes rooted primarily in culture, history, and identity rather than being solely determined by political or economic factors. His seminal works, *The Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism* and *Nations as Zones of Conflict*, elaborate on this perspective by emphasising that nationalism is not fundamentally a political movement, but a cultural and moral project aimed at restoring a shared sense of identity and historical continuity.⁵ The notion of cultural regeneration constitutes the core of his theoretical framework, in which cultural nationalists seek to revive the nation's moral and spiritual values. Within this paradigm, intellectuals, historians, poets, and artists emerge as moral innovators who reconstruct national myths and symbols to inspire collective unity and foster renewed national pride.

The Genesis of Hindutva and the Sacralisation of Territory

V.D. Savarkar is widely acknowledged as the principal ideologue and formative architect of cultural nationalism, as well as the foundational theorist of the Hindutva doctrine. While Hinduism represents an ancient and pluralistic religious tradition indigenous to the Indian subcontinent, *Hindutva* emerged as a modern politico-ideological construct seeking to recast Hindu identity within a nationalist framework.

⁴ Thanika Sarkar, *Hindu Nationalism in India*, C Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd, 2021, p.78.

⁵ John Hutchinson, *The Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism: The Gaelic Revival and the Creation of the Irish Nation State*, Routledge, 1987, p.121.

The intellectual and ideological foundations of Hindu nationalism were progressively articulated between the 1870s and the 1920s, attaining systematic coherence in the early decades of the twentieth century. Savarkar—initially recognised for his revolutionary participation in the anti-colonial movement and his prolonged incarceration under British colonial rule—played a decisive role in codifying and systematising the theoretical contours of Hindutva during his imprisonment, thereby transforming it into a comprehensive nationalist ideology.

Savarkar's prison writings, most notably *My Transportation for Life* and *Essentials of Hindutva*, articulated and systematised a theoretical framework that intricately linked collective Hindu identity to the dialectical themes of historical grandeur and civilisational subjugation. This conceptualisation was further elaborated in his post-incarceration works, including *Hindupad-Padshahi* and *Six Glorious Epochs of Indian History*, in which Savarkar advanced a historiographical reinterpretation of India's past through the paradigms of heroic resistance, martial valour, and civilisational resurgence. In contrast to Michel Foucault's theorisation of the prison as a disciplinary mechanism exemplified by Bentham's panopticon, Savarkar reconceptualised the carceral space as a site of ideological genesis—a crucible to produce nationalist subjectivity. Within this theoretical framework, the prison emerges as a transformative arena for reconstituting the Hindu self through discursive narratives of loss, endurance, and the ultimate reclamation of collective pride and sovereignty. In this context, John Hutchinson's observations on cultural nationalism acquire analytical resonance. Hutchinson asserts that cultural nationalists actively reinterpret the nation's past as a repository of collective memory, thereby constructing a symbolic continuum between antiquity and modernity. Through their intellectual and literary interventions, they produce narratives that integrate contemporary national identity with the mythic heroes, traditions, and moral values of the ancestral past. This process of cultural rearticulation functions not merely as historical recovery but as an act of moral regeneration, seeking to legitimise present aspirations through the invocation of a sanctified and heroic heritage.⁶

Savarkar's ideological formulation delineated Muslims as a cohesive, strategically conscious religio-political collective, positioned in sharp contrast to what

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.156-161.

he perceived as a disaggregated and hierarchically stratified Hindu society, fragmented along caste and sectarian lines. In response, Savarkar sought to transcend these entrenched socio-religious fissures and moral constraints by appealing to universal affective and psychological impulses—namely, passion, desire, and honour—as instruments for collective revitalisation. Through this psycho-political framework, he endeavoured to forge a distinctly Hindu “general will” grounded in the reimagining of collective glory, one that repudiated the debilitating legacies of shame, subjugation, and internal discord. Consequently, *Hindutva*, as conceptualised by Savarkar, transcended the domain of mere political ideology to emerge as a comprehensive psychological and cultural project—an enterprise aimed at consolidating and mobilising the Hindu populace into a unified, assertive, and affectively charged national community.⁷

Between 1911 and 1937, V.D. Savarkar remained under prolonged incarceration for his alleged complicity in the assassination of British District Magistrate A.M.T. Jackson. During this extended period of confinement, Savarkar submitted multiple petitions for clemency, which eventually facilitated his conditional release; however, within the carceral milieu, he clandestinely composed and transmitted *The Essentials of Hindutva* from Ratnagiri Jail in 1921, a text published in 1923. As Janaki Bakhle, in her seminal 2024 study *Savarkar and the Making of Hindutva*, incisively observes, this work constituted a critical epistemic rupture in the genealogy of Hindu nationalism by codifying Hindutva as the ontological and ascriptive essence of “Hindu-ness.” Savarkar’s theorisation redefined national belonging through an exclusionary cultural geography anchored in the twin concepts of *pitribhumi* (land of ancestors) and *punyabhumi* (land of sacred merit). This dual territorial-sacral formulation rendered authentic national identity contingent upon both genealogical descent and spiritual rootedness within the Indian subcontinent, thereby circumscribing the nation’s moral boundaries and excluding those—particularly Muslims and Christians—whose religious imaginaries and sacred geographies transcended India’s spatial and civilisational frontiers.

This ideological construct effectively instituted a politico-cultural litmus test for national inclusion; wherein religious minorities were symbolically interpellated into a homogenised Hindu civilizational matrix or relegated to the status of perpetual

⁷ V D Savarkar, *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* Veer Savarkar Prakashan, 1969, pp.46-49.

outsiders vis-à-vis the imagined Hindu nation-state. Savarkar's theorisation articulated a teleological schema of civilisational belonging predicated on the sanctification of territoriality, thereby reducing religious affiliation to the principal determinant of national legitimacy. In doing so, his discourse reconfigured the conceptual architecture of citizenship within an exclusionary ethnonationalist paradigm—one that privileged sacral geography and genealogical continuity as the constitutive foundations of authentic national identity, while simultaneously delimiting the moral and political boundaries of the Indian nation.

Reflections of Cultural Nationalism in Popular Cultural Context

In the contemporary Indian context, cultural nationalist ideology has become deeply embedded in popular culture. The term 'popular culture' has been widely used by academics since the late nineteenth century to denote forms of culture and art that are consumed and enjoyed by large sections of society. Owing to its wide reach and broad acceptance, popular culture serves as an effective medium for communicating political messages to mass audiences. During the twentieth century, several capitalist and fascist nations extensively utilised popular cultural forms as instruments for disseminating political and ideological propaganda.

Art occupies a distinctive position as a site of unity, community, and shared emotional experience. No other social sphere holds an equivalent capacity to generate collective meaning through beauty and affect. Across historical periods, art has remained central to the cultural life of societies, functioning simultaneously as both a form of labour and a form of leisure. However, this unique cultural power has also rendered art susceptible to political appropriation. From the emergence of the public sphere as a distinct arena of social interaction, artistic production has frequently been shaped by explicit political intentions.

Totalitarian regimes have systematically mobilised cultural images to disseminate and legitimise ideological narratives. British imperialism during the colonial period employed this strategy with notable sophistication. Following the social, cultural, and economic transformations initiated by the Industrial Revolution in England, significant segments of the population—especially youth—began to diverge

from the stated goals of imperial expansion.⁸ In response, colonial intellectuals developed popular culture as an ideological apparatus to realign public sentiment with imperial objectives. Popular culture, in this context, may be understood as the deliberate reconfiguration of widely consumed artistic forms and cultural practices into persuasive imagery designed to serve specific political ends, mediated through commercial advertising and political activism to ensure mass appeal and ideological compliance.

From the twentieth century onward, Fascist and Nazi ideologies extensively utilised popular culture as a vehicle for ideological expansion and mass mobilisation. By disguising propaganda as popular entertainment, these regimes rendered extremist ideas more palatable, packaging hatred and hostility toward perceived enemies in easily consumable and seemingly trivial cultural forms. Following the Nazi seizure of power in Germany in the 1930s, the regime rapidly implemented stringent measures to exert unchallenged control over cultural production. Beyond imposing strict censorship on publications associated with opposing political parties, the Nazis established the Reich Chamber of Culture (*Reichskulturkammer*), an institution designed to regulate and coordinate party control over film, music, theatre, the press, literature, and radio.⁹

The capitalist nation of the United States likewise employed popular culture as an instrument for advancing both domestic and foreign policy objectives. In 1940, as the American government considered participation in the Second World War, public opinion remained largely opposed to intervention; opinion polls indicated that only approximately 35 per cent of respondents supported U.S. entry into the conflict. In this context, the government strategically developed a coordinated cultural strategy to reshape public sentiment. One significant measure involved the establishment of a liaison office in Hollywood and the formal enlistment of major studios and cultural producers—most notably Walt Disney and Warner Bros.—through official contracts. These collaborations produced films that, through subtle yet persuasive narratives, sought to convince citizens of the necessity of participating in war. This sustained

⁸ John M. Mackenzie, *Imperialism and Popular Culture*, Manchester University Press, 1986, p.3.

⁹ John M. Mackenzie(ed.), *Imperialism and Popular Culture*, Manchester University Press, 1986, pp.49-51., see also Kunal Purohit, *H-Pop Culture: The Secretive World of Hindutva Pop Star*, HarperCollins Pvt.Ltd, p.12.

cultural campaign proved effective, and the United States subsequently joined the Allied war effort.¹⁰

In contemporary India, where communalism has become increasingly normalised within the socio-cultural sphere, Hindutva movements have progressively instrumentalised art as a vehicle of political propaganda to sustain and reproduce communal ideologies in everyday life. As communalism is rendered routine and socially acceptable, Hindutva ideologues strategically incorporate artistic practices into popular culture to address and reinforce the affective demands of this quotidian communalism. Through the systematic weaponisation of art, these cultural interventions actively enable the rapid circulation of hatred, hostility, and othering. This mode of cultural production operates as a large-scale ideological project—here conceptualised as Hindutva popular culture—which encompasses a wide range of artistic forms, including music, cinema, visual arts, poetry, and literature. Together, these media consolidate communal narratives and extend their reach across diverse segments of society.

In the contemporary period, digital technologies have emerged as the most influential media for the circulation and popularisation of popular culture. Right-wing political formations have adeptly repurposed social media platforms such as YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook as effective instruments for ideological dissemination, enabling rapid reach, effective engagement, and sustained narrative reinforcement. Within this broader cultural landscape, cinema occupies a particularly significant position in contemporary India. As a mass cultural form with extensive reach, cinema has increasingly functioned as an ideological apparatus that addresses popular sentiments while simultaneously intensifying hostility toward religious minorities. This transformation is evident in a series of recent films—such as *The Kashmir Files*, *The Kerala Story*, *The Taj Story*, and *The Bengal Story*—which exemplify how cinematic narratives are mobilised to normalise communal discourse and reinforce exclusionary ideological frameworks.

Distinct from overt expressions such as hate speeches, political rallies, or episodic outbreaks of violence, the most consequential mechanism for sustaining communalism at a deeper and more enduring level is Hindutva popular culture. Unlike

¹⁰ Ibid., p.13.

these visible, event-based manifestations, this cultural formation operates through the quotidian circulation of affect, enabling the continuous dissemination of hostility and the persistent mobilisation of anger against constructed enemies, particularly minority communities. Through the repeated consumption of cultural products—such as songs, poems, and literary texts—Hindutva ideological narratives are subtly yet systematically imposed and reinforced, cultivating fear, resentment, and antagonism toward the perceived Other. This process is spearheaded by a relatively small but influential cohort of cultural activists, predominantly young men and women aged approximately twenty to twenty-five, who play a central role in producing and circulating these ideological cultural forms.

The provocative lyrics of Kavi Singh, a singer who made her public debut in 2019, exemplify the rapid rise and influence of Hindutva popular culture. Within a remarkably short period, she amassed an audience of approximately 80 million listeners across diverse media platforms. Singh approaches her role with notable seriousness, explicitly framing her work as a mission: she articulates her primary responsibility as awakening patriotism and national pride among Indians who, in her view, have lost touch with traditional values and a sense of devotion to the nation.

The central thematic thrust of her major songs lies in legitimising the actions of the central government. For instance, one of her most widely circulated tracks, *Dhar 370*, functions explicitly to justify the government's decision to revoke Article 370, illustrating how musical pr Hindutva pop music has emerged as a highly pervasive and influential form of cultural production, representing one of the most strategic and forceful expansions of Hindutva propaganda. Its central objective can be summarised in the maxim: “There is a song for everything, and through it, inspire listeners to fight for a Hindu nation.” Among the prominent figures in this genre is Kamal Agne, a poet and musician whose work exemplifies the ideological ambitions of Hindutva pop.¹¹

The narratives embedded in Agne's songs actively seek to justify the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. In one notable example, he writes: “The pyre of Hindu aspirations—that was Gandhi. Bhishma, who decided to support the Kauravas—that was Gandhi...,” framing Gandhi as an obstacle to Hindu nationalist aspirations. Through his poetry, Agne not only levels a scathing critique of Gandhi's role in India's

¹¹ Kunal Purohit, *H-Pop Culture: The Secretive World of Hindutva Pop Star*, HarperCollins Pvt.Ltd, p.21.

freedom struggle but also attempts to legitimise and glorify Nathuram Godse, the assassin, thereby demonstrating the capacity of Hindutva popular culture to produce affective and morally charged ideological narratives that can operate as a vehicle for ideological reinforcement and political endorsement. Therefore, assassinating Gandhi was considered justifiable and necessary because Gandhi was allegedly focused only on appeasing minorities. A part of Kamal's poem reads: "All of this was tolerated by Nathu. He could endure no more. He went to Gandhi's prayer meeting to bid a final farewell. He shot forcefully. Gandhi finally remembered Shri Rama."¹²

Kamal, who wrote poetry denouncing the Father of the Nation, was not punished by the Indian authorities. On the contrary, the Government of Uttar Pradesh awarded him a cash prize of ₹51,000. However, Kamal's subsequent unusual action prompts deeper reflection: he returned the prize money to the Uttar Pradesh government and requested that it be used to purchase a bulldozer. In contemporary India, the symbolic significance of the bulldozer is well known. This is a moment that compels us to take the slow, everyday normalisation of communalism very seriously.

Conclusion

Through these cultural interventions, right-wing forces have actively worked to manufacture public consent in favour of the Hindu Rashtra and the broader Hindutva ideological project. Drawing on Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, this process can be understood as an attempt to secure ideological dominance not merely through coercion, but through the normalisation of values, symbols, and narratives within everyday life. Popular culture functions as a crucial site in this hegemonic struggle, shaping affect, identity, and common sense in ways that align public consciousness with majoritarian nationalism.

However, alongside these popular cultural strategies, the state apparatus has increasingly undertaken decisive institutional interventions to consolidate ideological control. Governmental policies and regulatory frameworks—such as the National Education Policy (NEP), revisions to NCERT curricula, and legislative initiatives like the *Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhithan Bill*—operate as formal mechanisms for embedding Hindutva ideology within the structures of education and governance.

¹² Ibid., p.126.

These measures may be analysed through Louis Althusser's notion of the Ideological State Apparatus, wherein institutions such as schools, curricula, and cultural policy function to reproduce dominant ideology by shaping subjects from an early age.

Together, the convergence of popular cultural production and state-led policy interventions reflects a systematic attempt to construct a homogenised national identity rooted in Hindutva ideology. This dual strategy—combining affective persuasion through culture with institutional enforcement through state mechanisms—seeks to produce a singular, unified conception of the nation, marginalising alternative histories, plural identities, and dissenting voices in the process.

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