

On the origins of Hindu nationalism: “An intellectual genealogy of Hindu nationalism reveals that there is nothing uniquely ‘Hindu’ about it”

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Hindu nationalism is more Italian and Christian than Sonia Gandhi.

Hindu nationalists have always made large claims about their exemplary and inimitable Hindu-ness. In *Essentials of Hindutva*, the book that comes closest to defining the ideology of modern Hindu nationalism, V D Savarkar claimed that the Hindus are a people who possess a common *pitrubhumi* or fatherland, common blood, “common *Sanskriti* (civilisation)” and a common *punyabhumi* or holy land.

A range of figures — from Narendra Modi alleging that Sonia Gandhi with her Christian ancestry represents ‘Rome Raj’ and V S Naipaul raging about the Muslim invasions of India to today’s trolls attacking Western scholars and journalists — have offered a distinctive version of Indian history: one in which a glorious Hindu past is violated by various foreigners.

This history calls for an acute consciousness of the defeat and humiliation of ancestors, an awakening to historical pain, and a resolve to rectify the wrongs of the past with superhuman efforts at power and glory in the present and future. The latter include self-sacrifice for the greater cause of the nation, as Modi has repeatedly exhorted after unleashing demonetisation. An intellectual genealogy of Hindu nationalism, however, reveals that there is nothing uniquely ‘Hindu’ about it.

Much has been written about the RSS modelling itself on the Nazis and the Fascists of the 1930s. But the origins of Hindu nationalism are more accurately located in the emotional and psychological matrix of exiled 19th-century Europeans. Savarkar and many other upper-caste Hindus derived from these Europeans their obsession with identifying a common fatherland or motherland, blood, civilisation and holy land.

Many educated Europeans in the 19th century, who were entering or being coerced into the modern world of industry and commerce, tried to construct an awesome past, often with the help of outright forgeries (such as the poems of Ossian, which inspired Napoleon as well as German Romantics). Ransacking the debris of the past for signs to their glorious future (as distinct from Gandhi alighting on the humble charkha), they endowed ruins that had been ignored for centuries with profound meaning. Ancient Greece suddenly became for many the symbol of a lost unity and harmony (budding Italian nationalists, however, succumbed to grand visions of ancient Rome).

This new historical consciousness was a particularly soothing balm to people uprooted and bewildered by the revolutionary processes of industrialisation, urbanisation and secularisation. Those traumatised by a profoundly disruptive modern world developed a strategic — and selective —

memory of the past in order to reorient themselves in the present and define the possibilities for a better future. History itself began to seem, as in the Muslim-invasion version of Indian history, like a series of abrupt breaks — one that also held out the promise of radical new beginnings.

The most seductive of these fables of tragic collapse and imminent rebirth were told by people from fragmented countries who found themselves ranged against vast empires, such as the Germans, the Scots and the Italians. And the most fervent among those dreaming of a common holy land were exiles and expatriates.

Like the Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) of today, expatriate Europeans were also the most zealous nationalists, longing desperately for identity and belonging in their alien settings. The most famous and internationally influential among them was the Italian activist and thinker Giuseppe Mazzini, whose organisation Young Italy found imitators as far as Japan.

It would be an understatement to say that Savarkar was obsessed with Mazzini. Living in London in the first decade of the 20th century, this Chitpavan Brahmin in his restless exile published a volume of Mazzini's writings with a breathless introductory essay. He modelled his organisation Abhinava Bharat on Young Italy and he continued to immerse himself in Mazzini's writings during his long imprisonment in Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

Militantly irreligious, like Savarkar, Mazzini spoke of regeneration of the Italian nation rather than of traditional religion. In his view, Italians had a sacred mission — the establishment of the 'Third Rome' following the First and second Romes of the Caesars and the Church. He wanted the Italian people, whom he only knew from afar, to dedicate their lives to the fulfilment of their nation's special mission, which involved, among other things, the creation of undivided or 'Akhand' Italy through the re-conquest of territories that had once belonged to the first and second Romans.

Nationalism, as Mazzini conclusively defined it, was a system of beliefs that ought to pervade collective existence, and encourage the spirit of self-sacrifice. His writing resonates with praise for martyrs who 'consecrate with their blood and idea of national liberty'. Indeed, Lala Lajpat Rai explicitly identified Mazzini as the founder of a whole new religion of martyrdom and sacrifice — one that Modi has pressed upon Indians with special vigour after the fiasco of demonetisation.

But, like many upper-caste Indian devotees of Mazzini, Lajpat Rai did not realise that Mazzini's own notions were derived from a hugely influential French Catholic priest Felicite de Lamennais, whose 1834 book *Words of a Believer* was one of the most widely read books of the 19th century. It was Lamennais who tried to establish a precise relationship, subsequently insisted upon by nationalists in India as well as Italy, between the 'motherland', and the isolated individuals who voluntarily 'penetrate and become enmeshed' with it.

Savarkar could not have formulated his messianic nationalism without the help of such deeply Christian ideas of sacrifice, martyrdom, resurrection and redemption that his hero Mazzini introduced into the political discourse of the 19th century. Indeed, Mazzini's fantasies of re-establishing Akhand Italy and Rome Raj hover over every page of *Essentials of Hindutva*; his pseudo-Catholic obsessions have suffused all subsequent Hindu nationalist dreams of a common blood, fatherland, civilization, and holy land. In this sense at least, Hindu nationalism is more Italian, and Christian, than Sonia Gandhi.

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P.S.

* The Times of India. Jan 22, 2017, 09.06 AM IST:

<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/sunday-times/all-that-matters/hindu-nationalism-is-more-italian-and-christian-than-sonia-gandhi/articleshow/56711905.cms>

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