The present day Hindu-Muslim conflict is not really a religious conflict, nor is it rooted in medieval history, as is often assumed. Political conflicts between the likes of Aurangzeb and Shivaji and religious persecution of the Hindus by certain Muslim rulers notwithstanding, India does not have a history of devastating, centuries-long religious denominational wars, as does Europe, nor do we have a history of Hindu-Muslim riots in pre-British India. Following the period of Islamic invasions, the conflict with the invading Afghani, Mughal, and Turkish Muslims came to be settled rather creatively in India.

Among the many other attempts at accommodation, the Bhakti movement, within the Hindu fold, and Sufism within the Muslim fold, built enduring bridges between the two contrary faiths and softened some of their confrontations on many theological issues. Kabir, Nanak, Rahim, Ravidas, Tukaram as well as many Sufi sants challenged the religious bigotry and tyranny of those claiming to speak in the name of God, and created a corpus of shared beliefs between the followers of Hinduism and Islam by preaching that a life of piety and love was the true religion — not sectarian rituals or following the priesthood blindly.

Almost all the sants, bhakts and Sufis had followings among the Hindus, Muslims and the Sikhs. They influenced the language and belief system of popular religion and helped evolve humane norms for co-living. Despite all the bloody Hindu-Muslim conflicts of the twentieth century, it is noteworthy that none of the prominent disputes are of a theological nature. The contemporary Hindu-Muslim conflict is primarily the product of late nineteenth and twentieth century politics.

Hinduism Has No Fundamentals
The ideology of the Sangh Parivar is often described as an example of Hindu communalism or Hindu fundamentalism. Those who claim to believe in secularism, including Congressmen, socialists, and leftists attempt to counter the Sangh Parivar’s ideology by emphasizing the need to keep religion out of politics, presumably in order to inculcate the true spirit of nationalism.

The Sangh Parivar cannot be considered Hindu fundamentalists because the Hindu faith does not base itself on any fundamentals. There is no one text or set of commandments which can be projected by any Hindu religious authority as representing the fundamentals of the Hindu religion for all the diverse communities that come within the Hindu fold. The vast multiplicity of gods and goddesses held sacred by different communities in India make it impossible for any one religious deity to be accepted as the chosen deity of all Hindus. For instance, most Shaivites do not worship Ram, an avatar of Vishnu, and vice versa. The Ramayan itself has hundreds of living versions created during different historical periods by different communities. In some of these versions, Ram is not provided the halo of divinity and in some others, he is not even the hero of the epic. The existence of multitudinous sects among Hindus, each with its own set of do’s and don’ts, as well as gods and goddesses, make it impossible to devise a set of fundamentals acceptable to all Hindus. In their attempt to unite all Hindus around the Ram mandir issue, the Sangh Parivar is trying to semiticise Hinduism and to make it resemble those aspects of Christianity and Islam which, in the Sangh Parivar’s view, helped Christianity and Islam become globally powerful and contributed to the evolution of strong nation states.

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Are they Communal?
Similarly, there is a problem in describing the Sangh Parivar as communalist. Outside of India, communalism is ordinarily defined in one of the following ways:
A theory or system of government in which virtually autonomous local communities are loosely bound in a federation; belief in or practice of communal ownership of goods and property; strong devotion to the interests of one’s own ethnic group rather than those of society as a whole.

It is noteworthy that, in the West, the word communal is mostly used in a positive sense but in India it is almost always used as a pejorative term to denote a person with a religious bias.

The Sangh Parivar is not communal even according to the Indian usage of the term because most of its members are not serious about religion. A religious person would want to retain the autonomy and sanctity of religious institutions. The manner in which the Parivar has brought politics into the religious sphere and hijacked religious symbols for electoral and other political purposes shows that their concern is not religious at all. Nor are the Parivar’s leading lights well versed in religious texts or theology.

Given the well known bias of the Sangh Parivar for a centralised authoritarian polity, controlled by a strong Centre, it cannot be called communal according to the first definition of the term. Nor does it believe in the communal ownership of property. If one studies the Parivar’s own literature seriously, it comes out clearly that it cannot be called communal even by the third definition – that is, they do not believe in being devoted to the interests of one’s own ethnic group as opposed to devotion to the interests of the nation as a whole.

The last thing the BJP-RSS-VHP combine wants is that people remain committed to their respective ethnic identities based on caste, language, race or religion. The Sangh Parivar leaders are not comfortable with the fact that different linguistic groups feel a fierce sense of loyalty to their respective languages and are not willing to accept the one rashtra bhasha the Parivar wishes to impose on them. Even while the Parivar itself articulates the aspirations of certain upper caste groups far more than those of its new found lower caste supporters, it is uncomfortable with caste-based loyalties because they come in the way of “uniting” all Hindus. Likewise, regional identities are opposed by the Parivar, for example, the Nagas demanding autonomy for Nagaland. The Parivar’s agenda is to remould the people of this country into one monolith called ‘Indians’ (also called Hindus). The assumption behind the Sangh Parivar’s homogenising effort is that once people become “proper Indians”, they will have overcome other multilayered, contending loyalties and learnt to put the “nation before self.

The Parivan’s are embarrassed about the people of India as they are and want Indians to be Europeanised. It is no coincidence that the uniform of the RSS is not a dhoti or any other local dress but khaki knickers which was the uniform of British Sergeant Majors. They think that exterminating the varied people of India is a precondition for building India into a strong modern nation state modelled after twentieth century west European nations. In their view, India failed to become “strong and mighty” because we were not a monocultural people. They consider the existing diversity of cultures, religions, regions and languages as the cause of India’s weakness. They want us to get over this fatal flaw by “becoming one” as they imagine Germans, Jews or Japanese to be “one people”.

They apparently do not realise that truly monocultural States are only possible within tiny homogeneous areas like Denmark. Even western European nations could become only somewhat less multicultural after exterminating or driving out ethnic minorities like the Jews. But in India, exterminating Muslims will not achieve the task they have set themselves because we have inherited numerous other diversities. Pakistan’s rulers drove out almost all Hindus but that did not succeed in uniting the wide diversity of peoples in Pakistan. East Bengal revolted and finally seceded, much to the applause of the Parivar.

Being ‘Indian’ can not be a communal identity. It is a political identity. In India there is no community called ‘Indian’ except perhaps a microscopic section of the English-educated elite. But even this national elite retains its separate communal identity for the purposes of marriage and social bonding. Unlike ethnic identities based on caste or language, this political identity can be changed by political acts. For instance, many Muslims born in Uttar Pradesh became Pakistanis during the Partition merely by migrating across

Be Indian, Think European

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the newly created border and accepting the jurisdiction of the government of Pakistan. Similarly, all those who migrate out and accept the citizenship of other countries lose their Indian citizenship.

The Sangh Parivar leaders clearly admit that for them *rashtra dharm* (that is, nationalism) stands above their religion. To quote a popular theme of the Parivar:

“Muslims who value their religion more than their nation, they can never be nationalists. And Hindus who treat religion as a personal matter can never be communalists... because those who give pride of place to their nation over their religion cannot be communalists.” (Extracted from one of Rithambhara’s recorded cassettes).

**Hate Soaked Nationalists**

The Sangh Parivar is selectively using gods from the Hindu pantheon while destroying or undercutting the religious and spiritual core of Hindu dharma and forging a hate-filled ideology of nationalism. The Advanis and Jinnahs get mistaken for religious fundamentalists. simply because they draw on select religious symbols of the people they seek to mobilise. But that is because of the compulsion of all nationalists to make this alien western ideology appear indigenous.

Nationalism has caused more bloodshed and hatred than any other ideology in recent times. The two world wars as well as all the other devastating twentieth century wars, including the current bloodshed in Eastern Europe and the erstwhile Soviet Union, have been rooted in nationalism, as was the war between Iran and Iraq, both Muslim nations.

Before the fifteenth century, modern type nation states were extremely rare. Nationalism as an ideology emerged as a major force in seventeenth century Europe and achieved maturity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Since then, it has become the most dominant ideological force the world over. In India the Sangh Parivar has succeeded in giving it a more virulent form in recent years.

Like all nationalists, the Sangh Parivar manipulates history to serve its present political purposes. It wants us to believe that every notable Hindu god, king, intellectual figure or warrior in our history or mythology - from Ram, Krishna, Arjun, to Vikramaditya, Chanakya, Shivaji and Rana Pratap - was a nationalist, even though they all lived at a time when the geographical entity called India was not a nation state. The tragedy of the Muslim nationalists of Pakistan is even greater. They dare not allow an honest study of the pre-1947 period, nor look into the early periods in the history of their land, before Muslim invaders came into the subcontinent, because that would debunk the very foundation of Pakistan as a nation state. A friend from Pakistan told me that the Archaeological Department of the Government of Pakistan has put a signboard at the entrance to Mohenjodaro, the famous excavated site of a very early settlement on the Indian subcontinent, saying something to this effect: “This is what Allah does to infidels - reduce them to ruins.”

**Nationalism versus Patriotism**

The excessive respectability accorded to nationalism in Third World countries is due to the legitimacy it enjoys in the hegemonic West, which is the homeland of this ideology as well as its association with the patriotism evoked by anti-colonial movements.

However, anti-colonialism (freedom from foreign rule) and patriotism (love of one’s people and the land in which one is born) are not identical with nationalism. For instance, Gandhi’s patriotism was very different from the nationalism of Jinnah and that of the RSS. Gandhi’s politics focused on ending colonial rule as well as strengthening the rights of the poor and vulnerable. Jinnah’s politics were elitist and showed little concern for redistribution of power and wealth in favour of the poor within the Muslim community. He confined his battle to strengthening the power of the Muslim elites against Hindu elites. Jinnah was not even remotely religious and did not observe basic Islamic religious tenets. He merely

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