Durga Vahini, so that the feeling of nationalism may awaken in you and we may be able to change India's condition, which is wretched today. We are truly secular because we have accepted the national religion. We removed the Jinnahs and we removed the Jaichands... We will do Bharat Mata’s archana with our very lives which will bum like lamps”, [emphasis mine]

Hitlerian Sons of Bharat Mata

That is the crux of the matter. The most sacred deity of the Sangh Parivar is Bharat Mata (Mother India). The Sangh Parivar insist that Muslims, Christians and people of other religions must learn to worship Bharat Mata and Bharat Bhumi more than they worship their own gods. The Hindus are also encouraged to put her above their sectional beliefs and gods. Even Ram and Krishna or Kali or Durga are sacred only so far as they lend themselves to the service of Bharat Mata. The national flag is more sacred to them than any Ramdhvaj or temple. The national anthem and Vande Mataram are in their view more sacred than any religious bhajan. One of their oft-repeated threatening slogans aimed at the Muslims is: “Hindustan mein rehna hai to vande matram kehna hoga” that is, Muslims will have to say vande matram (salute to Mother India) if they want to stay in India. They are not insisting on Ram bhajans because they themselves do not care as much about the latter.

While the Hindu religion does not have the tradition of being presided over by a jealous god, as do Christianity, Judaism and Islam, the nationalist Hindus make very jealous devotees even though Bharat Mata herself is presented as giving and nurturant. Since Muslim feelings towards Pakistan are ambivalent, they can never be trusted to be loyal to Bharat Mata. The occasional bursting of crackers by a few Muslims in the event of Pakistani victory in a cricket match becomes incontrovertible proof that Muslims in India are at heart Pakistanis and traitors to Mother India.

Bharat Mata is not a religious deity but a secular symbol. Loyalty to her requires that her devotees put her worship above that of all other deities and gods. She came into existence during India’s struggle against British rule. Her origin derives from a benevolent primeval, nurturing mother goddess. Unlike goddesses such as Kali, Bharat Mata is benign. It is not she who punishes people for wrongdoings or betrayals. Instead, her worshipping sons mete out punishment to anyone lacking in their devotion to her. A worshipper would not need to fear Bharat mata as would a worshipper of Kali, but would need to fear her sons who can easily become Hitlerian in their zeal to protect her honour. She remains mostly a vague idea to most, given concrete expression only in school plays whereby an older girl in the school dresses up to resemble Lakshmi. She is positioned in such a way that her shadow is cast on an outline map of India. Her classmates would stand in a formation also resembling the map of India and sing songs of devotion and praise.

Only in recent years has the Vishwa Hindu Parishad tried to get Bharat Mata accepted as an all India deity, as a part of ritualising Hindu nationalism. In 1983, the VHP undertook an Ektamata Yajna (sacrifice for unity) which travelled throughout India performing sacrifices to Bharat Mata and Ganga Mata. They have also built a temple dedicated to Bharat Mata in Hardwar. It enshrines various deities, warriors, “martyrs” and satis, gurus and sants, all of whom are interpreted through the Sangh Parivar version of history, religion and culture within the framework of Hindu nationalism.

**Their Religion: Nationalism**

The fear of the Sangh Parivar that Muslims are loyal only to their religion and consider the Koran more sacred than the Indian Constitution or Mother India, is unfortunately shared by many Hindus across the political spectrum, including those in the Left parties. In Bombay many secular-minded people who bravely went against the tide and condemned the killing of the Muslims, would confess to being very hurt by the behaviour of those Muslims who celebrate a Pakistani victory in cricket matches. The Hindus can easily be more tolerant in the religious sphere
because they are not used to jealous gods. But when Hindus learn to give *rashtra dham* primacy over all other dharms, they become as intolerant as any chauvinistic nationalist, and Advani becomes indistinguishable from Jinnah, their contrary religious backgrounds notwithstanding. We forget that people of Indian descent who have taken the citizenship of Britain or other foreign countries frequently celebrate India’s victory in an England-India match. The fact that many Indian Muslims have relatives across the border makes it harder for them to think of Pakistanis as enemies, as many Hindus do. The ambivalence of Indian Muslims toward Pakistan is comparable to the predicament of the Mohajirs, Indian Muslims who migrated to Pakistan in or after 1947. They find themselves treated as unwanted aliens in the nation state of their own making. Their language (Urdu), their culture, their connections with relatives in India, their lingering emotional attachment to the land of their birth and ancestors, are all suspect and hence under attack from the dominant Punjabis as well as from the Sindhis, the Baluchis and others in Pakistan. This is not a sign of their being traitors but rather a proof, if further proof were necessary, that the Partition of the subcontinent was unrealistic and unsound. Our prejudice does not allow us to realise that many Indian Muslims are anti-Pakistan because they feel that the makers of Pakistan jeopardised the safety of millions of Muslims who chose to continue living in India, and thanks to Partition became a despised and mistrusted minority.

What makes the ideology of the Sangh Parivar so powerful today is that it has been convinced large sections of the population that it alone is serious about building a strong nation state to defend national honour, unity and integrity. The genuine disgruntlement of the people become so appealing to large sections of the Indian population four decades after Partition? The political support base of parties like the Jana Sangh (precursor of the BJP) remained extremely narrow in the years after Independence. It was confined to some regions in urban north India and appealed mainly to sections of the trading community and small sections of the urban middle and lower middle classes. Even those communities that were victims of Partition, such as Punjabis from the areas that went to Pakistan, did not support the Jan Sangh in overwhelming numbers. Hindu Bengalis who were pushed out of Bangladesh, in fact, remained indifferent to the politics of the Sangh Parivar.

But in recent years the Congress party has witnessed a serious erosion in its support base in favour of the BJP and Shiv Sena. This is particularly true among the urban educated elite, including the liberal intelligentsia. Even as late as the 1970s, when I was at the university, it was considered extremely low brow to be associated with the RSS or any of its allied organisations. Their support base among students and teachers was largely at that time confined to the low status institutions whose students were generally from lower middle class backgrounds. However, in recent years large sections of the English educated elite, including students, teachers, professionals and bureaucrats, have switched their allegiance to organisations associated with the Sangh Parivar. What are the factors responsible for the appeal of the brand of nationalism whose chief component is a virulent anti Muslim sentiment?

**Reasons for their Success**
- The Congress party was able to marginalise the Sangh Parivar as long as it lived up to some of the expectations it had aroused during the freedom movement, and as long as it acted as a vehicle of patriotism. The fact that many of the RSS leaders were more often than not pro-British and had a history of opposing the anti-colonial movement led by the Congress party, isolated them from mainstream Indian political life. They were known to be actively hostile to Gandhi, who in popular imagination became synonymous with anti-colonialism. This kept the influence of the RSS limited at a time when the anti-colonial aspect of nationalism reflected the predominant mood of the country.

There are, no doubt, some differences between the liberal nationalism of Nehru and the

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**The liberal nationalism of the early years of Congress rule could not be sustained for long because... it was more appropriate for the governance of an empire rather than of a democracy.**

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