

# A Brief History of the Radically Different Nationalisms Vying To Shape the Indian Republic

Two radically different ideas of India informed the making of the modern Indian Republic, almost from its very beginning: one revolutionary and the other counter-revolutionary. The seeds lie in the emergence of Indian nationalism in the latter half of the 19th through the intellectual awakening of the Bengal Renaissance, and the political activism of a small, liberal, English-educated (middle class) elite.

The umbilical link between this intellectual awakening, and the political mobilisation through nationalism, was provided by the dissemination of Western ideas, both revolutionary and counter-revolutionary, following the colonial encounter during British Rule. The revolutionary ideas such as humanism, equality, fraternity, liberty, individual freedom, rationalism, and religious universalism, were those of the European Enlightenment which can be broadly put under the umbrella of liberalism that formed the basis of one idea of India, culminating with the constitution of the Republic after independence from British rule in 1947.

There was, from towards the end of the 19th century, also a counter-revolutionary rejection of these ideas that culminated during the inter-war period in Europe with the emergence of fascist ideas and regimes subscribing to these ideas. Nationalism lay at the junction of these two trends. It had both a forward-looking revolutionary face, as well as a counter-revolutionary one. The former sought to unite and liberate suppressed ethnic groups from external forces, manifest in the break-up of old-world empires in Europe and the attendant rise of nation-states, and the anti-imperial movements in the colonies, such as in British India. The backwards-looking counter-revolutionary face sought to repress and dominate minorities within society by linking the concept of nation to majoritarian social groupings such as race and religion. These radically different nationalisms also filtered down to India and lay at the roots of both ideas of India.

## The two ideas



Ram Mohan Roy, 19th-century social reformer, is considered the father of Indian renaissance. Photo: Wikimedia, Public

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The first idea of India began as a movement in the three presidency towns of Calcutta, Bombay, and later Madras, of a small professional upper caste and middle-class elite, such as Dadabhai Naoroji, Surendranath Bannerjee, Phirozshah Mehta, steeped in the constitutional liberal values of Western democracy that petitioned the colonial rule for greater Indian representation in government on the pattern prevailing in England. Social and religious reform led by thinkers such as Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar and Keshub Chandra Sen, was also inextricably linked with this movement. This spread to other urban centres with the split within the national movement between the moderates and the extremists during the Swadeshi movement and the partition of Bengal towards the end of the 19th century. The urban middle class was far less liberal and more socially conservative, which was ultimately a barometer of the failure of the Bengal Renaissance to spread beyond a small upper-caste elite. A new set of 'extremist' nationalists such as Lala Lajpat Rai, Bipin Chandra Pal, and Bal Gangadhar Tilak deployed Hindu religious symbolism to deepen the mobilisation for the anti-imperial struggle. The seeds of communal divide and religious nationalisms, and the uneasy coexistence of two radically different ideas of India, that was to result – but by no means culminate with – the partition of India were sown during this phase.

During the Gandhian phase beginning around the end of the second decade of the 20th century, the national movement spread to villages even beyond urban centres. A complex dynamic was now at work, as peasant movements led by grassroots people like Baba Ramchandra and Sahajanand Saraswati, demands for zamindari abolition, and other forms of social reform such as the non-Brahmin and self-respect movements in the South, led by reformists such as Periyar and Jyotirao Phule, were drawn into the vortex of the national movement in an unstable love-hate relationship. The Congress itself became an uneasy alliance of its primarily conservative, especially middle-level, leadership and a few influential radical liberals such as Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhas Chandra Bose and even Rabindranath Tagore. An uneasy compromise was forged by Gandhi who kept the flock together despite the radical revolt by B.R. Ambedkar, and the far-right Hindu (the Hindu Mahasabha and RSS) and Muslim (Jinnah and the Muslim League) streams that aligned nationalism to imagined pasts based exclusively on religion.

Following the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, the liberals within the Congress acquired ascendancy under Nehru's leadership in independent India. The revolutionary ideas of the European Enlightenment informed the drafting of the constitution of Independent India. Its illiberal soft Hindutva – an uneasy compromise between liberalism and illiberal conservative and right-wing ideas persisted, however. It is possible that this stream within the Congress might have been even stronger but for the mass revulsion following the assassination of Gandhi. The anti-zamindari reforms were implemented only in states such as Kerala and West Bengal – where communist parties were elected. Nehru himself was constrained to cave in on issues such as cow slaughter and uniform civil code. India never became a truly secular country with full separation between Church and State, although the constitution mandated that the state treat all religions equally.

After Nehru's death, the Congress's soft Hindutva culture hamstrung its efforts at keeping the resurgence of the Hindu far right at bay. The latter expanded its network and influence through civil society outreach and the activities of the RSS, and political mobilisation on religious issues such as Ram Janmabhoomi. The Congress's liberal credentials were further damaged by a brief brush with authoritarianism under Indira Gandhi and attempts to create '[committed institutions](#)'. But when the Hindu right first came to power (under A.B. Vajpayee), it did not feel confident of its mandate to change the secular and democratic fabric of the polity and society either.

But just as it seemed that the uneasy alliance was leading to political convergence, the political evolution of the Indian republic turned 180 degrees with the rise of Narendra Modi at the helm of the Hindu right. Although Modi's original mandate in 2014 was developmental and anti-corruption, he used social media and civil society, organisations supported by state power, to turn it into a hard Hindutva agenda.

The uneasy alliance between the Hindu Right, liberal English-speaking elite and the radical movements from below was severed. The liberal elite and social and religious minorities, such as Dalits and Muslims, were marginalised and excluded from the Republic and the State structure moved from soft to hard Hindutva. It now appears to be fast jettisoning democracy and constitutional values by taking the concept of committed institutions to their logical conclusion seeking legitimacy through the demagoguery of the people's will articulated through electoral institutions at a reducing arms' length from the government. This form of governance has been classified as fascistic or ethnonationalism. The second idea of India has now gained ascendancy.



The Indian flag. Photo: Pixabay

## **The battle in India**

How is this battle of two ideas of India playing out in India currently? Antonio Gramsci, an influential Italian political thinker, [described](#) political battles as comprising two separate components: the war of movement and the war of position. The war of movement is the capture of political power, either through force or through the ballot box, as the case may be. The war of position, on the other hand, is a war of ideas, such as between the two ideas of India. The war of movement is a political seesaw, with some party winning at one point in time, and some other at another point. Permanent victory can be achieved only through the war of position, through the hegemony of ideas in civil society. When the latter war is won, all the strong political parties operate within a broad ideological consensus. Thus in the West, the hegemony of liberal ideas is evident from the fact that all major political parties are wedded to basic liberal ideas despite political differences.

If one were to analyse Indian politics within such a Gramscian framework, one could possibly argue that despite recent major reverses in the war of movement in West Bengal and Karnataka, the BJP (representing the counter-revolutionary idea of India) nevertheless appears to be gaining in the war of position. In West Bengal, it enhanced its vote share, while in [Karnataka](#) it held on to its vote share. In Karnataka, the BJP didn't lose Lingayat votes despite their grievance against the BJP, and it also gained some Vokkaliga votes. It also gained ground in the communal hotspots in the state. This is unlike the occasion in the past, when Virendra Patil was summarily dismissed by Rajiv Gandhi, and Lingayats deserted the Congress. The campaign also revealed a possible soft or creeping saffronisation of the Congress party as it did not take a forthright stand on some divisive issues raised by the BJP for electoral purposes.

How might the two wars play out going forward? It is foolhardy to try and predict the future, especially the war of movement, such as the outcome of next year's general elections. On the future of wars of position, however, we can learn something from the past, from lessons of history. The world has been becoming increasingly globalised. This has by no means been a linear trend. Following the global financial crisis about 15 years ago, there is a growing anti-globalisation and illiberal trend such as "America First" and "[MAGA](#)". There was a similar short-term reversal in Europe between the two World Wars. Nevertheless, a long-term trend is discernible. In such a globalised world, where ideas tend to flow freely, can the Western liberal enlightenment, on which the successful Western model rests, be rolled back permanently? As the Greek philosopher Plato, and more recently the sociologist Max Weber, argued demagogues or 'charismatic authorities' emerge from time to time to destabilise long-term trends. This destabilisation could involve tragedy of varying, including unimaginable (the Nazi

holocaust) magnitude, such as the kind we see in Kashmir and Manipur presently, but yet there is hope. Hitler's Third Reich did not last a 1000 years and self-destructed within a decade. There are more recent examples. The Communist Revolution in Russia, and the Islamic Revolution in Iran. The former came apart, and the latter is coming apart. [Gresham's law](#) might hold for the market for money, but not when it comes to the market for ideas.

Ultimately, better ideas, with all their shortcomings and flaws, drive out worse ideas. Try as one might, it is not possible to return to the past. The second idea of India is a backwards-looking counter-revolutionary one. It cannot forever push back the Renaissance paradigm.

Only another revolutionary paradigm can.

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