

Cultural Nationalism in India

Aditi Athreya*

Symbiosis School for Liberal Arts, Maharashtra, India

Introduction

The concept of Nationalism is linked to the idea of sovereignty and hence; it has to be associated to the principle of self-determination [1]. In the 19th century, John Stuart Mill argued that nationalist movements were dependent on ethnicity, language and culture. These were the basis of the demand for statehood. While this stood true for most nationalistic movements, Hurst Hanum of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy remarked that in this era, the notion of self-determination was used by groups to divide rather than unify territory [2]. The disintegration of the Ottoman Empire can be used as an example.

It was at the peak of colonialism in the mid-19th century that the colonised world witnessed the rise in nationalistic sentiments with the emphasis on the idea of a common language, religion, ethnicity etc. While the western idea of nationalism aims to set up a uni-nation, uni-culture dictum, nationalism operates on different principles in a multi-national, pluralist context (for the purpose of this paper, the term pluralist and multi-nationalist will be used interchangeably). Nationalism had a dual role to play in the last century through the many nationalistic upheavals leading to decolonization of most of Latin America, Africa and Asia. At a macro level, nationalism was viewed as being anti-colonial with aims of liberating the country from oppressive rule and establishing a sovereign state while at a more local level, nationalism was perceived to be a form of cultural consciousness that aimed to protect different cultural communities within their homeland [3].

Nationalism in the third world countries was and is a response to colonialism and it must be noted that most pluralist nations evolved in the Asian, African and Latin American Continents, where colonialism played a very important role in the formation of these states through the recent historical past but failed to take into account the multi-cultural set up of these colonies. The colonial power played an important role in creating or fostering identities to ensure control by using the policy of divide and rule while the process of state formation during the process of independence (from the colonial power) ignored and even curbed the multiculturalist set up to create a single identity. The colonisers created provincial boundaries which barely corresponded to the cultural boundaries of communities. This arrangement led to a kind of conflict between culture and territory and eventually led to one sub nationality forming a pan national identity and dominating the others will be discussed in the subsequent paragraphs.

The Idea of Nationalism

The study of nationalism is important to analyse world politics today, but to understand the notion of nationalism, one must look into the idea of a nation. The concept of a nation can be traced back to the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. One must remember that even prior to the treaty; political boundaries were being redefined throughout the European Continent. After the treaty, the concept of sovereignty was introduced when Protestantism was officially recognised as a different religion from Catholicism [4]. Thus, in most contexts, a “nation is a community of people that can be organised around the idea of self-determination” [5]. Keeping this particular idea of nation in mind,

nationalism can be defined as either devotion (political or emotional) to one's nation or as a policy of national independence [6]. Therefore, a nation, or the idea of nation must exist in order for a national identity to be founded.

To better ality, one can also use Anderson's ideas of a nation which is an ‘imagined political community’ [7]. Thus is if a nation is considered as something imaginative, the very elements that are required for it to exist can be a myth. Even if a community does not share a common language, religion or ethnicity, a nation is formed on the basis of a strong formed identity. Anderson used the term ‘imagined’ because members of even the smallest nations will not know everyone and yet they will be aware of their image of the entire communion.

From an anthropological perspective, Max Weber speaks about ethnic groups that are formed on the belief of common descent. He discusses that there is a sense of affinity to a particular nation which relies on community living [8]. To connect the idea of community living to the notions of state formation and nationalism, it is necessary to discuss Michael Hechter's theory of nationalism. According to him, nationalism constitutes of several political activities whose aim is to create political boundaries of the nation that are culturally ‘distinctive collectivity aspiring towards self-governance’ [9]. While studying Nationalism, it is equally important to distinguish between civic and ethnic ties of nations. According to Stephan Shulman, the most primary difference between the Western and the Eastern European Countries, the former developed as civic nations while the latter as ethnic nations [10]. While ethnic nations can be characterised by extending kinship principle to the imagined community of the nation, the former can be defined by common political values and loyalties shared by the population of a sovereign territory [11]. To elaborate, the famous Czech Scholar Hans Kohn in his book, argued that nationalism in the West, primarily in countries like France and England were primarily political. He discussed that these ideas of nation and nationalism were inspired by enlightenment ideas of liberty and equality. Nationalism in the western context struggled against dynastic rule and equated citizenship with membership in the nation. Hence, in this model, the state usually precedes the creation and development of the nation [12].

On the other hand, in the Eastern European and in the colonial context, where these regions were comparatively backward, the notion of nationalism arose with little or no cultural and ethnic boundaries. (The vast Ottoman empire for example) Here, Kohn argues that nationalism had to struggle to “redraw political boundaries in conformity with ethnographic demands” [12]. Considering this statement, one could say that nations in the East were created on the basis of *volk* (people)

***Corresponding author:** Aditi Athreya, Symbiosis School for Liberal Arts, Maharashtra, India, Tel: 020-66861200; E-mail: aditiathreya@gmail.com

Received: April 28, 2016; **Accepted:** June 01, 2016; **Published:** June 04, 2016

Citation: Athreya A (2016) Cultural Nationalism in India. *Anthropol* 4: 165. doi:10.4172/2332-0915.1000165

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than the idea of a citizenship. In the Indian context, this idea can be consolidated with the idea of creating an “Akhand Bharat” that can literally translated to undivided India. This notion revolved around reuniting the ancient Indian civilisation by fighting the British. In the modern scenario, many right wing organisations including several factions of the ruling Party, Bhartiya Janata Party (Indian People’s Party) has staunch advocates of this idea which propagates the unison of present day India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Bhutan, Nepal and Sri Lanka. Having briefly examined the ideas of nation and nationalism, one must remember that there are several ways in which nationalism can manifest itself. This essay will explore cultural nationalism in India with the help of two case studies. Before proceeding further, it is important to study the idea of sub-nationalism which will be discussed in the next section.

The Nation of Sub-Nationalism

Before entering into a deeper discussion it is important to discuss the idea of sub-nationality. According to Prerna Singh, the main difference is that the dimension of the desire for political control of a territorial homeland necessarily manifests itself in the desire for sovereign statehood in the case of nationalism, but it could imply an aspiration for an independent country or the pursuit of greater autonomy within the existing politico-legal framework in the case of sub nationalism [13]. Keeping the above discussion in mind, our experiences with recent upsurge in the self-determination politics reveals that the idea of nationalism is vastly different in post-colonial world where the nationalistic sentiment is invoked (today and in the past) in order to preserve a more specific ‘sub-national identity’ [14] under the framework of a larger ‘national identity’ [15]. According to my understanding, this specific kind of nationalism that operates so as to demand provincial autonomy and statehood can be referred to as ‘cultural nationalism’.

This paper will attempt to analyse the historical trajectory of the manifestations of cultural nationalism in India. The first section of the paper discusses linguistic nationalism and secessionist movements in post-colonial India. The second section attempts to look at globalisation and the creation of a homogenous pan-Indian identity. The essay will conclude by analysing how religious identity is used to promote a specific Indian identity that is defined by a ‘cultural characterization’ of its people and the consequences that are visible today. Citizens of a multi-national country have to often distinguish between their pan-national identity and their individualistic identities. In such cases, Edward Shills observes that the people hold on to both civil-political and primordial ties at the same time [16]. A disturbance in this framework of dual ties leads to a socio-political and cultural conflict with a feeling of suppression amongst its citizens with the singular national identity being questioned and critiqued.

What is Cultural Nationalism?

The popular belief that exists today is that nationalism which can either be an ideology or a fully-fledged movement is directly linked to the notion of sovereignty. Using this perspective, nationalism is nothing but a means to achieve self-determination which aims at creating an independent sovereign state. It was only when colonialism had reached its peak in the late 19th century did the need to arrive a common language, culture, identity arose amongst the people [17]. Since then, the world is experiencing a rapid increase in nationalistic sentiment.

As far as Psychologists and Anthropologists are concerned, the

features of collective character and mentality also form an important aspect of nationalism. Renowned Anthropologist Margaret Mead was studying the ‘national character’ of the Americans and the English when she came to the conclusion that cultural values plays a significant role in the integration of people belonging to a particular nation [18]. Hence, one could say that every nation has certain specific cultural tactics that differ from the other. To quote Jelena Petkovic, “cultural theories adopt the stand that a nation is formed through cultural continuity and thus the issue of national identity is almost inseparable from the issue of cultural identity of a people” [19]. This means that a cultural national identity reveals itself as an attachment to an individual’s particular culture. Hence, with the increase in the notion of individual consciousness and with the development and improvement of the channels of communication, human civilisation has become more aware of the differences that reside between them. Once, one could say that while culture binds a group of people together, it also has the ability to separate them.

This is the reason why there is a need for adequate formulation of cultural politics of each nation is indicated. In the context of contemporary world issues, can lead to the preservation of a feeling of necessity to preserve a communities’ cultural identities. Failure to do so can lead to cultural and social consequences of the people. Keeping this idea in mind, the question of cultural nationalism needs to be raised. As previously discussed in the introduction, nationalism manifests itself differently in pluralistic nation states. In these nations, the people invoke nationalism in order to gain provincial autonomy that they believe is required for the preservation of their local values within the meta-identity of the nation they live in. On the basis of the above discussions of the narrative of nationalism, this specific category of nationalism can be termed as cultural nationalism.

It must be noted that most pluralist nations are located in the African, Asian and the Latin American Continents. Colonialism played a big role in shaping their history. Through the process of divide and rule, the European colonialists created a sense of confusion between two communities. In India for example, despite living together for centuries before colonisation, the Hindus and Muslims became increasingly polarised during colonisation. This led to a constant feeling of neglect within both communities. At a macro-level or a more pan-India level, nationalism was viewed as being anti-colonial with the dual aims of getting rid of oppressive colonisers and establishing a sovereign republic. On the other hand, at a more provincial level, one could say that nationalism was a form of cultural consciousness that aimed to protect different cultural communities in their homeland [20].

The States Re-organisation Act of 1956 and Linguistic Nationalism in India

Post-independence, India initially faced the difficult task of integrating the surrounding princely states. After the process of accession was complete, the political map of India now consisted of several multi-lingual presidencies of Bombay, Punjab, the United Provinces, etc. It is important to point that the British envisioned India to have autonomous provinces. This was inherited during independence and hence, there was a proliferation of cultural nationalism that aimed at creating provincial units within the Indian union.

When the Indian Republic was established in 1950, a parliamentary form of democracy was introduced and a new constitution was drafted for the country. The constitution legitimised the pluralistic nature of the country by initially enlisting fourteen regional languages as official languages of the country (Eight Schedule of the Constitution). This

number was later increased to twenty-two [21]. The first instance of cultural nationalism in independent India can be traced back to the demand for a separate province for Telugu speakers. While the movement had its origin in the colonial period, the protests increased as the Telugu population was discontent with the economic and political domination of the Tamils in the Madras province. This struggle finally culminated with the formation of the Andhra state in 1953 [22]. The creation of this new state led way to many other sub-national aspirations in the country. The demand forced the federal government to restructure the political map of India on the basis of linguistic homogeneity. Finally in 1956, the parliament constituted the States Re-organisation act that would divide states on linguistic grounds. When the bill was being tabled, India's first law minister, B.R. Ambedkar who is also widely considered to be the father of the Indian Constitution penned down his opinions on this issue. In his discussions of the advantages of such an organisation, he writes that democracy would be stabilised, administration would be simpler, and sense of "fellow feeling" would be created amongst the people. To quote Ambedkar, "A linguistic state will also reduce cultural tensions among communities as equal opportunity will be provided to all [23].

In his book, *Thoughts on Linguistic States*, Ambedkar says "A linguistic State with its regional language as its official language may easily develop into an independent nationality. The road between Independent Nationality and Independent State is very narrow. If this happens, India will cease to be Modern India; we have and will become Medieval India consisting of a variety of States indulging in rivalry and warfare." [23]. At the same time, Ambedkar also warned that reorganising states on linguistic grounds would inevitably lead to uneven distribution of resources as there have been always more Hindi speaking people in the country than non-Hindi speaking southern states. He warned that this arrangement could possibly lead to conflict. As he rightly predicted, this linguistic division of states contributed to the creation of multiple identities in India. To give an example of how the provincial state uses its machineries to promote its regional identity, The Madras High Court in a recent judgement has ordered all lower courts pronounce their judgements in Tamil instead of English [24]. By providing an analysis of the Tamil Nationalist movement, the subsequent section will discuss how cultural nationalism manifested itself through the anti-Hindi wave that spread across South India, especially in the southernmost state of Tamil Nadu.

Tamil Nationalist Movement

Although the study of the Tamil nationalist and secessionist movement has not been as extensive as the Khalistan¹ movement, I believe that is equally important in India's nationalist cultural history because.... The State of Tamil Nadu lies at the southernmost tip of India with over 80 per cent of its population listing Tamil as their native language (Government of India Census, 2011). Although the state is an integral part of the country today, during the years 1950's and the 1960's, it was witness to a large scale ethnic movement which was mostly based on linguistic backgrounds. Let us first look at a brief history of the Dravida Nadu Movement. The origins of the Dravidian movement began as an expansion of political and representational access. These men belonged to every ethnic group that lived in the erstwhile Madras Presidency and they eventually formed the Justice Party in the 1916. This party contested the regional elections in the presidency in 1926

in order to increase representation of the non-Brahmin Tamils in the legislature. Post-Independence, Tamil Nadu went into political and social turmoil. The relationship between untouchables and higher caste Brahmins deteriorated further. This was especially problematic to the Justice Party because most of their prominent leaders belonged to the dominant upper caste Brahmins. Tamil Nadu hence, witnessed large scale conversions to Islam. The Justice Party suffered greatly as they lost their major vote base that constituted people of lower castes and the Muslims.

Secondly, E.V. Ramaswamy led an exodus of the lower caste community out of the Congress Party to start the Self-Respect Movement [25] (Rajagoplan). This movement for uplifting the downtrodden soon came to be associated with the Anti-Hindi Movement. In the year 1937, C. Rajagopalachari, an eminent congressman introduced Hindi as a compulsory subject in 125 schools in Tamil Nadu. Periyar² mobilised mass support to create the anti-Hindi Brigade. In this way, a new equation of Brahmin-Hindi-North India-Aryan and Non-Brahmin-Tamil-Dravidian emerged. However, the movement soon became divided as the Congress too was supporting the linguistic division of states. After the Congress high Command met in Madras, a decision was made to create separate provincial units called Andhra, Karnataka and Kerala. After the above decision, Madras was the only region remaining that needed some kind of allocation. Soon, there were widespread campaigns to create this region into a separate Tamil speaking state. According to Saravanan [24], the foundation of this ethno-linguistic movement was parallel to the demand for a separate Muslim State. In fact, one of the triggers was the passing of the Pakistan Resolution of 1940. The Madras Congress Legislative Assembly saw fit to pass a supporting resolution [26]. It further fuelled the feeling that the Indian National Congress was more worried about North Indian Muslims than the depressed (Hindu) classes of the south.

During the period before and after Independence, the Dravidian Movement began to demand a separate Dravid Nadu³. This movement suffered an early split when Periyar continued with his social movements outside of the political spectrum while C Annadurai⁴ led the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam to participate in electoral politics.

1962-63 marked an important event in the history of the DMK as it led them to forego their secessionist demand and later reinforced it. During the Sino-Indian war of 1962, the party suspended the demand and raised funds to support the war. This is because they believed that there would be no secession if the idea of India did not exist. After the war, the demand for separation featured again. Fearing more of such movements, the Nehru Government amended the constitution in 1963 when it added an anti-secessionist clause. After Nehru's sudden death in 1964, the centre tried to push the usage of Hindi in all states. Not surprisingly, many states protested but Tamil Nadu witnessed one of the most violent reactions. Two students burned themselves to death to protest against this view. The government too, responded with force.

As the number of riots and the brutality of the violence got force, newly elected Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri stepped in and assured the general public that Hindi would not be imposed on states so as to give equally status to other regional languages.

Soon, the DMK amended its constitution and the demand for a

¹The Khalistan movement was a Sikh Political movement that demanded statehood for the Sikhs. The movement took a violent turn in the 1970's when armed supporters of the movement stormed into the Golden Temple. The army had to be called to restore order. They were also responsible for blowing up an Indian Airlines flight over the Atlantic Ocean killing more than 300 people.

²Periyar Ramaswamy was a social activist who started the Self-Respect Movement which is popularly known as the Dravidian Movement.

³Nadu is a term that generally refers to a particular territory.

⁴C Annadurai was the first member from a Dravidian Party to serve as Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu (1967-69).

separate Tamil State also died overnight. The aim of a Dravida Nadu was replaced by establishing a Tamil political unit within the Indian Constitution. Today, there has been little or no talk about a separate state, both political parties, the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) led by J. Jayalalitha and the DMK continue to demand greater state autonomy and minimal central intervention. However, the Tamil Secessionist movement was not based on purely linguistic grounds. It was also a movement between the Aryans⁵ and the Dravidans.⁶ The Tamil leaders used their so-called Dravidian identity to prove their nativity to the land as opposed to the Tamil Brahmins who were allegedly from the Sanskritised northern part of the country. There have also been instances where linguistic unity has not ensured the lack of conflicts. The demand for a distinct Koshal state from Orissa arose due to socio-economic reasons. The western region of Orissa has always been backward as it has experienced a very low level of development in terms of education, infrastructural growth. They also have inadequate political representation to put forth their demands. The coastal region on the other hand has been witness of the stark opposite. This led to disparity between the two regions has led to disaffection and discontent in the backward regions of Orissa, thereby leading to the demand for a separate state of Koshal.

Hence, one could say that nationalism in India acquired a kind of socio-political connotation and both the micro and the macro level. Unlike In Europe, India has many distinct nationalities did not lead to the creation of independent republics but instead, they preferred to retain their cultural identity within a larger sovereign and political framework. According to Nanda, cultural nationalism in India operates mostly within the cultural framework of national identity and political framework of autonomy anchored of homeland [1].

The following section of the essay will focus on the notion of globalisation and how India's decision to liberalise its economy in 1991, further fuelled the Hindutva ideology in the country. The basic characterisation of globalisation is that it affects people and nation-states, not only economically or politically, but also socially and culturally. The inevitability of the process was rightly described by Clare Short, A British Labour Politician when she compared globalisation to the rising of the sun [27].

Globalisation has caused a change in classical nationalistic sentiments. The increase in mobility has led to an increase in the rate of migration. The reasons to migrate are many. Globalisation has created an unequal world in terms of resources and hence, the most common reason for migration today is seeking better economic opportunities in a more developed economy than one's home nation. The sudden increase in the rate of migration post globalisation has subsequently led to a rise in xenophobic sentiments. The local population is unable to adjust and accommodate the mass exodus of people in their territory. According to Gerard Delanty, society today is an "age of anxiety" [28]. In this age, there is an increasing fear amongst the people of different cultures and ethnicities simply due to lack of knowledge of that culture or the inability to understand them. Nationalist thinkers of this age fear the loss of their culture because of the influence of foreign cultures. The "Clash of Civilisations" by Samuel Huntington also seems to support this thesis.

⁵The term Aryan refers to a racial grouping in the 19th century who was considered "noble" in comparison with other civilisations. In the South Asian, especially in the Indian Context, the Aryans are supposed to be ancestors of present day Brahmins.

⁶Dravidian essentially refers to the native population residing in the Southern States of India.

Hindutva and Globalisation

In contemporary society, multicultural societies foster nationalism differently. Any such nation-state will have a community that are more in number than other ethnic communities who thus form the minority. State institutions, intentionally or otherwise, created policies that were populist in nature, thereby leaving a sense of discontent on the minority communities. This leads to tensions between cultures.

However, in most liberal democratic societies, minorities are protected by the law and the state needs to take them into consideration while formulating federal policies. A typical consequence of this conflict will be the formulation of stringent immigration policies. In India, globalisation has played an important role in the emergence of Hindi Cultural Nationalism propagated by right wing nationalists. According to Appadurai, Hindu Nationalism can be seen as a middle class, high caste project of cultural homogenisation [29]. The aim is to create a unified and homogenised Hindu political entity. Hindu nationalists maintain that the word of the majority community should prevail over the others in a modern democratic state. To elaborate, further, colonial thinkers like Savarkar and members of the right wing organisations like the RSS⁷ maintain that Hinduism is a religion of tolerance and allows minority groups to flourish and hence, constitutes an integral part of Indian national culture [30]. In fact, the country's right wing political party, The BJP, in its election manifesto, refers to India's 'unique cultural and social diversity' which it believes is necessary to weave into a larger fabric by thousands of years of common living [31].

According to Gurpreet Mahajan [32], Hindu majoritarianism rests on two basic assumptions

1. They work on the belief that nation-states can be built successfully only if there is a shared cultural identity
2. Hinduism is not just a religion but also a way of life.

Thus, by secularising Hinduism, nationalists claim that it is the shared identity of the entire population, no matter which religion one belongs to. Not surprisingly, the rise of a radical form of Hindu nationalism directly coincided with India's integration into global systems of production and consumption. The demolition of the famous Babri Masjid led to the erasure of an important symbol of cultural diversity in India. For Hindu Nationalists, this diversity is a huge obstacle for India to emerge as a strong nation the modern world. The idea of modernity to most people around the world today is linked to the notions of power, economic prosperities and not to forget, "full an unequivocal cultural and national identities" [33].

The origins of Hindu Nationalism can be traced back to the revivalist movements that occurred during the colonial era. To name a few, *The Arya Samaj* and *The Brahmo Samaj* made a strong attempt to redefine Hinduism as a religious tradition to counter the rising number of conversions of the backward classes into Christianity.

The Central idea to the project of Hindu Nationalist movement is the concept of Hindutva which was the exact opposite to the secular idols of the Indian National Congress. The term gained popularity after Veer Savarkar published his book titled *who is a Hindu?* Savarkar writes that every individual who is born in India and who considers India to be his fatherland (Pitrubhumi) and Holy land (Patrubhumi)

⁷The RSS or the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh is considered to be the world's largest non-voluntary organization. It has been often criticized for its extreme views with regards to minority communities in India. In post-colonial India, it gained further notoriety for encouraging the demolition of the historic Babri Masjid (Mosque) in 1992.

are Hindus. However, Savarkar considered Christians and Muslims as foreigners because their holy land is elsewhere. This approach created a sense of hostility amongst the minorities as seen in the rise of attacks against Christians and Muslims. These attacks also tell us that there is a presence of hegemony of the upper castes.

Although the BJP has been trying hard to dilute its radical Hindutva ideology, there are some fractions within the party who are propagating the very idea of Hinduism that Savarkar once spoke about. As already mentioned earlier, the most famous and notorious example would be the destruction of the mosque in 1992 which was led by a senior leader of the party. The destruction of the mosque further fuelled attacks against Muslims in other parts of the country, especially in Mumbai. The then ally of the BJP, the Shiv Sena meticulously planned and carried out mob attacks on Muslims individuals and businesses in the country's financial capital. This form of nationalism expanded further with the massive anti-Muslim riots in Gujarat in 2002.

Economic liberalisation in India led to the simultaneous existence of extreme wealth and poverty. This undoubtedly had an important role in creating communal tensions as it reinforced the religious divide. Although Hindus are an overwhelming majority in India, the country also has one of the largest Muslim populations in the world.

In the discourse of Hindu Nationalism, Muslims are perceived to be foreign invaders even though historically, a vast majority of Muslims are converts from lower-caste Hindu backgrounds. Even after five decades of state sponsored secularism, minority communities continue to be underrepresented in both, the political and social sector. For example, in the National Parliamentary Elections of 2014, only 22 Muslims were elected in the lower house (India Today, 2014). In fact, they represent a large section of the population in terms of illiteracy, unemployment and poverty. Although one has to agree that disproportionate wealth has always been a source of concern in India, the problem did not improve as it was hoped post economic liberalisation. Although the increase in the GDP of the country did reflect employment generation, especially in the IT sector, it did not prove to be an adequate representation in terms of uplifting the population from poverty. This can be proven by the fact that a very small section of the Indian population was contributing to the total revenue. According to NDTV profit (2013), a popular business channel, only 3 per cent (about 36 million) of the country pays tax. Hence, the feeling of discontent among the general population began to rise. The Hindutva ideology played on these emotions to encourage a uni-cultural society in India.

To conclude, it is necessary to note that nationalistic tendencies, especially in pluralist societies such as India stem from economic disparity in the population. Cultural or ethno-linguistics identity is only used as a garb to demand better economic and political representations. The Tamil secessionist movement arose because the dominant upper class Tamils were allegedly oppressing the 'Non-Brahmin Tamils' When the gap between the rich and the poor increased post 1991 and when the entire world was witnessing a splurge of violence against certain communities, right wing communities began to demand for a singular identity as opposed to a multicultural one.

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