International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR)
E-ISSN: 2582-2160 ● Website: www.ijfmr.com ● Email: editor@ijfmr.com

Cultural Nationalism in Indian Political Thought: Intellectual Foundations and Contemporary Interpretations

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Abstract

Cultural nationalism has been a significant and contested strand of Indian political thought. It refers broadly to the understanding of national community through shared historical memories, civilisational experiences, languages, symbols, ethical traditions and cultural practices. In India, however, cultural nationalism has never represented a single or internally uniform doctrine. It has emerged through competing intellectual projects: cultural self-assertion against colonial rule; spiritual and ethical regeneration; pluralist and humanist conceptions of belonging; territorial and civilisational definitions of nationhood; and constitutional arguments that locate national unity in equal citizenship and social democracy. This paper examines these intellectual foundations through selected thinkers and debates associated with Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, M. K. Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, V. D. Savarkar, B. R. Ambedkar and Jawaharlal Nehru. It argues that the analytical value of cultural nationalism lies not merely in affirming cultural continuity, but in examining how cultural resources are translated into political membership, public institutions and civic obligations. The paper distinguishes cultural confidence from cultural homogenisation and argues that a democratic interpretation must accommodate India's internal diversity, confront inherited social hierarchies and remain consistent with constitutional guarantees. Contemporary interpretations are assessed in relation to identity, heritage, education, language, public memory and citizenship. The study uses a qualitative, interpretive method based on primary political texts, constitutional provisions and selected scholarly literature.

Keywords: Cultural nationalism; Indian political thought; civilisational identity; pluralism; constitutionalism; cultural heritage; citizenship; national integration.

1. Introduction

Nationalism is not simply an attachment to a geographical territory. It is also a political imagination through which people come to understand themselves as members of a shared community. Such a community is sustained by historical narratives, public symbols, memories of collective struggle, institutions and everyday cultural practices. Benedict Anderson's influential formulation of the nation as an "imagined community" draws attention to the cultural processes through which a large population comes to experience a sense of horizontal belonging (Anderson, 1983/2006). In the Indian context, this process developed under distinctive historical conditions: colonial domination, the recovery and reinterpretation of the past, social and religious reform, linguistic and regional diversity, and the emergence of modern representative politics.

The term cultural nationalism is used here as an analytical category rather than as a label for one political organisation or ideology. It denotes approaches that regard culture, historical consciousness and civilisational memory as important foundations of national identity. Yet the meaning of culture itself is disputed. It may refer to classical texts and philosophical traditions, popular practices and local histories, religious and ethical ideas, languages, artistic forms, or the shared experience of living together. Therefore, the central question is not whether culture matters to Indian nationhood, but how cultural inheritance is selected, interpreted and connected to political equality.

Indian thinkers offered different answers. Bankimchandra's literary and historical imagination contributed to cultural self-respect; Vivekananda and Aurobindo drew on spiritual and civilisational resources for national regeneration; Gandhi connected swaraj with ethical self-discipline and plural social life; Tagore warned against aggressive and mechanical nationalism; Savarkar advanced a historically and territorially framed account of Hindutva; Ambedkar insisted that political democracy required the destruction of caste hierarchy; and Nehru emphasised composite culture, scientific temper and democratic institutions. These positions cannot be reduced to a simple binary between cultural and secular nationalism. They represent a continuing argument about the relationship between culture, power, citizenship and the state.

The paper advances three propositions. First, Indian cultural nationalism is historically plural and intellectually contested. Second, cultural continuity can strengthen democratic belonging only when it is distinguished from compulsory uniformity. Third, constitutional democracy provides the institutional framework within which cultural expression, minority rights, social justice and national unity must be negotiated.

2. Objectives and Research Questions

The principal objective is to examine the intellectual foundations and contemporary interpretations of cultural nationalism in Indian political thought. The paper has four specific objectives: to identify major historical and philosophical sources of cultural nationalism; to compare selected thinkers' understandings of culture and nationhood; to analyse the relationship between cultural identity and constitutional democracy; and to assess the contemporary relevance of these debates in education, heritage, language, public memory and citizenship.

The inquiry is guided by the following questions:-

1. What historical and intellectual conditions shaped cultural nationalism in India ?
2. How did major Indian thinkers differ in their accounts of cultural belonging ?
3. What tensions arise when civilisational identity is translated into state policy and citizenship
4. What principles can support an inclusive, constitutionally grounded interpretation of cultural nationalism ?

3. Methodology and Scope

This is a qualitative and interpretive study. It relies on close reading of selected primary texts and a thematic comparison of major arguments, supplemented by peer-reviewed scholarship and constitutional provisions. The analysis is organised around five themes: cultural memory, spiritual and ethical resources, pluralism, social equality, and constitutional citizenship. The selected thinkers are not treated as representatives of fixed or internally consistent schools. Their writings emerged in different historical

settings and addressed different political problems. The paper therefore avoids claiming that the selected figures exhaust the diversity of Indian political thought.

The study is conceptual rather than empirical. It does not measure public opinion or claim to establish the prevalence of any contemporary political position. Its comparative tables and figures are analytical syntheses prepared to clarify arguments; they are not statistical findings. A limitation is that the paper concentrates primarily on influential modern thinkers and gives less space to regional, vernacular, Adivasi, women's and subaltern intellectual traditions. These are important areas for further research.

4. Historical and Intellectual Foundations

4.1 Colonial modernity and the recovery of cultural self-respect

The colonial encounter generated a complex intellectual response. Colonial knowledge systems frequently represented Indian society as static, fragmented or incapable of self-government. Indian intellectuals responded through historical writing, vernacular literature, religious reform, educational initiatives and public associations. Cultural recovery was not merely nostalgic: it could become a language of political criticism by challenging the claim that modernity and rational public life were exclusively Western. Chatterjee (1986) argues that anti-colonial nationalism developed its own domain of cultural sovereignty even while engaging with institutions and concepts introduced under colonial rule. This insight helps explain why culture became a site of political autonomy.

Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's literary interventions contributed to the formation of a modern national imagination. His writings connected historical memory, religious symbolism and the aspiration for collective self-respect. The importance of this contribution lies in the way literature could transform dispersed cultural references into a shared political vocabulary. At the same time, the use of particular symbols raises a continuing question: how can a symbol that inspires one community become a source of belonging for citizens with different religious or cultural histories ?

4.2 Spiritual and civilisational resources

Swami Vivekananda presented India's spiritual traditions as resources for moral regeneration and social service. His public interventions challenged colonial inferiority and urged Indians to recover confidence without abandoning engagement with the wider world. Sri Aurobindo similarly interpreted Indian civilisation as a source of national vitality and cultural creativity. In these strands, nationalism was not only a demand for political sovereignty; it was also a project of intellectual and ethical renewal. Their emphasis on spiritual resources should not be confused with a single state religion. The political question is how ethical and philosophical traditions may contribute to public life while respecting freedom of conscience.

4.3 Gandhi: swaraj, ethics and plural social life

In Hind Swaraj, **Gandhi** criticised the assumption that political freedom could be achieved simply by reproducing the institutions and material ambitions of modern European civilisation. His idea of swaraj joined self-government with self-restraint, ethical conduct and responsibility. The cultural dimension of Gandhian nationalism was expressed through everyday practices, local languages, religious dialogue and the moral dignity of ordinary people. Gandhi's approach offered a powerful critique of colonial domination, but it also raises questions about the relation between tradition, reform and modern rights. Its

continuing significance lies in the insistence that national freedom must be measured by the quality of social relationships and the ethical character of public action.

4.4 Tagore: culture, humanism and the critique of aggressive nationalism

Rabindranath Tagore's reflections on nationalism provide an important counterpoint. He valued India's historical capacity to accommodate difference and to create forms of unity without erasing particularity. Yet he warned that the modern nation-state could become mechanical, competitive and coercive when national power was treated as an absolute end. Recent scholarship has emphasised the importance of Tagore's idea of samaj, or relationship-based social life, as an alternative ethical basis for community (Lamba, 2022). Tagore's position does not amount to indifference towards India's freedom. Rather, it asks whether patriotism can remain humane, open to cultural exchange and accountable to universal human dignity.

4.5 Savarkar and the political definition of cultural nationhood

V. D. Savarkar's Hindutva (1923) gave a systematic political formulation to a conception of Hindu nationhood grounded in shared territory, historical memory and cultural affiliation. The text became foundational to modern Hindu nationalist thought. Contemporary historical scholarship has also cautioned against reading all phases of Savarkar's political career as identical: Visana (2021) re-examines his earlier writings on sovereignty and anti-colonial politics, while Bakhle (2024) offers a comprehensive intellectual history that attends to the range and contradictions in his writings. For this paper, the central analytical issue is the boundary of national membership: whether cultural identification is understood as a civilisational affiliation, a political principle, or a criterion that differentiates insiders and outsiders. This distinction matters in a constitutionally plural society.

4.6 Ambedkar: social democracy as a test of national unity

B. R. Ambedkar's political thought places social equality at the centre of democratic nation-building. In Annihilation of Caste (1936), he argued that caste hierarchy undermined the possibility of a society based on liberty, equality and fraternity. His intervention is essential to any serious account of cultural nationalism because it asks whose culture is being represented and whether inherited social arrangements deny equal dignity to large sections of the population. Cultural unity cannot be assumed where social relations remain hierarchical. Ambedkar's constitutionalism therefore provides a critical test: national identity must be compatible with equal citizenship, representation and the abolition of oppressive social practices.

4.7 Nehru and composite culture

Jawaharlal Nehru's account of Indian nationhood emphasised historical interaction, cultural synthesis, scientific temper and democratic institution-building. His approach treated India's plurality not as an obstacle to nationhood but as one of its defining characteristics. The idea of composite culture recognises that Indian traditions have been shaped by centuries of interaction among regions, languages, religious communities and social groups. Nehru's framework is significant because it connects cultural inheritance with modern state institutions rather than treating the past as a complete political blueprint.

5. Comparative Analysis of Major Intellectual Strands

The selected thinkers reveal that cultural nationalism in India is best understood as a field of debate rather than a unified doctrine. Some strands emphasise civilisational continuity and spiritual regeneration; others stress ethical conduct, pluralism, social reform or constitutional citizenship. The comparison below is intended to identify dominant emphases, not to reduce complex thinkers to a single phrase.

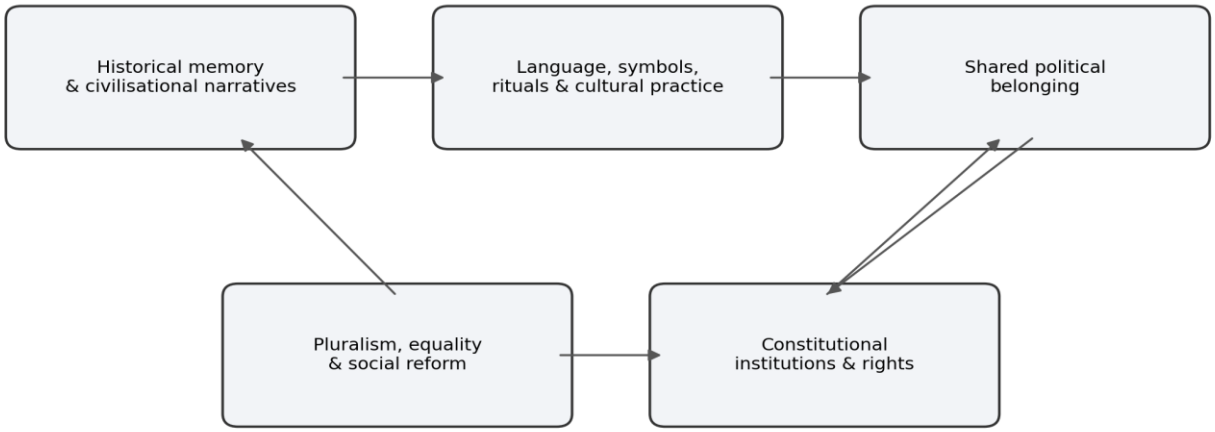
6. Cultural Nationalism and the Indian Constitution

The Constitution does not prescribe one comprehensive cultural identity as the condition of Indian citizenship. Instead, it establishes a framework in which individual liberty, equality, religious freedom, cultural rights and democratic participation coexist. Article 25 protects freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess, practise and propagate religion, subject to constitutional limitations. Article 29 protects the right of any section of citizens with a distinct language, script or culture to conserve it. Article 30 protects the right of religious and linguistic minorities to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice. These provisions make cultural diversity a constitutional concern rather than merely a matter of social tolerance.

At the same time, **Article 51A(f)** places a fundamental duty on citizens to value and preserve the rich heritage of India's composite culture. Read together, these provisions point towards a model in which cultural inheritance is both a shared responsibility and a field of protected diversity. The constitutional idea of cultural preservation is therefore not equivalent to cultural uniformity. It requires respect for distinct traditions as well as commitment to common civic institutions.

This constitutional framework also helps clarify the relationship between cultural nationalism and secularism. Indian secularism has developed within a society where religion is deeply embedded in public and social life. Bilgrami (2016) examines the distinct contexts of Gandhi and Nehru's approaches to secularism and argues that their accounts were shaped by an understanding of India's lived pluralism. The relevant democratic principle is not the exclusion of culture or religion from society, but the protection of freedom of conscience and equal citizenship in public institutions.

Figure 1. An analytical framework for inclusive cultural nationalism



Cultural nationalism becomes democratically sustainable when cultural continuity is mediated by equal citizenship, constitutional safeguards and inclusive participation.

7. Contemporary Interpretations and Challenges

7.1 Heritage, public memory and historical interpretation

The contemporary debate over cultural nationalism frequently concerns the representation of the past: which events are commemorated, whose contributions appear in textbooks, how monuments are conserved, and how regional histories are integrated into national narratives. A democratic approach should encourage rigorous historical research, multilingual access to sources and the inclusion of neglected communities. Cultural confidence is strengthened by evidence based history, not by suppressing disagreement or turning complex pasts into simplified political legends.

7.2 Education, language and knowledge traditions

Education is a major arena in which cultural memory is transmitted and critically examined. Curricula can introduce students to classical knowledge systems, regional literature, oral traditions, scientific achievements, philosophical debates and the history of social reform. Such inclusion should be accompanied by source criticism and disciplinary methods. The aim should be neither uncritical glorification nor dismissive rejection of inherited knowledge, but informed engagement. Language policy similarly requires balance: Indian languages are essential carriers of cultural knowledge, while multilingual competence and access to wider scholarly communication remain important.

7.3 Diversity, equality and the risk of homogenisation

India's cultural landscape is internally diverse across region, language, religion, caste, tribe, gender and class. A national narrative that recognises only dominant traditions risks making other histories invisible. The challenge is particularly acute where cultural symbols are treated as tests of loyalty. Democratic belonging cannot depend on compulsory conformity in matters of belief, worship, language or lifestyle. Ambedkar's critique remains relevant because it reminds us that social hierarchy can persist beneath claims of cultural unity. Cultural nationalism must therefore be assessed by its practical consequences for dignity, participation and equal protection.

7.4 Globalisation and cultural confidence

Globalisation has intensified the circulation of media, consumer culture, ideas and diasporic identities. Cultural nationalism can respond by supporting heritage conservation, translation, local arts and public education. Yet cultural preservation should not become isolationism. Indian traditions have historically developed through exchange, adaptation and contestation. A confident cultural outlook can engage with global knowledge while retaining the ability to evaluate external influences critically.

7.5 Digital public sphere and contested narratives

Digital platforms have widened access to archives, languages and cultural expression, but they have also accelerated the circulation of decontextualised historical claims and polarising narratives. Public institutions, universities and researchers have a responsibility to make reliable sources accessible and to cultivate historical literacy. The digital public sphere should enable debate based on evidence rather than reward the most emotionally charged account of the past.

8. Toward an Inclusive Framework

An inclusive interpretation of cultural nationalism may be built around five connected principles. First, civilisational continuity should be understood as a layered historical process shaped by exchange and change, not as a claim of cultural purity. Second, cultural confidence should be compatible with freedom of conscience and the right of communities to preserve their languages and traditions. Third, national unity must be linked to social justice, including the dismantling of caste-based and other forms of exclusion. Fourth, public institutions should promote historical research, critical education and fair representation. Fifth, citizenship must remain grounded in constitutional equality rather than in a compulsory cultural test. These principles do not require the abandonment of patriotism or civilisational self-understanding. They distinguish an inclusive cultural nationalism from majoritarian or homogenising projects. The former treats cultural heritage as a shared, evolving resource; the latter risks converting one interpretation of culture into a measure of political legitimacy. In a diverse democracy, the strength of national identity is better demonstrated by its capacity to protect difference than by its ability to eliminate it.

9. Conclusion

Cultural nationalism occupies an enduring place in Indian political thought because the struggle for national freedom was also a struggle over historical self-understanding, cultural dignity and the right to define India's future. Its intellectual foundations are diverse. Bankimchandra, Vivekananda and Aurobindo contributed to cultural self-respect and national regeneration; Gandhi connected swaraj with ethical responsibility; Tagore cautioned against aggressive nationalism and defended a humanist conception of community; Savarkar articulated a distinctive cultural-political definition of nationhood; Ambedkar placed social democracy and the annihilation of caste at the heart of democratic life; and Nehru emphasised composite culture and modern constitutional institutions. Their disagreements are not marginal to the subject; they constitute its intellectual substance.

The contemporary relevance of these debates lies in the question of how cultural inheritance can contribute to a shared political community without erasing internal diversity. The Constitution offers an essential normative framework through freedom of conscience, cultural and educational rights, equality and the duty to preserve India's composite heritage. Accordingly, cultural nationalism is most defensible as a democratic ethic of cultural confidence, historical inquiry and mutual respect. It becomes exclusionary when it treats a single cultural identity as the compulsory standard of citizenship or overlooks entrenched inequalities. The future of Indian national integration depends not on choosing between culture and constitutionalism, but on ensuring that cultural life flourishes within the protections and responsibilities of constitutional democracy.

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