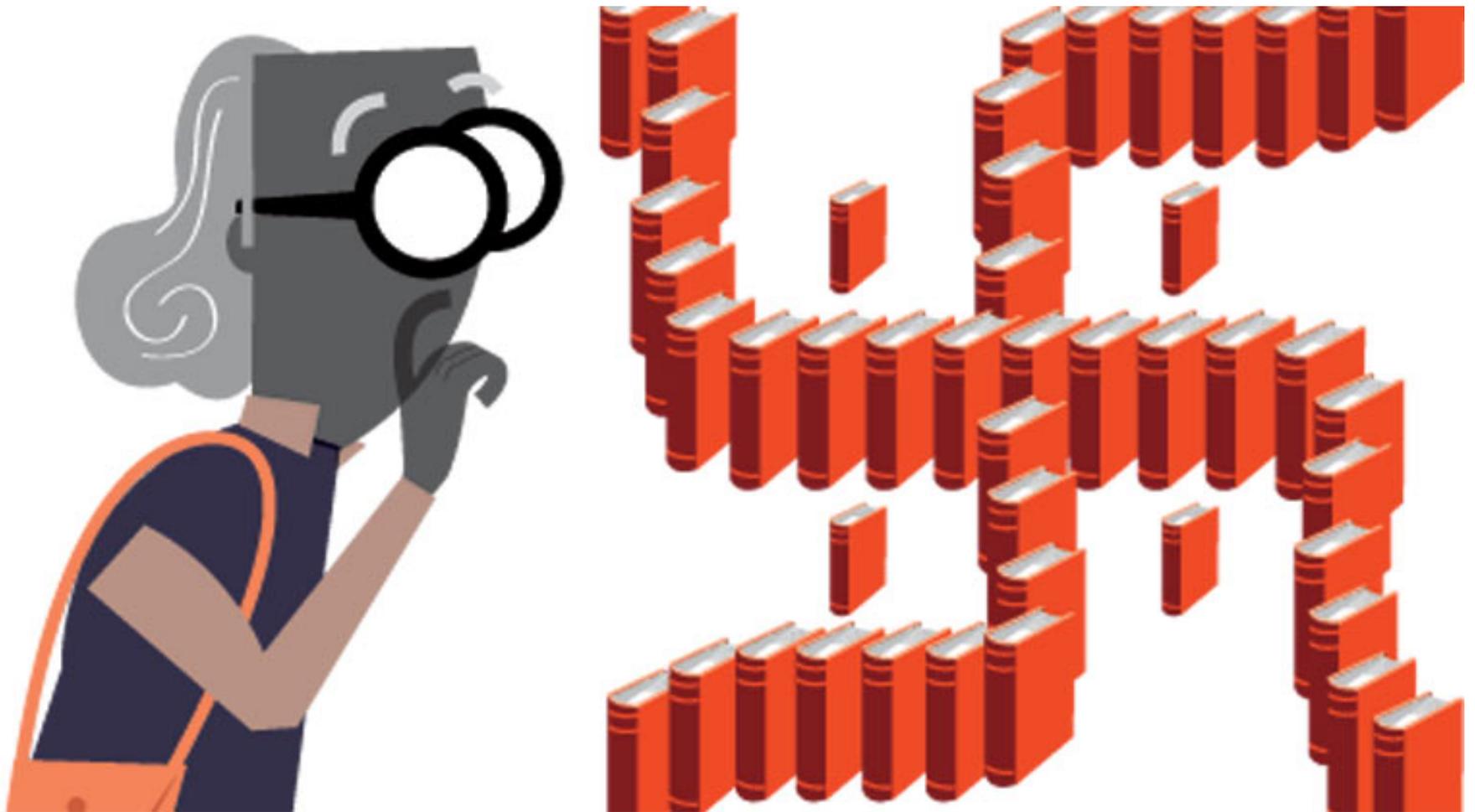


Liberals and nationalism

They disapprove of Hindu nationalism, but support the constitutionally consecrated view of the nation



Liberals are opposed to Hindu nationalism because it is a form of ethnic nationalism; it is not civic nationalism. (Illustration by C R Sasikumar/Representational)

This column is about liberalism, but it is not a direct intervention in the debate between Harsh Mander ([‘Sonia, Sadly’](#)) and Ram Guha ([‘Liberals, Sadly’](#)). Most of the commentary has focused on whether it was analytically proper for Guha to compare trishuls and burkas. But, essentially, it is a debate about how liberals should view minority rights.

The question I ask here is related but different. I want to enter a debate currently taking place in several democracies in the world. Liberals, it is said, are in decline because they intensely dislike nationalism, which is on the rise. It is also said that liberals defend all kind of rights – civil rights, women’s

rights, minority rights — but they rarely, if ever, speak of the rights of national communities. With great pride, Hungary's prime minister, Viktor Orbán, has gone to the extent of calling himself an “illiberal democrat”, which for him means a democrat “with national foundations”. And in India, the term “anti national” has also been used to describe liberals.

Are liberals really opposed to nationalism? To answer this question, two issues need to be dissected: What is liberalism? And how does one define nationalism? In a well-known text, *The Making of Modern Liberalism*, Allan Ryan, a political theorist, has argued that “we should be seeking to understand liberalisms rather than liberalism”. Liberals differ on the role of government; on which rights should be defended; on whether, instead of rights, the concept of utility, so dear to economic modes of thinking and central also to the 19th century liberalism of John Stuart Mill, can still be used in liberal politics.

While the argument about many liberalisms is not wrong, it is also true that it is impossible to imagine modern-day liberalism without at least three rights that should accrue to citizens and constrain governments: Freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and freedom of association. These freedoms, when enshrined in the constitution and laws, become the foundation of “limited government” which, to most liberals, is a defining feature of a liberal political order. For liberal modes of thinking, governments can't take these rights away. Only in exceptional conditions, mostly triggered by demonstrable, not fake, national security considerations, can restrictions be placed.

Just as liberalism can come in several forms, nationalism, too, is not a unitary concept. In the vast literature on nationalism, a standard distinction is normally drawn between two types of nations and nationalisms: Civic and ethnic. Civic nations allow citizenship and equal rights to all those born inside the territory of a state regardless of ethnicity, religion or race. The US and France are often cited as examples that come closest to the concept of civic nations. Though their historical record is less than perfect, the French and American revolutions that led to the birth of these nations were indeed

founded on civic ideals, not ethnicity, religion or race.

Ethnic nationhood is conceptualised differently. It says that an ethnic, racial or religious majority or group can “own” the nation, and minorities either do not exist, or must have a secondary status. Blood is the basis of such nationhood, not civic ideals. The literature cites Germany and Japan as key examples of this variant. In a famous comparison laid out in *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany*, Rogers Brubaker showed how post-revolutionary France gave citizenship on the basis of birth within the French territory, whereas for Germany, German ancestry was the basis. Consistent with this historic principle, right up to the 1990s, Germany gave several million Turks, including those born in Germany, the status of “guest workers” only, not citizens.

Of the two, civic nationalism is compatible with liberalism. But ethnic nationalism, by relegating minorities to a secondary status or expressing hostility to minority rights, is inimical to modern liberalism. Liberals are opposed to ethnic nationalism, not nationalism per se.

Let us now examine the implications of this reasoning for India. The first question we need to pose is one of conceptual categorisation. What kind of a nation is India — is it civic or ethnic? If we go by the Constitution, India chose more of a civic than an ethnic model at Independence. In the 1950s, Indians living in East and South Africa and Malaysia were not granted Indian citizenship, even though they had Indian ancestry. Rather, they were encouraged to remain committed to their adopted lands. Equally important, no ethnic or religious groups was given political primacy in the constitutional settlement. All groups and citizens were legally equal.

In Hindu nationalist circles, it is often suggested that this view of Indian nationhood was a Nehruvian imposition. It is forgotten that whatever their differences on other matters, Nehru, Gandhi and Ambedkar were in agreement that all religious communities were equal partners in the Indian nation. It should also be noted that the RSS intensely criticised India’s

Constitution, whose writing Ambedkar had led, stating that the Manusmriti, which in ancient India provided one of the earliest rationales of the awful inequalities of the caste system and whose copies Ambedkar had publicly burned in the 1920s, should have been the basis for India's Constitution.

Liberals are opposed to Hindu nationalism because it is a form of ethnic nationalism; it is not civic nationalism. It privileges India's Hindu majority in the political order and is hostile to minority religions, especially those that were born outside India, such as Islam and Christianity. All basic texts of Hindu nationalism — from Savarkar to Golwalkar to Deen Dayal Upadhyaya — carry this message. In contrast, no modern-day liberal can deny equality to minorities and support majoritarianism.

Nehru's biographers have noted that he used to keep two statuettes on his desk: One of [Mahatma Gandhi](#), the other of [Abraham Lincoln](#). The point was clear. Nehru would offer Gandhi's heart to all those who were members of the Indian nation formed by the Constitution, but he would use Lincoln's hand against anyone who sought to break up the nation. There would be no concessions made.

Nehru's tale is an allegory of Indian liberalism. Liberals disapprove of Hindu nationalism, but they support the constitutionally consecrated view of the nation — and would battle against those who seek disintegration.

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