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The Bharat Mata pivot

It gives the BJP a mobilisational narrative to link what the RSS wants with what it can render as a holder of state power.

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Bharat Mata statue (Archives)

The evidence is now unmistakable that India's economic transformation is not the primary project of the [BJP](#) regime. The BJP's 2014 election campaign was heavily based on that. But for all practical purposes, economic development has become a

secondary narrative for the BJP. A sensible 2016 national budget held political attention for a day or two. Make in India, Start-Up India, Digital India, Smart Cities, as projects, have not led to campaigns. Basically, no cadres, no crowds, no great emotions have been mobilised in behalf of economic development. To paraphrase Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#), *vikas* (development) has not become a *janandolan* (mass movement).

India's cultural transformation is the fundamental project of BJP politics today. If the economy is transformed, the success will, of course, be ardently celebrated. But if that does not come about, a cultural narrative is being created for political campaigns. The government is bowing to the RSS, which has greater mobilisation power than the BJP, provides cadres to BJP campaigns, and cannot live without its core belief that India is a Hindu nation. Economics is entirely secondary to the functioning of the RSS.

Compare this government's lacklustre economic mobilisation with the unflagging energy of Hindu nationalist cultural campaigns. First it was "*ghar wapsi*"

Indeed, the emergence of nationalism as a theme and the identification of *Bharat Mata* as its central metaphor are the new ideological pivots. The pivot was formed in the JNU crisis but its roots lie in the BJP's attempt to discover a formula that can merge its own concerns with those of the RSS.

All political regimes in India have, nearly always, appointed sympathetic heads of universities, research and cultural bodies. What is distinctive about the current regime is not its appointment of obscure figures as academic heads, but its focus on the student politics of universities. As part of this project, the BJP is also trying to turn the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), a Hindu-nationalist student organisation, into a prime vehicle. The ABVP has long been present in India's universities. Indeed, several important ministers of the Modi government, such as [Arun Jaitley](#) and Ravi Shankar Prasad, cut their political teeth as ABVP leaders. But at no point has the ABVP been critical to the decision-making of BJP governments.

That norm has been broken. Consider the two most important university-government conflicts of the last few months. [Rohith Vemula](#) was suspended from Hyderabad Central University because he fought with the ABVP, which successfully reached BJP ministers in Delhi for punitive action. At JNU, Kanhaiya Kumar clashed with the ABVP, which then used its access to the BJP government for a fullscale state assault on JNU's intellectual culture.

I was a student at JNU during 1977-81 and have also been in touch since then. I may not have a flattering view of JNU's research achievements, but that is irrelevant to how we judge the JNU crisis, which is about larger principles.

The student slogans, which ignited the ire of the political establishment, were always heard on the fringes at JNU. Several JNU professors were also rebellious. They were troubling then, as they are annoying today, but they were never the mainstream, which was always more anti-state than anti-national. Many at JNU disliked the Indian state, but they did not abhor the Indian nation. They simply had different views about how to make the state more humane and pro-poor.

in the civil service, journalism and academia. Their views did not cause India's disintegration, nor will that happen now, for debate is JNU's forte, not armed action. And without armed action, modern states do not normally crumble. All views at JNU were handled via debates and votes in elections. State power was not used, except during the Emergency.

The ABVP has every right to campaign against students, professors and organisations that question the Indian state, even nationhood, and win campus debates and/or student elections. But the use of state power, especially [sedition](#) laws, morphs a regular problem of debate into one of national security.

That is the metamorphosis the government has brought about with audacious impunity. The question is why. The best hypothesis is that the BJP is looking for a mobilisational narrative that can bridge what the RSS wants and what the BJP can render as a holder of state power. The BJP's own organisational cadres are not as

large, or as committed, as those of the RSS. So long as the BJP does not fully rely on its own cadres, its dependence on the RSS will remain.

But while in power, the BJP cannot openly embrace “ghar wapsi” or beef bans as its primary narrative. It can only wink and nod. Both narratives, nakedly communal, create political difficulties, internally and internationally. Some non-RSS members of the BJP are in the top tiers of power, and the respect that Modi has in Western capitals would erode, if his regime came to be identified with religious violence.

The nation, conceptualised as Bharat Mata, provides a solution. To the RSS, it merges the Hindu with the nation, but for millions of non-RSS Indians, Bharat Mata is larger in its symbolism. In *The Discovery of India*, Jawaharlal Nehru narrates in fascinating detail how during his travels, millions of rural peasants, regardless of background, described India as Bharat Mata. Even today, rural Muslims may not object to the concept of Bharat Mata.

Of course, right since Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay’s 1882 novel, *Anandamath*,

Akhtar, who do not share that view. Unlike the cow, the reconversions or the Ram temple, Bharat Mata cannot be unambiguously linked to Hindu communalism. Even the [Congress](#), as a result, has fallen for the slogan.

Can Bharat Mata be a magic fuel for the BJP’s onward ideological march? Can Indians be forced to say “*Bharat Mata ki Ja!*” (victory to Mother India)? Do the liberals have another way of defining the nation? These questions are analytically separable from why Bharat Mata has risen as a new BJP pivot.

The next columns will address them.

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FROM AROUND THE WEB
