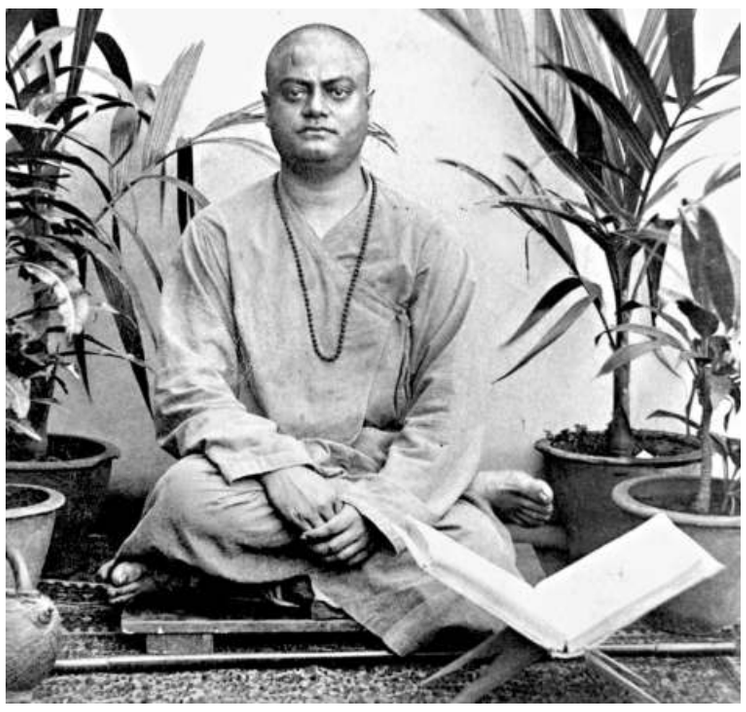
The monk who shaped India's secularism

Vivekananda was a proponent of a multicultural nation rooted in religious tolerance and modernity

RAHUL MUKHERJI



Swami Vivekananda believed in the philosophy of *sarva dharma sama bhava* (all religions lead to the same goal). ▪ VIVEKANANDA ILLAM/THE HINDU

Has Indian nationalism turned utterly exclusivist? What would one of the icons of nationalism, Swami Vivekananda, have to say about this shift? Nationalism, after all, is a battle for the myths that create a nation.

The practice of Indian secularism, despite its pitfalls, has distinguished the country from many of its neighbours. India is the nation with the third-highest number of Muslims in the world. Its ability to consolidate democracy amidst unprecedented diversity could teach a lesson or two even to advanced industrial economies that have operated along the lines of a classic monocultural nation. The country's secular ideals have their roots in its Constitution, promulgated by its people, a majority of whom are Hindus. Would this state of affairs change because a different morality, Hindu nationalism, has surreptitiously overtaken India's tryst with secular nationalism?

Indian secularism has always attempted, however imperfectly, to respect the credo of *sarva dharma sama bhava* (all religions lead to the same goal), which translates to an equal respect for all religions. However, the early-day Hindu nationalists were clearly at odds with the idea. This was the reason Nathuram Godse assassinated one of its strongest proponents, Mahatma Gandhi.

Hindu nationalism today

For the likes of Godse, a corollary of the two-nation theory was that independent India was primarily a land for Hindus. More than 70 years after Independence, this notion has gained prominence as never before in India's post-colonial history. This is evident when the Central government says it will consider all Hindus in neighbouring countries as potential Indian citizens. The most recent example of this is the bifurcation of Jammu and Kashmir, the country's only Muslim-majority State, into two Union Territories, with all special provisions taken away from the erstwhile State's residents.

Not only were Kashmiris not consulted, they were made to suffer an information blackout. Does this kind of Hindu nationalism align with the cosmopolitan nature of India's millennial traditions?

Another question that needs to be asked is: Is it fair to appropriate Swami Vivekananda, another follower of the *sarva dharma sama bhava* philosophy whom Prime Minister Narendra Modi keeps citing, as a Hindutva icon?

Here, it is necessary to understand what Vivekananda's life and world view said about Indian nationalism. His Chicago lectures (1893) marked the beginning of a mission that would interpret India's millennial tradition in order to reform it and he later spent about two years in New York, establishing the first Vedanta Society in 1894. He travelled widely across Europe and engaged Indologists such as Max Mueller and Paul Deussen. He even debated with eminent scientists such as Nicola Tesla before embarking on his reformist mission in India.

One of the key elements of his message, based on the experiments of his spiritual mentor Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, was that all religions lead to the same goal. Paramahansa is unique in the annals of mysticism as one whose spiritual practices reflect the belief that the ideas of personal god and that of an impersonal god as well as spiritual practices in Christianity and in Islam all lead to the same realisation.

While in Chicago, Vivekananda stressed three important and novel facets of Hindu life. First, he said that Indian tradition believed "not only in toleration" but in acceptance of "all religions as true". Second, he stressed in no uncertain terms that Hinduism was incomplete without Buddhism, and vice versa.

Finally, at the last meeting he proclaimed: "[I]f anybody dreams [of] the exclusive survival of his own religion and the destruction of others, I pity him from the bottom of my heart, and point out to him that upon the banner of every religion will soon be written, in spite of resistance: 'Help and not fight'; 'Assimilation and not destruction', and 'Harmony and peace and not dissension'.

Religion and rationality

Vivekananda's interpretation of India's past was radical and, when he returned from the West, he had with him a large number of American and European followers. These women and men stood behind his project of establishing the Ramakrishna Mission in 1897.

Vivekananda emphasised that India needed to trade Indian spirituality for the West's material and modern culture and was firmly behind India's scientific modernisation. He supported Jagadish Chandra Bose's scientific projects. In fact, Vivekananda's American disciple Sara Bull helped patent Bose's discoveries in the U.S. He also invited Irish teacher Margaret Noble, whom he rechristened 'Sister Nivedita', to help uplift the condition of Indian women. When she inaugurated a girls' school in Calcutta, Vivekananda even requested his friends to send their girls to this school.

Vivekananda also inspired Jamsetji Tata to establish the Indian Institute of Science and the Tata Iron and Steel Company. India needed a secular monastery from where scientific and technological development would uplift India's material conditions, for which his ideals provided a source of inspiration.

Influence on Gandhi, Nehru

Vivekananda made a remarkable impact on the makers of modern India, who later challenged the two-nation theory, including Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose. He used the term 'Daridra Narayan' to imply that 'service to the poor is service to god', many years before Gandhiji addressed the socially oppressed as 'Harijan' (children of god). The Mahatma in fact opined that his love for India grew thousandfold after reading Vivekananda.

It is for these reasons that the latter's birthday was declared as the National Youth Day.

Was Vivekananda then a proponent of Hindutva or of the millennial traditions that have survived many an invasion and endured to teach the world both "toleration and universal acceptance"? Should Hindu nationalism take his name but forget his fiery modern spirit that rediscovered and reformed India's past? And shouldn't India's secular nationalism also acknowledge its deeply spiritual roots in the beliefs of pioneers like the reformer?

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After Hamza bin Laden

The collaboration of competing anti-Indian and pro-Islamist outfits and standalone clerics is a deadly prospect

R.K. RAGHAVAN

A notorious surname can be a burden. For Hamza bin Laden, the surname was probably a curse as well as a blessing. Not many around the world had probably heard his name until news of his death was broadcast in early August by the U.S. media.

Some reports say that Hamza, 30, was killed in a military operation about two years ago. He was apparently last seen in Iran after he and a few others of his group had been flushed out of Afghanistan. There is also speculation that he sought refuge in Pakistan, like his father Osama bin Laden.

No one knows why it took so long for the U.S. to be convinced that Hamza had indeed died. In 2017, the U.S. had classified Hamza as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist. This decision was possibly on account of the realisation that Hamza's vitriolic utterances against the U.S could inflame passions in the Islamic world, inside al Qaeda and outside.

Ironically, the U.S. announced a bounty of $1 million on his head only early this year, an indication that there was some doubt about his death until July 31. This reinforces the impression that targeted terrorists are elusive, fleet-footed and are able to hide their identities and movements for long, even from the Central Intelligence Agency and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Impact on al Qaeda

Terror experts are divided on the impact of Hamza's killing on al Qaeda. Some say he was charismatic and had great oratorical skills that won him some admirers looking for straws to clutch on to in the post-Osama era. But beyond this there wasn't anything spectacular about Hamza to write home about. There is no account of his assuming a front-line role on any occasion – as a strategist, propogandist or fighter. In sum, he was a nondescript personality from whom a lot was expected. He disappointed his small number of followers.

Whispers went around in al Qaeda circles for a while that the mantle of leadership of the dreaded outfit was waiting to fall on Hamza. This was because Ayman al-Zawahiri, the current head, who took over from Osama bin Laden, was reportedly suffering from a potentially debilitating heart condition and had failed to provide inspiration for any major attacks. He also chose not to target the West and its allies.

But if one looks at it objectively, Osama bin Laden himself was unable to carry out any attacks after 9/11 as he was on the run. Realising that the U.S. would somehow get him, bin Laden was desperate that the outfit he had built assiduously should not become rudderless after him. Bin Laden groomed Hamza hoping that he would continue to work with the same zeal after his time. But Hamza did not live up to his father's expectations. He made occasional noises against the U.S., which were possibly feeble attempts to avenge his father's killing. But nothing more.

Perhaps Hamza could not have been able to do much after his father's death anyway. In the post-Osama era, al Qaeda began to be overshadowed by the arrival of a belligerent Islamic State (IS). With a relatively young leadership which exploited modern technology, the IS attempted to establish a Caliphate rather than focusing on winning followers by banking on a fossilised ideology, as al Qaeda did and suffered irretrievably.

Preventing a coalescence

Where does all this leave counterterrorism policymakers? They should focus on a strategy to prevent a coalescence of al Qaeda and the IS. The two are not bitter enemies (though al Qaeda believes less in reckless attacks) as some mistakenly believe. There are no doubt differences between them, such as the territory they should concentrate on and the methods they should employ in unleashing terror. Al Qaeda's targets are essentially the U.S. and its allies, while the IS has worked overtime in capturing geographical areas and associated assets in Syria and Iraq. The IS had huge appeal among the youth.

There was no major conflict between the two organisations which have demarcated among themselves territories from which to operate. On a handful of occasions the two have actually worked in tandem. This is why any tactic of playing one against the other may not work to destabilise either. Both are formidable and their prowess cannot be underrated. The two can individually or together work to muddy the troubled waters on our borders. Both are looking for space to expand. The recent intemperate utterances on Kashmir of Maulana Abdul Aziz, a cleric who was close to Osama bin Laden and who was the Imam of the historic Lal Masjid in Islamabad in 2007 when the Pakistan Army laid siege, are mischievous. This is why collaboration of an assortment of competing anti-Indian and pro-Islamist outfits and standalone clerics is a deadly prospect.

R.K. Raghavan is a former CBI Director. Views are personal

Recognising fair criticism

The central focus of 'The Lancet' has always been on health, and the editorial on J&K is no different

R. PRASAD

The anger against the British medical journal, *The Lancet*, for publishing on August 17 a strongly worded editorial on Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) was initially restricted to social media. However, two days later, the Indian Medical Association (IMA) waded into the controversy with a letter admonishing Richard Horton, the editor-in-chief of the journal. "The reputed medical journal *The Lancet* has committed breach of propriety in commenting on this political issue" and the editorial amounts to "interference into an internal matter of Union of India," the letter says. It adds that "*The Lancet* has no locus standi on the issue of Kashmir" and questioned the "credibility and the mala fide intention behind the uncalled for editorial."

The Lancet editorial

The editorial is broadly divided into three parts. The first lists facts. The second focusses on the findings of two reports: one by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights on human rights violations in J&K and the second by Médecins Sans Frontières on the state of mental health in J&K. The third part carries the opinion of the journal. The ground reality and the findings of the two reports are given equal treatment and weightage.

The controversial part is found in the beginning and end of the editorial. The editorial begins by calling the revocation of Article 370 a "controversial move" that gives the government "greater authority over the State's affairs". It then adds that "militant presence raises serious concerns for the health, safety, and freedoms of the Kashmiri people". It concludes that the "people of Kashmir need healing from the deep wounds of this decades-old conflict, not subjugation to further violence and alienation."

While those outside the medical fraternity may not know about *The Lancet*'s stand on issues such as J&K, it is unfortunate that the IMA reacted in the manner that it did. How can a body of over 500,000 doctors, which is supposed to be reading the journal regularly, be unaware of what the journal has always stood for?

The role of a medical journal

The editorial is not an "act of commission" by *The Lancet*, as the IMA calls it, but what the journal considers as its beholden duty to speak up for people in health distress. This may be the first time that *The Lancet* has written critically about the J&K issue, but it is naïve to assume that it has never written on such matters before. In fact, it regularly denounces any action or policy of any nation or group that harms people's health. It has commented on Pakistan, Sri Lanka, the refugee crises in the U.S. and Canada, Sudan, the Arab Spring, and several times on Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Rohingya.

In a July 2014 editorial on Gaza, *The Lancet* wrote: "The Lancet is a general medical journal that publishes research, news, and opinion about all aspects of human health and well-being. In situations of war and conflict – such as in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and elsewhere – our perspective has always been to put the interests of civilian lives ahead of the politics of military engagement... The role of the doctor is to protect, serve, and speak up for life. That, too, is the role of a medical journal."

The same day that the editorial on J&K was published, *The Lancet* also carried another on mass shootings in the U.S. After putting the editorial in context and referring to a report on mass violence, the journal criticised the government saying: "The far right and the Trump administration have fomented and normalised white nationalist sentiment and entitlement with anti-immigrant rhetoric, which is amplified by conservative media and then consumed by the disenfranchised."

Unlike in the case of the editorial on J&K, the journal has been scathing at times while commenting on other countries. But the central focus has always been on health, and the editorial on J&K is no different.

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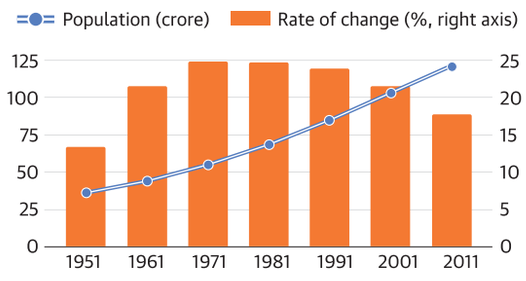
DATA POINT

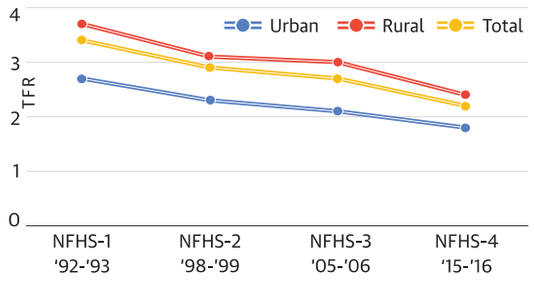
Taking a headcount

In his Independence Day speech, Prime Minister Narendra Modi touched upon the need to control 'population explosion' in India. However, the growth rate of the country's population has been falling since 1971. The Total Fertility Rate* (TFR) has also been falling across most States. By **Varun B. Krishnan**

GROWTH SLOWS India's population growth rate peaked between 1961 and 1971 and has been falling since. The Census of 2011 counted 121 crore people in India

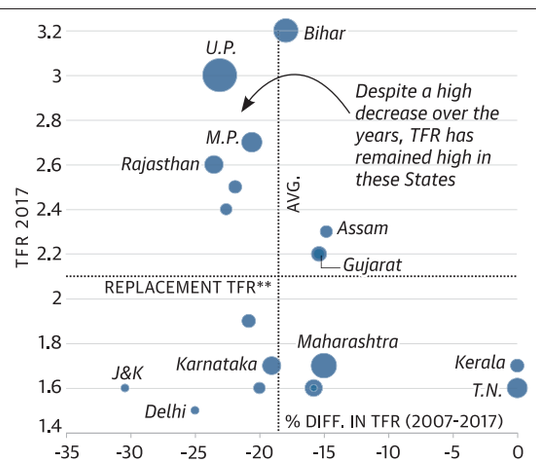


FEWER CHILDREN While TFR in rural areas remains higher than in urban areas, it has been declining at a faster rate than the latter, according to National Family Health Surveys (NFHS)



STATE OF FERTILITY
Among bigger States#, J&K and Delhi registered the biggest drop in TFR (in % terms) from 2007 to 2017, while Kerala & T.N. showed no change. Size of the circle indicates the State's population as a % of the total

**Avg. no. of children borne by a woman in her lifetime; #As given by Sample Registration Survey*
*** The TFR at which a population exactly replaces its numbers from one generation to the next (without migration)*
SOURCE: SRS, CENSUS, NFHS



POPULATION CHANGE
Increase in population was highest in Bihar between 2001 and 2011 and lowest in Kerala. The table lists the top and bottom three States (in % terms)

State	Population increase 2001-2011
Bihar	25.42%
J&K	23.64%
Chhattisgarh	22.61%
Punjab	13.89%
West Bengal	13.84%
Kerala	4.91%

The Hindu.

FROM THE ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO AUGUST 21, 1969

Giri elected new President of India

The independent candidate, Mr. V. V. Giri, who became the non-official Congress nominee of the Prime Minister in the wake of her current power struggle with the Syndicate, was to-day [August 20] declared elected the fourth President of India, defeating his official Congress rival, Mr. N. Sanjiva Reddi, in the most bitterly contested election since Independence, which might well alter the course of history in this country. Though Mr. Giri had a clear lead of 35,551 votes - having secured a total of 401,515 against the 313,548 polled by Mr. Sanjiva Reddi and 112,769 by C.D. Deshmukh - he fell short of 16,659 votes for an absolute majority in the first count under the system of proportional representation prescribed for the Presidential election. But Mr. Giri managed to meet this requirement in the second count which gave him a margin of 14,650 votes over his nearest rival, Mr. Sanjiva Reddi. The President-elect got in the second count 420,077 votes as against 405,427 secured by the official Congress candidate. Mr. S. L. Shakdher, Returning Officer, announced at 10-33 p.m., "I declare Mr. V. V. Giri duly elected President."

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO AUGUST 21, 1919.

The Inter-Caste Marriage Bill.

Colonel Yate intends to ask the Secretary of State for India on Monday next, whether he is aware that the introduction of the Patel Hindu Inter-Caste Marriage Bill in the Indian Legislative Council and its circulation by the Government of India through local government for opinion has caused great alarm amongst orthodox Hindus of all classes of society in India, as an interference with their most sacred religious and social usages which it has been the policy of the British Government hither to never to interfere with. In view of the considerations mentioned, Colonel Yate wants the Secretary of State to ascertain from the Government of India whether it would be desirable to take action to reassure orthodox Hindu opinion that no interference with religious usage is contemplated by the British Government. The subject was also raised by Lord Sydenham in the Joint Committee yesterday for purpose which you can well imagine. Most of his questions to Mr. Ramaswami Aiyar were intended to make as much as possible of the differences which exist amongst social and political reformers in India. Hence we had the questions about rival Home Rule Leagues and their respective relations with the National Congress.