

Why Hindustaniyat is an Alternative to Hindutva

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Tarunabh Khaitan

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The [Congress Party's manifesto](#) for the 2024 elections includes [some good policy proposals](#) to restore Indian democracy to good health. Many of them resonate with the recommendations I made in a [previous piece for *The Wire*](#).

Yet while there is much to commend in this document, it still speaks to the mind, not the heart. Mario Cuomo, former governor of New York, once remarked that a politician should 'campaign in poetry' but 'govern in prose.' The manifesto's prose is passably good. But can the opposition articulate a poetic narrative – one that speaks to the voters' hearts? Can it offer a narrative that expresses the sincerity of a believer, not the strategic manoeuvrings of a pragmatist? Can it frame a discourse that has something to say about the passionate spheres of the cultural and the ethical, beyond merely the political, the economic, and the social? Perhaps it cannot. But let it at least attempt to give a progressive answer to *the* defining question of our times: 'Who belongs?'

A large part of the attraction and success of Hindutva lies in its ability to answer that question: it offers a passionate identitarian vision, howsoever hateful, of who belongs to this land, and – importantly – who does not. Within its narrow, exclusionary confines lie the imagined solace of solidarity and fraternity. Twenty-first-century

liberals and progressives have failed to fully grasp the profound yearning for this sense of community felt by the inhabitants of a fast-changing world facing an uncertain future. Progressives around the world have clumsily dodged the issue of belonging, hoping the question will go away.

The question does indeed tend to go away in times of security and plenty. But in times of scarcity and suffering, it acquires great significance in human societies. Progressives have to answer the belonging question if they are to have a fighting chance in these elections. Good policies are necessary, but they are far from sufficient.

Progressives need to present an alternative to Hindutva.

A powerful possibility lies in the concept of *Hindustaniyat*: an idea fleetingly invoked by Sonia Gandhi in a speech in 2014, and more persistently by [Nayantara Sahgal](#) over the last decade. Nevertheless, progressive forces have failed to harness its emotive and poetic potential as a counter-narrative to Hindutva. Bharat Jodo was indeed an attempt to grapple with the belonging question, but it needed a coherent narrative glue – a glue that Hindustaniyat could provide.

Hindutva defines the self in terms of religious, linguistic and caste identities; Hindustaniyat – on the other hand – can become a virtue-based articulation of what it means to be Indian. Virtue has played a critical role in Indian ethical thought. One of the meanings of *dharma* is indeed virtue. In Tiruvalluvar's political philosophy, *aram* (virtue) is a central organising principle. The Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path is but a list of precepts a virtuous person would follow. Sufism placed great emphasis on *tawba* (repentance for one's sins) as a virtue. Every culture emphasises certain virtues more than others – such emphases are evidently impressionistic and stereotypical, for one can no doubt find enough people within a culture who lack 'its' virtues and many without who have them. But the mere act of identifying, expressing, and embracing certain virtues as definitive of one's fraternal community makes them aspirational, and – to some extent – self-fulfilling.

Also read: [Hindutva and the Question of Who Owns India](#)

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Consider the following list of virtues that many of us would readily identify as distinctively Indian, Bharatiya or Hindustani. It does not matter if you do not agree with every item in this list, or if you think more important ones have been omitted –

that can be finessed over time. It would, after all, not be in keeping with the spirit of Hindustaniyat if its tenets were placed beyond constant debate and questioning.

1. Unlike Hindutva's petty aversion to anyone deemed an 'outsider', Hindustaniyat prizes hospitality (*atithi-devo-bhava* or *mehmaan-nawaazi* – phrases that refer to the centrality of and respect for guests). Who will deny the pains that the poorest Indian household will go to for the comfort of a guest?
2. A Hindustani temperament is comfortable with complexity, difference, and contradictions (the opposite of Hindutva's black-and-white zealotry).
3. Hindustaniyat puts a social premium on civility and good etiquette in speech and in action, captured by numerous ethical concepts such as *shaaleenta*, *sanyam*, *namrata*, *adab*, *tehzeeb*, and *garima* (propriety, politeness, syncretism). This virtue looks askance at the ostentatious claims Hindutvawadis are fond of making about one's power and superiority, or about the dimensions of one's chest for that matter.
4. Unlike Hindutva's selfishness, Hindustaniyat demands *other-regardingness*. Although in need of de-gendering, the phrase 'adjust *karna*' means accommodating the needs of others to some extent, even at a cost to oneself – such as four people sharing a bus seat meant for two. You 'adjust' because it is the civic thing to do, even if it inconveniences you and even if you had a right to insist on not sharing.
5. Whereas Hindutva shuns questioning and dissent, Hindustaniyat celebrates 'the argumentative Indian', to borrow Amartya Sen's phrase.
6. Hindustani inventiveness and industry find expression in making-do (*jugaad*), a form of small-scale coping and anti-waste resourcefulness in the face of adversity, often realised by breaking rigid rules. *Hindutva* prefers the grandeur of a big project to a small but ingenious innovation. It enables a handful of capitalists to form monopolies, while seeking to curb the innumerable individual freedoms that make possible *jugaad* entrepreneurship.
7. The Hindustani temperament is permeable: it readily borrows and assimilates ideas, foods, goods, gods, and people from elsewhere, without losing one's own sense of self. This permeability requires a secure, resilient, and confident sense of self. Hindutva's self, on the other hand, is brittle and insecure, forever demanding protection from impure foreign influences.

8. Hindustaniyat, like Hindutva, gives great importance to the family, and the ethical duties of care one has towards one's kin. The difference between them is that Hindutva seeks to define the family in narrow, patriarchal, and casteist terms, offering a single, rigid, state-regulated model of what counts as a family. Hindustaniyat, on the other hand, has a very capacious understanding of family, which blurs the lines between kinship and friendship. It includes within the care-giving family the non-marital love of Radha-Krishna, the queer gharanas of Hijras, and inter-caste and inter-faith relationships.

This is far from an uncontroversial or comprehensive list. The point I wish to make is that there is surely some such set of culturally-salient virtues that are worth articulating, celebrating, and aspiring to as constitutive of Hindustaniyat. The aspirational character of a people's virtues means they have to necessarily be selective, in order to suppress the less virtuous aspects of one's culture. For example, it is an entirely legitimate question to ask how these virtues interact with caste. I have no doubt that caste often restricts generous behaviour only to members of one's own caste, or perhaps to Savarnas. The correct response, however, is not to dismiss these virtues as constitutive of Indianness, but to aspire for their universalisation beyond the shackles of casteism, sexism, and other forms of bigotry. There is much that is wrong with our society, especially its deeply hierarchical and unjust social and economic relations. Unlike Hindutva, Hindustaniyat can be an ideational ally in the fight against hierarchy, rather than an apology for it.

Similarly, I am sure we can find enough examples from our history or our present that are contrary to these virtues. But a discourse on belonging can never merely be descriptive – it is always performative, as well as constructive. We become the people we come to believe we are. It matters, therefore, that our beliefs about our aspirational selves reflect the best possible versions of ourselves as a people. So while a virtue-based fraternity must be rooted in our cultural ethos to some extent, our political history need not imprison our ethical future.

Some may worry that any definition of belonging is essentialist—that it reduces human diversity to a small set of commonalities. While this is certainly true of any identity-based definition of ourselves, a virtue-based definition is less problematic, provided we choose the right virtues to aspire to. I also note that finding solidarity in shared experiences used to be a progressive ideal, something we have forgotten by mouthing a hyper-individualistic identity discourse in which the 'we' has become entirely subservient to the 'I'. We need to reclaim the value of solidarity and fraternity, even if it entails a measure of essentialising and stereotyping. Even as our differences and diversity should be celebrated, it is also time for progressives to embrace a shared sense of virtues that define us as Indians.

Furthermore, a commitment to *Hindustaniyat* is not antithetical to global cosmopolitanism. ‘*Phir bhi dil hai Hindustani*’, sang Raj Kapoor’s character, in spite of the mixed provenance of his worldly wardrobe. Moreover, *Insaaniyat* – empathy with fellow beings, including strangers as well as non-human animals – is surely a key facet of any conception of *Hindustaniyat* worth aspiring to. Shahrukh Khan captured this defining essence of *Hindustaniyat* (alongside tongue-in-cheek self-deprecation), as he danced to a more recent lyric:

‘अपनी छतरी तुमको दे दें कभी जो बरसे पानी,
कभी नये पैकेट में बेचें तुमको चीज़ पुरानी
फिर भी दिल है हिंदुस्तानी
फिर भी दिल है हिंदुस्तानी’

(‘We will readily hand over our umbrellas if you’re caught in a shower, even if we might sometimes sell you old wine in a new bottle, for the heart is *Hindustani*’).

Ultimately, progressives will continue to ignore the belonging question at their peril. The question is not whether an unembarrassed progressive articulation of Indianness is warranted, but what shape it should take. Simply refusing to fight on the cultural battlefield will only ensure that you will lose. *Hindustaniyat* can become the rallying cry for the resistance to the [authoritarian nightmare we have sleep-walked into](#) – if only the political opposition would articulate, embody, and celebrate this alternative to Hindutva. It must be prepared to do so patiently, sincerely, and persistently, even in the face of political losses, mockery, and persecution. *Hindustaniyat* may just be the poetic embellishment a prosaic manifesto needs.

Tarunabh Khaitan is the Professor (Chair) of Public Law at the London School of Economics & Political Science.