

THE NEHRU CENTRE NEWSLETTER



ABOUT US

The Nehru Centre (TNC) in New Delhi is a unit of Sanket Development Group (SDG), a Bhopal-based organisation that has been working for several years in the areas of education, capacity building, Panchayati Raj and livelihoods. The unit works as a think tank that produces knowledge on history, economics, public policy, sociology and current affairs, using in-depth, fact-based quantitative and qualitative research methods. Our primary focus is to make authentic research and knowledge reach a larger audience through novel, creative, interesting and interactive ways of dissemination.



OUR TEAM



DR. MIHIKA SINGH

Senior Research Associate

Mihika holds a PhD in International Studies from Jawaharlal Nehru University, along with a Master's and Bachelor's degree in History from the University of Delhi. Her academic and professional interests lie at the intersection of history, culture, and international relations, with prior experience in academic and policy research.

At The Nehru Centre, Mihika is responsible for managing the Centre's activities, coordinating with external stakeholders, facilitating communication, and conducting in-depth historical and political research.



MANSI SINGH

Research Associate

Mansi holds a Master of Arts (MA) in History from Banaras Hindu University, following her undergraduate studies in History Honours at Gargi College, University of Delhi. Rooted in a Gandhian background, Mansi embraces the philosophy of *Sarvodaya*—the upliftment of all—guiding her commitment to fostering inclusivity and equity.

At the Nehru Centre, Mansi works as a Research Associate, where she actively engages in historical research and contributes to presenting evidence-based narratives. Her expertise lies in modern historiography and critical examination of facts, sources and historical interpretations.



AMARTYA

Research Associate

Amartya is a political analyst and researcher holding an MSc in International Relations from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). His interests include political communication, geopolitics, and emerging tech.

At The Nehru Centre, he focuses on researching Nehruvian foreign policy, evolving information landscape, and contemporary political discourse in India.



DIVYA CHAUHAN (SHE/HER)

Research Associate

Divya is a lawyer and social worker with an LLM from University College London (UCL) and a Master's in Social Work from TISS, Mumbai. She has previously worked with vulnerable populations including women survivors of violence, children in need of care and protection, and rural communities. Her legal practice has focused on service matters at the Central Administrative Tribunal and the Delhi High Court.

At The Nehru Centre, Divya contributes to researching and disseminating knowledge related to legal history, gender, human rights, and constitutional law, while also handling the Centre's social media outreach to engage with external stakeholders.



MIDHAT SAMRA

Research Associate

Midhat graduated from Jamia Millia Islamia with a Bachelor's degree in Economics and a Master's degree in Conflict Analysis and Peacebuilding. Her previous work includes extensive research on hate crimes, hate speech, and violence, along with the production of *The State of the Indian Republic*—a podcast series by *The Scroll*. She also has editorial experience and has contributed to the production of *The Caravan* magazine's fortnightly talk show-Baatcheet. Midhat has a keen interest in history, culture, and politics, with a deep passion for heritage.

At The Nehru Centre, Midhat contributes to research on post-independence economic, social, and political developments. She leads the production and editing of the Centre's podcast series and contributes to its social media outreach.



2024 RECAP

Written by Mansi Singh

Established in August 2024, The Nehru Centre actively began its efforts to uphold the ideals of Jawaharlal Nehru through intellectual discourse, research, public outreach, and countering misinformation. The period was marked by impactful events, critical research, and engaging public content, all reflecting Centre's commitment to truth, reason, and democratic values. The Centre undertook extensive research projects during this period on topics including the rise of communalism, India's Partition, the Ayodhya Title dispute, and socio-economic development during the 19th and 20th centuries. A separate team of interns focused on analyzing economic growth trends in Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu, aiming to identify factors driving regional progress in pre and post-independent India.

In November 2024, the Centre hosted a training session at Rajendra Bhawan, Delhi, on *Nehru and Partition* and *Nehru and Kashmir*, led by Prof. Sandeep Dikshit. The session delved into Nehru's responses to two of the most defining issues of post-independent India. The event aimed to clarify Nehru's vision in the context of historical challenges and shaping public understanding of his role in shaping modern India.

On December 29, 2024, the Centre organized a one-day event, *Nehru Ki Khoj*, at Gandhi Bhawan, Bhopal. The program blended intellectual and cultural engagement, beginning with a musical performance by Kabirpanthi Prahlad Tipanya ji and his team. The *Yuva Samvad* session featured young participants reflecting on Nehru's legacy, followed by addresses from Prof. Sandeep Dikshit, Prof. Purushottam Agrawal, and Prof. Manoj Jha. Key discussions included Nehru's economic vision, the democratic framework of the Indian Constitution, and the importance of protecting secular values. A *Truth Wall* initiative by The Nehru Centre team at the event addressed and corrected myths about Nehru, emphasizing the Centre's dedication to informed discourse.

Simultaneously, throughout the latter half of 2024, The Nehru Centre also worked on creating engaging digital content for the public. As part of its social media outreach, the Centre uploaded a tribute video to Mahatma Gandhi on his birth anniversary, featuring songs that Gandhi might have appreciated, and also prepared a series of short presentations on diverse topics related to Nehru, such as *Nehru and Animals*, *Nehru as a Thinker and Writer*, *Nehru as a Rebel*, *Nehru and Kisan Sabha*, and *Nehru on Culture and Cinema*. These presentations were intended to shed light on various facets of Nehru's multifaceted personality and legacy and are scheduled for upload on the Centre's YouTube channel in the coming months.

In line with its media expansion, the Centre has also planned to launch a podcast series on its YouTube channel, recording its first episode with Dr.Devdutt Pattanaik and Prof.Sandeep Dikshit. The podcast series, a new addition to the Centre's outreach strategy, aims to engage a wider audience by providing in-depth discussions with experts from various fields.

As The Nehru Centre moves forward, it remains committed to expanding its research initiatives, planning more events, and creating engaging digital content to foster public involvement.

HISTORY IN FOCUS

NATIONAL SYMBOLS: A HISTORY OF UNITY OR DIVISION?

Written by Mihika Singh

On November 16, 2024, the Indian diaspora in Nairobi greeted the Indian Prime Minister with chants of 'Vande Mataram' and 'Bharat Mata ki Jai'—slogans that have become synonymous with Indian nationalism and patriotism. From their origins in nationalist literature to their blend of religious and national themes, Bharat Mata and Vande Mataram have emerged as powerful symbols in shaping national identity in India. However, they represent a complex and often contested history, raising questions about whether they play a unifying or a dividing role in a diverse and secular India.

Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's novel *Anandamath* (1882) is significant in order to understand the popularity of the imagery of Bharat Mata and the hymn Vande Mataram, featured in the novel. In *Anandamath*, the nation is personified as Bharat Mata, a goddess suffering under foreign rule, urging her children to awaken and serve her. As Carl Olson stated, Bankim transformed Bharat Mata "into a fully fledged Hindu goddess." By intertwining patriotism with religion, Bankim Chandra effectively shaped a Hindu nationalist identity, and the portrayal of the motherland as Goddess Kali in *Anandamath* indicates that Bankim's nationalism was more Hindu-centric than an inclusive Indian nationalism, as noted by historian R.C. Majumdar.

The novel's narrative is closely tied to the Sannyasi Rebellion of the late 18th century, a resistance movement against British exploitation. The rebellion involved both Hindu Sannyasis and Muslim Fakirs, suggesting a collaborative effort that transcended religious boundaries. However, popular narratives, particularly those shaped by Bankim Chandra in *Anandamath*, often emphasise Hindu revivalism and an ambiguous coexistence with British rule, diverging from the actual events of the rebellion.

Although, *Anandamath* appears to describe historical events, it also performs a political act by envisioning a Hindu nation, not imagined in either the 18th century or during Bankim's time, leaving space for interpretations by various political groups. Bankim's shifts in narrative diverge from established histories, particularly by portraying Muslims as the cause of the famine and destruction of Hindu society, which is seen as a departure from his earlier writings. According to Tanika Sarkar, this shift from power-based Hindu monarchies to a populist, inclusive Hindu nation reflected a modern nationalist ideal. With a legacy marked by its communal overtones, *Anandamath* remains a contested work, interpreted differently by different ideologues.

The popularity of Bharat Mata and Vande Mataram surged during the Swadeshi movement (1905-1908), in response to Bengal's partition. Abanindranath Tagore's iconic painting of Bharat Mata and the hymn Vande Mataram's adoption at the Indian National Congress session in 1896 reinforced their status as symbols of resistance against colonial rule. Despite their widespread appeal, these symbols faced criticism for their exclusivity.

Initially intended as a cultural and nationalistic expression, Vande Mataram's significance shifted over time. The Muslim League objected to Vande Mataram as they perceived the song as emblematic of Hindu majoritarianism and exclusionary to other religious groups, complicating its role as a unifying national symbol. Syed Ali Imam, at the League's 1908 session, criticized the use of Vande Mataram as the 'national cry' stating that "under the cloak of nationalism, Hindu nationalism was being preached in India."

Mahatma Gandhi's suggestion to make Vande Mataram the national anthem of India further intensified the debate. Rabindranath Tagore wrote to Subhash Chandra Bose, then Congress president, questioning the suitability of Vande Mataram as India's national anthem due to its religious connotations.

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The core of Vande Mataram is a hymn to goddess Durga: this is so plain that there can be no debate about it... no Mussulman can be expected patriotically to worship the ten-handed deity as 'Swadesh'.... The novel Anandamath is a work of literature, and so the song is appropriate in it. But, Parliament is a place of union for all religious groups, and there the song cannot be appropriate.

Subsequently, the sub committee of the Congress that was formed in 1937 to assess the suitability of the song endorsed the first two stanzas while the remaining verses were left out due to their religious imagery. However, despite its controversial origins, Vande Mataram had become a powerful and inclusive expression of Indian patriotism attaching itself with a Hindu identity.

The ongoing debate around Bharat Mata and Vande Mataram reflect broader challenges in aligning national symbols with India's secular and multicultural identity. While the song was intended to foster unity and resistance against colonial rule, its religious undertones and sectarian associations have led to persistent friction. Similarly, the evolution of Bharat Mata has transformed from a unifying symbol during colonial times to a contested figure in post-independence India. Her representation has become more exclusive, represented primarily by Hindu identity which is evidenced by the creation of temples dedicated to her, diverging from her initial secular ideals.

The "sacred imagery or holy icons", as historian Eric Hobsbawm observed, highlight the symbolic significance of religious sentiments and shared beliefs in shaping communities that identify as nations. In India, however, the explicitness of the symbols often fostered communal divisions rather than unity. The tension between nationalism and secularism in India's narrative highlights the challenge of integrating historical symbols into a modern pluralistic framework, while balancing national pride and inclusive representation in a diverse democracy.

OPINION

PROFIT OVER PRESERVATION: DELHI'S MONUMENTS UNDER SIEGE

Written by Midhat Samra

The "Adopt a Heritage" initiative, launched by the Ministry of Tourism, Ministry of Culture, and the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), encourages private entities to "adopt" monuments and oversee their restoration and tourism development. While the government presents it as a solution for the upkeep of India's heritage, the program has sparked significant debate. In 2018, Dalmia Bharat, a cement company, became a "monument mitra" for the Red Fort for five years. The adoption of this iconic site by a private corporation raised serious concerns, particularly among academics and historians. They argued that the government's initiative amounts to "pawning off" national treasures to the highest bidder, and in doing so, jeopardizes the integrity of the monument.

William Dalrymple, a renowned historian, eloquently encapsulated these concerns when he remarked, *"There's a huge difference between Dalmia adopting, say, a haveli in Old Delhi and adopting the Red Fort itself. Tier 1 monuments are a nation's crown jewels. They should not be played around with."* His words reflect the anxiety that many feel about the consequences of privatizing such culturally significant spaces. Indeed, some critics suggest that corporations lack the necessary cultural sensitivity, expertise, and accountability to protect and honor the heritage they're entrusted with.

Adding to these worries is the background of Vishnu Hari Dalmia, the founder of the Dalmia group, who was involved in the Babri Masjid demolition case. This connection casts a long shadow over the company's motivations, further stoking suspicions about potential biases in the treatment of Mughal history. While the government justifies these corporate partnerships as "cultural rebalancing," but in reality it is a veiled attempt to diminish the prominence of Mughal history in favor of a more sanitized, nationalistic narrative.

Under this initiative, the Red Fort saw a number of changes, from the opening of cafes and museums to the introduction of light and sound shows, such as "Jai Hind." While these alterations may appeal to some, they also highlight the problematic commercialization of our heritage. The light and sound show, which costs between ₹500 and ₹1500 per person, is out of reach for much of India's population. This exclusivity fosters a dangerous divide between the wealthy and the masses, turning monuments into exclusive sites for the privileged, rather than spaces for all to experience and learn from. The essence of heritage sites lies in their accessibility to all citizens—regardless of their financial status.

This trend continues with the government's launch of "Adopt a Heritage 2.0" in 2023, under which Dalmia Bharat's child organization, Sabhyata Foundation, has taken over the conservation of *Humayun's Tomb, Purana Qila, Mehrauli Archaeological Park, and Safdarjung Tomb*. These monuments, steeped in history and cultural significance, are now being reshaped to include modern amenities like fine dining restaurants, cafes, and live entertainment. For instance, a proposal to relocate trees within Humayun's Tomb to create space for a restaurant not only violates the Ancient Monuments Act of 1958 but also sends a disturbing message: that these sacred sites are now commodities to be exploited by a select few, rather than communal spaces for cultural reflection and engagement.

The proposed changes at these sites, especially the introduction of live entertainment and fine dining within historically significant spaces, are a stark reminder of the growing commercialization of India's heritage. Humayun's Tomb, a burial site for over 125 Mughal emperors, is not an appropriate place for such activities. These actions risk disrespecting the sanctity of these burial grounds, reducing them to mere tourist attractions designed to cater to the tastes of the elite.

The rationale provided by Sabhyata Foundation—that visitors should "experience the narrative of Soft Islam, Sufi Philosophy, and Religious Harmony"—also rings hollow when juxtaposed with plans for commodifying the space. These plans reflect a troubling shift in the narrative: monuments are no longer viewed as public assets but as lucrative opportunities for commercial exploitation.

While proponents of the initiative argue that private entities bring much-needed investment and resources for the preservation of monuments, this approach comes with significant risks. Private companies are driven by profit motives, not cultural sensitivity. Their priorities often lie in making a return on investment, which could result in alterations to these historical sites in ways that distort their true essence. Public agencies, despite their flaws, are held accountable to the people and are more likely to preserve the integrity of cultural landmarks.

The commercialization of India's heritage is a perilous path to walk. Heritage is not just a commodity to be marketed or a stage for theatrical performances—it is a living testament to our history, identity, and values as a nation. Monuments like the Red Fort, Humayun's Tomb, and Purana Qila are not just tourist destinations—they are symbols of India's rich cultural heritage, deserving of preservation, not exploitation. It is essential that the government rethinks its approach, ensuring that these national treasures remain accessible, authentic, and protected for all, not just the privileged few.

BOOK REVIEW

NEHRU'S INDIA: PAST, PRESENT & FUTURE BY ADITYA MUKHERJEE

Written by Amartya Mishra

Published towards the end of 2024, Nehru's India by Aditya Mukherjee provides a refreshing take on Nehru's role amidst today's political climate in India, which is marred by half-truths and a narrow conception of nationalism. As an emeritus professor of contemporary history at Jawaharlal Nehru University, Mukherjee weaves together various themes deeply connected with the 'idea of India'. His straightforward yet impactful choice of language revisits the pressing challenges facing the nation, urging readers to reconsider the values promoted by India's first Prime Minister—values that are rooted in the national independence movement.

The book comprehensively captures Nehru's enduring legacy, particularly the foundational principles he established for nation-building post-independence. Mukherjee begins by defining the 'idea of India'—sovereign, secular, democratic, pro-poor, and scientifically progressive—realised through the 'consensus' of 'the entire spectrum of the Indian national movement.' He meticulously documents Nehru's steadfast commitment to these ideals. Each well-crafted chapter underscores the fundamental characteristics of the Indian state, currently threatened by the prevailing regime, and makes a compelling case for reclaiming the legacy of the national struggle.

As a distinguished historian of colonialism, Mukherjee initially focuses on Nehru's approach to history, highlighting his 'openness to reason and rationality' and 'acceptance of multiple truths.' This perspective starkly contrasts with the divisive Hindu-Muslim narrative often advanced by colonial and communal groups, a connection Mukherjee explicitly draws. The delineation not only emphasises Nehru's inclusive historical view but also challenges the narrow and divisive narratives long propagated by these factions. The book also stresses the importance of Nehru's historical outlook in shaping his vision for a modern democratic state.

In addressing the communal challenge, the book delves into Nehru's lifelong resistance to sectarianism, both before and after independence. His enduring battle against communal groups—described as his 'central objective' to cement a 'secular vision' of India—both minority and majority, underscores the national movement's intent to establish a clear dichotomy between communalism and nationalism, with the former being fundamentally opposed to the latter. Utilising this framework, Mukherjee comments on the 'gradual ceding' of nationalist space by secular forces, providing a crucial critique for his readers.

Moreover, the book highlights Nehru's 'unique' approach of coupling industrialization with democracy. Mukherjee makes a strong case for Nehruvian economic policies by emphasising the importance of state-led industrialisation, reminding readers of the context—an 'un-structuring' of the colonial economy—in which these policies were implemented. By establishing 'the conditions for future' liberalisation and growth, Mukherjee argues, the Nehruvian era positively impacted India's development, contrary to neoliberal critiques. The book concludes with a compelling call to action for its readers—to juxtapose today's burgeoning unscientific beliefs with the collective consciousness of the nation.

In an era where Nehru's legacy is under constant scrutiny, Mukherjee's work emerges as a crucial intellectual counter to the dominant communal narratives. With a recent statement by the RSS Chief Mohan Bhagwat claiming true independence being achieved only after the inauguration of Ayodhya's Ram temple, the pressures on the foundational values of the national movement and with it the nation-state is higher than ever. Mukherjee emphasises the increasing challenges to the value of the national movement and the nation-state. By elucidating the distinctions between nationalism and communalism and emphasising 'consensus', Mukherjee reaffirms Nehru's strategies to fortify the 'idea of India.' This book not only serves as a vital re-examination of his legacy but also as a powerful tool for its readers in understanding and advocating for the principles of one of India's foremost freedom fighters, second only to Gandhi.



WHAT THE WORLD BELIEVES

Jawaharlal Nehru deliberately sidelined Subhas Chandra Bose and opposed his leadership in the Indian freedom movement.

WHAT THE TRUTH IS

The differences between Nehru and Bose were more ideological than personal. Bose's vision of an authoritarian socialist state conflicted with Nehru's democratic and parliamentary approach. While Bose resigned as Congress president in 1939 due to differences with Gandhi and others, including Nehru, it was not solely Nehru's doing. The rift was largely due to Bose's strained relations with Gandhi, who wielded significant influence in the Congress. Nehru admired Bose's patriotism, and later, as Prime Minister, he ensured that Bose's contributions to India's independence were recognized.

ARTS COLUMN

Illustration by Divya Chauhan



GET IN TOUCH



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