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# ESSAY

## **Banal Nationalism in Everyday life: The Intersection of Cultural, Ethnic, Linguistic and National Identity in India**

**Akankshya Ray\***

### **Abstract**

*This paper seeks to explore the concept of 'Banal Nationalism', as introduced by Michael Billig, and its applicability to the Indian context. Banal nationalism is not used in a pejorative sense here and it refers to the subtle, everyday expressions of nationalism that continuously reinforce a national identity. In India, these expressions coexist with a complex web of cultural, ethnic, and linguistic nationalisms. Through an analysis of symbols, practices, and media narratives, the paper will assess whether banal nationalism in India unifies or promotes divisions. The paper examines how banal nationalism interacts with regional and religious identities and questions whether it leads to inclusion or exclusion in a highly diverse nation.*



### **Introduction**

Banal nationalism is a concept introduced by Michael Billig in 1995 which refers to the everyday, unnoticed expressions of nationalism that spread through established

democracies.<sup>1</sup> These are the ordinary, almost invisible symbols and practices that continuously remind citizens of their national identity, such as the presence of flags on public buildings, national symbols on currency, or the frequent use of terms like "we" or "us" in media and

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political discourse. It needs to be mentioned here, at the very outset that the term 'Banal Nationalism' is not being used in a pejorative sense at all in the article.

Michael Billig challenges conventional ideas of nationalism in his book titled *Banal Nationalism*. While traditional theories often focus on extreme displays of nationalism, Billig shifts the focus to the more subtle, everyday forms he terms "banal nationalism," which are neither extraordinary nor distant. He raises the question of why people do not forget their national identity, suggesting that nationalism is constantly reinforced in daily life through routine symbols and language used in the media. Billig critiques mainstream theories in sociology and politics for neglecting this aspect of national identity. His central argument is that nationalism in stable, democratic nations does not disappear or become irrelevant, but rather becomes so deeply ingrained and taken for granted that it operates beneath the surface of everyday life. These subtle forms of nationalism do not manifest in extreme, provocative forms but instead work quietly in the background, reinforcing a sense of belonging to the nation without being consciously noticed by most people. Therefore, banal nationalism is the subconscious, mundane reinforcement of national identity,

which becomes particularly important during moments of crisis when more visible, hot nationalism can be mobilized.

The concept remains relevant in today's globalized yet politically fragmented world. India is a mosaic of diverse cultural, ethnic, and linguistic identities, making it one of the most pluralistic societies in the world. Here, national identity coexists with immense cultural, ethnic, and linguistic diversity. The country is home to more than 2,000 distinct ethnic groups and 22 officially recognized languages, with countless dialects and regional variations. This rich diversity leads to multiple layers of identity in an individual, where religious, ethnic, regional, and linguistic affiliations can be just as powerful as a national identity. Hence, positioning national identity in this framework without threatening other identities is a challenge for India.

The purpose of this paper is to assess the success of banal nationalism in India, particularly in its ability to build a national unity amidst such a diverse population. By examining the everyday forms of nationalism, the paper will study whether banal nationalism has been effective in countering the forces of cultural, religious, ethnic, and linguistic nationalism, or if it has

worsened the divisions and given rise to exclusionary tendencies in the Indian context. Through this analysis, the paper will conclude whether banal nationalism acts as a cohesive force or a contradictory one within the framework of India's diversity.

### **The Concept of Banal Nationalism in India**

Michael Billig's framework on banal nationalism can be effectively applied to the Indian context, highlighting how the unnoticed or ordinary signs of nationalism are a part of everyday life. In India, this concept is deeply rooted in the cultural and political fabric of the nation, where symbols, language, and rituals continuously remind citizens of a sense of belonging to the nation. The Indian state, since 1947, has strategically employed banal nationalism to create a shared national identity that transcends regional, linguistic, and cultural differences and used as a tool of nation-building. These practices or symbols are not always overtly patriotic or grand, instead, they are woven into the routine activities and experiences of citizens. The national flag, the tricolour, is not just a symbol raised on significant occasions but can be frequently seen in homes, offices, and public spaces. It is a common sight to see the flag on vehicles or being used as a backdrop

during festivals and ceremonies. The mere idea of using the colours of the national flag in LED lights used to decorate streets, or even Mahatma Gandhi's face on the currency, embeds the idea of nationhood in the daily lives of citizens.

Political speeches and media narratives further perpetuate banal nationalism. Politicians often employ "Indians before everything else" slogans, which resonate deeply with the population, reinforcing the idea of national pride.<sup>2</sup> These phrases, which seem simple, evoke strong emotional responses and a sense of collective identity. Moreover, the media plays a crucial role in disseminating nationalistic messages, often through reports that highlight India's achievements, by inserting words that aligns with the national identity.

For example, news about Manu Bhaker winning two medals at the Paris Olympics was reported with the headline '*Manu Bhaker becomes the first Indian to win two medals in a single edition.*'<sup>3</sup> The article begins with the photo of Bhaker holding the national flag after her medal conferment ceremony and it is circulated on various social media platforms with patriotic songs in the background. This image or a ten-second video (reel) with patriotic

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songs is instilled in our mind and gives a serotonin boost.

Public institutions, such as schools and universities, are pivotal in instilling banal nationalism. The morning assembly in schools often begins with the hoisting of the national flag and the singing of the national anthem, rituals that imprint a sense of national identity from the very beginning. Governments often push for educational policies, activities in the educational space which constantly create the picture of a responsible Indian citizen. Recently, as per instructions from the Government of India, MHRD asked all universities and higher education institutes to participate in the Swachh Bharat Diwas celebrations on Gandhi Jayanti.<sup>4</sup> Activities included a pledge which started with:

*“Mahatma Gandhi dreamt of an India which was not only free but also clean and developed. Mahatma Gandhi secured freedom for Mother India. Now it is our duty to serve Mother India by keeping the country neat and clean.”*

This institutional embedding of nationalism through practices as simple as keeping the surroundings clean but advocating it through Gandhi's dream of a 'neat and clean Mother India,' contributes to its

perpetuation, making it an accepted part of life in India.

Other examples of India's banal nationalism can be vividly seen during major national celebrations like Republic Day and Independence Day. The grandeur of the parade, showcasing military might and cultural diversity, serves to unify citizens under the banner of national pride. These events are not merely ceremonial, they instil a sense of pride and unity among diverse groups, overshadowing the linguistic, cultural, and regional differences. There is an overarching national identity which facilitates collective participation in such events.

Another popular source of nationalism is art and culture, portrayed through films, music, and literature. Bollywood films often incorporate themes of patriotism, highlighting the sacrifices of Indian citizens and celebrating the achievements of national heroes at international platforms. In Hindi cinema alone, over 50 such patriotic blockbuster movies were released in the past two decades. These movies not only entertain but are also widely celebrated and discussed in everyday life. To add to the nationalistic fervour, songs celebrating the nation, with sentimental lyrics become anthems

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at public gatherings further entrenching the notion of banal nationalism in the consciousness of citizens.

These symbols operate beneath the surface and are unknowingly powerful in India's socio-political landscape. How, then, does this intrusive influence of banal nationalism coexist with the equally strong forces of India's cultural, ethnic, and linguistic nationalisms? Does the influence of national symbols in everyday life help unify these diverse identities, or does it risk overshadowing them and leading to conflicts?

**India's Cultural, Ethnic,  
and Linguistic  
Nationalisms**

The opening line of the Indian Constitution is, "*We, the People of India.*"<sup>5</sup> The Government of India has translated the Constitution into 23 different languages, with the original text written in both English and Hindi.<sup>6</sup> This phrase signifies that every Indian citizen is included in the collective "we," yet each citizen reads this text in a different language officially recognized by the state, while hundreds of other languages remain unacknowledged. It is ironic that this single sentence binds every Indian together while simultaneously highlighting their linguistic and

regional identities. The heterogeneity of identities is evident, yet constant attempts are made to unite them to a single thread of national identity.

India's cultural and ethnic diversity is one of the most distinctive features of its national identity. Several religious groups including Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, and others, have contributed to the nation's cultural fabric. Not only religious differences, but caste also plays a significant role in shaping social identities in India. Ethnic groups ranging from the Indo-Aryans of the North to the Dravidians in the South, further add to the cultural heterogeneity.

Even stronger than religious and caste identities are regional identities, which hold substantial weight. For example, the pride of a Punjabi, the rich history of Bengal, or the Dravidian heritage of Tamil Nadu often takes precedence over the idea of a singular national identity. Regionalism manifests strongly in these states, where linguistic, historical, and cultural identities create a sense of local belonging that can sometimes be at odds with the unified Indian identity. Moreover, the regional and tribal identities in Northeast India are even more complex, defying a single,



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unidirectional understanding of what it means to be “Indian.”

Language has likely been an even greater dividing factor among Indians than religion. The linguistic reorganization of states in 1956, following the States Reorganization Act, was a pivotal moment in India’s post-independence history, as states were created based on the languages spoken by the people. This marked a formal recognition of India’s linguistic diversity, where each community strived to promote and preserve their language as it became a symbol of cultural pride and resistance against homogenization.

Under British India, Odisha became the first state to be created on the basis of language in 1936.<sup>7</sup> In states like Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, linguistic nationalism is a potent force. Tamil Nadu has a long history of opposing the imposition of Hindi as a national language, viewing it as an infringement on its Dravidian heritage. The anti-Hindi agitations of 1965 changed the political landscape of Tamil Nadu.<sup>8</sup> Karnataka has also resisted the imposition of Hindi, in its desire to preserve Kannada culture and identity. These cases highlight how the current government’s nationalist efforts to promote Hindi as a uniform national language are

problematic and lead to internal conflicts.<sup>9</sup> Such tensions portray how building a national identity using language can be both a tool of unity but also a marker of division.

India’s tribal communities represent another layer of its diverse social structure, with distinct identities that are drastically different from mainstream nationalist narratives. There are 705 ethnic groups officially recognized as “Scheduled Tribes”.<sup>10</sup> Tribes such as the Gonds, Santhals, Sentinelese, Kurumban and Nagas, among others, have rich heritage and unique customs that set them apart from broader Indian population. Hence, resistance towards the Indian state would appear natural, which, they are likely to perceive as having encroached upon their lands and enforced its national symbols. Demands for political autonomy by these states inherently limits the attempt of Indian state to banalize nationalism and create a unified national identity.

Shashi Tharoor once said, *“In India, we celebrate the commonality of major differences; we are a land of belonging rather than of blood.”*<sup>11</sup> But is this commonality and sense of ‘belonging’ truly seen in the daily lives of an Indian? How casual it is, for an Indian with multiple identities to unconsciously align with the banal

practices of nationalism? And how do these identities intersect in a larger socio-political environment?

### **The Tension Between Banal and other Forms of Nationalism**

In a country as diverse as India, banal nationalism often collides with the realities of individual and collective identities. The everyday representations of the nation that build a sense of national belonging in subtle, unnoticed ways create tensions for those who do not recognize these symbols or outrightly contradict their presence. The question is whether these banal practices, such as the recitation of the national anthem or the use of Hindi in government communication, genuinely build a sense of inclusion and national belonging or whether they force exclusionary tendencies that marginalize non-dominant identities.

Movements like the Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu or the Khalistan movement in Punjab have directly challenged the homogenizing tendencies of banal nationalism. The Dravidian movement was rooted in resistance against perceived domination by the North and Hindi-speaking regions. Similarly, the Khalistan movement in Punjab sought a separate Sikh homeland,

rejecting the idea of a singular national identity imposed by the Indian state. These movements are reminders that many communities in India prioritise their local or regional identity over a national one.

Religion further complicates the picture. Recently, Hindu majoritarianism, which is being propagated through banal practices, has tended to marginalize religious minorities and challenge the pluralistic foundation of the Indian state. The rise of Hindu nationalist rhetoric is often seen as synonymous with Indian nationalism. In January 2024, the streets of India were filled with vendors selling two flags: the saffron flag and the national tricolour. This scenario offers a striking insight into how the sale of saffron flags during the Ram Mandir event and the tricolour for Republic Day complemented each other. Religious and national symbols coexisted, yet there was an underlying tension over which held more significance. By accepting both symbols, majority Hindus found their place in India's diverse socio-political environment.

This trend, however, creates a problem when non-Hindus witness the normalization of such practices and symbols, blending religious identity with the national narrative. Sadhvi Ritambhara, a Hindu Vestal, public speaker, and nationalist

ideologue, who is the founder-chairperson of *Durga Vahini*, the women's wing of the Vishva Hindu Parishad, proudly stated in a famous show called *Aap Ki Adalat*:

“लोक सभा बसंती चोला पहन के जिस दिन आएगी,  
गली गली मेरे भारत की वृंदावन बन जाएगी ।।  
काशी, मथुरा और अयोध्या ने एक साथ ललकारा है,  
कहो गर्व से हम हिंदू हैं, हिंदुस्तान हमारा है ।।”<sup>12</sup>

*Loksabha basanti chola pahan ke jis din ayegi,  
Gali gali mere Bharat ki Brundavan ban jayegi  
Kashi, Mathura aur Ayodhya ne ek saath lalkara hai  
Kaho garv se hum Hindu hain, Hindustan humara hai*

She was responding to anchor Rajat Sharma's question, who asked that opposition parties believe the inauguration of Shri Ram Mandir was deliberately timed to coincide with the upcoming Lok Sabha elections, with the intent of influencing the majority Hindu population and manipulating the election results. The translation of Sadhvi's words is that “The day Lok Sabha will come wearing Basanti Chola (saffron colour), every street of my India will become Vrindavan; Kashi, Mathura and Ayodhya have posed a challenge together, Say with pride that we are Hindus, India is ours.” The idea that India rightfully belongs to Hindus blurs the line between religion and nationalism. Sadhvi Ritambhara's rhetoric not only glorifies Hindu identity but also implicitly positions non-Hindus outside this vision of India. This creates a subtle yet powerful exclusionary message, where national identity is

inseparable from religious identity. Without proper inclusive interpretation of such assertion, non-Hindus are likely to feel alienated, as the symbols and language that define the national narrative seem increasingly aligned with a single religion. The normalisation of such religious-nationalist discourse raises concerns about the future of India's democracy, where diversity is a cornerstone. Uncritical normalisation of such a situation is likely to worsen it further under populist leaders who use banal nationalism to promote their vision of national identity, without paying serious attention to its long term societal consequences.

While banal nationalism, as it is being propagated in India, often operates on the principle of inclusivity, often overlooking the linguistic and cultural diversity of India. By pushing a single language or culture as a unifying factor, it risks alienating a substantive section of the population, which has been a point of contention for decades and is likely to engage the current generation in meaningless conflicts.

### **Practicing Banal Nationalism in Everyday Life**

Despite its shortcomings, the banalization of Indian nationalism has largely been successful. In moments such as wars or sporting

events, these symbols transcend ethnic, linguistic and regional differences, majorly across different parts of India. For example, when the Indian men's cricket team won the ICC T20 World Cup in June 2024, the streets of Mumbai were flooded with citizens who waited for hours to celebrate the team's victory.<sup>13</sup> Seeing the players in the Indian jersey with the trophy, was the ultimate dream for most Indian cricket fans that day.

National milestones such as successful space missions, like the Chandrayaan and Mangalyaan missions, instill a sense of pride, which is beyond the local differences. It is a moment of great joy, a memory that Indian's behold and celebrate in their everyday lives. Similarly, in times of crisis, a collective emotion emerges. Pratik Bachan, an Indian singer and music director, released a heartfelt tribute song during the COVID-19 pandemic. This viral song was dedicated to the frontline doctors who worked tirelessly beyond hours during the unprecedented crisis. The lyrics resonated deeply with the emotions of Indians at the time, capturing their collective fear, hope, and gratitude. The song emphasized the duty of a doctor when the nation (*desh*) calls, and treat everyone equally, regardless of the patient's religion.<sup>14</sup>

However, such feelings fail to gain traction in areas which are isolated

from nationalist rhetoric and have deep political grievances. The impact of banal nationalism on national unity is a double-edged sword. It is deeply entrenched in the lives of ordinary citizens but can also alienate identities who do not relate with those symbols of national pride. In the long run, the challenge for India's democracy will be to strike a balance between maintaining a unified national identity and respecting the country's rich tapestry of ethnic, linguistic, and cultural differences.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it is evident that the concept of banal nationalism is deeply entrenched in the nationalistic discourse of India. Using Michael Billig's framework, it is found that banal nationalism is a constant, underlying force, quietly shaping the national consciousness of Indians. This gradual development of national identity certainly acts as a unifying, cohesive force but simultaneously creates tensions, when national symbols and narratives are perceived as homogenizing or marginalizing non-dominant identities. It is a fine line between a collective force and an exclusionary one. For the dominant Hindu community, blending of national and religious symbols creates a powerful sense of belonging towards their motherland or 'Bharat Mata.' But failure of other

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religious communities to do so leads to conflicts between national and religious loyalties.

Banal nationalism has been effective in creating a shared national identity in India, but it is not without its contradictions. For a multi-cultural society like the Indian state, nationalistic symbols are 'normal' or 'obvious' for one community but might trigger antipathy in another group. Over the

years, majority Indians have accepted the idea of India in their everyday lives. The population is often divided on various issues of national and international importance. Yet, Indians have managed to uphold patriotic feelings and respect the country's diverse cultural, ethnic, and linguistic identities, ensuring that national pride does not become a tool for exclusion but rather a space for inclusive belonging. ■

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14 . Some parts of the lyrics are being transliterated here:

*Nanhi Si Hasi, Bholi Si Khushi, Phoolon Si Wo Baahein Bhool Gaye  
Jab Desh Ne Di Aawaz Humein, Hum Ghar Ki Raahein Bhool Gaye  
Hum Soye Nahin Kayi Raaton Se, Ae Jaane Watan Sau Chaand Bujhe  
Humein Neend Ussi Din Aayegi, Jab Dekhenge Aabaad Tujhe  
Majboor Hui Jab Dil Ki Duaa, To Humne Dawaa Se Kaam Liya  
Wo Nabz Nahin Phir Thamne Di, Jis Nabz Ko Humne Thaam Liya  
Beemar Hai Jo Kis Dharm Ka Hai, Humse Na Kabhi Ye Bhed Hua  
Sarhad Pe Jo Wardi Khaki Thi, Ab Uska Rang Safed Hua...*

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