Conclusion

The objective of this thesis has been to assess the scope and substance of Hindu cultural nationalism as a political ideology and movement over the last six decades since Independence, and to examine whether the strategies and tactics of the political organisations committed to Hindu nationalism have been effective in reversing the 60-year consensus on the retention of a civic and secular national identity for the Indian republic. This study is based on a detailed discourse analysis, culling from this author’s personal interviews of key spokespersons of the movement, the writings of Hindu nationalist ideologues, right from the pre-Independence period and documents reflecting the stances of the Hindu nationalist parties, including the Jana Sangh and the BJP, incorporating the views of the RSS and the VHP too. Apart from the discourse analysis, this thesis was based on extensive research of the political context in which the Hindu nationalist discourse confronted the ground realities of secular nationalism, in order to situate the significance of the Hindu nationalist contestations at different moments in time. At the end of this thesis, the question may be asked as to whether Hindu cultural nationalism, existing as it does as a persistent strand in the Indian political discourse, latent for the most part but having been able to gather considerable potency at different periods, can force a reversal of the consensus on secularism and civic nationalism. The answer is no.
While Hindu cultural nationalism has managed to retain a presence in the political arena and gain some significance as a pressure point on the public discourse, it has not succeeded in its efforts to present a convincing argument for its demand for an alternate view of nationhood, nor has it been able to dislodge the nationwide commitment to pluralism and secularism as enduring governing values, for two reasons. The first is of course the fact that the issue of national identity is one regarded as settled decades ago, primarily because it is seen as part of a larger legacy of freedom from colonial rule. The second reason is that the forces of Hindu nationalism have been unable to sustain a credible and persuasive campaign for a Hindu orientation of national identity, having relied primarily on violence and bloodshed to force their points on the public arena, as was demonstrated in the majoritarian belligerence displayed during the Ayodhya campaign culminating in the Babri Masjid demolition and during the Gujarat events of 2002, the lowest point being a state-sponsored pogrom against Muslims.

What then is the essence of the challenge that Hindu cultural nationalism poses to the polity? First, its claims and its antecedents. As discussed in the early chapters of this dissertation, the Hindu cultural nationalist discourse had existed as a competing view of nationhood before Partition and Independence. The claims made by its ideologues drew from the Romantic views of nationalism, of Herder and Fichte, which insisted that national culture would have to reflect the culture of its people, in this case, it was argued, the majority community, the Hindus. The Hindu nationalists built a core discourse of nationhood based on the three postulates of claimed prior antiquity, sacred geography and numerical preponderance. As the Congress-led national movement which was pressing for civic nationalism and secularism in acknowledgment of its heterogeneous mass base gained momentum, the Hindu nationalists were forced to adopt more
effective strategies and arguments in order to retain relevance. Thus the Hindu nationalist campaign made the birth of Pakistan a reason to reassert the hegemony of the Hindu majority, claiming that Muslims in India could no longer treat Indian nationhood as their birthright, with Pakistan now representing the homeland of all Muslims in the subcontinent. The Hindu nationalist view was completely marginalised after Independence and the subsequent adoption of a democratic Constitution, reaffirming the presence of a strong consensus in favour of secular and civic nationalism. The post-Independence national culture with its emphasis on providing a democratic framework that would recognise the diversity at the base of Indian political and social life, placed emphasis on a whole set of empowering measures and mechanisms. Thus secularism as a governing doctrine took its place alongside other key democratic aspects like federalism and the acknowledgment of linguistic pluralism. The protection of the rights of religious minorities was seen as part of a larger democratic commitment that also entailed social justice measures, including reservations for the scheduled castes, tribes and backward classes. Thus the discursive interest in debates on nationhood and national identity waned as new concerns relating to economic development and entitlements took priority in the national arena.

The singular success of the Nehruvian consensus, reflected in Nehru's own period but followed up by his successors, particularly Indira Gandhi, before her declaration of the Emergency in 1975, in interlinking the stated agenda of development and socialist transformation with repeated calls for national unity to ensure that the goals of modernisation and economic advance were not impeded by divisive impulses within the national fabric. The repeated reiteration of the importance of national unity by the leadership who expressed in no uncertain terms their distaste for communal and caste politics, ensured that the Hindu cultural nationalist stream, at that time primarily represented by the
Bharatiya Jana Sangh, was treated as a curiosity or a fringe phenomenon, rather than a serious political player. The Jana Sangh was also branded by Indira Gandhi as a friend of the privileged classes and landed interests, ensuring its isolation in the political arena. The Jana Sangh's attempts were to keep the Hindu cultural nationalist challenge alive by converting itself into a majoritarian platform. The Sangh constantly criticised Muslims for their perceived cultural separatism and projected them as having ties with Pakistan with a view to creating more pockets of Muslim dominance in India that would merge with Pakistan. But it was a measure of the isolation of this Hindu nationalist perspective that despite two wars with Pakistan in 1965 and 1971, there was absolutely no resonance for the Hindu nationalist propaganda in the public arena, with the secular consensus only increasing in strength in that period.

The change in the political circumstances that saw the Jana Sangh join other parties in resisting the authoritarianism of the Emergency of 1975 and its subsequent participation in the Janata party coalition helped end its isolation and created political space for its reinvention as a more effective force in the national arena. A respectability of sorts accrued to it as a result of its anti-authoritarian stance and its adoption of a new name, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), incorporating a professed adherence to Gandhian socialism in acknowledgment of its brief Janata party affiliation. More significantly, under the leadership of Advani, the BJP embarked on an ambitious course of strategic and tactical modifications that enabled it to position itself effectively to confront changing political and social realities. With violent anti-reservation protests reflecting in the anti-Mandal agitation, consolidating upper caste and middle class resentment against parties like the Congress and the Janata Dal seen as espousing secularism and social justice, in the 1990s, the BJP was quick to tap into the increasing consciousness of upper caste and middle class constituencies. In this context, the skilful modification of the key themes of the Hindu
nationalist discourse proved highly effective. Shifting emphasis from the old debates on nationhood, the BJP focused on the building of a platform that would seek to undermine the secular consensus by questioning the bona fides of the proponents of secular politics. The high-profile campaign by Advani and his colleagues to brand secularism as pseudo-secularism and vote-bank politics, enabled the BJP to showcase new themes intended to assert Hindu majoritarian dominance and also seek to discredit the secular national ethos while ensuring that the old staples—such as the stigmatisation of Muslims as collaborators in Pakistan's anti-Indian strategies, given to riots and other forms of anti-social behaviour—were linked to these new themes, producing a new narrative that had far greater polarising impact.

It has been one of the main arguments of this thesis that while the BJP sought visibility for its platform of cultural nationalism in its various yatras, most notably Advani's Rath Yatra, which ostensibly was to draw national attention to the Hindu nationalist demand for the restoration of its cultural symbols such as Ayodhya and other disputed religious sites, the real target of the BJP's campaign was secular nationalism. As Advani and his colleagues repeatedly made clear, the dispute over Ayodhya was only a metaphor for a larger battle between the forces of cultural nationalism and secular nationalism. The sustained denigration of secularism, coming as it did, against the backdrop of increasing middle class and upper caste disenchantment with the Nehruvian consensus in the wake of the controversy over reservations, found readymade constituencies in these sections, offering the BJP the ideological space in the political arena as had not been available to parties of the Hindu Right in the past.

A new dimension was added to the Hindu nationalist campaign with the intensified polarisation of communities that set in as a result of the Babri Masjid demolition which also saw an escalation of communal tensions as angry reprisals reflected in a spate of terrorist bombings in Bombay, Calcutta and other sites in
the period after December 6, 1992. It is one of the main arguments of this thesis that the Hindu nationalists recognised the import of this communal escalation and the danger to the credibility of the new campaign for Hindu majoritarianism, if the terror attacks were perceived as retaliatory strikes against majoritarian belligerence, and therefore in a swift strategic response, adopted a two-pronged approach, that targeted secular politics and parties on the one hand and attacked the Muslim community on the other, charging it with becoming conduits for Islamic terrorism. The new strategic focus on Muslims as agents of Islamic terrorism, acting in concert with its 'traditional sponsor' Pakistan, helped the Hindu nationalists, particularly the BJP to take advantage of the global campaign against terror that had been unleashed after the World Trade Center bombings of September 11, 2001, in the United States. This dimension also updated the perennial narrative pegged on the stigmatisation of Muslims as being anti-national because of their supposed religious conditioning. This enabled a re-articulation of the Hindu nationhood claims, with the BJP, the VHP, the RSS and the Bajrang Dal acting as connected points of a high-voltage ideological and political campaign reiterating stigmatising and dehumanising stereotypes of Muslims, thereby suggesting that Hindus are the only natural Indian nationals.

The central argument of this thesis has been that the stigmatisation of Muslims rather than any other minority group is a critical concomitant of Hindu cultural nationalist strategy. By suggesting that Indian Muslims have strong affinities to pan-Islamic ideologies and continued empathy for Pakistan, Hindu nationalists hope to project to the Hindu majority the idea that Hindus alone could have feelings of pure nationalism towards the Indian nation.

This thesis has also argued that the sustained ideological and political campaigns against Muslims against the backdrop of a continuous ridiculing of the secular ethos desensitised large sections of the Hindu middle classes and
provided conditions in which violent campaigns were carried out against Muslims in Gujarat, with the active connivance of State officials and the police, evoking comparisons with other cultural nationalist pogroms and ethnic cleansing. The Gujarat violence represented the lowest point in the trajectory of cultural nationalism, wherein the doctrines were taken literally and broken down into rudimentary street-level stereotypes, legitimising the worst forms of brutality. This thesis argues that the discourse as had evolved over the decades with its focus on the stigmatisation of Muslims had provided the ideological cover for this sort of violence. The addition of the dimension of Muslim terrorism in the '90s, served to isolate the community and render it more vulnerable than ever before, by suggesting that it was a denationalised group, with no loyalties to the Indian Union, thereby cutting it off from the natural goodwill of other co-existing social groups.

The analysis of the salience of the cultural nationalist discourse at different points in time shows that the Hindu nationalist movement has been able to gain momentum only when its discourse is employed in combination with strategies on the ground that are calculated to trigger communal polarisation through violent tactics, as happened in the case of Ayodhya and Gujarat. In both these cases, the discourse provided ideological rationales for the enactment of unprecedented violence. The second route by which Hindutva has managed to make headway is by making use of propitious political circumstances such as in the late '70s, when a coalition against the authoritarianism of the Emergency was formed and in 1990 when the BJP struck out on its own and began to launch a strategic campaign aimed at dismantling the decades-long consensus on secularism and social justice.

It is the considered observation of this thesis that the two radical moments in the trajectory of Hindu cultural nationalism--Ayodhya and Gujarat--which saw intensified violence and rapid communal polarisation, provided
tremendous traction for the movement on the one hand, by foregrounding it in a political landscape, giving it an opportunity to showcase its arguments as had never been the case before. But equally so, the intense violence and its aftershocks, as happened after December 1992 and February 2002, inviting national outrage and international concern, exposed Hindu cultural nationalism as an essentially destabilising factor in the Indian polity, which fact has alienated it from the mainstream of Indian public opinion. Thus despite achieving momentum and high visibility in the public arena, Hindu cultural nationalism, thus far has not been able make enduring gains. In other words, a pervasive sense of revulsion over its violent tactics of communal mobilisation has prevented the politics of cultural nationalism from acquiring the moral authority that it requires to be able to challenge the prevailing definitions of national culture or governing ethos.

The fact that the Gujarat violence and its implications were in a sense repudiated by the Lok Sabha elections of 2004, which saw the BJP's allies in the National Democratic Alliance openly attributing their defeat to the loss of the minority vote because of the "Gujarat factor", indicated that a broad segment of the political class was distancing itself from the politics of cultural nationalism and its bruising implications. This suggests that at the moment, the movement for Hindu cultural nationalism has been stopped in its tracks, as a result of the perception that its platform is highly abrasive as its message is deeply divisive, clearly found unacceptable by the masses of people who recognise that the secular national ethos provides an umbrella for their divergent aspirations.

Yet if the movement for cultural nationalism per se has now virtually gone underground, it would be a mistake to underestimate its influence as a political force in the public arena, with the BJP having managed to retain its standing in the political field as the main challenger to the Congress party. Unlike its predecessor the Jana Sangh, the BJP has managed to sustain its political
relevance by constantly modifying its strategies and incorporating new themes in its platform, on the basis of its own strategic assessment of the political priorities of the constituencies it has targeted in the Hindu middle classes, as they vary over time. However as has been indicated in the State Assembly campaigns that have ensued since 2004, most notably the Uttar Pradesh Assembly elections, the BJP continues to rely on the core theme of the cultural nationalist discourse--"pseudo-secularism" camouflaging the "appeasement of minorities" which in turn leads to an implicit encouragement of terrorism, thereby endangering national security. The BJP has refused to be deterred by the findings of the Rajinder Sachar Committee(2006) that the Muslim community "exhibits deficits and deprivations in practically all dimensions of development" and has in fact attacked the Sachar report's call to improve the social, economic and educational conditions of Muslims as another instance of appeasement. It is evident that as a party anchored to the ideology of Hindu cultural nationalism, the BJP's platform will continue to draw from the wellsprings of the Hindu nationalist discourse, thus keeping the forces of cultural nationalism alive, even though bridled, for the moment.

What have been the lessons of the Indian historical experience with the politics of Hindu cultural nationalism? According to this thesis, which has placed the entire evaluation of Hindu nationalism and its discourse within a historical periodisation stretching from the pre-Independence period to the present day, there are some broad conclusions that emerge. First, the historical reality that the national movement spearheaded by the Congress party led by Gandhi and Nehru had a mass base drawing from a range of social, cultural and religious identities made it inevitable that India would adopt a secular and civic-oriented national identity that would acknowledge the composite cultural heritage at its base.
Second, secularism and civic nationalism was seen as part of a larger commitment to a democratic framework that was designed to accommodate a host of different political and economic aspirations. The emphasis placed by India's governments at the Centre for the first three decades after Independence on economic planning, socialist economic transformation and rapid economic development ensured that national unity became a key postulate in political direction of the national framework. Secularism was regarded as one of the many facets of democracy, like federalism which translated into a large degree of regional autonomy and respect for linguistic pluralism. The social justice factor which required the addressing of caste iniquities and the issue of social and educational backwardness, made affirmative action and reservations a part of the democratic commitment. This ensured that the view of protection of the rights of religious minorities was not seen as an aberrance in the larger democratic scheme of things. Thus secularism was not regarded as the obverse of communal conflict, which in essence restricted the space for a fundamental challenge of its premises.

Third, the fact that secularism was seen as an integral part of national culture and highly regarded as a pre-requisite for modernisation, made it difficult for the forces of Hindu cultural nationalism to mount a direct challenge to the prevailing secular ethos and therefore they had to adopt a strategy that challenged secularism in its practice rather than its conceptual essence. The appeal of these forces in the public arena has thereby been facilitated by a narrative that paints Hindus as the victims of a "false" secularism or "pseudo-secularism", which it is alleged, only serves to promote the interests of the Muslim community. By stoking fears in the majority community that secular values and policies which emphasise the protection of minority cultural rights translate into an appeasement of Muslims, emboldening them to take to terrorism and furthering their separatist designs, the cultural nationalists paint a
picture of an endangered national security and integrity. Such portrayals open up the space for an assertion of Hindu majoritarianism, manifesting in challenges to the secular national ethos, seeking a reorientation of nationhood in Hindu terms. This underlines one of the strongest points in aid of cultural nationalist politics—its claims to represent the majority culture would enable it at any time, in any set of political circumstances that it might regard as opportune, to make periodic bids for dominance or hegemony.

Fourth, the fact that despite all the sound and fury, the discourse of cultural nationalism has very little resonance on its own. The discourse serves to provide ideological and political cover only when it is employed in combination with facilitating circumstances. One such instance was in the '80s-'90s, during the post-Mandal agitation phase, when the BJP withdrew support to the Janata Dal-led National Front Government of V.P Singh and launched a new campaign against the politics of "pseudo-secularism and appeasement". A deadlier utilisation of the discourse was as a cover for ground strategies of communal polarisation as in the cases of Ayodhya and Gujarat, which desensitised large sections of the Hindu middle classes, by using incendiary imagery and constructs, paving the way for hate politics against minority communities.

The fifth and most important conclusion is that the mobilisation of majoritarian sentiment through violent means, reflecting in deeply polarising sequences which have put at risk the social cohesion essential for economic advance has been seen as distracting the focus from a larger purpose of transforming the nation into an economic power. This perception has served to distance the Hindu middle class constituencies from the Hindutva campaign which has been unable to offer a persuasive explanation as to why the prevailing consensus on a secular national identity and an acknowledgment of a composite multicultural heritage, should be overturned. As six decades of communal
coexistence producing strong social cohesion have powered a trajectory of high economic growth and a pervasive sense of increasing empowerment of various sections of the Indian people, secularism which is seen as part of a larger legacy of democratic freedoms is unlikely to be undermined as a core governing value. Therefore, while the politics of cultural nationalism are likely to continue to pose periodic threats to the democratic governing structure in India, they are unlikely to be able to undermine the strong and abiding consensus behind secularism and civic nationalism, both seen as integral aspects of the democratic process that lies at the heart of the success story of India's emergence as a major developing power.