

# POLITICS AND SOCIETY BETWEEN ELECTIONS

---

## Public Opinion in India's States

*Edited by*  
*Siddharth Swaminathan*  
*and*  
*Suhas Palshikar*

First published in 2021

ISBN: 978-0-367-63666-1 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-12048-3 (ebk)

## Chapter 3

---

### Political Universe

(CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)



**Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
LONDON AND NEW YORK

### 3.3 NATIONALISM

Nationalism is a significant element of India's political universe. Over the past decade the constituent ideas of Indian nationalism have been intensely and systematically contested in the public arena. Several events and campaigns in public spaces, universities and in civil society confirm this ongoing contest. Legislative actions that ban the consumption of certain foods (beef, for instance), arrests based on charges of sedition, public attacks on those who do not say "*Bharat Mata ki Jai*" or stand while the national anthem is played starkly demonstrate the divergent attitudes of what constitutes "national" and "anti-national" behaviour. In some instances, such as the Supreme Court ruling on respecting the national anthem or in interpreting certain political speeches as seditious, State institutions have actively intervened in defining, at least in part, what constitutes nationalism. At other times, lynchings, the physical assault on citizens who do not stand for the national anthem, the vigilante enforcement of cow protection by *gaurakshaks*, and *ghar-wapsi* rituals, the impetus for defining the terms of nationalism in public discourse arises from organized social and political groups seeking to enforce their version of nationalism.<sup>1</sup>

Scholars note that majoritarian cultural nationalism has firmly established itself in the past decade as the dominant narrative of Indian nationalism (Varshney 2014, Palshikar 2015, Jaffrelet 2017). To what extent has this majoritarian nationalism spread across India's social and political landscape? Does this majoritarian nationalism vary across subnational entities? Is it shared by all castes and community groups? Are majoritarian nationalist attitudes polarized or do they appear evenly spread? These are questions of fundamental importance for a constitutional democracy, especially one in a developing country that binds diverse social, religious, and linguistic communities.

In this section we examine responses to a set of four questions that measure the strength of support for State sanctions against what has been recently construed as "anti-national". They are:

Government should punish those who (a) do not stand while the national anthem is being sung, (b) do not say "*Bharat Mata ki Jai*" at public functions, (c) eat beef or cow meat, and (d) engage in religious conversions. The responses to this set of questions range from "fully agree" to "fully disagree".

The four questions are meant to identify how people think about nationalism and its majoritarian form. Standing during the national anthem is a standard protocol associated with the national anthem and we consider this as a form of civic nationalism. It does not have a cultural or ethnic

ascription or value attached to it that would make the act of standing a violation of a cultural norm and hence controversial. Adding a cultural twist to standard national icons (as in “*Bharat Mata ki Jai*”) or matters related to faith (religious conversions, for instance) and diet (beef consumption) produces majoritarian versions of nationalism (referred variously as “ethnic” or “religious” or “cultural” nationalism). Public opinion that tends toward protecting cultural or ethnic homogeneity and advocates State punishment for violation of its sanctity (or that of the State) is seen as majoritarian while pluralist opinions would instead find alternate ways to accommodate cultural diversity. We examine these questions using responses to questions that have animated politics and society recently such as not calling out “*Bharat Mata ki Jai*”, or the consumption of beef (and the need to respect the cow) and religious conversions (*ghar wapsi*).

We also find that public opinion is particularly animated when questions of nationalism take on a cultural tone. For instance, while we find relative agreement on the question of standing during the national anthem (that is, most respondents agree that the national anthem should be respected), the responses to whether the State should punish someone for not saying “*Bharat Mata ki Jai*” is more polarized. Similarly, the question on beef consumption also elicits a greater polarization than do religious conversions. Spatially, we also find that the Hindi belt states cohere around similar positions on most questions tending to majoritarianism. States such as Maharashtra, Gujarat, Odisha, and Karnataka tend to also fall into this group. States with larger or significant minority populations such as Jammu and Kashmir, Mizoram, Nagaland, Kerala, West Bengal, and Tripura tend to adopt more pluralist positions. Castes and communities are clearly divided on the question of nationalism. While minority religious communities strongly disagree with State punishment, Hindus, across all castes, tend to strongly support State punishment. With the exception of the opinion on beef consumption, Hindu Dalits also tend to support a majoritarian position while Hindu Adivasis exhibit the least tendency toward a majoritarian nationalism.

### 3.3.1 The National Anthem

The national anthem, among other things, is a symbol of national unity and of India’s geography (as a distinct territory with borders). In fact, the national anthem literally identifies a geography with the rivers and terrain associated with India generating a national spatial imagination that is also political. The Fundamental Duties under Article 51A of India Constitution states, “It shall be the duty of every citizen of India to abide by the Constitution and respect its ideals and institutions, the national Flag and the National Anthem”.

While legislation (The Prevention of Insult to National Honour Act, 1971) specifies protocols for singing the national anthem (Section 3) and states that

whoever intentionally prevents the singing of the Indian National Anthem or causes disturbances to any assembly engaged in such singing shall be punished with imprisonment for a term, which may extend to three years, or with fine, or with both

it does not clearly specify any punishment for not standing when the National Anthem is sung. For instance, in 2015 an order related to the National Anthem of India passed by Ministry of Home Affairs requires an audience shall stand to attention whenever the National Anthem is sung or played. In 2016, the Supreme Court (in *Shyam Narayan Chouksey versus the Union of India*) directed all cinema halls across India to play the National Anthem before every feature film. In 2017, the Supreme Court asked the Government of India to consider amending the rules for playing the national anthem in movie theatres, and in 2018 the Supreme Court changed the previous order and stated that playing the National Anthem prior to the screening of feature films in cinema halls is not mandatory, but optional or directory. Despite multiple legal opinions and government orders, none have prescribed punishment for not standing when the National Anthem is sung or played. Here, we are interested in citizens' opinion on whether someone who does not stand during the national anthem should be punished.

In most states, we find that a majority of respondents either fully or somewhat agree (Figure 3.3.1). The Hindi belt states demonstrate a high degree of support for punishing those who do not stand during the national anthem – 60 percent in Haryana, one in two respondents in Delhi and Uttar Pradesh, and forty percent or more in Chhattisgarh, Uttarakhand, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Bihar. Karnataka, Maharashtra, and Odisha also indicate a high degree of support, about 60 percent of respondents fully agree. Least support, i.e., relatively lower proportions of fully agree are found in Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal, in addition to the states in the north-east. The largest proportion of respondents who fully disagree with State punishment for not standing during the national anthem comes from Jammu and Kashmir (about 50 percent) followed by Nagaland (30 percent).

Caste-community wise analysis indicates that among all castes within Hindus, a larger proportion of respondents fully agree than strongly disagree on the statement that the government should punish those who don't stand when the national anthem is played or sung (Figure 3.3.2). The difference ranges from 25 point (for Hindu Adivasis) to 35 points (for Hindu upper castes). Within Muslim communities, about equal proportions of Muslim Dalit and OBC respondents adopt fully agree and disagree position (about 26 percent). Christian communities tend to fully agree over disagree, but about 30 percent also somewhat agree. A larger proportion of Sikh respondents also fully agree.

POLITICAL UNIVERSE

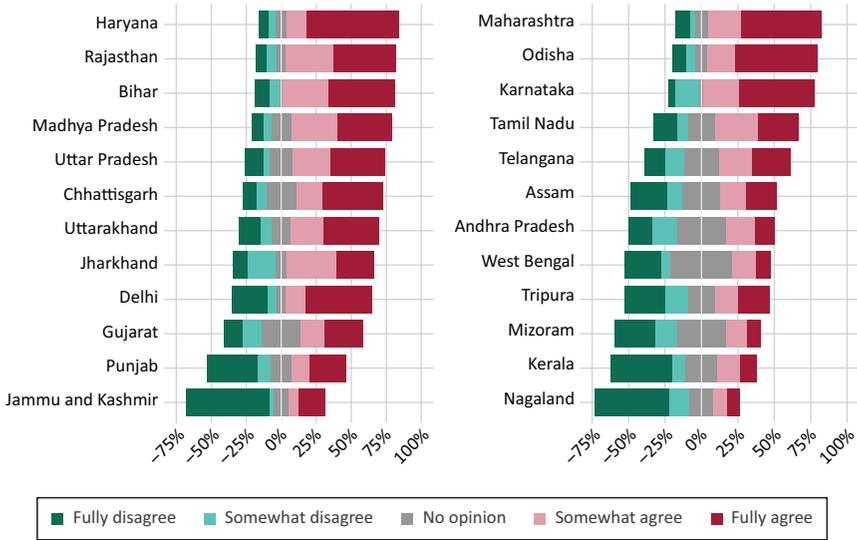


Figure 3.3.1 Opinion on Punishment to Those Who Don't Stand for National Anthem at Public Places (by State)

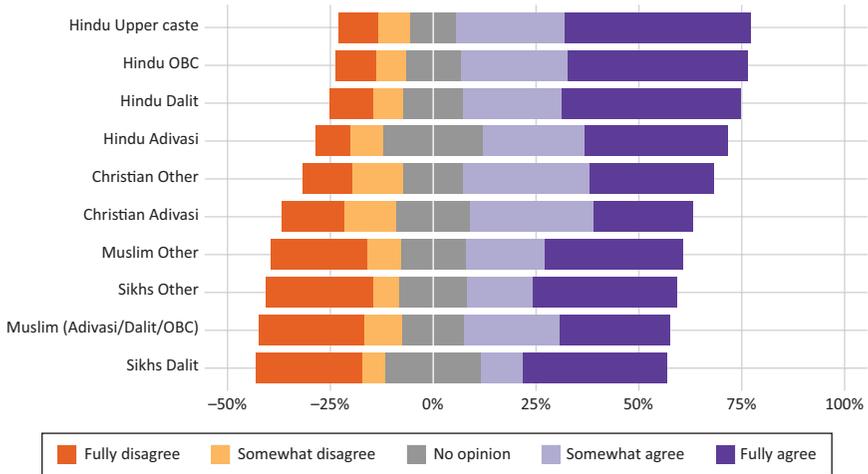


Figure 3.3.2 Opinion on Punishment to Those Who Don't Stand for National Anthem at Public Places (by Caste/Community)

### 3.3.2 “Bharat Mata ki Jai”

Linked to nationalism is calling out or chanting “*Bharat Mata ki Jai*” during public gatherings and events. Once a clarion call to unite all Indians during the national movement for Indian independence it has morphed into a badge of Hindu nationalism. The image of “Bharat Mata” or “Mother India” of a woman draped in sari, wearing a crown, holding the national flag, and sometimes flanked by a lion is strikingly Hindu. This representation of India’s geography and demands for the obligatory chanting of “*Bharat Mata ki Jai*” at public functions has generated resistance from non-Hindu social groups. In the following section we examine the distribution of responses to whether the State should punish those who do not say “*Bharat Mata ki Jai*” at public functions across states and caste and religious identity. This question adds a cultural twist to nationalism by linking a religious image to the territorial identity of India.

In Assam, Jammu and Kashmir, Nagaland, Mizoram, Punjab, Kerala, and West Bengal, respondents are less likely to support State punishment for those who do not say “*Bharat Mata ki Jai*” at public functions (Figure 3.3.3). We find extensive support for punishing those who do not say “*Bharat Mata ki Jai*” at public functions across the Hindi belt states such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan, Haryana, and Delhi, as well as in Karnataka, Maharashtra, and Odisha. In these states, 40 percent or more support the view that the State

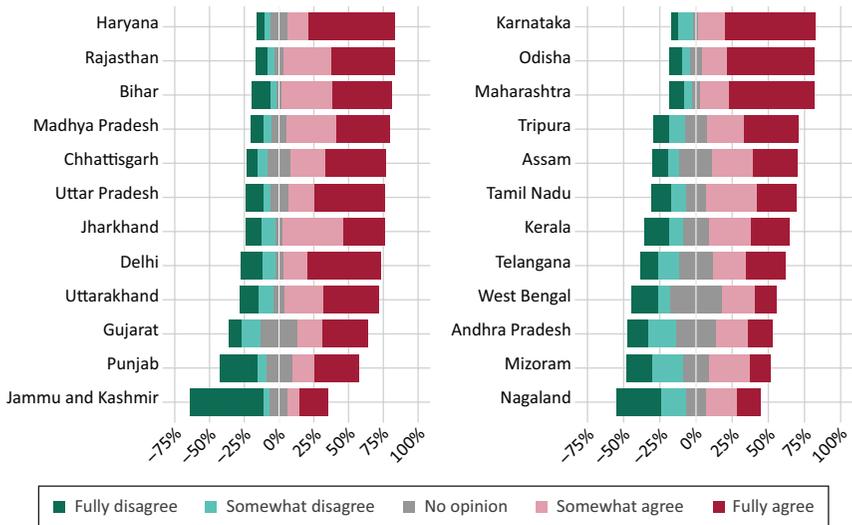


Figure 3.3.3 Opinion on Punishment to Those Who Do Not Say “Bharat Mata ki Jai” at Public Functions (by State)

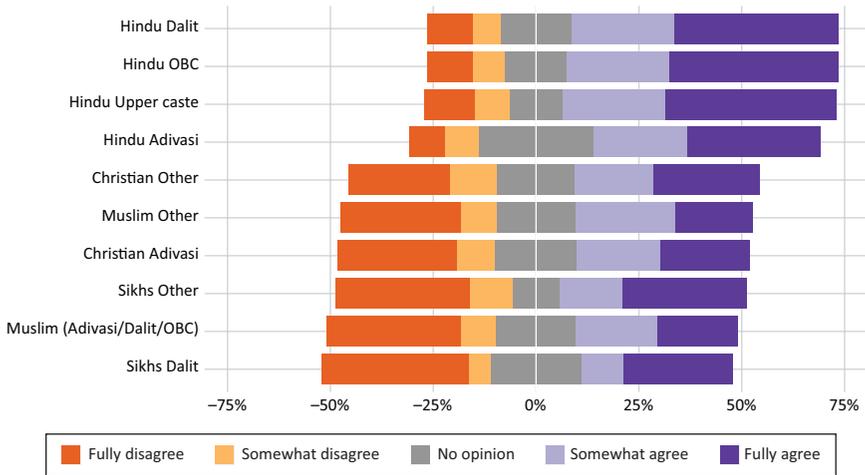


Figure 3.3.4 Opinion on Punishment for Those Who Do Not Say “Bharat Mata ki Jai” at Public Functions (by Caste/Community)

should punish those who do not say “*Bharat Mata ki Jai*” at public functions. In Gujarat and Tamil Nadu a little less than 30 percent fully agree. We also find greater support in Telangana compared to Andhra Pradesh, and in Bihar compared to Jharkhand. A large number of respondents, about 43 percent in West Bengal, a third of respondents in Andhra Pradesh and Mizoram, and about a quarter of respondents in Assam, Gujarat, Kerala, Mizoram, Chhattisgarh, and Telangana do not have an opinion.

Among Hindu caste groups, between 32 and 42 percent of respondents fully agree with State punishment for not chanting “*Bharat Mata ki Jai*” at public functions (Figure 3.3.4). Between 25 and 35 percent respondents from all minority caste communities fully disagree with this. However, for the same minority caste communities, between 19 and 30 percent also fully disagree. While Hindu caste groups tend to fully agree with the statement, and about ten percent fully disagree, the proportion of respondents fully agreeing within minority communities ranges from about 20 percent to 30 percent.

### 3.3.3 Beef Consumption

In the past years, there have been several incidents where some from minority communities have been attacked and in some instances lynched.<sup>2</sup> There is no uniform law about eating beef across Indian states, but various Indian states have different laws regarding cow slaughter and eating cow meat

including a complete ban on cow slaughter and cow meat consumption such as in Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand. Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Assam, Bihar, Odisha and Tamil Nadu cow slaughter is regulated. And in Nagaland, West Bengal, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tripura, Sikkim, and Kerala there is no law on beef consumption.

Across the states, we find that in Bihar, Haryana, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Odisha, Punjab, Rajasthan, Delhi, Chattisgarh, and Uttarakhand 50 percent or more respondents fully agree that the state should punish persons for beef consumption (Figure 3.3.5). In Haryana, 80 percent fully agree. Close to half the respondents fully agree in Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh – 46 and 48 percent respectively. In all of these states, the proportion of agreement far exceeds that of disagreement. In Mizoram and Nagaland about three percent fully agree while about seven percent do so in Kerala, 13 percent in Tripura, 15 percent in Assam, 16 percent in Tamil Nadu, and 18 percent in West Bengal. In all of these states, a quarter or more fully disagree. The proportion of those who disagree is greater than the proportion of those who agree. In the rest of the states, the proportion of respondents who fully agree ranges between 20 percent (Andhra Pradesh) and 37 percent (Gujarat). In Andhra Pradesh and Telangana the proportions of respondents who agree about equals the portion who disagree, while in Jharkhand and Gujarat, the proportion of agreement is greater than that of disagreement.

Close to 45 percent or more Muslims fully disagree with the idea of punishment for beef consumption (Figure 3.3.6). Christian respondents also

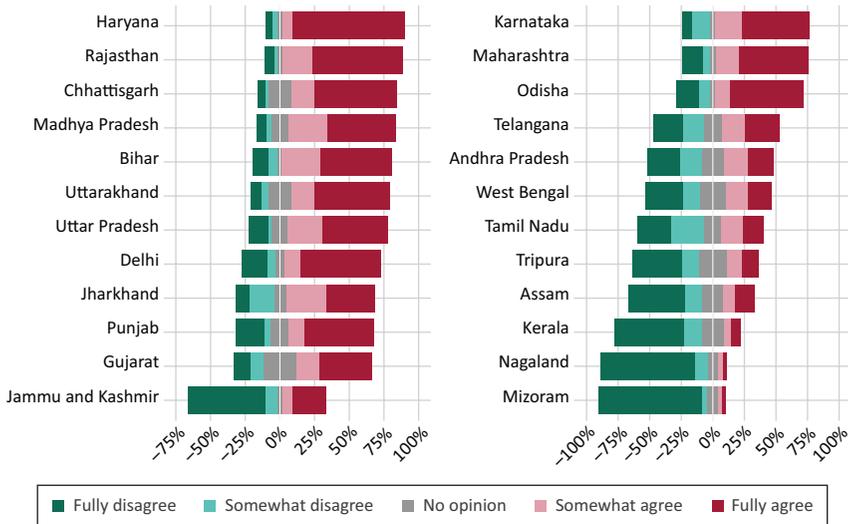


Figure 3.3.5 Opinion on Punishment to Those who Eat Beef/Cow Meat (by State)

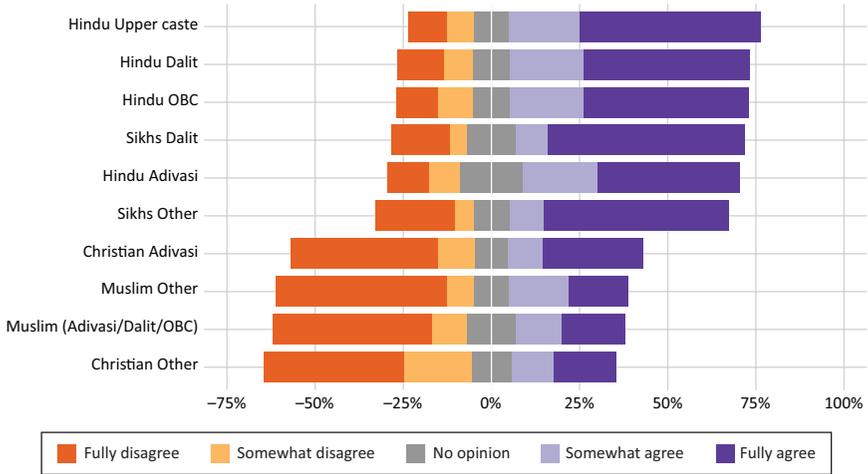


Figure 3.3.6 Opinion on Punishment to Those Who Eat Beef/Cow Meat (by Caste/Community)

fully disagree (about 40 percent). Among Hindu respondents, a majority of upper castes respondents fully agree. Between 40 and 47 percent of Hindu Dalit, Adivasi, and OBC respondents also agree. Similarly, a majority of Sikh respondents also fully agree. Between ten and 13 percent of Hindu respondents fully disagree. The proportion of full disagreement for Muslim and Christian respondents ranges from between 17 to 28 percent.

### 3.3.4 Religious Conversions

The issue of religious conversion is an oft-debated one in India. In some states mass conversions have occurred to draw attention towards community-based problems. There is no national law to prevent religious conversion and many Hindu organizations demand a strong anti-conversion law. In 1954 a bill called Indian Conversion (Regulation and Registration) Bill was brought into the parliament but could not be passed due to significant opposition.<sup>3</sup> At present, there are seven Indian states – namely Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan, and Himachal Pradesh – which have anti-conversion laws to stop forced and fraudulent conversion. Out of these seven states, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh are the states where this act is in force. However, some Hindu organizations like Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) widely criticize religious conversions and have also launched a movement that they call

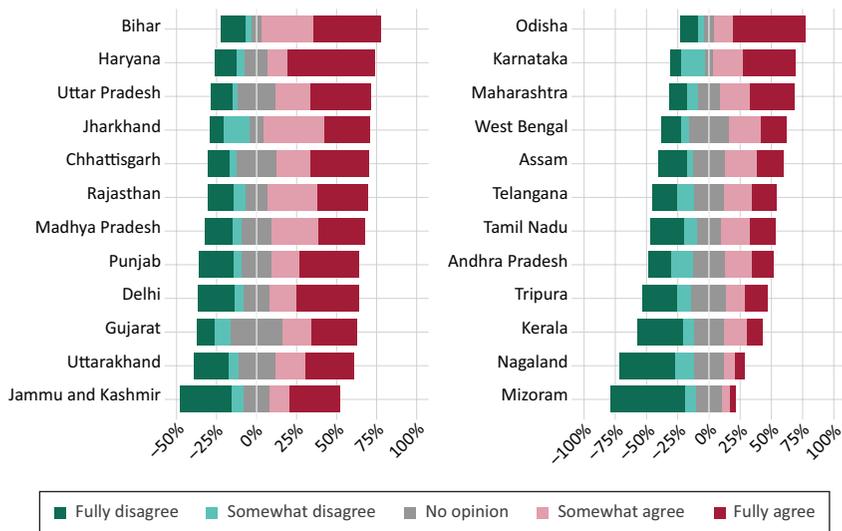


Figure 3.3.7 Opinion on Punishment to Those who Engaged in Religious Conversions (by State)

“*Ghar Wapsi*” to bring back the converted people into the Hindu religion. We asked our respondents their opinion on whether people engaged in religious conversions should be punished by the government.

We find only two states – Haryana and Odisha – with proportion of respondents fully agreeing greater than 50 percent (Figure 3.3.7). Only Mizoram has more than 50 percent respondents fully disagreeing. In Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Assam, and Jammu and Kashmir equal proportions both fully agree and fully disagree. In Kerala, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tamil Nadu the proportion of respondents who fully disagree is greater than those who fully agree. In the Hindi belt states and Karnataka, Maharashtra, Gujarat, we find the opposite – greater support for fully agree over strongly disagree. Yet, we find that responses to this question are less polarized compared to the previous ones. Though a greater proportion tend to agree than disagree, the distribution of responses within the agree category is apportioned relatively evenly.

About a third of respondents across all Hindu caste groups fully agree. Among Sikh respondents 42 percent strongly agree (Figure 3.3.8). A somewhat larger proportion of Muslim respondents (30 percent) tend to fully agree (the difference between those who fully agree and fully disagree is about 6 percentage points). About 30 percent of Christian respondents fully disagree and about 18 percent fully agree. We also find that about a third of Muslim respondents identifying as Dalit or OBC fully support this position

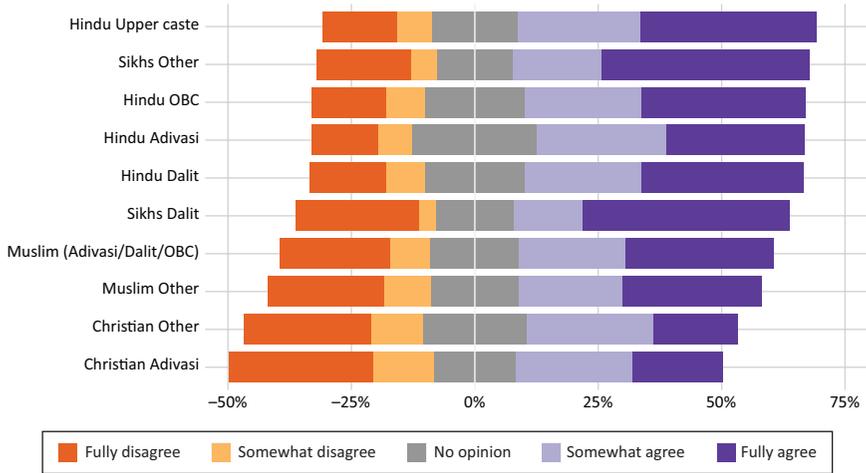


Figure 3.3.8 Opinion on Punishment to Those who engaged in Religious Conversion (by Caste/Community)

while almost a quarter fully disagree. Christian Adivasis and other Christians are the least likely to fully agree among all caste-community groups.

### 3.3.5 Index of Nationalism

These questions capture significant elements of nationalism. For instance, the idea of respecting the national flag is a reflection of civic or territorial nationalism, while adding a cultural inflection to India's geography with *Bharat mata* representing religious nationalism. Similarly, the sacred position occupied by the *gau* in Hinduism provides beef consumption with a religious flavour and points to a religious nationalism. In order to get an aggregate view of public opinion on nationalism we create an "index" of nationalism using the above four questions. Respondents are then grouped into one of three categories: liberal-nationalist, centrist, and conservative-nationalist. Those who disagree with any three statements are classified as liberal nationalist and those who agree with any three are classified as conservative nationalist. The rest are categorized as "centrist". We understand that these terms have multiple and contested meanings, and we use them only as broad indicators to see the extent of a majoritarian nationalist sentiment in India.

We find that states fall distinctively into one of these three categories (Figure 3.3.9). First, there are the centrist states where close to or more than half the respondents locate themselves in the middle and the rest fall

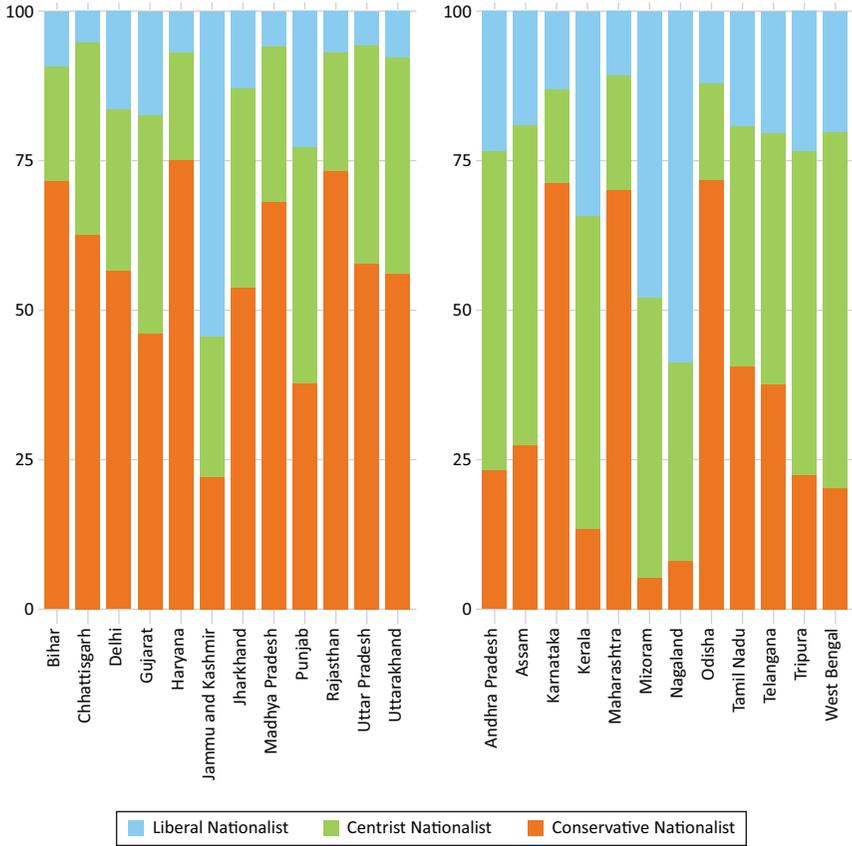


Figure 3.3.9 Index of Nationalism (by State)

on either side. These include Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Assam, Kerala, Tripura, and West Bengal, and 50 percent or more respondents in these states adopt centrist positions on the questions of nationalism. Jammu and Kashmir and Nagaland have more than 50 percent respondents who take a liberal nationalist position. Bihar, Haryana, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Uttarakhand have more than 50 percent of respondents who adopt positions that call for punishment. In fact, in some states (Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Rajasthan) 70 percent or more support punishment. In Tamil Nadu while 40 percent of respondents adopt centrist position an equal proportion also hold conservative views.

POLITICAL UNIVERSE

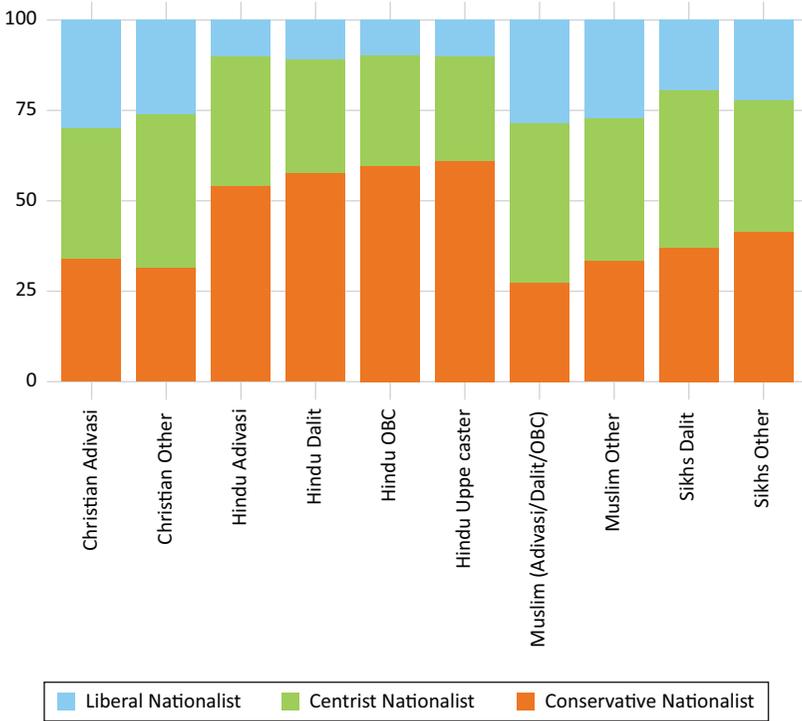


Figure 3.3.10 Index of Nationalism (by Caste/Community)

In Mizoram equal proportions (about 48 percent) adopt liberal and central positions.

Across caste/communities, we find a large proportion of all Hindu caste groups (upper caste, Dalit, Adivasi, and OBC) and including non-Dalit Sikhs, fall in the conservative nationalist category (Figure 3.3.10). This ranges from 54 percent among Hindu Dalit respondents to 61 percent among the Hindu upper caste. Ten percent or less among Hindu caste groups hold a position of no punishment. Several minority caste-community respondents, Muslims, Christians, and Sikhs have more respondents who fall into a centrist position. However, more or less equal proportions fall into the liberal and conservative categories among these groups.

A majority of both urban and rural respondents fall into the conservative nationalist category (Figure 3.3.11). Urban respondents are more likely to be liberal nationalists, relative to rural respondents, with a difference of about nine percentage points. Thirty percent of both rural and urban respondents are in the centrist position.

POLITICAL UNIVERSE

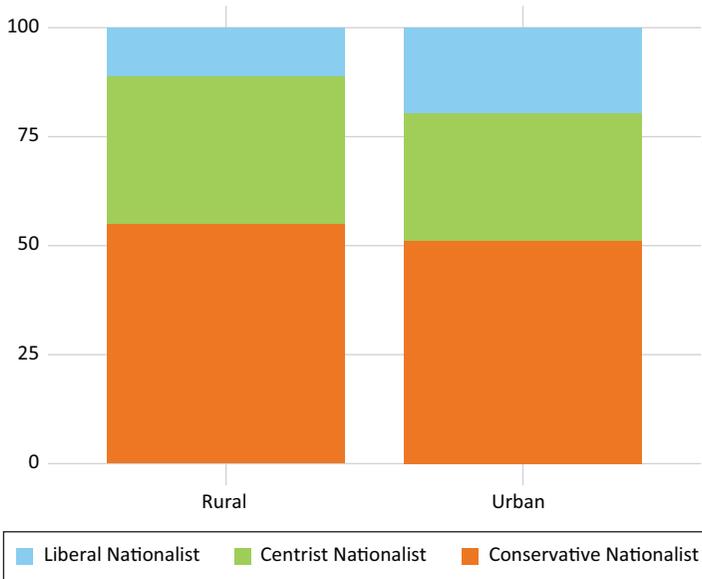


Figure 3.3.11 Index of Nationalism (by Rural–Urban)

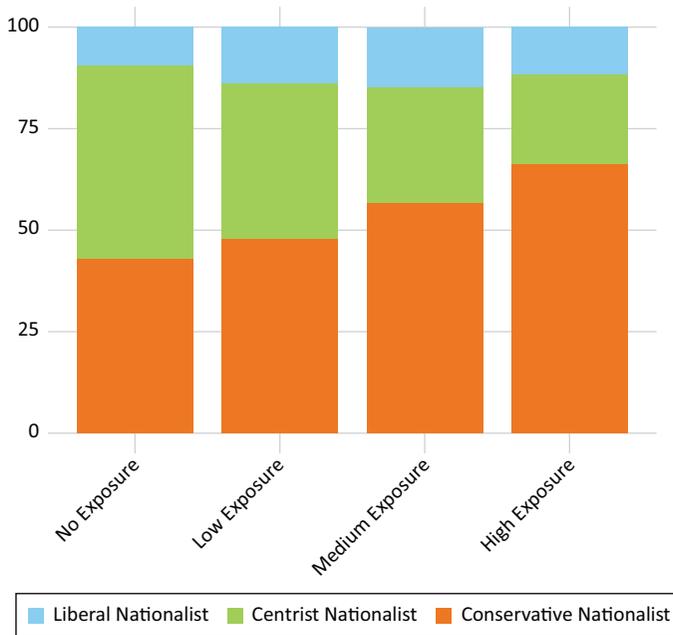


Figure 3.3.12 Index of Nationalism (by Media Exposure)

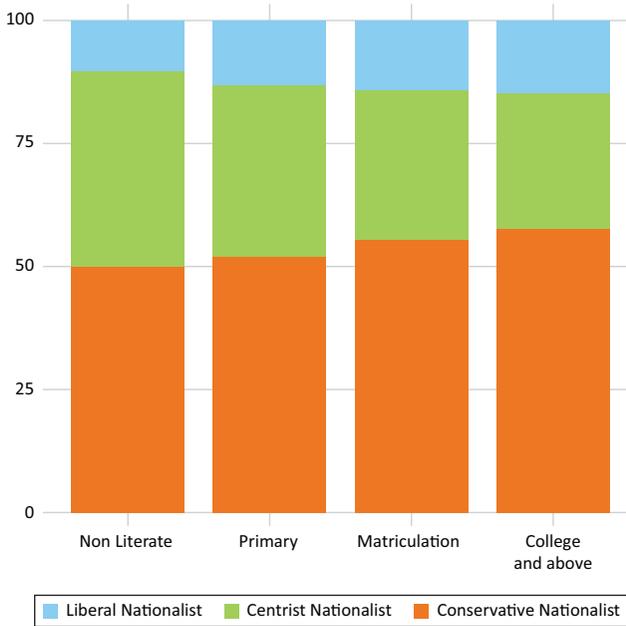


Figure 3.3.13 Index of Nationalism (by Education)

Increased levels of media exposure increases the likelihood of a respondent taking a conservative nationalist position (Figure 3.3.12). Forty three percent of respondents with no media exposure fall in the conservative category. This increases to 66 percent for respondents with high media exposure. Across these levels of media exposure, the proportion of respondents who fall in the centrist category decreases by approximately 25 percentage points. There is a two percentage point increase in the proportion of liberal nationalist respondents across media exposure levels.

Fifty eight percent of respondents with a college or higher level of education adopt a conservative nationalist position, and about 27 percent hold a centrist position (Figure 3.3.13). As levels of education increases the likelihood of holding conservative views also increases. The likelihood of being centrist declines by 12 percentage points. There is a five percent increase in the likelihood of being categorized as a liberal nationalist as the level of education increases.