

Welcome step back

For at least six months, India's movie-going patriots can stand down and enjoy the show, and both the central government and the Supreme Court must be applauded for giving them a reprieve. Following the court's suggestion in October, the government has formed a broad-spectrum inter-ministerial committee to draft guidelines laying down the locations and circumstances in which the national anthem should be played, and prescribing norms of public deportment at the time. Until it delivers its recommendations in six months, the government also suggested to the court a rollback of its 2016 order making the playing of the national anthem mandatory before film shows. This was immediately accepted and status quo ante is now established.

This marks a welcome shift away from the culture of performative nationalism which has been developing through the term of this government. The national anthem matter was a special case, since demands for the public display of patriotism were made enforceable by a court order. This coercive trend has mainly benefited vigilantes and has ill-served the idea of India internationally. Apart from numerous reports of cinema-goers being heckled or assaulted — including differently-abled persons — for failing to be visibly patriotic, even an international festival was not spared.

Six people were arrested at the International Film Festival of Kerala in Thiruvananthapuram for not rising to the occasion when the anthem was played. A more efficient way to generate bad publicity is scarcely conceivable. While the debate over nationalism at [Jawaharlal Nehru](#) University had marked the nadir of this trend, the order regarding the national anthem in theatres was arguably more disturbing, since it conferred sanction from the highest court. The court had ignored its own ruling in 1986, protecting Jehovah's Witness children in Kerala who did not sing the national anthem in school, since their church forbade allegiance to all but God. In making the national anthem mandatory before film shows, the court had intended to "instil committed patriotism and nationalism". It may have wished, rather, to distil the essence of the Constitution and of democracy, which vests in the right to choose freely, without coercion.

Fortunately, the court has reconsidered. The government has taken a broad view and involved in its committee, apart from predictable stakeholders like the ministries of defence and external affairs, ministries and departments handling culture, information and broadcasting, education, women and children, minority affairs and disability. Inclusiveness signals good intent, but the role of the ruling party in demonising students, creative people and other groups which disagree with its demand that everyone wears their patriotism on their sleeve cannot be ignored. If the committee only rolls back the court's rollback, this would prove to be a brief reprieve of only six months.

END

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