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From Devotion to Division: Rethinking Patriotism and Nationalism in Contemporary India

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Abstract

In present-day India, patriotism and nationalism are not always clearly distinguishable, and their evolving relationship has intensified debates around identity, dissent, and belonging. Patriotism is supposed to signify a deep, importantly inclusive love for the country - it exists within a democratic notion of the 'people' while valuing plurality - and nationalism as a social movement seems like majoritarian ideology, wherein loyalty to the nation becomes a function of a coherent culture or political loyalty originally. The study in this paper focuses on the evolving relations between nationalism and patriotism and their meanings today, rather than being simply synonymous with one another, the authors argue that they exist within issues of borders, boundaries and redefining of the public. Historically, that which has constituted patriotic human beings as having a commitment to civic bodies, constitutional values and an ability to exercise dissent; however, a range of Nationalism has emerged based on a number of historical, ideological and political definitions with time — being anti-imperialist, revolutionary, colonizer and so forth, to majoritarian forms of expression today. Examples are drawn upon to help illustrate how national loyalty is being redefined by political actors, media and state apparatuses, in order to equate dissent with dis-affection for country. Furthermore, alternative to what is presented in these examples are those citizens who may choose to conflate these categories for self-serving goals, and or other forms of nationalistic political expression are often indistinguishable, as well as that the distinction will be determined by context.

Keywords: Patriotism, Nationalism, Constitutionalism, Devotion, Citizenship, Identity



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INTRODUCTION:

In current political discussions, the terms patriotism and nationalism are often treated as

interchangeable, though they denote differing relationships to the nation-state. Conventionally, patriotism is an affective, critical, civic attachment to country, a love that permits dissenting from and examining one's own country (Orwell, 1945; Nussbaum, 2013). In contrast, Nationalism typically refers to a person's connection or commitment towards their country. In some cases, nationalism can manifest in ways that are forceful or separate people from one another by nationality. Anderson (1983) refers to national belonging as "imagined" and culturally based, whereas Gellner (1983) sees nationalism primarily as a driving force for modern societies' social and political organizations. Subsequent critical analyses of nationalism have shown that there are occasionally instances of nationalism being used to suppress dissent; this is especially true when the goal is to create a unified front in support of a national identity. George Orwell makes a distinction between patriotism as "devotion to a particular place and way of life" and nationalism as the pursuit of control and domination on behalf of one's nation (Orwell, 1945). The distinction has taken on a greater degree of importance in recent years in India, as political actors, media institutions, and civil society actors have appeared to pivot to "love for

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the nation" as either civic responsibility or unqualified service. Tensions between these two frames are conceptual and not only semantic, but reflect deeply political processes about who is in the nation, who is excluded, and how dissent is framed in the public order.

I. HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

There was a distinction between patriotism and nationalism in India which was shaped by India's colonial and postcolonial history. In the struggle for independence, patriotism was a mobilizing force in mobilizing people from different regions, religions and castes under the common idea of freedom and self-rule. Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru both emphasized a love for a pluralistic and democratic India as the essence of patriotism. Gandhi's notion of patriotism was derived from swaraj (self-government) and moral duty, which meant being non-violent and inclusive (Parekh, 1997). Similarly, Nehru used secular and civic straight-jackets to portray the nation rather than religious/ethnic straight-jackets (Nehru, 1946).

On the other hand, nationalism had more exclusivist connotations from the early-20th century, particularly with the emergence of cultural nationalism. V.D. Savarkar claimed in his book *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* (1923) that the place belonged to those for whom it was both *pitribhumi* (fatherland) and *punyabhumi* (holy land). This meant an implicit exclusion of religious minorities particularly Muslims and Christians as their sacred geographies transcend the boundaries of India (Savarkar 1923).

While patriotism honors national cohesion through civic engagement, and the values of democracy, nationalism primarily highlights the importance of some form of homogeneity, and the claim of cultural superiority. This distinction has been noted by scholars. Rabindranath Tagore was a vigorous opponent of nationalism and warned in his book *Nationalism* (1917) that a more aggressive nationalism, particularly one that was modeled on the West, would inevitably lead to moral corruption, as well as domestic fractures (Tagore, 1917). For Tagore, worthy patriotism was spiritual, and found sympathy in the community, not in the machinery of the modern nation-state.

Recent political theorists, like Partha Chatterjee, have probed the development of nationalism in post-colonial India. Chatterjee makes distinctions between the "inner domain" of spiritual and cultural identity that Indian elites strove to preserve during colonial rule, and the "outer domain" of modern institutions derived from the West (Chatterjee, 1993). These overlapping roles created space for a new nationalism that claimed to be indigenous, but was intolerantly exclusionary at the site of action.

The Indian state, after independence, tried to establish a civic nationalism rooted in constitutional values of secularism, equality and linguistic plurality. But, it has been increasingly contested over the decades by majoritarian ideologies that have equated patriotism with an allegiance to one culture/religion. Thus, while patriotism was conceived in India as an inclusive, pluralistic political claim, nationalism has at times oscillated to a homogenising, often exclusionary political project.

II. CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

The political, legislative, and media apparatus in India have managed to reshape what it means to be patriotic and/or nationalistic in India in recent years. With the BJP and its ideological parent, the RSS, in the forefront, nationalism has increasingly become developed and defined through a Hindu majoritarian perspective. Ultimately, it provides leverage and vehicles to frame loyalty to the nation, dissent as treachery, and whomever is either included or excluded from this imagined national community.

A. RISE OF NATIONALIST DISCOURSE: BJP, RSS, AND HINDUTVA

The ideological foundation of the BJP's nationalism is derived from the first assertion of Hindutva made by V. D. Savarkar in the 1920s. Hindutva relies on an ethno-religious definition of Indian nationalism, which is opposed to an inclusive civic nationalism that legitimizes all Indian citizens (Bhabha, 2010). Hindutva deems Hindu culture and philosophy paramount to national identity. The RSS, founded in 1925, has been spreading the tenets of Hindutva, through its vast networks for decades, but it has gained substantial state power only since 2014 (Jaffrelot, 2021).

Under the leadership of Modi, the BJP has declared itself the sole guardian of the Indian nation. The word nationalism is most often associated with fidelity to Hinduness, fidelity to the military, and fidelity to party policy. Familiar slogans like "Bharat Mata Ki Jai" and "Jai Shri Ram," which were once meant to inspire either patriotism or commitment to faith, have since been transformed into a means to criticize national fidelity among minorities, most often Muslims. Those who do not chant the slogans are often branded as "anti-national" or at the very least accused of not being loyal to the nation (Aloysius, 2020).

The wording "anti-national" has gained great traction in BJP rhetoric and in the media, where it is utilized to stigmatize critics, intellectuals, journalists, and student activists. The turn of nationalism into a loyalty test has led to a climate in



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which dissent becomes a synonym for disloyalty, thereby effectively closing and closing the democratic space for debate and disagreement.

B. STATE APPARATUS AND CULTURAL NATIONALISM

The BJP-led government has embedded a cultural nationalism based on Hindu identity through state-led legislation and administrative actions. For example, the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) of 2019 provides expedited citizenship to persecuted minorities from neighboring countries, but excludes Muslims. This exclusion represents a violation of the secular character of the Indian Constitution and highlights a shift from civic to ethno-religious criteria of belonging (Menon, 2020).

Similarly, the National Register of Citizens (NRC) - which has only been implemented in the state of Assam so far - has elicited fears among Muslims of mass disenfranchisement, especially in conjunction with the CAA. Taken together, these policies indicate a developing state logic which connects national belonging with national loyalty in a religious form and betrays the pluralistic aspirations of the Constitution's authors.

Education and cultural policy have also been rolled out along the contours of the Hindutva vision. Changes have been made to history books to remove reference to India's Islamic history, to embed glorification of the ancient Hindu civilization, and to conceal social and caste discrimination and religious diversity (Basu, 2019). This version of history is essential to the process of creating a single conscience for young citizens of India, confers legitimacy to a singular India narrative, and denies legitimacy to alternative identities and histories.

C. MEDIA AND NATIONALISM

Mainstream media, particularly news channels and news magazines, has invariably contributed to the dominant nationalist narratives. For example, anchors at Times Now, Republic TV, and Zee News portray political dissent and opposition leaders as threats to national security, and go further to sensationalize the language, thus reinforcing the framing of debates as to whether there is a national emergency or state of war, in which the honour and status of the nation must be defended, reducing complex issues into a litmus test of who is a "patriot": "patriot" versus "anti-patriot or traitor". Anchors, journalists, and politicians glorify the military and state: narratives of war and triumph are ubiquitous, the "enemy," which can include Muslims, leftists, or activists, is often framed as "internal". (Thakur, 2022). False, forced binaries become entrenched—and sharpened—when state affiliates mobilize their support and enlist an army of trolls, influencers, and IT cells via social media. For example, hashtags like #TukdeTukdeGang, #UrbanNaxal, #AntiNational, etc. interpolated pre-established categories and affiliations and articulated identity positions that mobilized support and action requiring followers to act politically as an "individual belonging to a community or another identity." Importantly, these hashtags localize topics polarizing discussion to false dichotomies in political terms as always in relation to them introducing "pro-India" versus "anti-India" language, without including or acknowledging dissent based on love of constitutional values or constitutional duties.

The impact of labeling dissent or activism as national threats or waste of national time has a chilling effect well documented (Alkhateeb and Hinton, 2021; Hurst, 2012), in student protests, art and artist expression, and reports, fact-checkers or scholars, etc. For instance, it is becoming common for people to be subject to unrestrained online abuse, surveillance, or legal harassment through police or courts on behalf of the nationalist government for raising reasonable questions about state policy utilizing frameworks entitled "sedition" or employing anti-terror laws like the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA).

III. PUBLIC SENTIMENT AND EVERYDAY NATIONALISM

In India, the politics of nationalism emerging from above is not only state mediated and state influenced through the media, but also performed and expressed in the normal everyday practices of ordinary citizens, especially youth. In the age of digital media, patriotism is increasingly mediated through hashtags, memes, and public performances of nationalism. At the same time, dissenting voices, have tried to reclaim patriotism, as a performative act of democracy, and challenge the state's exclusive or monopolized version of national loyalty.

A. YOUTH AND PATRIOTISM ONLINE

Hashtag activism and performative patriotism often characterize nationalism among India's digitally connected youth. Phrases like #JaiHind, #DeshBhakt, are regularly found trending on social media; especially on national holidays or in the context of geopolitical tensions with China or Pakistan. This reduction of love for the country to hashtag activism undermines a sense of belonging and instead reduces love for the country to a series of symbolic gestures - sharing nationalistic memes, boycotting so-called "anti-national" celebrities, or celebrating military strikes (Udupa, 2019). For example, when actor Aamir Khan expressed concern about the rising intolerance of the contemporary political context in India, he faced mass levels of authentic outrage online, and calls to boycott his films because of his "anti-national"



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statements that were framed democratically. A form of public expression of patriotism has clearly become highly polarized. Patriotism has become politicized; for example, the Republic Day or Independence Day celebrations embrace state sanctioned patriotism, whereas protest movements such as the Shaheen Bagh protests (2019–20), by Muslim women asserting their rights under the Constitution and waving the national flag, are dubbed anti-national by the government-associated media and political representatives they confronted. This paradox emphasizes that sense of belonging is no longer about connecting to the perceived members of the nation, but controlling who gets to express love for the nation and the form it takes (Chopra, 2020).

B. PATRIOTISM AS DISSENT

In this context, protest itself has become a radical act of patriotism. In student protests at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in 2016, slogans against the state, shouted by students are alleged (as far as we know) got national attention and caused arrests under sedition laws. The protesters were not projected as protesters, but traitors- *tukde tukde gang* as coined by supporters of the government and news media (Kumar, 2017). However, students and faculty from JNU and other institutions continue to assert that critique of the government is not anti-national, but part of the democratic process. The protests of farmers in 2020-21 were not just about laws concerning agrarian practice, but were also a performance of nation or expressed patriotism- waving the tricolour, reciting the Constitution and communicating national heroes like Bhagat Singh. These acts are representative of a kind of patriotism as opposed to other interpretations of patriotism: it is rooted in the lived realities, histories of struggle and visions for a just society. Many marginalized groups including ambedkarites, tribal communities, and feminist collectives have also employed symbols of patriotism to assert their inclusion in the political project of the nation, reclaiming the nation from exclusive narratives (Roy, 2021).

This duality—between nationalism as coercion and patriotism as resistance—reveals the contested terrain of everyday nationalism in India. It shows that love for the nation is not a monopoly of the state or its supporters, but a shared, diverse, and sometimes oppositional practice.

IV. THE SLIPPERY SLOPE: FROM DEVOTION TO DIVISION

Patriotism and nationalism become dangerously blurred when national devotion is recast as cultural conformity. In today's India, love of the nation has increasingly become a litmus test of identity, loyalty, and obedience. The implications of the transformation from inclusive patriotism to exclusionary nationalism are grave for democracy, minority rights, and social harmony.

A. INCLUSION VS EXCLUSION: WHO COUNTS AS A “TRUE” INDIAN?

Central to the nationalist agenda is a narrowing definition of where belonging is allowed. In contemporary discourse, the 'true Indian'—as framed—is someone who identifies as Hindu, supports the military without question, and abstains from questioning the government. This creates a figuration that at once renders the religious minorities—especially Muslims and Christians—further to the margins, and questions their patriotism... even if they explicitly say it (Hansen, 2019). Those who dwell in borderlands (Kashmiris or others from the border in the Northeast) are because of the decidedly national security line to speculate about their belonging, as though the occupation and militarization of the land is not meant to be a provocation to residents, and they are rather protected.

Similarly, the dissenters—the journalists, students, and activist class—are rendered the 'other' as well. The state has fallen back on the use, and repetition, of terms like, 'urban Naxal', 'anti-national', and 'foreign funded', which significantly delegitimizes critics, who are now considered as political threats—outside of being seen as a citizen talking about democracy (Banerjee, 2018). This redefinition of national loyalty includes practices of exclusion rather than inclusion, which in turn pushes entire "sections of a population to the periphery of political and cultural citizenship.

B. POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES: NATIONALISM OVER CONSTITUTIONALISM

When nationalism takes precedence over constitutional values, it begins to disintegrate the very bedrock of Indian democracy. Constitutional pluralism, secularism, and freedom of expression are constitutional imperatives, which can position them as virtues that are increasingly compromised; all in the name of unity. Nationalism, when made into an instrument of statecraft as opposed to a principle, undermines dissent and opposition by equating symbolism such as flag waving or taking the knee as disloyalty, unpatriotic or seditious (Thomas, P. Desai, 2016). We are already experiencing the fallout through increased hate crimes (especially against Muslims and Dalits), often committed by self-appointed vigilantes acting in the name of nation or religion. According to Human Rights Watch (2020), the result has been unabated violence against minorities and a rise in hate crimes, without accountability across the criminal justice system. The simultaneous rise of digital surveillance, facial recognition and sedition laws proliferate an air of fear and



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consequences to free speech (Bailey, 2020). While states can impose a literal unity though singular opinion, this does not create a unified state, only more division and distrust.

C. IDENTITY AND BELONGING: PATRIOTISM AS COERCION

In India, people increasingly see national identity not as a shared ideal but as a requirement. The burden of having to demonstrate one's patriotism regularly — through slogans, flags, or by not being critical — means belonging becomes mere coercion. Those who dissent are no longer fellow citizens with differing views, they are outsiders, traitors, or terrorists.

This transience undermines the voluntary nature of patriotism and enforces conformity through fear rather than admiration. The nationalistic state wants submission to state's authority, not love of the nation (Menon, 2012). Genuine citizenship and plural sense of belonging tends to become spectacle in allegiance to a homogenized India.

RETHINKING LOVE FOR THE NATION

India, today, sits at a crossroads when it comes to national devotion. When patriotism was a shared sacrifice, with constitutional ideals and a shared experience in the struggle for freedom, it was a designated sentiment. Now, we are transforming this feeling into a mobilizing, exclusionary, and nationalist practice that mutes dissent. It is important, more than ever, to push back against the growing trend of patriotism or national devotion being increasingly indistinguishable from chauvinism.

Patriotism, or love of nation, in a mature and democratic sense, must entail complexity. It must be Burkean, and should be based on, not cultural or religious homogeneity, but attachment to, Justice, equality, and plurality as provided in the Constitution. National devotion, attached to the ideals embodied in the Constitution, should be a way of acknowledging historical injustices, creating a space for dissent, and also recognizing that dissent and protest can be an act of devotion to the nation. Patriotism must create space for those whose voices are often on the margins of India's story: Dalits, Adivasis, religious minority groups, feminists and others, who continue to write India's story through love and through resistance.

To recognise a sense of legitimate national pride, separate from an unhealthy or jingoistic nationalism, xenophobia, or communalism, is nothing to be ashamed of. In fact, it goes beyond mere national pride; it is a defense of the soul and democratic spirit of the nation. Seeing patriotism as compassionate, and more than mere nationalism, opens up the possibility of India transcending rigid national binaries of 'us' and 'them', 'national' and 'anti-national'.

As love for the nation becomes defined by sloganeering and surveillance, perhaps the most patriotic thing to ask is: Can India love itself without hating its others?

CONCLUSION

The confusion between patriotism and nationalism in India is better understood through a range of alternative explanations than through simply treating them as completely interchangeable. To begin with, political actors and media can strategically obscure these two categories in order to mobilize support by equating dissent with a lack of loyalty. Then, many citizens may not consciously separate the two terms but rather engage with simplified ideas around “love for one’s country.” Additionally, some types of patriotism—those that focus on bolstering national unity and strength—may coincide with mild nationalism, leading to additional conceptual ambiguity. Furthermore, meanings of these concepts can also fluctuate based on the particular context in which they are expressed, such as during election campaigns, public protests or national crises, with appeals for national unity obscuring those differences. Finally, the growth of digital media has made it easier to portray nuanced ideas using binary representations (e.g., “pro-national” or “anti-national”). In summary, because India has a variety of intellectual histories—ranging from Mahatma Gandhi's inclusive idea of patriotism, to Vinayak Damodar Savarkar's emphasis on cultural nationalism—the lines between them are not delineated as clearly and are constantly shifting both in regard to each other and across all cultural contexts.

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