

Refurbishing the Spirit of Patriotism as a Durable Value among Youth

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Abstract

Characterised by globalisation, with its cohorts in rapid technological advancements, economic uncertainty, Western cultural diffusion and ever-evolving social and political landscapes, contemporary times are fraught with multiple challenges for youth. Diminution and alteration in the spirit of patriotism and civic engagement emerge as dominant and concerting traits of the times. The patriotism of today stems from a narrower and more instrumental view of what is national. Being more symbolic, selective, and issue-based, it lacks the qualities of sustainable, constructive democratic patriotism. As a nation in rapid economic and social transition, India expects its youth to play a proactive role in nation-building. To instil a sense of national pride, loyalty, and service for the nation, there is a need to revive their patriotism in them. This, in turn, entails that school and university education reinvent themselves to move beyond the mere perfunctory celebration of patriotism towards a more lasting and durable flourishing of critical loyalty, collective values, and civic participation.

Keywords: Youth; Patriotism; Constructive Patriotism; Civic Participation; Critical Loyalty

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Introduction

As a social work educator with over three and a half decades of teaching experience, I am deeply concerned about the discernible sense of detachment that the younger generation often exhibits toward its institutions, society, and the country at large. Feelings of patriotism and civic engagement are either declining or diluting among young people. While many sources indicate that this trend is visible globally, my concern is more contextual. Within my daily remit, when it comes to institutional pride, many among the present-day youth demonstrate nonchalance and even resistance towards integrating the spirit of gratitude, pride, service and commitment to their alma mater. Now this was something that I imbibed and practised quite effortlessly when I was a student and a young teacher. As a young person, I, along with most of my peers, held our country in the highest regard. We spontaneously engaged in patriotic fervour at home, at school and at college, not just during torrid India-Pakistan cricket matches.

Indeed, times have drastically changed since then, as have our youth. Socialised in neo-liberal times, they have integrated within them attributes, mindsets and behaviours characteristic of a globalised and privatised ethos. This is quite natural as globalisation has tended to reconfigure the manner in which youth perceive and conceive their relationships with their nations and their sense of belonging to them. Technological advancements, international migration, multinational corporations, and global cultural diffusion have created a world in which geographical borders increasingly lose their significance. This interconnected reality challenges the traditional conceptualisation of patriotism, which requires youth to demonstrate singular loyalty to their national identity and national interests. Alongside globalisation, individualisation has also emerged, in which individuals focus more on personal goals rather than collective or community ends. Placed in these labile times, young people are demonstrating a generalised trend of being indifferent, unmoved, oblivious

and significantly disengaged with the nation and its issues. The dilution of collectivism and the elevation of self-focus create a context in which feeling 'for' the country is largely absent.

Characterised as a constituency which is 'impatient', 'restless' and 'in the fast lane', a desire to pursue personal and materialistic goals within rapidly shrinking timeframes is leading most young people to disconnect from the more long-lasting pursuits of intellectual development and civic engagement. Raised in a context infused with fast, on-demand services, a desire for quick results and instant gratification can lead to disenchantment when outcomes are not immediate. Long-term goals that require sustained efforts are often unappealing. Placed in the midst of intense competition, hyper mobility, uncertainty and high levels of anxiety, this constituency usually remains preoccupied with itself. Self-enhancement is prized over collective good, and the cognition of rights tends to supersede any corresponding duties and responsibilities. Unfortunately, with both educators and learners more inclined towards career readiness and employability, there is an increasing focus on producing individuals who can be retrofitted into the market-driven ethos of neo-liberalism.

The decline of public spaces and the retreat of youth in homogenised, sanitised and exclusive private spaces have enhanced this disconnect, "gating" them away from 'uncomfortable' spaces and issues. The "work from home" ethos has also contributed to the curtailment of social skills and connections, be it with communities of peers, neighbourhoods, action groups or the citizenry at large. It has also undermined the cohesive social fabric of communities and society. The desire for "always looking good" has become paramount, but this does not often come from exemplary dedicated service to one's community as much as from unrealistic ideals and benchmarks set by social media influencers. Clustered by those who are like them and those who 'like and subscribe' to them, the circle of contacts for the young is circumscribed, with the 'diverse' others weeded out. Often fueling fake

news, lies and misinformation, social media generates dissonance, intolerance and polarisation. Unauthenticated narratives repeated over and over again manage to erode trust in governments and in the veracity of democratic institutions. The presence of polarising politics, economic inequality and the traumatic brunt of the recent unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic has also played a part in undermining patriotic sentiments. The influx of OTT platforms and multinational companies has led to a rapid dissemination of Western cultural infusion. A premium on the assumption of a cosmopolitan persona undermines the distinctness of one infused with Indian-ness. A disconnect between traditional values and modern ambitions becomes unnerving for many a youth, manifesting in confusion, anger, disillusionment, cynicism, an inward-looking disposition and a withdrawal from civic engagement. Conversations about the country, especially positive ones, are becoming rarer, and chronic discontent with most things narrows the action horizon. In the overall context, cynicism tends to replace love, optimism and hope for the country.

Without meaning to sound clichéd, in my experience, the youth of today are more difficult to convince and mould. Although I feel glad when in my classes I experience a shift in the young learners being more inclined towards open dialogue and reasoned debate, I also find that opinions and perspectives are often rigid and more deeply 'embedded' in their mindsets and world views. Unprecedented access to information, verifiable or otherwise, from multiple sources, either makes them well informed or gives them the illusion of being so. Exposed to misinformation and propaganda, they are not easily moved by conventional discourses and narratives. Only a well-experienced and skilful educator can manage to shatter their misconceptions and their often 'inflated' sense of superficial knowledge to create avenues for reflection and change.

Patriotism among the youth: Is it waning or transforming?

Whether patriotism among the youth is declining is a complex question that generates mixed responses. Patriotism is, after all, an emotional affection for the nation and an ethical orientation grounded in a rational and moral commitment to serve the nation's interests in both public and private life. As the oldest political virtue, it is about political allegiance, loyalty, commitment, and dedication, and it demands recognition of duty to the nation. Patriotism has been defined as love of one's country or zeal in the defence of the interests of one's country (Brown et al., 2018). It has also been described as a "degree of love for and pride in one's nation" (Kosterman and Feshbach, 1989, p. 271); and identification with the nation and special concern for its well-being and that of compatriots (Kleinig et al., 2015). Nathanson (1993) highlighted a comprehensive set of attributes which characterised patriotism, and these included: special affection for one's own country; a sense of personal identification with the country; special concern for the well-being of the country; and willingness to sacrifice to promote the country's good.

While the authoritarian type of patriotism has little space for dissent or critical engagement, constructive patriotism, critical patriotism and democratic patriotism promote questioning and criticism in the interest of improving one's country and also foster allegiance to democratic principles such as 'political participation, free speech, civil liberties, and social equality' (Westheimer, 2014, p. 129). Adorno et al. (1950) defined constructive or genuine patriotism as a healthier, more critical love of one's country, involving "attachment to national values based on critical understanding" (p.107). Underscoring the importance of patriotism, Nussbaum (2013, p. 210) argued that 'the kind of particularistic love associated with patriotism is necessary if unrelated people are to have 'a willingness to live together and face adversities for the sake of common goals' or to sacrifice their own self-interest in pursuit of the greater good. She professed that, 'even in a world

dedicated to the pursuit of global justice, the nation has a valuable role to play, as the largest unit we know so far that is sufficiently accountable to people and expressive of their voices' (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 212).

Patriotism emerges as a prized virtue for instilling a sense of belonging, community, purpose, duty, safety, respect, civic pride, and selfless commitment to public service. It is vindicated for its role in nation building, national solidarity, citizenship, national security, peace and harmony. In order for patriotism to fructify, it must unfold all its components which include the cognitive component (related to knowledge, perceptions, attitudes and patriotic consciousness); emotional component (comprising of love and commitment to the nation and, acceptance of its specific ethnic, cultural and socio-political features); and activity component (comprising of patriotic actions, civic engagement and political behaviour (Rozhkova et. al., 2020). Often used synonymously, it is important to distinguish between patriotism and nationalism. While patriotism "taps the affective component of one's feeling towards one's country" and the "degree of love for and pride in one's nation", nationalism "reflects a perception of national superiority and an orientation towards national dominance" (Kosterman and Feshbach, 1989, p. 271).

So, while, according to some, patriotism is waning, some amongst us would certainly like to believe that the forms of patriotic expression among youth have changed, shifting away from 'traditional' political engagement towards more issue-based, social, and even consumer-oriented forms of national pride. Is the dilution or change also linked to the fact that the erstwhile 'traditional' patriotism of yesteryears cannot fathom the complex and heterogeneous modern state that has emerged in the twenty-first century? Although there is no conclusive study on the subject, some recent surveys have revealed the various ways in which Indian youth connect with their sense of patriotism. For example, it could be when they read or hear about the sacrifices of soldiers, or hear the national anthem, or see the national flag being

hoisted or when India wins a cricket match against Pakistan. Many young people also report channelling their patriotic feelings into alternative forms of civic engagement, such as social entrepreneurship, digital activism, and volunteering for social and environmental causes, rather than traditional political participation.

It emerges that today's patriotism stems from a narrower, instrumental view of what is national. It is more symbolic in emphasising an emotional, often abstract attachment to the nation, its symbols, and core values, as demonstrated through outward displays of national pride, such as flag-waving or pledging allegiance. It is unpacked on certain occasions, like national days and sports events, and then packed away for the rest of the year. For today's youth, patriotism has become a symbolic, almost mechanical, routine year after year. It is also selective, as citizenship and patriotism are practised in a similar manner. It is based on specific issues or time periods and is often representative of those who support their country only when it aligns with their own interests or is convenient. So people pick and choose when or how to be patriotic, imagining that the best, and the only, form of patriotism is waving the tricolour at a cricket match and singing the national anthem.

Constructive patriotism demands an attachment to one's country that entails "critical loyalty," meaning citizens' support and love for their country while also questioning and criticising it to drive positive change. However, while it expects youth to be critical and reform any flaws in what has been inherited, celebrating the new India cannot just be about demolishing the spirit of Old India, which was so passionately envisioned by our forefathers. With passing time, as generations increasingly removed from the freedom struggle, they also remain ignorant and oblivious to the spirit of patriotism that suffused the era of the earlier generations and the sacrifices the forefathers made to make the idea of India a reality. Moreover, this type of patriotism is associated with higher civic engagement, such as voting and participating in

community actions. However, there is a perceptible decline in the demonstration of this real-life patriotism among youth, whether at the micro level of volunteering in educational institutions and communities, or engaging in civic participation on issues which afflict the larger society and nation. Unfortunately, it is not unusual to find some disgruntled youth distancing themselves from the nation and even proclaiming negative sentiments for it. Increasingly, love for the country is becoming dependent on personal attainments rather than a collective national identity. Rather than considering their belonging to a nation as a shared value or commitment, members expect to derive a benefit or utility from belonging to it. In such a context, any discontent or gap between aspiration and achievement is exploited by populist leaders, who create further disenchantment and detachment.

As a nation which is in a state of rapid transition, both economically and socially, contemporary India is characterised by a rich demographic dividend. It stands to gain significantly if it meaningfully harnesses the energies of its young population for national development. The ideals of *Viksit Bharat*, *Atmanirbhar Bharat* and *Vishwaguru* can only be attained if the fulcrum of allegiance of the youth is centred on their nation. The question as to how to instil a sense of national pride, loyalty, and service in the youth comes to me time and again. What role can educators and educational institutions play in this regard? How can they be helped to create the right balance between the assumption of global identities and the retention of their cultural identities? How can they be assisted in drawing a meaningful balance between self-gratification and an obligation to serve community and national interests?

Refurbishing Constructive Patriotism

With the families increasingly receding to the background, especially in the urban milieu, the mantle for refurbishing patriotism largely rests with educational institutions. Schools play a fundamental role in fostering this sentiment by instilling love for the country, developing a strong sense of identity, encouraging respect for

fellow citizens, and promoting selflessness and civic responsibility. By making students aware of their rich cultural heritage, celebrating national symbols, and engaging in patriotic activities, schools can create future generations who not only cherish their country but are also motivated to contribute positively to society.

The role of social science education is crucial in nurturing young people's connection to a world 'beyond' themselves. Much is currently being written about the negative impact of the relative marginalisation of social sciences and humanities on the permeation of the values and skills which are core to developing a patriotic persona. The decline is a consequence of decreased funding and institutional support, a societal shift towards practical, and job-oriented STEM fields, reduced student and government interest, a decline in the quality and quantity of research and the overall perception that these fields are less relevant or prestigious. It is the social sciences that provide the learners with a glimpse of the collective history, distinctive legacy and heritage, culture, and achievements of their nation. They raise awareness about the rich historical foundation of the democratic ethos, constitutional rights and duties. Moreover, they facilitate an analysis of the state, political economy, governance and international relations. They also augment a critical analysis of social structure and dynamics. In the ultimate analysis, these subject domains provide a critical lens for navigating the complex emotional content of patriotism and its distinction from the notion of nationalism. They can empower young minds to distinguish between fact and fiction and verify the diverse and often sensationalised media narratives. They can foster a more inclusive and democratic collective identity that aligns with the constitutional values and principles.

Educational policy must be oriented towards depicting history and culture in an unbiased manner. The subject must be taught by trained teachers who can foster critical understanding and discussion rather than perpetuating the perception of history as an account of a largely 'redundant' past. Schools should teach what is

distinctive and exceptional about India in order to foster a sense of pride. To rebuild civic confidence and responsibility, schools must refurbish civics curricula as a stimulating, content-rich discipline. They should do a better job of instilling the art of civil discourse. They must foster critical thinking about citizenship and promote active participation in civic life through projects, cultural activities, and community service. National service should be elevated. Recognition for positive personality traits must precede academic distinction. It was unfortunate that a valuable erstwhile programme of 'Socially Useful and Productive Work (SUPW) was unceremoniously discontinued in schools some years ago. It did enable children to derive meaningful experiential immersion in socially useful engagements in community and institutionalised settings. It is equally sad that the National Social Service (NSS) in higher educational institutions has become a customary, mechanical and uninspiring initiative that is considered more burdensome than gratifying. Schools and colleges are expected to move beyond the perfunctory performance of occasional *swatcchata abhiyans* on Gandhi Jayanti towards more well-integrated and well-designed transformative programmes for change in the values and perspectives of the young. Higher educational institutions should provision robust opportunities for inspiring young people to work together to evolve real-time solutions for the societal challenges proactively. A push towards evolving universities that are 'alive to the critical realities of the times' and those that are 'beyond their campuses' in terms of their impact, deserve singular focus.

Conclusion

A progressive society requires its young citizens to harbour gratitude, responsibility, and self-improvement through reform. It entails the flourishing of collective values and social attitudes centring on both altruism and social justice. It portends evolving a positive perception of one's nation based on a critical and realistic understanding of the prospects for its development. Therefore, emphasis needs to be

placed on the evolution of constructive, democratic patriotism that is based on informed love and attachment for the country and an understanding of its values, for this is more long-lasting than blind loyalty based on propaganda. It is based on positive identification and attachment to one's nation, and is actualised through a readiness to pro-actively contribute to the well-being of one's society and country. Moreover, most importantly, it facilitates the processing of information through reflexivity and rationality as opposed to impulse and intuitiveness. It is important to recognise and uphold that patriotism can be accompanied by critique, and that they are complementary. Reform and improvement rather than armchair cynicism must be encouraged. How the youngsters understand their unfolding history and their founding ideals, and how they imagine themselves in the evolving national narrative, shapes whether they feel a sense of civic integration or alienation. Evolving an ethos where an impending and obligatory sense of duty accompanies every claim for a right is the surest way to refurbish the spirit of love and service to the nation. I shall end with my most favourite words from the inaugural speech of President J. F. Kennedy, and the ones most often repeated by me in my class: 'Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country'.

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