



## National Identity and Patriotism

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–*Preeti Kumari*

A nation is formed by the set of people who inhabit a certain geographical landmass, are a part of a consolidated political unit, have shared rights and duties, follow a common legal system and so on. But more than all of this, a nation is an expression of people's ideas and aspirations. These ideas have originated, condensed, changed, evolved, lost and re-gained prominence over tens of centuries and so have the geographical boundaries and the political systems associated with them. These very ideas and aspirations of people are expressed in the various symbols and rituals which a nation chooses for itself as its motifs. The internalization of and identification with these symbols and rituals constitutes what is called as national identity at the level of political or even in day to day parlance. The respect, admiration and loyalty towards these symbols and rituals, which are in turn representation of the nation- its people, is what is called patriotism.

National identity, although a collective idea, yet can be read as the most important of the multiple identities an individual subscribes to in contemporary times. It has played an immense role in evolution of the social and the political world as it looks today. Meanwhile, patriotism has been the driving force in formation, articulation and assertion of the national identity. Therefore an essay on 'National Identity and Patriotism' becomes not only an exercise at comprehending the wider meanings and ramifications of these terms but is also an attempt to look at the debates surrounding these terms in our history and present times. In this process, we have to look at the various theories regarding their origin, story of their growth and conflicting prophecies about their probable future in a globalised and technology driven world. As such this essay also offers a chance to meditate upon the lessons from history and possibilities for future from the perspective of the present.

National identity derives itself from the idea of Nation-State. Nation-States themselves have their own history. While there are various theories regarding the origins of Nation-States, it is generally agreed upon that the bases of the Modern Nation States were laid after the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. It led to the formation of Classical Nation States of Northern and Western Europe. It also laid the foundation for the growth of Nationalism. This

ultimately led to formation and consolidation of Second generation of Nation States such as Italy, Germany, and countries of Central and Eastern Europe. The process of decolonization in the aftermath of Second World War saw the emergence of third generation of nation-states in the African and Asian Continents. The process of the formation of Nation-States continued till the end of 20th century when several new nations emerged in the aftermath of the decline and disintegration of USSR. The emergence of Kosovo in South-Eastern Europe and Southern Sudan in Africa highlight the fact that the process of Nation-Formation is still on, even in the 21st century.

The history of origin of National identity illustrates the importance of political events in the formation or emergence of modern nation-states. But that politics itself has been a derivative of interplay of diverse factors. National identity as such seems to be a superset of a combination of factors which include linguistic identities, regional loyalties, culture, religion and history.

Linguistic identities have been a feature of several demands of national self-determination. The wave of Nationalism in Europe in 18th and 19th century and the more recent struggle for and foundation of Bangladesh was largely based upon this very premise. One Nation-One Language was also mooted as the idea for the basis of national identity largely based upon the European experience. Similarly regional or ethnic identities have also acted as foundation of national identities. The disintegration of USSR into multiple nation states was seen as the culmination of the struggle for freedom of diverse groups that were ethnically diverse. The making and remaking of various African boundaries is also seen as the result of the assertion of ethnic identities as separate national identity.

Culture has also served as the bedrock of various nationalisms. The diversity of cultures has been seen as a challenge to the formation of a strong singular national identity. This line of argumentation also spilled over to religious identity as well. Religion was used as the basis for the two nation theory which led to the partition of United India into India and Pakistan. The modern state of Israel is also an example of the formation of National identity on the basis of an imagined coherence between Culture and Religion on one hand and Nation-State on the other.

All or any of these identities are given the form of National identity with the help of history. It is history of the Nation which gives legitimacy to national identity and assertion of sovereignty by that nation. Renan has even sarcastically remarked that 'Getting its history wrong is part of being a nation'. This is the reason all nations try to trace their history to a hoary past. Failure of being able to discover or forge one's history is seen as an existential question mark constantly lurking upon its national identity.

Benedict Anderson has famously theorized that 'Nation is an imagined community. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image

of their communion....Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined'. Ultimately it is the width and depth of the imagination of this community which decides the course of a nation. A country like India, with multiple and diverse linguistic, religious and ethnic identities could claim to be a nation only because of the inclusiveness and tolerance that has been its hallmark since centuries.

When various groups feel assured that their identities would not be threatened, but will actually flourish in the idea or imagination of a nation, only then a diverse but united nation like India can sustain and grow. Only an inclusive imagination can breed patriots, since exclusivity breeds division, secession and war. As such Patriotism is not only a display of love and a deep sense of affection for one's country; it is also a feeling of pride. Rabindranath Tagore often used a term 'Deshabhimaan' as a synonym for this word in his works which aptly captures one of the dimensions of this word.

National identity and Patriotism gives a sense of belonging to an individual in the world. It helps a person feel the presence of an extended family around him. Naturally the actions guided by such a philosophy will lead to betterment of a society and progress of the country. It is sometimes wrongly assumed that patriotism is love for one's country at the cost of others. Actually such line of thinking stems from crude understanding of the idea of National Identity and Patriotism. India has a guiding philosophy of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' i.e. whole world is my family. Only such understanding of patriotism can bring peace and prosperity to the country as well as the world.

Apart from that, excessive pride in a national identity and display of Patriotism may acquire the form of 'ultra nationalism' and jingoism. Ultra nationalism inevitably turns exclusionary in nature and hence leads not to the assertion but disintegration of national unity and ultimately identity. Similarly jingoism, by constantly falling back upon the idea of ultra nationalism when faced with any issue or problem of past/present, vitiates the community atmosphere and starts imposing restrictions upon any free speech or dissent. Such extremism leads only to great destruction as exemplified several times in history by various totalitarian regimes such as those of Hitler and Mussolini. One should always keep in mind what Edward R. Murrow, an American journalist said in context of USA during one of the most volatile phases of Cold War. He said 'We must not confuse dissent with disloyalty. When the loyal opposition dies, I think the soul of the nation dies with it.'

The turn of 20th century was seen as a challenge to the age of Nations, as it has been popularly referred to in the parlance of social sciences, due to unhindered rise of globalization, emergence of multinational companies with their revenues several times the GDP of several countries, and the age of internet which connected the world more than ever before. There was also a faction of scholars that saw it as approaching 'clash of civilizations' where multiple national or other identities are bound to engage in a clash, in order to emerge as the superior-most among all.

However, both prophecies can be seen to be missing the mark. The globalization has not only brought the world closer than ever, it has also sensitized people towards their own identities. It has taught the world to be more appreciative of the diversity of cultures, thoughts and nationalities. The demands for more apt representation from different parts of the world at United Nations and the recent reforms at International Monetary Fund (IMF) aimed at better representation of emerging nations at the international platform are two examples of the above phenomenon. Similarly, the increased contact between the various identities is not leading to any clash of civilizations but, in fact, has resulted in globally coordinated efforts to contain such clashes. Foundation of various international forums and signing of various trans-national treaties to engage with issues of security, energy and environmental concerns are cases in point. The visionary project of International Solar Alliance (ISA) launched by our Prime minister is an example of how multiple nations are coordinating in the contemporary globalised world to strike a balance between the global concerns of climate change and pressing national energy security concerns.

Towards conclusion, it can be said that National identity and patriotism are deeply humane terminologies. They represent the urge of the humankind to be a part of the collective and contribute meaningfully and loyally to it. Krishna says in Gita, that **there are multiple paths to the same truth**. Similarly, there may be more than one ways of not only subscribing to a national identity but also of displaying the patriotism towards one's country. One must always be ready and vigilant to defend one's national prestige but must not enforce one's own ideas and ideals of national identity and patriotism upon everyone else. The essence of National identity and patriotism, in a country like India, can be best summed up in the lines of the Ancient Philosopher Sun Tzu, who said

*“There are not more than five musical notes, yet the combinations of these five give rise to more melodies than can ever be heard.*

*There are not more than five primary colours, yet in combination they produce more hues than can ever been seen.*

*There are not more than five cardinal tastes, yet combinations of them yield more flavours than can ever be tasted.”*