Nationalism Vs Patriotism

Nationalism’s cynical misuse, conflating dissent with sedition, devalues our everyday patriotism

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Is there a difference between patriotism and nationalism? At one level, most people would think they are synonyms. But closer observation reveals there is a vital difference between the two. According to the dictionary meaning patriotism is, quite simply, love for one’s country. Nationalism, on the contrary, is its visible demonstration.

The two can interface in harmony. Or they can be posited against each other, whereby patriotism is considered somewhat inferior unless it manifests itself in its hyper version of overt nationalism.

This debate acquires resonance in the context of the recent air strike on the terrorist base at Balakot, and the public address to the nation by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on India joining the elite club of four nations – the US, Russia and China being the other three – who have the capacity to launch a missile against a satellite.

Both events are a source of legitimate pride. Balakot signifies a paradigm shift in our resolve to retaliate against Pakistan for its proxy terrorist war against us. The A-Sat is a demonstration of our will to upgrade our defence preparedness to a new frontier of space capability.

Should both these events evoke a sense of patriotism, or must they provoke nationalistic fervour? Patriotism includes a sense of pride, but does not require that proof be given for it. Normally, it can be restricted to the respect reserved for symbols like the national flag or the national anthem. Nationalism, on the contrary, often demands aggressive expression, public articulation and the assertion of superiority, going
beyond the rites due to national symbols. Patriotism is fulsome but not necessarily demonstrative; nationalism is exuberant and overt.

Is there, in this difference, a danger that nationalism can be misused by those who wish to benefit from its exuberance? Hyper nationalism can be artificially simulated, whipped up to serve an ulterior purpose. In the hands of politicians it can be a lethal weapon. BS Yeddyurappa, former BJP chief minister of Karnataka, made a statement that post-Balakot, the ‘nationalist’ wave would help his party sweep the elections.

BJP organised political events where the photographs of CRPF jawans killed in Pulwama were deliberately made a backdrop. Posters and hoardings mushroomed displaying the armed forces, and even containing pictures of Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman, a serving air force officer.

Politicising the armed forces is highly condemnable. National security is a bipartisan priority. The armed forces are mandated to be apolitical. Their valour and sacrifice is not the monopoly of any one party. To make them an accessory to party politics may help to stoke nationalism, but is an unpatriotic act.

For the government to take due credit for taking decisive action is legitimate; to coopt in this process the armed forces is not. It is good that the hoardings displaying the armed forces were taken down on the explicit directive of the Election Commission (EC). The EC has also set up a committee to examine whether the PM’s announcement of A-Sat constitutes a violation of the Model Code of Conduct for forthcoming parliamentary elections.

While patriotism is a continuum, ultra-nationalism requires an event, an external stimulus, to periodically invoke it. There is also the danger that if unchecked, this heightened nationalism can degenerate to jingoism or xenophobia. The last two are irrational mindsets. It is very difficult to counter them with logic, because the very attempt to be logical rather than emotional is perceived as an act of betrayal.
This forecloses the possibility to question or interrogate for that is seen as anti-national. Jingoism works to subsume other priorities that need attention, and compresses all national debate to a single issue.

In such situations, ordinary citizens are faced with an existential, even painful, dilemma. If they do not join the orchestrated chorus of nationalistic hysteria, their patriotism is considered inferior. If they do join the chorus, they have to stop behaving in the normal way of being patriotic.

This is so because patriotism is by definition inclusive, while hypernationalism thrives on exclusion, the conjuring of the ‘other’, against which the anger and animosity of the converted has to be directed. If patriotism is about sharing a sentiment, nationalism seeks to appropriate that sentiment. The citizen is forced to make a choice in this simulated tug of war.

In a mature democracy, patriotism is an embellishment. It ennobles the project of nationhood. Nationalism, if unchecked or deliberately hyped, coarsens the democratic discourse. Its cynical misuse devalues patriotism, conflates dissent with sedition, seeks to deflect attention from legitimate critique, sanctions mob violence, and encourages hatred.

Will ordinary citizens make the right choice between patriotism and nationalism in the national elections? People vote on a range of issues that affect the quality of their lives. No election is uni-dimensional. Our country is a subcontinent. The factors exercising the mind of the voter are many, including local concerns, quality of candidates, ethics in public life, regional aspirations, performance of the economy, jobs, business opportunities, rural well-being, and, yes, national security.

All of these are compatible with patriotism. But to brush everything under one carpet of contrived nationalism will be an insult to the voter, and hence unpatriotic.

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