Co-constructing National Identity in the Era of Identity Chaos

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ABSTRACT

At cognitive level, preliminary idea of nation and existence of a national group is essential to have a sense of national identity. For adolescents, evolving concept of social groups and possible affiliations with them starts during this period. Factors such as process of socialisation, schooling and exposure to media determines how an adolescent conceptualises the nation and reflects attachmentwith it. As adolescents are considered as the future citizens, this study aimed at tapping their perceptual understanding of nation. This study was conducted with volunteer adolescent students from senior secondary sections of four Delhi based school. They wrote essays on Indian national identity organised according to cue questions, given beforehand. Based on legibility and content appropriateness, 130 essays were selected for further grounded theory analysis. National identity was defined using references from native cultural constituents, such as norms, heritage, traditions, customs, and social values. Identity derived from nation was positive and filled with pride when contents were about patriotism and multiculturalism. However, sharp comments on perceived inadequacy of government were supported with appalling cases of disharmony. The expressions elucidating national identity were described more on the basis of external events than self-references. A possible inference may be drawn that adolescents' experienceswere in formative stage and hence were restricted to terminologies acquired from popular media.

Keywords: National identity; Adolescence; Thematic analysis

1. INTRODUCTION

Developinganunderstandingofnationalidentityisaffected by heterogenous factors such as caste, class. Language religion, etc. and their irregular distribution across national populations[1]. Nationality is acquired as default by birth, or citizenship. Often the initial understandings about national identity are marked with history, geography, or ethnicity[2]. Such parameter creates problems, particularly evidentat politicised and polarised area of any country. Some how all national identity markers are influenced by political agendas. Political events and leaders can mark historical and geographical specificities, and long term psychological and economic impactamong the nationals[3]. In everyday talk, historical, geographical, and political references are actively used to construct and strengthen national identity[4-5]. Likewise, national contextis upgraded from its banal form to areason of argumentation and contestation[6]. As a result of such landmark events and historical specifications, the nation stirs up for debate, about its contents and boundaries.

Indians are citizens of a relatively young democracy rooting from ancient civilisation, numerous kingdoms and centuries of foreign invasions. It may be even questioned whether India holds as a nation or is merely a conglomeration of sub-nations bound by colonialism[7]. Historically, contrasting cultures and faiths have blossomed in India and people have co-existed overcoming constrains of outgroup dynamics. Modern Indian society is developed on the legacy of ethnic homogeneity connected by language, religion and caste. After seven decades of independence, the reasons for national ties and collective solidarity have weakened. Modernisation have opened the global platform for individualistic development which have lowered dependence on national attachment and heightened need for international affiliation. Nation being an abstract concept limited to people's imagination on the basis a demarcated geographical territory renders no overt emotional ties. National identity is solely based on the perceptual attachment of citizens with collective history and imagined community[8]. In post-independent India, fabric of national integration was designed brick by brick, with contrast to the colonial period. During the nineteenth century, sub-national identities were reinforced by colonial administrators for segregating Indians and ease of governance[9]. Although Indian national identity is overshadowed by the sub-national identities, Indian culture is engrossed by metaphysical belief system since Vedic ages[10]. Hence Indian psyche is legitimised to its current status through absorption of modernity with its traditional past, enabling the features of co-existence and harmony.

Following social identity theory[11], identification with nation as a group is strengthened by projection of a positive image. There are two concurrent terms, patriotism and

nationalism; patriotism is love and support for the nation whereas nationalism led to claimed superiority and derogating other nations, even contradicting ideologies. Hence national identity operationally stands as non-comparable and unconditional affiliation with the nation; contrary to the version that it is only inherited association with a nation. Beyond Indian nationality by descent, Indianness has been described with multiple approaches, such as, psychological citizenship[12-13] legacy of civilisation[14-15], global Indian Diaspora[16-17]. Although there are prevalent ideas of secular nationalism, Hindu nationalism and separatist ideologies[18], Indian identity has been defined on plural platforms by scholars of social sciences[15, 19-32].

1.1 National Identity Among Adolescents

Questions of nationalism, national ideology and national identity have been largely questioned in India during recent years. Transforming political ambience has influenced media, public discourse and common citizen conversation. Arguing and extending research on these varied arrays, this study explores how Indianness is expressed in terms of psychological attachment among adolescents. During adolescence, distinct group identities are formed including understanding of nationality[33]. Self-Categorisation Theory[34] explains that situational factors determine social classification to the self as well as others. Views of oneself is assessed as compared to group attachment, hence group memberships with glorifying associations are preferred. Identification with nation guide career decisions apart from other personal preferences[35]. National identities can be conceptualised by comprehending social and political background within which people survive as per respective situation. Acknowledging importance of nation forms ideological standpoints shaped across national boundaries. Apart from these, factors like parenting and peer influence let adolescents envision their defining parameters of national identity[33]. Although these inferring factors responsible for formation of national identity is speculating in nature, this study aims to understand only the perceptual reality of nation and Indian national identity for school going urban adolescents.

2. METHODOLOGY

The rationale of this study was to understand the perception of adolescents about the nation and their national identity. Adolescents were considered as the study participants because they are the future citizens and they rapidly acquire information from the surrounding which later shape their mindsets. The study was conducted during the year 2016-2017 in Delhi, when the national capital faced major political and social events like nationalism debate among national universities, severe air pollution leading to closure of schools, vehicle control by odd-even number strategy, demonetisation, etc. All these incidents were presented by media in contradicting and controversial manner. Hence, this study was designed following qualitative research methods to extract adolescents' narratives.

2.1 Conducting the Field Work

Following the aim, this study was exploratory in nature; so, qualitative research method was used for data generation and analysis. Ten schools situated in North Delhi were approached for conducting the study. Prior initiating field work, entire study objectives and interview questions were debriefed to the school authorities for their approval. Only four out of ten schools granted permission to conduct the study during the school hours. Among the four, all were public schools, one was Hindi Medium and rest were English medium. Interview data were collected from students in textual form on the basis of pre-decided structured questions. All participants were asked to volunteer for an essay writing session on India- My Nation, either in English or Hindi. There was no word limit allotted but time was restricted. As cues four questions were written on the board and participants were asked to follow them while framing the essay. In each school, all volunteering students from different sections were seated in a classroom and the study was group administered. These essays were treated as a class drill and one of the teachers were present during the session. Questions targeted during the study were:

- What's your perception for Indians and their characteristics?
- How can we enhance the feelings of attachment with our nation and what hinders us to do so?

2.2 Data Generation

Cumulative of 171 Senior secondary section students participated, but 130 data sheets were selected for further analysis based on the response comprehensibility and writing legibility (Male- 92 & Female- 38). There were overall 28 essays in Hindi and rest in English. Most of the essays were written within two pages, approximately counting to 350-400 words. Due to ethical constrains, names of participating schools are not disclosed. All essays were considered as transcribed interviews as they were following structured interview pattern. Thematic analysis was done manually to interpret the data. It is a method for identifying, analysing, and shaping themes deduced from the data[36].

3. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Following thematic analysis[36], initial codes were drawn from each essay, making total of 779 codes. Initial codes were further clustered under six themes based on semantic and conceptual parity (Fig. 1). These themes are discussed in the following section.

3.1 Pride Associated with Nationality

Pride is the most associated factor while defining national attachment and patriotism[37]. Although students mentioned responses signifying pride and patriotism as Indian, but those were abstract in nature and were not supported with personal experiences or narratives. Somehow pride was associated with global success of the Indian diaspora globally. Fewer responses were indicative of robustness and vividness of Indian constitution and democratic system. Nation is explained as artificial community[8], pride and chivalry are constituent factors for forming national identity. School curriculum, popular media, cinema and sports are relevant for enhancing this sense of pride.
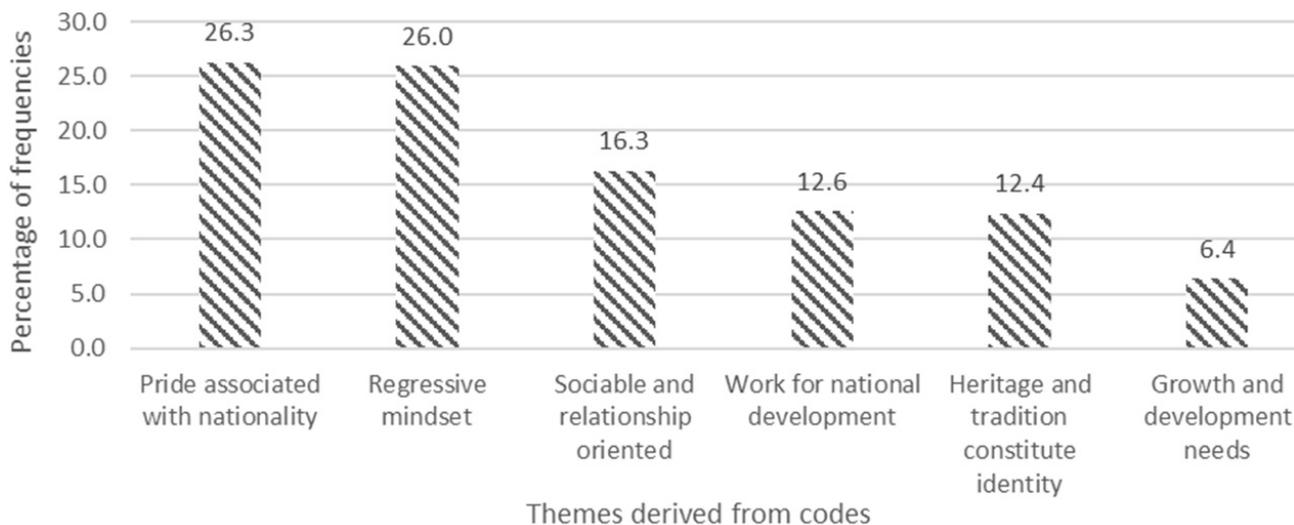
Figure 1. Major themes derived from essay data and the occurrence pattern.

3.2 Regressive Mindset

Along with the pride and respect associated with national identity, students expressed their feeling of shame and contempt for prevalent social evils in India. Among other negative perceptions, gender biasness and oppressive mindset towards women was highlighted. Social structure of stereotyping gender roles, fixating around compulsive goals and condemning others for not following norms are prevalent in India. Apart from the social structure, corruption and bribery are mentioned as disgraceful in the essays.

3.3 Sociable and Relationship Oriented

In terms of family[19], peer and surroundings, Indians are perceived as sociable and relationship oriented. Family attachments is strong, in spite ofdynamically changing family structure in India. Delhi being national capital is quite cosmopolitan; students responded to be warm and compassionate towards all sub national identities. Unity is formed out of diversity by working towards superordinate goals leading to national development.

3.4 Work for National Development

When asked about factors responsible for enhancing attachment with the nation, students wrote about individual and collective efforts. There were essays with responses about intension of contributing in national development. Although most of the ideas of making India a better place was abstract and intangible as per the essays, few examples were comprehensible. According to the participants, supporting developmental government such as *Swacha Bharat*, can improve the reasons for attaching to the nation. Other than that, serving nation, especially during crisis is an important factor for forming and extending national identity.

3.5 Heritage and Tradition Constitute Identity

Nation is relatively novel concept, as compared to other social groups, such as hamlet and tribe. For an artificially constituted nation on geographical basis, it is psychologically easier to associate with history and heritage[38-40]. For Indians, values and traditions are an important part of socialisation in all families irrespective of place and origin. Cohabiting with one's native culture along with prevailing diverse sub-national identity present around is defined as an Indian trait. Resultant cohesive social structure signifies Indian milieu, as envisioned by late Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru[41].

3.6 Growth and Development Needs

Indian identity can be understood only after delineating characteristics of Indians. Such characteristics might influence norms or national stereotypes, but are givingin-group perceptions of Indians for their fellow citizens is essential[42]. For these participants, Indians are growth oriented and successful. Few essays mention self-driven behaviour as ambitious whereas others mentioned personal growth as contributory to national development.Only few essays were written in first person, for all rest essay explained about Indians but not associated with self. Apart from ambitious, Indians were characterised as clever, shrewd, unreliable and inconsistent.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Identity development is a sequence of short-term repeating transactions between a person and her or his context[43]. Post-colonial rule, after seven decades of independence, struggling for civil liberties is rather ironical. India as an independent state, implement similar laws which were used by colonial rulers to suppress discord and restrict freedom of expression. Debates around shift of the majoritarian political party in the government are directional to fundamentalist viewpointsleading to chaos and conflicts. Developmental theory of ego identity formation proposes that during adolescence, self-identity arises out of the identity crisis[44]. To resolve such fundamental psychosocial crisis, adolescence is a period of exploration of roles and ideologies which eventually direct one to forming social identities[45]. Overall shift of governance affects the social milieu in macro scale and school curriculum in a subtle fashion. Such students responding about aspiration for national development

is encouraging. It is fascinating to report that the respondents as young as adolescents acknowledge the severe threats like gender disparities, poverty and corruption. The responses were not well illustrated with real references, subsequently making them shallow and precursive. However, co-construction of self-identity and national identity goes hand in hand during the age of adolescence, making this developmental stage crucial for formation of ideologies and group cohesion.

There were no differential responses for students of different schools and different genders. Overall response pattern of all school students was saturated within the analysed themes, hence this study it can be termed as limited to urban students only who are exposed to similar surroundings. The increased presence of social media and varied media reports may be a vital source of information co-constructing national identity among studied response groups. It still remainsa speculative question that how national identity constructing may vary among different age groups and living surroundings. This study faces limitation in terms of depth of generated data. Although the essays were nicely written, personal experiences were not referred therein. If this study was conducted with audio interviews, data quality would have been thicker and more narrative based. This study can be taken as a reference point for designing robust research on the topic of national identity in future.

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