

For love of country

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Shefali Tripathi Mehta, May 15, 2016,

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As someone who does not follow cricket, I often find myself alienated in frantic, passionate discussions and watching of the game. What is baffling is how everyone who follows it (that's almost everyone) seems to deride and even question my indifference.

This, in microcosm, is how we tend to impose our expectations, notions, beliefs, morality, religion and other passionate preferences on others. Deshbhakti of the zealots makes them spew hate, threaten, beat up, and in extreme cases, even kill those that do not hold the same view as them. Political parties and the media whip up mass hysteria over trivialities for their own benefit.

In the close-to-70-years of being an independent nation, have we learnt nothing of power play? Of how the vulnerable and marginalised are used as pawns to advance personal and political interests? Does anyone barge into the homes of the rich to kill; to check what they have in their refrigerator? An artist was driven out of the country for his nude paintings of goddesses. What about the men who threaten, attack and rape women of minority communities in the name of caste and religion? Those that shame the law and the constitution of the same nation they swear by when they pledge to chop off tongues, beat up, threaten and instigate hate wars.

Why are we so emotional about ideals and symbols but blind to real issues, real people? Why does our blood not boil when a 3-year-old has screws and nails stuffed into her genitals by perverts and her helpless parents are left to plead for treatment in government hospitals — in hospitals run on public money, our money? Why are we not provoked into action because poachers who shoot our wildlife into extinction have access to reserved forests; or because illegal mining continues to strip naked the bowels of our

land? Because green spaces in big cities are so easily sold to builders who seemingly have 'correct' political connections? Or because industrial effluents and harmful chemicals are allowed to flow into the water bodies that sustain us? Why does it not anger us enough that we cannot hold any government at helm accountable? Why does the love of the country not help us find solutions for the country's problems? Why does it only make us hate, destroy, kill?

Our enemy then is that voice of destruction, of unreason, of hate, and of violence that manages to outshout all that is otherwise.

An uneducated, tribal man saw the devastation of flora and fauna caused by floods and determinedly, against all odds, singlehandedly planted trees for over 3 decades creating a lush forest. Jadav Payeng of Assam's Jorhat district saw a problem and did what he thought he could to set things right. For 15 years now, a 64-year-old factory worker, Kamalbai Parmar, has been running a 'Footpath School' in Ahmedabad because the children of labourers, ragpickers and domestic servants did not learn well enough to benefit from the free education they were receiving in government schools. He provides the students with tuitions after school and free meals. That's how we build this nation, in ways that we can. The debates can go on forever — the micro shredding and incongruously stretched, high-decibel interpretation of the terms nationalism, patriotism, but the fact of the matter is what does our love for our nation move us to do? Is it only the flag-waving jingoism that goes for much of it today?

Our responsibility

It's alright to have the chest swell on hearing the national anthem, but what is one's contribution to the country, toward nation building? Isn't that how we will measure up? Not just as a soldier who's ready to make the supreme sacrifice, but as the clerk who is his parent, the teachers and the elders from who he learns, gets support and inspiration. Everyone who does their work sincerely and honestly contributes to nation-building.

From setting things right, standing up for justice, raising awareness on issues and resisting from making or sharing messages that spread hatred, every single thing that we do that takes us forward, contributes to building this country. That's the only way forward for a better world for us to live in. Bhakti Sharma, 26, went to work in the US after her Master's, like many young people of her generation, but the desire to work at the grassroots in her country drew her back within one year. Her initial work in villages made her understand that the reason why villages do not benefit from government schemes meant for them is because these schemes are poorly implemented.

To do this, she contested elections and is now the youngest educated Sarpanch in village Berkhedhi in Madhya Pradesh. She has built the platform from where to begin the work she wants to do. Nation-building begins with fixing our homes and families, communities, workplace. It begins with teaching our children to be honest and assertive;

and to live with integrity and empathy. Nationalism should mean giving back to the nation; working, volunteering in ways that are not for self-interest alone. Nationalism, then, should be our civic responsibility.

This civic responsibility can be fulfilled in small, workable ways. The Bhopal I-Clean Team is a group of dedicated people who spend a few hours each Sunday to clean up and beautify some part of the city of lakes. This team is inspired by Bengaluru's The Ugly Indian — a group that 'spot fixes' small parts of the streets each week. There are volunteers who take time to read to the blind and write exams for them and for those with other physical disabilities. A quiet clerk in my former office celebrated all birthdays in his family, including those of his little children, in an old age home.

Anti nationals & traitors

Our shouting is louder than our actions, Our swords are taller than us, This is our tragedy.

— Nizar Qabbani, poet & diplomat It is astonishing that criminals, cheats, tax defaulters; those that spread hate and acrimony in the name of religion and caste; and those who create barriers for the people living on the margins are not considered traitors or treated with the same disdain as those that are suspected of chanting anti-national slogans.

The insatiable hunger of a few for wealth and power makes them go blind to honesty and integrity. They twist rules and laws of our democratic institutions to steal from those that are struggling to make their ends meet. Traitors and anti-nationals should be those who cannot rid their minds of gender stereotypes and stand in way of letting women live fulfilled lives. They are the ones who cannot stand a chance at fair discourse, and in their desperation to see women beaten, counter them with sexist, degrading personal attacks, especially on social media.

The media that seems to control our thoughts and voices has managed to polarise us by creating useless binaries of discussions that have no bearing on critical issues. We are so swayed by loud, emphatic speeches and by our own political allegiances that we cannot but take sides. Our support of parties, and not ideologies, creates conflicts. What is the breaking point of our political loyalty — annihilation of our own identity, the voice of our conscience and intelligence in the mindless defence of political interests that are not even serving us, our country? We have to stop taking sides blindly and perceive issues for what they are, and not how they are brought to us, coloured in narrow interests by people who do not have our or the country's best interests topmost.

They do the country proud

To act with intelligence and integrity, to channelise our anger into improving things is how we become and prove that we are the proud citizens of a great country. Brave Indians like Manjunath, who stood up against the oil mafia, and Barun Biswas, who took on a gang of rapists — both paying for it with their lives, are martyrs and deshbhakts of the noblest order. There is an exemplary tradition that I witnessed at one of the country's premier institutions. With its top-notch faculty and academic resources, it offers

education on a highly subsidised fee — the reason why it attracts students from all over the country — a lot of them from distant towns and villages, and from economically weaker backgrounds. But the entrance exam for a seat here is highly competitive. Nowhere else in the country can poor students hope to study from the best. So guess who gives them that helping hand? Every summer, before the entrance exams in May, students of the university coach these aspirants.

During hot summer afternoons, sitting on the floor of the Students' Union office are at least a hundred or so youngsters, being coached patiently in all subjects by graduate students of the university who take time out from their own studies, sometimes even between 2 exams. I have never seen or heard of this tradition anywhere else. Those that have received the opportunity want others like them to come up, too. This is a tradition, a mindset that we have to embrace for the love of this land.