Censorship, Nationalism, and the Politics of Fear: An Orwellian Reading of Current India

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***Abstract*—The vocabulary of patriotism in today's India has grown heavier, more guarded, and urgently emotional. This shift is not merely political; it is psychological, shaping how ordinary people speak, remember, and participate in public life. When nationalism becomes a measure of loyalty rather than belonging, the atmosphere begins to resemble Orwell's warning: a nation where the state does not need to silence everyone because citizens begin doing it themselves. Censorship, in this moment, is not only a law or a ban; it is a feeling—a tightening in the chest before posting a comment, a hesitation before questioning power, a pause before naming injustice. It enters homes, classrooms, newsrooms, and friendships, altering the grammar of everyday speech. In such a climate, narratives are curated to produce unity, but the cost of that unity is interior compliance. Media cycles repeat selective truths, dissidents are framed as destabilising elements, and national pride is tied to singular interpretations of culture and identity. What appears patriotic on the surface slowly becomes a tool of emotional regulation: love the nation in this way, at this volume, and with this vocabulary—or risk being perceived as against it. The politics of fear works not through dramatic repression but through the quiet erosion of confidence in one's voice. This is where the Orwellian echo grows unmistakable. Fear no longer shouts; it whispers, persuades, and normalises. Citizens withdraw from debate not because they lack conviction, but because they sense that disagreement carries a personal cost—professional, social, or digital. The true danger is not that free speech disappears overnight, but that society forgets what free speech looks like, feels like, and demands. To read India through Orwell today is to ask not whether the state controls truth, but how easily truth can be reshaped when a nation equates silence with loyalty and conformity with patriotic love.**

***Index Terms*—Nation, Pride, Love, Censorship, Emotion, Unity, Truth, Media**

In India's current political moment, patriotism is no longer a quiet, personal sentiment; it is something citizens are expected to display, affirm, and perform. Public speech feels more watched, not always by law, but by a collective nervousness that mistakes critique for disloyalty. The ideological pressure resembles the world George Orwell warned against in *1984*, not because India has reproduced totalitarianism, but because the emotional mechanics of power—fear, conformity, curated memory—have begun to direct civic behaviour. National identity today is narrated as a singular feeling, and deviation from that feeling is treated as injury to the nation itself. As Pratap Bhanu Mehta notes, nationalism now "demands emotional alignment rather than intellectual agreement," turning sentiment into a political expectation rather than a private attachment (Mehta 23).

Censorship, in this climate, rarely appears as a dramatic prohibition. It moves more quietly—through television debates that leave no room for individuality, through accusations that cast dissenters as outsiders, and through social media outrage that punishes hesitation before it becomes speech. Arundhati Roy observes that the present political climate "thinks of nationalism as applause, not argument," creating an atmosphere where silence feels safer than participation (Roy 51). Citizens begin to retreat from conversation not because they have nothing to say, but because the emotional cost of saying it has grown heavier. The line between love of nation and obedience to state power becomes difficult to hold.

This is where Orwell becomes relevant—not as prophecy, but as diagnosis. When fear no longer needs force to operate, when citizens anticipate consequences before speaking, democracy shifts from constitutional practice to emotional discipline. In such a setting, the task of the citizen is no longer just to vote or debate, but to remember the difference between devotion and submission. As Vaidik argues, the state today "does not just govern its citizens; it shapes how they are supposed to feel" (Vaidik 115). The political

tension lies precisely there: in the gap between loving one's country and being compelled to feel that love in only one sanctioned way.

The political climate of contemporary India carries a deep emotional charge, one that transforms nationalism from civic participation into affective duty. To belong, one must not simply identify with the nation but embody a particular form of patriotic feeling, articulated publicly and without hesitation. It is within this emotional landscape that George Orwell's dystopian imagination becomes urgently symbolic. India is not Oceania, and its democracy is not erased; yet the psychological texture of nationalism, silence, dissent, and curated memory echoes the anxieties Orwell inscribed in *1984*. Patriotism, once a calm commitment to collective well-being, has become a performance of purity, almost devotional in tone, where the price of disagreement is emotional exile. Pratap Bhanu Mehta observes that today "nationalism seeks emotional conformity more than deliberation," suggesting that civic engagement is increasingly measured through sentiment rather than thought (Mehta 31).

Censorship in India now functions less as state decree and more as emotional instinct. No formal bans are required for a journalist to soften a headline or for a student to hesitate before writing a thesis topic that could be misread as unpatriotic. The boundaries of permissible speech are not drawn in legal documents but in public mood, social media aggression, televised condemnation, and the deep psychological knowledge that dissent risks being accused of disloyalty. Arundhati Roy writes that nationalism today "prefers applause to inquiry," creating an environment in which criticism feels like betrayal, not participation (Roy 54). The power of censorship is that it no longer needs to declare itself. It is felt, inhaled, and internalised long before it ever arrives at the doorstep of law. People withdraw from speech not because they lack conviction but because they have learned to associate critique with personal risk, social defamation, employment precarity, or public shaming.

This emotionalization of nationalism is not a historical accident; it follows a postcolonial trajectory. The Indian nation, like many postcolonial states, inherits not only the legacy of colonial rule but the vulnerability of identity formation after it. Homi K. Bhabha argues that postcolonial nationalism is "a fragile performance of unity, haunted by the incompleteness of its own self-image" (Bhabha 92). India repeatedly narrates itself against the memory of its colonial wound, and thus national pride becomes a moral bulwark, a gesture of strength against historical humiliation. Yet this very vulnerability invites overprotection. A nation that still remembers its subjugation fears fragmentation, fears difference, fears voices that could complicate its heroic narrative. It is easier, emotionally, to insist on a singular, unbroken nationalism than to accept the plurality and disagreement that genuine democracy requires.

This vulnerability fuels an atmosphere in which history is not merely remembered but sanctified. The past becomes sacred territory, insulated from interrogation. Alternative accounts of independence, caste violence, communal trauma, and border conflict risk appearing as challenges to national dignity. Postcolonial scholar Partha Chatterjee points out that nationalism in formerly colonised societies often frames the past as spiritual property, not open to analysis but demanding reverence (Chatterjee 61). This transformation shifts academic inquiry into emotional trespass. To revise historical understanding is to risk accusations of disrespect, not to political leaders but to the nation's soul. Fear in this environment is quieter than Orwell's imagined totalitarianism but no less operative. It moves through conversational pauses, through glances exchanged before a political joke is told in a café, through WhatsApp group silences when a controversial article is shared. It is not institutional terror but emotional caution, the kind that persuades individuals to blend into collective sentiment for the sake of belonging. Censorship is successful not when it punishes speech, but when it convinces citizens that speech is not worth the punishment. The person who remains silent does so not under force, but under anticipation. The emotional cost of speaking exceeds the democratic right to speak. Thus, fear becomes less a consequence and more a precondition.

Global political anxieties add to this emotional tightening. The rise of populism, digital surveillance, global terror narratives, and cultural homogenisation all feed into national self-assertion. Yet in India, these pressures do not operate in a vacuum; they merge with the memory of colonial vulnerability. National pride becomes a shield, but at times an overused one. When patriotism must be constantly affirmed, repeated, displayed, proven, it risks becoming fragile. The

louder the anthem, the quieter the room for debate. Orwell becomes relevant precisely because he understood that the most everlasting form of control is not physical coercion but internalised discipline. A society does not need a Ministry of Truth if its citizens voluntarily regulate their speech to align with dominant sentiment. India is not governed by totalitarian decree, yet the emotional boundaries around permissible speech operate with similar efficiency. The citizen today is asked not only to behave but to feel correctly. Loyalty becomes a language, a tone, a style of memory. It is important to clarify that this is not a condemnation of patriotism itself. Love of nation, belonging, cultural memory, and collective identity are not burdens but essential components of shared life. The danger arises only when patriotic sentiment hardens into moral compulsion, when love becomes a test rather than a choice. Democracy is not merely a structure of elections and institutions but an atmosphere in which disagreement is protected, criticism is allowed to refine collective vision, and national narrative can accommodate diversity, fracture, and complexity. Aparna Vaidik notes that the state today "shapes not just what citizens should think but how they should feel politically," signalling a shift from constitutional governance to emotional governance (Vaidik 113). The texture of this shift is intimate, almost invisible, but its consequences reach deeply into classrooms, newsrooms, and homes. To read India through Orwell, then, is not to declare it dystopian, but to acknowledge the fine emotional line between devotion and obedience. The health of democracy depends not on unanimity but on multiplicity. When patriotism becomes a chorus that demands identical pitch and volume, the quieter yet sincere tones of love risk being drowned out. The task ahead is nothing dramatic: it is the slow, patient restoration of speech as belonging, dissent as care, and memory as shared rather than owned. A nation is strongest not when it silences doubt but when it absorbs it, transforms it, and grows through it. True patriotism is not applause on demand, but the freedom to speak without fear of misinterpretation.

When placed beside Rabindranath Tagore's reflections in *Nationalism in India* and *Nationalism in China*, as well as his poetic plea in "Where the Mind is Without Fear," the present political atmosphere appears to contradict the ethical foundation he imagined for the nation. Tagore feared the rise of nationalism that turns the citizen into an efficient instrument rather than an autonomous conscience. He argued that nationalism, when defined as collective machinery and emotional control, risks eclipsing the "moral man" beneath the patriotic performance. In *Nationalism in India*, he writes that India should not imitate aggressive nationalism, because "a nation is not merely a political body; it is a moral idea" (Tagore, *Nationalism in India*). For Tagore, national feeling must elevate dignity, not regulate it. Against this vision, the present emotionalised political climate reflects a nationalism that asks for a singular emotional register. Citizens today feel compelled to present uniform love, uniform speech, and uniform memory, where deviation is read as disloyalty. Tagore, however, insisted that national pride must not demand sameness. His anxiety about mechanical nationalism becomes clear when he warns that modern states risk creating "organizations of power" rather than humane communities (Tagore, *Nationalism in China*). In today's India, nationalism often appears as emotional instruction rather than ethical invitation, resembling precisely the structure Tagore cautioned against: a nationalism that demands expression rather than belief, participation rather than contemplation.

In "Where the Mind is Without Fear," Tagore imagines a homeland that rises beyond fear-based belonging. The poem yearns for a nation where "the mind is without fear and the head is held high," a line that gestures toward dignity without surveillance, belonging without pressure, and love without compulsion. Contemporary citizens, however, do not inhabit this space of fearless speech; they negotiate emotion before they negotiate truth. While Tagore's lines speak of thought that is "clear" and words that come out from "the depth of truth," today's patriotic vocabulary is weighed down by caution, accusation, and emotional fatigue. Speech often anticipates backlash before it takes form. Where current nationalism equates dissent with injury, Tagore saw critique as essential to ethical citizenship. His nationalism was not a chorus but a conversation. In *Nationalism in India*, he argues that true patriotism does not silence difference but "opens the path of truth," because the nation must grow through listening, not through uniformity. This is precisely where the philosophical divergence becomes stark: Tagore's nation requires courage to question, whereas today's nationalism often requires restraint. National pride in

contemporary context leans toward protection of image more than introspection, toward defence more than dialogue. Tagore's homeland, conversely, is built upon moral spaciousness rather than emotional precision. Contemporary politics and Tagore share the belief that national identity is deeply emotional. Both recognize that belonging is felt before it is reasoned. But where current political rhetoric deploys emotion to discipline, Tagore deploys emotion to liberate. His vision does not deny passion; it denies passion without conscience. He wanted love of country to be tender rather than militarised, curious rather than possessive. In *Nationalism in China*, he reminds readers that national strength must come from "spiritual freedom," not rigid pride. His ideal patriot stands tall not because dissent is silenced but because dignity is inherent.

The contrast intensifies around fear. For Tagore, fearlessness is the very foundation of the nation's soul; courage is the element that allows love to coexist with doubt, devotion to coexist with critique. The poem envisions a nation where "knowledge is free," meaning not merely accessible but unthreatened. Today, however, knowledge is not always spoken without hesitation. Words are crafted to avoid misunderstanding rather than to seek clarity. Public discourse—online, televised, academic—carries a sense of surveillance that is psychological rather than juridical. Orwell warned of such internalised caution; Tagore prayed for its absence. Still, Tagore's thought does not simply exist as historical opposition. It offers a corrective horizon. His nationalism is a reminder that love is most authentic when unmonitored, that patriotism is most stable when unforced. He believed that unity emerges through consent of the heart, not choreography of the voice. The India he imagined—open, fearless, morally expansive—remains a measure for the India that is learning to go through emotional nationalism today. In returning to Tagore, one does not romanticise the past but recover a vocabulary in which nationhood does not suffocate the individual but anchors him in freedom. His vision remains a plea: that pride should not cost truth, that belonging should not cost speech, and that the head may be held high not because silence is imposed but because dignity is assured. The emotional texture of contemporary Indian nationalism—its heightened sensitivities, its pride, its quiet regulation of speech—suggests a political climate in which Orwell's cautionary world is not replicated but faintly echoed. Tagore imagined a homeland where the mind is without fear, where dignity is instinctive, not supervised, and where the citizen stands tall not because they conform but because they are free. Yet the present atmosphere often asks individuals to monitor their tone before their thought, their volume before their conviction. Patriotism has become something that must be shown, demonstrated, and efficiently communicated, rather than quietly lived.

What is most striking is not the presence of overt coercion, but the internalisation of it. People learn to pause, to soften, to avoid, to adjust. The lines between prudence and fear blur, and what begins as emotional loyalty gradually becomes emotional discipline. It is here that Orwell's warning acquires its relevance: the most efficient control is the kind that feels natural. When citizens begin to anticipate consequences before speaking, when they police themselves more diligently than any state apparatus, the democratic spirit enters a zone of quiet fragility. Tagore's plea for a nation of fearless minds becomes a moral counterweight. He believed that love of country should stretch the soul, not tighten it; that belonging should widen the horizon of speech, not compress it. Yet in the current climate, love is often measured by alignment, pride by volume, and dissent by danger. The health of a nation cannot be built on emotional uniformity. If critique becomes sacrilege, patriotism becomes performance. And so, the cultural whisper persists, sometimes humorous, sometimes ominous, sometimes painfully true: Big Brother is watching you. Not through force, not through decree, but through expectation, sentiment, accusation, and the silent agreement that patriotism must remain visibly unquestioned.

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