

Teaching nationhood to Gen Z

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Last Updated: August 16, 2026



Young girls march with flags amid rain during 80th Independence Day celebrations at Maulana Azad Stadium, in Jammu on Saturday. ANI

How to teach the young the importance of the nation when both the Right and Left constantly declare it irrelevant?

There is a particular kind of vertigo that afflicts students (and teachers) in post-colonial democracies today. They carry two contradictory inheritances at once. From one direction—call it the cosmopolitan Left, though its provenance is broader than any single ideology—they are told that the nation-state is a colonial residue, an artificial container imposed on older, more organic solidarities of caste, region, language, or class, and that its claims on loyalty are at best sentimental and at worst reactionary. From another direction—the transactional Right of globalised capital and technocratic liberalism—they are told that the nation is simply inefficient: a bureaucratic drag on markets, a border that supply chains route around, a jurisdiction to be arbitrated rather than inhabited. Both critiques, despite their opposed [politics](#), converge on a single verdict: the nation does not matter, or at least does not matter as much as it once claimed to. The teacher of national history, civilizational memory, or even international relations in a post-colonial classroom has to work against this double erosion. And the difficulty is epistemological, emotional, and pedagogical all at once.

POST-COLONIAL INHERITANCE

Post-colonial states inherited [education](#) systems designed to serve imperial interests, not nation building. These systems were often exclusionary, racially segregated, and culturally alienating, intended to sustain European domination rather than foster

indigenous identity. After Independence, these same institutions were suddenly tasked with forging new national identities and senses of belonging among populations divided by language, [ethnicity](#), religion, and caste. The challenge was intractable: reform curricula to reflect national development needs while rapidly expanding access to education. And today, in a country like India which is still, eight decades after Independence from British rule, working to define and settle its sovereignty with contested borders, malevolent rivals, and nuclear-armed antagonists is being urged from the Right and Left to “go beyond nationalism”, where in reality it is still trying to complete the process of being fully sovereign.

IDEOLOGICAL ASSAULT ON NATIONHOOD

Today, educators confront a new complication: the nation is under ideological siege from multiple directions. On the Right, where once “globalists” declared the “global village”, now tech bros promise borderless AI utopia. This approach fails to account for the ambivalence inherent in post-colonial identity and the power disparities resulting from coloniality. Meanwhile, the Left frequently critiques national identity as inherently exclusionary, tied to ethnic nationalism, or incompatible with cosmopolitan values and human rights frameworks. This dual assault creates a pedagogical vacuum. Students are told from one direction that the nation is everything (often in ways that deny historical complexity) and from another that it is nothing (a mere construct of oppression). The result is what scholars call “teaching ambivalence”—the need to navigate national identity education in multicultural societies where multi-ethnic discourses complicate straightforward narratives. In Sweden, for example, citizenship education grapples with creating national identity in multi-ethnic societies, assigning education the normative character of teaching ambivalence as a didactical principle.

HYBRIDITY CHALLENGE

Post-colonial theorists emphasize that national identity in formerly colonized societies is inherently hybrid—neither fully indigenous nor entirely colonial, but a complex amalgam. Homi Bhabha’s concept of hybridity suggests that national identity portrayals should be understood as malleable rather than fixed. This presents both opportunity and difficulty for educators. On one hand, hybridity allows for flexible, inclusive conceptions of nationhood that acknowledge colonial trauma while building new futures. On the other, it complicates the task of teaching a coherent national narrative. The Philippines experience illustrates this tension. Since independence from America in 1946, attempts to construct cohesive national identity have met limited success. Unlike other Asian nations where colonial histories were effectively harnessed for nation-building, the Philippines’ prolonged and varied colonization created fragmented identities resistant to unification. Postcolonial philosophies of education there emerged from desires to unite disparate populations under common identity, yet remained heavily influenced by Western conceptions of personhood and patriotism. The imposition of universal national identity upon diverse populations entailed erasure of differing identities, knowledge systems, and ways of life.

EPISTEMIC VIOLENCE AND CULTURAL UPROOTING

A deeper challenge lies in what is known as “cultural epistemicide”—the loss of indigeneity including indigenous knowledge, language, and national identity. Schooling in ex-colonies tends to de-historicize students and uproot them from cultural heritage, replicating colonial patterns of cultural alienation. This creates national security risks associated with the erosion of national cultural identities. African states inherited

underdeveloped, exclusionary education systems whose curricula sustained European domination, then faced the impossible task of reforming these systems while rapidly expanding access.

The language question exemplifies this dilemma. Research on language education and identity realization shows significant consequences in choosing between Indigenous or colonial language approaches. [Teaching](#) in colonial languages may provide global mobility but risks cultural disconnection; teaching in indigenous languages may preserve heritage but limit economic opportunities. This tension reflects broader questions about what kind of nation is being imagined—one oriented toward global integration or cultural authenticity.

WHY THE NATION REMAINS IMPORTANT

Scholars propose alternative frameworks for [teaching](#) national identity in post-colonial contexts. One approach conceptualizes teaching national identity as “play”—an interactive, exploratory process rather than instruction.

Teaching& Classroom Resources

But how can a country so troubled with deep structural and geopolitical existential challenges not develop instructional roles in engendering the very idea of nationhood and love for the country? In fact, today’s committed citizens are all part of the post-Independence cohort, or their children and grandchildren, who were provided this fundamental grounding in love for one’s country and knowledge of the sacrifices that went into achieving Independence. This instructional role, in my opinion, is not diminishing—it is in fact more urgent than ever.

GLOBAL NATIONALISM CONTEXT

Recent research highlights how global nationalism complicates efforts to connect curriculum with student identities. Studies in Catalonia and the United States show how efforts to counteract deficit views and re-centre curriculum in community priorities encountered challenges in different nationalist contexts. Global nationalism as a context can potentially undermine efforts to link curriculum and identity, requiring sustained attention to the dynamic, fluid character of identity.

Survey data from 23 countries reveals that most respondents consider speaking the same language (91%) and sharing traditions and customs (81%) more important for national identity than sharing birthplaces (58%). This suggests that national identity formation is not straightforward but an outcome of protracted socialisation and enculturation.

Formal curricula touch upon national identity through languages, history, geography, social studies, and civic [education](#), yet these efforts must navigate competing ideological pressures.

CAN WE THINK THIS PROBLEM A FRESH?

The way forward requires educators to embrace complexity rather than retreat into simplistic narratives. Teaching national identity as malleable rather than fixed allows students to engage critically with their nation’s history while maintaining civic attachment. This approach acknowledges colonial trauma without being trapped by it, recognizing hybridity without surrendering to rootlessness. It requires what scholars call “maximal interpretation” of citizenship education—promoting epistemological approaches based on rights and responsibilities rather than subordination.

Educators must also resist the false choice between national pride and critical engagement. National education policies, curricula, and textbooks construct the nation and delineate characteristics of “good citizens”. One of the education system’s most important tasks is developing strong sense of national pride and making students feel part of the larger national community. Yet this must be done honestly, acknowledging historical complexities while building toward inclusive futures.

The challenge in postcolonial countries is not merely ideological but fundamentally pedagogical and epistemic. It requires constructing national narratives that are historically honest, culturally grounded, and civically meaningful—narratives that acknowledge hybridity without surrendering to rootlessness, that foster pride without denying complexity, and that prepare students for global engagement without uprooting them from their heritage. In a world where both Right and Left declare the nation irrelevant, educators must insist on its continued significance— not as an uncritical object of devotion, but as an evolving project of collective self determination.

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