

India After Independence

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Freedom came to India on 15 August 1947 - a day that resonated with imperial pride rather than nationalist sentiment.¹ In New Delhi, capital of the Raj and of free India, the formal event began shortly before midnight. Apparently, astrologers had decreed that 15 August was an inauspicious day. Thus it was decided to begin the celebrations on the 14th, with a special session of the Constituent Assembly, the body of representative Indian working towards a new constitution.²

It was a thrilling moment. In a memorable address to the Constituent Assembly on the night of 14 August 1947, Jawaharlal Nehru, speaking as the first prime minister of a free India and giving expression to the feelings of the people, said:

Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge ... At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom. A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance. It is fitting that at this solemn moment we take the pledge of dedication to the service of India and her people and to the still larger cause of humanity . . . We end today a period of ill fortune and India discovers herself again.³

The sacrifices of generations of patriots and the blood of countless martyrs had borne fruit. But this joy was tainted by despair, for the country had been divided. Large parts of the two new nations were engulfed by communal riots. There was a mass exodus of people from both states across the new borders. More and more, independence had been accompanied by a multitude of problems, and, of course, centuries of backwardness, prejudice, inequality, and ignorance still weighed on the land. The debris of two centuries of colonialism had to be cleared and the promises of the freedom struggle to be fulfilled. The long haul had just begun. As Nehru declared in his 14 August speech, 'The achievement we celebrate today is but a step, an opening of opportunity, to the greater triumphs and achievements . . . That future is not one of ease and resting but of incessant striving so that we may fulfil the pledges we have so often taken.'⁴

It needs to be said that there were the immediate problems of the territorial and administrative integration of the princely states, the communal riots that accompanied Partition, the rehabilitation of nearly six million refugees who had migrated from Pakistan, the protection of Muslims threatened by communal gangs, the need to avoid war with Pakistan, and the Communist insurgency. Restoration of law and order and political stability and putting in place an administrative system, threatened with breakdown because of Partition and the illogical division of the army and higher bureaucracy virtually on religious lines, were other immediate tasks. As Nehru declared in 1947, 'First things must come first and the first thing is the security and stability of India.'⁵ Or in the words of the political scientist W.H. Morris-Jones, the task was 'to hold things

together, to ensure survival, to get accustomed to the feel of being on the water, to see to it that the vessels keep afloat.⁶

In addition there were the medium-term problems of framing a constitution and building a representative democratic and civil libertarian political order, organizing elections to put in place the system of representative and responsible governments at the Centre and in the states, and abolishing the semi-feudal agrarian order through thorough-going land reforms.

The newly-formed independent government also had the long-term tasks, of promoting national integration, pushing forward the process of nation-in-the-making, facilitating rapid economic development, removing endemic poverty, and initiation of the planning process. It also sought to bridge as quickly as possible the gap between mass expectations aroused by the freedom, struggle and their fulfilment and to get rid of centuries-long social injustice, inequality, and oppression. All these problems had to be dealt with within the framework of the basic values to which the national movement had been committed and within the parameters of a broad national consensus.

It is useful to reflect here on the way the political leadership set out to handle these short-term and long-term problems fuelled by an optimism, a certain faith in the country's future and with a *joie de vivre*. This mood was to persist for most of the Nehru years. Though many, especially on the left, were dissatisfied with and basically critical of Nehru and his policies, they too shared this feeling of hope. Nehru himself once again expressed this feeling after nearly a decade as prime minister: "There is no lack of drama in this changing world of ours and, even in India, we live in an exciting age. I have always considered it a great privilege for people of this generation to live during this period of India's long history ...I have believed that there is nothing more exciting in the wide world today than to work in India."⁷

Independent India embarked on its tasks with the benefit of an outstanding leadership, having tremendous dedication and idealism besides the presence of a strong nation-wide party, the Congress. Nehru had always believed that 'India's greatest need is for a sense of certainty concerning her own success.'⁸ And it was this sense of excitement and of the coming success which he succeeded in imparting to the millions. Beside the great Nehru stood a group of leaders who had played a notable role in the freedom movement. There was his deputy prime minister, Sardar Patel, a leader who possessed a strong will and was decisive in action and strong in administration. At the state level, were several leaders like Govind Ballabh Pant in U.P., B.C. Roy in West Bengal, and B.G. Kher and Morarji Desai in Bombay, who enjoyed unchallenged authority in their states. All these leaders had skills and experience to run a modern and democratic administrative and political system which they had acquired through organizing a mass movement.

The Congress leaders also shared a common vision of independent India. They were committed to the goals of rapid social and economic change and democratization of the society and polity, and the values imparted by the national movement. Nehru's commitment to these values is well known. But, in fact, Sardar Patel, Rajendra Prasad and C. Rajagopalachari were equally committed to the values of democracy, civil liberties, secularism, and independent economic development, anti-imperialism, social reforms and had a pro-poor orientation. These leaders differed with Nehru primarily on the question of socialism and class analysis of society.

We may point out, parenthetically, in this context that Patel has been much misunderstood and misrepresented both by admirers and critics. The right-wingers have used him to attack the Nehruvian vision and policies, while his leftist critics have portrayed him as the archetypal rightist. Both, however, have been wrong. In any case, it is important that Nehru and the other leaders shared the belief that for the country's

development building-up of a national consensus was necessary. The leadership's position was strengthened by the fact they enjoyed tremendous popularity and prestige among almost every section of the people.

Unifying under one administration, post-Partition India and the princely states was perhaps the most important task facing the political leadership. It may be noted that in colonial India, nearly 40 per cent of the territory was occupied by fifty-six small and large states ruled by the princes who enjoyed varying degrees of autonomy under the system of British paramountcy. British Power protected them from their own people as also external aggression so long as they did British bidding. In 1947 the future of the princely states once the British left became a matter of concern. Many of the larger princes began to dream of independence and to scheme for it. They claimed that the paramountcy could not be transferred to the new states of India and Pakistan. Their ambitions were fuelled by the British prime minister, Clement Attlee's announcement on 20 February, 1947 that 'His Majesty's Government do not intend to hand over their powers and obligations under paramountcy to any government of British India.'⁹ Consequently, rulers of several states claimed that they would become independent from 15 August 1947 when British rule ended.

In this they got encouragement from M.A. Jinnah who publicly declared on 18 June 1947 that 'the States would be independent sovereign States on the termination of paramountcy' and were 'free to remain independent if they so desired.'¹⁰ The British stand was, however, altered to some extent when, in his speech on the Independence of India Bill, Attlee said, 'It is the hope of His Majesty's Government that all the States will in due course find their appropriate place with one or the other Dominion within the British Commonwealth.'¹¹

On their part, the princes disliked and even feared Nehru.¹² Fortunately the Congress had assigned the problem of the states to the pragmatic administrator Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. With great skill and masterful diplomacy and using both persuasion and pressure, Sardar Patel succeeded in integrating the hundreds of princely states with the Indian union in two stages. Some states had shown wisdom and realism and perhaps a degree of patriotism by joining the Constituent Assembly in April 1947. But the majority of princes had stayed away and a few, such as those of Travancore, Bhopal and Hyderabad, publicly announced their desire to claim an independent status.

On 27 June 1947, a new States Department was set up by the government of India. This replaced the old political department, whose pro-princes, anti-congress tenor had caused so much mischief.¹³ Sardar Patel assumed additional charge of the newly created States' Department with VP Menon as its Secretary, Patel was fully aware of the danger posed to Indian unity by the possible intransigence of the rulers of the states. He told Menon at the time that 'the situation held dangerous potentialities and that if we did not handle it promptly and effectively, our hard-earned freedom might disappear through the States' door.'¹⁴ He, therefore, set out to tackle the recalcitrant states expeditiously.

It is hard to escape the general conclusion that economic performance, social opportunity and political voice are deeply interrelated. Despite the political facilities provided by India's democratic system, the weakness of voices of protest has helped to make the progress of social opportunities unnecessarily slow. That, in turn, has not only been a serious handicap in itself for the quality of life in India, it has also served as a major drag in the process of economic development, including the range and coverage of growth and the alleviation of economic poverty.

Political voice is extremely important for social equity, and to that recognition we have to add the connection between equitable expansion of social opportunities and the force, range and reach of the process of economic development. In those fields in which there has recently been a more determined use of political and

social voice, there are considerable signs of change. The issue of gender inequality has produced somewhat more political engagement in recent years (often led by women's movements in different fields), and this has added to determined political efforts at reducing gender asymmetry in social and economic fields.

References :

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