India at 70: A Vibrant Democracy

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The rise of India in the comity of nations is a tribute to its democracy and its celebration of diversity. Its achievements are based on political and economic liberty. However, India has a long distance to travel

Seventy years ago a new era of freedom was ushered in as a result of a long freedom movement, a momentous chapter in India's ageless history appropriately called 'tryst with destiny' that heralded democracy and sought to secure justice: social, economic and political. How should one try to understand and explain 70 years of democratic India – a country of antiquity and enormously rich civilisation spanning over five millennia? The uniqueness of India and dynamics of its society and polity make it difficult to capture nuances of various facets of development and its consequences.

The Constitution of India in the making of which B.R. Ambedkar bestowed visionary leadership as Chairman of its Drafting Committee was adopted on January 26 1950. The Constitution has given us a magnificent structure to build the idea of India through democracy and its institutions. We have moved on this path relentlessly and several achievements are to our credit. There are many unfinished tasks to be accomplished and several shortcomings and lacunae in our system and finding new ways of working it need to be attended to.

Achievements

Our achievements are many. Four of these are required to be specifically highlighted.

First, India went on to establish popular sovereignty, which meant rule by the people through their freely elected representatives. It was for the first time in recorded history that India established a democratic system of government and polity management (notwithstanding some experimentation in democracy in Vaishali in Bihar and in Buddhist Sanghas in the past). Today, India is not only the largest democracy in the world but also the most vibrant one.

A bold and magnificent decision was taken to introduce the system of *one person, one vote and one vote, one value* in the country. The universal suffrage paid rich dividends and the subsequent devolution of power to grassroots levels has helped consolidate the gains. Democracy is at the heart of governance in India.

The establishment of democracy in India challenged the traditional view of many thinkers, especially in the West, that democracy must have some *a priori* conditions like economic development, high levels of literacy and a common language. In fact, Indian democracy has blossomed in the midst of poverty, illiteracy, and diversity. It must be said to the credit of the Indian people and their freedom leaders that they not only established democracy in a plural and poor society, but also made it successful and stable, vibrant and result-oriented.

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A striking feature of Indian democracy is that elections are held at regular intervals in a free and fair manner based on universal suffrage as also the transfer of power from one political party or coalition to another takes place in a routine fashion. The electoral processes in India are fairly simple and well understood by the people. It is no surprise that democracy has become the institutionalized expression of the strength of the Indian electorate.

Another favourable feature in India is the increased participation of the common people in politics. Discussions of politics in urban as well as in rural areas are on the rise. People value their political rights and opportunities and exercise their votes in the elections to Panchayats, State Assemblies, and the Lok Sabha regularly.

The most remarkable achievement of Indian democracy has been to unify the country and in this Sardar Patel played a historic role by securing merger of 565 princely states in the Indian Union in a short time. Since then we have been able to keep the country united and its institutions of democracy functioning. This is particularly impressive in the context of partition of India which resulted in killing of more than a million people and displacement of millions of others. The architecture of constitutional democracy has prevented extremist organizations from wrecking the ship of the Indian State.

Second, the Indian democratic system introduced economic content in polity management. One of the significant triumphs of this approach is that India is self-sufficient in food production notwithstanding huge growth in population since 1947. Adoption of imaginative policies has also ensured that food is available to every citizen of our country thanks to programs like food at lower price for persons below poverty line, employment under schemes like MGNREGA, a common market and supported by an all India banking system. Recently, the adoption of Goods and Services Tax (GST) regime is an important landmark in this connection.
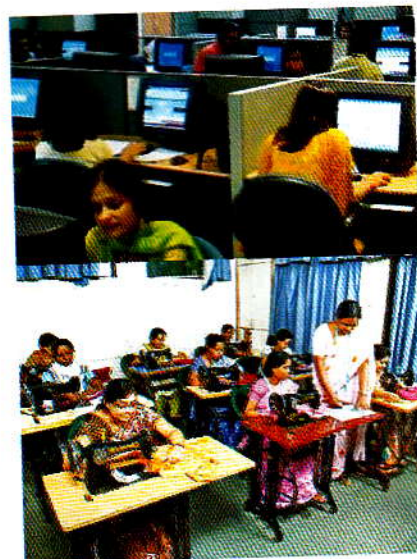
India's political leadership, policy makers, and business brains are motivated by a strong desire to make the country a major economic power in the 21st century. The high rate of economic growth coupled with comfortable foreign exchange reserves and rising Sensex figures have imparted in them a growing confidence. India is aiming to have a high growth rate with a focus on equity. Although these two objectives are not always contradictory, conflict arises when scarce resources are diverted to meet the demands of the growing middle class or business houses by ignoring the requirements of the poor and the underprivileged.

Third, our Constitution is committed to two different sets of principles that have a decisive bearing on equality. First, is the principle of equal opportunity for all and the second, the principle of redressal of educational and social deprivation. Our preferential policies in government employment were initially confined to persons belonging to Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). After the acceptance of the Mandal Commission Report by the Government of India in 1990, reservations were extended to candidates from other notified backward classes as well.

One of the advantages of affirmative action has been an improvement in the distribution of opportunities among the SCs, STs and backward classes. Ordinarily, children of poor and lower status parents get lower level jobs, and consequently, lower salaries and income. The reservation of jobs at all levels has ensured that the children of SCs, STs and backward class parents are selected for all-India Services like the IAS and the IPS. The advantage, however, has not as yet percolated to the entire community of poorer and lower status parents.

In the scheme of affirmative action that the Constitution offers, the State has been authorized to make special provision not only for the advancement of socially and educationally backward classes of citizens, for the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes, but also for women and children. Significant measures have been taken in this regard during the last seventy years. One such step relates to reservation of seats for women in local bodies. More needs to be done.

We are living in a period of time in which, encouraged by affirmative action incorporated into the Constitution about Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes, several communities are demanding similar entitlements. One has not only witnessed protests, but at times violent conflicts in the streets on the part of some communities demanding reservation. All these constitutional steps of empowerment are within a framework, which itself now demands re-examination and corrective measures so that the fruits of affirmative action reach those who must have them. The moot question is not only about the extent to which reservation in government employment has really changed things for the better, but also how it could benefit, in particular, the marginalised sections of the backward classes as benefits of reservation are getting monopolised by families which are well to-do families belonging to this class.

Fourth, several public institutions of Indian democracy like the

judiciary, the Election Commission, the audit system, the media, and some public bodies built over the decades are strengthening the processes of democratic functions in an admirable fashion. The Right to Information given to the people is another step that has empowered them.

Is the stability and success of Indian democracy a *sui-generis* phenomenon reflecting the plural character and age-old values of Indian culture and heritage? Could it be ascribed to the calibre of India's freedom leaders? Is this solely due to the Constitution that India has? Was this success on account of the leaders of the Indian government as well as of states? In my view, all these factors have contributed to both the stability and success of Indian democracy. In fact, the civilizational strength of India, that has over the millennia accorded tolerance and given consideration to different points of view, provided fertile ground for democratic institutions to take root.

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Challenges

The Indian political economy is facing manifold challenges. These primarily relate to security and justice; removal of poverty; generation of employment; effecting improvement in education and health care; and corruption and criminalisation of politics.

Security and Justice

The primary responsibility of the state is to provide security of life and property to every citizen.

The Indian State is facing a serious challenge to its authority from lawless elements. The Jihadi terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir and its adhoc but frequent spread to other parts of India; the insurgency in the North-East; and the rapidly expanding base of the Naxalite movement in mainland India constitute grave challenges to democratic governance. Fortunately, one sees national consensus against Jihadi terrorism and it is for the Indian state to deal firmly with this menace. Insurgency in India's North-East is largely confined now to Nagaland, Manipur, and Assam and these are being tackled by democratically-elected state governments with full support from the Centre. The Naxalite movement which is widespread in India's heartland is popular among the rural poor and indigenous tribes. The Naxalites have embraced the Maoist ideology which is opposed to democratic governance and the constitution of India. They believe in violence and forcible capture of political power. Naxalite menace has been controlled affectively at some places when the state system acted with imagination and resoluteness. It is essential to deal with the problem effectively in a co-ordinated fashion duly supported and guided by the leadership of the state and at the centre.

Access to justice entails that a citizen knows his rights as well as the forum where he can seek redress. In reality there are many citizens who do not know their rights, or cannot afford to fight and do not even know where to get help. Another challenge for such citizens is the complexity of legal proceedings themselves, apart from their length and cost. For example, at the end of 2016, over 28 million cases were pending in high courts and subordinate courts in the country. Systemic solutions are, therefore, called for strengthening access to justice. At the same time, ad-hoc measures are required to give immediate assistance to the needy citizens.

Removal of Poverty

During the last 70 years, millions of people have been lifted from poverty level and have joined the middle class. And yet nearly 200 million out of 1.3 billion people remain below the poverty line in the country. There is a high concentration of persons below the poverty line in the large and poorer states of the north and the east. It is imperative to correctly identify persons below the poverty line and computerise the list. It would be possible then to give them economic advantages directly. This economic criterion will naturally cut across religion and caste lines, rich and poor states, and also across rural and urban areas.

If India succeeds in giving its youth quality education and skills, democratic governance will be greatly strengthened. Today, the youth has a choice between world-class engineering colleges and joining Naxalite camps and criminal groups. The Naxalite option needs to be effectively closed and criminals brought to justice.

Can India's democracy rise up to tackle these critical issues? These include: effecting improvement of service delivery systems; accommodating the dispossessed and marginal communities within policy making systems; and imparting skills to the marginalized so that they may become beneficiaries of the market mechanism.

Employment

The most challenging task facing India's political economy is the generation of gainful employment for the youth. India has more than 800 million people in the working age group of 18-35 years, the largest in the world. Every month, a million young boys and girls become eligible to join the work force. The availability of jobs despite rapid economic growth has not kept pace with the rising number of job aspirants — a phenomenon which some commentators call 'jobless growth'. The situation is going to be complicated by induction of new technologies in manufacturing and services sector. The large size of 'technologically unemployable youth' particularly in states in the north and the east will add to the enormity of the problem.

A mechanistic view of growth assumes that demography is destiny. But this by itself does not add to prosperity, unless young people are educated and skilled and new jobs are created. If we fail to equip the youth

with good quality education and skills, India's demographic dividend could become a serious challenge to stability of the polity.

Education and Health

Besides employment to the youth, India has to rapidly work for providing quality education to children and healthcare facilities to all. In addition, the state has to pay particular attention in provisioning of health care facilities to working people, the elderly, the children, the sick and the poor. The public spending on health and education, however, is typically enjoyed more by the well-to-do. The schools and health centres in areas where the poor live are often dysfunctional and extremely low in quality.

Many studies have shown that the children in India have the necessary intelligence and potential but they should have access to quality primary and secondary schools. Unfortunately, most of our government schools are not functioning properly. Teacher vacancies and teacher absenteeism continue to plague these schools. As a result, half of ten year old students of government schools cannot read a paragraph meant for seven year olds. Many teachers are simply not up to the mark. Curriculums are overambitious. To make the system more meritocratic and accountable, teachers should be recruited for their talents and not their political connections. The situation is slightly better in private schools but they are very expensive and are invariably not located in rural areas.

It may be recalled that for centuries India had excellent centres of learning both at school and higher education levels. This contributed immensely in the making of Indian civilization as one of the most glorious in the world. Today, the country badly needs to strengthen its higher learning centres to facilitate innovations in important areas of human knowledge.

The health care facilities in the country too are in disarray. The situation is worse in several states and particularly in rural areas where seventy per cent of the population lives. It is true that cities have numerous private hospitals and clinics and have better doctors and the services. There is requirement to improve primary health care centres in rural areas. This could be done by building clinics in rural areas and developing streamlined health IT systems. The need for skilled medical graduates and nurses is rapidly growing in the country and it must be urgently addressed.

Fortunately, the present government at Centre, has taken steps to formulate a new Education policy and Health policy. These need to be adopted and implemented in view of their importance. In fact, this constitutes a major challenge to the Indian state and is required to be attended to with promptitude. An imaginatively crafted monitoring mechanism would be of enormous assistance to ensure quality delivery of services to people.

Corruption and Criminalisation of Politics

The criminalisation of the political process and the unholy nexus between politicians, civil servants, and business houses is exerting a baneful influence on public policy formulation and governance.

The more insidious threat to India's democratic governance is from criminals and musclemen who are entering into State Legislative Assemblies and the national Parliament in sizeable numbers. A political culture seems to be taking root in which membership of state legislatures and Parliament is viewed as a means for seeking private gain and for making money. The Gandhian values of simple living and selfless service to public causes are rapidly vanishing. The rule of law at times is sought to be replaced by the rule of men. The Election Commission and Parliament are concerned with this problem. It is imperative that a more stringent legal regime is adopted and put into operation urgently.

The high level of corruption in India has been widely perceived as a major obstacle in improving the quality of governance and as an impediment to inclusive growth. While human greed is obviously a driver of corruption, it is the structural incentives and poor enforcement system for punishing the guilty that have contributed to the rising incidence of graft in India. The complex and non-transparent system of command and control, monopoly of the government as a service provider; underdeveloped legal framework, lack of information, and weak notion of citizens' rights have all proved as incentives for corruption in India. We have to adopt a more effective system that punishes the guilty with speed and protects the reputation and honour of honest citizens including civil servants, business entrepreneurs and politicians.

Possibilities and Future Perspectives

There are enormous possibilities of India strengthening itself in economic, military and cultural terms in coming decades. The rise of India is getting noticed in every sphere of human activity ranging from sports to space, computer software to pharmaceuticals, yoga to dance forms. The path of progress and development, however, is not easy in view of India's neighbourhood and social challenges within. We cannot afford to indulge in foreign policy adventures nor ignore the demands of disadvantaged groups for more amenities in politics, education and healthcare. Simultaneously, we have to strengthen our military and strategic capabilities.

History is moving fast in terms of demography, culture, urbanisation, and expansion of human consciousness. All these changes accompanied by a phenomenal rise in expectations would pose unforeseen challenges. The Indian leadership is required to make policy choices in several economic, social, cultural, and external arenas in order that we can successfully synergise our strengths and abilities for technological innovation, problem solving skills, and political vision. India's elite in politics, the media, the academia, and think tanks have the capacity to re-define the issues and recast the public debate.

Mahatma Gandhi wanted all of us to *work for an India in which the*

poorest shall feel that it is their country in whose making they have an effective voice; an India in which there shall be no high class and low class of people; an India in which all communities shall live in perfect harmony'.

Democracy is increasingly defining new features of development and governance. Democracy during the last seven decades has gone beyond periodic elections towards good governance and participation of stakeholders in development programmes.

The building of an inclusive society requires patience and perseverance. The crucial task is to empower the marginalised sections of society to be more productive. Towards this, India requires innovations in education, healthcare, urban planning, public transport, waste management and rural housing. While we do not have to re-invent the wheel but new technologies should be developed to suit Indian conditions. In this context I am not talking of *'Juggad'* technologies alone but more substantive ones.

There are scores of examples of recent innovations by India in areas of space, computer software, automobile components, new drugs and health care facilities. For example, the performance of Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) is of global standards. The growing internet penetration in Indian cities and villages is another milestone of progress.

As a nation and as a civilisation, we have celebrated history of innovation commencing from Indus Valley Civilisation days. Our civilizational legacy of innovation in medicine and practices of yoga and naturopathy,

logic and *sasthratha* (dialogue), philosophical quest and *sutras* are well known. Fortunately, these attributes are of relevance in attaining excellence in the computer age.

Innovations are taking place in the government, in the market and in civil society. The social and political process is getting increasingly interlinked, changing the character of the elites in the countryside.

Development and secularism must go hand in hand. Respect for another person's point of view as well as faith are an integral part of India's inheritance. It is this civilizational attribute, a *Bahudha* approach, that allows India to stand tall in the comity of nations and it is this which has facilitated India being home to all the major religions of the world.

The world looks to India with respect for the manner in which we have permitted and practised a plural society. Our experience, in turn, should make us more concerned about our minorities and the weaker sections of our society. We must realize that only a democratic, secular India will command the trust of our own people, and also of the world.

The health and robustness of a civilisation may be judged by its capacity to challenge and jettison the rituals and practices, opinions and beliefs which stifle progress and create divisions. The Indian civilisation has shown its resilience from time to time. It is my belief that as long as Indian society and polity encourage creative minds in the literatures and arts, science and technology, and give primacy to democratic institutions, to inclusivity and justice, India's age-old

cultural strength would continue to be renewed.

In the wider context of values, **"India that is Bharat"** gives to her children: a simple living, strong family ties, and tolerance for other points of view, spiritual quest and respect for ecology. The Constitution of India sanctifies these values and provides a solid framework of 'rule of law' against 'rule by men'.

Hope

Prime Minister in his address to the people of India from the ramparts of the Red Fort on 15th of August 2017 has ignited hope that it should be possible for us to build a 'new India' in the next five years between 2017-2022. This would require eradication of poverty and removal of corruption and inefficiency in the implementation of the government plans. Towards this it is imperative to have unity of purpose particularly among the youth of India - of a kind that characterised the Quit India Movement. Let concrete plan and programme of action to realise the vision of 'new India' be urgently formulated. The NitiAayog may be entrusted to prepare state-wise action plan, convene meeting of Chief Ministers, and strictly monitor the approved plans.

The slogan **"Sabka Sath Sabka Vikas"** is most appropriate. It is and has to be inclusive and in conformity with our cherished values and principles of democracy and rule of law that the Constitution of India enjoins upon the citizens and the government to adhere to. Tomorrow's India will be a country free of the scourges of poverty, hunger and illiteracy. ❑

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Indian National Anthem Video in Sign Language

The Indian National Anthem video in sign language was launched recently at Films Division Auditorium, New Delhi. The video features Mr Amitabh Bachchan along with children with disability singing the National Anthem in sign language at the backdrop of the Majestic Red Fort. The film is conceptualised by Satish Kapoor, Founder Director, We Care Film Festival. We Care Film Festival produced the Film under the aegis of Brotherhood, an NGO. It is directed by Govind Nihalani and the music is scored by late Aadesh Shrivastava.