

Five Decades of Free India Between Naive or Vested Euphoria and Doomsday Cynicism Falls the Reality*

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Chhindwara, the drowsy, salubrious little district town, where I, an upper-caste Hindu boy belonging to an educated, third-generation Uttar Pradesh migrant lower-middle class family of petty-yet-respected government officials which had seen better days, was born in 1940, was one of the hilly and tribal revenue units of the largely backward territory of what the British called the Central Provinces and Berar. Gonds, the majority rural-tribal population, were simpletons, friendly and peaceful in the remotest areas. Some of them were getting urbanised, patronised, ruled and exploited by the Hindu, Muslim and Christian townspeople. European evangelical missions worked overtime to save the heathen-animist aborigine souls. The British seem to have no problem with the district, though it was among the first visited by Gandhi in the province and there used to be sporadic processions and speeches followed by the usual arrests. "Angrej", the alien white rulers, were heard of, but never seen on roads, streets or in markets. Indians had started being posted as Deputy Commissioners, District and Sessions Judges and Superintendents of Police since the 1930s, much to the disap-

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As this is not presented as a research or scholarly paper, no notes or references are given. The inconvenience and annoyance so caused is deeply regretted.

pointment of the people. When freedom was announced for India, the 30,000 denizens of Chhindwara were more baffled than jubilant.

My father, always the stiff-upper-lip, stoic type, remained silent. One of the most educated men in town - a Bachelor in Science with a rare Second Class - he could not pursue the coveted career in medicine due to my grandfather's sudden death and nationwide inflation and joined the Army Medical Corps and saw active service during the Japanese occupation of Burma in exotic places like Memyo, Mandalay and Chindwain in the company of British tommies and officers. Mentioned in Dispatches, he was demobbed after the end of the War at the age of 28 and lost his young, tubercular wife soon after he got a lowly yet coveted job in the (Foodgrains, Sugar and Kerosene) Control Department. Bribery has never been alien to Indian culture - the British encouraged it with hypocritical style - but my father earned a kind of notoriety by chasing away favour-seekers with the violence of an ex-serviceman. He was a never-to-marry-again widower government servant of 30 and I, his middle son, a third-standard student of the local Main Board Hindi Primary School, was 7 years, 6 months and 5 days old when I was told by my Gond-Christian lady class teacher Miss Alexander and the Muslim Head Master Munnoo Khan in the class that there will be no teaching tomorrow, 15th August 1947, but all students must come to the District Parade Grounds in their best attire to witness flag-hoisting, march-past and other festivities and shout the prescribed slogans of "Jai Hind", "Vande Mataram", "Mahatma Gandhi ki Jai", "Jawaharlal Nehru Zindabad" and "Subhashchandra Bose Zindabad" at suitable intervals "to celebrate this most important day in Indian History". There was also a veiled promise of sweets.

The students were made to go early, so they hardly had any breakfast. The ceremonies began late. August is a month of heavy monsoon rains in Chhindwara but this was a sunny day turned humid on the grassy parade ground. Soon we became restless with the never-ending speeches by the leaders hardly any of us had heard or seen before. Herded in an enclosure, we were hungry and thirsty but no food or water was in sight. The teachers were nowhere to be seen. Feeling cheated, most of us were on the verge of tears. The festivities finally over, we ran towards our homes, nearly two kilometers away, asking for - and being given - water from wayside households. Then we saw what was a near-miracle. Huge festive gates of bamboo-poles bedecked with palm-tree branches were erected on the roads and each tip of the sharp palm-leaves was decorated with "lai", the Indian popcorn. We, scions of respectable families of Chhindwara, pounced upon the prickly leaves, plucking and gobbling up the newly-discovered fruits of freedom like heavenly manna even as the hesitating, lowly street urchins joined us in the competitive loot.

Earlier, our town, and in fact our province, were least affected by the Hindu-Muslim riots and the Partition of India - none of the Muslim families we knew left for Pakistan though one heard rumours of some Hindu families buying utensils and goods being sold by some departing Muslims. But my Muslim teachers never left. My Muslim schoolmates also stayed, many of whom are doing rather well in their businesses and professions in Chhindwara and elsewhere. My father was no freedom-fighting patriot but revealed himself a bit when he brought home an early edition of Nehru's "The Discovery of India" for his sons' edification and made an affectionate caricature of Gandhi with a self-composed limerick in the manuscript school-magazine when he joined my next school as a government teacher. Gandhi had been assassinated by a Hindu fanatic in January 1948, barely six months after the independence he won for India. After him, Jawaharlal Nehru became more of the national icon he always was. Muslims felt safe under his leadership and even those Hindus who did not quite like them loved Nehru and went along with his secularism.

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Few scholars of the Indian struggle for freedom realise that while the masses had undying admiration for Gandhi, Nehru, Bose, Vallabhbhai Patel, Abul Kalam Azad, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan and other leaders of similar stature, they hardly had any attraction towards or respect for the Congress party. They would certainly take part in "Satyagraha" and other non-violent or violent demonstrations and direct actions and go to jail, simultaneously admire such armed revolutionaries as Bhagat Singh and Chandra Shekhar Azad, but would hardly join the Congress or any other party or movement. Joining underground activities or the Communist party was out of the question and the educated middle- and lower-middle class Indian could see that the local Congress leaders at the district or municipality level were dubious, if not downright notorious, characters comprising the Janus-faced rich, the landlords and the kulaks, the wealthy moneylenders and pawnbrokers, the contractor, the merchant and the trader, and lumps like the local goonda, the black-marketeer and the traditional "pahalwan" muscleman. In 1947, the most talked-about local leaders in Chhindwara were a government contractor and cinemahall owner, a grain merchant, a wrestler who ran an "akhara", the traditional Indian gymnasium, and a jobless demagogue. It was possible to fear them, at times perhaps necessary to keep them in good humour, but hardly anybody had any genuine respect for them. Indian society was infinitely more value-based then and such people still feared the really respectable individuals and groups of the town or city who, though not active in politics, were the spiritual leaders of the local populace. The conduct of Congressmen as sharers of power in pro-

vincial and local governments before 1947 had already exposed their dubious character and the term "Kangresi" ("the Congressite") had become contemptuous and pejorative long before Independence. One can find any number of cartoons and satirical prose and verse in the 1930-47 Indian press lampooning Congress leaders and their followers - some of them could have been for the benefit of the British masters, but most of them expressed popular disenchantment and disgust with the lower Congress leadership.

Anxious to belittle bourgeois freedom, Indian leftists were most vocally sceptical and derisive of this independence, which, in the words of the Marxist poet and activist Faiz Ahmed Faiz, was a "sullied dawn which nobody awaited". Indeed, the partition of the country and the massacre of hundreds of thousands of Sikh, Muslim and Hindu men, women and children, arson, loot and rape during the historic exchange of populations had almost totally destroyed the euphoria of "azadi". The tryst with destiny became a pact with hatred, murder and assassination. Most intellectuals, authors and journalists were not quite pessimist prophets of doom, but they were cautious, alerting optimists who hoped against despair.

The Partition-migration was so massive, the search for shelter and livelihood so desperate, that by 1948-49, Chhindwara, which had a toy-like narrow-gauge railway connection with the then provincial capital of Nagpur with the 80-mile journey taking 10 hours, and extremely narrow and risky roads to a few neighbouring towns, was sieged with the so-called "Sharanarthi" (refugees) from unheard-of places like Landikotal and Larkana, with strange surnames like Handa, Khanuja, Dhandha and Dhingra, with their alien languages and culture believing in the exchange of cooked food, where castes didn't seem to exist, where nobody thought it below his dignity to do any business or start selling anything in the street or the bazar, in which young girls and women, much fairer and infinitely more free than their tradition-fearing Chhindwara counterparts, daringly clad, would talk and mix openly with boys and adults. Sindhis were less voluble and gregarious than the Punjabis and many of them migrated to towns and localities with more Sindhi population but the Punjabis stayed and prospered in Chhindwara as in hundreds of such towns, earning more money and buying more property within less than a decade than the astounded, envious natives.

The wounds of Partition seemed to heal, the awareness of freedom seemed to seep in and the Congress party, led by Nehru, was swept into power in the first general elections to Parliament held in 1952. The triumph was repeated in 1957 and 1962, though with fluctuating party fortunes. Nehru remained the national idol, though his party and partymen could never win the same respect and confidence of the people, while they still

won their votes solely due to Nehru's unimaginable popularity - Sitabai Parmanand, the woman Member of Parliament from Chhindwara, was nearly unseen and unknown among her electorate. The masses were concerned only with Nehru. Whether he spoke in English or Hindustani, on politics, science or culture or any other subject under the sun, whether concisely or ramblingly, the intellectuals and masses listened to him in uncritical admiration. He introduced the Soviet-style five-year plans, pledged the country to a "socialistic pattern of society", inspired and encouraged the building of huge dams, steel plants, locomotive-and-wagon factories, fertiliser complexes, airplanes and ordnance factories and called them "the new temples of free India". He bungled in Kashmir but managed to give the impression that he was in total control.

Nehru supported the Soviet Union almost totally uncritically - he was a Fabian socialist in England as a student and admired both Marx and Lenin. On the other hand, along with Tito of Yugoslavia, Nasser of Egypt and Soekarno of Indonesia, he became the leader of the so-called non-aligned movement, propounding the neo-Buddhistic political doctrine of "Panch-sheel". The Indian communists felt comfortable with him and became his fellow-travellers. Avowed leftists joined his cabinet, the Planning Commission and myriad nationalist-bourgeois institutions and committees. The arrogant, pro-Pakistan USA became the destabilising covert and overt hand, what with the Cold War, Korea, Suez and the ubiquitous CIA. The successful foreign tours of Nehru, shown in thousands of cinema-halls in the obligatory film news reviews, made millions of viewers proud. He was popular among film stars, musicians, dancers, singers, authors and journalists who yearned to speak to him and to be photographed with him. He established the national academies of literature, performing and plastic arts, founded the national school of drama and started the Indian international film festival. He inaugurated science institutions, atomic reactors and medical bodies. Indians felt a glow in their hearts when they saw him or his pictures. He was an intellectual and a statesman without parallel. Yes, there were restraints and controls on economy, there was poverty, unemployment and illiteracy. Despite his justness and secularism, there was injustice and religious fanaticism in society. But everyone was sure that so long as Nehru was around, everything would turn out fine. Like Gandhi, he was supposed to be infallible, indestructible, considered by many to be an avatar in a society of ardent believers.

I was certainly no intellectual during 1947-64 and though I have worked in areas like teaching, writing and journalism that are supposed to be intellect-related, I don't think I am an intellectual in the sense the word "intellectual" has come to denote. But by 1955 I was already an admirer of Nehru like millions of Indians. It was not Marxism or Soviet communism but

Nehru's egalitarian stance and the (lower-middle) class to which I belonged that pushed me to socialist ideas and literature. Members or sympathisers of the Communist party used to be under surveillance for many years in free India, so being a leftist, even of a superficial, romantic kind, gave one an added excitement. The formation of the first communist government in the state of Kerala enthused young people like me but I could see no alternative to Nehru on the national scale, who, one thought, was the most committed leftist in Parliament. When he got the Namboodiripad government ousted, young admirers like me, and many seniors, took it as a temporary, unfortunate, even perhaps justifiable, aberration. Nehru the Socialist, Nehru the Democrat, could do no wrong. Hardly any newspaper or group of intellectuals protested. The Communist party whimpered a little bit but soon all was forgotten.

As common members of society, we could see that not everything was right around us. Ordinary people, the workers and farmers, had expected that they would have more money, more rights vis-à-vis the bureaucracy and government, more respect and dignity; they will not be afraid of the police and officers, they will be their "equal" and "free", things will be cheaper and available in plenty; soon there will be more roads and railways, they will have houses and electricity and would be able to educate their children better. All this came to be true only fractionally during the Nehru years. Those who were rich and powerful during the British regime and had even collaborated with it continued to prosper after 1947, with the newly rising political and monied classes joining hands with them. One curious aspect of Indian freedom is that hardly any Indian quislings or "traitors" were ever condemned or witch-hunted after 1947 - they took to independent India as fish take to water - and there was scarcely any hatred or hostility towards the departing British - in fact many Indians started missing them before they had actually left. The Punjabi and Sindhi refugees soon became hyper-dynamic in compensating themselves for the losses they had suffered in the making of Pakistan. Nehru's socialistic pattern allowed only mixed economy and the post-War British policy of quota permits and contracts continued and thrived. The displaced persons, native capitalists and landlords, speculators and profiteers, the brigands and lumpens, joined to monopolise over building and construction, road-making, forests, liquor and other contracts and supplies and stared buying properties and amassing wealth and power. "Progress" and "Development" had begun.

Many an idealistic campaign came to nought. As schoolchildren, we used to celebrate "Vana Mahotsava Divas", the Great Forest Festival Day, each year for the protection of trees and forest wealth, but by 1957, all neighbouring hills of Chhindwara were denuded by timber contractors, making their birds, reptiles and animals vanish forever. Bodri, the town

rivulet, which still had some water during summer, was soon high with sand and got flooded only in the monsoon months, if at all. The district was known for its tigers which became rare after 1955. We also celebrated "Flag Day", "Red Cross Day", "Teachers Day" and many other similar days, selling flags and souvenirs and collecting money for noble causes but we soon learnt that the efforts and collection were wasted. One of the earliest, and potentially most meaningful, official initiatives on the national scale was "Praudh Shiksha Andolan", the Adult Education Movement, of the early '50s in which all schoolteachers were involved in teaching grown-up illiterates in the evening hours. I still recall seeing my father teach turbaned and bare-headed working-class unlettered adults in mild petromax-lamp light for half-a-rupee per person each month. He took his job seriously, but not without some humour, and was proud to have taught reading to his unusual evening pupils. When and how this campaign was abandoned I do not remember. It has been revived with much fanfare in the last five years, with unsubstantiated claims. Had the original movement continued, our illiteracy would have been half of what it is now. Similar was the case with the "Birth Control Programme" which has been rechristened "Family Welfare Programme" due to persisting socio-religious objections. Sex is both a temptation and taboo for Indians and any talk of birth-control and the attendant pills, prophylactics, sterilisation and vasectomy evokes titters and guffaws from commonfolk while the Indian mania for male progeny as well as Hindu and Muslim opposition to family-planning has made the government go on the defensive on a matter which is of incalculable consequences to the nation. The population in 1947 was estimated at 300 million - in 50 years it is unstoppable at nearly 930 million, one of the most portentous gains of freedom.

One of the major post-1947 casualties was work-culture. While Nehru gave the slogan "Aaraam Haraam Hai" ("to laze is to sin"), most government servants and workers in the so-called public sector began shirking work by 1957. Rumours of bribery and corruption began to be widely heard. Freedom became freedom from honest public service. As for almost everything one had to go to various offices several times, even a petty clerk holding a file became a centre of power. Soon the elderly began to say openly that the British Raj was better, for there was no injustice, delay and corruption on such a scale in pre-1947 times - not many seniors of that era are still alive but the refrain keeps returning in community conversations among those who were barely young 50 years ago.

Yet, so long as there was Nehru, people had hope. But rumblings against him were beginning to be heard. Ram Manohar Lohia, the one-time Congressman-turned-Socialist, rose as the arch Nehru-baiter within and without Parliament. Criticising the anglicised, expensive, questionable and "anti-

poor" life- and political style of the irreproachable Nehru and his rising daughter Indira, Lohia gave others the courage to aim at the popular colossus. Support came from unexpected quarters - Nehru's Parsi son-in-law Feroze Gandhi (husband of Indira, father of Rajiv and Sanjay), a Congress back-bencher, began to trouble Nehru in Parliament. There was the notorious Mundhra deal (perhaps the mother of all subsequent scandals) which resulted in the resignation of the finance minister T.T. Krishnamachari (a kind of precursor to Manmohan Singh of 1991-96), and the jeep and fittings purchase scandals involving Nehru's most trusted radical colleague V.K. Krishna Menon and his own ambassador-sister Vijaylakshmi Pandit respectively. We, the young idolaters of Nehru, were getting confused.

But the ultimate blow came from unexpected quarters. China, with whom India was on seemingly brotherly terms, disagreed with the border between the two countries and chose to attack the fraternal southern neighbour on NEFA and Ladakh fronts in 1962, blowing to smithereens India's supposedly impregnable defenses and self-congratulatory, naive foreign policy vis-à-vis the Chinese. Poorly equipped, pathetically unalert, incompetently led, the Indian army was totally humiliated both in the east and the west.irate public opinion and a hostile Parliament claimed the next best scalp - Nehru's alter ego Krishna Menon had to resign as the bungling defence minister and could never quite return on the national political scene. It is difficult to say what horrified the people more - the national insult or Nehru's vulnerability. Commoners and intellectuals were as shattered by Nehru's failure as Nehru was by the "Chinese perfidy". Krishna Menon's humiliation was another blow to the leftist thinkers. The Communist party was divided into total disarray - the CPI siding with the nation and the sympathetic Soviet Union while the CPM remained critical of Nehru-Menon and did not blame the People's Republic of China. But Nehru was tragically lucky that he died mainly because of and within less than two years of the Chinese betrayal, for Indians still loved him, and on 27 May 1964, there were thousands of them who would have willingly lent him their years. I was 24 and a lecturer in English literature at a post-graduate government college in Madhya Pradesh - as the new, enlarged Central Provinces was literally translated into Hindi after the 1956 reorganisation of states on linguistic basis - and wept inconsolably with a million others in South Asia for he was loved in the entire subcontinent.

For what should we be grateful to Nehru, 33 years after his death and in the 50th year of the independence he helped us so much to win? He was instrumental in India acquiring a national identity. He was democratic to the core and kept parliamentary and political opposition alive and kicking. He hated fanaticism of any kind and thus succeeded in keeping India united. He discouraged religious rituals, abhorred superstition and astrology and

was a great educator of the masses and put India on the road to industrialisation and self-reliance. He put the nation on the world map in times when we were still using geography books of undivided British India. He might have failed to nip corruption in the bud but he and most of his cabinet colleagues were ostensibly honest. He could have done infinitely more towards social reforms, education and population control but was perhaps reluctant to hurt popular feelings. But for the Chinese debacle, his foreign policy was generally sound and he did modernise and galvanise India. The people were only too willing to give him unbridled power, but he refused to be a typical Third World despot and it is largely due to his founding policies that India did not degenerate into a banana republic.

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Those who talk of the Nehru-Gandhi "dynasty" tend to forget that the story would have been different had Lal Bahadur Shastri, the democratically elected successor to Nehru and the victor in the 1965 Pakistan war, not died in Tashkent after signing the Kosygin peace pact. Scholars and intellectuals now discover all kinds of virtues in Shastri but the fact remains that most of them had hardly any real respect for him, excepting his honesty, and still lamented the absence of Nehru during his 1964-66 tenure. Shastri was a humble, though extremely capable, statesman when he stepped into Nehru's gigantic shoes and very few political pundits had any faith in the self-effacing, diminutive figure (the neighbouring military dictator of comic-book dimensions, Marshall Ayub Kahn, called him "the little sparrow" but someone in Chhindwara discovered that Ayub Khan still owed some rupees to the local cantonment as a fledgling officer in undivided India - and a debtor is a dishonourable man) who proved to be a man of steel during the brief but victorious war with Pakistan. Some people claim that India would have been a better country had Shastri lived to rule longer but all that remains in the romantic realm of futile imagination. But the shock of losing a Prime Minister on the eve of national triumph in unexpected circumstances in an alien country lingers in the popular memory.

The passing away of Nehru and Shastri within 20 months heralded the era of Realpolitik in India which has continued for the last 32 years. The Congress suddenly became vulnerable and divided after the dual departure, though Nehru was more missed. With the disciplining, temperamental voice gone, ambitious senior leaders, state and party satraps and opposition parties began to flex their muscles and test their strength. But when Indira Gandhi, the Information and Broadcasting Minister who succeeded Shastri out of sheer surrender to the Nehru name and family charisma, trounced the so-called Syndicate within her party and nationalised private banking, the effect was electric. Her opponents were seen as power-hungry old men and

many like me thought that she was more boldly socialistic than her Fabian father and soon she became the rallying personage for modern, progressive and leftist intellectuals, economists, authors and other artists and journalists. She wooed the Harijan untouchables and Muslims and gave the catchy, populist slogan of "Garibi Hatao" - "Remove Poverty" - to the deprived people. Her, and India's finest hour came when Indian soldiers chased and defeated a demoralised and enmeshed Pakistani army in what was till 1971 East Pakistan and helped create the new nation of Bangladesh in South Asia. She became a charismatic figure, was likened to the Goddess Durga by the Hindu communalist opposition leaders in Parliament and sent the entire nation into unprecedented collective euphoria. Politicians, intellectuals, artists and journalists of all hues and colours vied with each other to shower praise and adulation on her and to win her smile. I was on a study grant in Prague when she visited the then Czechoslovakia almost immediately after her Bangladesh triumph and it was difficult to decide who was more excited to welcome her - we, the Indians in Bohemia, or the Czechs who seemed to adore her. We were dumbfounded by her majestic, almost erotic presence. And she was 55 then, my father's age, had he been alive.

But by radicalising politics and raising the hopes and aspirations of the commonfolk, Indira Gandhi courted political danger. Though her party won the 1971-72 elections, the Bangladesh euphoria proved to be short-lived and mass agitations against her non-performance on the domestic front had been gathering momentum. Even as the anti-Congress movement in Gujarat, led by the senior charismatic Gandhian-Socialist leader Jayaprakash Narayan seemed to peter out, came the fateful decision of the Allahabad High Court holding her election to Parliament invalid. A panicked Indira Gandhi declared a State of National Emergency, suspending the constitution and arresting a large number of dissident Congress and opposition leaders, journalists, teachers, students and political and social workers of various non-communist persuasions in June 1975. She became a virtual dictator and her younger son Sanjay, whom I met very briefly in unedifying circumstances, and who held no office in the government, became the de facto despot of India. The mass media were strictly censored. Some dissenting intellectuals went underground and many stopped writing but the vast majority of opinion-makers agreed to crawl when they were only asked to bend. Most newspapers abjectly surrendered their independence, many even supported the Emergency. Some writers tried to create a national forum of authors supporting Indira Gandhi. I was a lecturer in a Delhi University college when the Emergency was imposed and joined the National Academy of Letters as its Deputy Secretary and wrote and recited two anti-Emergency poems publically but either they were not considered subversive enough or the information never reached the authorities. The Academy,

consisting of the *crème de la crème* of Indian writers, made no protest against the Emergency, but included a rebellious letter from the novelist Nayantara Sehgal, a first cousin of Indira Gandhi, in its annual minutes which are routinely sent to the government. The Academy, though an autonomous body, is totally funded by the Central Ministry of Human Resources Development.

Earlier, non-Congress coalition governments had come to power in some states during Mrs Gandhi's premiership and did not survive long, but a significant development in the one-party hegemony politics of India had been made. Thereafter came the first such government in the Centre, when the Janata coalition was formed after Mrs Gandhi chose to lift the Emergency, declared fresh elections, and lost. The Janata experiment disappointed and disillusioned the people and the intellectuals further by its break-up due to its inner contradictions, conflicting personal ambitions of its leaders and their machiavellian manipulation by the diabolical Sanjay Gandhi. To add insult to injury, Mrs Gandhi was returned to power after the fall of the short-lived Janata government with a vast majority by voters who must have undergone much psychological agony, returning the same person as Prime Minister who had only a couple of years back sabotaged democracy and freedom. Intellectuals, who had rightly opposed and condemned Mrs Gandhi then, were demoralised and now had to do a lot of soul-searching. It was clear that the voters, who had punished Mrs Gandhi for the Emergency, had, in their disappointment and frustration, now punished the incompetent, anti-Indira Janata more, without going into the fine points of democracy and freedom. Most intellectuals have willfully avoided the disturbing analysis of the people's verdict of 1981.

This victory made Mrs Gandhi more reckless and intolerant of criticism. Intellectual advisors and colleagues like Romesh Thapar and Inder Kumar Gujral had already abandoned her, and the Left was also almost totally disenchanted. Jyoti Basu had created a CPM government in West Bengal, almost uprooting the Congress from the prestigious state. Indira Gandhi surrounded herself more and more with Rasputin-like yogis and other holy persons with mystical powers, dubious and self-seeking politicians, rapacious industrialists and sycophant bureaucrats. The mysterious deaths of Nagarwala and L.N. Mishra haunted her. Corruption became rampant. The death of Sanjay was a severe loss to her and she developed a nervous tick, started greying and aging faster. No Indian Prime Minister has been quite successful in solving the many vexatious demands for regional autonomy and downright separate nationhood, though it is obvious to the parties concerned that there can be no further partition of India without prolonged genocide. Mrs Gandhi made the blunder of her life in ordering the army to storm the holiest Sikh shrine of Akal Takht in order to quell the movement

for an independent Khalistan and had to pay for it with her blood. The politically-engineered carnage that followed her assassination resulted in thousands of Sikhs being burnt alive, their women molested and their homes and business establishments turned to ashes. The sufferers still await justice even as identified marauders walk the Delhi streets scot-free. Some journalists and intellectuals have condemned the carnage and kept the issue alive but succeeding governments seem reluctant to investigate, prosecute and obtain convictions.

Rajiv, the hesitant elder son, was sworn in as Prime Minister in an unprecedented move by the family-faithful President Gyani Zail Singh. The ex-airline pilot had almost no experience in politics, was basically a friends-and-family man, married to an Italian girl Sonia Maino who strongly disapproved of her husband joining the power game. Rajiv was indeed naive and unsure in the beginning, he had difficulties with his Hindi, but he began with a hard-hitting speech against the "power-brokers" in Indian politics which again raised some Nehruvian-Gandhian hopes. But he made three serious mistakes. His mother had already started appeasing the Hindu sentiment and he followed suit by having the locked Babari mosque opened to the gleeful Hindus. He made a suspicious howitzer deal with Bofors of Sweden, and he hobnobbed too dangerously with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, operating for a separate homeland in Sri Lanka. The first resulted in the demolition of the Babari mosque by the Bharatiya Janata Party hordes in 1992, bringing national shame and Hindu-Muslim riots, the second cost him his government and caused the rise of his own rebel cabinet colleague V.P. Singh as the next Janata coalition Prime Minister and the messiah of social justice who implemented the Mandal Commission report on reservation rights for backward castes, and the third took his life in a most gruesome manner when he was set to return to power in a repeat of 1981 after the non-Congress coalition fell for the second time in 1991. But Rajiv Gandhi had also started the process of liberalising and globalising the Indian economy by opening Indian markets to foreign investors, buyers and sellers, and multinationals. The 1984 Union Carbide-Bhopal deaths were nearly forgotten.

His successor, P.V. Narasimha Rao, proved to be the most disastrous Prime Minister for the nation and a dismal president for the Congress party. Rao allowed the Babari mosque to be demolished by the BJP and other Hindu communal forces. He overturned intra-party elections and throttled organisational democracy. Though he sought to further liberalise the economy through his finance minister Manmohan Singh, they both allowed several scandals like the securities scam, the urea scam, the telecom scam and the Swiss locomotive-deal scam, running into thousands of millions of rupees, to take place and Rao himself got implicated in several shady affairs

and transactions. He has the dubious distinction of being India's first Prime Minister to be accused of a crime in a court of law. He alienated several of his party and cabinet colleagues by implicating them in the infamous Jain Diary bribery cases. Narasimha Rao himself had the reputation of being a linguist, author and intellectual but no other Prime Minister has exposed and ridiculed himself among the Indian intelligentsia so miserably, in a way demoralising them. They could no more trust even a polymath, seemingly learned Prime Minister.

Narasimha Rao has done something more damaging - by his incompetence, self-serving machinations and sullied image he has not only nearly destroyed his party but has in turn strengthened the BJP and other forces of communal "Hindutva". The Congress was ruling in only two important states, Madhya Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh, when he left office in 1996 after a dismal defeat in the Parliamentary elections. The BJP came too close to forming a government in the centre and it is indeed the largest single party in the house, besides having independent or coalition rule in such politically crucial states as Punjab, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Haryana and Delhi.

If the precarious, 13-party Coalition led by its second Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral and simultaneously supported and blackmailed by the post-Rao, Sita Ram Kesri-led Congress, fails and mid-term elections are held, the chances are that the BJP might sweep to power, though things just might be different if the Bofors ghost is somehow buried and the sphinx-like charismatic widow Sonia Gandhi agrees to lead the Congress back on the road to power. Congressmen everywhere are eager to be rescued by her and the average voter is curious about the most senior member of the Nehru-Gandhi family, whose being a white foreigner is an advantage. In any case, her daughter, who was also constantly requested to join the Congress, has already married a native Indian Christian businessman. The previous Prime Minister, H.D. Deve Gowda, was removed by Kesri as he was relentlessly pursuing criminal cases against Congress leaders, including Kesri himself, and recently Kesri has compelled the malleable new Prime Minister to transfer "Tiger" Joginder Singh, the chief of the investigating agency CBI, which was looking into Bofors and other cases. Gujral is further dogged by the split engineered in his own party by its outgoing president, the colourful, multi-million fodder-scam accused Chief Minister of Bihar, Laloo Prasad Yadav, who has launched the parallel Rashtriya Janata Dal with himself as its founding president, yet pledging full support to an uncomfortable Inder Kumar Gujral, whose government, theoretically, could fall any day. On the eve of the 50th anniversary of Indian independence, the political atmosphere is foreboding, the people are looking at the tragic farce

with anger and frustration, while the intellectuals wring their hands in helpless pessimism.

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But a national golden jubilee is a historic event in whichever way you see it, and Indians are always fond of a spectacle, howsoever patchy. Millions of Indians fanatically believe their nation to be the very best in the world. India has the best religion, the best philosophy, the best culture, the highest and purest language, the greatest society and race on earth. All science, technology, industry, commerce and medicine began here and were subsequently borrowed or stolen by foreigners. India is the world's guru in all realms. The universe is an illusion, a divine play, but each mortal has to perform his Karmas, going along with God's designs. India was always the leader of the cosmos, but freedom made it even more so. "Saare Jahaan Se Achha Hindostan Hamara", "Our India is better than the rest of the world", runs the popular unofficial anthem written by the Urdu poet Iqbal, the spiritual father of Pakistan. Not to celebrate the 50th anniversary of freedom would have been an unpardonable sacrilege.

The Janata government found itself in a predicament. Most of its coalition partners didn't exist before 1947 and some were born only a few years ago. The undivided Communist party had opposed the nationalist movement and co-operated with the British rulers in "their fight against Fascism". How would this rag-tag conglomerate celebrate India's half-century of freedom? The pre-1947 and post-Independence history of 20th century India is the history mainly of Congress struggle and Congress rule. The Janata government cannot play up the dead or living leaders of its own coalition partners - it could annoy Kesri or Sonia and also create inner rivalries within the coalition itself. On the other hand, it is a moment of deep mortification for the Congress. The party which won independence and ruled the free nation longest finds itself out of power and struggling for its very existence in the 50th year of national liberation. The ruling Janata could not possibly extol the achievements of Nehru, Indira and Rajiv while the BJP, which did not exist before 1947, could only condemn the Congress for its "appeasement" of the Pakistan-minded Muslims and abject surrender before Jinnah and find serious anti-Hindu-majority faults with most of the post-1947 socio-political developments. It would only celebrate the growing Hindu communal sentiment.

However, the National Committee created by the Janata government to plan and oversee the year-long celebrations that begin at midnight on 14th August 1997 has sanctioned a budget of 510 million rupees for festivities in India and abroad. The brochure issued by the high-profile Committee, con-

sisting of 213 luminaries that include ex-Presidents and Prime Ministers, representatives of trade unions and the judiciary, freedom fighters, creative artists and intellectuals, says that the golden jubilee is "the most propitious opportunity ... to ... seriously think whether we are carrying on the priceless legacy of freedom on the path that was charted for us by the fathers of our freedom movement". The festivities begin with a joint session of both Houses of Parliament which will figure speeches by leaders and patriotic-spiritual singing by Bhimsen Joshi, the classical vocalist and Lata Mangeshkar, the prima donna of film songs. State-owned television will show many especially commissioned films during the whole year. Exhibitions, song-and-dance recitals, publication of literary anthologies, books and CD-ROMs are also planned. R.L. Sudhir, the Joint Secretary assisting the National Committee, says, "Our objective is to rejoice over the 50 years of independence, to rekindle our spirit of freedom, to remember the values of sacrifices and the whole sensation of freedom. It is also introspect about all those areas where our country has failed. Through these programmes we want to come up with corrective measures".

Coming from a bureaucrat, these words are a strange mixture of pious clichés and some surprising realism but how the programmes of the Committee can lead to correcting the national failures remains rather obscure. On the contrary, the absurd scheme to erect a statue of the barely-clad Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi, in the freezing wastes of the South Pole among bewildered penguins symbolises what is commonly called Indian tokenism. Most editors, leader-writers and columnists have either ridiculed or downrightly condemned the official initiative to commemorate the golden jubilee. One has yet to see even a moderately approving article anywhere. Commentators and experts are vying with each other in painting a starkly gloomy picture of the state of the nation, supported by reliable figures and unbiased national and international authorities and institutions. The last five years of benumbing scams, political and economic bungling, social and communal tension, uncertainty and instability have created such a mood of morbid despondency and self-flagellating irony and satire in the minds of both the intellectuals and the common folk that the last fifty years seem largely wasted. Scathing criticism and unrelieved pessimism seem to be the dominating intellectual attitudes. The "Letters to the Editor" columns of newspapers are full of irate, self-pitying jeremiads about the half-century of freedom.

Most of the invectives and outbursts are true and valid. Indians must accept that they are one of the most corrupt, poor, sickly, illiterate, backward, dirty and chaotic nations in the world. We do not need a Catherine Mayo, a Nerode Chaudhury or a V.S. Naipaul to tell us this - our own newspapers are full of daily facts to this effect. But can we deny the spirit of freedom

and democracy that pervades our people as the sole consequence of 15th August 1947? The people of India have so far voted hundreds of times for the state or central elections, always affecting political parties and the governance of this gigantic nation of 900 million, making it the largest working democracy in the world. Most of the voters are illiterates or semi-literate and poor, but most of them have now learnt to vote without fear or favour and are willing to come to exercise their choice again and again, no matter how unstable the governments or how complex the political scene. Every time they have surprised psephologists and political analysts with their innate wisdom that can punish them all, collectively or individually - the Congress, the United Front, the BJP and its supporters and the mushrooming regional parties. True, Indian masses are fickle, emotional and exasperating, but how is it that despite all caste, class and religious differences, which are played up by the political parties, the electoral verdict remains logical, practical, sane and healthy? Why do the same people vote one way during the assembly elections and the other way for Parliament, even when voting for both is held simultaneously? How do they topple Prime Ministers, lesser leaders, mafia dons and religious fanatics? Those who say that there is nothing to celebrate may have the best of emotional motives but in their anger and frustration they insult national independence and damage Indian democracy. We are fortunate that their enraged cynicism fails to rub off on the millions of our voters, otherwise it would pave the way for one or the other version of native fascism. Celebrating the 50th anniversary is a safeguarding action and an assertion of faith in our people, in ourselves.

We also cannot overlook or undervalue the fact that though we are failing to curb our population which has tripled during the last 50 years, at least 10 to 15 per cent of it, i.e., 100 to 150 million, which is more than the combined population of most developed European countries, can be said to belong to our middle class. More than 1.5 million individuals are managing their own industrial units. The number of doctors has more than doubled during the last fifteen years. There are more than 7 million investors in the Indian stock-markets now, a growth of 500 per cent in the same period. The so-called luxury goods like refrigerators, TV sets and music systems are being bought not only by the lower middle-class but even the urban poor. Go to a slum in any big city and you will find hundreds of antennae bristling from the hut-tops. Production of TV sets, two-wheeler mobikes and scooters and refrigerators has gone up by a mind-boggling 4000 per cent, 1200 per cent and 600 per cent respectively during the last two decades. Delhi has a record total of 1.5 million motorised vehicles of all kinds. In smaller cities and towns, housewives and college-girls are moving about on mopeds. Buying everything from room-coolers to luxury cars and flats and houses on hire-purchase has become the norm. The population

living below the poverty line has dropped to 33-35 per cent compared to the 50 per cent of 15 years ago. Incomes, salaries and wages have gone up steadily and with them the desire for a better standard of living. The growth of the middle class, steady increase in purchasing power and production and sales of consumer goods do bring other problems in their wake but the fact remains that more Indians are now more prosperous than ever before. What is more, the poor and the downtrodden are getting increasingly aware of their rights, including the one to live well without any fear, discrimination or persecution. The poor and the dalits can no longer be compelled or threatened to lead a life of deprivation and misery.

Though a house for each family remains a distant dream and most building activity lacks proper planning, from the smallest villages to the most populous cities India has witnessed unprecedented residential construction during the last three decades. Millions of humble houses, small or de luxe flats and palatial bungalows and mansions have gone up, making the prices of land shoot up astronomically. There are more trucks and buses on the roads. Indian Railways, perhaps the largest network of its kind, have improved and expanded enormously. Competing private airlines have improved the quality of air travel.

The Indian farmer has done his utmost for the country and there has been no famine or scarcity of food for almost three decades. In fact almost nothing seems to be scarce in Indian markets and bazars which are full of indigenous fruits, vegetables and all other conceivable goods made well or poorly in India. Markets are so full of people that one positively dreads the prospect of having to go out to buy anything. Citizens from Russia and the new Central Asian Republics can be seen buying Indian goods by plane-loads in popular suburban bazars of Delhi. Eating places, from the humble wayside dhaba to the exclusive 5-star restaurants, seem teeming with hungry people at all times. Working women from slums, when they wait for the bus on the road, look as well-dressed and graceful as middle-class ladies. Men from humble stations in life are better clad and fed than their fathers.

Despite all hindrances, India continues to throw up brilliant people in all walks of life. As a direct consequence of the implementation of the Mandal Commission Report, millions from backward castes and dalits will join the effective mainstream of national life. Talent smothered and stunted for centuries will be set free to the country's benefit. The vexatious question of preferential reservations in education and jobs has caused heart-burning among the privileged castes but reason seems to be prevailing. In any case, the backward, the tribal and the dalit has gradually come into his own and it is now impossible to put the social clock back. Perhaps the most far-reaching socio-political consequence of Indian freedom has been the liberation of

the lower castes, the untouchables and other dalits. Much remains to be achieved, but the crucial beginning has been made.

If freedom has unmistakably revolutionised and transformed a single area in our national life, it is in the realm of the performing and plastic arts. Though classical music had feudal patronage and survived in the "gharana" tradition of a singing family preserving and improvising its own vocal or instrumental style and there were music conferences and concerts with maestros and their promising disciples, the kind of musical explosion that took place after 1947, throwing up exciting new talents, schools and colleges of music being established and thousands of young men and women taking to classical music, is perhaps unprecedented in recent history. The rise and universal acceptance of Ravi Shankar and his sitar symbolises the renaissance in Indian classical music. Now almost each year sees new talent come up. The revolution is perhaps more remarkable in the field of classical dance, where less known, regional dance forms like Manipuri, Odissi, Kuchipudi and Kathakali were rediscovered, restored, learnt and performed on a pan-Indian scale. A classical dance recital was a rarity even in Delhi before 1947 - now there are prestigious dance schools with hundreds of male and female pupils in the major cities and a bewildering number of varied performances during the season. Folk music and dance too have been preserved and made popular. Who knew Seraikela Chhau or Pandwani before Independence? An institution like the Bharat Bhavan of Bhopal was inconceivable before 1947.

The advancement in painting and sculpture has been equally astounding. The list of artists before independence comprised of Raja Ravi Varma, Abanindranath Tagore, Nandlal Bose, Ram Kinkar and Amrita Sher-Gill but the works of post-independence artists like M.F. Husain, J. Swaminathan, S.H. Raza, F.N. Souza, Ram Kumar, Ghulam Sheikh, Himmat Shah, Vivian Sundaram and many other equally important senior and younger painters and sculptors can be seen with private collectors and at prestigious museums all over the world, not to mention such auctioneers as Christie's. It is now difficult to get admitted to prestigious art schools. Good artists command high prices, their works are displayed in scores of new metropolitan galleries and international art fairs.

Journalism, whose importance in the political and general life of a nation can hardly be exaggerated, has also made spectacular progress after 1947 and has indeed played a most crucial role in the making and development of free India. While not all publications, journalists and their employers are of the same par, the best of them have been enlightened, secular and progressive in their policies and outlook. The strides that the Indian press has made during the last 50 years are simply breathtaking. Where there used to be at the most three or four dailies from each metropolitan city, the number has

nearly doubled in most larger towns. Many regional newspapers have as many as five to eight different editions. Journalists are almost totally free to write what they please within the law, though recently the ideological pressure of the BJP is increasingly seen and many proprietors have become non-writing editors. Journalism is a profession where it is difficult, perhaps even undesirable, to remain uncommitted one way or the other but quite a few Indian journalists are among the most professional, vigilant, talented and fearless in the world and have the courage to write the most unpalatable truths about people in high places, and if an active judiciary is relentlessly pursuing criminal cases against the powerful and mighty of the land, supporting public interest litigation, the Fourth Estate is its close ally. The Indian journalistic scene is exciting and lively in each major, and even minor, language and though black sheep be everywhere, scribes in India are largely above bribery and blackmail. It is our journalism that makes Indian society one of the most open on the globe.

There are many other spheres in which India has made considerable strides. It has put its own satellites, though with French help, into orbit, it has its medium-range missiles and it is nuclear-capable - not very laudable feats, but they remain achievements all the same. The problem with progress is that there is always something odious about it. Already, liberalisation and the globalisation of the Indian economy and its results, if any, are being hotly debated. The myth of "Asian Tigers" is being questioned. In any case, one does not see many foreign investors and multinationals in India so far.

Indian women have certainly made unimaginable progress during the last five decades. Women in Bengal and Maharashtra were already awakened and active in society and the freedom movement, with their sisters elsewhere soon following suit, but now there is hardly any corner of national life where they are not effectively seen. True, they are still subject to discrimination, inequality, exploitation, molestation and prostitution, torture and murder, but one can see millions of self-assured, independent, unafraid girls and women in educational institutions and offices, businesses and factories, as bureaucrats and artists, authors and journalists, and in such male preserves as the police and defence forces. That they could bend an orthodox, male-dominated society is a great human achievement. My wife does not belong to my caste but she rebelled and married me thirty years ago in a small conservative town. When I look at my two young daughters and compare them with my two equally young aunts who died of tuberculosis 46 years ago, unmarried and confined to home, I realise how far Indian women have progressed. Reservation of a certain number of seats for women in Parliament, now being hotly debated, will be yet another landmark in their struggle for equality and dignity.

But no assessment of post-1947 India can be complete without considering the status of religious minorities. There are 125 million Muslims in India, followed by 20 million Christians, 18 million Sikhs, 8 million Buddhists, 4 million Jains and many others belonging to other religions. Together they form 20 per cent of the entire population. Of course, they are not ethnic or racial minorities, but imagine any other country having one-fifth of its population as religious, ethnic or alien minority and you can realise the complexity of the Indian situation. There has been almost no tension between the majority Hindus and the Christians, Buddhists and Jains. Sikhism is a non-idolater monotheistic offshoot of Hinduism, but gradually the Sikhs have come to claim an independent identity for themselves, which exploded in the militant demand for a separate Khalistan homeland. After much bloodshed, things seem to have normalised and hostilities have nearly ceased, with a largely Sikh-dominated popular government having come to power in Punjab, the predominantly Sikh state. But it is the formation of Pakistan that is made to hang like an albatross around the necks of Indian Muslims who chose to remain in India despite the partition on religious lines. Muslim dynasties ruled over India for nearly eight centuries, Islamic culture has enriched what is now called Indian culture and Indian Muslims have made a great contribution to free India in nearly all spheres of national life. Hindus are supposed to be a largely tolerant and peace-loving people but Hindu communalism, as embodied in such political outfits, like the BJP, the Shiv Sena, the Vishva Hindu Parishad and the Bajrang Dal, and their ideological-militant wings like the RSS, is rearing its ugly head. Muslims are generally suspect, denied their rights as Indian citizens, discriminated against and made to live in voluntary ghettos. At the same time, many of them have prospered, have made careers for themselves in administration, professions and management and have reached the highest echelons. They have their own religious divisions and social problems but brook no interference in Islamic matters. The demolition of the Babari mosque was a great religio-emotional blow. Hindu-Muslim riots are not infrequent. On the whole, the two communities appear to live peacefully, even, at times, fraternally, side-by-side, especially in South India where Muslims seem to be traditionally more integrated and accepted in society, but mutual distrust and violence is never very far. Indian freedom will remain flawed until the two communities really come to enlightened terms with each other.

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Post-1947 India's record is certainly not as glorious as most ruling politicians paint it to be or as simplistic, super-patriotic Indians imagine it, and it is certainly not so dismal and negative as many intellectuals, journalists or angry common citizens see and present it. But if India today is not what it

could have been, much of the blame should be shared by the self-seeking politicians, the unenlightened capitalists, the docile and conniving bureaucrats and the inactive, holier-than-thou intellectuals. But even among them, the failure of intellectuals is most saddening and appalling. Hundreds of thousands of our teachers, sociologists, scientists, bureaucrats, authors and journalists have shirked their moral and pragmatic duty towards the people of their nation. They have refused to participate in a meaningfully active way in national life and have left it to the tender mercies of the rapacious politician, the inhuman money-maker and the monstrous criminal. The very fact that a handful of intellectuals who care and take sides and fight have been effective makes us sadly aware of the opportunities lost due to the indifference of the remaining majority. The conditions prevailing in our schools and universities and other institutions of learning and research are abysmal. Teachers at all levels are either mediocre or they have lost their zeal and moral will to guide and shape the nation's future intellect. We are still producing brilliant students but how many of them bother about India and its people? It is not necessary for intellectuals to take to the streets, though they should have the courage to do so if need be, but they could have done their bit by simply saying what was wrong and what was right. Had our pre-1947 intellectuals been indifferent, morally slothful or fatalistic, they would not have turned into Gandhi, Nehru and others like them. The intellectuals among journalists are still the most active lot but even their number and efforts are not quite enough. The most dangerous among the intellectuals are those who in their superior, frustrated, morally lazy arrogance have turned into what Nehru used to call "prophets of doom", denying all progress and ridiculing all efforts to effectively intervene in national life. This is "trahison des clerics" of a different, destructive kind. In the 50th year of our freedom, it is clear that the vast majority of Indian intellectuals in all walks of life, in all political parties, have failed the nation. But fifty years is also not a long time in a nation's life and India has always been renewing itself and surviving, though mere survival is not enough. One can already see a new generation of younger intellectuals come up in India who are not as amoral, pessimistic and non-committed as their spiritual fathers. In celebrating the 50 years of freedom, one also celebrates the hope that the first centenary of independent India will see a more enriching and fruitful relationship and interaction between Indian intellectuals and the rest of society, liberating both from their inhibitions, mutual hostilities and social and political shackles.