

Nation of marvels AND MISSTEPS

In 75 years, India has defied prophets of doom to remain a plural, vibrant democracy. But it's the fault lines that need attention now

Shyam Saran

feedback@livemint.com

India at 75 is a wonder, having defied frequent predictions of the demise of its democracy, the disintegration of its polity and a descent into a Malthusian dystopia of galloping population growth and diminishing food supplies. There have been serious setbacks on this journey. Some crises have threatened to sever the threads holding this incredibly diverse nation together. Several strands may have been weak, ready to fray. Each strand may have its distinctive colour and shade. But the fabric which these myriad threads have woven has proved to be remarkably sturdy and resilient and a most pleasing blend of colours and textures. This is a nation to be celebrated, to be cherished because it is like no other. Its story began many centuries ago and continues to unfold. It has been a journey full of surprises and I am certain that more surprises, hopefully pleasant ones, will follow as we head towards 100 years of independence.

Which are the strengths which have stood India in good stead so far and how could they be leveraged going forward? Could one point to what we got right and where we went wrong in our 75-year journey? And then see what we must get right and avoid in the road towards 2047?

BY THE BOOK

We got the Constitution of India right. It is a document steeped in the elemental spirit of India, drawing upon what is the most noble in our traditions but putting aside the inherited dross from the past, such as the caste system, patriarchal values and social prejudices. It embraces the universal values of Enlightenment, which are best represented by political democracy and institutions of a modern state. Its anchors are drawn from a shared cultural sensibility and spiritual affinity among its people. It affirms India's immense diversity. Its idea of nationhood rejects homogeneity.

Instead of seeking to suppress the innate plurality of the Indian people—plurality of religious beliefs, languages, customs and traditions—the Constitution seeks to transcend these in a shared identity of citizenship, based on individual rights and responsibilities. While recognizing the reality of India's inherited social condition, it sketches, in bold strokes, the aspirations of an ancient culture but a young nation. The Constitution recognizes that an independent India must take its place in the comity of nations, contributing to the well-being of a larger humanity. We are citizens of India but we are global citizens too. The Constitution is the source of political legitimacy and sets the boundaries, which no authority must transgress to the detriment of India's citizens.

Since its adoption in 1950, the Constitution has served as a guidepost for India's political evolution. It has enabled relatively smooth and non-violent political transitions. It has enabled the exercise of civil authority over the armed forces. It has presided over social and economic reforms which seek to promote a more egalitarian and inclusive society. It has made an independent judiciary the sentinel of constitutional propriety and this has been an indispensable safeguard against arbitrary power. India remains a vibrant democracy, despite occasional and even serious lapses, thanks to its enlightened Constitution.

THE LATE BOOM
Since its independence, India experimented with a number of economic strategies of development, some more state-centred, others more market-oriented. There is no doubt that state intervention led the way towards a successful Green Revolution and an early White Revolution. The state set up several centres of excellence and higher education, like the Indian Institutes of Technology and Indian Institutes of Management. They supplied India and the rest of the world with a steady stream of highly qualified technical and management personnel. State investment also enabled a successful and world-class space programme

and a sophisticated nuclear programme. India is today one of the front-ranking space and nuclear powers. The emphasis on higher education and advanced science and technology has paid off handsomely. India got this right.

India has always had a significant asset in its vibrant entrepreneurial class, backed by a corps of professional managers. In the early years after Independence, we ended up with a highly regulated economy with pervasive state intervention. This was the legacy of a state-controlled economy adopted during the Second World War. The influence of socialist thinking was also evident. It was only in 1991-92, at the end of the Cold War and the near bankruptcy of the Indian economy, that sweeping economic reforms and liberalization measures were adopted. The Indian economy became more open to the rest of the world; economic autarky gave way to a steady globalization. The growth of the economy accelerated. Indian industry became globally competitive and there was a steady

infusion of both foreign capital and technology. India is, in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms, the world's third-largest economy and may well become the second largest by 2047. India got this right, though somewhat belatedly.

India got its foreign policy right. As a civilizational state, a major power already at independence and determined to hold its destiny in its own hands, it is not surprising that India opted for a foreign policy based on the principle of strategic autonomy. Strategic autonomy is the ability of the state to take relatively autonomous decisions on matters of vital interest. This found articulation in the policy of non-alignment in the past; today one may describe it as multi-alignment. The label is not important. What is important to note is that the objective of India's foreign policy has been to create an external environment conducive to achieving the transformation of the country. This has imparted a remarkable consistency to India's foreign policy behaviour under governments

of different ideological colours. The small corps of professional diplomats has been remarkably successful in safeguarding our vital interests and expanding India's diplomatic space. The successful negotiation of the Civil Nuclear Agreement with the US and the Nuclear Suppliers' Group in 2008 was a landmark in this respect.

FRATERNITY IS THE ANSWER

What did we not get right? The Constitution has remained the bulwark of democracy but needs bipartisan political consensus to serve as a guide to political and social behaviour. This consensus has begun to erode in recent years. We have a much more polarised polity and weakened institutions. The management of diversity requires the principle of fraternity—one of the founding principles of the Constitution, along with liberty and equality. Without a sense of fraternity, diversity becomes a source of divisiveness rather than affinity. India has several fault lines which, unaddressed, may overwhelm the

spirit of nationalism. We are witnessing the rise of communalism and the sometimes violent assertion of caste and regional identities. There is an incipient north-south divide, partly exacerbated by divergent economic trajectories but also by linguistic differences. The forthcoming delimitation exercise for redrawing parliamentary constituencies may reduce the political salience of less populous southern states. This may bring disruptive tendencies to a tipping point.

Growing inequalities of income and wealth also undermine the egalitarianism implicit in democracy. These may be traced to the differential availability of education. While prioritizing higher education, we neglected primary and secondary education. We failed to understand that in independent India, access to English language education has remained the passport to better jobs and earning capacity. This has condemned a very large part of our population to low-status, low-income jobs. No effort has been made to ensure

advanced and technical education opportunities in local languages. Almost all technical manuals are in English. So are teaching materials in advanced science and technology. It should come as no surprise that we are witnessing a "revolt of the vernacular" against an English-speaking elite, derided today as the "Lutyen's elite" or the "Khan Market gang." This is the glaring failure of those who profess liberal values. There are no easy answers. Do we universalize English language education from secondary school onwards? Should a massive investment be made in ensuring translations of teaching material and journals into key regional languages, and who would pay for this? Do artificial intelligence and machine learning offer a way out?

Other challenges must be addressed. An independent judiciary is the guarantee of constitutional propriety. But sometimes, it is selective and even inconsistent in discharging its role. The law and order and justice system in the country is in need of urgent reform. It needs to be more accessible to the ordinary citizen. The huge backlog of cases pending in the courts must be cleared. Both the Prime Minister and the Chief Justice of India have drawn attention to this.

THE STATE'S TASK

There is a need for the state to return to first principles. The three primary and indispensable responsibilities of a state are providing all citizens with security, education and health. Over the past several years, we have witnessed a progressive retrenchment of these responsibilities by the state. The private sector, with its profit motive, has been moving in to occupy this space. Some of the most rapidly growing segments of the Indian economy are private security, private education and private healthcare services. The services they offer are heavily skewed in favour of relatively high-income earners. This is a negative development particularly in a democracy.

What about the economy? The country is facing headwinds, as are many other nations but a few broad points need to be made for the future trajectory of our economic development. India must remain an open and market-oriented economy. It should strive to stay ahead of the globalization curve rather than resist it. Globalization is criticised as having led to economic inequalities. Those

are failures of public policy not of globalization, which still offers the best prospects for eliminating poverty and enhancing prosperity. In this context, India should reconsider its decision to stay out of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), especially considering the overall shift in policy towards regional trade agreements in general. After all, India has joined the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) and is negotiating trade agreements with Australia, the UK, and European Union, which will have higher standard provisions than the RCEP. Indian foreign policy has enabled a relatively more benign and conducive external environment for the transformation of the economy and must continue to do so.

India has developed close strategic partnerships with the US, Europe and Japan. These may be in economic decline relative to China, but remain the repositories of the most sophisticated technologies, the source of capital and are still the key markets of the world. Faced with an assertive China, these partners have a stake in India's economic success, since it is the only country which has the potential to emerge as a credible countervailing power. The benign phase may not last. It is time now to revamp our economic policies and regulatory procedures to enable a significant infusion of capital and technology from our strategic partners. This would also help India in confronting the growing security challenge from China.

I believe that, on balance, India may finally begin to deliver on its potential in the next 25 years. There is room for optimism. All the building blocks are in place.

The writer is a former foreign secretary and a senior fellow, Centre for Policy Research.



JAYACHANDRAN