



WORDLY WISE
...THE SOUL OF A NATION, LONG SUPPRESSED,
FINDS UTTERANCE.
— JAWAHARLAL NEHRU

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL



The 1947 we choose

As India turns 75, which logic of nation-building will it embrace — freedom or Partition? The answer is sobering



PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

IT WAS THE 1920s. India had been long subjected to colonialism. But the soul of the masses was stirring. Gandhi had arrived from South Africa. He crafted a political vocabulary that had no precedent in history. He put the Congress party on notice. It had to become a mass organisation, with a common touch and vernacular cadence. Even the elites, who privately grumbled about his simplicity and moralism, had to concede to his authority. After all, Gandhi had, as one leader put it, "lifted the pall of fear". The intellectual ambitions of India's new leaders were not modest. It was to create an alternative universality; position India as a vishwaguru on the dint of its values and the power of its example, not on the barrel of the gun. Human rights and development as the West understood them were cloaks for a false universalism. They came with imperialism and exploitation.

This vision was not uncontested. Ambedkar rightly pointed out that a civilisation that had perfected an oppressive social hierarchy was hardly in a position to occupy the high moral ground. But this vision also stood on the ground of values and an ambitious universality: The idea of human dignity at the front and centre of everything. He was cynical about the motives of his colleagues, but never about values, and he crafted the principles of a new social contract capable of being a lodestar for the ages. There were other leaders of other persuasions as well, some more conservative, some more liberal, some revolutionary, but all fully conscious of the monumental task of bringing back a long subjugated country to its freedom, its moral centre and civilisational creativity.

And creativity that generation saw in abundance. What had begun as a sort of renaissance in Bengal became a national creed. Poets and writers created new songs and stories for this new stirring nation in more languages than one can list. Its scholars were rediscovering the deepest recesses of its traditions, even as its scientists were beginning to win Nobel Prizes under difficult circumstances. New universities were created. New art forms flourished. Fierce political debate flourished over the ends of politics and the means appropriate to it. All kinds of futures were being imagined for India, from the industrial to the pastoral. But all com-

mitted to freedom. The arguments were sometimes bitter. But they were chastened by a consciousness that Gandhi reminded us of "that our besetting sin is not our differences, it is our littleness".

But under the surface of this brilliance and glitter of this golden generation that would lay the foundations of independent India, a poison was brewing. Limited democracy came in the form of the 1935 Act. Petty squabbles over power operated under the shadow of this greatness. But the deeper poison was the poison of communalism, with its same dreary murderous templates. There were fights over conversion and reconversion, sacred cows and prohibited pigs, which pamphlets were offensive to which community, who gets patronage from the state, threats of intermarriage, and the writing of history. There was sheer prejudice as well, those reservoirs of hate that cloak themselves under the garb of a higher purpose.

The social and intellectual partitions between Hindus and Muslims acquired new force. Rioting gained momentum, mutual recrimination became the new flavour. A nation looking at freedom was now contemplating division. In a few years, the energies of an authentic universality, spiritual regeneration, creative excellence, productive political debates were replaced by horrendous violence, a fearful nationalism, community narcissism and the strategic unity of the Subcontinent in ruins. This golden generation were no fools of history; but even they were certainly fooled by it. Once the poison took hold, the best and the brightest were powerless to stop it: A few drops of poison could overpower the sweetest of nectars.

Two new nations were born. India was born amidst the failure of its nationalist project. Nineteen forty-seven was both Partition and freedom; self-determination and slaughter. Pakistan decided to continue with the Partition project; it homogenised its territory, set religious benchmarks for identity. India in an act of creative resetting decided to make a fresh start. We embraced our trust with destiny, even in this truncated form. We tried to let the legacy of freedom define India more than the obsession with Partition. In that audacious commitment was born a grand experiment: The

largest democracy in the world, committed, with various imperfections, to liberal ideals, and a new hope. Our trust with destiny collided with quotidian realities. We did not lift people out of poverty fast enough. Social democracy was often held hostage by plutocracy, bureaucracy and caste hierarchy. But we still said, to use Aurobindo's words, we do not belong to the past dawns, but to the noons of the future.

In the new century, it looked as if India's economic promise would finally gain momentum. India had much to build on. But then we rolled the clock back. Our battles are like a rerun of the 1930s — cow protection, love jihad, new excuses to hate. We will now complete the logic of Partition, we said — deepen the divisions, define ourselves by those same violent templates, the sense of victimhood and bigotry that tore apart the soul of India. In the 1930s, it happened to a certain extent despite the leaders; now our leaders are leading the charge. So long as we are completing the project of Partition, we said, we will put up with anything, even authoritarianism. Fundamentalism in Pakistan, open calls for violence in Delhi, all now wearing the garb of some higher national purpose. In a strange alchemy, embracing this death wish seems to make us feel more alive as a nation.

The moral of the 1930s was clear. Once unleashed, communalism always breaks nations. It took the sheen off India's renaissance in the 1930s; it will again corrode new India's energies. It has momentum that we can only pretend to control. The logic of Partition and the logic of freedom are fundamentally incompatible. One traps us in compulsory identities, the other lets us define ourselves. One sees fellow citizens as a potential threat, the other as a resource to build something special. One wallows in the past, the other is oriented to the future. One concentrates on the true foundation of national greatness, the other creates an impostor-like substitute. One is premised on fear, the other on hope. One on violence, the other solidarity. Which logic will we embrace — freedom or Partition? A question for both India and Pakistan. And alas, the answer is looking depressingly clear.

The writer is contributing editor, The Indian Express

RETURN OF A SPECTRE

As Taliban makes a rapid military advance through Afghanistan, India too must brace itself for the consequences

THE WHEEL HAS turned almost full circle in Afghanistan. The Taliban first stormed to power in 1996, with an open demonstration of medieval cruelty and a barbaric transition to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Twenty-five years later, and two decades after they were ousted from their seat in Kabul by the US and other NATO forces, their steady march through the country as they capture one strategic city after another indicates that their return to Kabul may not be far away. According to the latest reports, the militants control two-thirds of the Afghan land mass, including in the non-Pashtun north where their advance was stalled in the 1990s by the Northern Alliance. There is no Northern Alliance this time. The Afghan National Defence and Security Forces — including a 1,80,000 strong Afghan National Army, and a police force with 1,50,000 personnel, besides an air force and other security wings — trained by the US military, have proved unequal to the task of holding on to territory and containing the Taliban.

As the August 31 deadline for full American withdrawal approaches, the irony is that the US will send 3,000 troops back to evacuate the personnel at its Kabul embassy, while the US special envoy to Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, author of the Doha agreement, pleads with the Taliban for the safety of Americans in Afghanistan. The Doha Agreement, from which the US excluded the Afghan government in order to keep the Taliban happy, is now in tatters. A UN report has already pointed to the continuing contacts between Taliban and al Qaeda, and Indian intelligence reports point to a confluence of Pakistan-based jihadi tanzim inimical to India in Afghanistan. There is no certainty as to how long the government of President Ashraf Ghani will hold in the face of the relentless advance. Finance Minister Khalid Payenda has already quit, underlining the isolation of the government. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees has estimated that nearly 4,00,000 Afghan civilians have been forced to flee their homes in the fighting this year, most of them internally displaced. There have been reprisal killings already and reports say 90 Afghan media outlets have shut down.

An offer by Ghani to share power with the Taliban may not make any difference to the insurgents who clearly believe they are on the cusp of winning it all. The Taliban appear to enjoy the support of the Pashtuns, the majority community in Afghanistan, and several international powers, including Russia and China. A question that has to be asked is if the Taliban's rapid military advance through Afghanistan would have been possible without help from Pakistan, its chief patron. It was Pakistan that delivered the Taliban to the table when President Donald Trump wanted to fast-track talks towards a US exit. For India, the invitation to Thursday's "Troika Plus" talks in Doha was small consolation. Delhi's only option at this moment is to secure the country against possible consequences, and wait it out as it unfolds. Delhi must also get ready for Afghans who may come to this country seeking refuge, as they have done in the past.

BEING UNSPORTING

Vinesh Phogat's predicament points to a sports culture that shows little equanimity, in victory or in defeat

VINESH PHOGAT RETURNED from her second Olympics without a medal, like thousands of athletes across the world. But her reception by the Wrestling Federation of India included the slapping of a temporary ban, and the prospect of a longer punishment. The show-cause notice issued to the disappointed athlete will require her to explain why she wasn't friendly enough with her team-mates, amongst other unrelated-to-sport allegations. The federation has not only mistaken the individual sport for a game of Ring a Ring o' Roses, it has sought to deflect attention from the first red flag that Vinesh raised upon landing in Tokyo: Questions on the absence of her regular physio, who could've contributed to nailing down the medal. The insensitivity of imposing a ban on an athlete even before she sets foot at home, is compounded by the slander for "indiscipline".

Celebrating its highest medal haul from an Olympics, India has swung from disingenuous athletes who couldn't medal in the first week to over-the-top celebrations by governments looking to piggyback on the winners. There is no semblance of balance when crores are showered on medal winners, while those who missed out are abused on social media and pushed off stage for not meeting expectations. Only three — or four, in case of contact sports — medals are given per event. But India, new to winning any medals at all, has refused to display the equanimity needed to empathise with those who return without medals.

Writing for this paper, Vinesh spoke of the flip side of fame, and how "failure" is treated by the country. Wrestling did bring home two medals in men — both well-supported by a foreign coach, an Indian coach, a dedicated physio and the backing of a federation, which arbitrarily refused to send a physio for the 4-member team of women. But at the core of Vinesh's cry for help is the anguish she has struggled to cope with while trying to win in a stacked field. When critics called for punishment to be meted out to her for having an "ego", they had forgotten that it was the same confidence that she used for tough take-downs on the mat. An elegant wrestler who has won on the world stage, the authorities didn't allow Vinesh to fight freely, with all the support she needed and deserved. Being penalised for not medalling was only the last straw.

GREENWASHED & STYLISH

There's really only one way to be both fashionable and sustainable — buy less

CAN FASHION BE green? In a recent social media post, the environmental activist, Greta Thunberg, wrote, "You cannot mass produce fashion or consume 'sustainably' as the world is shaped today." Quite simply — and this may come as a shock to those who wear their "ethically-manufactured" yoga pants like a badge of honour — there is no such thing as "sustainable" fashion. Much like how denims were once acid washed or stone washed, these days, everyone's "greenwashed".

The fashion industry, especially the sector known as fast fashion, has a massive environmental footprint, accounting for around 10 per cent of global carbon emissions and about 20 per cent of wastewater, and using up more energy than aviation and shipping combined. And, as consumers have grown conscious of this over the last decade or so, brands have been looking for ways to appear more eco-friendly. So they make clothing that includes a tiny percentage of organically-grown cotton, just to slap on a label that says "uses organically-grown cotton". Or they claim that their clothes are "ethical", "climate-neutral" or "green" — buzzwords that sound reassuring to consumers (whose conscience might otherwise play spoilsport) but which really mean nothing. More ingeniously, brands offer buy-back schemes to customers only to sell the used clothing in bulk to countries in Africa and Asia where they end up as waste in landfills anyway. In the meantime, consumers, their conscience soothed, keep buying, while manufacturers, their bottom lines intact, keep making.

With the release of the recent IPCC report on the climate emergency, it's never been clearer that sacrifices are in order. For consumers, this means consuming less. Know that it's fine to not own the latest Dries Van Noten or Céline knockoff. Just wear to brunch what you did last weekend or borrow your sister's peplum blazer. Because fashion can only be sustainable if there isn't so much of it filling up closets and, ultimately, landfills.

Our GDP Needs The HDP

Let's calculate human development product. Because you achieve what you measure



RISHAD PREMJI

I AM BLESSED and privileged. While I have the honour and responsibility of being the Chairman of Wipro, I also have the opportunity to be fairly engaged with the work of the Azim Premji Foundation. This has given me the chance to see very different views of the world — of the tremendous potential and success technology has brought to our lives and the tremendous deprivation and inequity that still exists all around us.

This reality is visible, but often not noticed. While we are all familiar with the economic hardship of many Indians, the figures tell us how deep this issue is. Even before the pandemic, the median household income in India was Rs 15,000 per month. That means a family of four at the median income level lived on just Rs 125 per day per person for all their expenditure on food, clothing, housing, health-care, festivals and more. Half of India lives with less than that. It isn't a surprise that one health emergency can crush an entire family economically even at the median income level — and this happens to fellow citizens in our country every day.

The bottom 25 per cent of households (about 300 million people in India) lived on an income of less than Rs 8,500 per month or Rs 70 per day per person. For the bottom 10 per cent these numbers are even more gut-wrenching. And these numbers do not account for the economic devastation that the pandemic has caused.

None of these numbers capture stark inequities and injustices across gender, caste, regions, and more. Can we even imagine what circumstances many of our fellow citizens live in?

There is no doubt that from the wonderful day when India became free in 1947 to today we have made enormous progress. However, we still have work to do to build the India that we promised to ourselves in our Constitution.

To make progress on these inequities, I propose we add an additional key measure to that of GDP — the Human Development Product (HDP). I believe deeply that you achieve what you measure. However, at times you must dig deeper, to the next level of measures, to truly understand the real health of the situation you are assessing. It is critical to narrow down to these "vital few" measures without forgetting that as time and circumstances change, these "vital few" measures may also need to be revised. What is special about these measures is that they themselves align and reflect the progress on many other measures.

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I propose that the HDP consist of the following five parameters: First, the female labour force participation rate. Depending on what definition you look at, currently this number is 11 per cent or 22 per cent. It is shockingly low. The empowerment of women through their economic independence is central to human development. Second, gender income parity: A comparison of both, the median and the 75th percentile, of wages of men and women. There is no point in more women participating in the labour force if we continue to give them insecure and lower-paying jobs than men. Third, stunting. Stunting amongst children is about 35 per cent. This number reflects many things directly, for instance, the state of our public health, the nutritional status of our people, and environmental conditions. Fourth, water quality and availability. This is more difficult to measure, but tracking a few important indicators can suggest the national trends. So, I suggest we measure the quality and flow of 10 key rivers at specified geographical points and periodicity, as well as measure groundwater levels and quality in some of the most stressed areas. All this could give us an aggregate water health index. Fifth, the quality of polity. For this, we can measure the percentage of members of all our legislatures — state legislatures and Parliament — against whom criminal cases are pending or have convictions.

The natural debate that follows is why only five measures and why these five. There is no perfect answer to this. I have tried to pick the "vital few" which I believe will measure

the progress of the most fundamental things in our country and reflect human progress. Like former US President Barack Obama once said, "if you want to see what a country is like, go and see how it treats its women". The two measures on women empowerment that I have chosen balance each other and reflect deep structural issues, both in the economy and in society. So, any progress on these two will happen only when there is broad-ranging progress across multiple factors such as education and an increase in employment opportunities

Stunting is not only one of the cruelest things that society accepts but is also reflective of widespread conditions of public health, nutrition and public education.

I also worry deeply about climate change. India will be ground zero for all effects of climate change — it will affect livelihoods, health and more. We must tackle climate change and its effects on multiple fronts, and these can be measured in many ways. But I cannot think of anything which will hurt the average person more and is already doing so, than water. Lastly, a country is as good as its polity and vice versa.

I am deliberately calling it the Human Development "Product", because these measures are a product of innumerable important factors — education, health, livelihoods, societal norms, political climate, environmental conditions, and more. Improvement in HDP will reflect and happen only with improvement on all these factors.

I am an amateur in these matters. Others could perhaps propose better parameters. What I am arguing for is a measure of true human progress, which if left behind will negate all the progress we make in our GDP and as an economic power of the future.

On this eve of the 75th anniversary of our Independence can we commit to ourselves that the HDP growth rate will be as much or higher than the GDP growth rate?

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We, the people, miss our House

Parliament helped country weather turmoil of Partition. In times of uncertainty wrought by pandemic, its capaciousness is needed but absent



MENAKA GURUSWAMY

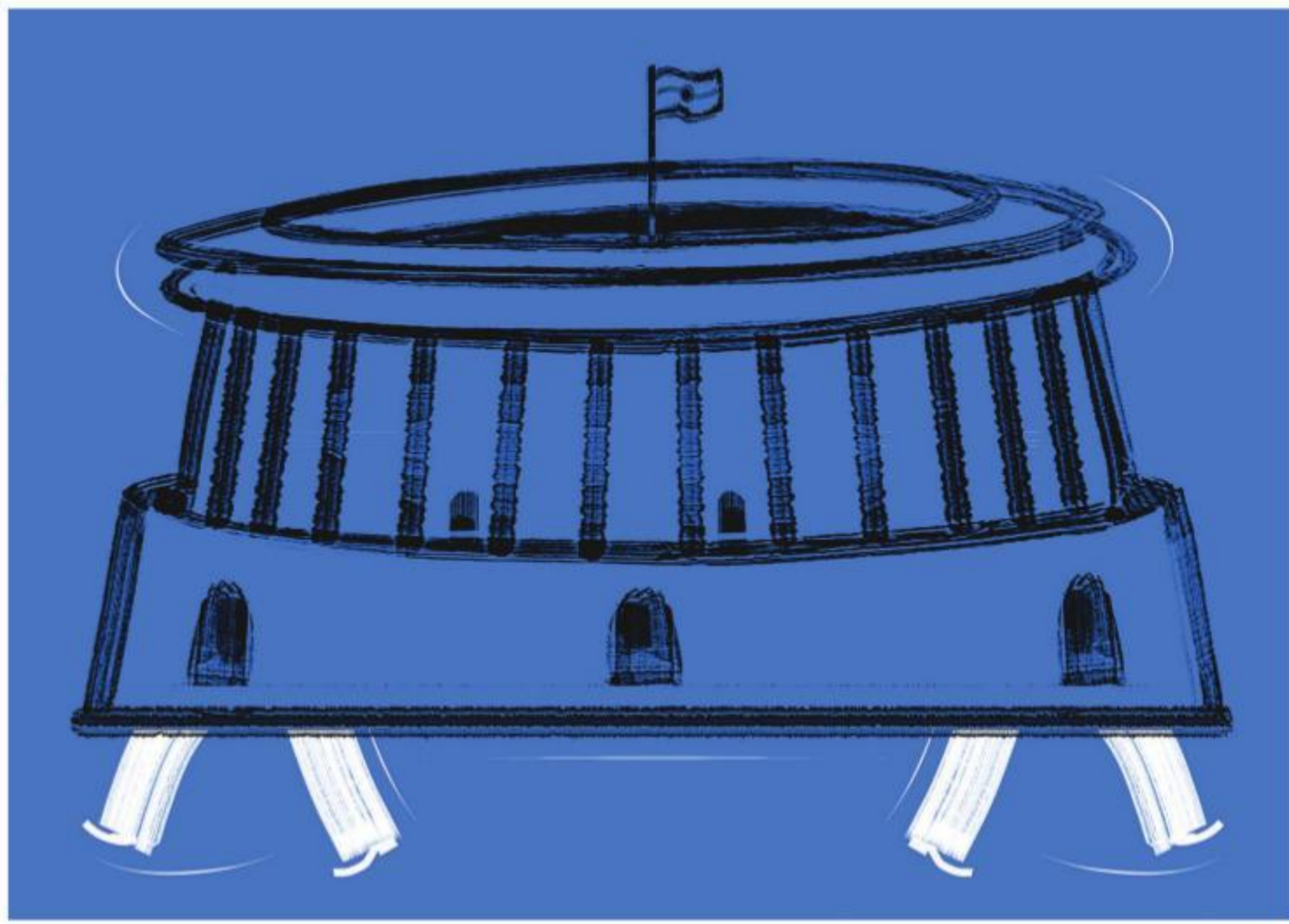
THIS 75TH YEAR of India's Independence feels like what its first year of freedom may have been like. How can 2021 remind this writer of how historians described 1947? Quite simply, this time of the pandemic is the single largest existential threat experienced by us as a nation just like that time of Partition when our constitutional republic was founded. The pandemic era defined by large-scale loss, lack of adequate state infrastructure and deep economic uncertainty — on the face of it — is reminiscent of the Partition years. Yet, there was one dramatic institutional difference that arguably enabled us to weather the existential threat that Partition was as a precursor to Independence — it was the functioning of Parliament or the legislature. However, in the pandemic-era 2020 onwards, Parliament, or the people's voice and will, is as chaotic within as are the streets outside it.

On August 14, 1947, at the midnight hour, Jawaharlal Nehru addressing India's dual-purpose legislature that was both Parliament and constituent assembly rolled into one, heralded our freedom by observing: "As the world sleeps India awakes to its freedom." That very same institution in its contemporary form, the People's House or the Lok Sabha, was adjourned sine die earlier this week.

It has been inexplicably rare for Parliament to have been convened in the pandemic era that spans March 2020 to the present. In 2020, Parliament sat in session for 33 days. According to PRS Legislative Research (PRS), in the 2021 Monsoon Session, the Lok Sabha was scheduled to work for six hours per day for 19 days. Instead, it sat for 21 hours in total or 21 per cent of what was conceived. Contrast this with Brazil's Parliament, that using an application called Infoleg, functioned at higher rates than in pre-pandemic times, with extraordinarily high voting rates. A contrasting approach was the United States Congress that met physically for 113 days in 2020. In the year before, they met for 130 days.

But it's not just the pandemic that has caused this abysmally low functioning. In the past 10 years, the Rajya Sabha has functioned for less than 25 per cent of its scheduled time. According to PRS again, none of the 15 bills introduced in this Monsoon Session 2021 has been referred to a Parliamentary Committee. In this current Lok Sabha commencing 2019, only 12 per cent of the bills introduced have been referred to committee. By contrast, the 16th Lok Sabha (2014-2019) had 27 per cent and the 15th Lok Sabha (2009-2014) had 71 per cent of bills referred to standing committees, where they could be discussed, debated amid testimony by experts. More significantly, fewer and fewer drafts of key legislation are being debated across the political aisle before becoming law.

Even more astonishing, in this Lok Sabha, nine minutes were spent discussing and passing the supplementary budget that included a Rs 15,750 crore Covid-19 Emergency Response and Health System



CR Sasikumar

Preparedness Package. This is the functioning of the legislature — increasingly convened less and debates are few. Worse, more law is being made bypassing the body itself. I will leave it to the press and politicians to ascertain who is to blame for the steady decline of Parliament, culminating in this the 75th year of our freedom. As a lawyer and student of our Constitution, the contrast of today's legislature with our founding one that gave us our Constitution could not be starker.

Indian Independence from the British was always meant to be a precursor to the real freedom that would follow, the adoption of a Constitution that would provide for equality, non-discrimination and fundamental freedoms. The drafting of India's Constitution started in December 1946, when the Constituent Assembly first met, seven months before Independence in August 1947.

The Constitution was drafted between 1946 to 1949 and adopted on January 26, 1950. What makes these years of our constitutional founding so dramatic, was that the backdrop to our founding was as torturous as this pandemic era. Partition was unfolding, millions would be displaced, killed or disappeared as they crossed borders between the two nation-states. Yet, as the heart of Delhi was slowly filling up with refugees, India's dual function legislature functioned as Parliament by morning and Constituent Assembly in the afternoon. What set it apart from the drafting project of any other assembly at that time, was its diligent attendance, committee for each theme and vigorous debate. Imagine writing a thoughtful Constitution as the world around you was being unmade and made afresh, as refugees flowed into Purana Qila that was only a short distance from Parliament. The violence, displacement, the smell of blood, smoke and fear was present all over north India and most certainly in Delhi.

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The first Constituent Assembly was meant to comprise 296 members, but its initial session had only 210 members in attendance. The assembly faced a boycott by the rest of the members. In response to the boycott and to entice these members back, the chairman of the Drafting Committee Bhim Rao Ambedkar said: "This is too big a question to be treated as a matter of legal rights. It is not a legal question at all. We should leave aside all legal considerations and make some attempt whereby those who are not prepared to come, will come. Let us make it possible for them to come, that is my appeal."

This approach of rapprochement and engagement with those who had contrasting opinions and interests was present at large. The Constituent Assembly caucus of the founding Congress Party included many members from outside the party. This motley crew of members from across the political-ideological spectrum were able to arrive at decisions as Upendra Baxi notes, "using a mixture of techniques of problem-solving, persuasion, bargaining and politicking". This was in tandem with the hard technical work done by experts in various thematic committees and the political charisma being deployed by popular leaders to give credibility to the exercise.

Within even comparative constitutional scholarship, the functioning of this Partition era Constituent Assembly is held up as a model of nation building in tandem with writing a rare enduring Constitution for a large and diverse nation-state. As I look at our Parliament today, I am compelled to ask our political class — would you have been able to draft this nature of a Constitution that continues to be our freedom even today? Are we a democracy if our Parliament does not function?

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Reading our freedom struggle again

Our understanding of India's anti-colonial movement must go beyond some institutionalised ideas, a handful of icons



RAKESH SINHA

THE 75TH YEAR of India's independence is, of course, a moment of celebration but it should not pass on with mere sloganeering, stereotyped publications, festive programmes and the exaggerated glorification of the icons and incidents from the freedom struggle. This would be a missed opportunity to reread our own history. The occasion should be used to not only critically understand the anti-imperialist struggle, but also to know the many socio-cultural and political processes which expanded its social base. The magnitude of the history of India's freedom movement is bigger than we know. Rigorous and consistent efforts to unravel and interpret historical events and the forces behind them strengthen their power to deliver a message to posterity. Hegemonic writings deplete the capacity to ferret out critical ideas and make icons out of a few actors. Similarly, the institutionalisation of ideas, the only source of success in achieving India's freedom, makes the present a prisoner of the past while obstructing the progressive evolution of thought processes. The Indian freedom movement was a battle of ideas that gave it a sense of modernity and also the quest for its own civilisational strength, which was demonstrated by its resilience against the efforts of the European mind to culturally subjugate the people.

Understanding the freedom struggle and colonial forces constitutes the basic paradigm for post-colonial India. Everywhere, colonialism masked itself as social transformation. This gave it the space for socialisation with the local elites and progressives. Moreover, in politics, it used the negotiation table for a meeting between unequal forces. It sought to end the abhorrent leadership of the exploited masses and exhibited pseudo-sympathy for the colony. This was a strategy to delegitimise those who considered colonialism a demon to be defeated by force. There are commonalities between the "marginalised" and "discredited" ideas and forces battling against the British regime in India and the anti-imperialist ideas and leadership of the African mainstream. For instance, forces like the Forward Bloc and the Indian National Army (INA), both formed by Subhas Chandra Bose, and the RSS, along with the revolutionaries, despite their differences in socio-economic perspectives, campaigned and acted to dethrone the British regime and made violence moral. At the same time, there was counter indoctrination of the masses against their ideology and programmes by the mainstream leadership. Nevertheless, they survived and played their role as the nationalist grassroots. This is obvious from certain historical instances.

Despite the unbounded reverence for Mahatma Gandhi, the masses rejected his silence on the hanging of Bhagat Singh. Another instance is no less important. In the Tripuri Congress session in 1939, Bose was re-elected as the president of the INC. His sub-

sequent resignation is important for understanding the evolution of internal democracy of social and political organisations.

It is aptly said that history does not explain, it has to be explained. Both the Gandhian and revolutionary movements had their own understanding of colonialism as well as post-colonial India. Anti-imperialist thinker Frantz Fanon's argument that colonialism was not a thinking machine but the state of brute violence does not need much rigour to be proved. Bajji Rout of Odisha, merely 12 years old, was killed by British bullets for his anti-colonial demonstration. Tileswari Barua of the same age met a similar fate in Assam. Seven teenagers who hoisted the tricolour at the Patna Secretariat were killed by the British police on the orders of district magistrate W G Archer on August 11, 1942. There are innumerable painful and unforgettable instances that are ignored or are footnotes in history books.

Freedom does not put an end to the colonial impact on a post-colonial society. Although Gandhi was a daring anti-colonialist who wanted indigenous ideas to supplant the colonial ones, the influential leaders of the freedom movement remained the social partners of colonialism. Gandhism was frequently and fervently quoted, but rarely practised.

This was reflected in independent India. We became lazy decolonisers and consumers of European ideas. On August 19, 1959, C Ramachandran, a veteran parliamentarian, and on November 3, 1965, M P Bhargava, asked India's sovereign government why the statues of Queen Victoria, King Edward and King George remained on Indian soil. On September 5, 1969, Dattopant Thengadi asked the government in the Rajya Sabha why the symbols of the British crown were still there on the pillars of North Block and South Block. It showed a disregard for the emotions and pains of innocent Indians who had sacrificed their lives for the motherland. Another instance is more glaring. On November 22, 1966, Atal Bihari Vajpayee expressed anguish over the imprisonment of Mohan Ranade, who fought against Portuguese colonial rule in India, and was awarded 25 years imprisonment after being arrested. He asked why the government at the time of Goa's liberation sent back 3,500 Portuguese prisoners without demanding Ranade's repatriation.

The Gandhian movement, based on non-violence, expanded with the help of violent resistance and the indoctrination of the masses by the nationalist grassroots. Teachers and religious leaders worked to invigorate Indians' sense of self and gave enormous strength to the freedom movement. There are umpteen stories. Dadoba Pandurang's *A Hindu Gentleman's Reflections Respecting the Works of Swedenborg* (1878) or Col U N Mukherjee's *Hinduism and the Coming Census* (1910) and *prabhat pheris, melas*, plays and religious festivals acted as patriotic catalysts to expand anti-imperialism. The INC failed to go beyond politics. Tilak's Ganesh and Shivaji festivals or Ramnarayan Basu's Hindu Mela were discredited by Marxist historians for creating a divisive discourse in the nationalist movements. This is an example of the fractured understanding of anti-colonialism.

The writer is a BJP Rajya Sabha member



SUHASH PALSHIKAR

Dreams need dreaming & thinking

India needs a re-imagined politics, a new road that leads it back to a lost self

CAN A SOCIETY be made to give up its dreams and commitments? Seventy-five years is not a very long time in the journey of a society. It is neither long enough to fulfill dreams, nor to render those dreams irrelevant. So, if amnesia is effected, where does a society search for the foundation of its self-hood after giving up on both the historical and the modern beacons that guided it? India at 75 seems poised not merely to give up on its commitments made at Independence; it also seems willing to renounce its own historical moral riches and instead, to uphold an un-Indian approach to self-hood by giving up its lived inclusiveness.

Such drastic departures are identified through moments of rupture, but they are often shaped slowly. Analyses of India's departure from the "tryst with destiny" will have to strike a balance between the deep cut caused by the regime change in 2014 and the invisible injuries from routine coups preceding that. Today, with the search for the "other" to demonise, we are on the verge of losing our own self. This predicament becomes all the more serious in its non-recognition.

India lost sight of its dreams through a combination of two routes. One is the false sense of "achievement", and the other is being uneasy with itself. Anti-colonial struggle and the Constitution gave us the dreams, not their fulfilment. But we mistook the dreams for the fulfilment. This happened not just in the field of politics but also in the realm of

ideas. Dreams require continuous dreaming, expanding the habit of thinking; but we converted dreams into convenient dead-ends in the art of thinking. We began thinking that democracy, welfare, nationalism, inclusion, were already in our grasp just by virtue of our being legatees of the dreams.

Side by side with this complacency, India lived through the politics of being uneasy with itself. If culturally we were uneasy with our innate plurality, socially, we were unwilling to accept that caste was a part that needed surgical removal. In the material sphere, we never got scandalised by squalor. While electoral politics allowed a sense of achievement despite many maladies, we remained deeply uneasy with democracy with respect to both political equality and individuality. The inevitable outcome was a state that neither cared for the dreams nor worked for their realisation. The single most deadly weapon India's social and political practices produced, and which has strengthened the contemporary rupture, is the Indian state. No wonder, affection for the nation is being replaced by fear of the state. This means that the spirit of India could be swiftly crushed through an electoral coup but an electoral upset might not be sufficient for its rejuvenation.

At the dawn of the 75th anniversary of freedom, these complications have brought India to the crossroads where the choice and trajectory will be extremely complicated. There is the highway of denial and erasure.

This road beckons us to hit the "delete" button on our dreams; invites us to redefine our selfhood in ways that are incongruent not just with the moral core of our anti-colonial past but also ill at ease with our tradition and history. It assures an image of ourselves seen through a cracked mirror. It has donned the costume of denial — it denies anything that we do not want to see. Its single-minded objective is to erase the dreams we saw 75 years ago and almost everything associated with those dreams.

But merely going back to those dreams is not a road that is available or advisable. The challenge is to pave a new road even as we keep using the by-lanes and recesses that we come across. This task involves resolute rejection at the intellectual level of the claims of the current regime, courage to simultaneously critique and question the past, ambition to dream but also caution to remember that politics is often about the less-than-ideal. Countering the regime that presides over the erasure of dreams is an urgent task but equally urgent is the task of searching within, for fresh dreams. We are at a deceptive crossroads where one road is visible, others invisible.

India's journey over the next quarter of a century and beyond depends on whether three kinds of politics emerge, converse and converge. The first is the politics of normal opposition. There will surely be many parties competing for formal power, but the question is whether they will qualify as the "opposi-

tion". Will they go beyond expanding their social base, increasing their vote shares, and aggressively defend democratic politics? At present, they are not even doing the former.

The second, even more daunting politics is the politics of civil society where little blocs of resistance and alternatives are continuously built, where interpersonal and intergroup relations are marked by democratic norm. If parties need to ensure democracy's form, the social universe — the universe of our lived reality — has to keep alive the democratic norm. The third politics is of ideas. Though not independent of the previous two, conceptually this third arena needs to be imagined separately. In the erasure of democracy as well as of dreams, the bankruptcy of this politics has contributed a great deal. It has contributed, also, in our embracing the current road. An atonement is overdue.

What can this threefold combination offer? It can ensure a narrow field of possibilities in the backdrop of the current atmosphere of the finality of fate; it can postpone democracy becoming debris. It can save us from forced amnesia about the collective dreams of 1947. Above all, it can save us from pseudo-nationalism which is replacing our national self-hood. But is there even a whiff of these politics with us?

The writer, based at Pune, taught political science and is currently chief editor of Studies in Indian Politics

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

DON'T COERCE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Spreading the net' (IE, Aug 13). The most effective method to tackle vaccine hesitancy is transparency. Over 26,000 adverse effects and 488 deaths following Covid vaccination were reported in India between mid-January and early June. The Union Health Ministry asserts that these cases may or may not be directly linked to the vaccine. Only one death has been confirmed to be directly linked to the Covid vaccine by the Centre so far. An increased transparency about the AEFI cases would go a long way in regaining the public trust. But the use of heavy-handed tactics is counterproductive and unconstitutional.

Varun Das, via email

CENTRAL ARROGANCE

This refers to the editorial, 'Parliament lament' (IE, August 13). The arrogance displayed in not engaging with the Opposition has harmed the government to levels it doesn't understand. Any system of governance works by the rule of legitimising its claim; in a democracy, it is its institutions — the SC, elections, opposition to name a few. The government should be amenable instead of acrimonious, even if out of self-interest.

Udit Sarkar, Kolkata

PARLIAMENT SHAMED

THIS REFERS TO the report, 'Govt de-

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railed House: Opp raises pitch, draws battelines outside' (IE, August 13). Looking at how it is functioning in recent times, one needs to reconsider the whole concept of Parliament. What is Parliament? Is it a meeting place for anti-social elements, for criminals, for black marketeers? Is it a free for all where people can settle scores physically? Or a street where all sorts of foul language is used? One definition of parliament says, it is a formal conference for the discussion of public affairs. Yes, public affairs should be the centre of all activity in Parliament. But sadly, what we are seeing today is anything but a Parliament. Our representatives need to ask themselves, are they worthy of their place in Parliament?

Melville X D'Souza, Mumbai