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India 62: Soaring high?

A few eminent Indians tell us what they think are some of the significant achievements since Independence.

Photo: G.R.N. Somashekar



Shashi Deshpande,
novelist



Our country has seen unnecessary wars, internal rifts, and, recently, hideous acts of terrorism. At the same time, corruption, fundamentalism and poverty have continued to mushroom. To offset this dark picture, there has been development in many fields. But for me our greatest achievement, and one that is specific to India, is that democracy has finally taken root in the country.

Voter's voice

Sixty-two years ago, when India began her new life as a democracy, there was much pessimism about the experiment of universal franchise in a country of illiterates. The pessimism seemed justified because most voters could be bought, pressurised or manipulated; the rest were indifferent. We heard the voter's voice for the first time in the elections after the Emergency. Since then a few elections have held surprises, at times voting out a seemingly well-entrenched government. And then we have, very hesitantly, praised the ordinary voter's wisdom, wondering, at the same

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time, whether this was, like the 'spirit of Mumbai' only a myth. I think this was decisively disproved in this year's elections, when the electorate voted with what I thought was a concerted wisdom and decisively rejected sloganeering, fundamentalism, regionalism and the slippery independent candidate. This election also showed that, whether it is the rural voter, the urban slum-dweller, or the middle and upper middle-class - people think it is necessary to go out and vote. Now, perhaps, we can confidently say that democracy has taken root in India. I consider these elections a milestone.

MEDHA PATKAR,

activist



Indian democracy is certainly more than 60 years old, but whether we can call this sovereign nation state a mature one is a question to be posed and reflected about. However, looking back and even looking forward, we see no clear signs of our dream of a 'Rule by the people and for the people' coming true. While we boast of being the largest democracy in the world, can we really claim that our governance or specifically the three pillars: legislative, executive and judiciary of the system are indeed transparent and accountable to the citizenry, the 'common' people with a 'common cause of common good'?

Missing direction

Article 243 incorporated in 1992 is a milestone, still in place. We have walked much beyond, but have missed its direction and dimension. Today, Ambanis and Adanis are thriving on the open space granted to them while the generations-old communities have no space, no primacy. How can they when, in their name, the "power of attorney", is being misused and deals to decisions are made, with no chance even to veto these. Today, this power grab is leading to resource grab. The communities and the sub-communities are devoid of power and resources why, even the faith and confidence in governance. The divide and disadvantage within is being misappropriated by those who rule, who decide, who produce and who profit in their name. This great political tragedy needs to be reversed by challenging the "politics of representation".

Our Planning Commission is not the constitutional body. It is the *Gram Sabha* and the *Basti Sabha*. Our export-import and foreign exchange are not hallmarks of progress. It is the value addition through sustainable technology and processes and equitable distribution within the country. Our global standing should depend not on our submission to the fora like WTO but on our national integrity and strong belief in humanity with human values and rights asserted at every united international forum. Let's turn back to the milestone and march on another path to reach the *manzil*.



RAGHAVENDRA RATHORE,

Fashion Designer

I believe our biggest achievement as a nation, till this moment is our "very recent" ability to overcome the sense of self-consciousness; in other words, the nation's self-esteem is at its highest peak on the graph. The newly empowered middle class that has facilitated and reinforced changes in the social and political arena, for better or worse, has served both as a voice and a consuming giant, which most western conglomerates simply can't resist.

New paradigm

The fact that we are no longer perceived as a nation that is in manufacturing but as a nation that has evolved into one that thinks for itself and others, is in itself a new paradigm that will give the next generations of Indians the innate ability to be global leaders, influencing society overall. The recent attacks in Australia prove this clearly, they were not directed as much against a race, as they were against the success of a race. With the urban landscape changing to emulate the global world, a bumpy road in the capital will unfortunately be the only reminder that we are in India.

However, like a thorn that protects the rose it might just be the basics like finding a bullock cart in the city or the manual but foolproof tiffin service, that are the simplicities that can save us from the 'sameness' of globalisation,. Words like "Third World" or "developing" may not necessarily suit our nation's anatomy anymore, as change becomes inevitable and growth a staple characteristic, "emerging leader" seems more apt. It is not just our ability to speak what we think, that is being recognised, the world is recognising our presence in the arts, biotech, technology and Steven Spielberg's tie-up with Reliance is a case in point.



PROF. KRISHNA KUMAR,

Director, NCERT

I am not old enough to know how things were in 1947. My mother used to tell me that she expected every child to be at school by 1960! She used to feel amused and puzzled hearing me talk about the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan during the final years of her life. Had she been alive, she would have been glued to the radio to hear the full text of the news on the Right to Education bill getting Parliament's approval. No matter how long it has taken, it is a

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great achievement for a nation in which the educated middle class does not mind using children as domestic servants, and where little girls are taught to regard marriage and motherhood as the ultimate goal of a woman's life. No wonder the struggle to widen the system of education and to reform it has been so tough. The other big change worthy of being called an achievement is in the status and lives of women. When I was growing up, girls and women hardly ever expressed their views, and sometimes I used to wonder whether they had any views at all. More women speak out clearly now, putting forth independent views. Indeed, that is the reason why there is more violence against women. The crude serials and reality shows so popular on television reflect patriarchy's desperate reaction to the pressure that women's emancipation is putting on men. The retaliation cannot last long, provided the struggle to confer dignity on women continues.



YAMINI KRISHNAMURTI,

danseuse

We are a great nation for culture, and the awareness of culture in different parts of society is much stronger now. This is partly because the arts are included in school curriculum and there is more exposure. People like the classical arts and are now trying to imbibe them and get their children to learn too. We find that more girls are learning classical dance, and the number of events at which dance is presented is growing. This growing awareness and interest have spread outside India too, and there is in general a little more commitment to classical dance than before in society.

Today, Indians settled abroad have themselves taken up the task of promoting Indian culture. You can see regional promulgation of the arts. In the 1960s when I performed abroad, Bollywood dancers were sent as part of our group. People told me I would never be a success if I didn't incorporate Bollywood dancing in my repertoire.

On the whole I think we have come to a very good period for the arts. But we cannot predict that as India grows and develops commercially and industrially, we will also produce great artistes. Art is a mystical thing. It depends on the individual artist. Nature brings about a situation where a great artiste may thrive. But with so many people in the field, let's see, maybe something will come.

As told to Anjana Rajan

Bikash Sinha,

nuclear scientist and cosmologist



Sixty two years is not a very long time in the long history of India. However, 62 years is a long time for an independent sovereign, called India, with a diversity of enormous proportion, of a scale, unique in the world.

Yes, there is unbelievable corruption; yes, we throw microphones in the parliament; yes, we dissipate our energy in arguing, sometimes without purpose, yes, we curse ourselves, yes, we only think nothing will happen here but yes, suddenly despite everything, everything is happening in this incredible India.

Now is the time to consolidate on what we have achieved: improve our primary education which is still well below standard; improve our university education which has the potential to be one of the best in the world; what we need is an inclusive growth in education. Please remember, our knowledge base remains one of the best despite all what I said - just imagine, if we get our act on education right what India can achieve.

To cite an example, let me turn to science. I have been in the business of science for a very long time. When I came back to India in 1976 after a long stint in England, the salary and the facilities in India were extremely poor compared to the west but the spirit was high with a level of commitment I have never come across in England. Now, oddly enough, the facilities are easily comparable with anywhere in the world, more recently, the salaries have become fantastic but the spirit is waning and often commitment is focused on self than science as a whole.

Finally liberate India, from the archaic rules of bureaucracy, especially the educational sector. Liberate India from the shackles of "don'ts", but allow India to plunge into the world of "do-es". Liberate but do not try to manipulate, do not be devious but be brave and fearless; I am sure in 20 years India will be at the top. I can hear the distant roar already.



Sarah Abubakar,
Kannada novelist

Nehru, Gandhi and Ambedkar were all products of a time when foreign universities were almost solely responsible for shaping the Indian intellect. That, a growing number of bright young people find academic enlightenment in our own country today, is the single most significant achievement of independent India.

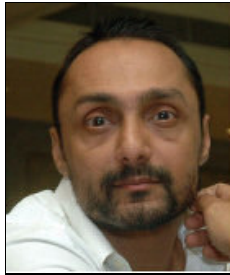
I was speaking to a young boy recently and he said that professional education in India is a valuable 'commodity' in 'job markets' abroad. "More valuable than even some foreign degrees," he said. He also felt that it costs much less to study in India and that it makes more 'financial sense'. The boy's comments reminded me that the class of people who would have

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otherwise studied abroad are choosing to study here. But in the process they are competing with and edging away students who never had a choice but to study in this country. The manner in which he referred to higher education as a 'commodity' made me wonder how many in India can afford to 'buy' it.

To make matters worse several state governments, in the pursuit of petty regional politics, are pushing for a vernacular medium of instruction. After all, which management, medicine, law or engineering textbook is written in Kannada or Tamil? These plans are only going to intellectually exclude those who are already financially excluded from the 'education markets'. Those who want to remain in the race for education will have to own the two most valuable commodities in the Indian marketplace: money and the English language.



Rahul Bose,
actor

The fact that we have a democratic secular constitution is probably our most effective step. We may have failed often in its implementation but definitely the drafting marked the significant step.

The C-DOT network conceptualised by Sam Pitroda during Rajiv Gandhi's tenure was significant. It's the reason for a PCO in every village across the country.

Other significant moments were the National Rural Employment Guarantee schemes (NREGA), the Sarva Siksha Abhyan and the Mid-day meal Scheme. The right to information is probably the best legislation this country has ever had.

The right to food and the right to education are two acts that we can look forward. It is sad that we still have to define these basic rights of a human-being. Article 377 is a landmark this year. In a more general way the stepping in of the judiciary when state governments refused to react, though unprecedented, is extremely welcome.

As told to Archana Subramanian



Makarand Paranjape, Poet and Professor of English, Jawaharlal Nehru University,

First of all, is India only 62? Some portions of us are much, much older,

while others are not even 15 years old. That is why celebrating national birthdays each year may actually trivialise or detract from the more serious issue of who we really are. We should thus be wary of any simplistic grand narrative of our identity as a nation. But the real question in evaluating our achievements even in these 62 years is what yardsticks to apply? If we invoke the idea of Svaraj so resonant during our freedom struggle, then we are still far from having achieved true "self rule". We are not yet a nation of highly evolved, self-regulating citizens for whom the state is an almost unnecessary imposition. In addition, for Mahatma Gandhi a society or a nation had to be judged not by its greatest achievements in business, industry, or technology, but by how its poorest and least privileged members fared. Antodaya, the welfare of the last citizen of India, is still not our priority. For Sri Aurobindo, a society, culture, or civilisation had to be judged by how developed its members were not just materially, but emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. That society or nation was successful whose citizens progressed integrally and found higher and higher levels of freedom and perfection. Today, who thinks of svaraj or self-realisation? And yet, India's accomplishments are considerable. Of these, I consider our new-found prosperity, even if it so uneven and iniquitous, a great achievement. What is equally important is the means to this prosperity, which is primarily knowledge or mindware. India has been both a prosperous country and a knowledge society for nearly 5000 years. But the colonial interlude brought us to unprecedented levels of degradation, poverty, and ignorance. While notions of inferiority and mental colonialism still dog us, there is a gradual re-assertion of the genius of the common people of the land. Our ability to create wealth through the application of skills and knowledge is one of our great leaps forward as both a nation and a civilization. In addition, our democratic polity, combined with our plural, diverse, and largely free society are our greatest assets.



Mani Shankar

Mukherjee (Shankar),

Bengali novelist

How time flies! August 15, 1947 is already a senior citizen! I was only 13, when the news reached our lane in Howrah that we will be "Independent" on August 15. No one in our neighbourhood possessed a radio and none could afford a newspaper. I must confess none of us had any idea of what Independence would mean.

Our community was being guided by gossip from Second World War days. Rumours were then floated that India would be divided: Delhi going to Hitler's Germany, Bombay to Mussolini's Italy and our dear dear Calcutta to Hirohito's Japan.

We heard that, from August 15, the Union Jack would have no meaning. What would be the other benefits of Independence? We clearly had no idea. But we heard on good authority that no more examination; First Division Matriculation Certificate for everybody automatically! More excitement: rice, *dal* and every kind of fish will be free. Even the sweetmeat shop Ghosh & Sons would offer *dahi* and *sandesh* without payment. Free tram and bus rides. Someone exclaimed, no wonder Bapuji had said life is meaningless without Svaraj.

Independence came on the midnight and, believe me, it was our tryst with destiny; travel free on buses and trams. Even the rickshaw-puller gave us a free ride to the cinema hall where the show was also free. We were,

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however, disappointed that Ghosh & Sons offered only 50 per cent discount. For many of us in that by-lane, life soon became very hard. Prices of every commodity started jumping.

Who would today believe that citizens complained bitterly because only two hilsas were available for a rupee? Who would imagine that, one day, my friends in the same by-lane would celebrate the availability of two hilsas for Rs. 1,200? We saw the shadow of famine because only four seers of rice were available for a rupee. Sixty two years later, people are happily buying four kg of Basmati rice for Rs. 240.



VANDANA SHIVA,
environmental activist

In his lecture at the World Conference on Religions in Chicago, Tagore said that India differs from the West because our learning has come from the forest; whereas, in the West, it came from universities built of brick and mortar. Just as in a forest every species has a place, Indian society is based on diversity and pluralism. A forest is living. Our civilisation too centres on the maintenance and enrichment of life on earth and in society, not on accumulation of material goods and exploitation of the earth.

[Aping the West](#)

The most important change in India in the last 65 years, especially in the last 20 years since the so-called economic reforms were put in place, is that we are destroying the ecological foundations of our sustainable civilisation by aping the West in its non-sustainable and inequitable production and consumption patterns. In the process the economic divide in the country has grown.

For a tiny elite, there is the excitement of joining the clone culture of Walmart and MacDonald's. For the tribals, the peasants, the craftspeople, it is the loss of land and livelihood. The more the govt talks of economic growth, the more it excludes large numbers of Indian citizens by appropriating their land for mines, factories and SEZ's. The result of this unjust and violent appropriation of people's resources is a violent response in defence of land. Sixty two years ago we were still colonised. We were recovering from the great Bengal famine. Three major reforms in independent India prevented famine. The first was land reform, which corrected the British-imposed Zamindari system. The second was the establishment of a universal public distribution system. The third was the system of public procurement and minimum support prices to farmers. Together these reversed the hunger and poverty that British policies had left us with.

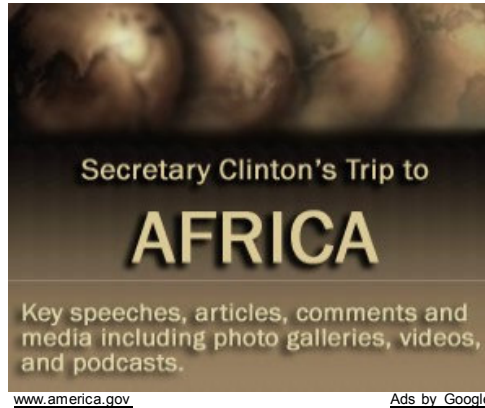
However, economic reforms have reversed the pro-people reversals. Land reform has been undone for a new Zamindari through SEZs. Our food system has been handed over to corporations, and the universal PDS has been dismantled allowing the price to rise and take food beyond the reach of the poor.

If we forget our roots in a civilisation based on biodiversity, hunger and poverty, inequality and violence will grow, threatening our very future.

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