

STILETTOS

70 years of progress



MINIYA CHATTERJI
LILARAMANI

Whatever the significance of progress may hold for different people, the realisation of progress has unvaryingly depended upon the expansion of the ability of each to make, procure, and implement their choice



At the time of India's Independence from the British, in Europe — where many of India's nationalist leaders had lived and studied — modernity essentially meant that the pre-modern needed to be disinherited. The Europeans had maintained a missionary zeal towards social change, ever since their 15th and 16th century explorers had brought back with them reports of newly discovered 'backward' societies in the rest of the world that badly needed to be 'civilised'. There was an alleged superiority of the Western cultures over the non-Western ones, which was explained by the latter being traditional forms of society and thus lacking in modernity. Tradition and modernity were perceived as polar opposites on the spectrum of human evolution.

In India — contrary to these trends in Europe — the march for social progress and evolution chose to have a very distinct character. This is because there was just so much to fix when we gained our political freedom.

At that time, we were not just poor, we were infected with copious amounts of social illnesses such as female infanticide, child marriage, dowry, sati, and burdened with a terribly hierarchical society divided by caste. Our wonderful diverse communities had cracked up along religious lines, turning us into anti-secular murderers. And our self-confidence had been battered by the British who ruled for two centuries with an air of bogus racial supremacy.

And so, instead of viewing progress in terms of successive, homogenous, graded stages of development — like they did in the West — in India, we made a deliberate choice to make social progress a priority in a way that our various diverse communities would retain

their own distinct character as well. The Preamble of the Indian Constitution, therefore, clearly laid this out as its objective. It read, "To secure to all its citizens social, economic and political justice; liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; equality of status and opportunity, and to promote among them fraternity so as to secure the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of the nation."

But how much have we achieved of that objective? Today almost four out of 10 Indians are illiterate, half are desperately poor, more than 133.5 million families earn less than \$0.51 a day, 77 million people do not have access to safe drinking water, and our girls are unsafe, thanks amongst other factors to the skewed sex ratio of 940 females per 1,000 males, resulting in 45 million women missing in our country as a result of female infanticide. This is not to say that there has been no progress since Independence. But if we look at the beneficiaries of those who have progressed, we notice that the most downtrodden sections of our population — low castes, minority religions, Dalits, and tribals — have gained the least from the nation's progress.

Nowhere else on earth is a human being considered so repugnant that he is considered untouchable. And no other society has a hierarchy so adamant as the Indian caste system either. Given at birth as a publicly visible marker of one's status in society, a low caste name is carried around as a burden. It doesn't go no matter what one does — in India you can change your religion but not your caste. He has no choice but to remain a low caste all his life.

Choice is dependent on identity, and therefore the issue of choice in society is important. However, the issue of choice in the idea of social 'progress'



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is highly problematic. It is so because it raises the moral question of who determines progress — the agent of social change or the subject of social change? Whose choice must it be that progress is indeed needed, and about the direction that it must be in? Let us say, if the choice for progress is made by the agent of change — the Government, private sector, not-for-profit agencies, religious organisations and so on — then does that not simultaneously restrict the subject's — the individual, specific community — freedom of choice? Moreover, is progress not the ability to make a well-informed choice?

Indeed, the meaning of progress is unique and different for each. In India, for some it can mean improving financial conditions, while for others it could mean just leading a more dignified life. Yet whatever the significance of progress may hold for different people, the realisation of progress has unvaryingly depended upon the expansion of the ability of each to make, procure, and implement their choice.

It is only education that offers us the chance to understand the various choices we have before us. It gives us the ability to make and implement an informed choice that ultimately plays an important role in shaping who we want to be and to live the life we seek.

Choice, even when instinctual, is a rational decision that determines change. And when a free and informed choice can be made uninfluenced by staunch tradition, forced modernity, intimidating surroundings, or any other encumbrances, that decision would then truly determine the path of our progress.

The writer is Chief Sustainability Officer for the group of companies, Jindal Steel and Power Ltd. She is a Global Leadership Alumna of the World Economic Forum. miniya.chatterji@jindalsteel.com