

## India at 70

Focus should be on providing dignity to Indians

**A** day before the 70th anniversary of Indian independence, it is tempting to look at how far this country has come since the British left. Whether it is literacy — only 16 per cent of Indians were literate in 1947 — or life expectancy — which was a mere 32 in 1947 — or simply its weight in the world, India has made much progress and can look forward to more. It is customary at such times to have a slight air of self-congratulation, and to point out that India is on the cusp of being a great power. Yet perhaps Indians should not rush to congratulate themselves on becoming a great power just yet; what should be examined is how much progress the country has made towards looking after its citizens, and how much work still needs to be done in that regard.

Literacy may be well over 70 per cent now, but there are significant gaps in schooling performance that need to be filled. Life expectancy may be more than twice what it was in 1947, but health care remains abysmal. As the tragedy in Gorakhpur demonstrated, with such stark inhumanity, there is little that Indians can expect from their health system. Public health care is mired in corruption, inefficiency, and chronic incapacity; private health care is expensive and often exploitative. In the Gorakhpur case, not only did a local hospital show a callous disregard for dozens of children in an entirely predictable breakout of an endemic disease; but the government reaction was to blame the private supplier of oxygen. Nor is the underlying problem — the recurrent nature of Japanese encephalitis in north-east Uttar Pradesh — cause for great hope. As UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, who is a five-time member of Parliament from the region, has pointed out, children have been dying of this since 1978; it is a poor reflection indeed on efforts to make India a decent place to live in that, after all these years, these deaths continue to haunt the city and environs of Gorakhpur.

It is, of course, true that the country has progressed on several fronts. Communities long oppressed by harsh social practices have been given a voice, thanks to the principles of liberal democracy. Technology has opened up new vistas to young people in areas that have been cut off from the world for most of history. And some imperfect structures of social or public support have indeed been set up, such as the public distribution system, public procurement, the rural employment guarantee act, and so on. But these do not, when summed up, perform well enough; nor, even if they did, would they provide a genuine path to dignity for India's poor. That can come only from a dynamic economy and a more open society. Instead, therefore, of focusing on this 70th Independence Day on India's place in the world, it might be wise to look at what needs to be done to remedy these continuing defects. Before becoming a superpower, India should focus more on providing dignity to its citizens.