

The Needle's Eye



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"August is the month of revolution," Prime Minister Narendra Modi said in his monthly radio talk a few days ago. Wednesday was the 75th anniversary of the launch of the Quit India movement against British colonial rule, and Modi talked about the five-year journey from *sankalp* (intention) to *siddhi* (achievement) to independence in August 1947.

Modi, India's first prime minister to be born in independent India, is very good at observing anniversaries. We have a well-stocked pantheon of heroes and heroines to commemorate, more numerous than the red-letter festival days on our calendars, and Modi has invoked many of them. "We have to make 2017 a year of resolve," he said in his Mann ki Baat talk, calling for a movement to rid a New India of dirt, poverty, corruption, terrorism, casteism, communalism, and religious intolerance over the next five years to the next milestone: the 75th anniversary of independence in 2022.

Why are we making so much of India at 70 going on 75? Is it more significant than India at 60, or India at 50, or looking ahead at India at 100? This is a fair question, and I remembered

that Tuesday was the 76th birth anniversary of CK Prahalad, the management guru who first spelled out the India@75 vision in a New York speech in 2007. "As we celebrate India@60, let us remember that all our accomplishments are in the past. Leadership, however, is about the future and it is about change. Leadership is about hope," Prahalad said.

He said India would need economic strength and technological vitality. We required at least 200 million college graduates, 500 million certified and skilled technicians, and universal education. Prahalad, who died in 2010, listed several audacious goals for 2022. Among them were: at least ten Indian companies in the Fortune 100 list (the last time I checked we had only seven in the Fortune 500 list, with Indian Oil at 161); and that India must account for at least 10% of global trade (government figures show India accounted for 2% in 2015).

Among other big goals was the wish that India should become a world leader in innovation and new technology. This would be great, but do we realistically think we are going to be home to the next Google or Facebook or WhatsApp within the next five years? Our start-ups seem to be content with copying or adapting existing models. It is well-nigh impossible to carry out a national audit of the research our universities and institutions produce; my guess is that a considerable proportion will turn out to be unoriginal or plagiarised. The

University Grants Commission urged universities last year to use anti-plagiarism software to catch fraudulent scholars, but you don't hear any naming and shaming.

Four days before he retired, Vice President Hamid Ansari told law graduates in Bangalore that pluralism and secularism were essential for India's democracy. Religious minorities constitute 19.4% of the population, Ansari noted. In his thought-provoking speech, peppered with citations, Ansari argued strongly for tolerance, compassion, and inclusiveness. The alternative was unpalatable, he added: "There is evidence to suggest that we are a polity at war with itself in which the process of emotional integration has faltered and is in dire need of reinvigoration. On one plane is the question of our

FINAL LESSON

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commitment to Rule of Law that seems to be under serious threat arising out of the noticeable decline in the efficacy of the institutions of the



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State, lapses into arbitrary decision-making and even 'ochlocracy' or mob rule, and the resultant public disillusionment". If our prime minister be-

UPHOLDING VALUES

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lieves we have five more years to erase communalism, casteism and religious intolerance and become the world's benchmark on how to cope with diversity, do you have high hopes we will succeed?

Ansari, who more than Pranab Mukherjee was an occasional voice of conscience, will be missed. We can look forward now to some hagiography: Modi released a book of Venkaiah Naidu's speeches and articles just as the new vice president was elected. Two months ago Naidu, a relentless cheerleader for the prime minister, spoke about MODI, the Making of Developed India. Last October he released a book on Modi's 'Midas touch' in foreign policy.

Couched in careful language, Ansari's farewell speech was an indictment of our political class. It is possible to be depressed by the depths to which this class can descend in its pursuit of power – whether it is a Nitish Kumar, who has shredded the last vestige of political morality the opposition could pretend to believe

in, or it is the sordid shenanigans that ended in the early hours of the Quit India anniversary with Ahmed Patel's re-election to a fifth term as a Congress member of the Rajya Sabha from Gujarat.

And yet, both Modi and Congress president Sonia Gandhi stood up in the Lok Sabha later that day to speak about the freedom movement and the ideals that fired men and women three-quarters of a century ago. Modi stuck to the script from his Mann ki Baat talk and ended with a series of pledges he said every citizen should take, which were emblazoned in full-page newspaper advertisements that morning. Sonia Gandhi dwelt at some length on the sufferings of Congress leaders from Jawaharlal Nehru on during the agitation. She added that the 'powers of darkness' that were out to destroy secularism and freedom of speech must be defeated. This was two days after Jairam Ramesh said in an interview that the Congress party

HARDLY A DEMOCRACY

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faced an existential crisis ("The sultanate has gone but we behave as if we were sultans still") and must re-invent itself. Many of us have been saying this for three years.

Forget the nitpicks: next week, we will be celebrating 70 years of democracy. This is no mean feat, although Western Europe, which rose from the ruins of war a couple of years before the Union Jack was taken off our flagpoles, has also had enduring democracies, however flawed they may sometimes appear. Our neighbours in South Asia have fared much worse; no prime minister in Pakistan has lasted a full term, and coups, monarchies, uprisings and civil wars have bucked and heaved around our borders.

These seven decades have been marked, elsewhere in the world and at least once in India, by an overall distaste for totalitarianism, although North Korea has survived as an exemplar and now looms monstrously on the horizon with its nuclear arsenal.

Across the world, we have fared less well against authoritarianism, which the dictionary defines as "the enforcement or advocacy of strict obedience to authority at the expense of personal freedom". We will forget this at our own peril. In his 2007 speech, Prof. Prahalad put this in stark terms: "Just economic strength and technological maturity is not enough. We know that the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany had economic and technological muscle. They failed. Morality is an integral part of leadership."