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Not a first division but a high second: The hits and misses in our 75-year journey

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India has made it global and become the only Asian country that can check China in the 21st century. But it must not lose its moral high ground.

India's 75 years of Independence are replete with major achievements but failures too. Compared with several other developing countries, India falls short of a first division on most counts but merits a high second division.

I am proud that a country as diverse as India, with 22 national languages and multiple regions, religions and ethnicities has remained united and not fragmented like the USSR, Yugoslavia, Ethiopia and Pakistan. Many expected it to split, including Winston Churchill. He sneered that India was a mere geographical entity, no more a country than the equator. Today Scottish nationalism means that the UK is more likely to split than India.

I am ashamed that India's once comforting social harmony has been replaced by communalism and hate speech. President George W Bush once congratulated India for being a country where the Christian president of the ruling party (Sonia Gandhi) asked a Muslim President (Abdul Kalam) to appoint a Sikh Prime Minister (Manmohan Singh) despite being 80% Hindu. Will we ever be congratulated for that again?

I am proud that after a slow start India has risen from being the biggest beggar for foreign aid to becoming the third largest economy in the world. It is currently the fastest growing major economy, and a world hub for computer software, small autos, and generic drugs. Poverty has plummeted, and by one estimate (by Bhalla and Virmani) is almost zero. India has incubated over 100 unicorns, startups valued at over a billion dollars.

I am ashamed our education is in a shambles. Most students in Class 5 cannot read Class 2 texts. In the international PISA school competition, India came 72nd of 73 countries. A few fabled Indian Institutes of Technology cannot compensate for hundreds of second-rate colleges producing unemployable graduates for whom there are no jobs. Recently 25 million people applied for 90,000 Railway jobs, highlighting the depth of the job crisis.

I am proud that India is a democracy, unusual for a developing country. Foreigners have asked me how India prevented any Army takeover. I had no answer: the very thought is alien to our

traditions. Few Indians realise how unusual this is for a developing country. Power here lies with voters, not generals.

I am ashamed of the deterioration of Indian democracy. In the Democracy Index of the Economist Intelligence Unit, India's rank has fallen from 27th in 2014 to 46th in 2021. Sweden's Varieties of Democracy Institute ranks India 101st in electoral democracy, and categorises India not as a liberal democracy but an "electoral autocracy". The Cato Institute's Human Freedom Index has downgraded India from 75th in 2015 to 111th in 2020. Freedom House now categorises India as "partly free," not "free" any more. India ranks 150th in the World Press Freedom index.

I am proud that India has developed independent institutions that check unbridled government power, unlike many other developing countries.

But I am ashamed of the rising weaponisation of draconian laws that facilitate arrests without bail, penalising dissent. The courts now give the executive much greater latitude than before. The Supreme Court utters homilies on human rights but hasn't been as quick to act. The conviction rate under these laws is pathetic, showing they are used to harass and intimidate rather than catch terrorists. Over 47 million cases are pending in courts, and two-thirds of those in jail await trial, a sad commentary on the quality of justice.

I am proud that India is the only country with a large Muslim population but negligible radical Islamists. This is praised abroad but ignored in India. A New York Times op-ed said the Shaheen Bagh agitation in 2021 was a great example for Muslims globally since it swore by secular Constitutional values and universal rights, not Islamic principles.

I am ashamed that anti-Muslim elements in India have sought to distort the Shaheen Bagh celebration of Constitutional values into some sort of terrorist plot.

I am proud of India's many technological feats. It innovated its own Covid vaccine and enabled billions of vaccinations here and abroad. It developed nuclear capability both in weapons and electricity, and launched Agni-V, an intercontinental missile with a range of 8,000 km. India has sent a satellite to orbit Mars at one-seventh the cost of a similar US launch.

I am ashamed that India has become one of the most polluted countries in the world, with 63 of the world's 100 most polluted cities. Aquifers are being destroyed by free electricity to farmers that encourages reckless pumping. North-western farmers insist on burning rice stubble that has made Delhi the fourth most polluted city in the world, yet the farmers do not care a hang and government lacks the will to stop them.

I am proud that while education overall is deplorable, India has nevertheless developed a skilled veneer that attracts global attention. None else save China can produce half a million talented engineers a year. Hence 1,400 multinationals have set up Global Capability Centres in India employing 1.3 million people with a revenue of \$36 billion. They initially used India for low-end back-office work, but have risen up the skill ladder to software, design, and R&D. Over 42% of GCC employees are in engineering R&D. Accenture, the world's top consulting company,

says 300,000 of its 700,000 employees are in India. Many Indian employees from GCCs have left to launch their own start-ups and made unicorns.

I am ashamed that women's labour force participation in India has fallen from 34% to just 26%. Even Saudi Arabia has now overtaken India with its ratio increasing from 20% a few years ago to 33%. Ominously, Indian female participation is lowest in urban areas, where future generations will mostly live. Many countries have a female labour force participation rate of 60%, almost as high as for men, making a major contribution to both the status of women and economic prosperity. India has fared terribly on both counts.

I am proud that after long travails Indian state capacity has major achievements to its credit. Once Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi said that 85% of money intended for the poor leaked out. Government projects were plagued by corruption, delay, and non-fulfilment. Today Indian state capacity is far better. The world has lauded India for producing domestic vaccines and inoculating a billion people, and for the free feeding programme during the Covid months that not only checked mass misery but reduced poverty, according to one estimate. Aadhaar has helped the opening of bank accounts for almost the entire population, a rare feat.

India's telecom services reach almost all villages at the lowest cost in the world. India's UPI platform has enabled the digitisation of payments on a scale rare in developing countries.

On this 75th anniversary, I am happy India has made it global and become the only Asian country that can check China in the 21st century. But I regret its loss of the moral high ground. What profiteth a man if he gains the world but loses his soul? We need to regain that by India's 100th anniversary.

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