



## 75 Years Of Independence: Where We Are Now

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Every year, 15 August is commemorated as the day India got liberated from colonial shackle ending an almost 200-year British rule. India's Independence Day is momentous as it stands as a reminder of the sacrifices that many freedom fighters made to get independence from British rule.

August 15, 2021, marks the 75th Independence Day of India. The Indian Independence movement began during World War I and was led by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. On August 15, 1947, India got its freedom.

From the time the country's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru unfurled the Indian flag at the Red Fort, India has been marching on, intent on continuing its "tryst with destiny". An independent India was bequeathed a ravaged economy, pervasive illiteracy and grinding poverty. Since Independence, India has witnessed many changes, vicissitudes in the political and socio-economic landscape.

Undergoing the excruciating experience of partition, ravaged by the war with China and Pakistan, devastated by religious fundamentalism, linguistic antagonism, communal skirmishes, yet standing strong in the face of all and that's India for the world. A country that today comes across as a strong powerful, the developing nation has achieved and lost so many things in its journey from 1947 to 2021. Poverty, hunger, inequality, rural distress, farmer's suicide, and unemployment are major problems plaguing the entire nation today.

### **Some important achievements:**

We have the greatest number of languages spoken in any one nation; 29 languages are spoken in India, by more than one million people each. The incontrovertible aspect of Indian Culture is the unit in diversity. India is among the handful of countries with the fundamental rights to information achieved in UPA rule. India is the world's largest democracy and the popular world because of its secular credential and socialistic nature.

It is the only country in Asia that has remained democratic ever since it attained its independence from British rule. India is the only nation in the world that gave every adult the right to suffrage from its first day under Nehru. The success of the parliamentary form of government, rule of

law, and the people's faith in the democratic process are the biggest achievements of independent India.

The distinctiveness of this achievement is the fact that every change of government since independence has been only through the ballot box as India has been able to keep out the armed forces from the democratic process. The only exception to this is the brief period of the Emergency in 1975-76 when the democratic process was encumbered. However, the election has now become rich man's game. People with criminal backgrounds are getting elected due to money and muscle power.

The economic history of India is the story of India's evolution from a largely agricultural and trading society to a mixed economy of manufacturing and service, though majority still survives on agriculture. The policy of mixed economy with public sector demanding the commanding height of the economy during Nehru regime led to the establishment of many industries and progress of the nation. Rourkela Steel Plant, the first in the public sector, was set up with Germany help.

Right after independence, India was importing food grains and depending upon international food aid up to the mid-1960s. In 1963, the Green Revolution modernised agriculture with better seeds, fertilisers and technology. Today India has self-sufficiency in food production and exports various food grains. We are the largest producers of fresh fruits, milk, pulses and oilseeds, sunflower seeds, and second-largest producers of wheat, rice, sugarcane, potato, tea, cotton, etc.

Food grain production in 1950-51 was 50.8 million tonnes; it is estimated to be 305.44 million tonnes in 2020-21. In 1970, operation Flood resulted in India becoming the largest producer of milk in the world from milk deficient country. India's per capita availability of milk more than doubled during 1991-2018, with the production growing at a 4 percent CAGR.

India is the second-largest producer of sugar cane in the world and the largest producer of cotton.

India is also the largest exporter of beef in the world. India's literacy rate at the time of independence was a mere 18 per cent. As per NSO, the literacy rate was 77.7 per cent in 2016-17. Life expectancy at birth in 1947 was 32, now it is around is 69.4 yrs. But it is lower than the world's average lifespan of 72.81 years. We have successfully eradicated various epidemics and polio from our nation. We have made rapid strides in space technology, information technology, and scientific innovation. However, for dreaded disease treatment, we have to visit foreign countries; the privilege is available to a few only. We have the lowest internet speed despite the digital India programme of Narendra Modi.

Growth has been accelerated but still hunger and poverty loom large in India.

It is argued that after the initiation of economic liberalisation in 1991, GDP growth was accelerated. But simply GDP has not increased only because of liberalisation. A quick look at

such data suggests that the growth rate in the colonial period was virtually close to zero and that there was growth momentum after Independence. But GDP growth was accelerated not after reforms but before reforms (i.e., in the 1980s.). For example, average GDP growth was 3.6 per cent in the 1950s, 4 per cent in the 1960s, 2.9 per cent in the 1970s. During 1980-1990 average GDP growth accelerated to 5.57 per cent while in 1991-2000, it was nearly same at 5.59 per cent.

The average GDP growth, which was 5.96 per cent in 2001-2010 has declined to 5.05 per cent in 2010-2020. Even after 75 years after independence what portends the failure of so-called reforms is that the world's highest number of poor and hungry people are in India. India is in the 'serious' hunger category and around 19.4 crore Indians are hungry. India ranked 94 among 107 countries in the Global Hunger Index 2020 even behind Nepal (73), Pakistan (88), Bangladesh (75), Indonesia (70) among others.

According to the Global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) 2018, though 27.3 crore Indians moved out of multidimensional poverty between 2005-06 and 2015-16, India still had 36.4 crore poor in 2015-16, the largest for any country.

As per the consumer expenditure Survey, the poverty ratio was 21.9 per cent in 2011-12 with 25.9 crore people languishing under the poverty line. Since 2011-12 no study is made on the consumer expenditure Survey. Hence, Santosh Mehrotra and Jajati Keshari Parida studied the Periodic Labour Force Survey and found that the poverty ratio has increased to 26.98 per cent in 2019-20 while the absolute number of people below the poverty line has increased to 34.8 crore. Now pandemic has doubled the number of poor people.

India's middle class shrank, poverty increased. A new Pew Research Centre analysis finds that the middle class in India is estimated to have shrunk by 3.2 crore in 2020 as a consequence of the downturn, compared with the number it may have reached in the absence of the pandemic. This accounts for 60 per cent of the global retreat in the number of people in the middle-income tier (defined here as people with incomes of \$10.01-\$20 a day).

Meanwhile, the number of people who are poor in India (with incomes of \$2 or less a day) is estimated to have increased by 7.5 crore because of the COVID-19 recession. China did not witness any rise in poverty. A recent study titled State of Working India 2021 — One year of Covid, documents the impact of one on jobs, incomes, inequality, and poverty by the Centre for Sustainable Employment (CSE) at Azim Premji University, presents a grim picture of post-Covid India.

According to the study, 23 crore people in India are now earning less than Rs 375 per day, signalling that tackling poverty could become the next big challenge for the country. According to CMIE's report, 97 per cent of Indian households witnessed the decline of their income in 2020.

**Development has gone awry:**

There is no meaning of growth if it does not lead to development. While development is the goal, economic growth is the medium to achieve that goal. Though the country could make much headway with respect to GDP and the number of richest Indians, it could not bring up the human side of development. The decline in health and educational expenditure has resulted in decline in development despite high growth.

But in terms of most indicators, the rest of the world did even better than India. In comparative terms, progress in India has been trifling or even non-existent. India has ranked 117 on the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted as a part of the 2030 agenda by 193 United Nations member states in 2015. The State of India's Environment Report 2021 revealed that India's rank was 115 last year and dropped by two places primarily because of major challenges like ending hunger and achieving food security (SDG 2), achieving gender equality (SDG 5), and building resilient infrastructure, promoting inclusive and sustainable industrialisation and fostering innovation (SDG 9) remain in the country.

According to the World Economic Forum's Global Social Mobility Report, published in January 2020, India has been ranked a lowly 72 out of the 82 countries profiled and it would take 7 generations for a member of a poor family to achieve an average income. India ranked awfully at 77th out of 180 countries on an UN-backed sustainability index and 131st spot on a flourishing ranking that measures the best chance at survival and well-being for children. India has been ranked at the 116th position among 174 countries in the Human Capital Index 2020.

Out of 189 countries, India has ranked abysmally at 131 on the Human Development Index 2020 prepared by the UNDP. India has been ranked 139 out of 149 countries in the list of UN World Happiness Report 2021. Pakistan is happier being placed at 105. According to the 15th Edition of Global Peace Index 2021 (GPI 2021) released by the Institute of Economics and Peace (IEP), India has been ranked 135 out of 163 countries, which specifies 'Low State of Peace'.

The liberalization process has also increased corruption, frauds, and scams too as evident from Transparency International (TI)'s Corruption Perception Index (CPI). India has ranked awfully at 86th among 180 countries in the corruption perception index (CPI) in 2020. From last year it has slipped by six places as it was ranked at 80. It means in terms of corruption; India is ahead of 85 countries.

Public healthcare is a great leveller and directly helps in reducing health inequalities. But sharp inequalities exist across different caste, religious, class, and gender categories on various health indicators, according to a report by Oxfam India. The report titled "India Inequality Report 2021: India's Unequal Healthcare Story" shows that the "general category is better off than the SCs and STs, Hindus are better off than Muslims, the rich are better off than the poor, men are better off than women, and the urban population is better off than the rural population" on most health determinants, interventions, and indicators. The grim reality is that as per Oxfam's report (October 2020), India's health budget is the fourth lowest in the world, it is ranked 155th on the health spending index.

## **Growth sans Equity**

India's long-term economic growth has steadily accelerated without any prolonged reversals but it has led to rising of inequality, rapid depletion of natural resources, environmental pollution, degradation, and job losses. While, on one hand, it led to the accretion of wealth by few and brought prosperity for middle classes, on other hand, it has marginalised vulnerable sections of society especially by leading to privatisation of essential services such as health and education.

What is distressing is that growth has spawned rampant inequality and job creation has been slowed down. After Brazil, India is the second most unequal country according to Credit Suisse's 12th wealth report. The wealth share of the top 1 percent went up from 33.5 percent in 2000 to 39.5 percent in 2019 and rose further to 40.5 percent by the end of 2020. Brazil's top 1 per cent holds 49.6 percent of the nation's wealth. The wealth share of the top 1 percent in the US is 35.3 percent, China 30.6 percent, UK 23.1 percent, Italy 22.2 percent.

The benefits of growth are snatched by few leading to impoverishment of the masses.

Impoverishment, inequality, enslavement and discrimination are inextricably linked. According to the Oxfam report 2021, titled "The Inequality Virus", from 2009 to 2020, the wealth of billionaires has increased by 90 percent to touch 422.9 billion dollars. Oxfam's previous year's report reveals India's richest 1 per cent holds more than four times the wealth held by 95.3 crore people who make up for the bottom 70 per cent of the country's population.

The Gini coefficient indicating inequality (0 or 0 per cent indicating perfect equality and 100 or 1 per cent indicating highest inequality) increased from 74.7 in 2000 to 82.0 in 2019 and reached 82.3 at the end of 2020 in India. Extreme inequality stands as a great impediment to poverty reduction and also spark wage inequality too.

## **Conclusion**

To celebrate 75 years of independence and commemorate it as 'Azadi Ka Amrut Mahotsav', the Government of India has called upon people to submit videos of them singing the national anthem. The Union home ministry has issued instructions to the states and Union Territories to follow necessary preventive measures while organising the Independence Day celebrations. But, in reality, confining Independence Day to some celebration does not make any sense. Real freedom is necessary. Freedom from hunger, poverty, inequality, slavery mentality and discrimination are need of the hour.

According to B R Ambedkar: "Freedom of mind is the real freedom. A person whose mind is not free though he may not be in chains is a slave, not a free man. One whose mind is not free, though he may not be in prison, is a prisoner and not a free man. One whose mind is not free though alive is no better than dead. Freedom of mind is the proof of one's existence. "But under present regime atmosphere has been created to kill independent thinking, suppress dissent. There is growing mistrust between ruler and people. Hatred is created against dissenters. People's minds are enslaved.

In records, people enjoy freedom, but practically not free to express own feelings, thoughts, emotions if it exposes the failures of ruling class. Media is subverted through allurements of advertisement or veiled threat and lost its independence. Present politicians speak about sacrifices of freedom fighters to derive political mileages but do just opposite in life.

The mainstream media no longer represents the voice of voiceless. There is decline human freedom in India. India is ranked 111th out of 162 countries in the Human Freedom Index 2020 report released by the Cato Institute, plummeting 17 spots from its position in the last index. Democracy seems to be in jeopardy. Time is to take step and create mass consciousness to sustain our hard-earned freedom.