

## **Nehru's tryst with destiny still towers over its long-winded successors**

**Sandip Roy** Aug 15, 2011

Day, the Prime Minister's speech seems to become just a little less memorable. No one appears to pay much attention to the person behind the bullet-proof glass on Red Fort – except for maybe the media. Of course, back in 1947, Jawaharlal Nehru had no such attention span problem. The reprint of Times Of India's historic edition described a “seething, swaying humanity [that] wildly cheered the momentous event, heralded with the blowing of conches.”

These days many Indians do not think that India really awoke to “life and freedom” until 1991 when the markets were first liberalised. *The Economist* in 1991 called India “the caged tiger”. Nehruvian socialism with its emphasis on self sufficiency is blamed for giving us endless Five Year Plans and the Hindu rate of growth, holding back India's transformation from the elephant to the Asian tiger. Yet now that the soul of the nation, long suppressed by the license raj has “found utterance, not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially”, is India any closer to the larger vision Nehru laid out in 1947?



Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru making his speech on the midnight session of the Indian CA when the new self-governing dominion of India was formed. Chinese, American and Dutch diplomats are seated to the left. William Stacey/Fox Photos/Getty Images

Dr. Swaminathan S. Aiyar of the libertarian think tank, the Cato Institute thinks we've done all right. In an article in *India Abroad* about 20 years of economic reforms, Dr. Aiyar ticks off his checklist of a successful India – GDP growth that survived the Asian financial crisis, literacy rates shooting up 21.83 percent in the last 20 years, per capita income up from \$300 in 1991 to \$1700 today. Even the dispossessed are having their own possessions now writes Dr. Aiyar. (Dalit) “television ownership was up from zero to 45 percent; cellphone ownership up from zero to 36 percent; dalits using cars for wedding parties up from 33 percent to almost 100 percent.”

In the same issue, leftist social scientist Praful Bidwai disagrees. He says what India embraced was not reform but GDPism or “worship of rapid growth of the gross domestic product as an end in itself”. Bidwai lists some of the costs – 200,000 farmers driven to suicide, or 400 million Indians living before subsistence levels. He agrees with Dr. Aiyar about the rise of the cellphone – the talisman of modern India. But Bidwai draws his own conclusion. “It's no achievement that more Indians have cell phones, whose value is reflected in a rise in GDP, than toilets.”

Whatever our disagreements on the state of the Indian economy, we seem to be at least in resounding agreement on our political leadership. “Freedom and power bring responsibility. The responsibility rests upon this assembly, a sovereign body representing the sovereign people of India,” said Panditji of the Constituent Assembly before him. And it's worth reading these words again at a time when according to the recent State of the Nation Poll by CNN-IBN 43 percent of Indians have no faith in their elected representatives and 32 percent think government employees are the most corrupt. At a time when political greed and corruption has reached historic lows, Indian politics is clearly driven by the freedom to prosper, unencumbered by the responsibility to govern.

Nehru could not have foreseen the extent of the rot, but it loomed large in the speech made by then PM Inder Kumar Gujral on the 50th anniversary of India's independence, when he talked about the “nexus between corrupt and politics” that was “eating into the vitals of the country”. His promise: a Lokpal bill that would be “another watch tower on official deals.” Today on India's 65th Independence Day, Manmohan Singh [reassured us](#) “We want a strong Lokpal to prevent corruption in high places.”

Nehru was fortunate. He didn't have to discuss corruption, inflation or terrorism; or offer a long laundry list of policies and government programs that promise to instantly eradicate all of the same. Such are the privileges of going first. But looking back, what is clear is that our leaders have since replaced that breadth of vision with the narrow lens of vote bank politics.

Our Prime Ministers today have less interest in the “noble mansion of free India where *all* her children may dwell” than in ensuring that none of those children feel left out – at least from the speech. Scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. Women. Farmer brothers and sisters. *Jawans*. Youth. Slum dwellers. The get-tough-on-Naxalites lobby. The get-tougher-on-Pakistan lobby. Everyone jostles for space in an Independence Day speech, looking for their 15 seconds of free speech love.

Where there were ideas, we now get names – not only of vote banks but of our long line of revered leaders. In his first speech as Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh mentioned Nehru, Mahatma Gandhi, Bahadur Shah Zafar, Lakshmi Bai, Peshwa Nana Saheb, Tantia Tope, Begum Hazrat Mahal, Subhas Bose, Rajiv Gandhi, Indira Gandhi. It was an exercise in historical namedropping as if invoking legitimacy by the company you keep (at least in a speech) or the blood in your veins as Rajiv Gandhi did when he incessantly invoked his “maa’s sacrifice.”

In stark contrast, in his midnight speech Nehru invokes Gandhi as “the greatest man of our generation” but never names him. Other than one reference to Asia, the only proper noun in that speech is India. It is the only name that matters. In fact, the entire speech is remarkable by its absence of namedropping. It is neither an Oscar acceptance speech nor a history lesson shoved down the throats of a nation distracted by its Blackberry.

Nehru talks instead about bringing “freedom and opportunity to the common man, to the peasants and workers of India; to fight and end poverty and ignorance and disease; to build up a prosperous, democratic and progressive nation, and to create social, economic and political institutions which will ensure justice and fullness of life to every man and woman.”

As ideas go, they are hardly revolutionary. In fact, in 2011 they sound like the platitudes of a politician’s stump speech, our rhetorical *dal-chawal*, dished out to the masses every August. In 1999 Vajpayee was still talking about his dream of “an India free of hunger and fear, an India free of illiteracy and want.” In 2007, Manmohan Singh informed us “Gandhiji’s dream of a free India would only be fully realized when we banish poverty from our midst.” In 2011 he told us “We have to banish poverty and illiteracy from our country.”

In 1947, in the bloody dawn of newly born country, the sweep of Nehru’s words must have sounded, as India correspondent Ian Jack put it “a lodestone that was ambitious and humane”. It is our failing as a nation that we have reduced these words – and the ideas they represent – to tired clichés.

And to India, our much-loved motherland, the ancient, the eternal and the ever-new, we pay our reverent homage and we bind ourselves afresh to her service. Jai Hind.

And that was it. With that, the first Prime Minister of independent India, dressed in a gold jacket with a rose in its button-hole, was done. Less than 1,100 words to commemorate the birth of a nation. Over sixty years later, our Prime Ministers spend thrice as many words to go nowhere.

But if we pay really close attention, we might just learn how much rice costs per quintal. Now if we could only remember how much is in a quintal.

You can read [Jawaharlal Nehru’s historic 1947 speech here](#).