

**Note for 15th August 2021 Web-based Event Announcing
AIPSN Campaign on 75th Anniversary Year of Independence**

by D.Raghunandan, DSF/AIPSN

**75th Anniversary of Independence:
The Idea of India --- Road to Tomorrow**

Independent India was born on 15th August 1947 with the end of British colonial rule and unfurling of the tricolour by the new nation's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. India's journey over the next 75 years has been remarkable by any standards. Born out of the values forged during the independence struggle and the wholehearted participation of all sections of the people, a poor, developing and highly diverse country with low literacy and massive diversity, embarked on a path at that time rarely seen among newly-independent states. This path comprised universal suffrage; a secular state with equality of all citizens before the law and plurality of opinions; respectful of all religions, castes, languages, ethnicities and gender, expressly underlining the idea of unity in diversity; a democratic, popularly accountable and federated system of governance; a strong industrial base built around scientific and technological (S&T) self-reliance and public sector enterprises in core sectors; a commitment to build a modern welfare state with a citizenry imbued with scientific temper and critical thinking. India's Constitution adopted in 1950 cemented these values in the governance of the country, and provided an institutional framework for rights of citizens and for democratic governance, with an independent judiciary and autonomy from the executive of major governance institutions. The world watched in wonder as India progressed along this path, managing arguably the most socio-culturally complex and diverse country, undoubtedly with many hiccups along the way.

The industrial foundation and central planning, along with establishment of premier public institutions of research and higher education in the early post-Independence years, propelled the country forward to a leading position among developing countries. The policy of S&T self-reliance not only helped the country build its own independent industrial base, with assistance from the then Soviet Union during a period when Western countries refused to help India industrially, but also to build its own capabilities across sectors including in advanced areas of space, atomic energy and defence, together enabling India to maintain strategic autonomy from major foreign powers and a policy of non-alignment along with most developing countries. All these bestowed India with an enviable position in the international community, substantial soft power and prestige in the comity of nations.

Several lacunae in the conception and implementation were noted even during these early decades, notably by progressive forces. India was not investing adequately in addressing poverty especially in rural areas, agriculture was neglected even though three-fourths of the country depended on it, the Union government was tending towards trampling on the rights of States, and low investment in school education and primary health were holding back the already impoverished masses and preventing them from achieving their potential. Whereas the 1948 Bombay Plan by

captains of the private sector had agreed with the state-sector taking the lead in core industrial sectors, on their part private sector industries did not go beyond demanding protectionist policies against imports and entry of foreign firms, capitalizing on a captive domestic market with low-quality, low volume and uncompetitive goods, all for their narrow profit interests, and made little contribution to self-reliance or national industrial advancement.

Some efforts were made through special emphases in subsequent 5-year Plans, for example in Agriculture which ushered in the input-intensive so-called Green Revolution which delivered on self-sufficiency in food grains but also triggered long-lasting ecological damage in these regions and a skewed development of agriculture, related infrastructure and agri research institutions. Progressive measures such as nationalization of banks, insurance, core economic sectors involving natural resources considered as national assets held in trust by the government, helped in broadening the industrial base. Other efforts were made in subsequent years through targeted poverty alleviation, rural employment and infrastructure programmes, and various commissions on school education, which made some dent but could not transform the scenario of extreme rural poverty, deprivation and lack of opportunities.

Public resentment of these failures, and growing authoritarian tendencies in the Union government, boiled over in 1974-75, when the government declared an Emergency arresting political and civil society opponents and suspending all civil liberties, press freedom, freedom of expression and assembly by citizens and workers, and States' rights, and even independence of the judiciary in practice if not in law. At one stroke, the people found all their hard won rights for which they had struggled during the freedom struggle and attainment of Independence in 1947, snatched away by an authoritarian government that dissolved the distinction between Government and State. The people's anger expressed itself forcefully in the general elections of 1977 when the government was defeated and democracy restored once again.

However, by the 1980s and 90s, the initial direction and impetus of self-reliant development led by the public sector had lost steam, and the dominant forces in the polity started moving towards courting foreign investment, divestment of public sector units (PSUs) and a gradual withdrawal of the State from public services, the social sector and many industrial sectors under the influence of the by now internationally dominant neo-liberal economic framework championed by the IMF, World Bank and other international agencies. These trends climaxed with a full-fledged embrace of neo-liberal policies in the 1990s with the stated aim of unleashing the "animal instincts" of the domestic private sector, foreign investors and multi-national corporations (MNCs), who were provided numerous incentives of de-regulation and opening up almost all sectors of the economy.

India no doubt experienced high GDP growth rates, with some poverty reduction but deepening inequality. Natural resources were handed over to private corporate houses in mining, minerals, petroleum and the airwaves, ports and other infrastructure, all at a pittance allowing for super-profits, and numerous key economic sectors were opened up to private corporations while simultaneously crippling any rival PSUs. While a small section of the middle-classes benefited from these economic changes, business magnates were the biggest gainers. There was a boom in consumer durables, boosted by salary rises for government and public sector employees through successive pay commissions and prods to banks to expand loan schemes. Foreign companies

entered the Indian market in a big way, while Indian companies too entered into collaborations with the former to enhance their product range and quality.

Yet, during this entire period no major gain was made in self-reliance and enhancing autonomous capability of Indian private sector industries. True, a few billionaires became multi-billionaires, there was greater concentration of wealth at the top of the pyramid, with some of it trickling down to the upper rungs of the middle classes. While the 1980s had seen other South East Asian countries, who were at a par with India a decade or two earlier, gallop ahead economically and in human development indicators through rapid development of indigenous S&T capabilities in mass manufacturing, white goods, electronic goods, micro-chips and computers, India completely lost out in what have been termed these “lost decades.” Things got no better in the 1990s or the decades thereafter, including after 2014 when grandiose promises were made to take India into the 21st century or become a developed country by 2025 or become a \$5 trillion economy soon.

Liberalization, privatization and globalization have only accelerated even further. Income inequalities have widened even further, and multi-billionaires believed to be close to the ruling establishment, have amassed huge additional wealth during recent years, even during the lockdown and nationwide economic slowdown. Such is modern neo-liberal capitalism, avidly promoted and supported by the present government, along with promises of further concessions, de-regulation, further dismantling of PSUs, de-unionization and other labour “reforms.”

The big belief, and break from the early post-Independence past, especially from the 1990s onwards has been that self-reliance is an outmoded concept, technologically an unnecessary effort to reinvent the wheel when any country can simply buy the latest technology from somewhere. History disproves this, notably in Japan, South-East Asia and later China, who have all shown the value of self-reliance and indigenous capability, which are not merely means to developing the economy but playing a dominating role in the global economy instead of remaining dependent on others.

India continues to be a good market for foreign or MNC goods, even if they are sometimes made in India, such as automobiles or white goods, or even if they are wholly imported or only assembled here, such as cell phones in which India is the world’s second largest and second fastest growing market. Even the largest Indian private corporations, except a few in the single digits, are junior partners of MNCs or other foreign entities, have developed no autonomous S&T capabilities despite having been around for many decades, and make few products of global standard or global brand. While the world is now on the verge of the “fourth industrial revolution” comprising 5G, AI, robotics and further automation, autonomous vehicles, electric or hydrogen vehicles and so on, India has been left staring at a future where we are no higher up the technological or value ladder than we used to be. With the private sector not interested in R&D or developing indigenous capability, and the government hell-bent on destroying the public sector who could have undertaken the tasks, as the few remaining PSUs in atomic energy, space and defence are showing even today, the future is not looking bright for the country.

Countries of South-East Asia and China whose achievements we have noted did so only on the basis of massive public investment in education, skill development and public health, ensuring that their human development kept pace with their economic development which would not have been possible without the former. In India on the other hand, especially under the present

dispensation, we are witnessing a transformation of education away from public education for the majority but, under NEP, towards private, commercialized education for a privileged few, going against the historical experience of all developed and recently-developed countries. How can India advance like this in the 22nd century?

Under the present dispensation too, despite its much-vaunted programme of “Atma-Nirbhar Bharat” or Self-Reliant India, India has continued in its path of technological dependence, even believing it could build a modern defence industry in India through FDI! This policy has predictably fallen flat on its face for obvious reasons --- no country will part with its advanced technology for love or for money. Many defence experts and commentators have said so forcefully, but it is the special trait of the present Government to not listen to experts and to only push their own ideology and beliefs, however wrong. This was clearly in evidence during the Covid-19 pandemic when even the opinions of leading scientists in government-appointment committees were repeatedly ignored. Numerous international scholars, human rights organizations and activists, have faced censorship, refusal of permission to enter or do research in India, with government even attempting to require academic institutions to seek permission before organizing even virtual webinars.

But this is the least of our worries. The imposition of their own ideology and core political beliefs on the whole nation, and the complete intolerance towards plurality of opinion, refusal to accept and follow the evidence instead believing that the evidence should be manipulated or manufactured to suit its own pre-conceived decisions, as revealed by pressures on premium autonomous research institutions to tailor data to suit government narratives, has characterized this government since its inception in 2014 and has put India’s future under peril in more ways than one.

This Government has put majoritarian Hindutva and its own ideology of “cultural nationalism” above, which undermines all the founding principles of the Republic and threatens the unity in diversity that holds this country together. Over the past seven-odd years, this nation has been torn apart by enforcement of majoritarian and discriminatory policies like the CAA-NPR-NRC, by brutal lynchings or harassment of minority community members on the pretext of cow-slaughter or “love jihad” by marrying girls of the majority community, assaults on the traditional eating habits of many communities in different parts of the country, by attempts to impose Hindi on non-Hindi speaking States in myriad ways, insisting that a mythical Vedic-Sanskritic past is the repository of all knowledge, the only true “history” and the only worthwhile tradition worthy of respect and being called Indian. Leading lights of the government and the ruling dispensation have repeatedly sought to impose their unsubstantiated views on ancient Vedic-Sanskritic science on a par with modern science, such as availability of the internet during the Mahabharata, advanced cosmetic surgery as evidenced by Lord Ganesha’s elephant head fitting seamlessly on a human body, and attacking all critics as westernized anti-nationals, the classic attack on all critics and those who defend evidence-based reasoning and the scientific temper.

The Constitutional ideals of unity of diversity, respect for all cultures in this vast country, a federated system have all been sacrificed at the over-centralized altar of One Nation and One Everything, whether religion, language, food or States’ rights.

The Government’s foreign policy has been completely laid at the feet of US imperialism, sidelining former special relations with, for instance, Russia, relations of solidarity with other

developing nations, and ignoring possibilities of working towards a multi-polar world as advocated by most countries and strategic experts. India is now a virtual military ally of the US, abandoning decades-old foreign policy maintaining strategic autonomy. All this despite continued unilateral US pressure on intellectual property rights, trade rules, non-tariff barriers etc. From a time when India was a leading figure on the international stage, based on its well-established reputation as a thriving pluralist democracy, India today is virtually friendless, has lost its admirers as a multi-cultural democracy now instead appearing as an increasingly intolerant, autocratic, majoritarian and undemocratic country

If a country is divided within itself, how can it work with a common zeal for the common good? If a country has no friends and a poor reputation internationally, with no soft power, how can it play a major role let alone a leading role in the comity of nations and advance the interests of its citizens? If a country does everything it can to stifle critical thinking, how can its youth lead the country in the knowledge era?

India desperately needs to restore its post-independence identity as a forward looking country, building its autonomous self-reliant knowledge especially in science and technology for the global economy of tomorrow, promote its major public sector industries to achieve these goals along with those private entities with a commitment and dedication to achieve self-reliance in India. India desperately needs to re-establish Constitutional values of unity of diversity so that all States, cultures and people of all religions can move forward determinedly each in their own unique way. India needs to take forward its values of plurality, freedom of expression, autonomy of governance institutions, strong anti-discrimination laws, and a planned and well-regulated economy keeping in mind socio-economic equity, environmental sustainability and protection of historically underprivileged populations. None of this can happen without a robust public education system ensuring 12 years of quality schooling for all sections of society, vocational education providing for lifelong learning opportunities continually upgrading skills in keeping with new demands of the economy, and higher education providing full opportunities not only for economically well-off and privileged sections. The future beckons India especially its youth. To achieve its due, India needs to re-generate and re-imagine the values and aspirations of its freedom movement which we are recalling and celebrating during 2021-22.