

[50 Years of Freedom](#)

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CELEBRATION

50 Years of Freedom

On August 15, 1947, the British quietly walked out of India. Five decades later, Bharat enthusiastically celebrates and soberly reflects upon her condition after that hard-won freedom.

Everyone knows how to celebrate; only a time and date are required to set in motion this inborn human behavior. So when something as big as India's 50th year of independence from British rule (not to mention 1,200 years of foreign domination) comes along, 936 million Indians need be told no more than "Party on, people." The government of Bharat officially kicks off the year-long celebrations in August. But in the West, many organizations and institutions have already begun.

The Parliament of India will hold a special session from August 6 to 14--in part to ratify the celebration plans, but more substantively to reflect upon all that India has experienced and done in the last fifty years. Then, on August 15, following a formal flag raising in every village of India, the prime minister will address the nation from the ramparts of the Red Fort, just as Jawaharlal Nehru did at free India's first dawn.

An entire government secretariat has been set up to coordinate the year of observances in India. The official intent

is to "rekindle the spirit of idealism and the culture of sacrifice that gave birth to modern India." "It is a moment," the government hopes, "for Indians to rededicate themselves to the noble task of nation building in pursuit of the great vision that had guided the freedom struggle." The wording of these goals is significant, for few in India today seem altogether satisfied with the results of 50 years of freedom. Yes, the British are gone. And never before in history had a nation won freedom by the power of dharma, righteousness, instead of the might of arms. For many years India was regarded by the world with respect and even awe for this accomplishment. But something happened along the way during these five decades, and now even this government committee must consider how to regain the "great vision" which earlier prevailed. In the second half of this article, distinguished observers of India--Ram Swarup, Mark Tully and Rashmi Mayur--offer their evaluations of India's past, present and future, respectively.

On top of most lists of complaints about India today is the state of what citizens call "communal relations," whether it is between Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and Christians, between high caste, low caste and no caste or between the various linguistic groups. These communal problems, inherited from Britain's divide-and-rule policy, have not been solved. In fact, they are growing worse. The Indian economy still leaves too many in poverty. Another burden is overpopulation (theoretically an unbelievable 4.6 billion by 2150, nearly the present world population), illiteracy, pollution, deforestation and the rest of the modern world's woes. There is Westernization, regarded as both curse and cure. Last and most depressing to the common man is corruption, where even the top politicians are regularly caught lining their pockets with phenomenal sums of bribe money [see story page 17]. Indians lament the widespread

cynicism which has resulted. Some still fume over the partition of India and talk as if it is something which could be undone--a task achievable by nothing short of full-scale war.

Bharat was not like this in the past. In earlier centuries, it enjoyed remarkable harmony among communities. It had a prosperous economy that the world envied and, unfortunately, coveted. It had clean water, abundant trees, tigers and elephants, great musicians, artists and dancers, and even honest politicians. If there is one thing to be accomplished by this year of celebration, it is to bring this past back into Indian and world consciousness so that it may be recreated in the present. It is not necessary to create a completely new India, many believe, but only to rediscover from India's past.

International observances: The celebrations in India itself are, naturally, the most extensive, and at US\$15 million, the most expensive. They include a year of television and radio programs in eleven languages on the independence struggle and India's fifty years of freedom, events honoring freedom fighters, programs focused on socio-economic progress, women's issues, minorities, children, science, law, farmers and trade unions and, of course, commemorative stamps and coins.

Nearly every nongovernmental organization will mark the anniversary in some way. The Divine Life Society, for example, plans to distribute hundreds of thousands of copies of a "National Code of Conduct for India"--a virtual manifesto of patriotism, duty, character, honesty, nonviolence and ecology.

The NGO "Pakistan-India People's Forum" was just established with the ambitious goal of creating a "new era of peace and harmony between India and Pakistan." Organizer Shrikumar Poddar scheduled its first conference of 200 delegates from India and Pakistan for May in Mumbai.

The United Kingdom is celebrating, most notably with a visit by the Queen to India and Pakistan in October. A web site at bricoun.org/visitingarts/indpak1997 gives a long, month-by-month list of events in the UK to honor India's independence. There will be art shows, cultural events (one called "making laddus"--even though creation of the delectable sweets doesn't seem to be on the agenda), theatre and banquets (including some at Buckingham Palace). Said Lord Robert Cranborne, leader of the upper House of Lords, "We have been friends with the peoples of the subcontinent for centuries. Our present relations have never been better or more productive. They are based on a shared history and shared traditions: parliamentary government, the rule of law, cricket." It is an irony of the 50th anniversary that these very shared traditions (with the possible exception of cricket) are now questioned as to how much good they have really done for India. In one sense, Britain still rules India through the institutions they left behind, which are so different than the traditional government of India.

Many Indian organizations in America, such as the Hindu Students Council (see: freeindia.org), the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Federation of Indian Associations and dozens of others are engineering programs. At least one organization, the Federation of Hindu Associations, refuses to celebrate the day unless it is also "remembered as a Memorial Day for the

massacre of millions of Hindus" upon partition, according to their president, Prithvi Raj Singh.

Umpteen art shows are in the offing, including two mentioned in this issue of Hinduism Today--the book and exhibition "India, A Celebration of Independence 1947- 1997," and "Gods, Kings and Tigers: the Art of Kotah." The Sackler Gallery at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington DC, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco all have scheduled shows on India. The latter exhibit includes items on Hindu home ritual, the sari and Siva Nataraja. National Geographic magazine's kaleidoscopic August cover story on India's 50th features the dazzling photography of Steve McCurry. Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan in New York has produced an exhibit of national heroes and freedom fighters of India. The Music Festival of India will present India's greatest exponents of classical dance and music in September at New York's Carnegie Hall. It is safe to say that most Americans will know India is celebrating something in 1997.

Dr. Gujja Magesan of the VHP in New Zealand reports a series of events being planned for August 15. In the Netherlands, seminars, art exhibits, a Sri Chinmoy Peace Conference, cultural events and a mela in the Hague are all on the docket for later this year. The India Canada Association of Montreal, the Bharat Bhawan Foundation and the Global Organization of People of Indian Origin are collaborating in Canada to commemorate the event.

Countries where Indians migrated before independence, such as Fiji, South Africa, Trinidad, Guyana and Mauritius, in general

are not taking much note of the occasion. But one significant gesture was made April 26 in South Africa, where President Nelson Mandela posthumously awarded the Freedom of Pietermaritzburg award to Mahatma Gandhi. He called the award "a message of dignity restored." It was in Pietermaritzburg station that Gandhi was tossed out of a first-class train seat on racial grounds, prompting his campaign against discrimination--training ground for India.

Whatever the progress or lack of progress over the last fifty years, one important fact remains--the destiny of Bharat is in her own hands. If the collective will which withstood the bullets, lathi blows and jails of the British can be rekindled, the current raft of problems can be solved by determined application of the one resource never plundered by any invader: 5,000 years of accumulated wisdom.

Pictures Tell Her Story

India, A Celebration of Independence 1947 to 1997 is the book version of a major exhibition of photographs now simultaneously touring the USA, UK and Bharat. Sunil Janah, Raghu Rai, Henri Cartier-Bresson and Sebastião Salgado plus youngsters Dayanita Singh, Sanjeev Saith and Pamela Singh are among the 21 photographers who contributed to the large-format book. Like the recently published 24 Hours in India, it attempts to portray a cross-section of Indian life today. Courageously, it records many classic black-and-white photographs from the years of India's independence struggle.

The book is more successful than 24 Hours in presenting India's upcoming middle class, rather than focusing almost

exclusively on "poor India." Still, no exhibition or book on India published in the West seems to consider itself complete without including the requisite concession to "strange and exotic India," such as, in this case, eunuchs in Delhi or transvestites in South India.

The book opens with "The Sacred and the Secular," a powerful personal essay by Kerala-born Victor Anant on his life from his boyhood, when the independence struggle came into full swing, to the present. In a way that transcends photographs, Anant lyrically traces the slow changes to his life on a personal level over the last half century.

The book was produced as a collaborative effort of the publisher, Aperture, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Ford Motor Company, the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation and Eastman Kodak Company.

Aperture, 20 East 23rd Street, New York, New York,
10010-4463, USA. US\$50.00

An Unfinished Past

Dharma inspired us in the early days

By Ram Swarup, Delhi

The early independence struggle had no teeth and had yet to learn to make any worthwhile demands. The approach was petitionary. Perhaps it had to be that way at the time; it provided a necessary protective cover. But something was

happening at a deeper level. An ancient people were waking up from a deep slumber and long self-forgetfulness. A Hindu renaissance was taking place. Swami Dayananda, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo and later on Mahatma Gandhi provided its leadership. Some European friends of India, like Madame Blavatsky, Annie Besant and Sister Nivedita, played a noble role in this awakening.

As we can easily see, these pioneers were not politicians as we understand the word today. They were philosophers, sadhakas (spiritual seekers) and cultural thinkers. They spoke of Gods, humanity, larger life, truth and justice. They spoke of Sanatana Dharma, of a golden Vedic Age, of Ramarajya. The pregnant words were spoken, and it took care of the rest. The nation was galvanized. Hindu awakening had begun. Later on, it passed through many phases and ups and downs, but things were never the same again. This input was to play an important part in the struggle, much of which still lay ahead. These pioneers taught us to look at India and her struggle in a particular way. India was to them more than a geographic entity; it was a spiritual idea and power, a sacred trust, even a Deity. India was to rise for the truth it represented, for recovering its soul and svabhava, innate nature. However, the forces of Hindu awakening were not the only ones in the field. There were also powerful, opposed currents. One of them was the old, unsolved Muslim problem--more correctly the problem of Islam or Islamic ideology, though even now we do not want to see it that way.

The next most immediate and important influences were those unleashed by Europe. A new triumphant Europe was both our exploiter and also our teacher. Its products and creations were

everywhere; its power and presence was felt in everything. It could not but impress our best people.

But a self-conscious imperialism was not satisfied with making merely a psychological impression. It waged a regular ideological offensive, an offensive in which missionary Christianity was already engaged. The white man's burden of civilizing the world and the Biblical command to go out and make converts became one single task--a task both profitable and meritorious. A new colonial-missionary view came into being which taught the superiority of Europe and Christianity over all.

With some modifications here and there, this view became specially attractive in its Marxist garb. Marx said about the same things, though he put it in radical and even in anti-colonial and anti-religious language. Marxism attracted many intellectuals, for it seemed to explain every nook and corner of the world, every notch and fold of history. It attracted many young men because they could now be radical without taking a part in the great national struggle of the day and even by opposing it. It was attractive to the self-alienated section, which was quite extensive, for it helped to justify their alienation from their country, people and religion.

These were the forces at work when India became free, the forces apathetic and antipathetic to Hindu awakening being very powerful and even more so after Independence.

Although Marxist parties were not important electorally, their

ideas dominated and shaped India politics. Their one important function consisted in providing progressive labels to all reactionary and questionable politics. The same old forces worked under new labels. Separatism, Balkanization of the country and casteism became progressive politics. Under their influence, many parties adopted Leftist slogans to improve their image--at least they thought so.

Most political parties passed through this evolution, but the BJP was regarded as different. It was shunned by them even when it did its best to court them. It was the great untouchable of India politics. In its origin and development it had a different orientation; therefore, many expected it to be different politically, too. But it could not live up to this expectation. It, too, failed to withstand the pressure of the prevailing slogans. Though it still found it useful to play the Hindu card, it did it without conviction or commitment.

What India needs is not another party under the same prevailing ideological influences but Hindus opened to the message of ancient teachers, Hindus who are also sadhakas. India's Independence struggle was rooted in a Hindu renaissance and it could properly be nourished also by the same source. It would also be meaningful to the world on that condition. Hinduism is the principle of India's self-renewal, its capacity to play its great civilization role and to serve humanity.

Sri Ram Swarup: The noted author actively participated in independence. His writings cover politics, economics, philosophy and religion.

Pride in the Present

A Hindu cure for the "colonial hangover"

By Mark Tully, Delhi

The end of India's freedom struggle fifty years ago was only the end of one stage of India's struggle. India deserves by size and its ancient civilization a place at the top table of the nations of the world. But it does not. We have to see why it does not enjoy that position, where freedom has not worked in India, and where the next stages of the struggle have to go. I think there has been--and India is not unique in this--a fundamental problem in achieving real freedom: a colonial hangover which still exists in the minds of some leaders and in the political and institutional arrangements. Corruption in the administrative services and courts, inefficiency in the government and misdirected economic liberalization are all results of this hangover.

One aspect of this colonial hangover is the vexed and controversial question of secularism. I think there is no doubt that the concept of secularism was inherited by Nehru from the West. It comes from a debased form of Enlightenment thinking which thought science and modern development had killed religion. Nehru's secularism was based to a large extent on the Western lack of concern, if I can put it like that, for religion. This secularism developed in India in such a way that they would say, "If you are a Christian and you go to church, you are communal. If you are a Hindu and you go to the temple, you are communal. If you are a Muslim and you say namaaz, you are communal." But if you look at the arrangements in Britain, you find the Queen is still the head of

the Church of England--so you could say Britain is in theory a communally Christian country. India is unique in its variety of religions--every historic religion in the world has a home in India, and everyone is free to worship in their own way.

I remember once at an exhibition of advertisements encouraging communal harmony in India run by the Times of India there was one which had a picture of a Christian priest, a Hindu priest and a Muslim cleric. The subtitle was, "Would you trust one of these?" Now this is a disgraceful thing, in my view, to put out, but it demonstrates the sort of way in which secular people have been taught to think of religion.

Indians are still for the most part deeply religious. India has to have some accommodation with religion which is more meaningful to people than merely saying, "Keep it out of politics, it's all rather suspicious and dirty and grubby." India has to have some way of expressing its respect for its own civilization.

Now the extraordinary thing is that as soon as you talk about Hinduism in Bharat, you are immediately--and I have had this said to me many times--told that you are BJP, RSS or something like that. In my view the BJP is a legitimate political party, but I do not share their ideology--I know from the slogans I've heard BJP supporters shouting that their ideology can lead to hatred of Muslims. But I do profoundly believe that India needs to be able to say with pride, "Yes, our civilization has a Hindu base to it." The genius of Hinduism, the very reason it has survived so long, is that it does not stand up and fight. It changes and adapts and modernizes and absorbs--that

is the scientific and proper way of going about it.

Why is Christianity in so much trouble at the moment? Because it is so difficult for it to adapt, to face up to the scientific inventions of our times and the findings of history. It is also difficult for Christians to say that the most important thing about a religion is the myth that underlies it. That is the power. Anyone who thinks myth equals lie, as some people appear to do, is totally misled. Hinduism has this great strength. It is based on myth unashamedly. You do not have to run around trying to find historical evidence to say that Krishna was born in Mathura to understand the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita. Whether Krishna or Arjun ever stood in a chariot together or not is not, in my view, of great importance to tradition and right and proper Hindu thinking. So I believe very strongly that it is a mistake to become confrontational.

What is needed is the proper teaching of Hinduism and the study of ways in which Hindus should adapt to the latest circumstances. I believe that Hinduism may actually prove to be the religion of the next millennium, because it can adapt itself to change. It is not stuck in history. That is the problem of the Semitic religions. A Roman Catholic cardinal said he thought that an Eastern religion--Buddhism--would be the greatest challenge to the Church in the next millennium, not materialism, as so many people think.

So you have the resources in Hinduism, you have the teachings, you have the history that shows you can do it. You can revive your religion in such a way that it does not become confrontational (which is a common practice) but does

something unique by becoming adaptive and adapting itself to the needs of the time. India must be able to be proud of Hinduism. At the same time, it should be proud that Indian Muslims can do namaaz whenever they like, and proud of Indian Christians flooding their churches. I believe Bharat has an enormous amount to teach the rest of the world.

Mark Tully: The Calcutta-born journalist earned the respect of Bharat during his years as the BBC's India correspondent

Is There a Future

Toward a new relationship with Earth

By Rashmi Mayur, Mumbai

Almost half a century, we are told, has elapsed into history since India became "independent" from the colonial British. Much of what has happened during this period is a memory, a great deal of which is already effaced. This is a stark reality confronting 955 million people now occupying the soil where Hinduism originated more than 4,000 years ago. The world has undergone profound changes since then. India had no boundary ever, and today only globalized Earth exists. What will happen to the people inhabiting this nation, their land, their philosophical system, their life, as humanity prepares itself to enter the third millennium is only a mystery wrapped in the unknown of the future.

It is to search for the unknown that we turn to Hinduism. As I understand it, Hinduism is philosophy, it is a way of life, it is a search for liberation, it is an exploration of the unknown, it is

an adventure of finding a path in the darkness.

Today, however, darkness pervades the Earth. In November, 1992, 1,600 eminent scientists, including 105 Nobel Prize winners, gave a warning to the world that it is in trouble, and if the present human driven destruction of the Earth continues, the ecological and environmental systems in about two decades will collapse, bringing an end to civilized living everywhere. This was not a silly warning of quacks forecasting on an April Fool's day. The warning was based on the vast research, analysis and understanding of the ravaged state of the natural and human systems in the globalized world. Such pralayas or catastrophes were not unknown to the great Indian philosophers of the past or to the thinkers in other religions. In fact, from time immemorial Hinduism attempted to address the tragic problems of human life and attempted to search for a life liberated from material distresses and bondages.

A casual account of the world we are living in presents a grotesque scenario of materialism gone berserk, converting great treasures of the beautiful Earth into carcasses. The Earth is littered with dead trees, foul air, poisoned seas, wasted lands, thirsty rivers, mountains of garbage along with miseries, emasculating hunger, dreadful diseases like AIDS and cancer, perennial wars--the list is endless. The Earth is suffering. It is bleeding. It is dying as if a Shakespearean tragedy is being enacted everywhere, as if God Siva is performing his Tandava dance. Hinduism as a way of life venerated all forces of Nature. Today Indians like all other earthlings are pursuing illusion--maya.

It is here that a true Hinduism, like any other great religion, offers direction, hope and a challenge for creating a vibrant life in harmony with Nature.

There is a deep philosophical statement in the Upanishads, which reveals the truth about our relations with nature. It says: "The essence of things here is the Earth. The essence of Earth is water. The essence of water is plants. The essence of plants is a person."

The annihilating materialism of the industrial civilization, which has emerged during the last 300 years, is rooted in the arrogance of humans whose sole pursuit is exploitation, consumption and greed. Indians have become renegades against their sacred philosophy. That is the tragedy of India. That is the malady of the Earth.

It is here that Hinduism as a way of life provides a challenge to humanity by offering the revelations of the ages as a path to salvation for the future. The essence of revelation is that we did not create the Earth, but we have come from the Earth. If we understand the deep meaning of our relationship with all-pervasive nature, then our approach to everything will be based on reverence and not exploitation, on love and not hatred, on conservation and not destruction. Sivadasa expresses it more eloquently, "The gift beyond all gifts, as it is said, is in this world the gift of sanctuary."

As we grope in the darkness of tomorrow, as the Earth shrinks, as time abridges, the ancient message of Indian philosophy

becomes more relevant. Its idealism, its message of renunciation, its tenet of simplicity, its doctrine of pursuing higher purposes of truth, love and beauty, if brought to ailing humanity, will take them and everyone to the morning of the rising Sun. Hinduism, with this grand but practical message, will liberate us from the tyranny of the present, and take us to the eternal possibilities of the future.

And as evolution unfolds beyond the next millennium, our spirits will harmonize with the flowers and birds, rising above the clouds and suns and galaxies, beyond time and space and unite with the Ultimate--Brahma.

Dr. Rashmi Mayur: The Mumbai-based futurist is one of the world's most influential environmental leaders