

Jasbeer Singh

As India busies itself with celebrating the 63rd anniversary of independence from British rule, it could help matters a great deal by taking a serious look and giving honest answers to three questions:

Are the benefits of independence available to all members of India's population in equal measure?

Who is responsible for any unequal distribution?

How can anyone, particularly from religious minorities, claim an equal share of the rights and freedoms that are due to citizens of independent nations with democratic governance?

As a great majority of nationals in the working age were born after 1947, why should past British rule be of such great significance to them? If 190 years of British rule was significant, why not the preceding 700 years of Mughal rule? Why not celebrate the end of that dynastic Mughal rule with similar fanfare and pride? History tells us that British rule was no more oppressive or exploitative than the Mughal period.

We may justifiably blame the British for the economic exploitation, how about some credit for building the nationwide infrastructure of railways, roads, radio and telephony, postal and telegraph services?

India's sixty-three year track record of self-rule also needs to be subjected to some critical appraisal. While India never tires of claiming to be 'the largest democracy' in the world, one wonders, what did India's leaders or its government, do to make it so? It was already the second most populous regime in the world and the British had already implemented a system of democratic governance.

One of the tests for any 'democratic' regimes is how the minorities feel and fare? On this count, in the case of India, one needs to examine the record over the past six decades.

Following the transfer of governing powers to the new rulers, various segments of India's marginalized regional minorities expressed natural instincts to experience the warm glow of freedom.

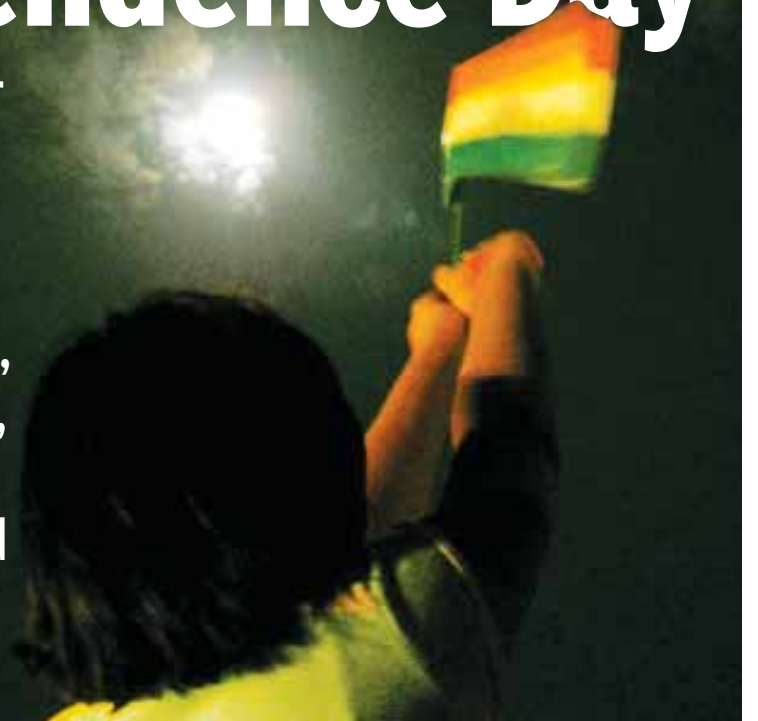
The first such voices emerged in the north-east in Assam, Manipur, Nagaland, Mizo Hills and other places; they were silenced with brute force. Kashmir was placed under military rule. Hesitant states like Hyderabad, Junagarh and Jind, where rulers were still contemplating their political options, were overpowered militarily. Goa, Daman and Diu, presenting no military opposition or threat, were also over-run with huge military might.

This may have been a dress-rehearsal for the extensive military adventures on its borders with China in the following year - 1962. In these skirmishes, India received a mighty punch from the Chinese army that forced a pause in India's military-led expansionism.

Rebuilding their bruised military

Reflections on India's Independence Day

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Edmonton based writer presents food for thought for Indian leaders, who have been riding roughshod minority aspirations in the decades since partition. It is time to reexamine the working of India and take corrective actions, says the author.



muscle didn't take long and after testing their restored military might in 1965 against Pakistan, India proceeded to break-up its neighboring state and turned East-Pakistan into the independent state of Bangladesh.

Perhaps, these acts can all be rationalized in the interests of securing its borders and ensuring territorial integrity, but the same cannot be said for its brutish heavy-handedness, repression and militancy towards vocal and non-subservient regional and religious minorities. Overtly, India was using the perceived external threats to build a sense of nationalism. At the same time, Hindu communalism was covertly taking over any flavor of nationalism.

Independence from the British had led to a territorial division and emergence of the Islamic state of Pakistan. The Muslim minority, remaining in India, had been simultaneously made to feel unwelcome and unwanted in India. Sikhs had, unwittingly and gullibly, become accomplices in societal ostracism and maltreatment of Muslims in so-called 'secular' India.

The famous author Khushwant Singh wrote, "The first man to talk of Hindus and Muslims as separate nations was V.D. Savarkar, who coined the word 'Hindutva' in a book with the same title in 1923. Other Hindu leaders who accepted the two-nation theory were Dr Moonje of the Hindu Mahasabha, Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, founder of the Benares Hindu University, Lala Lajpat Rai, Bhai Parmanand and Swami Shradhdhanand. The eminent Bengali writer Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay also supported the concept.

In Hindutva, Savarkar described Hindus as a nation because they acknowledged India as their fatherland and land of worship... The stream of Hindu separatism began to flow like the Paataal Ganga (underground Ganga)...

What in Nehru's time were parties of marginal importance, drawing inspiration from Savarkar's concept of Hindutva — the RSS, the Hindu Mahasabha, the Jan Sangh, the Shiv Sena, the Bajrang Dal — gathered strength and became the main opposition to secular forces. After indulging in mosque-breaking, church-burning and attacks on missionaries, they went on to perpetrate pogroms...

Coining a new definition of 'Hindu' to suit his goals, Savarkar developed a powerful instrument to exploit the emotions and passions of the Hindus against the rest."

The most violent explosion of this fanaticism occurred in the eighties, when India's military might was aimed against Sikhs' holiest shrines and several thousand innocent worshippers were gunned down in 1984.

In their relatively short history, it was not the first time Sikhs' had suffered desecration of their holy shrines, but certainly the first time it was inflicted by their 'own' government and not a foreign raider or ruler. It hurt badly.

Various credible revelations and subsequent publications have gone on to confirm the Sikhs' worst fears that a situation had been maliciously engineered to justify disproportional use of military force against innocent worshippers on a day of historic commemoration. This was totally unwarranted.

While it is not possible to overstate the suffering of the victims and their grieving families, it is reasonable to ask a few pertinent questions a full quarter of a century later. They might provide clues to the underlying motivations for the past human tragedies and reasons for comfort or relief, if any, as we look towards our community's collective future.

Why was it deemed appropriate to undermine and subvert a legitimate Punjab movement for greater rights for the provinces in keeping with the constitutional provisions and presented as 'Anandpur Sahib Resolution'?

Although the leaders of the movement consistently and publicly distanced themselves from it, still the charter of political and economic demands was misrepresented to the people of India as a Sikh attempt to carve an independent political entity, outside India as well. Why?

While the charter of demands (Anandpur Sahib Resolution) was fully compliant with the constitution of India, why were the Sikhs, spearheading this movement, presented to the people of India as 'anti-Indian, separatists, secessionists, terrorists and violent people'?

Why did the seemingly free and independent mass-media of India chose to reinforce and propagate a politically conceived fabrication of Sikhs as being anti-Indian, terrorist, and violent?

What good for the country and its

people could possibly emerge from ostracizing, humiliating, discrediting, ridiculing, incarcerating and killing innocent citizens of the country who belong to a highly visible religious minority?

In what manner have the members of all religious minorities in India been re-assured through effective words and deeds that no minority community in the country will again face the murderous might of its government in ways the Sikhs suffered during the eighties and beyond?

What meaningful initiatives have been undertaken by the government to mitigate the indignities, humiliations and sufferings inflicted on the Sikhs by their own government in Punjab, in Delhi and elsewhere, during the decade of the eighties and beyond?

I was born in India. So were my parents, their parents and so on. It is conceivable that some self-proclaimed super-nationalists of India will take exception to my asking the questions and attempting to hold the leadership accountable for their serious misdeeds in the recent past. 'Loyalty to the nation' does not lie in subordination or subservience to the political leaders or the chosen representatives of the people. Loyalty lies in ensuring that the people given the powers do not run amok and play havoc with the constitution, with the due processes of governance and with the lives and liberties of the people they are expected to serve, loyally, honestly and faithfully.

As readers savor the pleasures of belonging to a country that is no longer under foreign subjugation or rule, they will hopefully conduct an incisive and honest analysis of the events and achievements that India's government, its people and its media have participated in and claimed credits for: Courage lies in standing up and owning up to ones' misdeeds, short-comings and the consequences, and not in applying the powers of the state to silence critics and cover ones' tracks with coercive and repressive criminal force.

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