

A mirage called equality

The clarion call for freedom triumphed on August 15, 1947. What followed in its wake, along the road to transfer of power, were heart-wrenching stories of inhuman cruelty. The wounds never healed but found expression in pathological prejudice which dominates the national discourse even today. We also lost a colossus who brought the Empire to its knees. [Mahatma Gandhi](#), a beacon epitomising the values of humanism, became a victim of obscurantist forces which raise their ugly head ever so often. India became free but her soul is trapped in the existential conflict between unity and diversity.

On January 26, 1950, India became a republic in which the people, not monarchs, are sovereign. That day we buried our imperial past and the people gave unto themselves a Constitution which strove to build an egalitarian, liberal democracy.

But egalitarianism, even after 68 years, is a mirage. For the poor and the marginalised, equality of opportunity is a far cry. The journey of unequal opportunities starts with the poor anaemic lactating mother, deprived of nutrition, fearing that her undernourished, underweight children, may grow up stunted. They grow up sans quality schooling. Poor infrastructure and absentee teachers bedevil the system. Poverty and other factors see children drop out of school. As adults, they are either unemployed or underemployed. Life becomes a daily struggle for survival for they lack both skills and resources. For the haves, their children in private schools are empowered and become engines of growth for the nation. Economic disparities have increased. Rural poor, who comprise a majority of the 93 per cent of Indian households, earn less than Rs 21,000 a month while the richest 1 per cent own 73 per cent of the country's wealth. Inequality of opportunities impacts the exercise of fundamental rights. The poor are either silent or speechless and those who make themselves heard are not counted.

Environments conducive for communal and caste violence are engineered — yet another aspect of mindsets perpetrating inequalities. This chasm makes egalitarianism a constitutional chimera.

Farmers, the backbone of our agricultural economy, are facing a crisis. News of farmer indebtedness and resulting suicides are read and forgotten.

While floods wash away their dreams and drought impacts livelihoods, Digital India and Bharat Net are touted as milestones that will connect India though 59 per cent of the youth have never worked on a computer and 64 per cent have never used the Internet (ASER report 2017). The disconnect between people and government is palpable. The government works overtime to provide for speedy banking transactions and push [Aadhaar](#) while millions are in distress. The economic engine has slowed down and the promise of jobs eludes us. The outcome is the emergence of caste and identity politics. Jats in Haryana, Patidars in Gujarat, Kapus in Andhra Pradesh and Marathas in Maharashtra seek quotas in government jobs. The finance minister now admits that the economy was bound to falter in the short-term because of demonetisation and GST. The marginalised are oblivious of what is likely to happen in the long-term as their daily lives are a struggle for survival. This social churning is likely to find expression in forms that no one in government seems to have a plan to engage with.

Democracy functions only when all the stakeholders are heard and their views taken on board during decision-making. It thrives in an environment in which transparency and accountability are the norm. Our republic is threatened when freedom of speech is muzzled, when independent voices are subjected to suppression and non-believers coerced into silence. A state in which traditional professions become hazardous enterprises, where worldviews are attacked by obscurantist and fringe elements and where heartrending tales of violation of women and young

girls abound, may have a functional electoral system but the other basic characteristics of democracy are missing. It makes us wonder about the quality of our journey as a republic.

The foundation of our republic is based on values that are liberal, where the law has primacy and where courts administer it without fear or favour. But today liberal thought is looked upon with suspicion, liberal minds and deeds are termed anti-national. We witness investigating agencies bending the law. They persecute and prosecute individuals to serve a political agenda. A republic where the family of a judge cries foul and the judicial fraternity is silent is far removed from the values we cherish. We note with disbelief when investigating agencies choose not to file appeals against those charged with serious crimes and do a turnaround in favour of the accused in pending investigations because the government has changed. Such a republic stands diminished. More so when fear becomes an instrument of state oppression.

Despite all this, there is hope. The heroes of our past were not just those stalwarts who led our national movement but the many, unknown and unsung, who sacrificed their lives so that we march on. Our hope lies in those who are still committed to our republic, its liberal values and ethos and its inclusive dream. It is that hope we celebrate today, this 26th day of January, 2018.

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