

AT THE HEART OF THE REPUBLIC

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Indian Constitution - Historical underpinnings & Evolution

January 26, 1950. The date is 70 years old. And seems to belong not just to a distant age but to another planet.

A statesman stepped down from the office of Head of State that day and another, no less distinguished, stepped into his place. Hours before his departure from the nation's first residence in the national capital for his bare-bones home in Madras, India's last Governor General Chakravarti Rajagopalachari spoke with restrained emotion of Jawaharlal Nehru and Sardar Patel in his parting speech: "The Prime Minister and his first colleague the Deputy Prime Minister together make a possession which makes India rich in every sense of the term," he said. And added: "The former commands universal love, the latter universal confidence. Not a tear need be shed for anyone going as long as these two stand foursquare against the hard winds to which our country may be exposed."

Moving that day from a life career of startling austerity to that high domed mansion of great expectations, India's first President Rajendra Prasad said with unrestrained optimism: "Our Constitution is a democratic instrument seeking to ensure to individual citizens the freedoms which are so invaluable. India has never prescribed or prosecuted opinion or faith and our philosophy has room as much for a devotee of a personal god as for an agnostic or atheist. We shall, therefore, be only implementing in practice under our Constitution what we have inherited from our traditions, namely freedom of opinion and expression. Under the new set-up which we are inaugurating today we hope to live up to the teachings of our Master...."

Seventy years on we are entitled to ask if we have someone or anyone who commands universal love and someone or anyone who commands universal confidence among us, the people of India. The frank answer is, there is none. I say this not to make anyone look smaller than his right size or to diminish anyone's stature below his own natural height. And I also say this with the knowledge that it is quite standard and regular for persons to have non-overpowering attributes. But the fact is that we have today no one in our public life, be it in the ruling dispensation or in the ranks of the Opposition who may be said to command that purest of sentiments — love, or that truest of offerings — confidence. True, we have loyalists and followers. But loyalty and following come from sources and for reasons, unrelated to the heart of feeling.

The ruling dispensation and its supporters would, as they should, point to our Prime Minister and the Union Home Minister as an ideal combination though, out of caution, they would refrain from calling this power structure a duumvirate. Those in the Congress and its orbit would, likewise, point to the Congress President, her son and her daughter and find strength in that threesome without calling it a triumvirate. We may not begrudge them their loyalty or their devotion. That is how politics and party politics work. But we must point to them the difference between a leader whom leadership is seeking and a leader with whom leadership is playing hide and seek.

Our Prime Minister is seen by the faithful as possessing an "immaculacy" and our Home Minister as endowed with an immediacy. The two doubtless make for a persuasive mutuality in power that can be the envy of any Number One and Number Two team anywhere. A Prime Minister should have sheen, a Home Minister should look tough. India needs those qualities in these two offices. But immaculacy, in the essential sense of that term or concept is not the prerogative of human flesh, much less of political tissue. It may be claimed only by mythology and folklore, by super-naturals, not in real life.

As for immediacy, it is an admirable trait in one who is responsible for the nation's safety and security. But it is as a trait, the smart cousin of decisiveness and can turn into a power at the service of the nation, yes, but also at the call of power politics. Nehru was honest, he was fallible. Patel was tough, he was human. And so one commanded love, the other confidence.

If the two attributes in our first Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister that Rajagopalachari mentioned are missed today, the invaluable freedoms that Rajendra Prasad spoke of are also under challenge.

A Constitution hewn out of the aspirations of the freedom struggle under Mahatma Gandhi's leadership, crafted by men and women of insight, commitment and reformative zeal, enriched by the experience of the world's great democratic republics, was brought to life by the people of India on that, our first Republic Day. The famous photograph of Jawaharlal Nehru signing the freshly-bound and illuminated copy of the Constitution of India is a mural. The one of Sardar Patel signing it along with John Mathai, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur and Jairamdas Daulatram is a mosaic.

For some three years prior to that day, members of the Constituent Assembly, numbering about 300, had met, debated, argued, differed, expressed and overcome doubts, and heard Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, as Chairman of the Drafting Committee describe the intent and effect of each draft Article. Then, with a great sense of purpose they finally put their seal of approval on the document they had cradled. Their work brought our Republic into being, our people — us — into an ownership of our destinies and positioned leaders of outstanding agitational ability in offices of challenging administrative responsibility.

The still centre of that document is the Preamble to the Constitution. And of that Preamble, to use a phrase associated with Ramana Maharshi, its heart-cave (*hridaya-kuhara-madhya*) is the line that says we are giving to ourselves 'Liberty — of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship'. On this the 70th anniversary of our Republic, we cannot but ask how that pre-ambular, that is, before-you-even-start, attribute of our Republican life, fares.

And what is the answer we hear in that heart-cave?

Contrary to what readers of this column may think, I am going to say it fares well.

Well? Well? A deeply disturbed dissenter may ask: 'With three former Chief Ministers of Jammu & Kashmir imprisoned, the media wary, the bureaucracy timid, the judiciary cautious, how can you say liberty fares well in India ?'

I will accept the earnestness of the question and yet maintain it fares well because, for one, *The Hindu* is publishing this article of mine, and for another that the young in India, students and youth, by their almost entirely peaceful protests over the last few weeks, have vivified youth's hearkening to J.P.'s call in 1974 and to Anna Hazare's in our recent memory. Did those movements not peter out? Yes and no. Those two leaders did not come to hold office but the nefarious 42nd Amendment to the Constitution was to a large extent sanitised and the fact is that a movement became a party and that party has won a huge mandate.

The democratic spirit of the people of India is strong and if it stays non-violent and refuses to be co-opted by vested interests, it will make a difference that neither the protesting young and not-so-young nor the state can quite visualise.

Meanwhile we have Rajagopalachari's and Rajendra Prasad's sagacious words telling us that India is traditionally, instinctively and irreversibly about love, confidence and — liberty.

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