



# WHO OWNS INDIA?

**Fifty-nine years on, the argumentative Indian in us needs reviving. We must be citizens first, consumers later. Democracy survives because we ask questions.**



Priyamvada Gopal

Recently on the BBC, some of us criticised attempts to glorify the so-called 'Anglobalisation' or British colonialism as a precedent for American global domination. We were scolded by the South Asia correspondent, for what she called our 'blame game'. Claiming to speak for younger Indians (like me), the America-raised correspondent assured British listeners that this generation had no interest in its "anachronistic" colonial past because it could "take ownership" of India and its problems.

Though the correspondent's task was to help a nervous BBC underplay criticism of empires past and present, her phrase is worth pondering as we approach the 60th anniversary of Independence. What did and does it mean to take 'ownership' of a nation? To lay claim to India today, must we 'secede from history', as the narrator of *Midnight's Children* puts it? Is this at all possible, given how much of the present—and the future—is shaped by the past? Moreover, are there not lessons to be learnt from history that might enable us precisely to take full and responsible ownership of the present? If the past weren't important, why would some people, including imperialists and religious chauvinists, keep trying to rewrite it? In many traditions, a 60th anniversary signals a time to reflect, take stock and consolidate wisdom. Our past has much to offer us in this regard.

No one else has ever needed to tell Indians to take responsibility for their country and its challenges. Even early nationalists were clear that problems like poverty or communal discord could not be blamed on the British alone. They saw that while British colonialism contributed greatly to widespread impoverishment, the hardening of religious identities and the subsequent spread of communal tensions, change would only occur if Indians took a good hard look at their own role in shaping their society and culture. Our greatest thinkers understood that formal independence did not automatically result in 'ownership' of the nation. In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi, asserting that a newspaper must "fearlessly

expose popular defects", described true freedom as a thorough transformation of one's own self and society. Switching ownership of the economy from British captains of industry to Indian CEOs would not be enough; true patriotism was a regard for "the welfare of the whole people". Rabindranath Tagore had already warned against blaming "all our miseries and shortcomings" on "the historical surprises that burst upon us from outside". The author of our national anthem likened refusing to change in the name of tradition to a man "whose legs have become shrivelled and useless, trying to delude himself that these limbs have grown still because they have attained their ultimate salvation".

Though we have yet to fully debate the legacy of Partition, when Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims alike inflicted horrific violence upon each other, writers like Saadat Hasan Manto and Amrita Pritam did speak out then as well. While Partition was undoubtedly the culmination of divide-and-rule colonialism, they recognised that we participated fully

in its making and must take responsibility for our barbarous and blood-soaked conduct then. Even in despair, Manto glimpsed the *insaana* (human) inside our *haiwaan* (beast) and held to the belief that the former would triumph in the long run. We must hope that Manto may yet be proven right, though the *haiwaan* has shown up quite often since, perhaps most disturbingly in the Gujarat pogroms of 2002.

Our greatest resources of hope, however, are the subcontinent's unique traditions of questioning, self-criticism and debate, some of which Amartya Sen has discussed brilliantly in terms of the quintessentially "argumentative Indian". Indeed, the wonder repeatedly expressed by Europeans and Americans at India's thriving democracy derives partly from an ignorance of the subcontinent's long-standing hospitality to diversity, debate and dissent. Whenever there have been attempts to suppress this, it has necessitated the use of immense force, in the form of censorship, military intervention or the abuse of Emergency



SUMEET INDER SINGH

## 671 m

voters in 2004, of whom 322 m were female. India has the world's largest electorate.



## 4,663

the total number of elected Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha representatives. Britain has only 643 MPs.

## 283

assembly elections held in India apart from 14 general elections

## 8%

women's representation in the 14th Lok Sabha, while 34 per cent of India's 3.5 million village legislators are women

## 1,73,000 sq km

the size of the Ladakh parliamentary constituency, India's largest. The largest in the world, Kalgoorlie in western Australia, is 22,55,000 sq km.

## 58.07%

of eligible Indian voters cast their ballot in the 2004 general elections, compared to 64 per cent in the 2004 US presidential elections

## 2

independent MPs in the 14th Lok Sabha, compared to 37 in the first

## 6

the number of times both the Congress and the Janata Dal have split. The Communist Party of India has split only twice.





GENERATION AWAKENS: (From left) Shukla, Rajpurohit and Chandrashekar are determined to correct the system

## Rise of Yuva

A few disgruntled youth decide to take it upon themselves to straighten the flaws of the Indian political system and stem the spreading rot. The plot of *Yuva*? Not quite. It's the Lok Paritran (LP), a political party

started by a group of under-30s. "But that does not mean it is a party only for the young," clarifies Ajit Shukla, national working committee member and treasurer of the party. Founded by Tanmay Rajpurohit, an IIT graduate who returned from the US to work in rural Rajasthan, in Jodhpur, the LP has acquired the status of a national party in less than six months, thanks to its foray into the south with the assembly elections in Tamil Nadu this May.

None of the six candidates fielded by the party won, but they put up tough competition. In Mylapur the LP candidate came third and together, the candidates polled more than 35,000 votes. Door-to-door campaigning, blogs, community-run websites, SMS and chain emails did the trick for the

party, which caught the imagination of educated youth. "The apathy towards electoral procedures is due to the rotten political structure. When people are made to choose the lesser evil, they prefer not to choose at all," says Shukla. The LP is a party of highly educated individuals, a lot of them, like Vice-President Amit Beesen and Chandrashekar, are engineering graduates from the IITs. It may seem elitist, but it is also honest—everyone on the four-member committee has quit well-paying jobs to make this work.

Making a mark on the political scene is not easy and the party learnt it the hard way. In the second week of July, its office was attacked and the LP was warned to shut shop—a threat validating the party's impact. Lack of resources is the biggest problem plaguing the LP today. Most members—there are 25,000 including online members—make contributions and all posts are honorary with no reimbursements.

The party has declared that it is anti-reservation and is, at the moment, focusing on the corporation elections in Chennai, Delhi and Bangalore in 2007, and Assembly elections in Goa and Delhi. "Everything has happened so soon that it's a bonus," says Rajpurohit. Will youth power prevail over a system steeped in corruption? The Lok Paritran may well have the answer. **by Nirmala Ravindran**

powers. Our democracy survives because we ask questions.

Among our challenges, 59 years into formal sovereignty and almost two decades into our tryst with globalisation, is that of retaining ownership of this heritage of heterogeneity, under siege by a range of forces from McWorld Inc to Hindutva and Islamism. Typically seen as opposed forces, they actually have a great deal in common. All three advocate homogenisation, the narrowing of economic, social, spiritual and political choices. 'McWorld,' the America-led spread of corporatisation, has reduced 'freedom' to the licence to choose between brands. "Swadeshmoto", cries an advertisement for an international brand in an ironic, even mocking allusion to anti-colonial attempts to gain owner-

# 3.37m

voters in Outer Delhi parliamentary constituency, the largest number in the world. In comparison, Isle of Wight, UK's largest, has only 1,08,253.

# 93

amendments in the Indian Constitution, compared to 27 in the US Constitution in 217 years



**12.83%** of members between the ages of 25 and 40 in the 14th Lok Sabha. The first Lok Sabha was younger, with 25.85% in the same age group.

**136** 14th Lok Sabha MPs with criminal backgrounds. The first Lok Sabha had none.



**147** postgraduate Lok Sabha MPs in 2004, compared to 85 in 1952

MANEESH AGNIHOTRI



JUNGLE BOOK: People of Koska village patrol the forest

## A Green Mile

Rabindranath Tagore's "*jadi tor daak shune keu naa aashe tabe ekla chalo re...* (If they answer not to thy call, walk alone...)" echoes through the dense jungles of Orissa's Neyagarh district. Inspired by "*ekla chalo*", people here walked the hills that were covered with thick forests before Independence but were slowly denuded by drought. They formed a Jungle Surakshya Mahasangh (Forest Protection Federation) and in two decades achieved what high-sounding government campaigns could not. Today, thick forests cover over 2.5 lakh acre of land.

In Koska village, 5 km from Neyagarh district headquarters, volunteers patrol the woods, day and night, by rotation to keep out the timber mafia. "We have nurtured every tree like our own child," says Vishwanath Baral, president of Ghantulai Jungle Surakshya Samiti. Efforts at reforestation began in the 1980s, but isolated attempts coalesced in 1992, when the Mahasangh was born. There are 1.5 million active members from 65,000 households. A thousand volunteers are forest guards while about 10,000 people make sal leaf plates. Another 8,000 pluck tendu (beedi) leaves and 6,500 sell firewood. Besides, 5,000 work as bamboo artisans, 1,000 as charcoal-makers, 200 trade in forest produce and a hundred are wood carvers. Everyone makes Rs 40 to 50 a day. The committees function on an annual contribution of Rs 4 per family. By restoring Orissa's natural heritage to her former splendour, these villagers have set an example for the world. **by Farzand Ahmed**

ship of India's political economy. This regime calls upon us to be consumers first, citizens second. While a prospering middle-class gobbles crumbs off rich corporate tables in a feeding frenzy, the hungry stay, by and large, hungry. India still has the most malnourished people in the world: chronic hunger affects over 200 million Indians. Even advocates of globalisation like former World Bank economist, Joseph Stiglitz, have conceded that "something has gone horribly wrong". Globalisation "is not making life better for those most in need of its promised benefits".

Meanwhile, the purveyors of 'Hindutva', profoundly un-Hindu in their attempt to force Hinduism to become an authoritarian and codified religion, seek to reduce the remarkable and ancient elasticity of Indian pluralism to the paltry tolerance of "well-behaved minorities" in their Hindu Rashtra. Militant Islamism aspires to a similar tyranny by narrowing the great cultural and spiritual reach of Islam to a handful of authoritarian diktats issued by self-appointed jihadi leaders. They, like their Hindutvawadi brethren, do not shy away from harming the innocent through cowardly violence, most recently in the attacks on Mumbai's trains. Each provides the justification for the other.

Ironically, we see in the rise of these forces a return to some of the basic features of colonialism: the concentration of wealth under mercantile interests, the erosion of social welfare goals like mass literacy, public distribution systems, universal healthcare and land reform, and the assertion of cultural supremacy by vested interests willing to use violence. How can we own India when we allow questionable forms of 'development' to dispossess people of their own land? What about the paradox that as more and more middle-class individuals come to own cars, homes, and plasma screen televisions, the less we seem to own as a national community? Has economic 'growth', as extolled by the proud statistics of a nation 'shining', really spelled growth for all? As we celebrate 59 years as a nation, a fundamentally collective entity, then why are we reckoning with the loss of ownership of some things? The longstanding public-private gulf in primary education has already created a divided society: what then are the implications of further privatising healthcare, and higher education? Why is the state disowning its fundamental responsibilities regarding healthcare, education and food distribution?

Spoilsport questions at a time to celebrate? Perhaps. Then again, perhaps the tradition we most need to celebrate is that of asking questions of ourselves and rethinking the course we tread. It is in doing so that we will come to own India, at long last, fully and collectively.

The writer teaches at Cambridge University

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