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REFLECTIONS

past & present

RAMACHANDRA GUHA

A GREAT GANDHIAN,
A GREATER PATRIOT

India became independent on August 15, 1947. On the same day, five years previously, a great patriot died in prison. His name was Mahadev Desai, and he is known to history as 'Gandhi's secretary', a description that scarcely does justice to his contributions to the making of the Mahatma or to the movement for freedom from British rule.

Desai was a lawyer by training and a scholar by temperament. In August 1917, shortly before he joined the Ashram, Gandhi told Desai that 'I have found in you just the type of young man for whom I have been searching for the last two years.' He had discovered 'three outstanding qualities' in him, these being 'regularity, fidelity and intelligence'. 'I have got in you the man I wanted', Gandhi said to Desai: 'The man to whom I can entrust all my work some day and be at ease, and to whom I can rely with confidence.'

Nine months later, Gandhi wrote to Desai: 'You have made yourself indispensable to me. ... It is for your efficiency and character that I have chosen you to help me in my political work and you have not disappointed me. Add to this the fact that you can cook khichdi for me, with so much love.' Then, in February 1919, Gandhi told his nephew

Maganlal that Desai 'has come to be my hands and feet, and my brain as well, so that without him I feel like one who has lost the use of legs and speech. The more I know him, the more I see his virtues. And he is as learned as [he is] virtuous.'

For 25 years, Desai was Gandhi's closest associate and confidant. Through this period, Desai meant more to Gandhi than Jawaharlal Nehru and Vallabhbhai Patel (a fact that Nehru and Patel knew and acknowledged). Apart from transcribing Gandhi's words and drafting his letters, Desai also served as his interpreter, travel manager, interlocutor, fellow jailbird, and, when necessary, cook. Far more learned than his master, he tutored him on sociology, literature, and history, and much else besides. Desai often disputed with Gandhi on matters of principle and politics, and sometimes even got him to change his mind.

Desai and Gandhi were both arrested in Bombay on August 9, 1942, shortly after the passing of the 'Quit India' resolution. They were interned in the Aga Khan's house in Poona, where, six days later, Desai died of a heart attack. He was only 50.

The news of Desai's passing took some time to seep out of jail. But, as it did, a wave of condolences came in from across the country.



Illustration: MALAY KARMAKAR

A file in the archives has more than 300 letters/telegrams on Desai's death, addressed to his wife Durga, their son Narayan, or to Gandhi. These were written in Gujarati, Hindi, English, and Marathi, with a couple even in Tamil. They came from, among other places, the Gujarat Mitra Mandali, Secunderabad; the district boards of Madura, Nellore, Chidambaram, Jalgaon, Thana, and Anand; the staff and students of the Bombay University School of Sociology and Economics (calling Desai 'one of the most devoted workers in the country's cause'); the Co-operative Banks of Dhulia and Bular; the Ahmedabad Bar Association (noting that Desai was a former member); the Sahitya Sabha of Surat (for

Desai was an accomplished and widely published litterateur as well); the Poona Journalists Association (which noted that apart from his services to Gandhi and the nation, 'as a journalist Shri Desai distinguished himself as an outstanding champion of the freedom of the Press'); and the propaganda secretary of the Punjab Students' Federation (a Communist front, in theory opposed to the Congress), who wrote to Narayan that 'your father's loss is an irreparable loss to the nation. India is today intellectually poorer than it was four days back' (and so it was).

Perhaps the most poignant of all the letters came from the wife of a Congressman in Delhi in whose house Desai had often stayed. The

hostess remembered the affection and intelligence of a man she had come to regard as a brother. 'Hum kya saara bhara unke liye rotay hai', she said: 'Why only me, the whole of India weeps for him today, before adding: 'jab tak Hindustan aur Mahatma ji ka nam rahega tab tak Mahadev bhai bhi jinda hain'—Till such time as India and the name of Mahatma Gandhi are known, the memory of Mahadev will be alive too. Seventy-five years on, India is independent and democratic, Gandhi is much memorialised (and much criticised), but the role of Mahadev Desai in our freedom struggle is mostly forgotten.

In this age of manufactured patriotism, when politicians (and television anchors) loudly trumpet their love for the country, to recall Desai may seem an anachronism. For one reason he is so little remembered today is that, in addition to all the qualities I have described, he was remarkably self-effacing. But Gandhi himself knew what Desai meant to him and his movement. In September 1938, when Desai came close to a breakdown because of over-work and his refusal to take a holiday, Gandhi wrote to him: 'Shall we say you have a mania for work? Don't you know if you were to be disabled, I would be a bird without wings? If you became bed-ridden, I would have to wind up three-fourths of my activities'.

Perhaps no finer or more truthful tribute has ever been paid by a famous politician to a mere 'secretary'. For Gandhi, more than anyone else, made India; and Mahadev Desai, more than anyone else, made Gandhi.

Ramachandra Guha's books include *Gandhi Before India*. The views expressed are personal

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KARAN THAPAR

INDIRA: DURGA WITH
A SENSE OF HUMOUR

It's a felicitous coincidence that this year marks both the seventieth anniversary of India's independence as well as the centenary of Indira Gandhi's birth. Polls suggest she is the prime minister most Indians regard as the best we've had. And certainly in the seven decades since independence her 16 years in office saw both the acme of India's achievement—the Bangladesh victory—as well as the nadir and shame—the Emergency. She was the critical factor in both.

Today, when many believe that Narendra Modi's strengths and weaknesses bear resemblance to those of Indira Gandhi, it's worth recalling how different her public persona was to the private individual. This is why she can, with accuracy, be thought of as a political monster but also a delightful personality. It's possible this could be true of our present prime minister.

The Indira Gandhi most people remember is the political virago who decimated the syndicate, defeated Pakistan, stood up to America, appointed chief ministers at will, damaged institutions and imposed the Emergency. This was the forbidding side of her. It led Atal Bihari Vajpayee to call her Durga and the western media The Empress of India.

The private Indira Gandhi was surprisingly different. She was petite, with delicate, almost fragile hands. Her letters to Dorothy Norman reveal a troubled personality struggling between the political demands on her life and her inner wish for solitude and quiet contemplation.

In a recent fascinating book, Jairam Ramesh reveals her involvement with nature. She loved animals, was extremely knowledgeable about trees and felt most at ease holidaying in the mountains. The survival of the bird



Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, New York, March 31, 1966 BETTMANN ARCHIVE

sanctuary in Bharatpur and the conservation of the Indian Tiger would probably never have happened without her.

Indira Gandhi also had an impish sense of fun. In the 60s, when deference and formality still determined our lives, she would organise treasure hunts for her children's friends' parties. The clues were innocently naughty. They included fish bones from Alps, then a restaurant in Janpath, and a policeman's helmet. No one knew that the architect of this harm-

less mischief was Indira Gandhi. In 1976, at the height of the Emergency, when her power was unchallenged, I recall a breakfast at Safdarjung Road before she took me and my sisters to see one of the pink panther films at Rashtrapati Bhavan. When it was time for a quick pee before leaving for the cinema, my sister Premila asked her how she managed on her travels. I'll never forget her reply. 'It's a dreadful problem for every woman politician. Unlike men, we can't go behind a tree! So I drink all the water I need last thing at night in the hope it's out of the system by the morning.'

Indira Gandhi also had a dry and subtle sense of humour. Speaking to Peter Ustinov about the appalling state of the Indian telephone system she said: 'They call it cross-bar but I think they mean cross-wire.' At the time, that said it all.

Inevitably, Indira, the individual, is either not known or forgotten. The myth, on the other hand, lives on. I suspect something similar could be true of Narendra Modi.

Of course, the private person doesn't excuse the public politician and history will judge both people by their behaviour in office. But there's always another side, even if only friends and relatives remember it. But then you could also say Caligula loved horses and Nero had a ear for music...

The views expressed are personal

deepcut

RAJESH MAHAPATRA

INDIA@70: WHERE DO
WE GO FROM HERE?

Seventy years is not really a long time for an ancient civilisation. But for a young nation, seven decades of memory, experience and events are more than enough to contrast India's present with its immediate past. This comparison, however, would be unhelpful if we reduce it to a simple stock-taking exercise. Today's India has become faster and better in so many ways that it would be unfair to compare and contrast over material advancements.

Rather, reflecting on 70 years of Independent India should be about understanding the many imaginations around her future. Especially, amongst those who are increasingly becoming louder, voluble and clearer as the days go by. And here is where India is becoming more surprising, more curious and more intriguing by the day.

Notably, the past few years have

seen a spurt in agitations and massive stirrings by 'backward caste' farming communities, who urban India believed had gained much from commercial agriculture, green revolution technologies, subsidies and the expansion of primary commodity markets. A layer of rural India that became so 'well off' that they were referred to as the 'rurban'—beyond rural, but not entirely urban.

The festering Jat protests in Haryana have, however, put more than a pause on our views of today's rural India. How and why should such an eruption occur in a state which has the highest per capita income (about ₹1.5 lakh a year, at 2013-14 prices)? Does more development cause even more unmanageable aspirations? The recent patidar 'revolt' in Gujarat has added more fat to this fire. The western Indian state is witness to a patidar ferment despite being one of India's most industrialised and fastest growing states

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over the past two decades. Shouldn't rapid industrialisation have spurred the rural sector—attracting its youth for jobs, making demands on agricultural produce and inspiring ancillary industries? And lastly, just for us to emphasise the point, witness the case of the humongous Maratha silent protests in the state of Maharashtra, which is the nation's financial powerhouse. Why is the mix of Mumbai and Bollywood not enough for the Marathas?

Economists and political analysts have pointed out that much of this discontent, alongside the desperation and violence by these farming communities, is no great mystery. Ever since agricultural commodity prices have dipped and input costs have risen, this other wise dynamic segment in rural India, despite their material and social clout, has experienced palpable economic distress. Simply put, farming does not pay like it used to, which is why, for some TV channels, it is now only Jai Jawan.

While we thus do know the sources

of India's current rural crises, what is most intriguing is how these farming communities are arguing and protesting a way out for themselves. Their demands are clear: They want government jobs and modern education through quotas and the time-tested belief in reservations. Their quest for a new future, in effect, is more about India's past rather than its present.

While for India's successful urban children, a permanent government job is seen to be stifling and 'totally uncool' even as a financial aspiration, the reverse seems to hold as one moves out of the city. Are large social chunks of India, in effect, still seeing the Nehruvian mixed economy and the Ambedkerite social inclusion model as viable pathways for meaningful futures?

One must emphasise, here, that if anything, the agitations by these middle castes tell us that they are not the start-up, stand-up, risk-taking entrepreneurial individuals. Instead, they seem to consider the community as the basic social bloc for economic movement. And their discontent and anger appears to be growing amidst statistically successful developed states.

If the argument is that imaginations about the future help shape and define aspirations, then India's 70 years is still an open ideological debate. The idea about what comprises progress cannot be taken for granted, or assumed.

Interact with the author @rajeshmahapatra

bigpicture

IAN BREMMER

TROUBLE FOR EU
IS FAR FROM OVER

The sharp slowdown in the migrant crisis since 2015, Emmanuel Macron's defeat of anti-EU populist Marine Le Pen in France earlier this year, and the likely re-election of Germany's Angela Merkel have reinvigorated optimism that Europe has survived yet another round of challenges. Not so fast. There will be many more problems to manage in coming months, and the current confidence is unlikely to last long.

The most remarkable outcome of France's elections was the scale of defeat for the centre-Right and centre-Left parties that have dominated politics for decades. Pro- or anti-EU, French voters want change, and Macron must deliver it with a legislature in which 70% of deputies are serving in government for the first time.

The new president quickly lost 10 percentage points from his early approval rating as citizens look past the easy smile and confident speeches toward cuts in social spending. And as his predecessors discovered, labour reform, no matter how skillfully presented, draws unions into the streets.

Then there is Italy, a country that remains in political stalemate. The next elections, likely in the first half of 2018, are increasingly likely to produce either another fragmented government that can't advance much-needed political and economic reforms or a Five Star Movement-led government that's openly hostile to the EU.

The migrant story continues to reshape Italy's political landscape. An EU deal with Turkey has sharply limited the flow of desperate people across the Aegean toward Greece, but arrivals in Italy increased 20% from 2015 to 2016. For the first half of this year, just 9,000 migrants reached Greece, and 4,000 arrived in Spain, while Italy has now taken in more than 90,000 people. Italian anger is rising as the French and Austrian governments seem more interested in tightening their borders

with Italy than with sharing even a small part of its burdens.

In particular, the Visegrad countries of Eastern Europe—Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia—were expected to accept about 11,000 refugees as part of this system. Slovakia and the Czech Republic have taken in 28 people, as of this writing, while Poland and Hungary have accepted zero. Hungary's Viktor Orbán has fully embraced the term 'illiberal democrat' as he battles to consolidate political control in that country, and Poland's Right-wing government is still working on legislation that would allow legislators to fire the country's judges and replace them with political cronies.

If all that weren't enough to worry about, there is also the quest of Turkey's president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, to give himself Putin-like powers in his country and the problems that creates between Turkey and the EU. Erdogan has discovered that public hostility toward Europe boosts his popularity at home, and a re-election bid next year is sure to create more friction with Germany and others. It could also jeopardise Erdogan's deal with the EU that keeps huge numbers of refugees in Turkey in exchange for European cash and various political promises. That deal will probably hold, because it works for both sides. If it doesn't, Europe could face another migrant crisis, reviving populist anger across the continent.

Add troubles with Trump, provocations from Putin, and the high-stakes complexities of Brexit negotiations. Merkel remains a force for stability, and Macron may energise reform in France and the EU more broadly, but it's clear that EU leaders will have their hands full for the rest of this year and beyond.

Ian Bremmer is president, Eurasia Group. The views expressed are personal

sundayletters

YECHURY'S RS EXIT WILL WEAKEN THE OPPOSITION

This refers to Yechury's Rajya Sabha exit a godsend for NDA (Sunday Sentiments, August 6) by Karan Thapar. Communist leader Yechury belongs to that rare group of parliamentarians who takes part in debates held in the House with great enthusiasm. Yechury's exit from the upper house will deprive the Opposition one of its important speakers. If there is a chance, the CPI(M) must reconsider its decision to not nominate Yechury to the Rajya Sabha.

SAMIUL HASSAN QUADRI BIKANER

Society can prevent dowry abuse

Lalita Panicker makes an important point in Don't ask your girls to 'adjust' to abuse (Engender, August 6) in saying that parents must have the courage to protect their daughters. Our society also has an important role to play. Anti-dowry forums and NGOs should play a proactive role in protecting young brides, wives and mothers from marital abuse. Such initiatives will deter anyone who think they can get away by abusing women.

MAHTAB AHMAD TICKTHI ALIGARH

The poor must not pay for the rich

Apropos Rajesh Mahapatra's Deal with bad loans to get economy ticking (Deep Cut, August 6), a major portion of NPAs belongs to macro defaulters. Why should the public be forced to pay for the misdeeds of some rich defaulters? How can a bank penalise its customers by lowering interest rates to make up for the loss from NPAs?

SUJIT DE KOLKATA

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thisweekthatera

PICTURE OF
THE WEEK

AUG 13: Fifty-nine former Indian rulers and their successors met in New Delhi on Saturday (Aug 12), the first get-together of its kind since the dissolution of the Chamber of Princes after Independence



August 13-19, 1967 >> FROM THE ARCHIVES OF THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

NEWS OF THE WEEK

INDIA

1,642 THEFTS IN DELHI
IN A MONTH

AUG 13: In the past one month, 1,642 burglaries and thefts have been reported from all over the Union Territory. As many as 490 have occurred in the last one week, giving an average of nearly 70 burglaries and thefts a day

WORLD

SOVIET TROOPS IN
MONGOLIA: CHINA

AUG 19: China said today the Soviet Union had occupied Mongolia by sending in 'tens of thousands' of troops. It charged Mongolian PM Yumzhagyn Tsendenbal with selling Mongolia's sovereignty to the Soviet Union