

75 Years Post-Independence, India's Tryst with Fear

Written by Ajay Gudavarthy

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AJAY GUDAVARTHY, AUG 13 2021

While India celebrates its 75th Independence Day, it continues to remain an exceptionally open society that is making it difficult for the right-wing Hindutva project to instill fear. Apart from the various other sociological factors of caste, class and region, the project of a majoritarian *Hindu Rashtra* (nation) is sought to be achieved by way of silencing and disempowering the citizens. There is a concerted attempt to create fear and conspiracy. There have been spate of interconnected events in the recent past including the snoopgate controversy currently rocking the Parliament. It is believed that close to 1500 people have been targeted using the spyware, which includes journalists (40 of them belonging to leading dailies), academics, activists, industrialists, Constitutional functionaries, including judges, military officials and bureaucrats in the Election Commission.

Recent investigations revealed that many of the accused in the infamous Bhima Koregaon case that is about social activists' alleged connections with the insurrectionary Maoists and their attempt to incite violence have been targeted through the Pegasus spyware and incriminating documents falsely implanted in their computers. Prior to Bhima Koregaon, there was an indiscriminate accusation of students, journalists and activists who opposed the current regime branded as 'urban naxals'. It essentially meant they were all rebels working in urban areas and universities masquerading as activists and professionals. There were organised events of violence in course of elections in the capital city of Delhi and Jawaharlal Nehru University, apart from lawless vigilante groups indulging in mob lynching meant to create spectacles of fear and violence that were regularly with impunity beamed on television sets in drawing rooms.

While the intent of all this is clear, the effect of it is not. Fear refuses to settle and take a vice-like grip over the imagination of the citizenry. While one cannot deny hushed up talks, activists and others taking precautions, using coded language on social media and common people refusing to speak up openly as they often did. The symptoms of fear are visible but the kind of condensation necessary in creating a closed and totalitarian society is not being manufactured. It could well be read as being momentary, but it somehow does not seem to enter popular imagination. It is not uncommon for people to openly talk about alleged conspiracies and express their opinion about them. There are intense moments of fear, but it somehow does not seem to take an institutionalised form where public activity is primarily guided by fear. One needs to look closely at the possible reasons to make sense of the future of Indian democracy.

First, fear, possibly, fails to settle among activists and communities as a lot of activism and issues being addressed are localised in India. India continues to be provincial, and the 'imagined community' of a nation is often made sense through local imageries and imagination. Community bonding, caste-based solidarities, regional and linguistic affiliations here work as a solid bedrock of support and inspiration. Fear that is externally imposed is sought to be resisted by entrenched localism. Noted historian Romila Thapar in her recent book *Voices of Dissent*, succinctly observes that India was a civilization of dissent, and it is marked by heterogeneity and religious identities were marked by diverse localised sects than homogeneous unification.

Second, governance in India is run not by institutions and laws but by individuals. Institutions and procedures are fairly supple and vulnerable. There is no embedded legal or Constitutional imagination or morality. These can be easily bypassed and violated without much public rancour. It is in fact considered to be a common-sense that that is how institutions work or 'meant to work'. It has been easy for the current regime of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)

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to subvert laws and occupy institutions. There has been very little resistance by officials in the name of the sacrality of rules. In conditions of intimidation and fear, they crumbled without a whimper of resistance. But what keeps democracy going and attempts of instilling fear challenged is the phenomenon of 'conscientious individuals' in public life.

It is ironic that for a communitarian society, it is individual actions that stand out. Universities, the world of journalism, judiciary, bureaucracy, apart from social activism are marked by such exceptional individuals who are prepared to work in face of every kind of hardship, including death. Even the threat of physical intimidation and elimination does not budge such individuals to compromise what they believe in. It is their presence that disallows fear to become the norm and State often falters in dealing with them. The intimidation that it wishes to create through arbitrariness, impunity and the use of exceptional laws becomes a matter of public reasoning and debate.

Third, India's modernity precariously balances the relation between politics and cultural life. Politics is often gauged by cultural symbolism and also reduced to an uneventful exclusivity. In other words, politics become central to people's lifeworld through culture and politics in itself becomes a matter of banal routine or even a matter of indifference, notwithstanding the high emotions it invites. Behind the visible emotions, politics is seen with a sense of disdain and equated with instrumental reasoning, while culture is considered in the popular imagination to do with universal concerns.

One could even call it 'informed indifference', where the idea that State can become omnipotent simply does not seem to exist. It creates an intriguing condition where even if the State has become authoritarian it is seen and received with a degree of indifference. We might have conditions of a totalitarian state spying but the chilling effect it wishes to create is lost on its people. State in India, therefore, has to not only impose exceptionalism but has to inform its citizens that it is becoming lawless but with impunity and there is no case here to either hide or justify the lawlessness (to draw an analogy in a lighter vein, it reminds me of a heatwave in London, where it was needed to not only announce but remind people to drink water !).

Finally, fear as an external factor is difficult to impose because violence is routinised in India. I had in my earlier writings referred to India as a 'violent democracy' because violence is so complete that it is almost invisible. Brutalised conditions of existence that includes in rural hinterlands tremendous amounts of sexual violence against women, conditions of dispossession, bonded and child labour, hunger and more recently farmer suicides, apart from everyday caste-based violence being rampant. Fear becomes a non-event, as people cannot differentiate Statist violence as something being different but it is seen as part of the everyday normal.

India's independence is marked by an absence of freedom for swathes of its dispossessed population but that in itself creates a situation where fear cannot be an exclusive state project. How this will span out for Indian democracy in days to come has to be discussed at a future occasion.

About the author:

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