India Independence Day: Like Israel, India's Founding Values Challenged From Within by Religion

India and Israel strove to become democratic, modern nation-states upon independence but appear to be reaching the same outcome: founding ideals challenged from within

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A parent adjusts the costume of her child dressed as Lord Krishna for a competition during the Janmashtami celebration in Agartala, India, August 14, 2017. Arindam Dey / AFP

As the Indian republic completes 70 years of independence, its democracy has a record of worthy success against many odds. The political trajectory of this third world nation-state marvels as much as it intrigues.

In his famous speech at Parliament on August 14, 1947, India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, termed the moment of freedom from British rule “a tryst with destiny.” Nehru's speech was abstract, aspiring, and to an extent romantic.

Keeping in mind its colonial past, India's journey from 1947 to 2017 is one of remarkable political experiments in the postcolonial world. To begin with, fighting British colonialism and achieving political sovereignty was a radical achievement and among the high points of the decolonization moment on the world stage.

Aspiring to political equality against the sociocultural hierarchy of the caste system and patriarchy was another radical step. Aspiring to a secular and modern constitution based on an egalitarian and scientific temper was indeed radical for a society defined primarily by an overt religiosity. Article 51A of the Indian constitution explicitly sought to develop scientific temper, humanism and the spirit of inquiry and reform. Nehru had been emphasizing the need for a scientific temper in his 1946 book “Discovery of India” as essential to the pursuit of a modern, secular and democratic state.

Today, India can claim many achievements such as being the world's largest democracy possessing credible political institutions, a multiparty polity, a vibrant press and civil society, and a global diaspora. Religious and cultural diversity has been the cementing force for the integrity of the Indian experiment and is now a core aspect of its soft power. Overall, India's democratic functioning is indeed worthy of celebration.
Internationally, India is poised as a stable and important player. It enjoys good bilateral ties with the great powers, and as one of the fast-growing economies it is very much at the center of global attention.

How does one assess the “idea of India” as envisioned by its founding architects compared with India’s domestic and international character today? In his “Tryst of Destiny” speech, Nehru also spoke of the troubled past out of which India secured nationhood and sovereignty. An important element in that speech was Nehru’s set of worries about India’s future.

He cautioned: “We are citizens of a great country, on the verge of bold advance, and we have to live up to that high standard. All of us, to whatever religion we may belong, are equally the children of India with equal rights, privileges and obligations. We cannot encourage communalism or narrow-mindedness, for no nation can be great whose people are narrow in thought or in action.”

The narrow-mindedness that Nehru was apprehensive about continues in contemporary India. The idea of nationalism is increasingly narrowed to a specific religio-cultural imagination of the majority. The struggle for equal rights for Dalits (untouchables) and women is far from over, posing critical questions to the praxis of the world’s largest democracy.

Democracy and legitimacy also wear thin with the ubiquitous use of force in Kashmir and India’s northeast. The rule of law is yet to be substantively realized, as large parts of the Indian polity remain replete with corruption and power politics. India is gradually withdrawing from its obligation toward its poor and marginalized in a desperate pursuit of foreign direct investment, growth driven by an open market economy, and an unsustainable vision of development. India, dreadfully, is walking away from its earlier vision of a welfare state.
One could well juxtapose the political trajectory of the Republic of India and of the State of Israel. David Ben-Gurion’s Declaration of Independence speech of May 14, 1948, speaks to Nehru’s speech of a year before. Ben-Gurion envisioned an Israel based on the ideals of “freedom, justice, and peace ensur[ing] complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex.”

To an extent, Nehru and Ben-Gurion each sought to fashion nation-states premised on modern, egalitarian, secular and democratic principles. They are both shrinking figures in their respective nations. Many of the internal struggles in contemporary Israel are similar to what India is going through. The oppressing of political or ideological dissent, corruption, and the nexus between politicians and the corporate world are glaring examples.

Political philosopher Michael Walzer has addressed this similarity between the two in his latest work “The Paradox of Liberation: Secular Revolutions and Religious Counterrevolutions” (Yale University Press, 2015). He explains why, not long after very sincere secular national liberation movements came to power in India and Israel, they were replaced by religious counterrevolutions opposed to secularism and the spirit of the liberation movement.

India and Israel went through paths of striving for democratic and modern nation-states at roughly the same time, and appear to be reaching the same outcome – having their founding ideals challenged from within. It must be emphasized, however, that the Indian republic is remarkably well poised to self-reflect and recall its “tryst with destiny” 70 years ago.

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