

# What three systemic afflictions say about India at 75

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Youth Congress workers protest in Bengaluru on April 22. | PTI

The Preamble to the Indian Constitution begins with the assertion that the principles contained in the landmark document are being endorsed by “we, the people of India”. It suggested an idea of a people who were innocent, trustworthy, self-conscious and respectful in collectivity – in contrast to the corrupt, interest-oriented ruling oligarchy.

But since Independence, the idea of “the people” has changed, academicians Hilal Ahmed and Subir Sinha note in an article in the August edition of *Seminar*. “Success in [Indian] politics is described as ‘the people’s’ decision; while political debacles are seen as a tactical failure to attract them,” they observe.

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Contemporary politics has invoked the “will of the majority” to justify communal projects, even as widespread protests have resulted in a pushback from citizens, they note.

The authors explain how under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, “New India” makes a distinction between state and society: politics is not about fighting for or securing social reforms anymore.

What has changed over the past 75 years?

Here is an analysis of three systemic ills afflicting the landscape of state-society relations in contemporary India.

## Bulldozing the rule of law

The Nehruvian state introduced a series of radical social reforms in the 1950s through constitutional means and gave the state and the ruling elite a pedagogical function. The people, in this framework, were to be educated and reformed by the state to make them adequately modern and fully democratic.

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The Indira Gandhi government intensified this process. She reinterpreted the Directive Principles of State Policy to legitimise her authoritarian rule. Indira Gandhi even went on to justify the Emergency (1975-'77) in the name of people's welfare.

But now, rights-based people-focused movements that led to some degree of transparency and accountability from the government are increasingly met with disdain and the iron fist of the Indian state. In the past, such movements had led to the enactment of laws such as the Right to Information Act.



Farmers celebrate at the Ghazipur border after the farm laws were withdrawn, in December 2021.

Credit: PTI.

Satyagraha, in fact, is now being treated with harsh punishments and jail, much like the manner in which the colonial British rulers responded to India's freedom struggle. Modi's "governmentality" is reimagining the imperial British Raj's project of centralising power to codify laws and enforcing coercive measures on dehumanised labourers with a weakened bargaining position.

Instead of "Amrit Kaal", the era of nectar that the Modi government has promised, what India is witnessing is the bulldozing of the rule of law combined with political action solely aimed at winning elections at all costs. If, for some reason, the party does lose an election, its Big-Capital-backed deep pockets, financed by opaque electoral bonds, ensures the breakdown of Opposition regimes – as seen in Maharashtra and other states.

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## **Crisis in Ambedkarism**

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Another element of the crisis has manifested itself while trying to apply the ideological and socio-legal philosophy of BR Ambedkar, the writer of the Indian Constitution, to affirmative action programmes and the realisation of basic rights for marginalised communities (such as Dalits, Adivasis, Women and LGBTQ+ ).

Ambedkarites have been involved in disseminating Ambedkar's ideas and teachings, while seeking to apply these to the fight for the rights, lives and livelihoods of marginalised communities. The last few decades have also seen a greater emphasis on Ambedkar's ideas in the reimagining of critical social and economic policies across India.

Nevertheless, as scholar Anand Teltumbde argued at an Ambedkar Memorial Lectures in 2011: "Every Ambedkarite whether (s)he is conscious of it or not, experiences some crisis" – which he lists as a crisis of identity, crisis of ideology, crisis of leadership, crisis of politics, crisis of morality, crisis of living and an organisational crisis. Teltumbde's concerns merit further reflection.

The foremost challenge before those following Ambedkar's visions is to construct Ambedkarism as a guiding philosophy for the struggle of those in marginalised spaces while recognising the reasons for the structural crises outlined by Teltumbde.

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"Much of the Ambedkarite discourse is rooted in the past," contends Teltumbde. To project a vision for a better future, the present conditions of the marginalised must be considered more carefully.

## **Widening inequality**

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The third systemic issue is that of the widening inequality of access afflicting state-society relations. A report of the Centre for New Economics Studies, OP Jindal Global University, released in 2001, outlines the state of access inequality in Indian states. It ranks the performance of Indian states in five areas: healthcare, education, amenities, socio-economic security and a fair legal recourse system.

India has made significant progress over the past seven decades in tackling poverty, malnutrition, maternal and infant mortality, family planning and other challenges. But the rural-urban, north-south, rich-poor, have-have nots divide continues to rise even 75 years of independence.

The path of neoliberal growth-anchored development championed by an urban-biased model has left the marginalised with even fewer resources.



A mob vandalises trains and railway properties at the Secunderabad railway station on June 17 during a protest against the short-term armed forces recruitment scheme Agnipath. Credit: PTI.

India has one of the highest youth unemployment rates and one of the worst female labour-force participation rates. It is worth asking whether the neoliberal economic reforms of the last three decades have actually yielded better economic outcomes and opportunities for all. Evidence on job creation gives a mixed picture while access equality across Indian states is dismal.

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Despite this bleak outlook, there is a ray of hope. People-based movements are still striving for social reform. Environmental activism is peaking. Ambredkar's teachings and push for a social democracy remains the guiding light for many people.

On access equality, states such as Goa and Sikkim, Kerala and Tamil Nadu, are doing well to provide residents have equal access to basic socio-economic opportunities and public goods.

We, the people of India, must see the paradoxical realities of India and strive together to expand possibilities of realising progressive action for all. At the same time, we must bring politics back to the track of fighting for social reform and justice while hoping for an egalitarian order. Or else, the looming darkness of an Anishchit Kaal – the era of uncertainty – may soon be upon us.

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