

Past forward: Young India rushes to meet new aspirations

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Bad news is, as the nation becomes younger by the day, its collective memories are fading. Good news is, this is creating space for brand-new aspirations



Shiv Visvanathan | August 17, 2013



We need not worry about leadership or parties but see the future as commons

1947 represented an ideal world. It represented the beginning of freedom; it represented a sense of the Indian dream. It gave us a sense of exemplars and paradigms. It was a period of idealism where character building and nation building went together. It was an ideal, even naïve; it might have been simplistic but it was the myth that provided the moral fibre of the nation. It was the tuning fork for what one was to live for. The ideal soon lost its way and this narrative is an attempt to understand it.

Ian Hacking, the historian of science, once described the history of the body in terms of three phases. In the first, the sovereign was preoccupied with the individual body. In the second phase, the west moved from control of the individual body to handling large bodies of populations. This was the period of demographic centring on large migrations to the city. The vagrant, the destitute, the vagabond, the criminal, the mad man had to be disciplined and punished to create an ordered society. It was in this era that the panopticon as a model of surveillance was born.

Hacking then makes a slight shift in perspective. He observes that in the third stage there was a shift from the control of the body to the control of memory. The idea of memory went beyond propaganda or even information revolution. It was an attempt to shape the collective mentalities and attitudes of an era.

The idea of memory has become problematic in India today. One sees an opposition between two facts today. We see a generation of leaders who are septuagenarians and octogenarians. India today reminds one of the Soviet Russia of a few decades ago where a wag claimed that the October revolution gave way to the Octogenarian revolution. Our old-crop statesmen, from Manmohan Singh to LK Advani, are losing their edge. Simultaneously they face an India where a large part of the population is below 35. We are not just confronting a polarity of age, what we are facing is a dual world of memories. The first has been raised on the vintage of nationalism, socialism, planning, Nehru and Gandhi. Another, born after the emergency, reads about nationalism in NCERT textbooks and is quick to digest an era in a few paragraphs. The battle of memories is an intriguing one. It reminds one of a recent confession of a major Indian social scientist who claimed that his books are about an era that no longer exists. Ashis Nandy's note is not a confession of failure. It is a quiet recognition of change and need for newer categories and perspectives to understand it. It goes further than the song 'Who wants yesterday's newspaper' to ask who wants yesterday's politicians, values, ideas, events and baggage.

Yet one cannot wish away history in India. History is problematic not just for being history but because it competes with myth, legend, folktale and civilisational memory, in a land where text and archive, orality and digitality co-exist to create their own life worlds.

In a conventional sense, when we talk of history, we talk of the nation state, the national movement and the story of India after 1947. Textbook style, it is presented as a unified history of Nehru in power and Gandhi in heaven. It is a Nehruvian vision of "a tryst with destiny", of a society that felt "dams and laboratories were the temples of modern India" and "where the future belonged to those who make friends with science". It created planning as a panacea for economic problems and non-alignment as a framework of foreign policy. It was a unified vision with the nation state as a framework, the

constitution as a sacred text, the Congress as a political vector, and development, justice and security as a wish list. It was a textbook memory but without an unconscious, yet it was so powerful a mnemonic that one often refers to it umbilically in moments of crisis. It is seen as the encapsulated vision of a democratic state. Confronting it we face two questions, how do we look at the memories of that era and secondly, how do we construct a new mnemonic?

The end of a Nehruvian era is often constructed by its pampered elite as the end of history. What Alexander Kojeve and Francis Fukuyama formulated as a dialect of ambiguities is bowdlerised to a simplified historical capsule.

What does 1947 mean, as the end of an era and the beginning of a new one? To capture it as a mnemonic, one has to give it a past, a future, a liminal threshold where history was simplified for the purposes of unity. Doubt, irony do not enter the choices of the period. 1947 for all its eloquence as an inaugural myth is an act of suppression. It suppressed the history of the partition where individual histories were suppressed by official history. 1947 was an imposition of neologisms like planning, Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), community development, import substitution and transfer of technology (ToT). An old vocabulary was suppressed in the process.

The dreams of alternative imaginations around nature, villages, language died out as India became a formal historical nation. In giving it symbolic power, we destroyed its unconscious. 1947 as mnemonic is coming apart for several reasons. Firstly we are confronted with a new generation which is more au courant with 9/11 than with 1947. 47 now appears like skeletons from an old cupboard. We are caught with several problems. First: partition history has re-emerged in an ethnographic form challenging the officialdom of transfer-of-power history. Second: planning as a world view gobbled up the other imaginations. Development as a model turned ironic creating displacements and erasures in order to sustain official ideology. Sadly, the Congress is a mimicry of itself and Rahul seems miscast as a Nehruvian talking of his family and the nation.

Yet 1947 has force of adrenalin as a new generation nostalgic for an era before they were born gathered around Anna Hazare as an icon of nationalism. Revisionist historians are forging the Nehruvian world anew as science and even as table manners. It seems more correct than the anarchy and anomie of the present. Breaking 1947 becomes important because for the first time we can think of an India without the Congress party. We need to exorcise or psychoanalyse 1947, if we wish to escape into the future. Not because we missed the tryst with destiny but because we encountered a destiny called modernity, science, development and the nation-state and found we did not quite like it.

This is the secret we are trying to hide. Not the mystique of 1947 which is of low brand value but the mysticism of 1947. It is obfuscation. 1947 died in 1962, 1975-77 and 1984. It died as a workable imagination. Invoking the nostalgia of the original recipe does not deny that we cooked it badly or we prefer other dishes. Memory performed a double shift. For the older generation between the China war and the emergency, the Nehruvian halo was dulled. The emergency was a destroyer of mnemonics and memories. It hollowed out

the core values of 1947, the faith in institutions, the goodness of politics. From a nation-state that dreamt of democracy, we began graduating to a national security state. Instead of unity in its full richness, we settled for law and order, for a government where trains ran on time.

Our intelligence became of a mimic variety and its chain of institutions like universities, courts and banks collapsed during the emergency. Nehru became a mask. The eyes that peeped out were Sanjay Gandhi's. The anti-Nehruvian had usurped the Nehruvian legacy before Rajiv, Sonia and Rahul banalised and corrupted it further. The soul died years ago, 1947 was a ventriloquist's dummy by the beginning of this century. It was like a cassette tape in the hands of an inane Congress which echoed old ideas in idiotic contexts. The irony is that the ideas had fallen into decay before the leaders died out. Rahul's reticence, Manmohan's silence, and Sonia's cryptic Hindi are symptoms of a hollowed-out imagination. Sadly, there was a gap between the death of the concept and the obituary report.

As critical as the emergency was liberalisation. It marked the end of socialism as an era of the repressed body, the ration card mentality. The body used to deferred gratification lost its sense of sacrifice. The new generation suddenly exuded desire. The new generation had no memory of the sacrifices socialism demanded. They wanted governance at the touch of their mobile phone. The bodies exuded urgency, sexuality, a sense of speed. Politics yielded to technology as a mode of problem-solving. There was a sense that 1947, like a dinosaur, was falling extinct. There was a need for a new imagination.

The old is desiccated but the new is yet to come. It is demographically there but has been articulated as a paradigm. It gives us the paradox of Rahul Gandhi who is forty going on eighty. Advani has retired but Rahul needs to retire. As an intermediate phenomenon, he does not belong to the old or the new. In persisting with him the Congress is museumising itself.

It is a strange death wish of power cannibalising itself. Only Delhi thinks that the Nehruvian idea survives. The idea of India has seceded from the capital but sadly IIC and North Block are not aware of it. Crony Congressism has destroyed the Nehruvian 1947. Between silence, amnesia and caricature, 1947 lost most of its symbolic power. The Congress treats as private property what was the legacy of a nation. The family has destroyed the dynasty and the dynasty has corrupted the mnemonics of a nation.

The challenge of the future leadership of ideas is to redeem 1947 and weave it into the coming years. I am not suggesting a break between the past and future but an exorcised 1947, combed by dissenting historians and marginal narratives could still be source of inspiration. Imagine setting up the Republic Day so that it moves from its statist dullness to a new imagination. The past is not a fetish and the future need not be the new seduction.

The creation myths of the future could be different. Myth and history will have different functions. Bollywood cannot pretend to be an NCERT book. More critically before the standard leadership models which are predictably technocratic we need a plural imagination. History has to be commons rather than a regimented archive. Read Saadat Hasan Manto, Mahasweta Devi, UR Ananthamurthy, Patrick Geddes or Ashis Nandy to sense the other quarrels, the other narratives. Nehruvian development and its official narratives of history created a pre-emptive future destroying alternative imaginations.

We have to do for 1947 what scholars are doing for 1492. They broke the latter date as a stereotypical history of Columbus and created a flood of memories and imaginations, offering a life blood of diverse alternatives. To think of 1492 not just as the year of Columbus but the end of Moorish Spain, the beginning of the Jewish Diaspora, the trigger for the inquisition allows for other possibilities. This much we owe history if we wish to write a future.

I am reminded of what Margaret Mead, the famous anthropologist, once said. She claimed that we should stop teaching history and begin teaching the future. Mead suggested that the past was an unnecessary baggage while the future could be an open experiment in pedagogy. One wishes Mead had read a bit more of the anthropologist Gregory Bateson. She could have seen the future as a part of an evolutionary framework, where mistakes are common. The future is never singular and has to be rescued from our current projects which boast of singularity. Moreover, the future will be there whether we arrive or not. Words like design, tailor-made and plan need to be more modest. The future comes despite us.

This is what the Nehruvian era failed to understand. This much our new generation of liberalisation's children must contend with. It is no longer the old question of 'after Nehru who?' or 'after Congress what?' The new is being invented despite us. What we need to do is not worry about leadership or parties but see the future as commons, a narrative of diversities, where our marginal do not disappear where our cultures, our languages, our seeds, our skills have a niche. We have to create modesty around the future which the Nehruvian epoch didn't. Glimpses of the future will have to be narrated differently from the Glimpses of the World History. Our current paradigms of liberalism do not allow for it. The Pitrodas, the Nilekanis, the Modis all struggle for a single window solution.

The future is not for planning but muddling through.

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