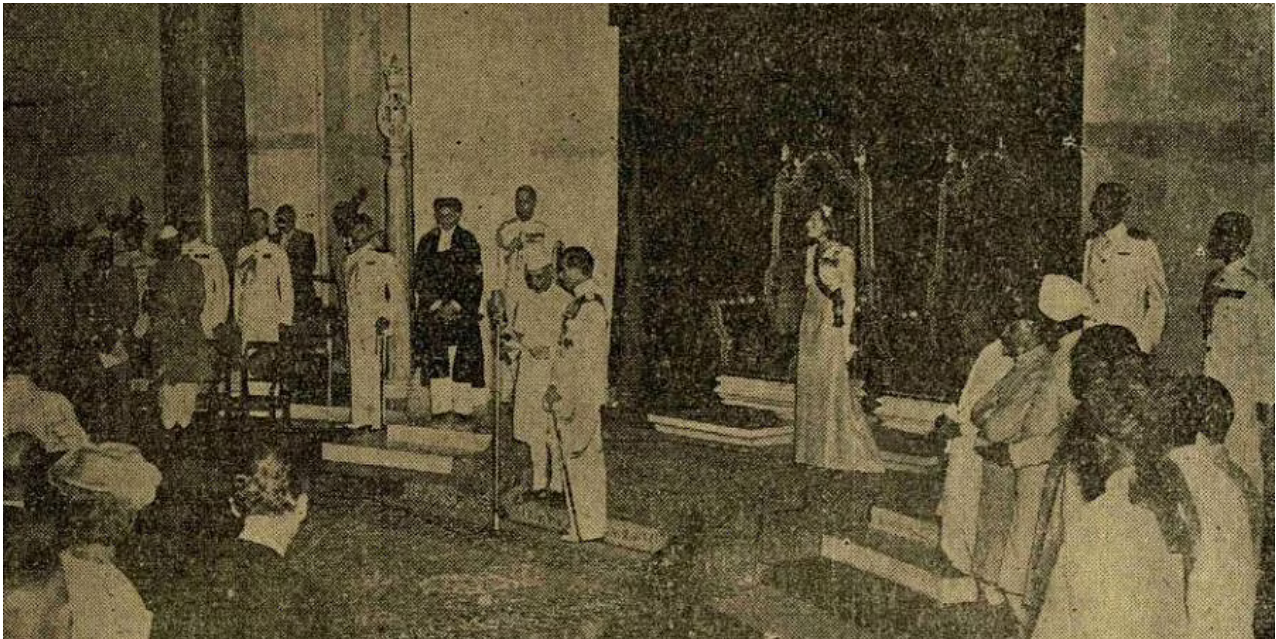


A tale of three concepts in independent India

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File picture of the swearing-in ceremony of Jawaharlal Nehru as the first prime minister of India by Governor-General Lord Mountbatten.

By Shiv Visvanathan

Commemorations of Independence often become insipid revivals of memory, mere mnemonics acting as symbolic mothballs. It is time we open such events to critique and discourse, rereading them so that they add value to the future. Even epics cannot be a mere recital of events. We need to psychoanalyse the discourses and contexts behind the events. Consider Independence Day itself. It is bad theatre, emphasising inanity, reinforced by insipid politicians. But what if we were to open up the concept to a different kind of exegesis? Let us treat concepts as scripts unfolding possibilities and read them philosophically. The tragedy of worlds can be better caught in the words that embody them.

Consider how India reads Independence. Independence is read as a part of a triad of concepts, the other two being freedom and liberty. Freedom and liberty float more abstractly, but for Indians, Independence is always an event. It announces the birth of a nation-state and thus, presents a collective celebration. Freedom gets drained out by the nation-state from a wide collection of alternatives and possibilities to a sense of the rules for a nation-state. As a result, free-floating concepts like Independence get sanitised.

Independence here is also negative; it is freedom from. You disconnect to be. Such a concept often gets frozen and reified. A sense of liberation is lost as we parochialise the concept, and surround it with a grammar of insulating terms. Independence is Independence of and for the state. It is memorialised in collective terms and demands a collective commitment. Independence is always accompanied by the litany of patriotism.

It is not Independence but its consequence, the nation-state, that becomes the glorified entity. Independence, rather than becoming an epic goal or a sacrificial drama, gradually becomes bureaucratized, conformist, more a certificate of entry into a club of nations, a rationale for membership into the UN, a claim to geography and sovereignty as territory. The rituals of certification become more sacrosanct than the concept. A dullness and coercion creep in.

Imagine one were to cite the historian Dharampal in this context. Dharampal suggested on the basis of his archival research that secession was the first right of citizenship. Villagers in the 16th-century world abandoned homes if the ruler was too coercive, and often he had to run after them and beg them to come back. Secession as a possibility is no longer built into the idea of Independence. Independence freezes a political reality allowing no part to secede. This leads to atrocities like the AFSPA.

India is not too prone to science fiction. Imagine when India was being assembled by Sardar Patel. Imagine a weaker Patel loses out to C P Ramaswami, and Kerala is a different country. Would the South as an idea have been a different possibility? Would the idea of Independence have been conceived less monolithically? The sadness of Independence as a reified concept creates its own paradoxes and ironies, and today, a majoritarian India celebrating 75 is too obtuse to realise this, that a historical epic called Independence is degenerating into an irony of authoritarianism, costing lives in the Northeast and Kashmir. Imagine Independence had that internal generosity. India would have been a different story. Maybe each of the triad of concepts we began with needs a different kind of storytelling to sustain them.

If Independence has a sense of history and collectivity, freedom appears more abstract and free-floating. Freedom seems to deal more with individuals and civil society. If Independence is freedom from, freedom claims to be more freedom for. Freedom is more a space for dreaming possibilities. It needs a different sense of metaphysics. It evokes a sense of the playful and the unpredictable, while Independence seems a specific project, the way we constructed it.

Think of Modi on Lal Qila. His speech sounds prosaic, repetitive. Independence is a didactic lecture, a catechism of official concepts, not a story of surprises and possibilities. The sadness lies both in the nostalgia and the concept. It is a world we have lost than a possibility we sustain and nurture.

Freedom appears to operate at several levels. It is abstract, a set of linguistic possibilities, an actual articulation of speech acts. Freedom evokes performance, possibility, and an epidemic of interpretations. Think of the Tunisian uprising or the protest at Tiananmen square. Freedom commands an expanding semiotic. Freedom emphasises freedom for; it is always an articulation of a possibility. If Independence is a *fait accompli*, freedom articulates possibility, understands the sense of resistance. If Independence indicates a collectivity, freedom moves towards wholes. It can never be in fragments. It encompasses the site, the field. If Independence is a defined project, freedom is a poetics of

effervescence, of hope, an explosion of possibilities. It is a festival, a celebration, a carnival that makes even power topsy turvy. It has a poetics that the two other concepts do not fully possess. It exudes a sense of the catalytic.

Saying one is free goes beyond boundaries and targets. Freedom combines possibility and creativity. We hardly use the word in India, preferring discipline, rights which are more corseted terms. Freedom hints at the unexpected. Movements and manifestoes emphasise freedom. Independence draws its limits as boundaries. Liberty explores a particular space. Freedom is more exuberant, and we have lost this exuberance, whether we talk of science or childhood or play or art. Freedom as it hints at the uncontrolled, appeals little to the puritan restraints of Independence or citizenship. It is a word one uses with caution as it evokes license. Sexual freedom invites taboo. Scientific freedom demands accountability. Childhood demands the realism of adulthood. In fact, our social distancing from freedom has limited our creativity over the last few decades. Freedom reincarnates as license, loses its charisma, and becomes a threat, especially in the way we discuss the body or morals or even mysticism. Freedom to the powerful is a misbehavioural science. Freedom as a metaphysic needs articulation phenomenologically as being and becoming. It needs a language beyond management, or even spirituality, which in India has degenerated into a second order of management. Freedom needs a recurrence of the primordial, not the mere receptivity of discipline or technique. It is seen as too enzymatic to control. We are not only losing freedom but the languages of freedom. This is the real sadness of independent India. Freedom has a sense of the mystical that an India dependent on social sciences wishes to avoid. Freedom demands a different music.

We need a third category to transcend the dualism of the duo. We need to go beyond binaries to a different thesaurus of politics. Liberty becomes a welcome term in this context.

Liberty as a term evokes possibilities and limits. It is both specific and convivial and evokes the social of citizenship, not the anarchy of freedom. It oozes rights which are specific demands. It is more thinkable as a social science. Liberty evokes humanity and citizenship. It implies civics. The Greek sense of liberty evokes civitas both as a city and civilisation. Rights and liberties serve as doubles in this civics discourse. Liberty is a sign and possibility of civics and citizenship as ways of life. If freedom is a state of being intended in its phenomenology of experiencing, liberty is an external state of freedom from a specific control. Liberty is freedom from restraint and restriction imposed by the state on ways of life, livelihood and living. Freedom in that sense is an inner state of mind, while liberty is the outer sociological condition.

The language of discourse at the level of scholarship and the public has focused more on the rights and liberties and on Independence. Freedom is seen more as an ought, a mythical condition. This has consequences. Independence tolerates federalism but has no sense of dissent, secession or decentralisation. For Independence to survive, the state as the centre of surveillance must hold. Independence evokes nostalgia, a sense of

communitas the state does not provide for. Liberty has become more of a lesson in civics. Sometimes to confront it, we talk of pursuing majoritarian values, which is one way of saying we prefer the authoritarian.

One can witness it in the civics of rituals. Freedom is seen as abstract. The search for human rights is seen as a pursuit of harassment. Human rights activists are seen as non-convivial, in fact, anti-civic, urban Naxals who do not appreciate the expertise of the state, and the comforts it provides. The human rights activist is anti-civics, anti-social. The state becomes supreme. Independence is for the state; freedom is for abstract individuals, not a minority, marginal or human rights activists. The urban Naxal is not even human, so to offer him rights is to violate civics.

Oddly in a paradoxical way, all three concepts fail the victim or the rights activists. Democracy has no space for specific victims, only abstract individuals. Rights in an everyday sense don't seem to work. The irony is the short circuit in meaning that all three terms create, making rights elusive and democracy remote. Our courts have to understand that freedom demands a classic exegesis that cannot be left to the whims of spectators, clerks and consumers. It is time we remove the tinsel of Independence and explore the real sense of freedom. The freedom movement has culminated in a deep vulnerability where citizenship succumbs to tyranny at short notice. This August, we are celebrating the irony of concepts created as life-giving concepts but are now silent on life itself. The tragedy of the political lies there.

Social scientist associated with THE COMPOST HEAP, a group researching alternative imaginations

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