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Although India achieved Independence on August 15, 1947, it was not until we promulgated our own Constitution on January 26, 1950, that we became fully and formally free with self-governing institutions. Republic Day is when we shed the leftovers of Western colonialism and set out in pursuit of true self-determination.

The pomp and glory in celebrating Republic Day are meant to commemorate a momentous historic shift, when we as a people collectively negated the arch-imperialist Winston Churchill's statement that "Indians are not fit to rule, they are fit to be ruled." Our republic became a pioneer and a beacon for other developing countries by not only adopting the world's longest written Constitution that was highly progressive and inclusive, but also by showing how systemic transition from colony to sovereign state can be done maturely and legitimately.

The roughly two-and-a-half years between Independence Day and Republic Day comprised an intermediate period when India was technically a "dominion" of the British Empire. We did have our own Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, with his Cabinet of Indian ministers, but he was only the head of government. The head of state was the British King George VI and he appointed governor-generals (Lord Mountbatten and C. Rajagopalachari), who represented London in New Delhi. Even India's military Commanders-in-Chief (Sir Claude Auchinleck and General Roy Bucher) in that era were British.

All these high offices were abolished or transferred after Republic Day to Indians chosen by Indians, starting with the newly-elected President of India, Rajendra Prasad. By turning into a republic, we kicked out the final vestiges of the British monarchy and embarked on a new journey of moralistic and nationalistic aspirations.

B.R. Ambedkar, the founding father of our Constitution, captured the great responsibilities coming onto our shoulders on India's first Republic Day by remarking, "We have lost the excuse of blaming the British for anything going wrong. If hereafter things go wrong, we will have nobody to blame except ourselves."

The decision of India's Constituent Assembly to rid the nation of hereditary British monarchy and install an elected head of state was unique for that time of global decolonisation. We were the first so-called "Commonwealth realm" among developing nations to move, by 1950, to the ranks of a parliamentary republic with top public offices being elected rather than inherited. Our example of a republican order was later followed by Pakistan (1956), Ghana (1960), Tanzania (1962), Uganda and Nigeria (1963), Kenya (1964), Guyana (1970), Sri Lanka (1972) among others.

From Africa and the Caribbean to Asia, it was the Indian case that reverberated whenever nations broke free of colonial rule and moved towards republican form of government. If the Indian struggle for Independence was a torch that electrified fellow developing nations locked in liberation struggles against Western masters, the Indian Constitution and the manner in which it has guided a stable, democratic and liberal political system have been lighthouses for post-colonial state building.

The worldwide appeal of the Indian republic is especially strong because our Constitution rests on what the American scholar Granville Austin termed as its "indigenous nature" and "an Indian rather than a parochial — a Madrasi or Bihari — consciousness". It is true that our Constitution drafters borrowed features from the United States, France, Canada, Australia and Ireland, but they were also driven by core Indian nationalism.

The greatness of our own ancient republics (known as *gana sanghas*) like Kalinga, Licchavi, Panchala, Malla, Kamboja, Vajji and Madra were also reminders to our Constitution-drafters that they were not imitating the trends set by the Western models of Greek and Roman republics. The wisdom of participatory politics and dialogue-based policymaking through assemblies, voting and committees of citizens, which our ancient republics already practised, was not lost on the makers of our Constitution. For instance, Ambedkar's stress on social justice and equity in the Indian republic derived from principles of the Buddhist *gana sanghas*. Even the procedural conduct of the Constituent Assembly sessions and the extensive feedback they solicited from the general public were landmarks in democratic consultation that harked back to our mini-republics of yore.

Indians reached back to their partly imagined and partly reconstructed "golden age" of the past to enact the modern republic, thereby cementing the Constitution in our own ethos. For every fellow African or Asian country that followed India on the paths to Independence and republican systems, it was necessary to perform similar introspection of their respective pre-colonial heritages and then build their contemporary republics. India enabled their self-discovery processes.

The other reason why India's republic is a benchmark for the "global south" is because we have scrupulously adhered to the bedrock values of our Constitution. The periodic elections through which we choose our governments and the civil liberties most of us enjoy are the envy of the world, where many developing countries to this day are yoked under authoritarian and arbitrary rule.

Today, it is commonplace to feel cynical about Indians being incorrigibly dishonest and habitual rule-breakers. But we have rarely broken the macro rule underpinning stability in our country — contestation for power through the ballot box and smooth transfer of power based on the people's will.

Despite flaws, we have largely respected the "basic structure" of the Constitution as defined by various court decisions, including concepts like fundamental rights, federalism, equality before law, freedom and dignity of the person, unity and integrity of the nation, independence of judiciary and separation of powers. Even where we fail to uphold these core pillars, the aspiration is there and no one in India questions the essential Constitutional tenets or proposes any better alternative to them.

Unlike many developing countries, we have retained one “big tent” Constitution that has not been overthrown or replaced. This continuity of the state under a predictable set of laws and rules is extraordinary in the “global south” and gives meaning to our claim to be the “world’s largest democracy”.

On Republic Day, we must not lose sight of all the deficiencies that plague India. Ambedkar would have cringed at the myriad injustices and iniquities that still hold us back. But if India has endured as a symbol and a reference point for the world, it is thanks to our priceless republic.

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