

Independence Day: What India really needs from its leaders

We require a healthy system of morality to be entrenched in the core conduct of an able political leadership in our fragmented and ethnically diverse nation.

[Deepanshu Mohan](#)

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A boy selling the Indian national flags in front of Mumbai's Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus in 2018. | Reuters/Francis Mascarenhas

Why do we need leaders at all? This provocative question, raised by Kaushik Basu in [a paper earlier this year](#), aims to use insights from the field of game theory to understand the governing dynamics of societal behaviour. Why does society need leaders to guide groups (and individuals) towards certain social outcomes and to what extent do leaders have a moral responsibility towards citizens?

Basu argues how, from social contracts or norms, through the law, to the authoritarian ruler, each of their power(s) come from the “gossamer threads of our beliefs” and opinions about one another.

For an authoritarian leader in power, his power of authority over the citizenry (and most tyrants in history have been men) is broadly shaped by the collective beliefs of people about the leader.

A focal point

A leader, who tends to act as a “focal point”, he writes, helps (or commands) citizens to gravitate their actions towards a set of social and economic outcomes that affect their welfare.

Why is this discussion relevant?

In a year when India celebrates its 75th Independence Day, this (re)conceptualisation of leadership and its significance from the applied contours of game theory and accompanied philosophical insights should make us reflect on the role of a leader – and the moral responsibility they have.

In the current state of India's polity, the discourse on [constitutional morality](#) and adherence to basic constitutional values may seem to be mere ink on paper. As an authoritarian leader in power appears to be the focal point of all public attention and policy action, the question (and demand) for “moral conduct” in leadership warrants deeper contemplation.

As Basu's research explains, it does not matter whether the power of authority commanded by a leader is “democratically defined” through an electoral mandate or is acquired through an “ascension to a throne”. There can be a “fundamental commonness” found between both kinds of leaders – from an assessment of the collective failures in society – based on how they choose to conduct themselves ie, immorally, or for worse, being consequentially insensitive in their decisions.

India's political economy landscape, much since Jawaharlal Nehru (and Atal Bihari Vajpayee), has lacked the sustained presence of a “focal point” in its political leadership that reflects conduct personifying moral rectitude in duty and which inspires an undeterred will to secure azaadi for its citizens from the ills that occupy them from within the finitude of a fragmented modern nation state – not just threatened by an external enemy (or a coloniser).

Freedom from within

But what does azaadi (freedom) from within mean for citizens today? It refers to an azaadi from deep-rooted economic and wealth inequality, from a lack of access to basic social opportunities (quality education, healthcare) and social security, from the indignation of work experienced by most vulnerable workers, from communal hatred and from class-caste-gender based inequalities.

While we might have unshackled ourselves from the clutches of a foreign power in 1947, the nature of our own domestic politics and leadership over the years has allowed the creation of social hierarchies to become instruments of social and political discrimination. The amoral conduct in leadership has more often used the weak and the powerless as pawns for electoral gains and for ideological mobilisation.

As Pratap Bhanu Mehta once [argued](#):

“In practical terms, morality is the terms of engagement with which individuals relate to each other. A health system of morality will regulate our affairs on terms where our status as free and equal individuals is recognised.

Moral progress is often not made just by ideas or transforming consciousness. It is made through the availability of exemplars, who expose our hypocrisies, inspire us by the power of example and give us civic courage. The problem with modern India has been that, with a few exceptions, most of those who claim access to, or speak in the name of more evolved forms of consciousness, have largely served easy spirituality to the privileged.

We rarely speak truth to power (often they seek their patronage), or support the kind of civic and constitutional morality that would preserve our freedom and equality.”

A leader, as a focal point, could help us do that.

New colonialism

The current socio-political context, however, inspires less hope. A permanence of loss in institutional autonomy and freedom observed within India’s own public institutions over the last decade, extended use of sedition law on citizens, activists and the incessant political use of the law and order machinery for suppressing dissent has taken our nation into a [neo-form of colonial raj](#) where both, the “coloniser” and the “colonised” emerge from the same land.

The [Pegasus scandal](#), more recently, exposed the roots of technology-based state surveillance – amidst the realisations of an Orwellian state – where those critiquing the government, or its leader, can now be found subjected to state surveillance without showing proper cause or appropriate justification.



Congress party workers protesting against the use of Pegasus spyware. Photo credit: Prakash Singh / AFP

What is worse is the extent to which citizens, after Pegasus, have been coerced to cede to governments and corporations the legal right to invade and take over their phones, without reasonable cause. This act, for most citizens, may appear like voluntarily submitting themselves to being violated. And so, the need for making our leaders “morally” responsible and publicly accountable for their actions remains vital – not just for azaadi to be secured from within, but also to be safeguarded for times to come.

We need a healthy system of morality to be entrenched in the core conduct of an able political leadership in an already fragmented and ethnically diverse nation for a varied set of economic and social changes to be realised.

A political leader, as a focal person, who refuses to do so will see the realisation of a “collective moral failure” in society becoming an existential threat, even in the years to come. Seventy-four years since azaadi, we are already oscillating in that zone (f collective moral failure, both as a nation and as a society).

Deepanshu Mohan is Associate Professor and Director, Centre for New Economics Studies, Jindal School of Liberal Arts and Humanities, OP Jindal Global University.