

Published in Indica

India @75

By Jeevan Zutshi

India is known as a land of diversity where people of different caste, creeds, religions, cultures, and beliefs live together.

Before Independence, the condition of Indians was very pathetic as they were under the rule of Britishers. For decades, Indians suffered a lot under the British rule.

While the Indian diaspora is celebrating Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav, an initiative of the Government of India to celebrate and commemorate 75 years of progressive India and the glorious history of its people, culture and achievements, I find myself in a unique position to reflect on the past decades as I complete 50 years stay in California on September 16th. When I, a young hungry immigrant with a civil engineering under-graduate degree from my native Kashmir University and in my early twenties, entered this beautiful part of the country on a green card, there were just 3 or 4 families from Kashmir, mainly students, and very few fellow Indians, who had just graduated from neighboring universities like Berkeley and Stanford and started working on temporary visas. Many stayed on in the universities in the pretext of higher studies to be able to maintain their student visa status. My younger sister and her husband were one of them who were ready to graduate. Even when I was in the comfort of their student housing for a short time in Berkeley upon my arrival, I felt very home sick as there was nothing like India here. Indians have now grown from the thousands to about 800,000 just in California and more than 4.5 million in the United States. The young and already westernized Indian generation, which lands in a mini India within the U.S now, may be shocked to hear that 50 years back, the commoners had no idea about India. If at all some knew it was as a land of impoverished snake charmers.

When I was searching through the thick phone directory for employers upon my arrival in 1972, my interviewer with the look of an imbecile said “we are looking

for a sanitary Engineer. How would you know to design a sewage disposal system when you don't even have toilets in India?" With sheer luck, drive and perseverance, I proved him wrong when I landed in a job with an international company at par with the U.S graduate Engineers, just little over one month's arrival and also, started pursuing Master's degree in Civil Engineering, partly to fulfill my father's dream. The U.S. dollar was worth 8 Indian Rupees and salary for a young Engineer with U.S. master's degree was less than \$1000. A decent apartment in the bay area rented at \$150, a gallon of gas was about 38 cents and a nice used car about \$600. After 50 years now, you can do the math.

The country had been plagued by Vietnam War and was going through very depressed economy and Watergate scandal.

Due to technology boom starting with Y2K in last decade of 90's, the U.S now is a home to a very large number of professionals from India in IT related areas. To India's credit, the relatively low cost and emphasis on education motivates the young students to pursue education in professional colleges, which positioned them well in the global market.

Presently, Indian youth find very good opportunities available in India itself as most of the multi-national companies are established there.

Upon my arrival in 1972, I found there were two small Indian stores, one in Berkeley and the other one in San Francisco. There were just one or two Indian restaurants. With Mexican food in abundance, least did I know then that California had been part of Spain and then Mexico until it was taken by the United States with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. Even today, Los Angeles can claim one of the largest communities of Mexican people outside of Mexico City. Now there are hundreds of Indian restaurants, hotels, Gas Stations, small and big businesses, franchises and Indians are everywhere. Not only most of the CEO's of major companies are Indians but also there are five members of Indian Congress as well. Indians are participating in the political process and take pride in their civic responsibilities. The Vice-President is an Indian woman and I see one of us becoming the U.S. President soon.

As I started writing this article, it was on this day India received freedom from the British Empire. Overnight on August 14-15, 1947, Lord Louis Mountbatten, the last viceroy of India, brings the curtain down on two centuries of British rule. The Indian subcontinent is divided into mainly Hindu India and Muslim-majority Pakistan. A poorly prepared partition throws life into disarray, displacing some 15 million and unleashing sectarian bloodshed that kills nearly two million people.

India has continued to face animosity from Pakistan. Territorial disputes over the Kashmir region sparked major Indo-Pakistani wars in 1947 and 1965, and a limited war in 1999. The neighbors fought a third war in 1971 over Islamabad's rule in then East Pakistan. 1989-1990 saw thousands of Kashmiri Hindus killed as Hindus had flee to other parts of India. In November 2008, a group of heavily armed Pakistani militants attack the Indian city of Mumbai and kill 166 people. In 2019, 41 paramilitary members were killed in a suicide attack in Kashmir, claimed by a Pakistan-based armed group. Pakistani inspired terrorism has killed tens of thousands of people since 1947, one thing that has not changed in the past 75 years. I am hoping things will improve after India revoked Kashmir's limited autonomy under the constitution on August 5, 2019.

The U.S is losing its grip as the super power. Racism is not hiding its face anymore. Influencing the government has become a multibillion-dollar business, with companies and trade associations hiring lobbyists and attorneys to push their agenda and shape policymaking. In 2020, the pharmaceuticals and health products industry in the United States spent the most on lobbying efforts. In the same year, the insurance industry spent about 151.85 million U.S. dollars on lobbying. The Pharmaceutical Research & Manufacturers of America and the American Hospital Association rounded out the top lobbying spenders in 2020.

Despite its long and generally promising history, some believe that the Indian constitutional democracy is facing turbulent times. Yet, many believe that India is in very good hands.

There are some states in India where current ruling party BJP is in the opposition. But you won't see a BJP supporter standing with a Maoist, or a jihadi terrorist, just to spite the government. Not now, not before, not ever. Eight years have passed since Modi came to power. Not everything has gone right, nor could it have. But despite war and pandemic, India has made it to the position of 5th largest economy in 2022.

(Jeevan Zutshi is the author of The Last Smile – A Journey of Hope and Earth on Trial: Fighting the visible and invisible enemies.)