



Cover: "Delhi February" by Amitava Kumar (gouache on paper, February 2021)

INDIA AT 75



TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	6
Suketu Mehta	7
Aakar Patel	9
Aanchal Malhotra	10
Aatish Taseer	11
Abraham Verghese	12
Akhil Katyal	13
Akshaya Mukul	14
Altaf Tyrewala	15
Amandeep Sandhu	16
Amit Chaudhuri	17
Amitava Kumar	19
Angela Saini	20
Anirudh Kanisetti	21
Anita Desai	22
Anuradha Bhagwati	23
Arjun Sethi	24
Arshia Sattar	25
Arvind Krishna Mehrotra	26
Ashish Kothari	28
Ashok Vajpeyi	29
Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni	30
Damodar Mauzo	31
Daribha Lyndem	33
David Davidar	34
Deepa Mehta	36
Dev Benegal	37
Devyani Saltzman	38

Gaiutra Bahadur	39
Ganesh Devy	40
Geetanjali Shree	41
Ghazala Wahab	43
Gyan Prakash	44
Hamraaz	45
Hari Kunzru	47
Hemant Divate	48
Imraan Coovadia	50
Jacinta Kerketta	51
Jaideep Hardikar	52
Jeet Thayil	53
Jerry Pinto	55
Jhumpa Lahiri	57
Kai Friesse	58
Karan Mahajan	59
Karthika Naïr	60
Kazim Ali	63
Keshava Guha	64
Kiran Desai	65
Kumar Ketkar	67
Madhusree Mukerjee	68
Manil Suri	69
Manisha Joshi	70
Manjula Padmanabhan	71
Manu Bhagavan	72
Maya Jasanoff	73
K R Meera	74
Meira Chand	75
Minal Hajratwala	76
Mira Jacob	77

Mira Kamdar	78
Nabaneeta Dev Sen	79
Namita Devidayal	80
Nandita Das	81
Natwar Gandhi	82
Navina Haidar	83
Nayantara Sahgal	84
Nilanjana S. Roy	85
Nilita Vachani	86
Panna Naik	87
Perumal Murugan	88
Pratap Bhanu Mehta	89
Pratishtha Pandya	90
Preti Taneja	93
Priyamvada Gopal	94
Priyanka Dubey	95
Raghu Karnad	96
Rajesh Parameswaran	97
Rajmohan Gandhi	98
M V Ramana	99
Ritu Menon	100
Romila Thapar	101
Ruchira Gupta	102
Ruchir Joshi	103
Sabitha Satchi	104
Saikat Majumdar	105
P Sainath	106
Salil Tripathi	109
Salman Rushdie	111
Samanth Subramanian	112
Sandeep Jauhar	113

Sangamesh Menasinakai	114
Saumya Roy	115
Shauna Singh Baldwin	116
Shobhaa De	117
Shruti Ganguly	118
Siddhartha Deb	119
Siddharth Dube	121
Sita Venkateswar	122
Sonora Jha	124
Suchitra Vijayan	125
Sujatha Gidla	127
Suketu Mehta	128
Sumana Roy	129
Sunil Amrith	131
Tabish Khair	132
Tanuja Desai Hidier	133
Thrity Urigar	135
Tishani Doshi	136
Vandana Singh	137
Vijay Seshadri	139
Vishakha N. Desai	141
Vivek Menezes	142
Yashica Dutt	143
Zia Jaffrey	144
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	145

INTRODUCTION

On 15 August, India will mark 75 years of its independence. What should be a moment of celebration and joy has become a moment of deep despair and reflection. At independence, India offered a beacon of hope—a multi-everything, secular society choosing democratic governance and a Gandhian vision of inclusion and tolerance. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru spoke of India’s ‘tryst with destiny,’ and the hope was that the country would live up to the dream of its Nobel Laureate for literature, Rabindranath Tagore: “Where the mind is without fear... into that heaven of freedom, let my country awake.”

But India retained many colonial-era laws that restricted freedoms and, over the years, added more such laws, undermining its democracy. An internal Emergency in 1975 curtailed civil liberties and jailed dissidents. Since its founding, India has witnessed insurgencies and brutality by armed forces and the police against its citizens, as well as periods of horrific violence along caste and communal divides.

But the election in 2014 has transformed India into a country where hate speech is expressed and disseminated loudly; where Muslims are discriminated against and lynched, their homes and mosques bulldozed, their livelihoods destroyed; where Christians are beaten and churches attacked; where political prisoners are held in jail without trial. Dissenting journalists and authors are denied permission to leave the country. The institutions that can defend India’s freedoms—its courts, parliament and civil service, and much of the media—have been co-opted or weakened. In PEN America’s most recent Freedom to Write Index, India is the only nominally democratic country included in our count of the top 10 jailers of writers and public intellectuals worldwide. In recent years, India has seen an acceleration of threats against free speech, academic freedom and digital rights, and an uptick in online trolling and harassment.

To mark India at 75, PEN America reached out to authors from India and the Indian diaspora to write short texts expressing what they felt. Together they make a historic document. Authors who were born in British India responded, as did India’s Midnight’s Children and grandchildren. Authors from around the globe sent us their thoughts, as did authors from India’s many languages, communities, faiths and castes. Some voices are optimistic, some prayerful, some anguished and enraged. Some suggest defeat, others venture hope, still others are defiant. The authors hold a spectrum of political views, and may be in disagreement about much else, but they are united in their concern for the state of Indian democracy. We invite you to read their ideas of what India was and ought to be, and what it has become.

SUKETU MEHTA

What is at Stake

I am writing this as an act of love. I was born in India, and I love India with all my being. But this country that I love is facing the gravest threat to its democracy since its founding.

Indian democracy is one of the 20th century's greatest achievements. Over 75 years, we built, against great odds, a nation that for the first time in its 5000-year history empowered women and the Dalits, people formerly known as untouchables. We largely abolished famine. We kept the army out of politics. After independence, many people predicted that we would become Balkanized. Yugoslavia became Balkanized, but India stayed together. No small feat.

But I write this today to tell you: things in India are more dire than you realize. India is a country that is majority Hindu, but it is not officially a Hindu state. The people who are in power in India today want to change this. They want India to be a Hindu ethnocratic state, where all other religions live by Hindu sufferance. This has practical consequences: people of other religions are actively harassed, even lynched on the streets; their freedom to practice their religion in their own way is circumscribed. And when they protest, they are jailed and their houses bulldozed. Most worrying, much of the judiciary seems to be sympathetic to the Hindu nationalist agenda, and issues its verdicts accordingly.

There is also sustained and systematic harassment of writers, journalists, artists, activists, religious figures—anyone who questions the official narrative. We who have attached our names here are taking great personal risk in writing this: our citizenship of India could be revoked, we could be banned from the country, our property in India seized, our relatives harassed. There are many others who think like we do but have told us they can't speak out, for fear of the consequences. I never thought I'd use the word 'dissident' in describing myself and my friends who've compiled this document; I thought that word only applied to the Soviet Union, North Korea, China.

It is crucial that India remains a democracy for all its citizens. India is not Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan. Not yet. A lot of India's standing in the world—the reason we're included in the respectable nations, the reason our people and our tech companies are welcome all over the world—is that we're seen, unlike, say, China, as being a multiethnic democracy that protects its minorities.

With over 200 million Indian Muslims, India is the third largest Muslim country in the world. There are 30 million Indian Christians. There are Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Zoroastrians, Atheists. They are as Indian as I am—a Hindu who's proud of being a Hindu, but not a Hindu as Narendra Modi and the BJP seek to define me.

When countries safeguard the rights of their minorities, they also safeguard, as a happy side effect, the rights and wellbeing of their majorities. If a judiciary forbids discrimination against, say, Muslims, it is also much more likely to forbid discrimination against, say, LGBT people. The obverse is also true: when they don't safeguard the rights of their minorities, every other citizen's rights are in peril.

The alienation of Indian Muslims would be catastrophic, for India and the world. They are being told: you are invaders, this is not your country, go back to where you came from. But Indian Muslims did not come from elsewhere; they were in the country all along, and chose which God to worship. After the Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, they voted with their feet; they chose to stay, and build a nation.

The challenges facing India in the next 75 years are colossal, perhaps even greater than the first 75 years. This year, northern India saw the hottest temperatures in history, reaching 49 degrees Celsius (120°F). Next year looks to be even hotter. By the middle of the century, New Delhi could become uninhabitable.

The country also has an enormous, restive, and largely unemployed youth population—half of its population is under 25. But only 36% of the working-age population has a job. To meet these challenges, it is crucial that the country stay united, and not fracture along religious lines, spend its energies building a brighter future instead of darkly contemplating past invasions.

In this time when country after country is turning its back on democracy, India has to be an example to countries around the world, this beautiful dream of nationhood expressed in the Hindu scriptures as 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam'—the whole earth is a family. We should all be rooting for this incredible experiment in multiplicity to work. As goes India, so goes democracy.

Suketu Mehta is the author of Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found, a Pulitzer Prize Finalist, and This Land is Our Land: An Immigrant's Manifesto. He teaches journalism at New York University.

AAKAR PATEL

India is adrift today. It is detached from the moorings it had been secured to in 1950. The pluralist and progressive vision of those who led it into independence has been discredited and all but vanished. It has been replaced by a confident majoritarianism which expresses itself against other Indians, and finds pleasure and delight in the trauma it inflicts internally. It is instinctive and that is why it has been difficult to resist. This cold wind has brought us into unfamiliar and dangerous waters. We will get out eventually, of course: all humanity will. But India must first finish its adventure fully. This is the most important moment in our history and this is our pivotal generation.

Aakar Patel is Chair of Amnesty International India. His work The Anarchist Cookbook: A toolkit to protest and peaceful resistance is being published in September by HarperCollins.

AANCHAL MALHOTRA

“My father used to say to us—Hindustan is our *vatan*, our land. It didn’t matter that we were Musalmaan; what mattered was that we were born here and here is where we would die . . . Our Hindu brothers are born in Hindustan, they grow up here, live their lives here, they die here. And when they die, they are cremated and their ashes are immersed into holy waters of the river Ganga. Within her tides they flow, even if it is eventually into foreign waters. But look at us Musalmaans—we are born in Hindustan, we grow up here, we live here and we die here. And when we die, we are buried deep into the ground [and] we become one with the land. We become Hindustan . . . We become Hindustan, our bodies mix into its soil. How could we ever leave this land, then? Our home, our life—how could we ever leave it? We are within the very land.”

— *Excerpt from a conversation with a Partition witness, Delhi, 2014.*

Aanchal Malhotra is an oral historian from New Delhi, India. She is the author of two books, Remnants of a Separation, published internationally as Remnants of Partition, archiving the objects carried by refugees across the newly made border in 1947, and In the Language of Remembering, on the long-lasting, intergenerational, cross-border legacy of Partition.

AATISH TASEER

India turns seventy-five, but I am not invited to the party. India is a Hindu country and in the eyes of those I grew up amongst I am merely a Muslim now—denatured by a place that is itself denatured. Since the ‘mountaineer’ on Raisina Hill—‘ten thick worms his fingers, his words like measures of weight’—decreed me a Pakistani, I have not been able to go back home. I don’t mind. The best of us are exiles now, some external, some internal, and I (at least) am spared the pain of returning to a place that has ceased to exist.

“I do not love Germany,” wrote Sebastian Haffner, taking leave of a country he no longer recognized, “just as I do not ‘love’ myself.” Love is too small a word for what one feels for one’s country. True belonging is to hold one’s place to a standard, as one would hold oneself. India has slipped. The primal cry for a *limpieza de sangre* has taken the country by the throat. We know from the fear in the faces of those propagating this dark new vision of an impure purity that it will not last. We carry away a strand of DNA from that old India and bide our time—ready for when that glamorous big-hearted country is ready to return to herself.

Aatish Taseer is a British-American writer in New York. He is the author, most recently, of The Twice-Born: Life and Death on the Ganges.

ABRAHAM VERGHESE

I was born in Africa, the son of Indian Christian parents from Kerala. When I settled in Madras for college, I had just fled a country where a military dictatorship had trampled over human rights. So I could only marvel at the unwieldy miracle of Indian national elections, the vibrant free press, and the freedom of all religious groups to worship. I never took what India had accomplished for granted. How sad and alarming then to see these very things under threat today; we must not stay silent.

Abraham Verghese, author of three books, the most recent of which is Cutting for Stone. He was born in Ethiopia and lives in California. He is a physician and writer who teaches at the Stanford Medical School. In 2016, he received the National Humanities Medal from President Obama.

AKHIL KATYAL

The Bystander

*pours wax
into his own ears
sprays pepper
into his own eyes.*

*He stuffs his nostrils
with marigolds*

*clogs his mouth
with sand.*

*One by one, he dams up
all his senses.*

*He claims innocence.
The night of massacre climbs.*

Akhil Katyal was born in Bareilly and lives in Delhi. He is a poet, translator and scholar. He has published three volumes of poetry, one anthology, and translated a volume of verse. He writes in Hindi, Urdu and English.

AKSHAYA MUKUL

Each passing moment I feel like the chronicler of Zbigniew Herbert's *Report from a Besieged City*. The only difference is my country is besieged. I have no right on my food, dress, belief system, and sexuality. Dissent has been banished and the bravest have been packed into jails where an inmate with Parkinson's had to fight for straw and sipper. Another inmate is denied P.G. Wodehouse. Paranoia rules us, bulldozers dominate the streets, courts are on a long vacation, and universities no longer question. Cheering masses—unemployed and angry—blame the minorities for their tattered lives since the leader can do no wrong. Every morning newspapers are full of tales and an example is made of those who verify facts. As the nation dies out, our middle class has taken the coward's route, justifying the state of the nation and its descent into abyss. 'It is a chaos before our ascent to the summit of nations' they tell you.

Is everything lost? Not yet. Maybe never. Defenders of rights and the Constitution, small in numbers, will outlive those full of violence, hate and fury. And even if one defender is left, she will stand at the gate.

Akshaya Mukul is a journalist and writer in Delhi. He is the author of two works of non-fiction, including the award-winning Gita Press and the Making of Hindu India. His biography of Agyeya was published recently.

ALTAF TYREWALA

I NEEDED A GOD TODAY

I needed to confess
That I was back to needing
A father in heaven
Back to needing
Being afraid of sin
Of hellfire and demons
And a belief in the invisible
I needed a god today
But he's closed for business
The prayer house is padlocked
The priests have disappeared
A sign on the door says
Seek Me in your heart's shrine

You mean that shrine I razed?
That altar I burned?
That sanctuary I demolished?
That pedestal I smashed?
What resides in those ruins
Is belief's ghost
And the echo of a prayer
To never need a god again

I needed a god today
I needed to tell him
That heart's shrine
Is now a mausoleum
To disbelief and to living

Altaf Tyrewala is the author of three fiction books and has edited a crime fiction anthology. His works have been published around the world and he was awarded the DAAD Artist-in-Berlin literature grant. He has also curated a literature festival. He hails from Mumbai and now lives in Dallas.

AMANDEEP SANDHU

Births are bloody. At the dawn of India and Pakistan's birth as nations in 1947, the Urdu-language poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz said: "ye daag daag ujala, ye sab-gazida seher, wo intezaar tha jiska, ye wo seher to nahin"—"This stained tainted light, this night bitten dawn, that we were waiting for, this is not that dawn." While the Indian mainland celebrated the nation's birth, the poet looked at the birth pangs, the bleeding, the result of extreme identity politics, the laceration of Panjab and Bengal due to Partition. About 1 million people died, and 15 million were displaced in the largest, inadequately documented, migration in the history of the world. At birth India was a poor, populous nation. Over the decades, India progressed on various development indices but its mass was so large, its complexity so dense, that it also bumbled along the way. Discontent grew in society. In the last decade, the wounds of identity politics festered when India's majority mostly abnegated their secular ethos in favor of a right-wing dispensation that has used every sectarian trope, even institutions of state, to attack the minorities and erode democracy. Those who support the powers in this new India now seemingly find direction, but it is a downward spiral on all indices and its economy. Faiz's dawn has turned to noon, and I tremble, stating: now another darkness beckons.

Amandeep Sandhu is the author of Panjab: Journeys Through Fault Lines and a Homi Bhabha Fellow 2022-24. He lives in Bangalore.

AMIT CHAUDHURI

An excerpt and a translation – Amit Chaudhuri

1. The Deer and the Ewe (short excerpt from an essay published in *Social Research*)

What does religion use reason against? Post-Enlightenment convention, which we have internalized, states that religion's enemy is, in fact, science and reason, and vice versa. A more careful examination reveals that rationality, in India, is religious thought's means of refuting hegemony, and hegemony, until 300 years ago, in India as elsewhere, was religion (though the narrative of Christianity and its wars with the state and science have to be distinguished from the argumentation I'm referring to). So religion uses reason to refute religion, or, more precisely, bogus religion—from which (in case we need reminding) xenophobia mainly emanates. Here, in Arvind Krishna Mehrotra's translation, is an example from the fifteenth-century Bhakti poet Kabir, the son of Muslim weavers, deploying logic against the habit of equating religiosity with signs of religiosity:

If going naked
Brought liberation,
The deer of the forest
Would attain it first.

If a shaven head
Was a sign of piety,
Ewes would be
Pious too.

If holding back the semen
Brought you closer to heaven,
A steer would
Lead the way.

The song ends:

There's no salvation
Without Rama, says Kabir.
Not to know it
Is really dumb. (Kabir 2011, 23)

Some premises are being examined here and being tested against another premise at the end. The propositions in question have to do with whether the markers of renunciation, asceticism, and piety (an unclothed body, a shaven head, holding in semen) are a guarantee of spiritual attainment. If they were, "Ewes would be / Pious too." The benchmark is not the observance of a form of practice, but direct experience: "no salvation / Without Rama." "Rama," here, is proof (*pramana*); the accessories presented as evidence of spirituality are accoutrements that are easily acquired—in the case of the deer and the ewe, acquired without any effort at all.

Hum dekhenge by Faiz Ahmed Faiz

Translated by Amit Chaudhuri

We shall see—
It's certain we too shall see
The day that was promised to us
And set indelibly in iron

When the boulder-weight of tyranny
Will scatter like wisps of cotton
And under the feet of the reigned-over
The earth will pound like a heart beating
And over the heads of those who govern
Lightning will burn and crackle

When all idols will be vacated
From the holy places
And we, the dispossessed and displaced,
Will be returned to our inheritance,
Each crown will be flung away,
Each seat of power brought down

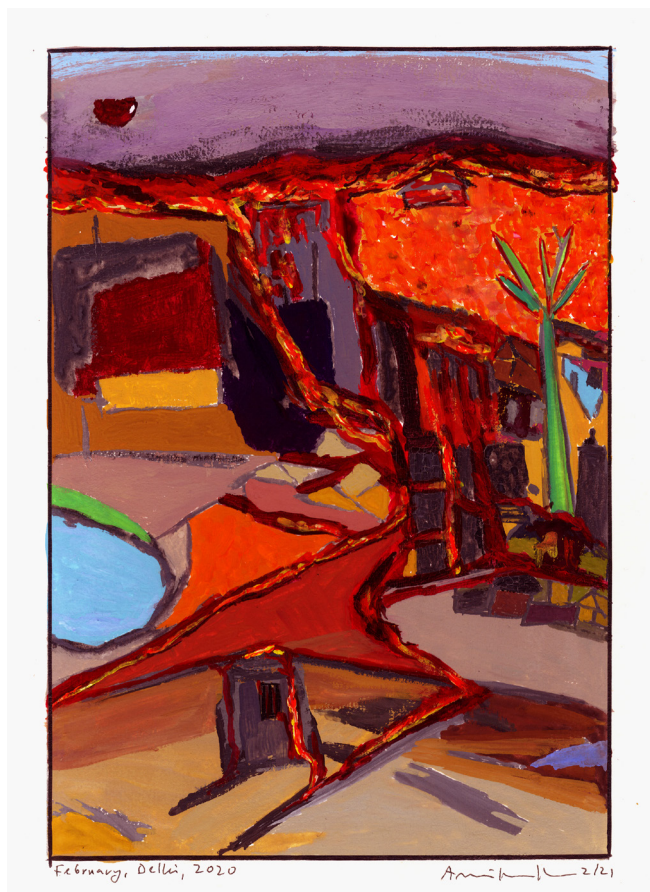
Allah's name will remain: nothing more—
He, who is present and absent too,
He, who is both scene and spectator;
The cry "I am truth" will be heard,
The cry that is me as it is you,
And everywhere will reign God's progeny
Which is what I am, as you are.

Amit Chaudhuri is a singer, musician, and the author of eight novels, including Sojourn, published in August 2022, besides one collection of short stories, three books of poems, and five volumes of non-fiction. He lives in Calcutta.

AMITAVA KUMAR

On February 23, 2020, riots erupted in Delhi. The homes and shops owned by Muslims in northeast Delhi went up in flames after a ruling party politician, irked by those protesting discriminatory citizenship laws, whipped fanatical fury among his followers. There is a story that I wrote down in my notebook from one of the news-reports I had read: 'A Muslim resident of Shiv Vihar kept pet pigeons. The mob burned down his home and then killed the pigeons by wringing their necks.' *Were they Muslim pigeons?* There is another brief, heartbreaking detail that I recorded in my notebook: 'A man returned to a street corner to sift with his hands through a pile of black and gray ash searching for his brother's bones. He had seen his brother on fire as he tried to flee the mob. He found charred bits that he was going to bury in a cemetery when peace returned.'

I believe we should remember what was done by our fellow human beings. We ought to fight for justice on behalf of those so grievously wronged. What is the central conceit of art? That someone reading you will be moved, that your work will leave someone altered or changed. I cannot say I have bought into that worldview completely. But I do want to remember, and my words or art to keep alive a memory. Many lovers of Urdu poetry remember Bashir Badr's lines: 'Log toot jaate hain ek ghar banane mein / Tum taras nahin khaate bastiyan jalaane mein.' (People go broke in building a home / And you remain unmoved as you burn down whole neighborhoods.) The poet was speaking from experience. His own home in Meerut was gutted and reduced to rubble in the Hindu-Muslim riots in 1987. Like Bashir Badr, I am saying that I remember, I remember.



"Delhi February" by Amitava Kumar, gouache on paper, February 2021

Amitava Kumar is a writer and journalist. He is the author of several works of fiction and non-fiction, and, most recently, a book of drawings. Kumar was born in Ara, Bihar, and teaches at Vassar College in the United States.

ANGELA SAINI

My father rarely speaks about the past. Just the occasional anecdote, dropped like a bomb and never mentioned again.

He recalls his parents in Punjab urging their Muslim neighbors not to leave during Partition. Entering one empty home after it was all over, some villagers found a kitchen knife. My father pauses to consider how quickly the Muslim family must have packed up and ran to have left behind an object that they were too poor to lose.

What happened to that knife afterwards, I wonder. Did those who used it remember the friendships that once existed between neighbors?

Or was having the knife more important?

Angela Saini is a British writer born to Indian parents. She lives in New York. She writes on science and is the author of three works of non-fiction, most recently Superior: The Return of Race Science. Her next book is on the origins of patriarchy.

ANIRUDH KANISETTI

We choose what history means, and what we learn from it. Today, the past has been appropriated to only make us yearn for imagined, bygone splendor, to provoke shame or anger. But India's history is something grander.

For thousands of years, people like us lived in a harsher world, where power ran untrammelled. Yet, somehow, 75 years ago, our ancestors said “no more.” And they tried, at least, to correct the injustices of the past, with an ambition and optimism unparalleled in human history.

It may seem, in 2022, that all this is irrevocably in jeopardy; that we are doomed, inevitably, to return to the horrors of our iniquitous past. But the lessons of history are not so bleak. They cannot be allowed to be. The progress that our ancestors fought so hard for will not be forgotten so easily. Through the dark and difficult years ahead, there will always be some who speak truth to power. There will be those who fight for what is right. And I hope that they will look back to 2022, and hear voices like theirs, and know that they will never be alone in what they stand for—just as we are not.

Anirudh Kanisetti is a researcher, historian, and columnist who writes and hosts podcasts on South Asia's past and present. He is the author of a book about the medieval history of Southern India.

ANITA DESAI

Our Old Delhi garden was once a pleasant place to sleep on summer nights, but the summer I was ten years old was different: we could see the smoke and flames of fires burning in the Old City; our parents and neighbors awake and watchful. When school reopened, the classrooms were half empty, so many students had "crossed the borders," we were told. Refugee camps teemed everywhere.

Yet out of that nightmare, the flag of an independent India was raised, a new constitution written that was fair and free of the sectarianism that had caused the agitation and its violence, a testament to the survival of the people's hopes and idealism. Briefly, we held our heads high.

Seventy five years on, what do we see? All the riches of the many cultures we had inherited coldly and deliberately destroyed, so many vibrant and valuable voices silenced, even the natural world of forests, rivers and wildlife desecrated, leaving us with the dust and ashes of hate and falsehoods.

Anita Desai is the author of 18 works of fiction including In Custody and Clear Light of Day. She is a professor emerita at MIT, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Among her honors are a Padma Bhushan.

ANURADHA BHAGWATI

Istiqlal

Where are you from? he asks. We are both in bathing suits in the local pool, breathing hard, cellulite and body scars bare. He is as British and pale as I am Brown and assimilated.

New York City, I say, defiantly. He looks at me without speaking, assessing the rights and wrongs of his next question. I spare him the struggle. I just want to swim another lap.

India, I add, each detail revealing more to confuse him, *my family is from Gujarat. Where Gandhi was from. Where Modi is from.*

Oh, he replies. And we both know my explanation on origins is not enough, because he is scrutinizing my right upper arm, where Arabic wraps itself around bicep and tricep.

But then why the tattoo? he continues.

It's a long story, I say, prepared. Too long for a break at the wall of the pool. Dad is a secular Hindu. Mom is a convert to Christianity. I am a student of Buddhism.

Istiqlal, I explain. *It means "independence."* It's a word I adopted from Palestine, and I apply it to all of today's moments: the struggle for Black lives in Trump's America, for Dalit and Muslim dignity in Modi's India. It will never get old.

On the next break between intervals, he says suddenly, *I hope I didn't offend you.*

No, I respond, smiling extra hard. I push off the wall, and swim.

Anuradha Bhagwati (she/her) is the author of Unbecoming: A Memoir of Disobedience. A former Marine Corps captain and award-winning activist, she founded the Service Women's Action Network, which brought national attention to sexual violence in the U.S. military and helped repeal the ban on women in combat. She lives in San Francisco with her service dog, Duke.

ARJUN SETHI

India was at the center of the global struggle for decolonization and liberation not long ago. Its legacy was the power of collective action, nonviolent resistance, and the promise of a democracy, albeit an imperfect one, rooted in inclusivity and pluralism.

An authoritarian regime inspired by Hindutva nationalism has extinguished that flame. The BJP and RSS wage war on the press, erase minority rights, blockade Kashmir from the world, and employ a propaganda and disinformation machine unrivaled today.

India often escapes global scrutiny because of its vivacious culture, massive economy, and geopolitical alliances. In the interim, those who paved the way for modern India mourn in the ethereal and those who dare speak out risk arrest, death, or languish in dark cells hoping the world remembers their names.

Only the most dystopian could have imagined that there would come a day when India would bear closer resemblance to the colonial power it dethroned than the democratic republic it aspired to be.

Arjun Singh Sethi was born in Virginia and teaches law at Georgetown University Law Center. He is the author of a book about racism & hate in America.

ARSHIA SATTAR

When you live in a nightmare, when you wake each day with a sense of dread, you recall things that gave you hope, you imagine things as they could be, you look for reasons to engage with your increasingly horrifying reality. I often return, at those times, to a past that promised a world of peace and love and harmony, of equality and freedom for everyone. Joni Mitchell comes to mind, telling me that we are better than what we are living through, that we have been sold for blood money, that we must bring ourselves back to the beauty, the compassion and the solidarity that we are all capable of.

*We are stardust, we are golden
We are part of the devil's bargain
And we've got to get ourselves
Back to the garden.*

Joni Mitchell, 'Woodstock,' 1969

Arshia Sattar is a writer in Bangalore. She translates from Sanskrit. Her work includes translations of the Ramayana, and three critical studies.

ARVIND KRISHNA MEHROTRA

Laugh Club of Gandhi Park

In lanes too narrow
for three to walk abreast,
that only peddlers

with goods to sell
from upright bicycles enter,
are modest houses,

modest only in name,
behind whose barred windows,
ornamental gates,

the spikes along the top
painted black and gold,
live family men who can

wiggle their fiery
bellies at will.
You see them

in Gandhi Park,
on opposite benches,
practicing their skills,

a smokescreen
of laughter
hiding their faces.

They move in a pack
and eat sprouts
on the way out.

Mistimed
badminton shots
exploding around him,

a metal soldier
with assault rifle
stands guard

and a musical fountain
plays fountain music
in the background.

Arvind Krishna Mehrotra was born in Lahore in 1947 and lives in Dehradun. He is the author, most recently, of Collected Poems (Shearsman Books) and Ghalib, A Diary: Delhi 1857-58 (New Walk Editions).

ASHISH KOTHARI

India@75: Behaving like an Elder?

As India celebrates 75 years of Independence, does it embody the wisdom such an age should bring? At least from one point of view, the answer is a resounding NO—the sustainability of its natural environment, on which all our lives depend.

It is astounding how we still ‘externalize’ nature in our single-minded pursuit of economic growth. After decades of high growth, 480 million people in northern India face the most extreme levels of air pollution in the world. According to the NITI Aayog, “600 million people in India face high to extreme water stress ... with nearly 70% of water being contaminated.” The Indian Space Research Organisation says that 30% of our land is at various stages of degradation, some getting desertified. In the markets of most cities, food has levels of pesticides well above human safety levels. The climate crisis is threatening the livelihoods and lives of several hundred million—mostly the poorest. Yet, the government is busy dismantling environmental and social security policies to favor corporate access to land and natural resources. 60 million people¹ have already been displaced by ‘development’ projects; how many more?

It does not have to be like this. Thousands of initiatives are demonstrating how basic needs including food, water, energy, housing can be met, dignified livelihoods generated, and learning and health access enhanced, while working with and within the natural environment, respecting not only human rights but also the rights of fellow species to thrive (www.vikalpsangam.org). But this requires spaces for everyone’s voice in decision-making (a radical democracy), community control over the commons, struggles against various inequalities including gender and caste, sustaining diverse cultures and knowledges, and replacing GDP with meaningful indicators of well-being ... a genuine swaraj. In the last quarter of its century of Independence, this is India’s biggest challenge. If we fail, we will be mourning, not celebrating, in 2047.

Ashish Kothari is with Kalpavriksh, an environmental organization in India. He has taught at Indian Institute of Public Administration, served on boards of Greenpeace International & India, is a judge on International Tribunal on Rights of Nature, and helps coordinate Vikalp Sangam and the Global Tapestry of Alternatives. He is co-author/co-editor of Churning the Earth, Alternative Futures, and Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary.

¹ Study by H.M. Mathur in India: Social Development Report 2008.

ASHOK VAJPEYI

Freedom as reality is forever in jeopardy. But as we complete the 75th year of freedom as a nation, freedom is ironically suffering a huge deficit and assault in India today. Intellectually, creatively, and imaginatively we were free before political freedom came to us. Literature, the arts, and science of pre-independent India were created by free-minded writers, artists, and scientists. After independence we enjoyed, by and large, freedom to express our dissent, our criticism of the establishment, our vision of alternatives. This freedom today is being seriously and grievously curtailed by both legal and extra-legal ways. Unfortunately, not only freedom, but also equality and justice, the founding values of our constitution, are under assault.

Today to be a writer in India, in its many languages, is to be a victim of surveillance by many ideological watchdogs whose feelings are hurt at the slightest deviation from the given social-religious norms. A genuine artist or writer today has to be a person of courage, conscience and creativity. She has to struggle against forces of amnesia, hatred, violence, and bulldozing, lie-spreading technologies. Truth is in minority, courage and imagination, conscience and solidarity, are in minority. Speaking truth is unpardonable blasphemy. And yet literature and the arts survive with dignity, invincible courage and moral resistance. Politics, power, economy, and the media may not listen and care, but truth is being spoken and protected by writers and artists. Freedom finds residence in creativity, even if it is shrinking in reality.

Ashok Vajpeyi is a poet and critic. He writes in Hindi and lives in Delhi.

CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI

Stories

I grew up on heroic tales of women
Sarojini Naidu Matangini Hazra
Who underwent torture to buy us freedom
willingly and sometimes with their lives. Travel backwards
with me to Hazrat Mahal Rani Laxmibai, back, back
to Draupadi Arundhati Radha the ever-misunderstood Sita
With her quiet epic resistance. The chiaroscuro
silhouettes of my lifetime too
Indira Mahasweta Ismat and should I include Kiran?
Time blurs closeup, hard to tell protagonist from antagonist.
#MeToo and #NoMoreCompromise
butt heads against memories of Nirbhaya.

But today I think of the nameless ones
who broke the love-laws who stepped out at night
sometimes their homes were their most dangerous place
whose stories wash up if at all
like bodies far downstream bloated and unrecognizable.
Beloved India I hold close this 75th birthday
With joy and trepidation and precious hope of change.
Droupadi I am waiting to see what you will do.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is the Betty and Gene McDavid Professor of Writing at the University of Houston. She is the author of thirteen works of fiction, including, most recently, The Last Queen and the award-winning collection Arranged Marriage, five books for young adults, four collections of poetry, and has edited three anthologies.

DAMODAR MAUZO

Translated from Konkani by Riya Kirtani

Sprout

While reading a book, I came across a thought. Quite a profound one. That nudging thing would not let me sleep. No matter how hard I tried, it didn't give up, so I simply decided to sleep with it.

When I woke up in the morning, I found that the thought had sprouted, so I rushed with it to my front yard, in order to plant it. However, I knew that the soil in my own yard was not quite productive while my neighbor's land was very fertile. Besides, he liked gardening. So, I crossed over the fence and carefully planted the tiny sprout there. Even before it rained, the little sprout drew nutrients and bloomed to become a plant. Soon it was a tree that bore flowers and fruits. The neighbor was delighted.

I was then surprised to learn that the fruits had therapeutic value that provided an instant cure for many ailments. People flocked at the neighbor's door asking him to give them some. The generous neighbor never sent away anyone empty handed. Whenever he was at private get-togethers or at public meetings, the neighbor tended to share his fruits with the people.

News started popping up about this healing fruit. The stories were afloat, day in and day out. Someone who could not see well had a clear and effective vision. A confused soul claimed to have gained a new-found understanding.

Someone who had been faltering to see the path clearly, now got the foresight to visualize what was coming. A person whose intelligence had gathered dust found the wheels turning again.

Even someone with severe brain fever was cured.

What surprised me the most was when I saw Mr. X, a person known for his crooked ways, was now most well-natured, as good as Mr. A1. Even the abusive Mr. Y and Mr. Z, who always mouthed profanities, were unrecognizable with their newfound persona of piety.

Before long, the fruit had become popular on Facebook, number of its followers increasing with every passing day.

Nevertheless, all good things always face an alternate viewpoint. The disapproving frowns gradually started rising.

Someone had severe stomach ache from just the smell of the fruit.

Some were hit by indigestion.

Some others' migraines had worsened.

Some started throwing up at the smell of the fruit.

While some were hit by insomnia.

When things became worrisome, the affected people held a meeting and decided to give my neighbor a piece of their mind.

“Do not go around distributing those fruits, do not even let people take them away,” they said. When the angry men found the neighbor not paying any heed to their plea, they saw to it that the fruits were legally banned.

They spread rumors that the seed was smuggled from the enemy country, giving people a reason to troll the neighbor for it.

“Such anti-national activities will not be tolerated by our Bharat-Premi Sena,” the patriots vowed.

The perpetrators then realized to their chagrin that the neighbor was named Bharat! So they decided to look for a new name for their outfit.

One day, I overheard of their conspiracy to teach my neighbor a lesson. When I called on him and cautioned him about it, he simply laughed.

Soon afterwards, in the dread of a dark night, I heard frightful sounds in my neighborhood. I felt a chill in my spine when I could sense truckloads of people gathered there. I plugged my ears and tried to sleep. I envisaged my neighbor put to sleep for good. In no time, I could sense the sparks flying, hear the embers ticking and feel the heat on my skin. Did they set the house on fire?

It was a lot later in the wee hours that the spell subsided.

Yet, I could not get myself to fall asleep. The thought I had found in the book kept nagging me.

The next day, gauging the situation, I solemnly made my way over to my neighbor’s house. He was in a murky mood. It was not his house but the tree that was in ashes.

“They should have just killed me instead. Why the innocent tree? They incinerated it along with its flowers, fruits, roots...” He said. I wiped his tears and quietly walked away without even a fleeting look at the burnt tree.

As I reached home, I suddenly had an inkling of doubt. I examined it closely. And look—

The thought that was nagging me at night, had grown a sprout.

Damodar Mauzo lives in Goa and writes in Konkani. Essentially a short fiction writer he has several books to his credit. He is the recipient of the highest literary award of India, the Jnanpith 2022.

DARIBHA LYNDEM

News

The couple read the news together every morning, the few in their high rise building that still get the papers. They flipped the first few pages to get past the advertisements—they knew they had reached the actual news when they could read that everything was well. Outside their tinted windows, down in the streets, they could see a commotion. A crowd on the road, smoke and banners. But there was nothing in the news, so they did not bother.

Daribha Lyndem is a writer from Shillong. She is currently working and living in Mumbai. Name Place Animal Thing is her debut novel which was recently shortlisted for the JCB Prize for Literature. She was named one of the promising writers of 2021 and beyond by digital magazine Feminism in India and in a list of 'Best Summer Reads of 2020' by Vogue India, and has reviews in The Hindu, The Caravan, and Firstpost among others.

The Murmurous Dead: A Very Brief Exchange with a Spirit

Not so long ago, after a fall, I was laid up in bed. As a result of bruised ribs, and stitches in my jaw, sleep was often elusive. One restless night, in the pre-dawn hours, just as gray began filtering through the kachnar trees outside my bedroom window, I had an unexpected visitor. My visitor had neither form nor substance but was simply a consciousness outside my own—its voice was nevertheless clear and unmistakable.

“Sir”, my visitor began, respectfully, “I have a question for you.”

“Who are you?” I asked.

The voice belonged to the spirit of a fourteen-year-old girl who had died in a communal riot in a small town a few years ago.

“And what is this question you have for me?” I asked.

“Why?” she asked, “Are there no memorials for us? Rightfully, there are memorials to the brave men and women who gave their lives protecting our country, their sacrifice should never be forgotten, but how come there are no memorials for us, all of us innocents whom the country failed to protect?”

Nonplussed, I did not reply immediately and she spoke up again.

“There are hundreds of thousands of us who have paid with our lives in this glorious nation of ours because of the acts of commission or omission of our leaders, the least we deserve are memorials so we will be remembered.”

“But surely,” I said weakly, “There must be plaques or memorial stones...”

She interrupted me. “Private markers by our families and those who mourn us don’t count. We died because the state did not look out for us, so it’s the state which should erect memorials for us.”

She had piqued my interest, so I said, “And what form should these memorials take.”

She said, “The form doesn’t really matter, though I would love it if my memorial were to be a garden or even just a flowering tree in a prominent place in the town where I was killed, an amal-tas or a gulmohar or a jacaranda, just imagine if all us were honored thus our ugly cities and towns would be transformed into paradisiacal places of shimmering green and yellow and red and violet.”

I was momentarily lost in the vision she had conjured up, until she spoke again. “No matter what form each memorial takes, every single one of them has to have an essential component.”

“And what is that?” I asked.

“Each of them must have a plaque listing the names of the leaders who failed us, those who were responsible for our deaths. Our leaders love to put their faces on all sorts of billboards and posters that are prominently

displayed in public places, so their portraits should be engraved on these plaques for all eternity. That way the part they played in our deaths will never be forgotten.”

And with that she was gone, as abruptly as she had appeared, just as the morning light came flooding into the room.

David Davidar is a publisher, editor, novelist, and anthologist. His books include the best-selling novel, The House of Blue Mangoes, and an anthology of classic Indian short fiction, A Clutch of Indian Masterpieces.

DEEPA MEHTA

Dear PEN,

I am in India from Toronto every four months or so. Ma has accelerating dementia and it's important to be there with her and my brother, her primary caregiver. To hang on to the memory of the mother I knew, Ma who sang Begum Akhtar's thumris, recited Faiz Ahmad Faiz's poetry at the drop of a hat, and insisted I take Higher Hindi in boarding school in order to read Premchand's stories effortlessly. Gurmukhi, courtesy her, became my second language—all this while my classmates opted for what I considered exotic—French, German, and Spanish. Ma, who reminisced about a huge bonfire in her Delhi neighborhood in 1945. Led by 'Mamaji' the flames were fed with everything Brit he could lay his hands upon. And Ma, though a devout Gandhian, refused to part with her favorite hard copy of Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*. Moral of the story? I guess we can't always do what we know we should do.

I am blabbing on—trying to create a picture of my bright, hopeful, all-embracing mother and through her, of my country. Mother and Motherland both disappearing before my eyes. Helpless as I watch Ma's inevitable decline, and equally helpless as I watch India, in its own trajectory. where the basic pursuit of freedom of expression feels like an elusive privileged dream.

I wonder, if I were not a NRI could I have a more active role in the necessary protests? Probably. And conversely does being a part of the Indian diaspora give me the right to protest the transformation of the country of my birth? I guess so. 'Birth' being the operative word here. The umbilical cord is difficult to sever.

Sitting as I do in Toronto, known pretty much as a controversial Indo-Canadian filmmaker, all I fear is of being denied an Indian visa (to be accurate, this has not ever transpired. The current Consul General is a Satyajit Ray fan). But IF that denial ever comes into fruition (the visa stamp on my Canadian passport that is) it would mean I could not fly to Delhi and be with my mother. It's an alarming thought.

Please consider me a mere foot soldier who is terrified of not seeing Ma again.

Deepa Mehta is an Indo-Canadian filmmaker. Her work includes Earth, Water, Fire, Heaven on Earth, Midnight's Children, Anatomy of Violence, Netflix's Leila, and Funny Boy.

DEV BENEGAL



"Tryst with Destiny" by Dev Benegal

"I want to live forever.
What else can I say.
It rains as I write this. Mad heart, be brave."
— Agha Shahid Ali

Dev Benegal is a film director and screenwriter of the award winning films, English, August, Split Wide Open, and Road, Movie. English, August won India's highest award in cinema, was selected at MOMA's New Directors New Films and was the first Indian acquisition of 20th Century Fox. He teaches screenwriting and is a longtime advisor to the eQuinox Europe screenwriting workshop.

DEVYANI SALTZMAN

On the eve of August 15th, the seventy-fifth anniversary of Indian independence, I'm remembering sitting in my Nani's Maruti as a child and watching the Delhi traffic go by, and later hearing her stories of the nascent republic, the freedom movement, and how she and her sisters rejected cotton for khadi to build what would be, at least in the early dreams of its first post-colonial leaders, the world's largest socialist democracy. Now, as of November, sitting in the same roundabouts watching the saffron decals of a new India, one rewriting the narrative of secularism in favor of populism and Hindu nationalism, erasing its pluralist past in favor of violence and the silencing of its own journalists, one thinks how quickly history can be changed, narratives retold, stories unwritten and wonders if there is any way to recapture its foundations.

Devyani Saltzman is a writer, independent curator and arts leader. She is the author of Shooting Water and her writing has appeared in the Globe and Mail, the Atlantic and Tehelka, amongst other publications. Born and living in Toronto, she is the former Director of Programming at the AGO and Director of Literature at the Banff Centre. She is Vice Chair of the Writers' Trust of Canada.

GAIUTRA BAHADUR

For at least half a century, indentured laborers in British Guiana escaped plantations, trying to walk back to India. One scamp who took their paisa said: Waaalk—waaalk ‘til you reach one mountain. De road to Calcutta deh pun de other side. From the start, return could be a con, the dream fatal. Some died in its pursuit, martyrs to a particular idea of India. The motherland represented freedom, as it did for those aboard the last ship of ex-indentured to sail back, in 1955, to a newly independent nation. Now I, heir to their longings, attached to their idea of India, boycott return.

Gaiutra Bahadur, author of Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture, lives in New Jersey.

GANESH DEVY

The mass-psychology of fascism thinks of intimidation of a few as a weapon for keeping the masses tethered to an ideology of hatred. Love is a word scary for it. It is quick to equate it with a *jihad*, for in hatred does fascism take birth and in hatred does it thrive. Can we allow it to overtake the Indian Constitution and India's Federalism? All of us have to act, act in unity, act with courage, and safeguard the diversities and the federal structure of our country which is unambiguously defined in the Constitution as 'a Union of States.' The freedom of expression is the essence of the ecosystem that keeps courage alive. We have to protect that freedom as a primary freedom of all citizens.

Ganesh Devy is a literary critic known for the People's Linguistic Survey of India. He writes in English, Marathi, and Gujarati, and is the author of 18 books. He lives in Dharwad.

GEETANJALI SHREE

Earthworms in Masks

The time was my childhood. Till recently it did not feel so very long ago, but, suddenly now, it does. Not because I have come a long way but because I feel I might be near the end!

In that childhood would come a rare sound, a whirring, in the skies, in those days quite blue still. We would rush outdoors and look up. A machine with wings, flying far far above, flying far far away. To lands remote. To lands longed for. To lands never to be reached.

Hawaijahaz hawaijahaz, we children would shout.

It was no whirring. It was stirring of our dreams and longings.

Today. A whirr in the skies. The whirring as rare as in my childhood. The skies as blue. I don't rush out but go with some weariness to the window, or to the balcony, my access to the outside during lockdown. I look up, a wee bit sadly, longing somewhat still, but dreams feeling a bit quashed. It is the same machine with wings, flying far far above, flying far far away, to places which had all come in my reach, but, may have gone out of my reach forever and ever.

There was magic when the horizon was far. Possibilities were the stuff of dreams.

But man was fast and confident and driven. He forged ahead. Became too fast, overconfident, ruthlessly ambitious.

The collateral effects were to my pleasure. I got on to planes and crossed the horizon. I wandered in unknown lands. Dreams became reality.

Everything became possible. Everything opened up. Everything lay under me. The trees of my childhood which gave shade to my house were now trees over which my house in a multistorey towered.

Man, the master of all, friend to none.

In the market. In global competition. In barrier-crossing. In the country, in the countryside, in the center, in the margins, in the skies and the waters and ready to be so in Space too.

We shook up everything and felt good about it. I did too as I am the collateral beneficiary of this glittery, overhyped, overactive world. Ever increasing our pace.

But shaking up everything meant Everything moved.

That Everything was alive. We were not making an inanimate world move. We were shaking up the Animate. Earth. Air. Water. Planets. Mountains. Worms.

Warnings came. Everything is shaking and us too with it and it will speed up. Speed thrills but also kills. But we believed in our immortality.

It struck. The virus.

In a flood a scorpion climbed up a swimmer's shoulder and was being safely ferried across. Midway it stung its savior, the very being saving it. But the scorpion was innocent. Stinging was its Dharma.

So too the virus. It was merely fulfilling its Dharma to leap borders and infect bodies.

Innocent.

But man? His Dharma?

And what of me, willy-nilly part of that erring man?

How now and how much to slow down after getting addicted to speed? After flying galore, rending apart the atmosphere, how, and how much, to fold up my wings?

The world had to run at our behest. We were not going to be dictated by a virus. We planned on gagging others, not ourselves.

So are we the aliens and robots we thought we will make of you and control? Hey you, in front of me, behind that mask and in that three piece protective suit, are you human? Am I? No smile. No hug, kiss, touch, love!

Move over humans, for the aliens and the Robots are upon us and are we them!

I was sure I will escape even if you can't!

There was this earthworm which raised its head from the mud and stared at the disaster all around. He saw another earthworm doing the same. And said to the other—you stay stuck here, I am leaving for happier pastures.

At which the second earthworm replied—idiot, we are linked, I am your other end! Where I stay there you do too, where you go there go I. But where is there to go?

Here, he said, as if resolving anything, take this mask!

So—no place to go and anyway planes are not flying and when they do it is not safe and us a bunch of earthworms, some heads, some tails, all in the same mess of overkill and overreach. In masks.

That was then. Indeed planes are flying again and there we are flying in them as jubilantly as before. No slowing down, no reflecting on lessons to be learnt, improving the world, we confidently believe again.

Gandhi was not such a madman after all!

Geetanjali Shree lives in Delhi and writes in Hindi. She wrote this piece in Hindi and translated it. She is the author of five novels, including Ret Samadhi (Tomb of Sand, translated by Daisy Rockwell) which won the International Booker Prize in 2022. She has also written five collections of short stories. She is one of the founding members of a theater group, Vivadi.

GHAZALA WAHAB

The 75th Independence Day, which the government of India is celebrating as *Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav* (translated as the elixir of energy of independence by the government), is a good time to remember how through our collective complacency we have allowed this amrit to turn into a poison that has entered not just our society and politics but is running as lifeblood among a large number of Indian citizens. For the last 75 years we ignored the warning signs, believing that by ignoring them we will make them disappear. We forgot that nothing is permanent, least of all freedom. Unless we work towards restoring it every day, we contribute to its whittling away. No better time than the present to start reclaiming our India from those who are deforming it.

Ghazala Wahab is executive editor at Force India. Born in Agra, she lives outside Delhi, in Noida. She is the author of two works of non-fiction, including Born a Muslim: Some Truths about Islam in India.

GYAN PRAKASH

1947 was a moment of hope. It came at the cost of millions of lives tragically lost and uprooted during the Partition. But independence from British rule promised a new beginning, a life of equality, freedom, and pluralism to the citizens of the new republic. For much of its postcolonial history, India struggled to fulfill this promise. The existence of democracy, however flawed, meant that people could voice their demands and protest injustice. Until 2014.

After the Narendra Modi government came to power, democracy's doors began to close. Not even during the dark days of Indira Gandhi's Emergency was the picture as bleak. She at least used the fig leaf of law to suspend lawful, democratic activities. Now, there is no such pretense. While unleashing the Hindutva ground troops to violently impose its majoritarian ideology, the BJP government has systematically bent the bureaucracy, the police, and the judiciary to follow its diktat. No journalist, no academic, no writer, no artist, no activist is safe if critical of the government, particularly if she happens to be Muslim. The seventy-fifth year of independence is a time for mourning the death of democracy, and for fighting for its revival.

Gyan Prakash teaches at Princeton University. He is the author of several non-fiction books including Mumbai Fables and Emergency Chronicles.

Tremble

Some day soon,
you'll be watching
a pair of tiny squirrels
chase each other
around a muddy park—
or you'll hear a young girl
laugh as she rides
an oversized cycle, hard
through rain-soaked lanes—
and for a time you may
forget the fading light—
but later you'll read
more friends have been charged
for reading namaz,
or that Hany Babu
is still in jail—
or you'll see a brown kite
fly away with a squirrel—
and you'll remember
the darkness and tremble.

Like That Cat, or Our Constitution,

Sometimes precious things
disappear in a moment,
like the flash and bang
of a wedding cracker
or that cat you used to feed,
caught under a swerving bus;
but sometimes they slip away slowly,
like an early morning dream
where you know you left something
of great value in the train car

you see sinking in the river—
a box of old family photos,
perhaps, or the lipstick you took
from your grandmother's table
on the day she died—
and you're glad you're safe on the shore,
but by the time you come fully awake
you cannot remember
where the train had been going,
what had broken the bridge,
or how many fellow travelers
now lie beneath rushing waters.

Hamraaz is a fictional character who writes poems about the dark times in India. Their work has been published in many places including The Penguin Book of Indian Poets, Rattle, nether Quarterly, The Wire, and The Alipore Post.

HARI KUNZRU

I only met my great grand uncle, Pandit Hridaynath Kunzru, in the last year of his life. By that time he was completely blind, and I, a child of eight, was brought to him so he could ‘see’ me, which he did by brushing his fingers, very gently, all over my face. Later, I discovered that this former freedom fighter with the fluttering papery touch had, as a member of the Constituent Assembly, been one of the framers of the Indian constitution. He believed in an India that was tolerant, pluralist, and ruthlessly committed to the freedom of its citizens. He built civil society organizations because in a democracy there should be a counterweight to government power. He declined the Bharat Ratna,² because he thought such honors had no place in a Republic. On this seventy-fifth anniversary of Independence, I honor his principles, and his memory.

Hari Kunzru was born in London and lives in New York. His latest novel is Red Pill.

² India's highest civilian honor

HEMANT DIVATE

Translated from Marathi by Mustansir Dalvi

We are Cursed to Speak

Speak, poet, speak!
Keep speaking to these hanging devils Or you're done for
Look, it's something o'clock or the other
The venom of religion stretches to infinity Out in the street, holy men everywhere
Hiding to target
In my mind, at least,
We come together, crush them Leave them behind
Shivering in the dark
It's the business of poets To show unseeing crowds Rotting stories
Mired in riddles
Soaked in the ink of darkness
Should I speak, you ask?
To those who listen but do not hear Keep at it
You have to
Tell the deaf, dumb and blind
Tell the bhakts, herded like sheep
You have to keep telling
Until blinders are lifted from their eyes
All this telling will find its worth sometime And, in any case, who other than us
Can do this?
Let the truth be blown to smithereens
Let its smoke billow
Let the deaf see
Let the blind hear
Let the dumb sneeze
From the vacuous maws of their navels Let dirt be emptied
From their minds
For until the blind regain 20/20 vision Until the deaf can hear acutely
Until the dumb can scream
The telling cannot cease
It's the job of the poet To keep speaking
We are cursed to speak

Terror

Translated from Marathi by Mustansir Dalvi

I
sit
to

write

and
those
at
home
quake
in
terror

Hemant Divate is an award-winning Marathi poet, editor, publisher, translator, and poetry activist. He lives in Bombay. He has published seven collections of poems in Marathi and has been translated in many languages around the world. Mustansir Dalvi, who translated these poems, is a poet, translator, and editor. He has published three books of poetry, and translated Muhammad Iqbal's poetry from Urdu to English.

IMRAAN COOVADIA

Gandhi's Houses

On 27 May 1947, assessing the violence of partition, Gandhi wrote: “I am in the midst of a raging fire. Is it God’s mercy or the irony of fate that the flames do not consume me?” As close and eccentric a father to India as to his own children, his experience of communal killing was both anguish and a certain sense of invulnerability, a condition not so unlike those of us, India’s children and step-children, who watch the country’s arrival at a second slow-motion partition, supervised by the BJP: the destruction of Gandhi’s greater ashram. At the closure of the first ashram at Sabarmati in Gujarat, he defined the community, whether nation or ashram, as a mere house and confessed in a letter that “I have made it my profession in life to break up homes...I started doing this in 1891...ever since I have been doing nothing but that.” Moreover “I do not remember having ever felt a wrench in the heart in all these wild adventures.” We could call that spirit of joy, resistance, and creative destruction libertarian, if that word retained its meaning, let the same spirit guide us in resisting the massive, dour, purified, and homicidal house Prime Minister Modi is building across the subcontinent.

Imraan Coovadia was born to Indian parents in South Africa. He is the author of works of fiction and non-fiction and teaches at the University of Cape Town.

JACINTA KERKETTA

Translated from Hindi by Bhumika Chawla-d'Souza

क्यों महुआ तोड़े नहीं जाते पेड़ से?

Why is the mahua not plucked from the tree?

Mother, why do you wait all night
For the mahua to fall?
Why not pluck from the tree
At once the mahua all?

Mother replies,
They grow in the tree's womb all night
And when the time is ripe
Fall to the ground on their own
As the dewdrops soak them in the morn
We pick them and bring them home

When all night long the tree
Is writhing with pangs of birth
How could we shake a branch, tell me?
How could we pluck the mahua, say,
From a tree forcibly?

We wait for the mahua to fall,
For we love them, is all.

Jacinta Kerketta is an Adivasi poet and journalist. She writes in Hindi. Her poetry collections include Angor, Land of Roots and, most recently, Ishvar aur Bazaar. She has won multiple awards, including the Indigenous Voice of Asia Award in 2014. Bhumika Chawla-d'Souza is a translator in Bangalore.

JAIDEEP HARDIKAR

At the stroke of freedom, India chose to follow a secular state and vowed to turn her fractured and communal civil society on to a constitutional path.

Framers of the Constitution believed that ultra-nationalism can't keep societies united. Civil cultures do. Secular constitutionality and egalitarian civil society are a prerequisite to co-existence and growth of a heterogeneous society as ours. Religion or markets can't address polycentric problems of humanity. Fulfilling those ideas remains, alas, a dream. More difficult to achieve today.

At 75, India is steered by a regime wedded to religious and market fundamentalism and ready to shun communal harmony and non-violence to stay in power.

It's the symptom of a far deeper malaise. Departing from the ethos of a just, liberal, and social democracy, a demographically young and impatient India is toying with ultra-nationalism, aided and emboldened by the rise and rise of benevolent dictatorship and egged on by a pliant media, a corrupt executive, a spineless judiciary, an inept legislature, collapse of institutions, and a non-existent political opposition. In an era marred by growing inequality, the anxieties plaguing our nation are but a manifestation of the many failings and fears of uncertainties.

Our freedom—the freedom to err as Mahatma Gandhi would say—is in peril.

Protecting that freedom and returning to the earnest constitutional path, a consensual form of democracy, calls for a resolute action from all of us who believe in a plural, secular and liberal thought, to bring a people back from the spell of majoritarianism and authoritarianism.

Jaideep Hardikar is a journalist and author of A village awaits doomsday and Ramrao—the story of India's farm crisis.

JEET THAYIL

TWO GHAZALS

FEBRUARY, 2020

The climate's in crisis, to breathe is to ache in India.

Too cold or too hot, we freeze and bake in India.

They police our thoughts, our posts, our clothes, our food.

The news, and the government, is fake in India.

Beat the students bloody, then file a case against them.

Criminals in power know the laws to break in India.

Pick up the innocent and lynch them on a whim.

Minorities will be taught how to partake in India.

Hum Dekhenge, the poet Faiz once said. But if you say it,

You're anti-national. You have no stake in India.

Women and students and poets: they are the enemy.

Come here, dear, we'll show you how to shake in India.

The economy's bust, jobs are few, the poor are poorer.

Question is: how much more can we take in India?

When you say your prayers make sure you pick the right god.

Petitions to the wrong one you must forsake in India.

Jeet, if you don't like it here, Pakistan isn't far away.

If you want to stay, shut up, learn to make in India.

DECEMBER, 2020

Twenty-twenty is acuity of vision, a bane of the plague.

It's the year we saw clearly the claim of the plague.

The poor and the powerless were first to be forgotten.

And last. How else do you play the game of the plague?

The corrupt and the cockroaches always will survive.

Home ministers too. Oh shame on thee, plague!

Mandelshtam's joke about Stalin's roach mustache:
It got him sent to the gulag, a stain on the plague.

Ferreira, Gadling, Dhawale, Gonsalves, Raut—
Hounded, imprisoned, driven insane in the plague.

Kalita, Narwal, Teltumbde, Wilson, Rao, Bharadwaj,
Babu, Sen, Navlakha, say each name to the plague.

Where did conscience go in India's new gulag?
To the alley, to sell itself for fame in the plague.

Say nothing, hunker down, mask up, stay safe.
No jeet here, just your share of blame in the plague.

Jeet Thayil is the author of four novels and five books of poems. His essays, poetry and short fiction have appeared in the New York Review of Books, Granta, TLS, Esquire, The London Magazine, The Guardian and The Paris Review. He is the editor of The Penguin Book of Indian Poets.

JERRY PINTO

1977. A cinema hall in Mahim, Mumbai. *Amar Akbar Anthony* is playing. It is a Manmohan Desai special, which means we, the audience, those who love Hindi films, were ready for a rollick. We did not expect to cry.

To those lucky people who have not seen AAA, as we learned to call it: A terrible rich man kills someone by mistake; he asks his loyal driver, Kishanlal, to take the blame and promises that he will look after the driver's family and his three children. Kishanlal takes the fall, goes to jail and when he comes out, he finds his wife is dying of tuberculosis and his sons are starving. He goes to confront his boss and in return for his loyalty, his boss orders his henchmen to kill Kishanlal. He eludes them and jumps into a car full of gold bullion and comes home to find his wife has gone off to commit suicide. The goons are still in hot pursuit so he stashes the children for safety in a nearby park, in the shadow of a statue of Mahatma Gandhi and continues to take evasive action. His eldest son runs after the car but is knocked down, and left by the side of the road. A policeman takes the boy home, adopts him and names him Amar. The second boy is adopted by a Muslim tailor and named Akbar. The third child falls asleep in front of a Christian church and is adopted by the priests; he is Anthony. The boys grow up and one day, they are called to a hospital to give blood to a woman who is in need of it. They do not know it but they are donating blood for their mother.

Now, everyone knows that when you go and donate your blood, you fill a bottle and it is whisked off to the blood bank. But in Manmohan Desai's magnificent and corny spectacle making, this could not be how we would see it. The three young men are seen lying down in a ward and each would declare his name as a nurse hooked him up to a blood donation line.

"Amar," declares the Hindu as his blood rises up, against the laws of gravity, to meet the blood of Akbar and Anthony. And then these three bloodstreams, conjoined, flowed down into the arm of their mother.

The man in the next seat began to weep. The whole theater was weeping together as a song underlined the message: *Kya iski keemat chukaani nahin?* (Will you pay your debt?) They got it. You don't get India unless you have Amar, Akbar and Anthony, blood and blood and blood, paying their debt to the motherland.

I wept too. I was eleven years old.

At the end of the film, we all came out of the theater having cried and laughed and rejoiced when the three brothers are reunited in the end.

I used to say that the trope of three brothers separated at birth and reunited at the end was Hindi cinema's way of thinking about Pakistan and Bangladesh. That we don't make these films any more is perhaps our way of reconciling to the new political reality of the subcontinent.

I showed the film to a group of students recently. One of them said: "I'd really like to know what happened afterwards. Was Akbar circumcised by his Muslim father? Did Anthony remain a Christian?"

On bad days and there are so many of them, I know the answer to that one.

On days of hope, I cling to the promise/premise of those lines:

Anhonee ko honee kar de, honee ko anhonee.

Ek jagah jab jamaa ho teenon:

Amar, Akbar, Anthony

A rough translation of which would be: When the three of us, when Amar and Akbar and Anthony, get together, we make the impossible, possible.

Jerry Pinto is a poet, novelist, and translator in Bombay, and the author of several works of fiction, translations, and poetry, including Em and the Big Hoom. He received the Windham-Campbell Prize for Fiction in 2016.

JHUMPA LAHIRI

Because I was born and raised outside of India, India, in its absence, took on even greater significance in my mind. I grew up with parents who, in missing India, sought out other Indians, and so my notion of an Indian community was always diverse. When they invited other Indian families to our home, in the small Rhode Island town where I was raised, I realized that India was an elastic container of individuals who spoke, ate, dressed, and prayed in different ways. These differences did not “enrich” an otherwise homogeneous India; they were India. In that sense, India seemed light years ahead of the United States, which was a melting pot in name but alienating and provincial in practice, at least from my perspective. Visits to Kolkata, a city that, as my mother liked to point out, welcomed all of India’s populations, only confirmed my perception that India’s relationship with The Other was built into its very fabric. The plurilingual aspect of India, in particular, both inspired and consoled me, for it insisted on the need for ongoing communication and translation. The co-existence of more than one language generates curiosity, calls for interpretation, and subverts any notion of absolute power. Unravel certain threads, or snip some strands away, and the conversation is lost; we are left with a frayed society, with imposed silence, with banal and baleful notions of nationhood.

Jhumpa Lahiri was born in London and grew up in the United States to Bengali parents. She won the Pulitzer Prize for her debut short story collection, Interpreter of Maladies, and is the author of three novels, including, most recently, Whereabouts, and two collections of short stories. She writes in English and Italian.

KAI FRIESE

Indians of my vintage are accustomed to a few signature cliches about our country: ‘a land of contradictions,’ a ‘raucous democracy.’ Chestnuts that have been invoked by everyone from Che Guevara to the U.S. State Department. But as the 75th anniversary of independence approaches, those backhanded, if affectionate, compliments sit uncomfortably with the spirit of a majoritarian and increasingly intolerant ‘new India’ where the raucousness of power seems to silence dissent. Meanwhile the ruling dispensation faces the challenging ironies of celebrating a national history most of which unfurled under the auspices of its political adversaries. The government has struggled valiantly to control the narrative by branding the anniversary with its own somewhat anodyne slogans. “Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav,” the official site informs us “means elixir of energy of independence; elixir of inspirations of the warriors of freedom struggle; elixir of new ideas and pledges; and elixir of Aatmanirbharta.”

I attended my first azadi event a few days ago: A global corporation was paying court to India and its government. The elixirs were flowing at a well-appointed bar in an enormous air conditioned gazebo, though they were briefly stilled as a minister ran through his garbled speech. I had one of the customary ‘the country is doomed and there’s no hope’ conversations one has grown accustomed to of late and felt like what they used to call a ‘champagne socialist.’ Until a costumed band drowned us out with songs of national integration delivered in the emotional register of a new car launch. My glasses fogged over when I fled outside which seemed somehow appropriate. Driving home, I braced myself for a salutary rebuke from the real India. But even the familiar figure of the friendly beggar at the traffic light had passed out for the night.

Kai Friese is a widely-published Indian journalist based in Delhi. These are his personal opinions.

KARAN MAHAJAN

On India's 75th, I find myself worried for my country. The fascist takeover of all aspects of public life is well-documented; but what is even more disheartening is the complicity of the majority. India is fast becoming a country of people who shout about their nation's greatness even as it is laid to waste by pollution, corruption, disease, environmental degradation, overcrowding, violence. To wake to reality is too painful; it is far easier to lash out at minorities. On India's 75th, I wish the people of India a clearer vision, and a sense of what they will lose if they refuse to see.

Karan Mahajan is the author of the novels Family Planning, and The Association of Small Bombs. Raised in New Delhi, Mahajan is an associate professor in Literary Arts at Brown University.

Hisaab-Kitaab or Current Assets: The Nation at 75

Gains Gains Gains Gains Gains Gains Gains Gains Gains Gains Gains Gains Gains Gains Gains Gains Gains Gains	Losses: there are no losses in this New India are no losses in this New India no losses in this New India no losses no New India
<p>★One more home for Lord Ram, the grandest yet, we build in this New India. / There'll be little room for lower gods nor humans, in this New India</p> <p>★Godmen galore to bid you when and how to pray, what to eat and wear and / say, whose babies never to bear — that's how we begin this New India</p> <p>★High statues of gods and guides and leaders crowd land and sea, blot out the sun / while Unity and Equality will skywards spin this New India</p> <p>★From idols to men, our richest two grow richer, join the world's wealthiest club. / Coastlines and rivers and forests we cede to trade-in this New India</p> <p>★More millionaires we export year after year, gifting great wealth to foreign / shores. We have plenty to spare, who needs them to rejoin this New India</p> <p>★Fewer people work in our nation than ever before! With a record /-breaking fall in labour force as grand feat do we quoin this New India</p> <p>★What rises, with our pride, is the rate – breath-taking – of encounter killings / all across the land: swift justice greets those who'll ruin this New India</p> <p>★While on things that grow: preventive detention in Kashmir, now not even /a state — oh, and Internet shutdowns, small price to win this New India</p> <p>★One card, Aadhar, to rule us all, bind all things from bank account to cell phone, / food stamps to taxes, the locus of each breath within this New India ★</p>	<p>★Subhash Kumar Mahto</p> <p>★Rohit Kumar Biswal ★Buddhinath (Avinash) Jha</p> <p>★Raman Kashyap (with nine other people)</p> <p>★Manish Kumar Singh</p> <p>★Chennakeshavalu ★Sulabh Srivastava</p> <p>★Stan Swamy</p> <p>★SV Pradeep ★Rakesh Singh Nirbhik</p> <p>★Parag Bhuyan ★Isravel Moses ★Sunil Tiwari</p> <p>★Shubham Mani Tripathi</p> <p>★Achyutananda Sahu ★Chandan Tiwary</p> <p>★Shujaat Bukhari ★Naveen Nischal</p> <p>★Vijay Singh ★Sandeep Sharma ★Naveen Gupta</p> <p>★Sudip Dutta Bhaumik</p> <p>★Shantanu Bhowmick</p> <p>★Gauri Lankesh</p> <p>★Kamlesh Jain ★Dharmendra Singh</p> <p>★Kishore Dave ★Ranjan Rajdeo</p> <p>★Akhilesh Pratap Singh ★Karun Misra</p> <p>★Mithilesh Pandey ★Hemant Kumar Yadav</p> <p>★Raghavendra Dube ★Akshay Singh</p> <p>★Sandeep Kothari ... ★Jagendra Singh</p> <p>★Tarun Kumar Acharya</p> <p>★MNV Shankar ★MM Kalburgi</p> <p>★Govind Pansare</p> <p>★Sanjay Pathak ★Sai Reddy</p> <p>★Narendra Dabholkar</p> <p>★ and more and more, all too many more, named and unnamed, counted and unaccounted. But there are no losses in this New India</p>

Pro Salute Patriae: August 2017

At seventy—mere ripple in the ocean, as
 they sing, of human history—your skin now has
 the sheen of a battle just begun, or living
 metal, say, validium: youthful, ungiving,
 a sheath impervious to tenderness and touch,
 fresh breeze and clement rain, or warm earth, any such
 element that could thwart the route—return, you insist—
 to cosmic dominion, a sudden hallowed tryst.

At seventy, you ripple with anaerobic might—
 chest a hypertrophied vault, limbs chiseled for a fight,
 predisposed to setting your own lustrous head of hair
 alight, somewhat vile and futile a form of warfare
 even against vermin. Eyes and ears—on constant red
 alert—appear within thighs and breasts and knees, forehead
 and groin. But most ganglions, you decide, are suspect;
 so, severed or suppressed, lest their signals misdirect.

At seventy, you rip and reconfigure brain
 and heart, neural networks, the works, all to unchain
 this enhanced, singular self that claims devotion,
 unquestioned, from units of every persuasion,
 tissue and cell and organ system. Cerebral
 worth gets reassessed; lobes frontal and temporal –
 meaning and memory – are deemed nonessential.
 One-chambered hearts, ideally, more consequential.

At seventy, your arteries throb in full riptide,
 as do the veins: both suffused with plasma, rage and pride,
 red-hot and cold-white. Yet, blood too bountiful will seep
 into marrow and tendon, skin and membrane, then sweep
 across your newly-compressed heart like waves of basalt.
 Fresh rules, too, must apply on feelings: doubt a dire fault,
 so are hunger and humor and thirst; triumph's the chrism,
 and wild umbrage tagged your sharpest defense mechanism.

At seventy, you enjoy the ripple effect
 of high, mutant power coursing through each perfect
 cell, the scent of their allegiance, the deference
 of peers. The losses, you scoff, are false reference,

minor, disposable fry—dead vacuoles, torn
ligaments, the damaged liver, a crushed neuron

or three or ten. You love the hashtags you trigger,
daily global headlines, the murmurs, the shimmer.

At seventy, there's not a ripple of laughter nor
space for tears or regret or guilt. Compassion's a chore,
and glory the sole touchstone you cherish. We're strangers
now: you can't recall me, and a dog in the manger
I'd be named if you did. Still, a wish on a birthday
is custom, and mine, although a chimera this day,
shall chime through time: be human, plural, or better yet,
an atoll, with reefs more varied than the alphabet.

Karthika Nair, born in Kottayam and settled in Paris, is a poet, fabulist, librettist, and dance producer. She is the author of several books, including the award-winning Until the Lions: Echoes from the Mahabharata.

KAZIM ALI

My ancestors came from Baluchistan to settle in Chennai and Vellore. During Partition, my mother's family moved to the kingdom of Hyderabad and my father's family went to Karachi. I was born in England and raised in Canada. Is a human a fixed point in time and space? Are we never meant to move? Or grow?

Anyhow, I am *Indian*, influenced by its culture, language, and spiritual systems. How did I, as a Muslim, chose to study yoga and Vedanta so deeply? Yoga has always been transnational and cosmopolitan: its origins are ancient, but its flowering came in 14th century Kashmir, when the Shaivite sages were engaged in deep interchange with the Persian and Arab world. Ideas from Islam and Vedanta cross-pollinated. Dara Shikoh, son of Shah Jahan, had the ancient yogic texts translated into Persian and Arabic and distributed across the Muslim world. Lal Ded and Kabir, one of them Hindu (itself a Persian word) and the other claimed by both Muslim and Hindu communities, wrote a poetry of spiritual humanism equally influenced by philosophies of both religions.

Did the poses of the *surya namaskar* come from the poses of the *salaat* or was it the other way around? Did the devotional *kirtan* transform into *qawwali* or did *qawwali* give shape to the musical elements of Vedic chanting? Does it matter?

What matters is that these spiritual practices and these peoples have been bound together and have been feeding one another for countless generations, bound together by language, by culture, by belief, and by blood.

Kazim Ali was born in the UK to Indian parents and lives in San Diego. He has published six volumes of verse and five works of fiction, besides non-fiction, translations, and edited an anthology. His new and selected poems will be released in the US and Canada in 2023.

KESHAVA GUHA

The Republic of India was written into being—ours is a country made by writers. From Rammohun Roy to Ambedkar, the central figures of the 150 years of intellectual and social ferment that culminated in Independence and the Constitution were not simply people who used writing as a vehicle, but true writers of the highest class—of poetry, fiction, memoir, and above all of journalism. They quite literally believed that the answer to a book was another book: Lala Lajpat Rai's was one of dozens of book-length replies to Katherine Mayo's *Mother India*. Our Republic's record, across governments, of treating books and writers with suspicion is a particularly tragic betrayal of our own history.

As we celebrate 75 years of freedom, one way of honoring the men and women who gave us that freedom would be to begin, at last, to reverse that betrayal. We could start by letting people read *The Satanic Verses* without restrictions.

Another would be to read them. Compared with the writings of say, the American Founding Fathers, our inheritance is far richer and immeasurably more relevant to today. From Vivekananda to Tarabai Shinde, from Ranade to Phule, they give us, paragraph by paragraph, a source of insight and invigoration that is inexhaustible, like Draupadi's cooking pot. For all their differences, what they shared was a love of India that a century later still explodes off the page. That love manifests as deep pain at our collective sorrows and imperfections, and deep conviction in our collective capacity for improvement. We have never needed them more.

Keshava Guha was born in Delhi and raised in Bangalore. He is the author of the novel Accidental Magic.

KIRAN DESAI

Eight Haikus for Asifa, age 8

I

as if a girl is
evening blue and green that just
hovers a moment

before the night's dark then falls

II

as if a girl is
what it takes to rape and kill
it takes a village

it takes a policeman
a temple custodian
a tax man, a son

who took the bus all
the way from meerut because
it takes a village

III

as if a girl is
a mother without a child
the moon still rising

IV

as if a girl is
a bad luck curse parents flee
over this mountain

the next and over
the border to lose their names
so we can't find them

V

as if a girl is
snow obscuring mountains and
lies covering truth

VI

as if a girl is
chinar leaves or grass marked red
bloodied by murder

VII

as if a girl is
a ghost making a devil
of us all
 she haunts

VIII

as if a girl is
only eyes—that's all that's left
warning—don't forget!

Eight year old Asifa was gang raped and murdered in a temple in 2018, Kathua, Kashmir. When she died she became a symbol of the hate that has overwhelmed today's India. But she also became India's daughter, the daughter of us all.

India may be in darkness, but we will forever remember your light, Asifa!

Kiran Desai is the author of Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard and The Inheritance of Loss. Among her honors are a Guggenheim, a National Book Critics Circle Award and a Man Booker Prize.

KUMAR KETKAR

George Orwell would be the right person to describe the current condition of democracy in India. Superficially, all the “forms” of democracy are there. There is Parliament, there is judiciary, there is Reserve Bank of India, there is the vast expanse of the print and electronic media, there is the Indian Administrative Service, there is the Enforcement Directorate, the Income Tax Authority, there is the Central Bureau of Investigation and, of course, there is the Election Commission. All these institutions were the pillars of sovereign democracy. Or that is what we believed. Looking at the current conditions it appears that our belief was misplaced. These so-called “independent institutions” have surrendered their autonomy, their independent approach and even courage to stand up to the authority. Not only do they wait for directions from the Modi administration, they literally prostrate before the Prime Minister. Many of these illustrious leaders and heads of the institutions publicly state that Narendra Modi is an incarnation of Lord Rama, or Krishna, or the Supreme God of all Gods. And now he has become “Vishwaguru” who has descended to this planet to liberate the world from injustice, oppression and sins.

Even as these words are being spoken, some Muslims are killed, some tortured, or their businesses boycotted. Some Dalit communities attacked, the people of Kashmir are virtually under constant surveillance or threat, and those who dare to write or show the atrocities are arrested. The politicians who confront the government are charged with some offense or the other, framed on cooked up charges, over minor misdemeanors.

No wonder, from the corporate class to the media, from sincere bureaucrats to honest judges, from various NGOs to litterateurs and filmmakers, many are living in the shadow of terror.

All this is camouflaged in the glorious words of democracy and even references to human rights and Gandhian values. That is why Orwell would have been able to write about the current condition of democracy. But it appears to me that even Orwell would have found no words to express himself fully.

Kumar Ketkar is a journalist and editor for nearly fifty years, of English and Marathi dailies. Author of 10 Marathi books and regular contributor to a few English periodicals, he is a Member of Parliament, Rajya Sabha, India's Upper House. He lives in Mumbai.

MADHUSREE MUKERJEE

15 August, 1942. Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabhbhai Patel, Maulana Azad and thousands of other freedom fighters are in prison. More than 90,000 people will be arrested and up to 10,000 killed as the Quit India movement is crushed. Kasturba Gandhi and Mahadev Desai will die in prison. Millions will perish of hunger. India is an occupied and hostile country, says a British general. Virtually no one—not the rulers looting the country’s wealth, nor the people crushed under their weight and induced to fight one another instead of their exploiters—can imagine, in this darkest of dark times, that in a few years the land will be free.

15 August, 2022. Anand Teltumbde, Hany Babu, GN Saibaba, Gautam Navlakha, Arun Ferreira, Shoma Sen, Surendra Gadling, Rona Wilson, Mahesh Raut, Vernon Gonsalves, Khalid Saifi, Meeran Haider, Sharjeel Imam, Umar Khalid, Aasif Sultan, Siddique Kappan, Sanjiv Bhatt, Teesta Setalvad and countless other freedom fighters are in prison. So are thousands of Muslims, for being Muslim, Dalits, for being Dalit, and Adivasis, for living on mineral-rich land that billionaires covet. Stan Swamy is dead. Gauri Lankesh, Narendra Dabholkar, Govind Pansare, MM Kalburgi and far too many other truth tellers—rural reporters, Right-to-Information activists—are also dead. Murdered. And innumerable people whose crime was to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Three-quarters of Indians are malnourished and being induced in their desperation to turn upon one another instead of their exploiters. Just one of their rulers is the world’s fourth-richest man.

India is once again an occupied and starving country. It’s hard to imagine, in this darkest of dark times, that the country will soon be free. But history repeats. And great evil always falls to great courage.

Madhusree Mukerjee is the author of Churchill’s Secret War and The Land of Naked People. She is a Guggenheim awardee and serves as a senior editor at Scientific American.

MANIL SURI

In 2007, on the 60th anniversary of India's independence, I wrote an essay for *India Today* on their commemorative theme, "What Unites India." The gist was that the country's citizens are so diverse in terms of religion, caste, class, culture, language, skin tone, and so on, that they find themselves pulled in different directions by the different groups to which they belong. These competing allegiances prevent radically divisive movements from snowballing, thereby helping keep the country together.

Now, fifteen years later, a wave of hatred, as virulent as it is nakedly political, is sweeping the land. People are being asked to support attacks on secularism, on free speech, on the constitution itself, to supposedly further their own self-interest. While the current situation is dismaying, let's remember the population has surmounted past upheavals such as Partition, the Emergency. What I wish for, for India's 75th birthday, is that her citizens renew links they might have ignored, rediscover their divergent affinities, so that the push and pull of attracting and opposing forces restores the equilibrium of the country's fabric.

Manil Suri was born in Mumbai and is a mathematics professor in the United States. He is the author of three novels on India, including The Death of Vishnu, which was long-listed for the Booker Prize in 2001, and a non-fiction book on mathematics.

MANISHA JOSHI

When it comes to defining a country as vast as India, it is best to think of her as a small village. I often remember the village of my childhood where I sometimes used to eat at our neighbor Shirin's house. As per the Muslim tradition we all used to circle around a huge aluminum thali (platter) to break bread together. It's been twenty years living away from India but I still miss that rare comfort of interdependent communities in an otherwise paradoxical country.

India of my mind has always been that one imaginary morning where the doorbell of my house keeps ringing and dhobi, doodhwala, sabjiwala, paperwala, cablewala (washerman, milkman, vegetable vendor, newspaper vendor, cable tv channel provider) and many others come and go, like invisible guests in my life.

The boundaries between the private and the public are so easily blurred in India that the idea of individualism still remains alien. What I really like about Indian society is that there is always a conversation taking place in some form or the other and there is always some room for negotiation.

Manisha Joshi worked as a print and television journalist in Mumbai and London and now lives in California. She has published four collections of Gujarati poems Kandara, Kansara Bazar, Kandmool and Thaak.

MANJULA PADMANABHAN

Like a banyan tree, India will endure.

The original tree has died, of course. The one that you and I loved, praised, and revisited in dreams—yes, that one has gone.

But the living forest of ideas, stories, tastes, sounds, and scents that sprang up around the original tree? It lives on. It thrives.

We continue to call it India, even though it is unrecognizable.

Meanwhile, with every passing year, our memories of that original tree grow sweeter and more vivid. Already, what we remember is better than it ever was.

Let us be grateful that we can never return.

Manjula Padmanabhan was born in India in 1953; currently living in Newport, RI (USA). She is an award-winning playwright, artist, illustrator and writer. She is the author of 14 books of prose and plays, has illustrated over 20 books for children and till recently published SUKIYAKI, a weekly comic strip.

MANU BHAGAVAN

India's Most Significant Contribution to the Modern World

In 1952, former U.S. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt traveled to India, where she was received by the high-flying diplomat Madame Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, then a Member of Parliament. Both were among the most famous and acclaimed women in the world at the time. Over the previous decade, they had developed a close relationship based on mutual respect and admiration. Madame Pandit, as she was internationally known, interviewed Mrs. Roosevelt for a national radio broadcast and asked her what she thought was the most significant contribution to the global community her newly independent country might have recently made.

India, Mrs. Roosevelt responded immediately, stood for democracy, equality, and justice. "I think your elections in the first place was a great contribution and I also think the decision of India to have a Secular State, a State in which all religions were recognized and tolerated and still a Government that was not a Government primarily motivated by a particular religion, was a very great contribution perhaps, because that is the way we feel in [the United States]... and I think the other thing which has impressed me the most is your legislation against the caste system. We all know, of course, the legislation alone does not accomplish everything we want to accomplish, but it has to be there as a background and those of us who care about [such] questions will then be able to work with something to help us do the work. I believe that from my point of view those are the three big contributions that India has made."³

Manu Bhagavan is a historian who lives in New York. He is the author of The Peacemakers and a forthcoming biography of Madame Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit.

³ Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit interview with Eleanor Roosevelt, All India Radio, 22 March 1952, Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, The George Washington University, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/radio-interview-vijaya-lakshmi-pandit-march-22-1952>. Last accessed 17 July 2022.

MAYA JASANOFF

On the 75th anniversary of the nation's independence from the British Empire, a statesman addressed his countrymen. The republic "has met dangers, and overcome them; it has had enemies, and conquered them; it has had detractors, and abashed them all... and the world beholds it... with profound admiration," said Daniel Webster, celebrating the United States in 1851—which championed equality while enslaving millions and waging wars of genocide and conquest. Ten years later, the tension between American ideals and practices culminated in civil war. As India turns 75, statesmen will celebrate democracy in a nation tilting, not for the first time, toward authoritarianism. The republic's founding ideals are disdained by a BJP régime that throws over secularism for strident Hindu nationalism; traduces freedom by intimidating and censoring its critics; and winks and nods as a country once associated with non-violence has become notorious for beating, lynching, and rape. Ten years from now, can the ideals even survive to be fought for?

*Maya Jasanoff is the Coolidge Professor of History at Harvard and the author of the prize-winning books *Edge of Empire*, *Liberty's Exiles*, and *The Dawn Watch*.*

K R MEERA

Independence Day is something personal to me. My grandfather was a freedom fighter. I grew up with the pride of knowing that I too am a part and partner of the legacy of a greatness named India.

My India is the promised land where every single citizen sings: “where the mind is without fear and where the head is held high.” My India is the paradise of the ultimate freedom of everyone’s thoughts and expressions. My India is characterized by non-violence and Ahimsa. My India is deep rooted in pluralism, diversity, and secularism. My India is where wisdom prevails, scholarship is treasured, human dignity is ensured, justice is endorsed. I can’t imagine India in any other way. My India is a living entity, growing within me, through me and out of me, forming an ecosystem. My India is a happy country. A very very happy country.

K R Meera was born in Kerala and lives in Kottayam. She is the author of ten novels, nine collections of short stories, and three memoirs, all written in Malayalam.

MEIRA CHAND

Cycles of Violence

No greater symbol of non-violence exists than the name of Mahatma Gandhi. My English/Swiss mother, newly married to my Indian father, garlanded Gandhi, during his visit to London in 1931. Hope for an enlightened and peaceful Independent India filled those years between the two world wars. Indian Independence came but was followed closely by the man-made horrors of Partition, with experiences of violence that damaged my Indian husband and multitudes more, for life. In the few years I lived in India in the early 1970s the country struggled before a fork in the road. The Emergency came, its vicious repression bringing new meaning to the role of political power in India. Today violence, to those who politically command it, is seen as an expediently easy tool to serve egoistic agendas, shaping India in frightening new ways. Yet the opportunity for peace always exists. Men who seek an expansion of the human spirit, like Gandhi, are rare, but their names live on forever, beyond megalomaniacal autocrats. Peace, and enlightened ideas, are what humanity consistently remembers. Observing India's sad and horrific shift towards bigoted aggression, it is ironical that historically Gandhi's legacy places India forever as a unique example of the human power of non-violence.

Meira Chand's multi-cultural heritage is reflected in her nine novels, including, most recently, Sacred Waters. An earlier novel, A Different Sky, was long-listed for the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award and on Oprah Winfrey's reading list. She lives in Singapore.

MINAL HAJRATWALA

Today we jubilee! 75 years since that solemn moment when the soul of our nation, long suppressed, found utterance. Ah! how we ousted those oppressors who wreaked such outrages: kidnapping of 1 million into indenture, massacre at Jallianwala Bagh, lathi charge at Dandi, famine of Bengal. That midnight we awakened to triumph. See how we have birthed a nation of gang rapes and acid attacks, wars to sever every border, endless caste and communal atrocities, and the ever-greater concentration of wealth in the hands of an ever more brutal elite! Today let us set off fireworks to consecrate the yajna, sacrifice-by-immolation of every institution of civil society—free press, independent judiciary, rational system of education—on the altar of Hindutva. Let us clasp hands across our tech companies and casteist samaj halls and sex-selection clinics and construction high-rises and bollywood-mafia theaters throughout global Greater Bharat. Let us carry on our tryst—a tear for every eye!

Minal Hajratwala is the author of three books of non-fiction and poetry, editor of an anthology of queer Indian writing, and founder/guiding coach of the Unicorn Authors Club.

MIRA JACOB

“My parents called me their good luck baby,” my mother tells me. She was born in May of 1947, passed from person to person in the triumphant march toward Chowpatty that August. The rest of the details—the thousands of shining faces, the singing, her fat body buoyed by so many strangers—are not as much memories as her inheritance of a dream, one she folded into neat squares and brought to America. But now. But now. “What is happening?” she whispers. We feel it rising through the silences on the phone calls back home, the panic tucked into banalities. But what else can they say? What can any of us say? We look outside and find the dark and rising tide our own horizon. Our questions come with it, urgent and useless. Where is the safer ground? What turns a dream back into the body’s memory? What else will it take for us to remember how to cradle each other’s children, to carry them toward a brighter future?

Mira Jacob is a best-selling author, illustrator and cultural critic. Her memoir, Good Talk was shortlisted for the National Book Critics Circle award, longlisted for the PEN Open Book Award, and named a New York Times Notable Book. Her novel, The Sleepwalker’s Guide to Dancing, was a finalist for India’s Tata First Literature Award.

MIRA KAMDAR

Young India, you held such promise. Dreaming of your freedom, my teenage grandfather left home to join the Mahatma on the banks of the Sabarmati in the 1920s. Decades later, my Danish-American mother discovered a newly independent nation full of hope, and fell in love with an Indian man. Color was no bar. Caste was no bar. Religion was no bar. Now, religion is a bludgeon wielded by a Hindu nationalist government that has hijacked the India of my freedom-loving grandfather's dreams. How I mourn it. How so many of us ache remembering a country where, despite occasional communal riots, hungry children with distended bellies, women married against their will—all this, and more was true—people were largely free to express their own minds without fear. Fear is everywhere now. A journalist can be thrown in jail for a tweet. Writers learn at the airport that they are no longer free to travel because what they have written has displeased. Still, the bravest persevere. We must not let them down. We must not give up on the dream of a free India. In a world slipping toward totalitarianism, it is the dream of freedom everywhere.

A former member of the New York Times Editorial Board and a contributor to leading publications around the world, Mira Kamdar is the author of four books. She lives in Paris.

NABANEETA DEV SEN

Translated from Bengali by Nandana Dev Sen

There was a time

There was a time I loved you so, black cloud,
that's hard now to forget.

And yet

I can let no one know, for, cloud,
now you have turned blood-red.

Nabaneeta Dev Sen (1938-2019) remains one of the most beloved Bengali writers of all time. Equally expressive in poetry and prose, she won multiple awards and published over 100 books. Her daughter Nandana is a writer, actor, and child-rights activist. She has authored six children's books, starred in twenty films, and translated two collections of Nabaneeta's poetry.

NAMITA DEVIDAYAL

There are two powerful laws in Hindu philosophy that the soldiers need to remember as they go to war. The first is the irrefutable law of interconnectedness and the second is the law of consequence. You plant a seed, it grows into a tree; you slay the tree, you lose oxygen. Every time you inflict harm—on a tree or a human being or a river—you are hurting yourself. The impact could be instant, or much later, for your grandchildren to forbear. That's all everyone needs to know.

*If the red slayer think he slays
Or if the slain think he is slain
They know not well the subtle ways
I keep, and pass, and turn again.*
— RW Emerson

Namita Devidayal is the author of three books and a journalist with The Times of India in Bombay.

NANDITA DAS

India at 75 is a momentous anniversary. After 200 years of colonial rule, the chaos we were left with, few thought we would survive. But the country emerged as a democracy, thanks to the vision of our founding fathers—Nehru, Gandhi, Ambedkar, Patel, and others. The long non-violent struggle for freedom and the commitment to equality and justice, regardless of caste, class, gender and religion, gave us the identity of a progressive nation.

But today we are engulfed in the undoing of that hard earned freedom. The sliding democracy is stifling free speech, the judiciary is often unable to protect even our constitutional rights, many are being incarcerated for simply speaking up, violence and prejudice has been unleashed, unemployment is at its highest ever...the list is long and depressing. It is easy to mourn. But is it fair to those, who despite all odds, are fighting the good fight? Would it not dishearten them and undermine their struggles? Isn't this the time and occasion to recognise, support, and celebrate the big and small voices of reason and dissent? Each of us can be an ally. And what better day than 15th August 2022 to pledge that?

Nandita Das has acted in 40 films in 10 languages. She has directed Firaq (2008) and Manto (2018). She has served as a jury member at the Cannes Film Festival and is a strong advocate for issues of social justice. Her third film explores the life of a food-delivery rider.

NATWAR GANDHI

India at 75: No longer the heaven of freedom where the mind would be without fear

When Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, gave his famous "Tryst with Destiny" speech on India's Independence Day, August 15, 1947, he said, "at the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom." Though he was aware of all the pains that were endured to secure India's freedom, he was hopeful that "the past is over, and it is the future that beckons to us now." Since that fateful day, India has changed remarkably. From a timid, diffident, and hesitant nation, it has morphed into an assertive, even aggressive, behemoth. Indian corporations stride triumphantly abroad and smart Indians abroad dazzle their host communities. Despite all this, the country has always lagged behind China in economic progress, but we had the trump card—a multi-party democracy and freedom of press and individual liberty, particularly the freedom to dissent and, above all, the freedom from fear. No more. Presently the freedom that Nehru had bequeathed is squandered. Sadly, India is no longer the country that the Nobel laureate poet Rabindranath Tagore had once envisioned as "the heaven of freedom.... where the mind is without fear."

Natwar Gandhi was born in Bombay and lives in Washington and Philadelphia. He was the Chief Financial Officer of Washington, DC, 2000-13. He is the author of three books of poetry and an autobiography in Gujarati. He is also the author of Still the Promised Land.

NAVINA HAIDAR

I know at least 75 Indias: Boarding school was a touch of Kipling's India; Kim and the Jungle Book. I knew Muslim India in education-minded Aligarh, and Hindu India in everyday life. I knew Christian India through my convent-educated family, and met Jewish India in Bombay's dazzling synagogue. Poor India is always knocking at the car window for coins, and rich India emerged on the Delhi streets in the 80s with its five-star hotel scene. Sikh India saved my uncle with oxygen-*langar* during Covid. I know at least 75 Indias. But we are being told there is just one....

Navina Haidar was born in London to Indian parents and is curator-in-charge of Islamic Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. She has written or co-authored six books.

NAYANTARA SAHGAL

Since 2014 when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power for the first time since independence, India has been under fascist rule. Indians are deprived of their Constitutional guarantee of freedom of expression and the right to live and worship as they choose. After independence from British rule in 1947, a multi-religious multi-cultural India, in its regard for all religions, emphatically rejected a religious identity. The ruling regime now defines the country as Hindu (in a distorted form known as Hindutva) and makes outsiders of all non-Hindus. The persecution or killing of 'outsiders' is now rife, as is of those who oppose this fanaticism. I have called this development the Unmaking of India and have seen fit to describe it in political articles, in my correspondence with the writer Kiran Nagarkar (published as a book, *Encounters with Kiran*) and in my new fiction, *When the Moon Shines by the Day* and *The Fate of Butterflies*, now published in a joint edition called *The Unmaking of India Chronicles*.

Can the spirit of 1947 complete with its individual rights and freedoms be recaptured? The battle is on. Civil servants, lawyers, writers, artists, farmers, students, teachers, and women in great numbers and organized groups, are joined in the fight which is desperate because at present there is no sign of hope or light in this darkness.

Nayantara Sahgal was born in Allahabad and lives in Dehra Dun. She is the author of 13 novels and seven works of non-fiction. She is a vice-president of PEN International and has been engaged in the demand for freedom of speech which is now under increasing pressure.

Interrogation Poem

Do you belong here?
Do you have the right ancestors?
Are you pure like us?
Or are you one of them?
Have you insulted the country? The Leader?

Are your thoughts seditious?
Have you read the wrong history?
Are you an anti-national?

Who said you could demand freedom?
Who taught you that you were equal?

Have you saluted our flag?
Do you refuse to salute our flag?
Will you kiss The Leader's ring?

Have you resisted arrest?
Were you jailed anyway?
Did you show the world your bruises?

Do you dream of freedom?
Will you keep dreaming?

Nilanjana S. Roy was born in Kolkata and lives in Delhi. A writer and critic, she is the author of three novels (including The Wildings fantasy duology, and Black River, coming out in late 2022), has edited three books, most recently Our Freedoms: Essays and Stories, and written The Girl Who Ate Books, a memoir about reading.

NILITA VACHANI

We were the inheritors. Born a decade or two too late to breathe the air of jubilation. We held the history in our hands, though, in books, and in our ears and tongues from the stories of elders. My heroes were equally Nehru and Gandhi, Azad and Ghaffar Khan, Naidu and Asaf Ali.

My first love was a Muslim, he remained a secret from my parents. The fissures of partition coursed through our community's veins: wrenching stories of loss, families separated, the horrors of crossings. My paternal grandmother's brother, Gopal, was killed during the Calcutta riots. He was mistaken for a Muslim, taken too late to the hospital after someone noticed the Krishna tattoo on his arm. Beneath the cosmopolitan veneer of the Sindhis of Calcutta with whom my parents mingled lay bigotry and fear, the excoriations of partition, the scabs barely formed. Thank god, I would think, that my grand-uncle and Gandhiji were killed by Hindus, not Muslims. A decade later when I brought home a white foreigner as my future husband, I knew in my heart that he was accepted in a way an Indian Muslim would never have been.

A gift from my first boyfriend was Azad's *India Wins Freedom*. The proceeds of its sales went to support two annual essay writing competitions, the best essay on Hinduism written by a Muslim and the best essay on Islam written by a non-Muslim. Today, I long for such simple tokenisms. As a filmmaker who prided herself in producing subtle and sophisticated works dealing with racism, casteism, patriarchy, I'd inwardly scoff at the facile constructs of Hindu-Muslim unity that played endlessly on television in national integration campaigns. Today, I long for that wholesome propaganda. It placed a lid on simmering tensions. It demarcated lines that couldn't be crossed. It kept alive the idea of an India for which we had fought.

Today, in India's darkest hours, it is enslavement and not freedom that greets us, enslavement not to a foreign power, but to the worst instincts within us. I cannot get the words "Jai Hind" out of my mouth. Instead I modify two historic lines and offer them as a rallying cry. I wish we would hear this through the length and breadth of India.

*Iss desh ke hain anek sipahi,
Hindu Muslim Sikh Isahi
Na bhed-bhav, na unch-neeche
Apas mein sab bahen bhai*

This country's many soldiers
Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian
Living without discrimination or inequity
In harmony, as brothers and sisters.

Nilita Vachani is a filmmaker, writer, and educator who divides her time between India and New York.

PANNA NAIK

India at 75: A Climate of Fear Pervades in Literary India

Presently in India, a climate of fear pervades everywhere, even in poetry. As an American poet writing in Gujarati, Mahatma Gandhi's language, I am deeply distressed and saddened. On June 25, 1975 Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, fearful of political reversal, threw away her legendary father Jawaharlal Nehru's legacy—popular democracy and individual freedom—by a stroke of the pen. She then established the Emergency. At the time, one of the strongest voices of dissent against her fiat was that of a great Gujarati poet Umashankar Joshi. As a nominated member of Rajya Sabha, India's Upper House of Parliament, Joshi thundered that this untoward action would destroy the very truth of life as envisioned in the Mahabharata, an ancient Sanskrit epic. Even during that 21-month long Emergency when press freedom and individual liberty were suppressed, poets like Joshi and other dissenters took great risks to speak freely. Today, it is different. Today, my poet friends in India tell me they are cautious in what they write and say. When I hear this, a part of my being as a poet dies.

Panna Naik was born in Bombay and lives in Philadelphia. She has published 11 books of poetry and one collection of short stories in Gujarati. She has also published a book of poems in English, The Astrologer's Sparrow.

PERUMAL MURUGAN

Thousands of Hands

Unlike monarchy, democracy is not about the centralization of power. Devolution and decentralization of power are symbols of democracy. As far as India is concerned, the devolution and decentralization of power did not happen at a fast pace, because of Sanatana Dharma⁴ which protects the caste structure. The caste structure forms the basis of Hinduism. Taking advantage of the psychological beliefs built by caste structure over centuries, Sanatana Dharma attempts to thwart any change. When a change becomes inevitable, it attempts to slow it down besides finding alternatives to make it smoother. The Sanatana Dharma constantly appropriates any uprising in the society as its own. When necessary, it creates clashes. It unleashes violence. Sanatana Dharma constantly struggles to retain power by hook or by crook.

Freedom of expression is fundamental to the devolution of power in a democracy. In a functioning democracy, a multitude of voices are raised, each given its due recognition and societal norms are set taking into account all the voices. But freedom of expression is against Sanatana Dharma. The policy of Sanatana Dharma makes it a duty of those in the lower hierarchy to unquestioningly accept the rules set by those on the higher level of the hierarchy. Not everyone can talk. There are clear demarcations on who could speak and who could listen. There could be only one voice anywhere.

Sanatana Dharma doesn't aid the growth of freedom of expression. It is intolerant to a variety of voices. By putting forth the norms established in the caste structure, it seeks to arrest freedom of expression. When it fails, it uses the law. There are no laws to expand the borders of freedom of expression. The law's fundamental idea is to ensure law and order maintenance. Behind every right, the baton of law and order stands erect. The baton is taller for freedom of expression. The hand of Sanatana Dharma is ready to land a blow at any moment. The Sanatana Dharma which has grown over centuries occupying almost all the social spaces has thousands of hands.

Perumal Murugan writes in Tamil. He is vice-president of PEN International. He is the author of more than 20 books, including novels, collections of short fiction, poetry and non-fiction. He lives in Namakkal, Tamil Nadu.

⁴ Eternal duties or practices incumbent upon all Hindus.

PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

The passage of time in nations is not marked by dates. It is marked by moods. India at 75 is youthful, energetic, innovative, politically engaged, with a stronger state. It has, persisting poverty notwithstanding, traveled a considerable distance from the abject material dependence of 1947. But instead of writing its will across the stars in the glorious language of freedom, India has a strange haunted feeling, as if it is possessed by too many inner demons. It fears individual freedom. It valorizes ethnic majoritarianism. It is impatient of its own plurality. Its growth in power has denuded its spiritual confidence. Its constitution is being reduced to mere form. Its politics is a throwback to the 1940's: Blasphemy, Identity and Revenge are its watchwords rather than Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. India is, as Raja Rao once said, is a *darsana*,⁵ one that seems to overcome time. But it will be dishonest to not admit to a sense of foreboding. There is one "patriotic" song that has been impossible to get out my head "Hum laye hain toofan as kishti nikal ke, is desh ko rakhna mere bacho samabhal ke" (We rescued this fragile boat from the storm/ my children take care of this country). We did not need heed the fragility of this experiment. And as parents often do, we now hope our children will do a better job than we did. The good news is that they probably will. The bad news is: if only we let them. This is not India at 75, as much as a time for refounding.

Pratap Bhanu Mehta is Senior Fellow, Center for Policy Research Delhi, and Laurence S. Rockefeller Visiting Professor at Princeton University. He has written widely on democracy and constitutionalism.

⁵ A philosophical term meaning to discern or to behold.

PRATISHTHA PANDYA

I

Wild smelling flowers

Heavy, ruthless blades
haul and push debris away,
excavate ghosts of history,
demolish mosques, minarets.
They can even uproot an old banyan,
nests and aerial roots and all.
Make way for bullet trains,
remove stumps and boulders,
clear battlefield obstacles,
prepare firing positions.
Iron claws of sharp rippers
break down dense, resistant grounds.
They know how to crush, clear, and level things up.
But when you are done with all of it
You still have to deal with these pollinators
fiery, potent, soft, love-filled
falling out of books
sliding off tongues.
You don't need bulldozers
to tear those defiant books
or to rip the loose tongues off.
But what to do with them,
escaping on the back of chance winds,
riding on the wings of birds and bees,
sliding on river waters,
diving underneath the lines of a poem
pollinating without restraint
here, there, everywhere?
Light, yellow, dry, obstinate dust
encroaches on fields, plants, petals,
minds, and slippery tongues.
See, how they burst out!
Colonies of bright flowers

Wild smelling,
holding onto this earth.
Growing like hope
from between the blades
of your rippers
from under the tracks
of your bulldozers.
See, how they burst out!

II

The lions and the wheel*

No, no, these are not the same lions,
not the ones Bharat was playing with.
The jaws wide open, the teeth,
perhaps, you can count them,
but no!
Weren't they little cubs?
Not with sharp metal teeth
tearing through the hide of the night.

I do not know which Prahalad
held the pillar at Sarnath
in one tight embrace and said what
that released these 'narsimhas' –
teeth glistening in the dark
in moist reddish brown and speckled white.
The feel and taste of the blood
from the last meal still fresh and warm

The forests are stunned.
They have not seen anything like this before.
Trees stand terror-stricken
mute witnesses shrouded in moonlight,
bearing the roaring winds
without a whisper or a whine.

But after the wild massacre,
when all things fall dead and quiet
in their veins
they dream of another forest wide,
stretching all the way
from the forgotten past
into a future unknown.

Inside their veins they hear
the sound of wheels
moving beneath the earth,
beneath the lions' feet.
Inside those frozen veins
they feel a throb
of something marching up
like spring sap from the roots,
like the churning of the oceans.
Elephants, lions, horses, bulls
laborers, farmers, sufferers, women
homeless, landless, faceless, voiceless
horses, bulls, elephants, lions....
Who are these nameless creatures
turning the wheel around?

**One of the biggest national emblems with four bronze lions on a pedestal, 6.5 meters high and weighing 9,500 kg was unveiled on the new Parliament building in July 2022*

Pratishtha Pandya is a bilingual poet working across Gujarati and English. Born and brought up in Ahmedabad she currently resides in Bangalore. She works as an editor and writer at People's Archives of Rural India. Her first collection of poems in Gujarati has been published by Navjeevan Samprat in December 2019.

PRETI TANEJA

Meera, 7, finds a sixth edition of *The Fascist Playbook* on her Nanaji's bookshelf. She turns to page 2022:

'Dress the part. Play the long game. Opinionate, legislate, incarcerate: always point a finger to the sky. Stack the court. Rewrite the law. Buy the press. Shut the libraries. Police the universities. Education is your weapon. Teach a history for as long as forgetting takes. If the people exist, or write, or speak, or march together: kill. If you cannot yet kill, eradicate. Genocidally, via policy, for progress, for power, your religion.

This will require finances. Feed on otherness. Harness the expatriate's insecurity of being outsider where they are. Blessings will pour forth.

Provenance, above all else, is important. Demand that proof of authenticity be carried at all times. For this you require surveillance technology. Incentivise your backers with promises of purity. Stoke rage, stoke fear. Turn against any water that flows away from you. Insist that the flow is controllable, that you will dry it out.'

In the future, Meera runs the bath. Naked, she gets into it. She holds a book of songs. Smiling, she drowns. Her body's mound sprouts green shoots. The vines climb up the walls, they break the roof. They reach us, sitting here.

You cannot control the water. It seeps into earth's strata. No matter who you kill or how: we will always remember. The body turns to mulch or ash, as fertilizer. Stronger vines will always grow.

Preti Taneja is a writer and activist, who has published two critically acclaimed books. She is Co-Chair of English PEN's Translation Advisory Group, and Professor of World Literature and Creative Writing, Newcastle University, UK.

PRIYAMVADA GOPAL

Seventy-five should be a time to take stock of a life richly lived, a sanguinary birth receding into the past, turbulence replaced by leavened wisdom and expansiveness. Actuality could not be further from this clement vision. The pitiless venom of majoritarianism, never absent, now routine in hate speech and sanctioned harm. Democratic institutions desecrated openly, dissent rendered criminal. For the minoritized who dare speak at all, home demolitions if you're lucky, lynching if you are not.

This may not have been inevitable, but it was foreseen. Not least by Babasaheb Ambedkar, 'Father of the Constitution', erased through canonization, piously invoked by the political classes but largely unheeded. Not for him today's glib liberal distinction between once 'tolerant secular India' and now 'Hindu Raj'. As the new nation emerged, Babasaheb warned that a mere 'transfer of power' to nationalist leaders would not be enough. Unbreachable structural safeguards were needed if white rule was not merely replaced by 'the tyranny of a Hindu Communal Majority.'

We still shy away from a grim truth: the radically egalitarian anti-caste democracy Ambedkar envisaged never emerged, was hamstrung from the start. Out of this arrested decolonisation, the warped malignity of the present. Hope persists only as a figment of desperate will.

Priyamvada Gopal is a professor at Cambridge University who has written about decolonization and the empire. Her most recent book is Insurgent Empire: Anticolonial Resistance and British Dissent.

PRIYANKA DUBEY

I am the 'carrying a fistful of its soil in my jeans' kind of lover of India.

As a reporter and writer, I have traveled across the country since my teens and more than often, returned with a fistful of soil wrapped in paper, thrust inside the upper pocket of my pants.

Hanging by the doors of sleeper class train coaches or riding pillion on a local bike across the countryside, I often cry, just by looking at the vast fields, mountains, deserts, forests and rivers of my country. Perhaps that is why, as a 'homeless person' in traditional ways of the world, the field has always felt like home to me. I go to the ground and I am instantly at home among the common people of India. During my travels, whenever I look at the children of my country, I suddenly feel a pining surge in the innate sense of responsibility that I have always, almost constantly, felt about India.

I feel for India so strongly that I have spent a large part of my life reporting and writing about what's going wrong with it.

Each time when I reported a caste or gender crime—or the numerous times I wrote about our collapsing health infrastructure or police excesses or citizenship issues or hate crimes, I thought of the people who spent years making our constitution with an overwhelming sense of sorrow. For years, this sorrow has been like a dark unending tunnel.

As a young person trying to make sense of India, I sometimes dream of my haunting visit to the partition museum in Amritsar. And I dream of Bhagat Singh. Often, I slip into my personal brooding mode while reflecting on the lives of Mahatma Gandhi and Babasaheb Ambedkar. So many great people sacrificed their lives to make our constitution a reality.

Today, as India comes to its 75th Year of Independence, my biggest worry is that we are taking our constitution for granted. WE MUST NOT. In the current political and social climate, the Indian Constitution is our last refuge.

The constitution is not a slave of power or politics, it belongs to the common people of India. More than ever, now is our collective duty to defend the democratic and secular values enshrined in our constitution. To never let the dream of the inclusive egalitarian equal society, which forms the soul of our constitution, fade away.

That is why, the role of writers and journalists is more crucial today than ever. As my beloved Hindi Poet Gajanan Madhav Muktibodh wrote 'ab abhivyakti ke saare khatre uthaane hi honge' (We must face the dangers of speaking up now).

Priyanka Dubey was born in Bhopal and lives in the Himalayas. Her awards include the Kurt Schork Award and the Knight Journalism Award and several honors in India. She writes in Hindi and English and is the author of No Nation for Women: Reportage on Rape from India, the World's Largest Democracy. She is currently writing a novel.

RAGHU KARNAD

I met Mahesh Raut in 2018 at the top of Niyam Dongar, the 'Mountain of Law,' according to the Dongria Kondh tribe to whom those hills in Odisha belong. That night I had to sleep out in the open, and I hadn't come prepared. He sheltered me by his fire, behind a windbreak of bark and branches. He told me about his work, helping 'forest dwellers' form elected councils, to defend their interests and lands. Four months later, Mahesh was in prison. He still is.

I met Waheed-ur-Rehman Parra in 2019 in Kashmir. He spoke about the frenzied campaign to kill off young militants, who were also local boys, in time for the national election. His words were the clearest I had heard in a week of interviews. Three months later, Waheed was in prison.

In 2020, I met Umar Khalid in Delhi. His soft, sure voice had given inspiration to the largest protest movement I'd ever seen; a movement for a just, inclusive country. Six months later, Umar was in prison.

To move through India now, looking in on struggles for peace and justice, is to travel with the sound of iron bars closing behind you. I feel like a traitor—not to country, but to friendship—because each time I leave, I say “we'll meet again soon,” and each time it feels more like a lie.

Raghu Karnad is a fellow at the Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers at the New York Public Library. He is from Bangalore, and is the author of Farthest Field: An Indian Story of the Second World War, for which he received the Windham Campbell Prize in 2019.

RAJESH PARAMESWARAN

Father Stan Swamy, the Jesuit priest and activist who died in state custody in 2021, was, at 84, a few years older than India herself. Arrested under anti-terror laws, Swamy had devoted his life to advocating for the rights of Adivasi peoples and Dalits, fighting alongside them against the dispossession of their land and resources. In doing this work, he seemed to stand for many of India's most praiseworthy qualities: her rich religious and ethnic pluralism; the commitment of so many of her citizens to achieving justice and equality for the marginalized.

When his arrest was nearing, Swamy said he was in a sense happy in his predicament, because it meant he was engaged, part of the process, and not a silent spectator.

The spirit of Father Swamy and others like him offers a light of hope for India's next 75 years.

Rajesh Parameswaran was born in Chennai and lives in New York City. He is the author of I am an Executioner: Love Stories.

RAJMOHAN GANDHI

Ground one for future hope is the eagerness in Indians to belong to the world and live everywhere in the world. The assumption that recently arrived Indians should have every opportunity in their new country, including to occupy the White House in the U.S. or 10 Downing Street in the U.K., torpedoed the Hindu right's core argument, which is that Muslims and Christians within India can only be second-class citizens, and must never dare, for example, to think of renting a home in a desirable Indian neighborhood, since many centuries ago their forebears, allegedly, were "outsiders."

Ground two for long-term hope is the age-old Hindu awareness that all of humanity is one, and each human has equal value. In practice, Indians may have successfully denied this truth, but it remains part of their being.

Ground three is the certainty of Indian resistance to supremacy and its twin, authoritarian rule. Indians do not like being told what to do or think. If this resistance takes the form of satyagraha, i.e. nonviolent direct action, it could again hearten the world, as India's distinctive struggle against imperial rule did in the first half of the 20th century.

Rajmohan Gandhi is a historian and biographer who has taught at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, and has been scholar in residence at the Indian Institute of Technology in Gandhinagar. His latest book is India After 1947: Reflections and Reflections.

M V RAMANA

In his famed 1947 poem *Subh-e-Azadi* (Freedom's Dawn), Faiz Ahmed Faiz had bemoaned the fact that the end of British colonialism had turned out not to be "that clear dawn in quest of which those comrades set out" ([translation by Victor Kiernan](#)). Those were the terrible days of partition, with millions of people being displaced from the homes they had grown up at, perhaps over a million killed, and thousands of women abducted and raped. And yet Faiz was hopeful enough to end that poem with "Let us go on, our goal is not reached yet." Seventy-five years after that, it is hard to find such hope in today's subcontinent. In so many ways, the situation seems more dire. Except for a small set of ultra-rich that have made out like bandits, few are optimistic about the future. But that is not all. The greater threat is the growing power of the religious right, and the goals they strive for will eventually destroy even the very possibility of shared existence.

M.V. Ramana is the Simons Chair in Disarmament, Global and Human Security at the School of Public Policy and Global Affairs, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada, and the author of The Power of Promise: Examining Nuclear Energy in India (2012) and co-editor of Prisoners of the Nuclear Dream (2003).

RITU MENON

India on my Mind

In six months I will be as old as India on August 15. The country I was born in was a country torn asunder, it's true, but growing up in it, I felt—even very young, very immature—a sense of its difference from other countries. It was a bold experiment, an exercise in democracy and nation-building that was grounded in principles that, politically speaking, were certainly quite new: non-violent co-existence; non-alignment; non-communal; egalitarian; plural in a still semi-feudal society.

In hindsight, it strikes me that perhaps that was a “womanist” way of defining oneself and one's place in the world. Accommodative, not maximalist.

What worries me about the hyper-masculinism that now holds sway, is that it conceals a deep insecurity. My country now has such a diminished sense of itself that it is ill at ease with a capacious and confident embracing of difference. Fueled by testosterone it demands compliance with cast-iron definitions of self and other, flexing its muscles against anyone who deplores and decries this puny redefinition of itself.

I had thought we would grow old gracefully together, my country and I. Instead I worry that the India I will die in might become the kind of country I may not want to be born in.

Ritu Menon is a feminist publisher and writer, based in Delhi. She has written and edited several critically acclaimed books and anthologies. Her books include Borders & Boundaries: Women in India's Partition, Out of Line: a literary and political biography of Nayantara Sahgal, and ZOHR! A Biography in Four Acts.

ROMILA THAPAR

15 AUGUST 2022

The period just after Independence saw the continuation of earlier debates on defining India as a secular, democratic nation with a national identity that included all Indians. We were no longer colonial subjects but were free citizens, and could claim the rights invested in citizenship and in accordance with our constitution. Our national identity as Indians, included all who lived in India—irrespective of religion, language, caste, or ethnicity—and rightfully claimed equal status. Establishing a secular, democratic nation was our aspiration. We faced many problems but we persisted, even though the persistence had glitches. This may in part explain why today, seventy-five years later, these rights of citizenship and the concept of identity have yet to be established. Some Indians in authority, seem averse to India being a secular democracy. Therefore, poverty and unemployment prevail, nationalism is being replaced by religious majoritarianism, freedom of expression is increasingly disallowed, the rights of citizenship have faded, and the security implicit in being a citizen is denied. How do we fulfill the aspirations of the national movement for Independence? That is the question we should be asking.

Romila Thapar has specialized in the study of early Indian history and historiography. She is a Professor Emerita in the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

RUCHIRA GUPTA

Dear India,

I have looked into the future with you to solidarity in dreams, in joy, in sorrow, in aspirations, and in hope.

You taught me that there is unity in diversity. That a South Indian Brahmin might speak a different language, eat different food, wear different clothes than a North Indian Muslim, but since all had suffered collectively under British rule, there was at least a striving for a shared identity.

You represented living examples of cultures of balance and peace—in the marketplace, in temples and shrines, in universities, in trade routes. We encountered each other's differences at every turn, exchanged thoughts, ideas and goods, traded and did business, made alliances and unions, found common aims and values.

The teachings of Buddha and Gandhi were ever present in our lives.

Today their philosophy of non-violence isn't always guiding the most public events. As you turn seventy-five, there are so many stories of atrocities and vengeance, so much anger and fear that it is hard to imagine how it will end. The deafening silence about it breaks my heart—from the attacks on Muslims to the arrests of journalists.

Remember you are not alone; you have sisters and brothers who are listening and standing by you in your struggle for equality and peace in every corner of the world. I was never able to fully match or make use of many of the lessons I learned from you and now I am trying to catch what is slipping away.

What we want, once was here, on this land. I hope with all my heart that we find it together.

Ruchira Gupta is an author, artist and activist who dreams of a world in which no human being is bought or sold. She has won an Emmy for outstanding investigative journalism and a Chevalier de l'Ordre National du Mérite for confronting sex-trafficking. She has edited two anthologies: As if Women Matter: The Essential Gloria Steinem Reader and River of Flesh: The Prostituted Woman in Indian Short Fiction.

RUCHIR JOSHI

After seventy-five years it should be clear that there are not just one or two 'ideas of India' but multiple competing ideas of what our country should be. We need to interrogate each of these with cold-eyed urgency. Within a few years roughly 20% of all the humans on this small, troubled planet will be looking to shelter under the tent we call India. As ethnicities and genetic groups increasingly mix with one another our species is moving towards multiplying micro-diversities rather than any overarching homogeneity. The people we call Indians are centrally a part of this—in a hundred years people will hopefully shun any ideas of purity, whether of regional or religious or caste identities; there may not be any Bengalis or Gujaratis, any Hindus or Muslims, any upper or lower castes as we understand these categories today. Climate change, global warming, ecological crises, whatever your preferred codification, will need large masses of people living adjacently to work *with* rather than against each other. Therefore we must ask: which idea of India provides succor and safety to the widest variety of people? Which idea is most accommodating of difference, whether ethnic, racial, religious, of sexual orientation, of differing practices of living? Which idea will ensure the fairest distribution of increasingly scarce resources? Which processes of completing, repairing and shoring up the loose tent that was begun to be erected 75 years ago will provide the best quality of life to the largest number of people?

Ruchir Joshi is a writer and film-maker who lives between Calcutta and Delhi. Besides his regular opinion columns and essays in newspapers and magazines, he is the author of two novels, The Last Jet-Engine Laugh and the forthcoming Great Eastern Hotel and one work of non-fiction.

SABITHA SATCHI

Kites on 15 August

Kites flying overhead, father,
like only kites can do, controlled
yet soaring beyond boundary walls,
yet entangled with each other, terminal.
And we must still sing the freedom songs
the voice hoarse, the lines crooked, tuneless.
In her white hand-spun and broken spectacles,
I remember grandmother.

Kites have been routinely flown in India, especially in the capital city of Delhi, on the occasion of 15th August. Gujarat—the home state of both Gandhi who unflinchingly stood against religious sectarianism, and of Narendra Modi from the Hindu-majoritarian Bharatiya Janata Party—is a region that holds a celebrated kite-flying festival in January every year. The competition is both joyful and fierce. Kites that fly beyond walls and are often cut by neighboring kite-flyers, are perhaps an apt metaphor for today's India. In the 75th year of India's independence, we find ourselves in the darkest period yet of independent India's political history—with alarmingly risen levels of violence against minorities, especially Muslims, and routine censorship and incarceration of dissenters and champions of human rights. There is also resistance to divisive politics from civil society, and kites do soar and fly out defiantly in the buffeting wind.

Sabitha Satchi is a poet, researcher, and cultural critic. She is an art curator based in Delhi. She is the author of a poetry collection, Hereafter (2021).

SAIKAT MAJUMDAR

She talks too much. She loses the strand of her thought, moans about her aching joints, her noisy neighbors, her tattered purse, children who don't work but fight and curse each other, bloodying faces and limbs. She pauses to pop a betel nut to suck, the babel lady, the kumbh mela of tongues—dizzying tones, pitches, accents, idioms, cries, gali, pyar, fury, sobs and snores. A seductive seventy-five, skin a bit wrinkled from the sun, teeth stained with addiction, hair starved out her scalp. Shut her shivering gums? Never. Then she becomes a doorknob, the navel that lives through the flame, the dead thing flung to the river. Her chatter lost, she's a photo on the wall, a flesh-colored lizard peeping over her frame.

Saikat Majumdar is the author of four novels, including The Firebird/Play House and The Scent of God, a book of literary criticism, Prose of the World, a general non-fiction, College, and a co-edited collection of essays, The Critic as Amateur. He lives in Delhi and teaches literature and creative writing at Ashoka University.

P SAINATH

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's lockdown speech of March 24, 2020 gave a nation of 1.4 billion people four hours to shut itself down. It would devastate hundreds of millions of livelihoods within days. Minutes after Modi's speech, his government listed the essential services that would remain operational through the lockdown.

Refreshingly, that included 'print and electronic media, telecommunications, internet services, broadcasting and cable services.'

In the next few months, major media houses, mostly corporate-owned or controlled, sacked between 2,000 and 2,500 journalists. They achieved much of this by extracting 'voluntary resignations and retirements.' The classification of media as an essential service did not save a single job. Or life. Covid-19 killed at least 700 journalists in the first 20 months of the pandemic.

All these numbers are gross underestimates. The sackings, especially. I was a member of the Press Council of India sub-committee to investigate the retrenchments; our letters seeking information from major media houses were met with anger and aggressive lawyers' replies.

The country's biggest newspaper group told us that the Press Council had no right to question the sackings. They were recruitment and labor issues and had nothing to do with press freedom (the Council's purview). The government stayed silent on the sackings.

The media's failure to cover the exodus of millions of migrant laborers from cities back to their villages was not unrelated to the Great Downsizing. These same segments of the media, too, have said barely a word in their editorials on the arrests, detentions, denial of bail, and the hundreds of cases against media persons—some under sections of laws not applied to journalists in over 100 years. The 'mainstream' media's silence on the assault on democracy that India has seen for years now is not just about cowardice—though there's dollops of that—but also about complicity and collaboration, coaxing and coercion.

Sure, there are rare exceptions—like the *Dainik Bhaskar* group that held out bravely despite the income tax and other raids on it. Mostly, though, truly courageous resistance has come from smaller, non-corporate media whose journalists and editors suffer severe harassment, tax raids, arrests, jailing. That have seen donors and sponsors pull their funds in fear. That are unsure of paying their staff salaries in the current financial year.

The new trend: arresting journalists and editors for 'economic offenses'—'money laundering' being the official favorite. That vilifies journalists, hurting their credibility and making it hard for them to be viewed as political prisoners.

It's worth knowing that four major public intellectuals assassinated in the past decade—Narendra Dabholkar, Govind Pansare, M.M. Kalburgi and Gauri Lankesh—had this in common: they were journalists, columnists or

writers who wrote in Indian languages. Also, rationalists who challenged religious fundamentalism.

Meanwhile, the super-rich, heading India's biggest corporate houses, are rapidly acquiring more media properties. (With 166 of them, India ranks 3rd among nations in dollar billionaires. But ranks 131 in the UN Human Development Index). Owners whose billions flow from government contracts and huge public resources privatized for their benefit, and who contribute fantastic sums to the ruling party.

What did bother the government was the Paris-based Reporters Sans Frontières' ranking India 142 (among 180 nations) in the World Press Freedom Index, 2020. (This year's rank - 150). And Twitter's latest transparency report confirms India made more 'legal' demands than any other nation to remove content posted by verified journalists and news outlets during July-December 2021. We've also seen what amounts to months of internet shutdowns across entire regions like Kashmir.

Indian journalists can always be shown the error of their ways. The worst you can do with non-Indians is to deny them visas. Yet, they acted swiftly to rebut the RSF report and index ranking.

In May 2020, the government set up an 'Index Monitoring Cell' (IMC) on the directive of the Union Cabinet Secretary, perhaps the country's most powerful bureaucrat. One who reports directly to the two most important men in India—the Prime Minister and Home Minister. I was one of the IMC's two original journalist members.

In December 2020, a subgroup presented the committee with a draft report striking for the absence of the word 'draft' on its cover. It failed to reflect the content of our discussions. And it made outrageous claims, some of which seemed to mock the sufferings of journalists in Kashmir.

I wrote a note of dissent which, among other things, listed 100 instances of arrests of, legal notices to, and FIRs and cases filed against, journalists in the span of just some months. Such as the October 2020 arrest of Siddique Kappan, a freelancer from Kerala who had gone to Uttar Pradesh to cover the Hathras rape and murder atrocity against Dalits. He was not allowed to meet a lawyer for weeks and remains in jail 22 months later.

Or Zubair Ahmed, a journalist in the Andamans booked on multiple charges for this tweet: 'Can someone explain why families are placed under home quarantine for speaking over phone with Covid patients?' Ahmed died by suicide this July, supposedly in depression—but an investigation is still on.

Immediately after that note of dissent went in—the committee simply vanished and has never been heard of since. Right to Information queries have failed to elicit any reasons for this. My friends find me ungrateful. 'At least,' they say, 'it was the committee report that disappeared, not the journalist.'

And so you have the Indian media @75.

For three of my four decades as a journalist, I argued that the Indian media are politically free but imprisoned by

profit. Today I'd say they are still shackled by profit, but are increasingly politically imprisoned as well.

P Sainath is the founder-editor of the People's Archive of Rural India and author of Everybody Loves A Good Drought. His new book, The Last Heroes: Footsoldiers of Indian Freedom, will be out later this year. Sainath has won more than 60 national and international awards and fellowships for his reporting.

SALIL TRIPATHI

This, we have learned:

A closed mind is filled with fear.
It is wise to keep our heads low.
The history in our books is mythology
The legends in our scriptures are facts.
We need our border walls tall
To keep out the light that illuminates
And our windows are shut so tight
That foreign wind can't sway us.
Retreating into our narrow selves makes us purer
And words once swallowed had never existed.
We say what we are permitted to
And repeat what is required.
Our tired arms can't stretch far
And the sluggish stream of reason has run dry
As we think what we may be allowed to think—
But we no longer worry, we are happy.
We work more, talk less.
Discipline makes a nation great.

We are Midnight's Grandchildren
From the land of *chup*
We have known no light
And we need not wake up.

My Mother's Fault

You marched with other seven-year-old girls,
Singing songs of freedom at dawn in rural Gujarat,
Believing that would shame the British and they would leave India.

Five years later, they did.

You smiled,
When you first saw Maqbool Fida Husain's nude sketches of Hindu goddesses,

And laughed,
When I told you that some people wanted to burn his art.

'Have those people seen any of our ancient sculptures? Those are far naughtier,'
You said.

Your voice broke,
On December 6, 1992,
As you called me at my office in Singapore,
When they destroyed the Babri Masjid.

'We have just killed Gandhi again,' you said.

We had.

Aavu te karaay koi divas? (Can anyone do such a thing any time?)
You asked, aghast,
Staring at the television,
As Hindu mobs went, house-to-house,
Looking for Muslims to kill
After a train compartment in Godhra burned,
Killing 58 Hindus in February 2002.

You were right, each time.

After reading what I've been writing over the years,
Some folks have complained that I just don't get it.

I live abroad: what do I know of India?

But I knew you; that was enough.

And that's why I turned out this way.

Salil Tripathi was born in a city once known as Bombay and lives in New York. He has written three works of non-fiction, and his next book is about Gujaratis. He is a member of PEN International's board, and was chair of its Writers in Prison Committee 2015-2021.

SALMAN RUSHDIE

Then, in the First Age of Hindustan Hamara, our India, we celebrated one another's festivals, and believed, or almost believed, that all of the land's multifariousness belonged to all of us. Now that dream of fellowship and liberty is dead, or close to death. A shadow lies upon the country we loved so deeply. Hindustan isn't hamara any more. The Ruling Ring—one might say—has been forged in the fire of an Indian Mount Doom. Can any new fellowship be created to stand against it?

Salman Rushdie was born in Bombay and lives in New York. He is the author of 20 books, including Midnight's Children. His many international honors include the Booker Prize, the Best of Booker Prize, Companion of honor (UK), PEN Pinter Prize, PEN/Allen Lifetime Achievement Award, US), and EU's Aristeion Prize, among others.

SAMANTH SUBRAMANIAN

When Nehru spoke to the constituent assembly on the eve of Indian independence, the English portion of his speech began with that famous line: “Long years ago, we made a tryst with destiny...” But before that, he spoke in Hindustani, and it's the final sentence of that brief address that truly breaks the heart today. If we proceed on the basis that India belongs to everyone, regardless of religion, we can tackle big problems, Nehru said. “But if we become narrow-minded, we shall not be able to solve them.”

The BJP has picked up that line and run with it—in the opposite direction. The narrowing of the Indian mind is now a state policy. Its aim is to shrink our empathy, to turn us against one another, to police each other on what to say and what not to say, what to eat and what not to eat. It wants to trick us into thinking that mistrust is a form of strength, when really it's the opposite. India still has big problems. (What country doesn't?) But our public mind, narrower and more sour, is less prepared to solve them than it was in 1947.

Samanth Subramanian is a writer and journalist. His most recent book, A Dominant Character: The Radical Science and Restless Politics of JBS Haldane was one of the New York Times' 100 Notable Books of 2020 and among the Wall Street Journal's Ten Best Books of 2020.

SANDEEP JAUHAR

My family moved from India to America in early 1977, beneficiaries of liberalized U.S. immigration policies for scientists and academics. One of my last childhood memories of India was a talk my father, a noted plant geneticist, had with us, some days before we went to the American Embassy in New Delhi to apply for immigrant visas. In 1975, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had declared a state of “national emergency,” suspending the constitution, disbanding opposition political parties, and rounding up politicians and academics and throwing them in jail. The resources and national will to promote scientific research had disappeared, and we were going to have to leave. “It is a problem with the country,” I remember my father telling my weeping mother. “It is not my fault.”

Sadly, fifty years on, India continues to grapple with this “problem.”

Sandeep Jauhar is a doctor. His new book, My Father’s Brain, will be published in April by FSG.

SANGAMESH MENASINAKAI

LOSING MY INDIA!

I went to donate my blood at a blood bank recently.

A Muslim person had come there, seeking blood for his father, who was admitted in a hospital. The blood bank staff suggested that he should bring a donor for replacement. I immediately decided to be a donor for him.

Later, he revealed the truth of what had happened. He had been denied blood at another blood bank, as he was a Muslim. When he had inquired over the phone, the blood bank staff had told him that the blood was available. But when he went there, they denied it to him, saying it was reserved for someone else. He pleaded for blood. That's when one member of the staff came to him and whispered: "Since you are a Muslim, you can't get it here. We are instructed to prioritize Hindus. So I am telling you—don't waste your time here. Just rush to some other banks and try your luck."

His eyes were filled with tears. My heart turned heavy.

I recalled another incident during the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. My Hindu friend was helping his Muslim friend to get blood for his ailing mother. He approached the blood bank manager, whom he knew well. "When I told him the name of the patient, he straight-away replied that if I wanted blood for Hindus, I could get it. But not for others. I felt like I am losing my India," he told me.

I have been feeling the same in recent years.

Sangamesh Menasinakai is a journalist and writer who has written four books in Kannada, including a novel, and has translated Raziya Sultana from Hindi to Kannada. He lives in Hubballi.

SAUMYA ROY

I've always suffered from a vivid imagination. Later, I came to believe that freedom was the ability to create oneself according to one's imagination.

Thinking of my hopes for India as it steps beyond its 75th year, I thought of the waste pickers I had written about, the shiny new India rising not far from them—always staying a little out of their grasp. They collected its detritus in their hands, it lay strewn and shimmering in the vast landfill around them.

The glowing light and dark shadows of new India played in my mind along with its idealistic constitution, Gandhiji's Talisman (thinking of how everything we do affects the most vulnerable) and the primordial prayer to goddess Durga that I recite every night—

“When called upon to help in a difficult pass, you remove fear from every person. When called upon to help by those in happiness, you bestow a mind still further pious. Which goddess but you, O dispeller of poverty, pain and fear, has an ever sympathetic heart for supporting everyone?”

I wish that independent India fills all its grandchildren—and their children—with a most expansive imagination, the freedom to make their country according to it and delivers freedom from poverty, pain and fear...

Saumya Roy is a Mumbai based writer and social entrepreneur. She has written a book about the city's landfill and the waste pickers who work on it.

SHAUNA SINGH BALDWIN

A Toast for Independence Day ***August 14/15***

With my thanks to the freedom fighters
 who were injured or died in a non-violent
 struggle for freedom from the British
With my thanks to the 5 million people of India and the Pakistans
 who paid for that freedom with their lives
With my thanks to those 17 million Punjabis and Bengalis
 who suffered displacement by the Radcliffe border lines
With my thanks to abducted women
 never taken back by their loving families
With my thanks to men who died trying
 to protect the honor of their families

Here's to the hopes, ambitions, and appetites of the post-Partition generations
Here's to three countries that have gone far, but are still young
 May they grow further, may they grow in peace.

Shauna Singh Baldwin is the award-winning author of the novels: What the Body Remembers, The Tiger Claw, and The Selector of Souls. Her collections are English Lessons and Other Stories and We Are Not In Pakistan. Her latest works are a play, We Are So Different Now, and Reluctant Rebellions: Selected Non-Fiction.

SHOBHAA DE

Two words: 'Memory' and 'Past' make strange bedfellows. As India turns 75, those of us who cherish the emotional richness embedded in both, react with knowing looks, wry smiles and unshed tears. Being not quite a 'Midnight's Child,' but close enough (I was born in January 1948), I took freedom for granted, naively believing it was mine for life, as promised by the political leaders of the time. Our 'tryst with destiny' was infused with hope and excitement—the almost limitless possibilities and opportunities extended by a functional democracy, cherished and protected by citizens. Today, that same word—democracy—has been systematically desecrated and ruthlessly diminished by our elected representatives who defy us to live our precious dreams—if we dare.

Yes, we dare.

Our minds will not live in fear... the 'heaven of freedom' must be reclaimed... and India will awake, once again... stronger than ever.

Shobhaa De lives in Mumbai. A best-selling author, popular columnist, screenwriter and editor she has published 12 popular novels, including, most recently, Srilaaji: the Gilded Life and Longings of a Marwari Goodwife, and collection of stories, including Lockdown Liaisons and ten works of non-fiction, including her memoir, Seventy... and to hell with it!. She wrote India's first long-running soap, Swabhimaan, which ran in the 1990s and has been founder-editor of three magazines.

SHRUTI GANGULY

How It All Started

The handwritten sheet shook in her hands as she stood on top of the cement stairs. A dusky pre-teen girl in a dusty field in the summer heat. Everyone was dressed in white-ish. Sweat-stained shirts and sandy shorts, pleated culottes. It was August 15th at the Indian School Muscat.

The girl, who loved theater and elocution making an audience laugh and marvel with delight, was now terrified. She had won a writing contest that celebrated Independence Day, and what she didn't realize when she turned in her pages was that part of her prize was sharing her poem, at a podium, to hundreds of fellow students and teachers. She could not hide behind the verses of William Shakespeare or Alfred Noyes. No, she had to play herself with her own words.

The microphone crackled with glee as she crept up to it. She was trembling. Dry mouth, wet eyes. A breeze crept in from the distant sea, past the mountains, into the field, picking up the smells of samosas from the canteen. Some grabbed their hijabs, others held onto their rosaries, the sand mixed in with the tikkas, oily braids lost their sheen.

The girl coughed, then cleared her throat. A realization. She loved her country, that's why she was crying. She looked out at the crowd and began.

Shruti Ganguly is an award-winning filmmaker and writer based between Oslo and New York City.

SIDDHARTHA DEB

I am not allowed to say the name of the person who told me, years ago: “India is not a nation. It is a prisonhouse of all possible nations.” Now this person is incarcerated, but I can’t describe the specifics of their suffering. What if these words are read somewhere in the command tower of that vast, subcontinent-sized prisonhouse also known as India, and orders are then passed demanding more suffering. As Colonel Joll puts it in J.M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*, “First I get lies, you see ... first lies, then pressure, then more lies, then more pressure, then the break, then more pressure, then the truth.”

That is the sort of truth that has led to thousands in Indian prisons at the same time as India supposedly celebrates 75 years of freedom. “Ignorance is Strength.” “War is Peace.” And, of course, “Freedom is Slavery.” But still there are some names that can be said, should be said, in case we forget these prisoner citizens whose crimes include being opposed to Hindu majoritarianism and to capitalism and wanting justice for the most immiserated, marginalized sections of India’s vastly unequal society.

I can say the name of Stan Swamy, incarcerated and, eventually, killed by the Indian state on July 5, 2021. I can say his name because his life, if not his memory, is beyond the reach of the prisonhouse. Father Stan, dead at 84 because those running India are terrified of a Jesuit priest whose life was dedicated to working with indigenous people brutalized by Hindutva, the state, and the market. Father Stan, suffering from Parkinson’s, but denied bail by “His honor The Special Judge Dinesh E. Kothalikar,” who called it an “alleged sickness.” Say Father Stan’s name. Say it.

I can say the name of Arun Ferreira, who writes about his incarceration in his memoir, *Colors of the Cage: A Memoir of an Indian Prison* and who was back behind bars before I had time to write the foreword to the American edition of his book. Say his name. Say it. And say the names of Umar Khalid and Rona Wilson. Say the names of Anand Teltumbde and Surendra Gadling, of Sudhir Dhawale and Shoma Sen, of Mahesh Raut and Jyoti Jagtap, of Gautam Navlakha and Hany Babu and Sagar Gorkhe and Ramesh Gaichor.

Say the names, known, unknown, of thousands of political detainees in India’s prison system. Say the names of the people of Kashmir.

Say the names of the half a million people in prison for non-political crimes, among which being poor, being Dalit, and being Muslim rank the highest. Even if we don’t know the names, say them all.

Say the names of those not yet in prison but on this list or that list, those in the cross-wires of the National Investigative Agency, the Central Bureau of Investigation, and the Uttar Pradesh police, those who give the political leaders of the Hindu right indigestion and bad dreams.

Finally, say your own name because you sometimes worry that one day they will come for you as well. Say your name because you think, late at night, that you might be reported for what you wrote, for what you said, for what you thought. Say your name because you can't help wondering if they will come for you, if they will stop you from flying out, or if they will stop you when you are coming in. This is how you know that you may be against prisonhouses posing as nations, but that you are always on the side of the many worlds that are possible.

Siddhartha Deb was born in Northeast India and lives in Harlem. He is the author of two novels and one work of non-fiction.

SIDDHARTH DUBE

How very different India's 75th anniversary feels to its 50th anniversary.

There was a hopefulness 25 years ago on the cusp of the new millennium, apparent even to those like me who worked on poverty and marginalization. I was not caught up in the boosterism of that era—the notion that India was set on the glorious path of becoming an economic and political powerhouse. I knew that notion was misplaced, as my research invariably reminded me that all of India's gargantuan failures on poverty, illiteracy, ill health, hunger and inequality were bound to persist. But, what inspired me nonetheless were all the thrilling signs that democracy had become a reality even in some of the most hostile and unlikely of settings.

I witnessed sex workers in West Bengal demanding complete equality—demanding respect, decriminalisation and other rights, fair pay for the work they did, and an end to violence. To my astonishment, in November 1997, just months after India's 50th anniversary, I saw the incumbent union home minister, the legendary Communist leader Indrajit Gupta, officiate as chief guest at the sex workers' first national conference in Kolkata.

In UP, in the remote Awadh village where I had lived for several years, I saw the Dalits begin to succeed in their unrelenting, day by day fight against the elite-caste landlords who had oppressed them for centuries. For the first time ever that they could recall, Dalit men and women exchanged blows with the landlords—a turning point that marked the end of the landlords' tyranny in at least this one small village. That transformation was mirrored on a far vaster scale by a young Dalit woman, Mayawati, rising to become the chief minister of this mammoth, unruly state.

There was so much hope then—but today there is none.

Today, after years of bullying misdirection by Narendra Modi's government, India has become a society that has turned on itself. It devours its best people, the Sudha Bharadwajs, the Stan Swamys and the Anand Teltumbdes. It devours the defenseless: Adivasis, Buddhists, Christians, Dalits, and Muslims, women and men and children alike. It devours all those who fight for India's good.

There were many things to celebrate at our 50th anniversary. There is nothing to celebrate at our 75th.

Siddharth Dube is the author, most recently, of An Indefinite Sentence: A Personal History of Outlawed Love and Sex.

SITA VENKATESWAR

“There is a crack, a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in.” Leonard Cohen, Anthem from the 1992 album *The Future*

On the eve of 75 years of independence, as the ‘idea of India’⁶ is recast as a tyranny or the majority, I, among others, chronicle, bear witness, and speak dissent from afar. We grapple with the risks of dwelling across locations of origin and residence. The ties that knit our lives between past and present, mark the spaces that we claim as ‘home’, a *plurinational*⁷ location, where I stand to speak as an Indian, in solidarity with other collective efforts to envision diverse, democratic futures.

I apply my anthropological training to discern the contingencies of the moment. I recall the recent mass mobilisations pulsating across the country, as efforts to redraw the borders of belonging and resurrect an authoritarian patriarchy, confronted resistance, and resolve. The mission is to construe the long manoeuvres⁸ ahead. To strategically dismantle, plank by plank, the edifice on which the current regime stealthily took form, ever since the emergence of independent India 75 years ago. Even as the threat of violence surveillance and fear stalks the country, history teaches us that every tyranny has cracks. Our efforts must be directed at prising apart the openings and letting the light shine through. Who will dare to lead that challenge?

Sita Venkateswar is Programme Coordinator of Social Anthropology at Massey University, Aotearoa New Zealand. She is the author of Development & Ethnocide: Colonial Practices in the Andaman Islands and has co-edited The Politics of Indigeneity: Reflections on Indigenous Activism and Globalisation and the Challenges of Development in Contemporary India.

⁶ Khilnani, Sunil (2017). *The Idea of India*. Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, New York.

⁷ Santos, Baventura Sousa, & Mendes, José Manuel (Eds.). (2020). *Demodiversity: Towards Post-Abyssal Democracies* (1st ed.). Routledge.

⁸ Egan, Daniel (2013). Rethinking War of Maneuver/War of Position: Gramsci and the Military Metaphor. *Critical Sociology*, 40 (4): 521-538.

I am not a true global citizen, equally at home anywhere. The whole world is a feast, but only India flows in my veins in a particular way. India, Maharashtra, *aamchi Mumbai*. Home. Sublime, tragic, hilarious. Neon rice fields simultaneously soothing and electrifying in the monsoon light. Shrieking and playing Holi with lurid pink potions. Burying my father with an orchid and a feather. Afternoon light playing golden tricks in the banyan leaves where I knew as a child there were secret kingdoms. Itchy school uniforms. The pure, purely demented cry of the Malabar Whistling Thrush. *Vada pav* and biryani and *idli-dosa-hot-samosa-Bombay-meri-hai*. Singing hymns, chanting *bhajans*, reciting duas. The whole 8th standard class sharing one *jhoota* raw mango with chili powder. India, you color the world, glorious, cruel, kaleidoscopic. The sun sets, the moon rises, painting the sea and polishing the sky. I have bled and broken on your rocks, danced and shouted on your sands.

But now—What is next? Rules may change but I will not. Whether you hold me close or spit me out, I will always belong to you.

SKB has published fiction as well as non-fiction books. She hates to be anonymous but feels she must.

SONORA JHA

Do you long for me, India, the way I long for you? Where once I was your daughter, obedient, am I now the sister who ran away, wild? Or may I be the mother, shaking my head, never quite landing that silly threat of “one tight slap,” loving you beyond love and from within an aching heart that imagined you could be so much more if you’d only get out of your own way? Would I be the journalist who stayed to tell your best stories or the one you threw into prison for telling the true ones? Would I be the feminist unworthy of your protections, not quite the kind of *beti* to *bachao* (daughter to be saved)? May we now go in search, you and I, for The Others you burned or denied or drove out?

At 75, my mother, are you worthy of being mine and I yours?

If I come back, will you abandon me again within your own borders?

Sonora Jha hails from Bombay and teaches journalism at Seattle University. Dr. Jha is the author of the novels The Laughter (forthcoming Feb 2023) and Foreign (2013) and the memoir How to Raise a Feminist Son: Motherhood, Masculinity, and the Making of my Family (2021).

SUCHITRA VIJAYAN

Age 21

They arrested me
for holding a
blank paper.
No words,
just a blank paper.

The charge:
arrested for standing in silence,
provoking peace without words,
and protesting without a permit,

I stood at a street corner
with a blank paper
held above my head.

Who knew you could censor silence?

Age 32

Protesting for peace
became hate speech.
Arrested for the offense
of demanding dignity.
Bail denied.

Age 55

A government order – G.O.–
proclaimed that they had
no record of deaths,
no one died of anything.
Dead bodies are no longer proof of death.
Data was declared anti-national.

Age 31

Memory became excess baggage.
Record keepers vanished
Writers: disappeared
Poets: disappeared
Journalists: disappeared
Bards: exiled
That's what happens when you
tinker with reality too much.

Age 46

They accused him of pelting stones
and then bulldozed his home.
No law sanctioned it.
No judge, jury, or facts were
involved in the matter.
Punishment delivered
for a crime he couldn't commit.
He had no hands.
They called it
bulldozing justice.

Age 57 and 60

The court fined a citizen
for seeking justice,
sent another to prison.
Lordships had confused
vengeance for verdict

Age 71

Then I stood on a street corner
in protest of nothing.
They arrested me.
Inquilab Zindabad!

Suchitra Vijayan is a writer, essayist, activist, and photographer. She is the author of Midnight's Borders: A People's History of Modern India.

SUJATHA GIDLA

Seventy-five years ago, my uncle Satyamurthy, an untouchable sixteen-year-old and the first in his family to go to college, dressed in his best and joined the throngs on campus celebrating India's liberation from the colonial yoke. Now that the British have left, he naively believed, there will be no more poverty, no more caste oppression. Many among the downtrodden shared his hopes on that day, even as millions were forced to flee in the bloody partition of the country on sectarian lines. In this year of Amrit (elixir, or nectar) anniversary, India has the highest number of extreme poor, caste violence is worse than ever before, and Muslims and Christians live under existential threat, while activists such as Teesta Setalvad and those framed in the Bhima Koregaon case face severe repression. Indians still await that elusive freedom.

Sujatha Gidla was raised in Kakinada, Andhra Pradesh, and lives in New York. She is the author of a family history, Ants Among Elephants.

SUKETU MEHTA

The Hands From The Trains

The manager of Bombay's suburban railway system was once asked when the system would improve to a point where it could carry its ten million daily passengers in comfort. "Not in my lifetime," he answered. Certainly, if you commute into Bombay, you are made aware of the precise temperature of the human body as it curls around you on all sides, adjusting itself to every curve of your own. A lover's embrace was never so close.

My friend Asad bin Saif works in an institute for secularism, moving tirelessly among the slums, cataloging numberless communal flare-ups and riots, seeing first-hand the slow destruction of the social fabric of the city. Asad is from Bhagalpur, in Bihar, site not only of some of the worst communal rioting in the nation but also of a gory incident where the police blinded a group of petty criminals with knitting needles and acid. Asad, of all people, has seen humanity at its worst. I asked him if he feels pessimistic about the human race. "Not at all," he responded. "Look at the hands from the trains."

If you are late for work in the morning in Bombay, and you reach the station just as the train is leaving the platform, you can run up to the packed compartments and you will find many hands stretching out to grab you on board, unfolding outwards from the train like petals. As you run alongside the train, you will be picked up and some tiny space will be made for your feet on the edge of the open doorway. The rest is up to you; you will probably have to hang on to the door frame with your fingertips, being careful not to lean out too far lest you get decapitated by a pole placed too close to the tracks. But consider what has happened. Your fellow-passengers, already packed tighter than cattle are legally allowed to be, their shirts already drenched in sweat in the badly ventilated compartment, having stood like this for hours, retain an empathy for you, know that your boss might yell at you or cut your pay if you miss this train, and will make space where none exists to take one more person with them. And at the moment of contact, they do not know if the hand that is reaching for theirs belongs to a Hindu or Muslim or Christian or Brahmin or untouchable or whether you were born in this city or arrived only this morning or whether you live in Malabar Hill or Jogeshwari; whether you're from Bombay or Mumbai or New York. All they know is that you're trying to get to the city of gold, and that's enough. Come on board, they say. We'll adjust.

Suketu Mehta is the author of Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found, a Pulitzer Prize Finalist, and This Land is Our Land: An Immigrant's Manifesto. He teaches journalism at New York University.

SUMANA ROY

Third Molar

'Infiltrators are like termites in the soil of Bengal ... A Bharatiya Janata Party government will pick up infiltrators one by one and throw them into the Bay of Bengal.'

— Amit Shah, April 2019

When I open my mouth
he mentions my brother
—just his name—
and my mouth almost shuts.
'Who's older?' he asks.
'I ...,' I say, unsure,
suddenly forgetful of my long—longer—life.

'It's exactly the same,' he says,
'The inside of your mouth, yours and his—
the way your teeth sit on the lower jaw.'
Nose, eyes, forehead
—all of these that ferry resemblance—
dissolve.
Teeth? I swallow spit.

In front of me hangs
a map of India,
its mouth wide open:
Goa, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa,
Bengal—the lower jaw.
Bengal-Bangladesh, the third molar ...

'Yes, yes, here,' I say in pain,
'Here ...
That's where it hurts ...'

The dentist writes a prescription.
'I'll extract it ...
It's the third molar,' he says.
I think of my brother

and all my relatives,
everyone with mouths like mine,
waiting,
waiting to get Bengal extracted.

Sumana Roy has published a novel, one work of non-fiction, a collection of short stories, and two volumes of poetry. She teaches at Ashoka University.

SUNIL AMRITH

To my colleagues, who have been harassed, hounded, and detained—

In the face of crass brutality, you uphold grace and humor. You confront the erasure of history with the stubborn insistence of memory. Your testimony speaks of lives ruined and communities torn apart. You shine a light on the rivers mined for sand, the forests felled by dams, the species driven to the brink. In your work and in your words there lives another India: an India more just, more fully alive, more open to the world.

Sunil Amrith was born in Kenya to Tamil parents, grew up in Singapore, and teaches history at Yale University. He is the author of four books.

TABISH KHAIR

Tricolor

The shrinking strip between
The saffron and the green
Still offers space to write
What once was meant by white,
Before three gunshots (loud)
Turned it into a shroud.

Tabish Khair was born and educated in the small and historical town of Gaya, India. He remains an Indian citizen though he now teaches in Aarhus, Denmark. Author of thirteen works, he is a novelist, poet and critic. He has published a new novel, The Body by the Shore, in 2022.

TANUJA DESAI HIDIER

Sooji, Sakar, Badam, Ghee

75 years ago, my future mother was living in Kolhapur, India. Childhood sun still upon her cheek, taste of that time, her tongue, she speaks:

Of August 15.

Indian Independence. It seemed.

School commenced with prayer: *Vande Materam*. My little-girl-mother, in khadi sari skirt, blouse, envisioned this motherland a goddess. Bejewelled; abloom. Golden-sari-swathed. Wide wise eyes; sweeping smile assuring worlds of delight.

After: *Ah!* Teacher distributing laddoos from magic-hat barrel.

Sugar-lipped, salt-skinned, she imagined this boon in the hands of all! The Catholic schoolkids, too, tucking in. Polish children from the nearby refugee camp, with their fascinating faces and beautiful Marathi, in the semolina savoring a hint of the kasza manna from the homeland they'd been forced to flee.

This—no flag-hoist, headline, parade—my mother's image of Independence:

Sooji. Sakar. Badam. Ghee.

A treasure in her, every, palm.

A taste of sweeter days to come.

In the months after, tragically, that scent, sense, gave way to another: Ash-acrid. Bitter-burn. neighbors' homes, set afire. Others, too, through Laxmipuri. Kolhapur.

Country/ies.

One day, my future mother and best friend Mumtaz were Hide-and-Seeking when Mumtaz's brother fetched her away, despite *please-let-us-plays*.

Increasingly: Hindu families forbidding their 'issues' to see Muslim children, too.

Two little girls no longer allowed to meet.

All hide. No seek.

Childhood games tainted. Sides violently delineated.

Why couldn't we just...be? That laddoo-promise—an India mothering, nourishing, freedom, inclusivity—was given to Mumtaz and me.

Now, that childhood goddess: Hair matted. Sari shredded. Body plundered. Eyes red.

Gone the gold. Sparkle. Smile.

Scent of jasmine, jamrukh, tea? Blood-sweat-tear gas. Artillery.

And we must renew her, come through, allow all to breathe.

Safely. With dignity. Coexisting peacefully.

All rivers to the sea!

The innocence of children at play in the street: Seek.

Speak.

A childhood memory: a metaphor for what still could be?

Please, dear India, this anniversary:

Reach into the barrel, bullet-free.

Sooji! Badam! Sakar! Ghee...

Ring in the sweet.

Tanuja Desai Hidier is an author/singer-songwriter. Her pioneering debut Born Confused—the first South Asian American YA novel—was named an ALA Best Book for Young Adults. Sequel Bombay Blues received the South Asia Book Award. Tanuja has also made 'booktrack' albums based on the novels. She lives in Maine.

THRITY UMRIGAR

I have loved two countries in my life and they have both broken my heart. One bills itself as the world's oldest democracy, while the other is the world's largest democracy.

But both nations have been bedeviled by ghosts they refuse to confront and transcend—the U.S. by the original sins of slavery and racism, and India by caste divisions and Islamophobia and anti-Christian sentiment. Unfortunately, the current Indian government is actively ensuring that these poisons spread throughout the body politic, by suppressing civil liberties and making minority citizens feel like strangers in their own country. From the promulgation of the reprehensible Citizens (Amendment) Act of 2019, to the jailing of journalists and activists, the vandalizing of churches by mobs, and the demolition of Muslim homes and businesses by the police, the repression of minorities bears the full imprimatur of the government.

I still hold out the hope that Hindu citizens of India will speak out against policies that target minorities, and work to make modern India live up to its potential and promise, to become the secular, pluralistic nation imagined by its founders.

Thrity Umrigar was born in Bombay and lives in the United States. She is the author of 13 books, including The Space Between Us and Honor.

TISHANI DOSHI

Cento for India's 75th

O mystic mother of all sacrifice!
At first, my encounters on the thoroughfares
of your country were quotidian: the threshing
thighs, the singing breasts, the snap
of wheel on rutted stone into that heaven
of freedom. These were my homes then,
though I did not know. As we enter the era
of the assassin, someone says from behind,
You are Hindoo, aren't you? The land yields
in places, deliberately, knowing there is never
a single point to any story. A mirror shakes
in recognition. All these burning afternoons
later, your room is always lit by artificial lights,
your windows, always shut. I'd like to believe now
I have nothing to do with you. I tried to keep
my nostrils above mud. All of India's become
like that—bursting like an apple on the table
keenly to be killed. The question of being
drowned or afloat does not really matter.
Badshah, I say, to no one there,
Go quickly and look at your sky.
What can trees do in such a place
except light their own fires?

with lines from Sarojini Naidu, Bhanu Kapil, Nissim Ezekiel, Vivek Narayanan, Rabindranath Tagore, Vijay Nambisan, Robin Ngangom, A.K. Ramanujan, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Arundhati Subramaniam, Adil Jussawalla, K. Srilata, Kamala Das, Jayanta Mahapatra, Meena Alexander, Hoshang Merchant, Srinivas Rayaprol, Mona Zote, Jeet Thayil, Shreela Ray and Eunice de Souza

Tishani Doshi is a novelist, poet, dancer, and teacher. She has written eight books, including four volumes of poetry and three novels. She lives in Tamil Nadu.

VANDANA SINGH

Freedom Song

They called me Mother. I was forests and grasslands, lakes and rivers, clouds that carried promises to parched earth. Elephants, like mountains, moved to shape the forests; the birds, and slender-footed deer followed in their wake, and butterflies danced in shafts of sunlight. Humans lived in city and village, forest and meadow. There were kingdoms, incursions, wars and confluences. There were ancient oppressions, dividing lines. The land was bountiful and made no distinctions.

Then came the colonizers from over the oceans. Gazing with mechanistic eyes, they carved me up, crisscrossed my body with numbers and lines; this, my verdant body, redolent with life, became 'resource' and 'raw material.' They caged my humans in prisons of body and mind; deepened rifts to keep their hold. It took lifetimes to drive them out. *Mother! You are free*, my human children said, drunk with visions of possibility, as they danced in the streets.

Now, too, you call me Mother. You celebrate freedom, my children, as your leaders dismember my body, cut off my limbs to sell to the highest bidder. My craggy crown of snow, my heart, the Hasdeo forest, my outflung arms, Kutch⁹ and Dehing Patkai,¹⁰ my sandy feet, washed by waters of three seas; all for sale! Your billionaires raise phallic towers of triumph on the bones of the poor. Gluttonous greed devours entire landscapes, leaving devastation, dispossession and misery. The elephant cries for the lost forest, the kharchal¹¹ contemplates extinction with sorrow-bright eyes. And my defenders, the people of forest and desert, grassland and mountain, village and city, the truth-tellers who march with sore feet over kilometers to seek justice; those you silence, entomb them in prison walls.

Is this freedom?

Tell your leaders this: I am more than Mother. I am thunder and avalanche, I am the secret only the deep forest knows. I am the fury of surging water. I am the gale that topples your delusions. I am the flood that uncovers the graves of your victims. I am the truth that burns down your palace of lies. No name, no boundary can contain me. No lines of hatred, no waving pennants, can define who I am. If you wish to know me, my children, you must come to me with empty hands, like a child, to learn. To learn to spell *Freedom*, you must open the prison gates, you must speak to the grassland, acknowledge the dignity of trees and elephants, rejoice in the variegated colors of human difference, let go of greed and hatred and fear.

⁹ Desert region in Gujarat, bordering Pakistan.

¹⁰ Forest in Assam, in India's northeast.

¹¹ The great Indian bustard, a rare bird.

VANDANA SINGH

Only then will you be free.

Vandana Singh was born and raised in Delhi. She teaches physics and climate change at a public university in Massachusetts and writes speculative fiction. Recent work includes a collection titled Ambiguity Machines & Other Stories.

VIJAY SESHADRI

My parents left India in the nineteen-fifties—my father first, in the middle of the decade, and then my mother, at the end, with me in tow. They brought the country with them when they left, though—its habits of mind, its customs, patterns, and ideals, especially the moral and political ideals of the young Indian Republic. They were people who took politics seriously, and those ideals and that early high-mindedness might, in fact, have been the most Indian things about them. My father was born soon after the Non-cooperation movement; my mother during the First Round Table Conference. My father was a Marxist when he was young, of a not uncommon Indian scientific and intellectual type of that era. My mother was impatient with theorizing. Instead, she participated and participated. In India as a young teenager, she demonstrated. In America, she volunteered and registered voters, canvassed for candidates, and at election time for over thirty years could be found sitting at a table in a polling station on behalf of the local Democratic club, to record the signatures of voters on voting rolls. Her political activity had a little something to do with American politics. Mostly, though, it had to do with universal democratic work independent of any particular circumstances. This is what grown-up people did. They engaged in making social choices and in exercising their choices in an ordered arena. They didn't submit to cults. They participated in their communities through rational processes and kept those processes alive and rational by their participation.

My parents were pacifists and internationalists. They were strongly pro-labor. Their notion was—or at least this was the way they expressed it to me when I was a child—that the government of a country was meant to represent its poor people in the inevitable scrum of competing interests of a democratic society. Though they were orthodox South Indian Vaishnavites, they knew that the place of religion in politics should be small and carefully circumscribed, and that communalism was by far the greatest danger India faced. They were proud of the India of the Independence movement and the early Republic—threadbare and struggling materially but rich in ideas and ideals and destiny, with a sense of its own dignity and profound historical depth, a dynamic (however inconsistently applied) progressivism, and an astonishingly sophisticated (the sophistication most fully apparent in the Ambedkar Constitution) accommodation of Indian complexity and variety and multitudinousness.

I've lived out of India for over sixty years now. By my estimates, I've spent during those years about ten months in the Subcontinent, five of which were in Pakistan, in Lahore, on a grant to study Urdu, and almost all the rest of which were in Bangalore, at the other end of the land mass, where I was born. An Indian living in India or someone out of India but much closer to the country or, even, a detached observer could make a case that people like me don't have any standing to criticize or deplore Indian political developments. While I don't buy this argument, I understand its reasoning. But though I might or might not have the standing to speak for myself, I can definitely speak for my parents. If they were alive, they would be appalled at what's happening in India now—the harassment of writers and the suppression of dissent; the encouragement, the positive embrace, of communal identity and antagonisms; the encroachments on and manipulations of the judiciary; the tone of anger, frustration, resentment, even rage, that underlies and poisons political discourse; the growing violence. What

might most dishearten them is the willful repudiation on the part of Indian “leaders” of India’s inherent and inalienable complexity and subtlety for the sake of a single, simple-minded, primitive story about the country. For them, an India that wasn’t complex, that wasn’t too complex to be subordinated to one idea of it, too complex to be grasped except by the most vigorous effort of the mind, wasn’t India at all, and never could be.

Vijay Seshadri is the author of five books of poetry and many essays, memoir fragments, and reviews. His work has received a number of honors, including the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. He teaches at Sarah Lawrence College.

VISHAKHA N. DESAI

Reflections on the 75th Anniversary of India's Independence

When India achieved freedom from the British rulers in 1947, the whole world was in awe of the ancient culture and an infant nation. It was not because India was rich; the colonial masters had made sure that the country was far poorer than when they rushed to it. Troubled as the region was with an ill-planned partition, all eyes were on India because of the moral authority of the Gandhian principle of *Ahimsa*, freedom through non-violent means.

Growing up in a household of Gandhian freedom fighters in the early years of Independence, I was proud to know that my young country aspired to live up to the famous Vedic verse inscribed at the entrance of its parliament, *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, treating the whole world as family. It was important that respect for cultural diversity and protection of minorities was a fundamental part of the country, as enshrined in its new constitution.

Seventy-five years later, how sad it is that such noble ideas and actions are conspicuous only by their willful and persistent erasure in the land that birthed them.

Vishakha Desai is Senior Advisor to the President and Chair of the Committee on Global Thought at Columbia University. She is the author or editor of five books, most recently, World as Family: A Journey of multi-rooted Belongings. Raised in Ahmedabad, she lives in New York.

VIVEK MENEZES

India's smallest state didn't get that famous "freedom at midnight" in 1947, because the Portuguese dictator António de Oliveira Salazar refused to countenance decolonization, and the 451-year-old Estado da India was invaded and conquered only in 1961, after Jawaharlal Nehru finally sent in the Indian Armed Forces.

It's a great pity it had to happen that way because—as Salazar was repeatedly advised—Goa overwhelmingly supported Independence, and diaspora Goans were already contributing mightily—far out of proportion to their minuscule numbers—to the grand experiment of the Republic of India. Nonetheless, instead of the appropriate negotiated merger (as happened with French India), there was only annexation—the official legal term—with all terms imposed directly from New Delhi.

Even then, there was huge optimism. The tiny territory, which became a full-fledged state in the Indian Union in 1987, voted in the first government with the Bahujan Samaj as its main base of supporters in modern Indian history, and implemented a remarkable raft of land, healthcare, and education reforms. Unfortunately, none of that proved sufficient to stave off the cynical depredations of the 21st century, as the politics of division have taken root in dark and dismaying ways. At this point, the future does not look good at all.

Vivek Menezes is a widely published photographer and writer, columnist for the 120-year-old O Heraldo newspaper, and the co-founder and co-curator of the Goa Arts + Literature Festival.

YASHICA DUTT

What does freedom look like? To a people whose sovereignty lives on borrowed time, when anyone walking by, can clank our metal cages they named caste, rattling our very belonging in this country they declared free a long time ago.

In '47, we heard freedom was fought for, hard-earned, won. Ours was still at bargain, with a republic, whose zeal to be the 'world's largest, brightest, newest' couldn't conceal the chains of caste they never considered breaking.

Freeing us too, would make us all free, with no one left to look down beneath, from above the slippery ladder of caste they sit on, defining their world, and ours. Redefining their existence, rearranging the illusion of 'upperness' that gives their life any meaning, would be excessive. We must wait for our turn for freedom. Asking for it too soon makes us greedy. Always asking, always demanding, to rupture the only order that ever made sense to them.

They say things are worse now. They're right. Illusory, phantom or evident, all freedoms now lie at stake. Freedoms fought, won and bargained evaporate as we watch. Like a brass tap dripping through the night, and then, all at once. We have been here before. WE have always been here. It's worse for some, not all. It never is.

"Will she lose it again?" Ambedkar had asked about India, months before he declared her, and her Dalit children truly free, with democracy. She is losing it now. But freedom, even at a bargain, is priceless, worth striving for. As people in waiting for 75 years to be free, we'd agree.

Yashica Dutt is a journalist and award-winning author of the best-selling memoir on caste, Coming Out as Dalit. She is a leading anti-caste expert and lives in New York.

ZIA JAFFREY

Memory, Delhi, 2014:

We were on the lawn. It was warm, though winter. You turned, in your light blue sari, and said, *All the trouble in the world today has been started by Muslims*, hadn't I noticed? And then: *We just want them to sign a piece of paper to say they will abide by our laws—this is a Hindu country—we are the majority—and if they don't, they can leave.*

How could you utter such words so casually? In front of your grandchildren, who are part Muslim? In broad daylight. When you know my last name. Do you not see that I am shaking now? I am so terrified, I cannot speak. Do you even believe these words? Or are they the words of a Mrs. Jones, the Joneses, said almost amiably, without consequence? Are we in Rwanda? When did it become permissible to speak this way? I must say something. But where are my words? I cannot find them. It's an old position from childhood. That is not true, I say, feebly. I am still shaking. I don't hear what she says next... In this moment, though I identify with my mother's side of the family, culturally, which is Hindu, I am Muslim. I am Muslim.

The lawn, the light, the people—they feel sinister now. I seek out a familiar face. Or perhaps his eyes find mine. Her in-law. It feels conspiratorial. What's wrong? he says. I explain. How do you stand it? I ask. He shakes his head softly. We just agree to disagree. We try not to speak of such things at family gatherings.

In the car, I cannot stop speaking. Someone says, she means, those other Muslims. The religious ones.

Who is 'our'? Who is 'they'? Who is 'we'?

I am reminded that in Rwanda, people were 'primed' for genocide. There were phases, over the years, in which it became possible to kill. The radio, the media, helped. *Will today be my day to die?* So that when it came, the negotiation was not about the fact, but about the manner of death. How well will you kill me? Will you kill me well?

Zia Jaffrey is the author of The Invisibles, a book about the hijras of India. She has written cover stories, features, and reviews for many publications. Her work has most recently been anthologized in Toni Morrison: The Last Interview. She has covered Israel/Palestine, South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings, and AIDS. She is writing a book about Palestinian-Americans. She teaches in The New School's M.F.A. program.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The *India at 75* project was overseen by the PEN/Barbey Freedom to Write Center staff, including Liesl Gerntholtz, Karin Deutsch Karlekar, Veronica Tien, and Rachel Powers.

This project would not have been possible without our partnership with a number of writers from India and in India, from conceptualization to curation and outreach. We thank them for their essential help and support.