

THIRD EYE EDITION

Freedom express

The old morality tale of curiosity killing the cat no longer has us in thrall. These days everyone is curious – trying on new gadgets (how the heck does this thing work?), treating the palate to new cuisines (we had grilled tofu last night), pulling down old interiors to pave the way for something Art Deco. So when Indian Independence Day came along, I was full of questions which I put to unguarded souls in the near vicinity. I wanted to know if there's a new way, a novel way of celebrating Independence Day. How original and creative is the Indian patriot?

"So, the big day is tomorrow. What are you doing?" I ask a high-flying IT professional.

"Doing?" She looks puzzled. "I'll be working on my presentation at home all day." I am crestfallen. An Independence Day without festooning your home porch with the tricolour, without going to watch the boy scouts and girl guides marching, not watching a Manoj Kumar film full of patriotism and ideals, not biting into tricolour *barfis*, what kind of celebration is this? But I am willing to let it pass. In fact, I am rather proud of my young IT professional, for I daresay it is this professionalism, this total commitment and firing away full cylinders that have accelerated India forward.

"What about you?" I ask my neighbour Juri. "Singing any freedom song?"

"I was about to have the worst Independence Day in my life!" Juri has a flair for dramatics. She even rolls her eyes for effect. "Knowing I would be home tomorrow, my two maids plotted and conspired against me to take leave for the whole day."

"It's Independence Day," I say a trifle archly. "Surely you can give them freedom for a day?"

"Are you on their side or mine?" She asks me crossly. "It's Bleeding Hearts like you who are putting notions into their heads Anyway, I sorted out the problem on my own, thank you."

"Oh, good," I say. "What did you do?" A wicked gleam appears in her eyes. "Oh, I said go ahead, enjoy yourselves. But I'm cutting your salary for a day. Matter solved. Nipped in the bud."

I feel indignant. Juri's handling of her maids reeks of the old India, an India where the affluent feudal class cruelly oppressed those in their bondage. Juri prides herself in being modern, her son goes to a posh boarding school, the family vacationed in Bali last year, but in her home, she has a separate set of utensils for servants and does not let them sit still for a moment. Those two young maids are as Indian as you and me, but August 15 will come and go as just one more day of drudgery.

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"Of course I can sing the national anthem," retorts my nephew. "We have to sing it at morning assembly everyday."

I am not one to let him off so easily. "But tell me," I probe further, "Do you know what it means? Can you explain the lines to me?"

"Aw, gimme a break," he pleaded. "None of us know all that. Can we order the pizza now?"

I look at my chubby twelve year nephew, wearing a Stars and Stripes T-shirt. Addicted to Nintendo games, rooting for Ronaldo. Maybe he would grow up a true citizen of the world, absorbing diverse influences. But without a revelation of what India stood for in our beautiful, stirring national anthem, how would he feel that deep pride and dignity of being an Indian, of belonging to and representing this great country?

It is interesting to look back and trace how the idea of India took root in one's own life. The first time our kindergarten teacher pointed out with her wooden ruler the country whose name itself was only a nebulous entity in my consciousness... at first sight its shape intrigued me. I at once figured out that India was a female – a shapely head, slender neck, generous hips, tapering legs sheathed in a sari and arms outstretched, very much like a mother prepared to enfold her beloved child in a warm embrace. That image remains to this very day. And because, unlike any other country in the world, India has a human shape, she is not just a blob criss-crossed by latitudes and longitudes, but something living, breathing, emoting, even on a page. Along with the idea of India as a feminine presence came other impressions. Every movie screening in theatres like Kelvin and Garrison in Shillong was preceded by grainy black and white newsreels – of Pandit Nehru disembarking from a plane, rosebud tucked on *bandhgala* button hole, Bapu spinning the *Charkha*, Netaji saluting the tricolour. Along with these beamed images of dams releasing thundering waterfalls, speeding trains, helmeted colliers, smiling school children, men in turbans driving tractors, bridges spanning rivers. It was as if India, an idea I was only beginning to be vaguely aware of, was a giant wheel rolling forward to some golden destiny. I enjoyed those newsreels so much that I would sulk if we were even a little late in entering the theatre. Watching the great leaders, the farmer, the soldier and the school girl, I felt my tiny insignificant self being a part of the whole, and being borne along with it. This sense of something momentous taking place, of restless energy and purposeful endeavour, is what remains with me even today, long after the newsreels vanished from our screens.

When placed against the image of an embracing mother figure, the action, the momentum of the newsreels, seemed male in nature. And thus, in my mind was born the duality of India, its masculine/feminine principle.

What does being an Indian mean to you? Everybody will have their own answer. Most will express pride in belonging to the world's largest democracy. In this century, every sixth human being will be an Indian. We are close to becoming the second largest consumer market in the world, with half a billion buying middle class. But for all the glitter of

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technology and progress, millions starve in hovels, communal violence breaks out in minutes and multi-core scams draw yawns of indifference.

If we can collectively take pride in being Indian, we must also have the honesty to see ourselves as we are in the mirror. Being Indian means you always connive to jump the queue, grease someone's palm, flaunt your VIP connections. It means spitting on public walls and then badmouthing the civic authorities. Being Indian means trying to find out the caste, occupation of the stranger sharing a journey with you. It means not stopping at red lights, not protesting when a girl is teased, not turning up on time for an appointment or meeting. It's time to turn away from the mirror in embarrassment.

But this is hardly the occasion to end things on a sour note. Sixty-six years ago, we won freedom at a great cost. As we move ahead in this giant wheel into the future, let us rejoice that we live in a country which, as Mark Twain put it, is a cradle of the human race, birthplace of human speech, mother of history and grandmother of legends. India will always embrace multitudes.