<u>Brochure</u>
<u>AIPSN Campaign on 75 Years of Independence</u>

Independent India came into being on 15th August 1947 with the unfurling of the tri-colour at the Red Fort in Delhi by India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who famously spoke of India's "tryst with destiny". Though India's journey has been remarkable there have been many disappointments, and now considerable anxiety about the future.

India's Constitution in effect from 1950, along with amendments, enshrined the "Idea of India" forged during the freedom movement comprising a democratic polity, unity in diversity of India's multiple cultures, social justice, freedom of thought and expression, equality of all citizens before the law without discrimination on grounds of religion, caste, language, ethnicity or gender, and a commitment to build a welfare state. These values are also linked to, and require, a citizenry imbued with scientific temper. The Constitution provided for a federated system of governance involving the Union of India and the States, with separation of powers between legislature, executive and judiciary, and strong autonomous institutions.

India started on an ambitious course of planned, self-reliant industrial development. Public sector undertakings (PSUs) were established in core, mainly heavy industrial sectors. Emphasis was placed on frontier areas of science and technology (S&T) such as nuclear energy and space, and on building advanced capabilities through premier education and research institutions.

Parliament adopted the Industrial Policy Resolution in 1956 and the path breaking Scientific Policy Resolution of 1958 underlining the importance of S&T and self-reliance for development of India.

India's progress along this path, democratically managing one of the most diverse countries in the world suffered many failures and weaknesses along the way, many having relevance even today.

Self-Reliance

Despite its industrial strong base in the 1970s, India missed the opportunity and its self-reliant capabilities kept falling behind ever since. After India embraced neo-liberal economic policies in the 1990s, self-reliance was abandoned based on the erroneous belief that it was an outmoded concept, and that modern technologies could always be bought from developed countries or brought in by MNCs. This never happened.

The present government has gone out of its way to attract FDI, shockingly even in the crucial defence sector, claiming this would boost *atmanirbharta*. But almost no new know-how has yet been absorbed or developed, and no globally competitive Indian product or brand has been launched. The share of manufacturing in the economy has declined, exports have stagnated and the much-touted goal of reaching $5 trillion GDP is a distant dream.

Today, the world is at the cusp of the "fourth industrial revolution" comprising Artificial Intelligence (AI), Internet of Things (IoT), 5G, electric or fuel-cell vehicles and battery storage

systems, autonomous vehicles etc. Countries that possess relevant know-how and technology will dominate coming decades. No country or MNC will give away this know-how, which can only be acquired indigenously through determined self-reliance.

This calls for a major role for PSUs, since only they have the capability and size to develop advanced technologies, as witnessed in the early decades in space, nuclear energy and defence. It is beyond the private sector given their poor track record in R&D. Yet, the present government is on a privatization spree, selling off PSUs. Without PSUs empowered with autonomy and adequate support, and without an appropriately funded education system, India will find it very difficult to face the challenges of the knowledge-era.

Education & Health

India's expenditures on health and R&D are languishing at about 1% respectively, and only about 3% on education against 6% recommended by all committees. India fell far behind from the outset, with severe impact on human development.

The Right to Education Act (RtE) of 2009 made free and compulsory education between 6 and 14 years age a right but, despite being law, RtE has now been virtually abandoned under the National Education Policy (NEP). NEP gives so much prominence to online education that government may even deny the importance of enrolment or drop-out in physical schooling!

A public health system to deliver preventive and primary health care was not taken up strongly in the early period nor strengthened later. India lags behind many low-income countries as regards basic health indicators.

The positive impact that greater attention to public health and education can make is revealed by the high human development indicators in states such as Kerala and Tamil Nadu, close to levels in developed countries, while national averages are close to those in sub-Saharan Africa.

Unfortunately, inequalities between urban and rural areas, well-off and poor students, and between upper and lower castes have become deeply ingrained in both the education and health sectors. All these structural weaknesses in public health were cruelly in evidence during the Covid-19 pandemic, with the exception of Kerala which demonstrated the strength of its public health system.

Given weaknesses in the government education and health systems, the private sector has expanded rapidly in both education and health, including in rural areas, deepening inequities. Liberalization and withdrawal of the State have worsened these trends. Around 75% of hospitals and tertiary health facilities in India are in the private sector, and thus oriented towards the better-off. The Indian people incur over 60% of out-of-pocket expenditures on health.

Fees have risen sharply even in state-run professional education institutions. Private colleges and universities especially in engineering and medicine have proliferated, often with poor infrastructure, malpractices such as capitation fees, deficiencies in reservation and access, and poor quality of education and employability. India also suffers from a serious deficit of doctors, nurses and paramedics.

NEP will further aggravate these tendencies due to its emphasis on commercialization and "vocationalization" of undergraduate courses. The S&T and Innovation Policy (STIP) and the National Higher Education Qualification Framework (NHEQF) do not take account of these trends. The Government continues to shy away from meaningful public investments in R&D, only imagining that private and foreign investment would somehow happen. The future appears uncertain and chaotic.

Agriculture & Rural Employment

Agriculture was neglected in the early post-Independence decades. Persisting low food grain production and several near-famine years, as well as a devastating and frankly humiliating dependence on food aid especially from the US, prompted a major push to augment agricultural production in the late 1960s through the so-called Green Revolution (GR). GR focused on wheat and rice in Punjab, Haryana and West UP. GR brought dramatic improvements in production. India became a major agricultural producer but with many negative consequences. Overuse of chemical fertilizers, depletion of soil health, severe depletion of groundwater and water-logging, skew in favour of larger farmers, high indebtedness, loss of indigenous varieties, change of cropping patterns, sharp decrease in cultivation of millets and over-reliance on just two crops with decreasing returns are some of these impacts.

The recent farmers' agitation can also be related to the skewed socio-economic impacts of the Green Revolution. Agricultural universities, which made important contributions to GR, got inter-twined with interests of large farmers, mechanized industrial farming, and linkages with Western institutions. The extension system for the GR collapsed over time, leaving farmers dependent on MNC agri-businesses for support services.

Despite the "self-sufficiency" that India has attained in food production, a large proportion of the Indian people still do not get two square meals a day. Clearly, problems are not restricted only to quantity of food production, but relate to socio-political realities of inequality and access.

Rural poverty and employment were explicitly addressed only from the 5th five-year plan onwards, through poverty alleviation and related self-employment programmes. Unfortunately these could not achieve their objectives. It was only much later in the early 2000s, that the demand-driven NREGA scheme, which was pushed by progressive forces and civil society organizations, provided much relief for the rural poor. The strength and potential of NREGA were revealed during the pandemic, when migrant workers returned to their villages needing livelihood support. Rural poverty and large-scale un-/under-employment persist as structural problems, calling for imaginative solutions to provide sustainable rural off-farm employment.

Environment & Climate Change

Environment regulations in India were initiated much after Independence. India's adoption of a variety of legislations and other regulations largely flowed from either international agreements or pressure by popular movements in India.

The 1972 UN Conference on Environment in Stockholm triggered several policy measures in India, notably Article 48A under the 42nd Amendment requiring the state to protect and preserve the environment, followed later by the Water Act 1976, Air Act 1981 and Environment Protection Act 1986. Policy measures on hazardous wastes, ozone-depleting substances and emission reduction commitments also flowed largely from international agreements.

The "Chipko" movement, the Silent Valley agitation, prolonged popular movements and civil society action to protect rights of tribals and other forest dwellers, many struggles related to growing human-animal conflicts and the need to protect wildlife habitats resulted in the Forest Rights Act. The Bhopal Gas Tragedy, which the PSM responded to multi-sectorally, catalyzed a number of laws and regulations governing industrial pollution.

Environmental policies and implementation in India have had a mixed record, due to push-back from corporate interests and supporting political and bureaucratic forces, and inadequate support from mainstream political parties.

Industrial accidents including those involving hazardous materials continue to occur due to lax if not collusive regulatory action. Forests in both quality and area, as well as forest rights of tribals and others continue to be threatened. The ecosystem is being severely damaged, along with lives and livelihoods of millions of people dependent upon it.

The present government is deliberately and actively undermining environmental regulations so as to promote "ease of doing business," and driving States into a "race to the bottom" in their competitive bid to attract investments. Efforts at systemic dilution through the Environmental impact assessment (EIA) 2020 Notification was put on hold in the face of strong opposition by experts, civil society organizations and peoples movements, although piecemeal changes are being quietly introduced or implemented.. The PSM has long demanded a fully autonomous institution for EIA and recommendations regarding approvals, conditions for the same or rejection with reasons.

On climate change, the government has continued the earlier Copenhagen policy of emission reduction commitments, but limited to a very few sectors. Many sectors with greater co-benefits for people, better energy equity and re-oriented low-carbon development pathways are not being addressed.

Despite victories for popular movements in many battles, the longer fight continues. Environmental regulations remain a theatre of daily confrontation calling for constant vigil by civil society and peoples movements.

Idea of India, Scientific Temper

During the past 74 years, the Indian republic has faced many challenges to participatory democracy as well as to core values and ideas emanating from the freedom movement and embodied in our Constitution. These challenges have risen to crisis proportions under the present government.

Tendencies towards centralization, moving away from accountability and participatory democracy, and undermining of constitutional safeguards have recurred from time to time, underlining the need for constant monitoring and resistance when required.

The federated system of governance involving both the Union and the States is being trampled under a new de-facto unitary structure, contrary to the Constitutional system and subsumed under numerous centralizing schemes.

In contrast, efforts propelled by popular movements have been made to enrich participatory democracy and enhance social welfare. The Right to Information (RTI) Act, amendments to the Forest Rights Act, the Food Security Act, the impactful National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, decentralized Peoples Planning, the Total Literacy Programme initiated by the PSM earlier and the later Right to Education (RtE) Act, as well as numerous efforts to improve environmental regulations are some examples, mostly arising from popular movements. The present government has strongly opposed such rights-based approaches and the forces championing them, and is constantly seeking to reverse their gains in participatory democracy.

Governmental and supporting non-state organizations today pose perhaps the most serious challenge to the edifice of the Constitution and the very Idea of India. The current dispensation has put majoritarianism and "cultural nationalism" at the forefront of efforts to build a so-called Hindu Rashtra undermining the secular state, pluralism, multi-culturalism and unity in diversity. Policies such as the CAA-NPR-NRC, brutal lynchings and harassment of minority community citizens on various pretexts, are dividing the people and threatening to tear the country apart. Traditional food habits of many communities in different parts of the country, from the North-East to Kerala, are continually attacked putting forward upper-caste Hindu practices as the norm. Hindi is sought to be imposed on non-Hindi speaking States and people in many ways so as to project an exclusive "Hindi-Hindu" culture.

Of particular concern to the PSM, leading lights of the government and the ruling dispensation have repeatedly tried to impose an imaginary narrative of ancient Vedic-Sanskritic science as the most ancient and superior knowledge system, even compared to modern science. Myths and legends are offered as irrefutable evidence beyond question. Critics of such improbable claims, and those who defend evidence-based reasoning, have been attacked as westernized and "anti-national."

Critical thinking and pluralism including in seminars and discussion groups have been repeatedly attacked. Books, plays, films and their makers have been banned or attacked by mobs. Champions of scientific temper such as Narendra Dabholkar, Govind Pansare, M.M.Kalburgi and Gauri Lankesh were murdered. Science and creative thinking cannot flourish without pluralism of opinion and freedom of expression, or through blind subservience to authority figures or faith.

The government has shown blatant disregard for evidence-based policy making and lack of respect for data even from respectable research institutions, holding back official reports and data when they do not support government narratives. This was clearly witnessed with respect to demonetization and the Covid-19 pandemic. These tendencies go against critical thinking and a scientific approach.

What does the future hold?

India desperately needs to take the path of a forward looking country, building its autonomous self-reliant knowledge especially in science and technology for the people of the country and the global economy of tomorrow, promote its major public sector industries to achieve these goals along with those private entities with a commitment and dedication to achieve self-reliance. India needs to establish Constitutional values of unity of diversity so that all States, cultures and people of all religions can move together determinedly yet each in their own unique way. India must promote values of pluralism, freedom of expression, autonomy of governance institutions, social justice and ecological sustainability. All this needs a robust public education system and an effective public primary health care system. Together these call for systematic planning and a welfare state.

The "demographic dividend" of India with over 600 million youth under the age of 25 can be a tremendous asset for the future, provided the youth receive requisite basic and higher education and appropriate skills.

The British colonialists perpetuated their rule over the Indian sub-continent through their conscious policy of divide and rule, ultimately leading to partition of the country along religious lines. No country can progress if its people are divided against each other. 75 years after Independence, can we allow ourselves to be divided again?

The future beckons India, especially its youth. To achieve its due, India needs to take forward the values and aspirations of its freedom movement in the contemporary context, learning from the experiences of the past decades. The Peoples Science Movement will take this message to the people during this 75th anniversary year through grassroots dialogues and other mass contact programmes.