

What Became Free in 1947?

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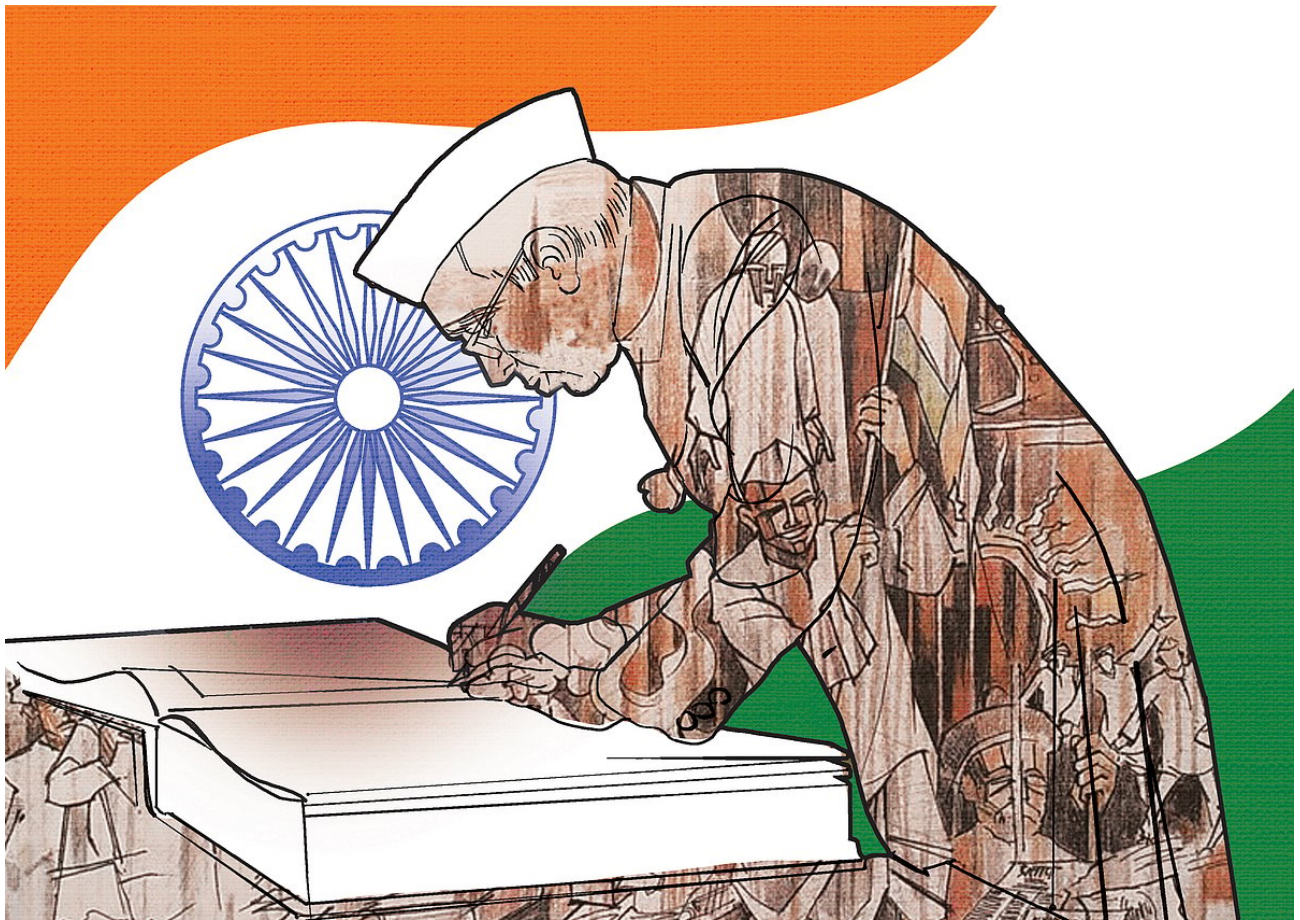


Illustration for representation

At midnight, on August 14-15, 1947, Jawaharlal Nehru rose in the Constituent Assembly to announce India's celebrated 'Tryst with Destiny'. "At the stroke of the midnight hour," he famously declared, "when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom." India certainly awoke to freedom that night. But did India awaken into existence?

As another Independence Day recedes into yesterday, that distinction is worth pondering. For 1947 is often narrated not merely as the birth of an independent Indian state, but almost as the historical 'birthday' of India itself—as though an assortment of disconnected peoples was first welded together by the Raj through railways, censuses, and the telegraph, before being bequeathed nationhood as a final colonial benefaction.

The evidence tells a more complicated—and infinitely more fascinating—story.

No serious historian should transpose today's Republic, its boundaries and institutions, backwards by two millennia. Political India was seldom coterminous with the map we recognise today. Empires expanded and contracted; kingdoms routinely appeared and

vanished. Yet the antiquity of the idea of a larger Indian geography is difficult to dismiss. The Hatigumpha rock-cut inscription of Kalinga ruler Kharavela, generally dated to around the 1st Century BCE, contains an early inscriptional reference to Bharadavasa or Bharatavarsha. What precisely that term encompassed, or whether it can be understood in the modern political or geographical sense, demands caution. But it belongs to a much older vocabulary through which the subcontinent and its regions came to be imagined.

Across subsequent centuries, inscriptions, literary traditions, and accounts by travellers and chroniclers reveal changing conceptions of this larger geography—from texts of Megasthenes and Ptolemy, to Xuan Zang, Al Biruni, and Amir Khusrau; from inscriptions of Satavahanas, Sakas, Guptas, Palas, Rashtrakutas, Chalukyas, and Vijayanagara Rayas; and Mughal chroniclers.

But civilisations are not born with constitutions. The Vishnu Purana famously describes Bharatavarsha as the land north of the ocean and south of the snowy mountains. The Mahabharata's Bhishma Parva, enumerates rivers, mountains, regions, ethnicities, and peoples. These are not maps in the modern cartographic sense, and it would be ahistorical to treat them as such. Their significance is, however, subtler: that a consciousness existed of a larger geography within which numerous peoples, kingdoms, and cultures could be situated.

More remarkably, that geography was actually traversed repeatedly by its people. For centuries, Indians undertook journeys that would test even the modern traveller. Kashi drew pilgrims from distant corners. Rameswaram linked the far south to sacred narratives extending northwards. Dwarka looked towards the western sea while Puri stood on the eastern coast. Buddhist, Jain, and later Sikh sacred geographies added their own networks to older ones.

Pilgrims carried more than offerings. Their ideas travelled with them. Philosophers crossed regions to debate rivals. Monks moved between centres of learning. India was connected to worlds beyond by merchants who connected ports to hinterlands. Epics migrated from one language to another, acquiring local landscapes, characters, and inflections while remaining recognisable participants in a larger civilisational conversation. This perhaps is India's historical peculiarity—an astonishing local diversity existing alongside equally remarkable habits of interconnectedness.

In this long sweep of history, political unity was episodic, but civilisational conversation was persistent. This requires us to resist two simplifications. The first is the romantic claim that a homogeneous modern Indian nation-state has existed unchanged since hoary antiquity. History sustains no such proposition. But equally untenable is the colonial conceit that India possessed no meaningful consciousness of a larger geographical or civilisational belonging until British rule manufactured one.

Colonialism, after all, did not merely conquer India, but also classified her—through censuses, ethnographic categorisations, and administrative definitions of caste, tribe, martial and non-martial communities. Undoubtedly, European scholars translated texts, recovered inscriptions and pioneered disciplines for which Indian scholarship owes many of them a genuine debt. But knowledge produced within structures of power was hardly always innocent of those structures.

And herein lies the significance of the morning after Independence. The British left India in 1947, but their intellectual categories did not necessarily board ship with them. Independent India understandably retained much of the institutional apparatus it inherited. Decolonisation does not require rejecting something merely because it originated in the West. Nor does it mean manufacturing a fantastical golden antiquity to compensate for colonial humiliation. Patriotism cannot substitute evidence.

Intellectual decolonisation means something harder: acquiring the confidence to ask fresh questions of our own past and accepting the answers even when they inconvenience our preferred narratives. What did Indians themselves call their land and communities? How did political geographies interact with sacred ones? What might an inscription reveal that a royal chronicle conceals? How might settled arguments look different if historians worked seriously with original sources in India's many languages rather than relying predominantly upon translated selections? Our country contains an extraordinary—and inadequately explored—inheritance of manuscripts, inscriptions, archaeological remains, vernacular chronicles, temple records, and private archives. Recovering these demands less rhetorical sloganeering and more scholarship.

Perhaps that is a task for August 16. The previous day commemorates the generation that recovered India's political sovereignty. The morning after should remind us of the intellectual sovereignty that remains every generation's responsibility.

A civilisation confident of itself need neither sanitise its past nor be ashamed of it. It need not invent antiquity, nor accept inherited interpretations as eternal truths. A mature nation does not require history to flatter it; it requires history to remember.

India became independent in 1947. India did not begin there.

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