

[Print](#)

Friday, August 19, 2011 3:16 AM EDT

India's Unstoppable March Toward Greatness

By Frank Islam

WASHINGTON, D.C.: India celebrated its 65th Independence Day on Monday, with much fanfare. Among other things, the Independence Day of a nation is an occasion to pay tributes to its freedom fighters and founding fathers, celebrate its accomplishments and review its general direction.

From a personal standpoint, there is no better day to pay tributes to the country of your birth than the day of its birth. Even though the last Independence Day I celebrated in India was when I was in my early teens, like every Indian American — or for that matter, any person of Indian origin who became a citizen of another country — Aug. 15 is etched in my memory.

The day has been part of my memory bank for the past four decades, and like every pleasant memory, it has been made even more pleasant and beautiful by time.

I am grateful to India, both the country and the civilization, and its people for the enormously positive influence they have had on me.

Growing up in Azamgarh, an ancient town in eastern Uttar Pradesh, I learned several lessons that would last with me the rest of my life. The boys that I played with taught me how to ride bike in hot summer sun and how to catch a kite in brown muddy waters filled with rice paddies. More importantly, they also taught me how to give dignity and respect to others, values that I still treasure.

Similarly, one of the countless lessons my parents taught me was to treat people in exactly the way that you want to be treated. Work hard and aim high, and do what you can to serve your community, is also what they taught me. In the neighborhood where I grew up, all of us from different backgrounds and different faiths learned to work side-by-side.

These and other lessons and values, which I internalized, helped me immensely when I moved to America, pursued my college education and became an entrepreneur, in pursuit of the American Dream.

The India I left behind, in the meantime, also moved ahead. In many fields, the nation's accomplishments have been extraordinary. The nation has built remarkable and lasting institutions, and has made giant economic strides after four decades of its experiments with socialist and centralized economic policies.

Today, India is the fourth largest economy in terms of purchasing power parity, and the country is now a major engine of the global economic growth. Ever since it began fostering business-friendly policies, it has attracted foreign investments worth tens of billions of dollars.

As a result, wealth is being created at an unprecedented rate by a vibrant, new generation of business leaders and new class of entrepreneurs, adding momentum to the country's economic boom.

The nation's success on the political front has been even more remarkable. In a region where democracy has been in short supply, historically, India has assiduously and tirelessly nurtured it. India remains a shining example of liberal democracy.

If the Independence Day is the best time to celebrate the country's

accomplishments, it is also an opportune moment to take stock of its failures and look at the tasks ahead.

Perhaps the biggest failure of the independent India has been in tackling poverty, which has continued to plague the country well into the seventh decade of independence. According to a study released last year, as much as 37 percent of Indians live below poverty line, a statistic that no nation can be proud of.

What we have in India is an island of prosperity in an ocean of poverty. The lack of basic access to sanitation, education, nutrition and healthcare represents a broken base that precludes hundreds of millions of Indian citizens from advancing up the pyramid of success.

Poverty drains institutions of good governance, depletes scarce resources, weakens leadership and crushes hope. It fuels frustration and desperation.

How can India eradicate poverty? Experiences of countries and societies all over the world indicate that throwing money at poor people will not have any long-term benefits.

On the other hand, it has been shown that poor people trying to break out of poverty would much rather be given an opportunity to improve their condition via their own work, rather than simply receiving a handout. India should focus on helping people realize their potential to succeed.

The best way to eradicate poverty is through education and entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship can deliver on the dreams we all have, turning hope into reality. India has immense potential for free enterprise and creativity to unlock many of the intractable problems that the country is facing today.

Any entrepreneur will tell you that there is nothing like the excitement, glory, fun and sheer thrill of starting something from scratch and watching it grow into a large enterprise of astonishing proportions.

India should help its young men and women to become entrepreneurs, by providing them with business mentoring and seed funding for start-ups. In order for an entrepreneur to succeed, to convert a vision into reality, capital is needed. The governments must ensure that the entrepreneurs have access to capital.

I strongly believe that everyone deserves a chance to get a decent education and a good job; a chance to grow a successful business; a chance to raise a healthy and happy family, and a chance to prosper.

The widening of income inequality in India, if it is not addressed, is sure to create social problems. It will also hold back India's ambition to become a major economic, cultural and diplomatic power.

Fortunately, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, the architect of the country's economic reform, is aware of this truth, and his government has indicated that it is serious about fighting poverty. Similarly, on the education front, it has had some success in increasing the literacy rate by focusing on primary education.

I am optimistic that the government will be able to meet these challenges and India will continue its unstoppable march toward greatness.

(Frank Islam, Chairman and CEO of FI Investment Group, is a columnist based in Washington, D.C. He is the coauthor of the book Renewing the American Dream: A Citizens Guide, which was released last summer. He is also a member of the advisory committee of the U.S. Export-Import Bank and the Department of Commerce Industry Trade Advisory Committee.)