



# The I in Independence

**YOUTH SPEAK** Have our hard earned independence and democratic vision lost their meaning? **TANYA THOMAS** speaks to a few youngsters to find out what they think.

What's the biggest grouse that I've got about Independence Day? That this year it falls on a Sunday, and that means no extra day off from college. Call me cynical but, if you do, you'll be calling the youth of India the same.

The youngsters whom I spoke to about our 63rd Independence Day feel that Indian independence has been reduced to its fancy trappings; National Anthem, flag hoisting and yet another re-run of 'Border' on TV. And although only a few of their views have been given space here, it's representative of the fact that August 15 has become one more national anniversary for us.

Swati Sheshadri, a student of International Studies at the Stella Maris College, describes Independence Day as "just another holiday when we get to stay at home and watch whatever is on TV. The celebrations at colleges and schools are obligatory. People don't know the difference between the national anthem and national song any more; and have forgotten who wrote those! Independence day has definitely lost its charm."

## Real Freedom

This pessimism isn't on the surface alone; there are many who've earnestly tried to create positive change only to find it nearly impossible. For instance, Pundlik Wagh, Director of Vayu and a double-Masters degree holder, just completed a four-month bike tour across India, dedicating his holidays for a patriotic purpose. He visited all the 28 states and met around 6000 people. Many of them are clueless about the freedom struggle, and 1947 was not of any importance.



**CELEBRATIONS:** Realising the value of freedom. PHOTOS: M. PERIASAMY; PAUL NORONHA; COVER: K.R. DEEPAK

Pundlik's defining experience was meeting an 83-year-old former freedom fighter from Haryana who summed it up beautifully. "On August 15, 1947, nothing really happened. The white rulers left and the brown ones entered. What we need now is another revolution; for political freedom."

Subhashree, a student of Chartered Accountancy, feels that we don't even use the freedom we've got. We can vote, but how many of us are registered voters?

"We break rules and get away with bribes, RTI activists are murdered, and the Parliament is all about flinging mikes, chairs and flower pots around. Nobody, of course, justifies these actions, but it's still accepted as a way of life."

Shradha Palsani, a final year engineering student said, "Everybody faces issues with the system, but all we do is curse it, blame a

bunch of people, and finally adjust."

## Know our history

Subhashree criticises the education system, "In schools, history is about *ratta maarna* (rote learning). There's no inspiration. The political science syllabus ends with memorising the eligibility requirements for the Lok Sabha membership."

These complaints don't come from ignorant minds. These are young people who are constantly updated of the events in the country; they aren't shooting off criticism without giving any thought. They even offer alternatives. Shradha recommends altering our own indifferent attitudes before overhauling the political system. Subha suggests forming strong youth organisations at the university level, besides learning to appreciate our history better.

While on my journey, I was apprehended by terrorists in Manipur. When I introduced myself and explained my mission to their leader, he was enraged. "Why are you creating awareness about India in our country?" he questioned. I was shocked when I heard an educated man refer to Manipur as a separate country. I realised that they don't even want to be a part of us any longer. The government, they say, has done nothing for them. And they're right. There are no schools there, not even roads and lights and no basic infrastructure. And this is true not only in Manipur, but in most states in the North East.

- Pundlik Wagh

Seeing the flag being hoisted or hearing the national anthem being played does give me goose bumps. And being Muslim doesn't change that. My feelings for my country aren't hampered by the religion I belong to. But I don't agree with how Muslims are portrayed in movies and sops. Like the way they show a Muslim reading *namaz* - it's completely wrong! And dons in movies are always Muslims. I'm sure there are a million dons in the real underworld who aren't Muslims. Living in a democratic country, this stereotyping hurts. I know I can't alter the image the Taliban and LeT have created, but every time there is a bomb blast, the media always targets the Muslims first. All I'm asking is, why jump to conclusions?

- Tabaan Anwar, undergraduate student.

I don't believe in jingoism or shouting anti-Pakistan slogans to prove my patriotism. But I have done my bit for my country, like pooling money with friends from my colony for the Prime Minister's Relief Fund during the Kargil war. And contributing when the cyclones hit Orissa by cancelling our jam sessions at the college fest and sending that money there. I am patriotic and pro-democracy; I still stand in attention when the National Anthem plays. I've imbibed it as part of my middle-class morality. There are definitely some questions and scepticism but also a lot of hope.

- Shalini Nirmal

"Knowing Gandhi's principles is pointless unless we learn from it."

## Strengthen democracy

I'm convinced this outward cynicism is only a cover for the frustration and angst we share about the country we've grown up in; about the country we're an active part of; about the country we want to change, but are afraid we can't.

Shalini, a young Delhi-based journalist, injects optimism to the grim picture. "Despite the Com-

monwealth Games, corruption and the menace of Khap panchayats, I still have full faith in our democracy." What she, and others mean, is going back to the basics of democracy. We're part of the system, and we're equally responsible for how it functions. And things won't change until democracy goes back to its original definition of 'working collectively for the greater common good'.

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