

Visionary Approach

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By Ambassador Anil Wadhwa

India's 74th Independence Day on August 15, 2020, is being celebrated as the world is in the grip of an unprecedented pandemic, which has disrupted every aspect of life. Former Ambassador Anil Wadhwa takes stock of the developments that make this a momentous occasion

India has not been spared when it comes to the spread of the COVID-19, but has demonstrated great resilience in fighting the impact of the pandemic with determination. It has pushed ahead with accelerated development and the creative energy for innovative and new policies as demanded by the times. This strength to face challenges derives from the Indian struggle for independence and is rooted in the concepts of political and socio – economic inclusion inherited from the nation's founding fathers like Mahatma Gandhi, Babasaheb Ambedkar and Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel.

The re-elected government of Prime Minister Modi has continued on the transformative course of India's development through breakthroughs in governance, enacting historic legislations, expansion and strengthening of programmes, upgrading basic amenities to all citizens, providing economic assistance to the marginalised, and enhancing protection for women, children, and those with disabilities. During the pandemic, the government acted promptly to save lives, provide effective medical treatment and control the spread of the virus, by upgrading hospital infrastructure, and ramping up the manufacture of medical supplies and equipment to adequately deal with the medical exigency. Early preventive measures such as screening of international passengers started as early as January 2020 followed by restrictions on travel and a total nationwide lockdown imposed on March 24. These, along with a very effective mass health awareness campaign, helped India to stem the severity and spread of the virus, beating all predictions.

Though cases have crossed two million in the first week of August, both the high recovery rate and low fatality rate point to the success of the strategy to combat the pandemic, which has been accompanied by a slew of economic measures for the most vulnerable and to mitigate the deleterious effect on the national economy.

Creating opportunity

A total stimulus package of INR 20 trillion equaling 10 per cent of India's GDP has been announced by the government so far. Besides containing a plethora of fiscal and monetary measures, the package covers almost every sector of economic activity including mining, defence production, power, industry, space, education etc. Prime Minister Modi, in summing up the package, in an address to the nation on May 12, said that it would focus on land, labour, liquidity and laws and seek to make India the lead player in the 21st century by focusing on self-reliance.

Cementing friendships

Internationally, the past year has seen India's global stature enhanced further as it exhibited a renewed confidence in leadership and the conduct of its foreign policy. PM Modi's outreach in South Asia included visits to the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and hosting of PM Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh, highlighting the centrality of India's neighborhood first policy. Despite the long-standing border dispute and the threat of terrorism, Prime Minister Modi took the initiative to launch a SAARC virtual Summit for regional cooperation in the fight against the pandemic. In keeping with the deepening multidimensional ties with the US, PM Modi paid a visit in September 2019, which was followed by a historic return visit by President Trump in February 2020. India's election to the UN Security Council as a non – permanent member, the assumption of the Chair of the Executive Council of the WHO, and forthcoming Presidency of the G20 in 2022 gives it an opportunity to lead institutional reforms in multilateral organisations. In fact, the pandemic has not restrained India's diplomatic engagements. In addition to the virtual summits with Australia and EU, PM Modi has spoken to his counterparts from 61 countries while the External Affairs minister Dr S Jaishankar has spoken with his counterparts from 77 countries thus elevating India's profile as a constructive and reliable actor and partner on the global stage. They have also addressed important multilateral platforms such as the NAM (Non-Aligned Movement) and G20 Summits, and ECOSOC (Economic and Social Council at the UN).

During the crisis, India has come forward to be a net provider of health security by supplying essential medicines, and equipment to almost 150 countries and sending medical assistance teams to friendly countries such as Kuwait, Mauritius, Maldives and Seychelles.

India has continued to deepen economic relations with foreign partners, attracting USD 74 billion last year and commitments of USD 20 billion in Foreign Direct Investment even during the months of the pandemic. The Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan (self-reliant Indian mission) provides an opportunity for India to engage more closely with foreign partners to make Indian manufacturing globally competitive and integrate domestic consumption and production with global supply chains; promoting resilience, embracing both investment and technology.

India will celebrate its Independence Day with the usual enthusiasm, although special measures will need to be put in place given the pandemic. Celebrations in Delhi, including those at the Red Fort where the Prime Minister will address the nation, the states, as well as those organised by Indian missions abroad will avoid large congregations of people, ensure social distancing, practice sanitisation, protect the vulnerable and use virtual technology.

A renewed push will be given to the theme of "Atmanirbhar Bharat'. Hence, as India celebrates its 74th Independence Day, its citizens will reaffirm their enduring belief in democracy, which ensured a clear mandate for the current government in 2019,

and aspirations for a human – centric path of growth catalysed by open and responsive governance.

Celebrations this year

- Military bands from Indian armed forces have kick-started the Independence Day celebrations this year from August 1. The bands from the Indian Army, Navy, Air Force and police have performed at Porbandar, Hyderabad, Bengaluru, Raipur, Amritsar, Guwahati, Allahabad, Kolkata, Vishakhapatnam, Nagpur, Gwalior and Srinagar. These performances will continue till August 15 at several prominent locations across the country.
- These performances are intended as gestures of appreciation towards the efforts of Corona warriors amidst the battle with the global pandemic.
- An essay competition is also being organised with the help of the National Council of Educational Research and Training for school students studying in Classes IX to XII on the topic: 'Atmanirbhar Bharat-Swatantra Bharat (Self-reliant India-Independent India)'

About the author

Ambassador Anil Wadhwa has served as Secretary (East) in the Ministry of External Affairs, and as the Indian ambassador to Poland, Oman, Thailand and Italy. He has also been posted to Indian missions in Hong Kong, China and Switzerland and worked for the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) in The Hague.