THE INDIA FORUM
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Thinking about India

From PEN America's 'India at 75'

By: Pen America

Twelve Indian and Indian-origin writers from India and across the world share their hopes, concerns and fears about India on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of India's independence.

On the occasion of the 75th anniversary of India's Independence, PEN America reached out to Indian and Indian-origin writers across the world to write what they felt about India's independence and India today.

Dozens of artists, poets, novelists, essayists and academics have written short pieces on the occasion.

'The India Forum' is pleased to publish the Introduction and a selection of 12 of these reflections. The entire collection is available on PEN America's 'India at 75' collection

The writers here: Hari Kunzru, KR Meera, Mira Jacob, Perumal Murugan, Navina Haidar, Nilita Vachani, Ritu Menon, Salman Rushdie, Sunil Amrith, Vivek Menezies, Yashica Dutt, and Amitava Kumar.

Introduction

On 15 August, India will mark 75 years of its independence. What should be a moment of celebration and joy has become a moment of deep despair and reflection. At independence, India offered a beacon of hope—a multi-everything, secular society choosing democratic governance and a Gandhian vision of inclusion and tolerance. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru spoke of India's 'tryst with destiny,' and the hope was that the country would live up to the dream of its Nobel Laureate for literature, Rabindranath Tagore: "Where the mind is without fear....into that heaven of freedom, let my country awake.

But India retained many colonial-era laws that restricted freedoms and, over the years, added more such laws, undermining its democracy. An internal Emergency in 1975 curtailed civil liberties and jailed dissidents. Since its founding, India has witnessed insurgencies and brutality by armed forces and the police against its citizens, as well as periods of horrific violence along caste and communal divides.

But the election in 2014 has transformed India into a country where hate speech is expressed and disseminated loudly; where Muslims are discriminated against and lynched, their homes and mosques bulldozed, their livelihoods destroyed; where Christians are beaten and churches attacked; where political prisoners are held in jail without trial. Dissenting journalists and authors are denied permission to leave the country. The institutions that can defend India's freedoms—its courts, parliament and civil service, and much of the media—have been co-opted or weakened. In PEN America's most recent *Freedom to Write Index*, India is the only nominally democratic country included in our count of the top 10 jailers of writers and public intellectuals worldwide. In recent years, India has seen an acceleration of threats against free speech, academic freedom and digital rights, and an uptick in online trolling and harassment.

> Some voices are optimistic, some prayerful, some anguished and enraged. Some suggest defeat, others venture hope, still others are defiant. The authors hold a spectrum of political views, and may be in disagreement about much else, but they are united in their concern for the state of Indian democracy.

To mark India at 75, PEN America reached out to authors from India and the Indian diaspora to write short texts expressing what they felt. Together they make a historic document. Authors who were born in British India responded, as did India's Midnight's Children and grandchildren. Authors from around the globe sent us their thoughts, as did authors from India's many languages, communities, faiths and castes. Some voices are optimistic, some prayerful, some anguished and enraged. Some suggest defeat, others venture hope, still others are defiant. The authors hold a spectrum of political views, and may be in disagreement about much else, but they are united in their concern for the state of Indian democracy. We invite you to read their ideas of what India was and ought to be, and what it has become.

Hari Kunzru:

I only met my great grand uncle, Pandit Hridaynath Kunzru, in the last year of his life. By that time he was completely blind, and I, a child of eight, was brought to him so he could 'see' me, which he did by brushing his fingers, very gently, all over my face. Later, I discovered that this former freedom fighter with the fluttering papery touch had, as a member of the Constituent Assembly, been one of the framers of the Indian constitution. He believed in an India that was tolerant, pluralist, and ruthlessly committed to the freedom of its citizens. He built civil society organizations because in a democracy there should be a counterweight to government power. He declined the Bharat Ratna, because he thought such honours had no place in a Republic. On this seventy-fifth anniversary of Independence, I honor his principles, and his memory.

Hari Kunzru was born in London and lives in New York. His latest novel is Red Pill.

K R Meera:

Independence Day is something personal to me. My grandfather was a freedom fighter. I grew up with the pride of knowing that I too am a part and partner of the legacy of a greatness named India.

My India is the promised land where every single citizen sings: "where the mind is without fear and where the head is held high." My India is the paradise of the ultimate freedom of everyone's thoughts and expressions. My India is characterized by non- violence and Ahimsa. My India is deep rooted in pluralism, diversity, and secularism. My India is where wisdom prevails, scholarship is treasured, human dignity is ensured, justice is endorsed. I can't imagine India in any other way. My India is a living entity, growing within me, through me and out of me, forming an ecosystem. My India is a happy country. A very very happy country.

K R Meera was born in Kerala and lives in Kottayam. She is the author of ten novels, nine collections of short stories, and three memoirs, all written in Malayalam.

Mira Jacob:

"My parents called me their good luck baby," my mother tells me. She was born in May of 1947, passed from person to person in the triumphant march towards Chowpatty that August. The rest of the details—the thousands of shining faces, the singing, her fat body buoyed by so many strangers—are not as much memories as her inheritance of a dream, one she folded into neat squares and brought to America. But now. But now. "What is happening?" she whispers. We feel it rising through the silences on the phone calls back home, the panic tucked into banalities. But what else can they say? What can any of us say? We look outside and find the dark and rising tide our own horizon. Our questions come with it, urgent and useless. Where is the safer ground? What turns a dream back into the body's memory? What else will it take for us to remember how to cradle each other's children, to carry them towards a brighter future?

Mira Jacob is a best-selling author, illustrator and cultural critic. Her memoir, Good Talk *was shortlisted for the National Book Critics Circle award, longlisted for the PEN Open Book Award, and named a New York Times Notable Book. Her novel,* The Sleepwalker's Guide to Dancing*, was a finalist for India's Tata First Literature Award.*

Perumal Murugan:

Thousands of Hands

Unlike monarchy, democracy is not about the centralization of power. Devolution and decentralization of power are symbols of democracy. As far as India is concerned, the devolution and decentralization of power did not happen at a fast pace, because of Sanatana Dharma which protects the caste structure. The caste structure forms the basis of Hinduism. Taking advantage of the psychological beliefs built by caste structure over centuries, Sanatana Dharma attempts to thwart any change. When a change becomes inevitable, it attempts to slow it down besides finding alternatives to make it smoother. The Sanatana Dharma constantly appropriates any uprising in the society as its own. When necessary, it creates clashes. It unleashes violence. Sanatana Dharma constantly struggles to retain power by hook or by crook.

Freedom of expression is fundamental to the devolution of power in a democracy. In a functioning democracy, a multitude of voices are raised, each given its due recognition and societal norms are set taking into account all the voices. But freedom of expression is against Sanatana Dharma. The policy of Sanatana Dharma makes it a duty of those in the lower hierarchy to unquestioningly accept the

rules set by those on the higher level of the hierarchy. Not everyone can talk. There are clear demarcations on who could speak and who could listen. There could be only one voice anywhere.

Sanatana Dharma doesn't aid the growth of freedom of expression. It is intolerant to a variety of voices. By putting forth the norms established in the caste structure, it seeks to arrest freedom of expression. When it fails, it uses the law. There are no laws to expand the borders of freedom of expression. The law's fundamental idea is to ensure law and order maintenance. Behind every right, the baton of law and order stands erect. The baton is taller for freedom of expression. The hand of Sanatana Dharma is ready to land a blow at any moment. The Sanatana Dharma which has grown over centuries occupying almost all the social spaces has thousands of hands.

Perumal Murugan writes in Tamil. He is vice-president of PEN International. He is the author of more than 20 books, including novels, collections of short fiction, poetry and non-fiction. He lives in Namakkal, Tamil Nadu.

Navina Haidar:

I know at least 75 Indias: Boarding school was a touch of Kipling's India; Kim and the Jungle Book. I knew Muslim India in education-minded Aligarh, and Hindu India in everyday life. I knew Christian India through my convent-educated family, and met Jewish India in Bombay's dazzling synagogue. Poor India is always knocking at the car window for coins, and rich India emerged on the Delhi streets in the 80s with its five-star hotel scene. Sikh India saved my uncle with oxygen-*langar* during Covid. I know at least 75 Indias. But we are being told there is just one....

Navina Haidar was born in London to Indian parents and is curator-in-charge of Islamic Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. She has written or co-authored six books.

Nilita Vachani:

We were the inheritors. Born a decade or two too late to breathe the air of jubilation. We held the history in our hands, though, in books, and in our ears and tongues from the stories of elders. My heroes were equally Nehru and Gandhi, Azad and Ghaffar Khan, Naidu and Asaf Ali.

My first love was a Muslim, he remained a secret from my parents. The fissures of partition coursed through our community's veins: wrenching stories of loss, families separated, the horrors of crossings. My paternal grand-mother's brother, Gopal, was killed during the Calcutta riots. He was mistaken for a Muslim, taken too late to the hospital after someone noticed the Krishna tattoo on his arm. Beneath the cosmopolitan veneer of the Sindhis of Calcutta with whom my parents mingled lay bigotry and fear, the excoriations of partition, the scabs barely formed. Thank god, I would think, that my grand-uncle and Gandhiji were killed by Hindus, not Muslims. A decade later when I brought home a white foreigner as my future husband, I knew in my heart that he was accepted in a way an Indian Muslim would never have been.

A gift from my first boyfriend was Azad's India Wins Freedom. The proceeds of its sales went to support two annual essay writing competitions, the best essay on Hinduism written by a Muslim and the best essay on Islam written by a non-Muslim. Today, I long for such simple tokenisms. As a filmmaker who prided herself in producing subtle and sophisticated works dealing with racism, casteism, patriarchy, I'd inwardly scoff at the facile constructs of Hindu-Muslim unity that played endlessly on television in national integration campaigns. Today, I long for that wholesome propaganda. It placed a lid on simmering tensions. It demarcated lines that couldn't be crossed. It kept alive the idea of an India for which we had fought.

Today, in India's darkest hours, it is enslavement and not freedom that greets us, enslavement not to a foreign power, but to the worst instincts within us. I cannot get the words "Jai Hind" out of my mouth. Instead I modify two historic lines and offer them as a rallying cry. I wish we would hear this through the length and breadth of India.

Iss desh ke hain anek sipahi,
Hindu Muslim Sikh Isahi
Na bhed-bhav, na unch-neech
Apas mein sab bahen bhai

This country's many soldiers
Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian
Living without discrimination or inequity

In harmony, as brothers and sisters.

Nilita Vachani is a filmmaker, writer, and educator who divides her time between India and New York.

Ritu Menon:

India on my Mind

In six months I will be as old as India on August 15. The country I was born in was a country torn asunder, it's true, but growing up in it, I felt—even very young, very immature—a sense of its difference from other countries. It was a bold experiment, an exercise in democracy and nation-building that was grounded in principles that, politically speaking, were certainly quite new: non-violent co-existence; non-alignment; non-communal; egalitarian; plural in a still semi-feudal society.

In hindsight, it strikes me that perhaps that was a "womanist" way of defining oneself and one's place in the world. Accommodative, not maximalist.

What worries me about the hyper-masculinism that now holds sway, is that it conceals a deep insecurity. My country now has such a diminished sense of itself that it is ill at ease with a capacious and confident embracing of difference. Fuelled by testosterone it demands compliance with cast-iron definitions of self and other, flexing its muscles against anyone who deplores and decries this puny redefinition of itself.

I had thought we would grow old gracefully together, my country and I. Instead I worry that the India I will die in might become the kind of country I may not want to be born in.

Ritu Menon is a feminist publisher and writer, based in Delhi. She has written and edited several critically acclaimed books and anthologies. Her books include Borders & Boundaries: Women in India's Partition, Out of Line: a literary and political biography of Nayantara Sahgal, *and* ZOHRA! A Biography in Four Acts.

Salman Rushdie:

Then, in the First Age of Hindustan Hamara, our India, we celebrated one another's festivals, and believed, or almost believed, that all of the land's multifariousness belonged to all of us. Now that dream of fellowship and liberty is dead, or close to death. A shadow lies upon the country we loved so deeply. Hindustan isn't hamara any more. The Ruling Ring—one might say—has been forged in the fire of an Indian Mount Doom. Can any new fellowship be created to stand against it?

Salman Rushdie was born in Bombay and lives in New York. He is the author of 20 books, including Midnight's Children. *His many international honors include the Booker Prize, the Best of Booker Prize, Companion of honor (UK), PEN Pinter Prize, PEN/Allen Lifetime Achievement Award, US), and EU's Aristeion Prize, among others.*

Sunil Amrith:

To my colleagues, who have been harassed, hounded, and detained—

In the face of crass brutality, you uphold grace and humor. You confront the erasure of history with the stubborn insistence of memory. Your testimony speaks of lives ruined and communities torn apart. You shine a light on the rivers mined for sand, the forests felled by dams, the species driven to the brink. In your work and in your words there lives another India: an India more just, more fully alive, more open to the world.

Sunil Amrith was born in Kenya to Tamil parents, grew up in Singapore, and teaches history at Yale University. He is the author of four books.

Vivek Menezes:

India's smallest state didn't get that famous "freedom at midnight" in 1947, because the Portuguese dictator António de Oliveira Salazar refused to countenance decolonization, and the 451-year-old Estado da India was invaded and conquered only in 1961, after Jawaharlal Nehru finally sent in the Indian Armed Forces.

It's a great pity it had to happen that way because—as Salazar was repeatedly advised—Goa overwhelmingly supported Independence, and diaspora Goans were already contributing mightily—far out of proportion to their minuscule numbers—to the grand experiment of the Republic of India. Nonetheless, instead of the appropriate negotiated merger (as happened with French India), there was only annexation—the official legal term—with all terms imposed directly from New Delhi.

Even then, there was huge optimism. The tiny territory, which became a full-fledged state in the Indian Union in 1987, voted in the first government with the Bahujan Samaj as its main base of supporters in modern Indian history, and implemented a remarkable raft of land, healthcare, and education reforms. Unfortunately, none of that proved sufficient to stave off the cynical depredations of the 21st century, as the politics of division have taken root in dark and dismaying ways. At this point, the future does not look good at all.

Vivek Menezes is a widely published photographer and writer, columnist for the 120-year-old O Heraldo *newspaper, and the co-founder and co-curator of the Goa Arts + Literature Festival.*

Yashica Dutt:

What does freedom look like? To a people whose sovereignty lives on borrowed time, when anyone walking by, can clank our metal cages they named caste, rattling our very belonging in this country they declared free a long time ago.

In ‘47, we heard freedom was fought for, hard-earned, won. Ours was still at bargain, with a republic, whose zeal to be the ‘world’s largest, brightest, newest’ couldn’t conceal the chains of caste they never considered breaking.

Freeing us too, would make us all free, with no one left to look down beneath, from above the slippery ladder of caste they sit on, defining their world, and ours. Redefining their existence, rearranging the illusion of ‘upperness’ that gives their life any meaning, would be excessive. We must wait for our turn for freedom. Asking for it too soon makes us greedy. Always asking, always demanding, to rupture the only order that ever made sense to them.

They say things are worse now. They’re right. Illusory, phantom or evident, all freedoms now lie at stake. Freedoms fought, won and bargained evaporate as we watch. Like a brass tap dripping through the night, and then, all at once. We have been here before. WE have always been here. It’s worse for some, not all. It never is.

“Will she lose it again?” Ambedkar had asked about India, months before he declared her, and her Dalit children truly free, with democracy. She is losing it now. But freedom, even at a bargain, is priceless, worth striving for. As people in waiting for 75 years to be free, we’d agree.

Yashica Dutt is a journalist and award-winning author of the best-selling memoir on caste, Coming Out as Dalit. *She is a leading anti-caste expert and lives in New York.*

'Hum dekhenge' by Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Translated by Amit Chaudhuri

We shall see—
It’s certain we too shall see
The day that was promised to us
And set indelibly in iron

When the boulder-weight of tyranny
Will scatter like wisps of cotton
And under the feet of the reigned-over
The earth will pound like a heart beating
And over the heads of those who govern
Lightning will burn and crackle

When all idols will be vacated
From the holy places
And we, the dispossessed and displaced,
Will be returned to our inheritance,
Each crown will be flung away,

Each seat of power brought down

Allah's name will remain: nothing more—
He, who is present and absent too,
He, who is both scene and spectator;
The cry "I am truth" will be heard,
The cry that is me as it is you,
And everywhere will reign God's progeny
Which is what I am, as you are.

Amit Chaudhuri is a singer, musician, and the author of eight novels, including Sojourn, published in August 2022, besides one collection of short stories, three books of poems, and five volumes of non-fiction. He lives in Calcutta.