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Who are the True Founding Fathers and Mothers of Indian Democracy?

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India's founding fathers and mothers contributed in multiple ways to the establishment of democracy in the country. Some of those mentioned by the prime minister on 15 August did not make such contributions. Here is a more representative list.

After the celebration of 75 years of Indian independence, there has been a lot of discussion about who the founding fathers of our democratic system are. The ruling Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)/Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) combination, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who addressed the nation from the Red Fort on 15 August 2022, have initiated a new discussion on this crucial question.

Modi was earlier heard saying on various occasions, (both in India and abroad) that India was “the mother of democracy”. His speech this year from the Red Fort was quite well crafted and meant to glorify the outlook of the “Modi Shining” era, which he indirectly referred to as “Amrit Kaal”. He went a step further and laid emphasis on today’s aspirational society, which is key to understanding the body politic of Hindutva’s vision.

Apart from M.K. Gandhi, B. R. Ambedkar, and Vallabhbhai Patel, the RSS-BJP combine has been lately invoking the names of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar and Subhas Chandra Bose. Jawaharlal Nehru was, and still is, their nemesis and he therefore merits only cursory mention. It is worth quoting what Modi said on 15 August 2022,

All the countrymen are deeply indebted to puja (revered) Bapu, Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, Babasaheb Ambedkar, Veer Savarkar, who devoted all their life on the path of duty towards the nation. The path of obligation has been their sole life path... Today is an opportunity to pay homage to countless such great men like Dr. Rajendra Prasadji, Nehruji, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, **Shyama Prasad Mookherjee**, Lal Bahadur Shastri, **Deendayal Upadhyay**, Jai Prakash Narayan, Ram Manohar Lohia, **Acharya Vinoba Bhave**, **Nanaji Deshmukh**, Subramania Bharati **who fought the war of independence and built the country after independence** (emphasis added)

We leave it to readers to decode what has been emphasised in the above quote. Modi is one who always likes to have an audience that suits him. He enjoys reading the crowd to gain legitimacy and that is how the script evolves. In other words, what you see is what the RSS/BJP combine wants you to see. This defines a new *kaal* (time) called “Amrit Kaal” (in Vedic astrology, the perfect time to start a new venture). Since they are in power now, Kali Yuga (a demonic age) has become Amrit Yuga (an age of immortality).

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In understanding the founding fathers of Indian democracy, each political party has its agenda and outlook. For a long period, the Congress regime prominently mentioned only Gandhi and Nehru. Now, the RSS-BJP combine is reinventing the language and grammar of political democracy. Yet, ironically, the founding mothers of Indian democracy are overlooked by everyone.

Even after 75 years of freedom, we are still grappling with fundamental questions to do with the founding of our democracy and who can be deservedly listed as our founding fathers and mothers. In our view, they are those who contributed in multiple ways to setting up the democratic system we have now. They played a critical role in the freedom struggle and evolved their philosophy in the Constituent Assembly. They were involved in drafting our Constitution and represented various sections of Indian society.

We list eight names—six men and two women—who could be called the main pillars of the present democratic set-up. They are Gandhi (1869-1948), B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956), Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964), Vallabhbhai Patel (1875-1950), Rajkumari Amrit Kaur (1887-1964), Maulana Abul Kalam Azad (1888-1958), Jaipal Singh Munda (1903-1970), and Dakshayani Velayudhan (1912-1978).

Quite accidentally, they came from diverse castes and religions. In terms of caste, Gandhi was a Bania, Ambedkar a Dalit, Nehru a Brahmin, Vallabhbhai Patel a Shudra, Kaur a Christian and Sikh, Azad a Muslim, Jaipal Singh a tribal, and Velayudhan a Dalit from South India. Except Gandhi, all of them were members of the Constituent Assembly; five of them served in the first cabinet and set up

the structures that were needed for democratic institutions to grow. Also, barring Ambedkar, all of them were Congress leaders in the fight for freedom.

Ambedkar played the double role of trying to free India from casteism and colonialism from the 1930s onwards, working from his own platforms. Amrit Kaur and Velayudhan played a critical role in the Constituent Assembly, representing the interests of women and children of all castes, religions, and communities.

We believe that the founding fathers and mothers are different in some ways from all the participants in the freedom struggle. The freedom fighters were numerous and came from different political backgrounds. Many fought for freedom and died for it. Many gave away their property and lived an unmarried life with the single goal of freeing India from the British. Rajkumari Kaur was one such remarkable female freedom fighter, and there were many such women and men in the years leading up to 1947.

It is important to think and rethink the roles these eight freedom fighters and thinkers played in shaping Indian democracy. They all deserve laurels whether one agrees with their ideology or not. Petty politics should not undermine our regard for those who gave us a democratic system that has survived many odds and challenges.

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American democracy acknowledges seven figures as founding fathers—George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison. There was no leading woman politician at that time. Of the seven, four became presidents and stabilised the democratic system in the early years of America’s existence as a unified country.

In India, only Nehru became the Prime Minister from among the founding figures and continued in the post for 17 years. In our view, he should have done exactly what George Washington did—resign after two terms to ensure that no dynasty got hold of the power structure of the nation. Nelson Mandela resigned after his first five-year term.

Nehru’s long innings in power created a coterie of writers and thinkers who paid little heed to the roles of Ambedkar, Vallabhbhai Patel, Amrit Kaur, Jaipal Singh, Velayudhan, and Maulana Azad in the freedom struggle. All Nehruvian scholars not only ignored Ambedkar, but also considered him unworthy of being on a list of freedom fighters. This led to a backlash from Dalit, Adivasi, and Other Backward Class (OBC) intellectuals and many others. The intellectuals also diminished the role of Vallabhbhai Patel. Ironically, the BJP is now using these two figures to undermine Nehru.

Gandhi remains a constant symbol for all parties. For a long time, his murder by Nathuram Godse created a sense of unease whenever the RSS/BJP approved of him. From Atal Bihari Vajpayee’s days as prime minister, the ruling party has been ritually paying tributes to him at Rajghat. For a long time, the communists respected Gandhi, while completely ignoring the other founders, particularly Ambedkar, who could have come to their rescue in a crisis like the present one.

All the political parties conveniently ignore Amrit Kaur, Jaipal Singh, and Velayudhan, who had perhaps been among the most active members of the freedom movement and the Constituent Assembly. Amrit Kaur was the only female Cabinet minister in the Nehru government for 10 years with the important health portfolio. Maulana Azad, of course, got minority treatment throughout.

Each one of them had their own ... personalities, but they were also accommodative of opposing views ... For example, Gandhi and Ambedkar had opposing views about various aspects of Indian life, institutions, practices, and culture, but they worked together for the common cause of democracy.

We feel that each one of these eight figures were equally important in instituting our present democratic structures and sustaining them with a constitutional democracy, which was supported by a well-written constitution and a dignified national flag. Though each one of them had their own grounding, all of them were experts in modern constitutionalism, the principles of democracy, and the moral and ethical bases of the institutions that had to be built by Indians. They were all well educated, both in India and England (except Azad, who was self-educated in English, and Velayudhan, who was educated in Kerala), and deeply committed to national freedom and advancement.

Each one of them had their own philosophical and ethical personalities, but they were also accommodative of opposing views and principles. For example, Gandhi and Ambedkar had opposing views about various aspects of Indian life, institutions, practices, and culture, but they worked together for the common cause of democracy. Ambedkar became the chairman of the committee drafting the Constitution of India from the Constituent Assembly debates to build a sustainable democratic system for all Indians. The way he cooperated with Nehru, Vallabhbhai Patel, and other Congress leaders in the Constituent Assembly and also in the Cabinet showed what goals he had set for himself.

Whether we agree with the non-violent or violent character of it, the freedom struggle reached its goal under Gandhi's broad leadership. His idea of gram swaraj and national swaraj dwelt broadly within the framework of democracy. He stood for the abolition of untouchability, if not the varna system.

We briefly outline the careers of the eight founders we selected which will illustrate why we have chosen them.

1) **Gandhi** played a key role in making the nationalist movement a mass movement. Whether we agree with the non-violent or violent character of it, the freedom struggle reached its goal under his broad leadership. His idea of *gram swaraj* (village self-rule) and national swaraj dwelt broadly within the framework of democracy. He stood for the abolition of untouchability, if not the *varna* (social stratification based on caste) system. Gandhi played a key role in stopping communal riots after Partition and formed the drafting committee of the Constitution under Ambedkar, while making Nehru the first Prime Minister and Vallabhbhai Patel the Deputy Prime Minister. He knew what the democratic set-up would be once the Constitution was adopted.

2) **Ambedkar** began working to free Indians from colonial rule and caste oppression from 1927 onwards. He played several roles that aided in making India a constitutional democracy. He was the only political thinker who drew democratic lessons from Buddhism and put in place a workable Constitution for the nation. As the first Law Minister, he was responsible for making sure the Indian legal system was on track. Through his work and writings during the colonial period, he left a strong imprint on India on the idea of equality, both in theory and practice. He guided the Constituent Assembly debates to a democratic synthesis. He laid down the foundation to curb authoritarianism and wrote several books that aimed to transform India into a civil and egalitarian society.

Amrut Kaur was the only woman cabinet member in 1947 and played a pivotal role in shaping health institutions in India till 1964. She was unmarried and donated all her property to health and educational institutions.

3) **Nehru** began his activism in 1920 with a kisan (farmer) march in Uttar Pradesh and remained active in the anti-colonial movement despite being jailed nine times. As a Congress leader, strategist, thinker, writer, and our first prime minister for 17 years, he was the central pillar of our democratic system. He played a critical and decisive role in working out a constitutional framework with a strong respect for fundamental rights and putting it into practice in a brutally casteist and class-divided society. He was responsible for stabilising democracy in India while it failed to take root in many neighbouring countries even during his lifetime.

4) **Vallabhbhai Patel** began his anti-British campaign in 1918 with the Kheda farmers' agitation. He gave up a prosperous legal practice when he joined the Congress in 1917 and became a mass leader second only to Gandhi after the Bardoli movement. He mobilised people and money to fight the British, and became first Shudra Congress president in 1931. As Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister, he played a key role in bringing the princely states into the Indian Union. He also played a critical role in promoting a consensus in the Constituent Assembly. Though he did not write much, he was the most influential of the administrators who worked to put the young Indian nation state on its feet.

Jaipal Munda was the most enlightened Adivasi member of the Constituent Assembly and advocated drafting of constitutional provisions for tribal liberation from internal caste-class exploitation.

5) **Rajkumari Amrut Kaur** came from a royal family, but she gave up everything and joined the freedom struggle after her higher education in Oxford University in 1918. She had grown up as a Christian woman and saw the liberation of all women from bondage and the freedom of Indians from British rule as her primary goal. Though she was a part of many Gandhian movements, she developed her independent views on women's rights, education, and health. She was a founder-member of the All India Women's Conference in 1927. She played a significant role in the Constituent Assembly in formulating equal rights for women of all religions, castes, and tribes. She was the only woman Cabinet member in 1947 and played a pivotal role in shaping health institutions in India till 1964. She was unmarried and donated all her property to health and educational institutions. She combined in herself an indomitable nationalism

with an international vision of a democratic and developing India.

6) **Abul Kalam Azad** was a staunch Muslim nationalist who was with the Congress and became the party's youngest president at 35 in 1923. When Mohammed Ali Jinnah planned to form a separate Muslim nation, Azad's preference was for a united India. He was a scholar, politician, writer, thinker, journalist, and educationalist, who had never studied in England. He played a critical role in keeping many Muslim regions and people in India during Partition. As a learned member of the Constituent Assembly, Azad played a significant role in drafting the Constitution. During the freedom struggle, he established educational institutions for Muslims to bring them into the modern era. As the first Education Minister of India, he established many new institutions of higher learning and the University Grants Commission. His scholarly writings helped many in the Muslim community realise the importance of building a democratic system with adult franchise.

Dakshayani Velayudhan was ... the first Scheduled Caste woman graduate in India, and a member of the Cochin Legislative Council and one of the nine female members of the Constituent Assembly that had 389 representatives.

7) **Jaipal Singh Munda** was the son of tribal farmer in Jharkhand, an Oxford-educated intellectual, a world-famous hockey player, a teacher, a tribal rights leader, and a freedom fighter. He established the Adivasi Mahasabha in 1939 and worked for the liberation of India from the British and also Adivasis from internal oppression and exploitation. He was the most enlightened Adivasi member of the Constituent Assembly and advocated drafting constitutional provisions for tribal liberation from internal caste-class exploitation. He worked hard to keep the Nagas and other rebelling tribals within the Indian Union and at the same time popularised the idea of Adivasis forming their own states to promote their development.

8) **Dakshayani Velayudhan** was from a Dalit Pulaya family from Ernakulam in Kerala. She was among the first women from her community to wear an upper cloth, the first Scheduled Caste woman graduate in India, and a member of the Cochin Legislative Council (1945) and one of the nine female members of the Constituent Assembly that had 389 representatives. From 1946 to 1952, she served as the first and only Scheduled Caste member of the Constituent Assembly and the Provisional Parliament of India. She emphasised equality in all spheres and believed that a "moral" aspect of human life and the principles of the Constitution were fundamental requisites to annihilate caste inequalities. She was an intellectual politician, who, as the editor of *Common Man*, a magazine published from Madras, educated many of the depressed classes on their rights. A close associate of Gandhi she worked till her death in 1978 to establish a healthy democracy and its supporting institutions in India.

Ideologically, we do not agree with some of the founders, but we recognise their role in ushering in democracy to this country. They too dreamt of India turning into an aspirational society but respected its diversity. It is therefore necessary to remember that aspirations cannot simply be met through rhetoric or charisma. These thinkers delved deeply to craft a healthy grammar of politics without being carried away by the aura of the freedom movement. In this Amrit Kaal, the regressive approach towards nationalism has to be shunned to enable democracy to progress, excel, and, more importantly, protect its own future.

All of them were experts in modern constitutionalism, the principles of democracy, and moral and ethical basis of the institutions that had to be built by Indians.

Why only these eight? Why are freedom fighters such as Bose and Savarkar not on the list? We are of the opinion that a founding father or mother should have played the following roles: (1) they dedicated themselves to participation in the anti-colonial struggles; (2) they had a clear idea of establishing a democratic political system with a written constitution and a commitment to human equality—both among the sexes and within them—with no acknowledgement of caste or hierarchy; and (3) they played a concrete role in the pre- and post-1947 process of introducing democracy and the institutions it needed to India.

Apart from participating in the freedom struggle with militant approaches of their own, Bose and Savarkar had no vision of democracy, equality, and the constitutionalism that had to be set in motion in post-colonial India. Neither in their writings nor speeches are such formulations available.

The other names that Modi mentioned do not qualify because they played varied roles in colonial struggles and post-colonial politics with their own ideology. They could be respected if we agree with their ideologies. But they certainly cannot be counted as among the founding fathers of India's constitutional democracy.

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