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The young, optimistic and idealistic will shape India at 100

Rohini Nilekani writes: They bring energy, passion, diversity into the work they do, as the battle for justice, environmental sustainability, rights and dignity of the vulnerable. In a country that will still be young on its 100th I-Day, this active citizenship is heartening news

Written by **Rohini Nilekani** | Updated: August 15, 2022 9:02:46 am



If we can unite in our incredible diversity, nothing can stop this country from blazing ahead. (AP/File)

It is 75 years since we raised our own flag in our own country, reclaiming it for ever more. What a time for celebration. Here we are, a young democracy, alive with the throbbing hopes of a young population, seeking to fulfil the promise of the Constitution that we gave ourselves in the new India.

As we celebrate the past, we also look ahead. What can we do, as a nation, as a samaj, as citizens, to bring peace and prosperity to all those who live on this beloved soil? Not just people of one religion, or some castes, or some geographies, but all our people. After all, even if our public posturing may sometimes diverge, our interests are indisputably shared.

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So what must we do? That is the question that should be in all our minds on August 15 as we unfurl the flag in every home and every heart.

I will share what makes me personally optimistic. Despite global shocks, the fundamentals of our economy seem to be sound. The race to abundance may be ours to lose. India has laid out the world's most advanced and innovative open digital public infrastructure. I truly believe this is the foundation for economic democracy in this country. We can now go full-speed ahead in this digital age to allow more access, and more participation in a re-imagined economy that hopes to be more innovative and much greener. Big business seems to have bet big on this path. Now small businesses need policy backing and capital to build the vision from bottom up to put India on a more sustainable path.

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Meanwhile, there seems to be a cultural resurgence that has pulled millions of people out of lethargy into a visible pride and celebration of India's 5,000-year-old civilisation, its rich and diverse rituals and traditions, its public artefacts, and its mythology. India is asserting its soft power at home and in the world. From Kashmir to Kerala and from Rajasthan to Manipur, communities are building on their traditions to innovate for a modern economy. At 75 years, India seems confident and poised for leadership in the world.

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But we shouldn't take our successes for granted, because the same things that make India strong could also make it weak.

If we falter in democratising economic opportunity, if we succumb to a regime of crony capitalism, then we will stifle innovation, and have even more concentrated wealth in the hands of an unaccountable elite. It is essential that samaj, sarkar and bazaar work together to expand livelihood opportunities and dignity across the length and breadth of the country, not just in a few pockets. If we can reduce the trust deficit, and distribute the ability of each sector to do what it does best, such inter-sector collaboration can do wonders.

We all experienced the recent example of the collective power of cooperation during the Covid-19 pandemic. Across the globe, and certainly so in India, ordinary people, civil society institutions, private philanthropy, the state, and markets came together in record time to push back against the virus. For all the dark days of death and desperation, it was truly an important two years in human history. We have learnt so many lessons that when the next crisis comes around, we might be better prepared to cooperate more quickly and effectively.

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There are other headwinds to face. The same cultural resurgence we celebrate can lead to jingoism, or it can leave some communities and geographies feeling excluded or uneasy. Social media, with its ability to trivialise, heighten the emotional response, and sustain mutual animosities, makes it harder to build bridges of trust.

It will take some time for social conventions around these interactions to settle into a better normal. But I truly believe we are getting past the sell-by date for public acrimony. People are fed up with the binaries. They want to go back to the rich hues in between the blacks and the whites that this country has lived in for millennia. And hopefully, it is the young people of this nation, who are naturally idealistic and freedom-loving, who will shape the society of their dreams.

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I often catch up with youth leaders around the country, and any anxiety I may feel about the future simply vanishes. They bring much energy, passion, diversity, and creativity into the work they do, whether it is for better access to justice, more environmental sustainability or for the rights and dignity of the most vulnerable of communities. Born as digital natives, they are also unleashing the power of technology for social good. Slowly but surely, many are building solid processes for youth to become more active as concerned citizens. In a country that will still be young on its 100th Independence Day, this active citizenship is heartening news for our democracy.

If we can unite in our incredible diversity, nothing can stop this country from blazing ahead. Building on our heritage, we can pioneer a path for the world to follow, whether it comes to co-existing with nature, innovating inclusive markets or scaling up service delivery. But we cannot take such a future for granted. Every citizen will have to work for it, there are no bystanders of good fortune. Everyone will need to internalise that our fates are entwined. The elite, especially, cannot afford to secede anymore. No one is safe until everyone is safe, whether it comes to climate change, pandemics or breathable air. So all of samaj will have to actively pitch in to make sure bazaar and sarkar play their role in making the world's largest democracy also the most peaceful and prosperous for all its citizens. We are so lucky that our founders created this magnificent, humanitarian ideal for us to follow. It is up to us, the diverse, vibrant samaj of India, to realise this country's tryst with destiny. Hopefully, we can then look back at August 15, 2022, as our Navaratna Jubilee.

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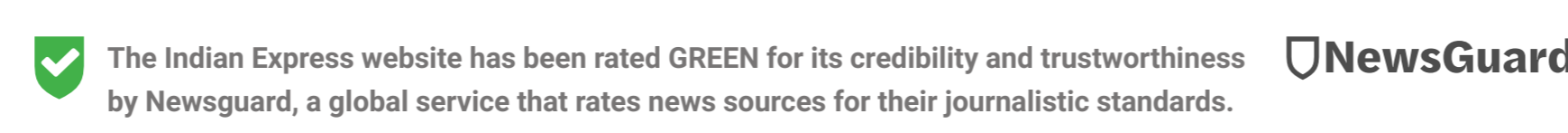
The writer is chairperson, Arghyam, a foundation working on sustainable water

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