

Independence: Dream and Reality

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I thank my stars for enabling me to come to Holyrood in the very month – September – that has made the date 18 and the year 2014 special for the world.

Far too many dates in our times have been burnt into our consciousness by the fires of hate and the toxins of vengeance. It was time the world found a new date, a date that brings some relief, a date with the design, if I may say so, of hops and grain embroidered into it, with the pollen of the thistle and the primrose upon it, a date that has in it something of the flamboyant flight of the Scottish Chough. It was time the world's calendar got a date that can become an anniversary not of trauma but of achievement, not of torment but of contentment.

Vital as the outcome of the referendum has been, the fact of the referendum is, to my mind, even more important. Great houses need great doors. 'Better Together', or 'Better Separate' were signs written on either side of a great door that the referendum was to open. The key that was to open that door needed to be a great key too, and it was called 'Better Find Out'. One might say dictatorships have locksmiths, democracies have key-smiths. 'Better find out', and 'better listen', are democratic sentiments, liberal considerations. The crafting and the using of that key in Scotland by Great Britain has been a signal achievement, a signally democratic achievement, and the world hails it.

Great Britain's seeing the need and indeed the urgency for a generational leap of its liberal soul into another order of democratic self-questioning is, undoubtedly, a singular achievement. To borrow from Shakespeare, we have seen the lily painted afresh and refined gold gilt itself again but not, as in the great play, to some ridiculous and wasteful excess, rather, in much needed and much valued proportionality.

Unique as it is for Scotland and for Great Britain, the 18th of September, 2014 now belongs to the world – England and Scotland cannot patent it. It is invaluable for all the democracies of the world. It is invaluable for those who believe that the political aspirations of a people can and should matter, that they can and should be heard, that they can and should be met through political means without violence being used either to advocate or to resist change. It is invaluable for those who cherish political and lawful instruments for the allaying of disquiet and for the abatement of contentions. But above all it is special for those who believe in the self-appraising, self-correcting and therefore self-renewing strength of democracies.

The referendum was, therefore, not just about 'Should Scotland be an independent country?' . It was about a country – Great Britain – searching its political soul for equilibrium between the dynamisms of its history and the compulsions of contemporary human aspiration. It was about a country – Great Britain – aware of the evolution of its liberal institutions, ripe in its experience of running them, wholly wedded to the rule of law and accountable to the will of democratic opinion, recognizing, even within the spaces of its just system, room for a major ascertaining.

As a marker in the world's journey towards representative self-governance, the Scottish Referendum date now joins dates on which major referendums were held, like that which Norway held, in 1905, on the continuance of its union with Sweden. A near 100% said a resounding *Ja!* to dissolving it.

It also joins the date, exactly seventy years ago, in 1944, when Iceland held a referendum on whether it should continue to be part of Denmark. Again over 98% voted *Ja!* for independence, ushering in the new Republic.

Scotland will be interested to know, and perhaps surprised as well, that nearly two years after India won her independence, in 1949, a referendum was held in the tiny town of Chandernagore north of Calcutta, now Kolkata. This town had been a French enclave for some two and a half centuries and faced a choice for its future. The choice was shaped into a question: "Do you want to stay with the French union?". White slips with "yes" and pink slips with "no" were distributed to the 12,000 plus voters. Barring 112, all voted a very pink *Haen!* to leaving France.

India had no doubt about Chandernagore's intent and was a bit bored by the exercise. But Paris too was not surprised by the outcome. It was less prepared for the very different outcome of the 1974 referendum in the islands of Mayotte, off Mozambique, which voted strongly to stay with France. The Falkland Islands in the 2013 referendum held on that Overseas Territory of the United Kingdom voted by over 90 % for continuance of the status as British territory.

Do Norway, Iceland, Chandernagore show that the world wants to be free, independent of outside control? Do Mayotte and the Falklands show the opposite?

They do not. They show that the world wants to be able to choose. It may even choose through a narrow win ambiguity but it wants that choice. And it deserves that choice.

There is a nuance, though, we must bear in mind.

A referendum is conducted by a government and joined in by a people who live in conditions of certitude about most matters except in the matter that is being posed in the referendum. A referendum is the harvest of a field that is at peace with the seasons, not one that is being ravaged by fevers. It is the ripe fruit of a ripe tree plucked by ripe hands at a ripe moment.

Not every society with problems that need public consultation has the time, the means, the conditions precedent or the will for a referendum.

A much earlier generation saw on the African continent its eight distinct European groupings become, in a steady time-line, a grand family of independent nations. Between Ghana, the first to become independent and South Africa, several nations like Chad, Upper Volta, Cameroon, Gabon, Cape Verde, Guinea Bissau, the Comoros sprang up like buried truths from underneath the pastel chromes of European colonization. They had never been known to exist there or anywhere, even as a notion, by much of the world.

Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus rose, likewise, from the dull pages of pressed-flower albums to a new life, to independence, without going through a referendum. Indeed they could not have. Time overtook the clocks. Similarly, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tadjikistan,

Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan emerged like philatelic discoveries from the 'nowhere' of world amnesia by just the awakening of its people's long-suppressed will.

Now they are where they ought to be in what an old cliché calls 'the comity of nations'.

The important thing is they wanted to be, deserved to be and are independent.

But the question of questions, on which no referendum can be held but which demands reflection, is: Does reaching 'independent' status mean independence? Must the absence of that status mean dependence?

The real and only test of independence, whether for a person or a people is not the absence of dependence but the absence of fear – fear of a bully in one's backyard, fear of one at home. And the only question that can be asked of oneself to check if one is quite free or not is: 'Is there someone, some image that I dare not look in the eye?'. Or, 'Is there something, harmful to no one, that I wish to do but can't because of some one, or some entity, disabling me?'

By that criterion, few, very few, independent nations are independent.

Loss of independence to foreign powers happened in colonial and imperialist times through war, diplomatic sleights of hand, negligence and complicity. We do not have colonizers of the old mould around, but we do have forces, both political and commercial, that seek dominance, control over the world's resources. Territory and trade, nowhere better combined than in the shape of oil and natural gas, monetized in petro-dollars, come together today in the same ballistic orchestrations as they did a century ago.

There are hydro-carbon limits to national sovereignties today, petro-dollar limits to policy options. Energy constrains, technology restrains, independence.

This is not a history class and so I will not inflict on you tedious details of what transpired in India with the British, of which entity the Scottish were part, but I must allude to the role of one extraordinary figure who showed how that loss of independence happened, how it is happening even now and can happen in the future.

A mid-nineteenth century Governor General of India, Lord Dalhousie, was a great Scotsman who should have become Prime Minister of Great Britain, is remembered as the Lord Sahib who devised the Doctrine of Lapse, as unsurpassed for the audacity of its imagination as for its cold conceit. By means of this device, he made every native state that lacked an apparent lawful male linear heir, to lapse to British India. Many native states did lack male heirs or any heirs for the reason that native palaces made better seraglios than nurseries.

By that one stroke of the Dalhousie pen State after Native State that had not been subdued by gunfire, fell to British hands. If Britain were to colour those parts of its Indian possessions which came to it courtesy this Scotsman, the map would be very colourful indeed. Dalhousie also managed to do something else that was no less dramatic. And that had to do not with land, but with something as vital to a people's sense of sovereignty – its palladium of sovereign power. He inveigled the diamond of all diamonds, the Kohinoor – 'Mountain of Light' – out of India and into the vault of Crown Jewels.

Within three years of Dalhousie's departure, northern India was to erupt into the Great Uprising of 1857 in which rebelling Indian soldiers showed great courage and equal ruthlessness, not sparing even British women and children. Dalhousie made India feel its loss of independence as few of his predecessors had or successors would. The Uprising was put down by Dalhousie's successor with many times the same savagery.

Let us assume, for a moment, that Dalhousie was to re-appear today. Would he alight from a hot-air balloon? On a giant aircraft? No. He would appear invisibly, intangibly, like some spirit which cannot be seen or felt or heard. He would come not as the First Marquess of Dalhousie, rather, as the First Marquess of Cyber Surveillance. And his dewy eyes would be fixed not on native palace key-holes to see which prince is capable of male heirs – that too perhaps, on the side – but with phantom fingers on cyber keyboards to spy on the legations and chanceries, the foreign offices and defence ministries of the world, to see who is up to doing what in the wheeling world of techno-commercial dealing.

And then, feigning moral outrage, he would confiscate in equivalents of the Doctrine of Lapse, from state after state, the independence, not formal independence, but real workaday freedoms of independent action, for the augmentation of his Empress's writ. I said 'his Empress'. That is not quite right. Many among today's Dalhousies work for their Victorias but then we are living in the world of high-tech free enterprise. Who Julian Assange's or Edward Snowden's 'empresses', if any at all, are only they know and those who are doing an Assange on Assange and a Snowden on Snowden.

There is another Lord Dalhousie in our times, seeking for his Empress that other precious tangibility. You have guessed it. If that glittering stone, which was mined in the Guntur District of present day Andhra Pradesh and belonged originally to the Kakatiya rulers of that tract lies today in London, it is because the telescoping avarice of indigenous suzerains from India's north and the nimbleness of Dalhousie turned it into a global bauble to be tossed from grasping hand to grabbing fingers.

What is the equivalent of the Kohinoor today? It is the right, in developing countries, of natural resources to be used in a way that benefits their fellow eco-citizens and assists their natural habitat without en-fouling the precincts or dispossessing its denizens. This 'Kohinoor' of our natural resources, which now include the spectrums of Cyberia, has become the object of global commercial speculation and monopoly. Global metropolitan capital, no less profit-minded than any Empire of old, deals in the wealth of independent nations while governments deal with their poverty, natural disasters and terrorism. Modern Kohinoors get vaulted in mutually-guarding protectionisms, with annual expositions in the shape of world trade summits. Modern Kohinoors also fuel the defence industries of the world, while governments and people deal with the wars.

Dadabhai Naoroji, the Grand Old Man of India, as he is called, wrote the masterly 'Poverty and un-British Rule'. Naoroji says in it of nineteenth century India under the British: "In the case of former foreign conquests, the invaders either retired with their plunder and booty, or became the rulers of the country; they made, no doubt, great wounds but India, with her industry, revived and healed the wounds... With the English the case is peculiar... The former rulers were like butchers hacking here and there, but the English with their scientific scalpel cut to the very heart, and yet, lo there is no wound to be seen, and soon the plaster of the high talk of civilisation, progress, and what not, covers up the wound!"

Naoroji could have been writing today, with 'the English' substituted by 'techno-commercial imperialism'.

This is of course not just about developing countries. One of the strongest issues under discussion around the Scottish referendum was the certain ceding of sovereignty by an independent Scotland if it wanted a common currency. "It is clear", wrote The Scotsman, with terse clarity, "any currency union would leave some power residing outside Scotland".

Independent or not independent, Scotland would have to go with rUK's debts and defence arrangements. Independent or not, it would have to participate in the retrenchment of rUK's public debt of 1.3 trillion GBP. And rUK, irrespective of whether Scotland is independent or not, would need its participation.

And since all developed countries, countries of the world's North, so to say, are members of economic unions like the EU or of defence unions like NATO, their independence is rounded like album-picture holders at the four corners, in any case.

Scotland as part of Britain could not have asked nuclear stations to be removed. Scotland independent of Britain could not have been able to, either, if it was to remain in NATO.

'Developed' and 'developing' apart, to few countries even continents, if any at all, is given freedom from tensions in the neighbourhood. You can ask India!

We could not, even if we wanted to, dismantle our defence establishments, our weapons. We are as self-reliant as we can be in defence production, defence preparedness but then we cannot be, 100%.

When raptors scan the earth from the skies, the snakes on the ground hiss. You could, if you want, put it the other way round as well.

The fangs of jingoism in a country dement it, foment it, torment it into postures and actions that make its independence hostage to fears and hates. When this happens in two neighbouring countries, with non-state players complicating life for both, independence is lost to war or the preparation for war.

How independent are Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Israel, Palestine independent?

And Ukraine?

How many independent countries today are, or can be, really, independent?

There are other dependencies.

Scotland which has chosen its path may like to ponder this:

Independence is lost by the dice of fate played on the checkerboard of human failings and failures. It is retrieved by the galloping action of a redemptive human will. It is lost by soldiers and regained by statesmen only to be squandered by politicians again. A tragedy when it is gone, a romance when it is being recovered, independence is the greatest glory. But life in independence is another story.

No one spills milk yesterday. No one breaks a promise last year. Every ill is now. The saint in a tyrant's shoes is a saint only in intent.

Those who have chosen to stay as they are, and those who still wish to be independent, may consider the fact that independence is not a commodity of trade. One does not settle for it. Nor is it an investment in stocks. One does not speculate on it. It is a state of being at once political and civilizational, collective and individual. Independence is physical and metaphysical, it is as hard as a milestone and as subtle as a dream. Above all, independence is either there or it is not. You cannot wonder whether you are independent or not; you know when you are, you know when you are not.

Empires and colonies and the vast hold of the Soviet state on nations beyond its natural borders are now a matter of the past. And so we take the independence of nations as 'a given'. The fact of the Scottish referendum has showed that assumption to be wrong.

But the external imperium is only the more prominent and pernicious of the forms of dependence. Apartheid South Africa did not answer to London or to The Hague. Pretoria was South Africa's South African yoke. Other examples from every continent on the globe can be given that show home-grown dependencies, some of which are within and some above toleration limits. These mock at the independence under which they labour.

See the trajectory of any independence movement that has ended in triumph and you will see that independence makes a formidable goal, but it is a fragile and fraught station. As a vision, independence allures by its sheer lucence; as a reality it overwhelms by its leaden complexities. Campaigning for it is arduous and exciting; handling it is no less arduous, and is exacting. Reached in exhilaration, independence is enjoyed in perplexity. Hope dissolves in bewilderment if not in dismay, ideals turn to slogans, slogans to shibboleths which rightly become the stuff of satire. Charisma crumbles into caricature, reputations that soared in struggle reach for the inflated tubes of media hype to simply stay afloat.

The very methods used for reaching the goal return to haunt the new independents. It is almost as if the placards for independence had spoofs written on their backs, to be flipped as soon as Act One is done. Heroes from the trenches become distant villains. In battle, rank and file fight as one; in peace rank rankles the file. Sacrifice is shared in the struggle, power is held up close. The hoops of camaraderie that bound campaigners on the streets, in court-rooms, in prisons, during the struggle, slacken on the post being reached. Where there was collegueship, there enters competition. Where there was mutual admiration, creeps up reciprocated envy. Where there was trust comes, smouldering, suspicion. The old bitter herbs of sacrifice that had made for nourishment were partaken of together as sacrament. The sugar candy of power is gobbled on the sly. Keepers of confidences forfeit their charge, keepers of consciences their honour.

No wonder Wordsworth wrote of the French Revolution "Whither is fled the visionary gleam? Where is it now, the glory and the dream?"

Historically, for India, had Britain meant a hefty bill.

Luckily, that bill carried a discount called Scotland.

And a refund coupon called Ireland.

In Britain's colonial clamp on India, Scotland and Ireland have been saving graces.

It is not that Scotland did not benefit from Indian surpluses. Glasgow and Dundee owe much of their prosperity to India, to Indian jute in particular.

And it is not as if Scotsmen serving the British administration in India were there for love of India while the English were there for love of Empire. It is not that at all. Scotsmen helped consolidate the British Empire in India as energetically as did their compatriots from England.

But this discount that I have mentioned came in the shape of a remarkable Scotsman. If Dalhousie is synonymous with the loss of India's independence, another Scotsman and a contemporary of Dalhousie's, is inextricably linked to the retrieval of India's independence. A bird watcher by personal inclination, talent and training, Allan Octavian Hume was a civil servant whose passionate involvement in the improvement of India's political conditions was an irritant to his British colleagues and bosses and an inspiration to India.

It is not widely known that the Indian National Congress, no less, was founded, no less, by none other than this Scotsman. But Hume chose not to be Congress' first President, letting that honour go to an Indian, W C Bonnerjee, himself remaining its secretary for 22 long and formative years. Hume was no political saint and the Governor General of the day, Lord Dufferin had to keep a sharp eye out on the Scotsman's hustling methods. But Hume it was and Hume alone who first thought of a national political platform on which Indians of education from all possible backgrounds would come together to organise a political charter for the country.

And it is from that awakening that India began to see the loss of independence not just in terms of crowns and thrones but the siphoning of economic surpluses, the drain of home revenues, the diversion of raw materials at minimum cost for maximum profit, the relegation of Indians to clerkdom at the top and serfdom at the base of their opportunity pyramid.

India has known this from the time of its struggle for freedom. And so the Indian National Congress assiduously built into its struggle spaces for those communities and peoples who were oppressed by the Indian social condition. Internal reform was stressed alongside independence from the British Raj. This was not always to the satisfaction of the oppressed some of who, from time to time, preferred dealing with London through its Governors and the Viceroy, than with the Congress. But the signposts were clear. A change of guards in national capital and in the provinces had to lead to major re-structurings of the Indian socio-political order in which Indians will demand a say in their self-governance.

The last Scotsman to have served as a Governor General of India, Lord Linlithgow, is recalled for his suppression of the Quit India Movement of 1942 with ruthlessness and his presiding over the Great Bengal Famine of 1943 without remorse. Linlithgow was to the viceroyalty of India what Douglas Jardine was to cricket – "Bodyline" would just about describe his manner. The national struggle for independence was at its peak when, charging Congress with "dangerous preparations ...for unlawful and in some cases violent activities", the war-time Governor General clamped the Congress leadership in prison. Gandhi had never been accused of "violent activities" before. In a rare personal rebuke to be administered by him, he wrote to Linlithgow: "Of all the high functionaries I have had the honour of knowing, none has been the cause of such deep sorrow to me as you have been".

So, two Scottish Governors General propelled India into its struggle for independence negatively by the injustice of what they did – Lord Dalhousie and Lord Linlithgow. And one Scotsman did the same by his single positive step of extraordinary and timeless impact – A O Hume. When independence did come to India, it came the more valuably, the more inevitably.

But Dalhousie and Linlithgow notwithstanding, as I said, India regarded Scotland rather differently from England.

Why was this so? Truth to tell, hard to tell!

There were times when the British civil service in India had as many Scotsmen as it had Englishmen, certainly far more than it had Welsh or Irish officials. And so identifying the Scottish people as part of the colonial apparatus was not difficult. But there was sufficient education in India, sufficient awareness, to know that 'back in Great Britain', there was such a thing as a lion and that lion roared in English, not Gaelic. There was an idea, faint perhaps, but there, about who was who and what was what in terms of hierarchies in Britain. Scotland's union with Britain made Britain 'Great', Ireland's union made it 'United' but Britain was what the union was with, not the other way around. Scotland and Ireland were predicates, the subject-object was Britain.

In two important regions two great Scotsmen made a great difference to how India perceived Scotland. Two Governors – I am partial to that office – Thomas Munro, Governor of Madras, who initiated peasant-based assessments of land revenue in India and Mountstuart Elphinstone, Governor of Bombay, who founded state-sponsored education in India made names for themselves that still abide.

But it was not just in the way Scottish members of the Imperial elite functioned and what they achieved or did not achieve but in the way Scotland, as a nation within the British nation, complete in spirit and identity, presented itself to the Indian mind that made the difference.

If Munro and Elphinstone had entered the popular Indian imagination, the names of Alexander Duff, the first missionary of the Church of Scotland to come to India became part of Bengal's social and intellectual lore as one of the early initiators of higher education in that province. The Scottish Church College in Calcutta recalls his work with nostalgia. Similarly, the Scottish watchmaker David Hare who founded the Hindu College in Calcutta which later became Presidency College, now a university, influenced a whole generation of opinion makers in Bengal.

Duff and Hare were not part-time philanthropists, lenders of a weekend's helping hand. They were builders of thought, moulders of views with both – thoughts and views – being strongly forward-looking and chapter-turning. They laid the foundations, without intending to, for a future strengthening of the peoplehood of India.

To the coarsening of freedom's fibre, is added the steam-rolling of freedom's natural folds into a false smoothness by the dominant class, community, caste, tribe. Linguistic, ethnic, religious and other minorities then begin to feel within the nationhood what the nation felt as a whole when it was under foreign domination. Independence loses its meaning then, for those who feel insecure. It means little for such people that the country in which they live is supposed to be independent, has a President and a Prime Minister who hoists a flag from time to time.

Electoral democracies have an executive that is accountable to parliament. This accountability is dependent on a working majority enjoyed by the Prime Minister in the House to navigate legislation and parliamentary discussions on government policy and on matters of moment. That is where the principle of majority starts and that is where the principle of majority ends. That operational majority on the floor of the House, if it seeks to embrace or become one with anything like a majority language, a majority religion, a majority community outside the House, breaches the principle of democracy and converts its legislative majority into majoritarianism which is the very anti-thesis of democracy.

No democracy that has a majoritarian view of its Constitutional mandate is home to an independent people. It can at best be home to a patient people, at worst to an agonized people, but never to an independent people.

We in India have been independent for nearly seven decades but from fear we are yet to be set free.

Mohandas Gandhi, speaking at the Minorities Committee of the Second Round Table Conference in London, in 1931 said: "...In spite of appearances to the contrary, especially in England, the Congress claims to represent the whole nation and most decidedly the dumb millions among whom are included the numberless untouchables who are more suppressed than depressed, as also in a way the more unfortunate and neglected classes known as the backward races. ..The Congress is wedded to adult franchise. Therefore millions of them can be placed on the voters' roll. ..But what these people need is more than election to legislatures. (It is) protection from social and religious persecution. Custom, which is more often more powerful than law, has brought them to a degradation of which every thinking Hindu has need to feel ashamed and do penance. I shall therefore have the most drastic legislation rendering criminal all the special persecution to which these fellow countrymen of mine are subjected by the so-called superior classes."

That is about the most eloquent description there can be of the gnawing inequalities that can persist in a democracy that fails to distinguish between a majority in parliament and majoritarianism. Removing these inequalities has been independent India's most challenging task, a far from finished task, in fact, an agonizingly more complicated task, with what Gandhi called "the superior classes" adding fresh sinew to their sense of superiority.

Independence is not just about having a constitution and a parliament of one's own.

It is about individual wills amalgamating with the intent and purposes of that parliament and that constitution.

And it is about not being under dictatorships, foreign or home-grown. Franco, Pol Pot, Duvalier, Milosevic, Idi Amin were not imperialist colonizers.

Independence is, ultimately, about holding a view and being able to express and propagate it without fear of being menaced by the midnight knock or the morning news.

Independence is perhaps everywhere a dream and nowhere a reality. But as long as we know that difference there will be hope of bridging the gulf between the glory and the other story.