

India celebrates half-century of independence.By **Chaitanya Kalbag**

723 words

15 August 1997

08:15

Reuters News

English

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NEW DELHI, Aug 15 (Reuter) - India put on a dazzling show of fireworks, laser beams and parades capped early on Friday by a solemn ceremony in parliament that relived the moment 50 years ago when the subcontinent won independence.

Thousands of people led by old and frail "freedom fighters" marched with the Indian tricolour down a wide avenue flanked by twinkling lights that etched the dramatic outline of Edwin Lutyens' imperial architecture against the night sky.

Singers and dancers staged a joyous celebration on a giant stage at Vijay Chowk (Victory Square) a stone's throw away from Parliament House where hundreds of lawmakers gathered in the majestic Central Hall to recreate their nation's "tryst with destiny" at the stroke of midnight on August 14-15, 1947.

"Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny...At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom," the new nation's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru said in a speech replayed as the clock moved to Friday in the hot, humid hall.

In the eastern city of Calcutta, capital of Britain's Indian empire until 1911 before the seat of power was shifted to Delhi, thousands of people poured into the streets, blowing conch-shells and whistles as tugs on the Hooghly river tooted their horns.

Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral was scheduled to deliver a traditional Independence Day speech from the soaring ramparts of the 17th century Red Fort in Delhi at 7.00 a.m. (0130 GMT).

Underlining the stresses and strains that tug and pull at this tumultuous nation of 960 million people, authorities tightened security for Gujral's speech. Several battalions of paramilitary police were deployed and sharpshooters were posted on nearby rooftops.

The celebrations of an enduring democracy, self-sufficiency in food, and an economy that has grown rapidly over the past few years were tempered by sadness and introspection as Indians reviewed their country's problems.

In his speech to the midnight meeting of parliament, President K.R. Narayanan appealed to citizens to mount a national movement to cleanse India of corruption and poverty.

"I am painfully aware of the deterioration that has taken place in our country and in our society in recent times," Narayanan told the silent lawmakers.

"Sheer opportunism and value-less power-politics have taken over the place of principles and idealism that had been the hallmark of our social and political life...corruption is corroding the vitals of our politics and our society."

A bomb blast triggered by militants in the troubled northeastern region earlier on Thursday was a grim reminder of India's continuing struggle against separatist violence.

Seven people were killed and eight injured when the device exploded on a railway line in Assam state, derailing a carriage.

Separatist groups waging an armed struggle for independence have asked people to stay indoors on Friday in most of the northeastern states to protest against Indian rule.

Kashmir's leading separatist alliance, the All Parties Hurriyat (Freedom) Conference, urged people in the disputed Himalayan territory to observe August 15 as a day of mourning.

In a reminder of the inequalities besetting India, hundreds of children marched through New Delhi's avenues on Thursday shouting for an end to child labour.



Many of the children themselves had only recently been freed from bonded labour and poignantly asked the question: What did independence mean for them?

On India's border with Pakistan thousands of Indians gathered at the Wagah border post to light candles and torches and seek friendship with Pakistanis. But they met with silence and barbed wire.

Relations between the two countries have never been easy since at least half a million people were killed in bloody riots accompanying partition. Six million Hindus and Sikhs fled to India and as many Moslems went to Pakistan.

Pakistan celebrated its 50th anniversary of independence on Thursday, but the festive mood was soured by crowd trouble at a rally in Karachi.

Two people were killed by gunfire and a score injured in a stampede after Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif addressed a crowd of about 20,000 at the marble mausoleum of the Islamic state's founder, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, in the southern port city.

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