

VOICES OF FREEDOM:
SOCIETY, CULTURE AND IDEAS IN THE 70TH YEAR OF INDIA'S INDEPENDENCE

Editor's note

The year 2017 brings up a historic milestone for India as the country attained 70 momentous years of Independence. On this occasion the International Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), in collaboration with ISMEO – International Association for Mediterranean and Oriental Studies, promoted a Seminar called '*Voices of Freedom: Society, Culture and Ideas in the 70th year of India's Independence*', which was held in Rome, on November 11, under the auspices of the Embassy of India.

The present volume comprises the papers (in English, summarised in Italian) presented at the Seminar; they explore a whole spectrum of the subcontinent, from the socio-historical to the artistic, with a view to mark trends and tendencies that emerged with Independence and which, at the distance of seven decades, continue to feed the development, evolution, and metamorphosis of the world's biggest democracy. The multiplicity of perspectives with which certain themes are treated, allow this collection to cut through the commonplaces which often continue to persist even in highly cultured circles, providing the reader with the means to understand the complexity of India's contemporary culture and tendencies.

The introductory essay by Adriano Rossi, President of ISMEO – International Association for Mediterranean and Oriental Studies, deals with the figure of the great Italian scholar Giuseppe Tucci (1894 – 1984). Throughout his lifetime, Tucci was a living bridge between Italian and South-Asian cultures. He not only taught *Italian Language, Art and Literature* in a number of prestigious Indian universities, but he was also one of twentieth century's major Orientalist — Indologist, archaeologist, explorer, eminent expert in Tibetan culture and Buddhist Studies. In 1933 Tucci, along with the philosopher Giovanni Gentile (1875-1944), founded, l'Istituto per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente (the Institute for Middle and Far East), ISMEO, of which the new ISMEO would represent an ideal continuation.

However, what's especially worth noting in Rossi's paper is that the figure of Tucci, treated both from scholarly and human points of view with reference to his own writings, comes out here in all its stark objectivity; therefore, this essay does justice to Tucci against some recent

misrepresentations of his figure and constitutes a landmark for anyone who wishes to delve deeper into this stalwart Italian Orientalist.

Y. K. S. Murthy, one of the most respected and knowledgeable members of the Indian community in Italy, has written a quite unique essay, speaking as a freedom fighter himself and as one of the last remaining witnesses to the months immediately before and after India's Independence. His refreshing testimony represents the view of a generation that took part in the dramatic events of that time.

Stella Sandahl's incisive article focuses on the problems and the challenges that arose, after independence, in establishing Hindī as the official language of the Union, in accordance with the Indian constitution. As a matter of fact, in spite of the central government's all-out efforts to propagate Hindī at the national level, as of today, it is still not part of the linguistic background of all Indians. Sandahl identifies several reasons for this state of affairs, amongst which was the intent to draw the vocabulary of Hindī primarily from Sanskrit, with the consequence that many of the new Sanskritized Hindī words have not entered the public domain. By depicting, on the contrary, the almost complete success that Pakistan has had in imposing Urdū since 1947, she makes interesting observations, building up to the final thought-provoking assertion that, in popular parlance, there actually exists a de facto 'spoken Hindi' understood by most Indians throughout the country, yet distant from, if not at variance with, the Sanskritised Hindī.

Mario Prayer analyses the administrative organisation of independent India, particularly the structure known as the Panchayati Raj (a system of grassroots government by 'committees of five') acting as intersection-nodes between peripheral localities, the state and the Centre. It's a subject of great relevance in the administrative sector of the post-independence era, since the Panchayats Raj, the single largest body of democratically elected local leaders in the world, represents one of the primary factors of political, social and economic cohesion of Indian society.

Sanjukta Das Gupta touches on a live and stirring field, namely the development and peculiar characteristics of feminist and ecological movements before and after Independence. Since colonial times, such movements have fought both for social justice along Gandhian lines— against patriarchal oppression — and the ecological sustainability. Das Gupta maintains that independent India, contrary to the past, has witnessed an ever-increasing participation of subaltern and marginalized women at the grass-roots level, who have been drawing upon their own experiences and organizational capacities in their struggle against social discrimination. They have been in the forefront of the land-rights movement; particularly worthy of note was the 1970s' 'Chipko andolan' (from *chipko*, to cling, and *andolan*, campaign, in Hindi). The images of women in the Himalayan forests with their arms around majestic trees, defying the illegal fellers by demanding to be cut down with them — attracted worldwide attention.

The highly engaging contributions by Julia Hegewald and Giuseppe Flora, analyse the post-independence ferments from social and artistic points of view, the latter being of no-secondary importance, since it is mostly through visual arts that Independent India presents itself to a national and international audience. Hegewald's paper builds on two interlinked themes, corresponding to two different approaches to architecture and urban planning taken soon after Independence: continuity with the colonial past and new departures. The latter trend was well realised in the layout of Chandigarh, the new capital city of Punjab, where the modernism of Le Corbusier, promoted by Nehru, India's first prime minister, was a fitting statement of an independent, modern and progressive state. The two themes are treated in-depth and finely illustrated with several photos taken by the author herself, which highlight the major architectonic guidelines promoted in and by Independent India and, more importantly, the reasons underpinning such choices.

Flora's article, illustrated by rare photos and pictures, underlines how Independent India became a pole of attraction for intellectuals and artists from all over the world. The new nation entered on its own right the twentieth century international cultural milieu. By the end of the 1960s India inspired the counterculture in the West. The 'Indian craze' of those years was partly due to the Beatles' Indian sojourn in February-March 1968. Of greater significance, anyway, had been the encounter of the Beat poets, Allen Ginsberg, Peter Orlovsky and Gary Snyder with a new generation of rebellious Indian poets and artists.

The Indo-Anglian writer Olaf shom Kirtimukh has traced the graphic evolution of India's national flag, underlining what makes it so unique. He opines that while the flags of newly independent countries tend to illustrate events and values that forged their own recent past, the Indian banner upholds ideals that seem to be more relevant today than they were 70 years ago — not only to Indians but to all mankind. More so, having also had a long international career as an advertising copywriter, shom Kirtimukh has thrown new light on the interpretation of certain details appearing in the Indian tricolour as well as the preliminary experiments that led up to it.

Lastly, starting with the historicisation of the ancient Indian classical dances, Tiziana Lorenzetti's paper deals with changes occurred in the colonial and post-colonial period, when the ancient performing art was transformed — through the agency of international contacts — into new dance forms. The core of the essay investigates how, by what processes and devices, the new dance styles (although an intercultural product) came to be representative of Indian traditional cultural-artistic heritage, becoming a key aspect in the making of Independent India's identity and imagery.

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Last but not least, I would like to thank Dr. Beniamino Melasecchi, chief editor of ISMEO publications, for his customary care in all publications which he has also lavished on the present volume.

Tiziana Lorenzetti

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