

Beyond the flag: A tale of two indias

Photo story by: Farhan Sayeed Masoodi

I recently had the opportunity to witness India's 78th Independence Day celebrations in a remote village called Chandigam, nestled 20 km away from the beautiful town of Kupwara in Kashmir. The village came together to commemorate the historic occasion as the national flag was ceremoniously hoisted at PM-SHRI Boys High School Chandigam Lolab.

The headmaster, Mohd Ayoub Shah, proudly raised the flag amidst the presence of enthusiastic staff members, students, and local visitors. The event was filled with engaging programs organised by the students, including spirited parade marches and cultural activities.

However, I couldn't help but notice that many of the cultural performances didn't fully represent the local Kashmiri traditions in songs and dances. Nonetheless, the students' dedication and enthusiasm for the event were evident. The teachers taught me that the students had been practising diligently for the past 15 days leading to the Independence Day celebrations.

During the event, I had the chance to engage with the students. When I asked them about their aspirations for the future, I was surprised to learn that the majority expressed their desire to serve their nation by joining the armed forces. Witnessing their enthusiasm for celebrating Independence Day reflects the remarkable level of patriotism this generation displays compared to previous ones. They have absorbed valuable lessons from the mistakes of past generations and have come to understand that violence is not the path to achieving peace and progress within a nation.

As the program continued, heavy rainfall came down, prompting everyone to seek shelter in the school hall, where the rest of the event took place. Despite the rain, the spirits of the attendees remained undampened. I observed as the vibrant performances filled the air with excitement, and certificates were presented to deserving students who had excelled in academics and sports.

Following the program, I visited the school's kitchen, where the mid-day meal is usually served to the students. There, I met Ali Mohd Dar, a 55-year-old sweeper at the school, who kindly invited me inside and offered me a cup of tea. As we conversed, I learned that he receives a monthly salary of 600 rupees, a figure that struck a chord with me. Despite being a father to five boys and a girl, his adult sons were not yet earning. When I inquired about why he hadn't sought new job opportunities with higher pay, he explained his hope for a permanent position with a better salary as a sweeper, similar to others who had previously held the same role. Ali expressed that he has been extremely busy with the arrangements for the upcoming Independence Day for the past 15 days. His responsibilities have included maintaining the cleanliness of the campus, classrooms, and offices, in addition to overseeing the decoration of the entire campus for the upcoming Independence Day event. Despite his busy schedule, he dedicated extra time by staying on campus last night to ensure that everything was running smoothly. This led me to contemplate the countless individuals similar to Ali Mohd across the country who, despite receiving modest compensation, demonstrate commendable dedication and diligence in fulfilling their assigned duties.

As the event ended, I observed the students slowly dispersing and making their way back home. At that moment, my thoughts were consumed by Ali Mohd and his incredible perseverance in providing

for his family despite severe financial constraints. This reflection prompted me to contemplate India's remarkable strides since gaining independence in 1947. However, amidst this progress, it became evident that many individuals within our communities continue to encounter significant daily challenges in pursuing social and economic independence.

I vividly recollect the occasion when the students received certificates of appreciation for their outstanding performances. It struck me deeply that individuals like Ali Mohd, who consistently demonstrate resilience and determination in adversity, often go unnoticed and unappreciated. It became clear that more needs to be done to support and acknowledge individuals like Ali Mohd who are striving against all odds.

Despite many challenges, there remains hope for a future where individuals can overcome these obstacles and achieve the freedom and self-sufficiency they deserve.

As India moves forward, the stories of individuals like Ali Mohd Dar remind us of the importance of inclusive growth. They underscore the need for policies and initiatives that reach the farthest corners of the country, ensuring that all share the fruits of independence and progress. The journey towards a genuinely free and self-sufficient India continues, with each Independence Day serving as both a celebration of how far the nation has come and a reminder of the distance yet to be travelled.

Photographs:



Headmaster Mohd Ayoub Shah standing tall during the flag-hoisting ceremony.



As the program is about to begin, everyone at the school takes their seats.



A group of young girls proudly saluting the national flag of India during their dance performance.



A group of young boys performing an energetic bhangra dance in front of the audience.



Govt Boys High School Chandigam students stand in formation, gazing confidently at the camera after the flag hoisting ceremony.



As the rain intensifies, students rush towards the hall where the rest of the program is scheduled to take place.



While attending the program indoors, the students' shoes are getting wet due to the rainy weather outside.



Ali Mohd posing for a portrait picture.



As the sound of rain pitter-pattered on the windowpane, Ali Mohd carefully pouring a steaming cup of tea.



Ali Mohd moving the chairs from the lawn, where they were meant for the audience, to the store room after the program ended.



Headmaster Mohd Ayoub Shah giving a speech to the audience, highlighting the sacrifices made for independence.



As the program came to an end, the last of the students slowly made their way out of the main building. The energy and excitement from the day were palpable as they bid farewell to one another and headed home.