

**An Uncommon Man  
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The country that gave birth to Buddhism celebrated its 50th anniversary as a democracy on Aug. 15. India. A country of 950 million people embracing five major religions and speaking 17 languages. A country that freed itself from British colonial rule through nonviolence.

A country that now feeds itself, but still struggles to meet the expectations of its own constitution — a document that aimed to abolish the 3,000-year tradition of Hindu castes.

In this 50th year, one of Mahatma Gandhi's dreams came to pass: For the first time, one of India's 150 million low caste people (previously called untouchables) was elected president. Kocheril Raman Narayanan now resides in the hilltop mansion where the British viceroy once lived like a modern-day king.

But despite his advancement, Narayanan is more than aware that the Mahatma's vision of democracy, his desire to "dry every tear from every eye," is far from realized. Elected president by an overwhelming majority of India's national parliament members and state legislative assemblies, Narayanan called on the country's leaders to eliminate corruption and divisiveness and work for the people's welfare.

"That the nation has found a consensus for its highest office in someone who has sprung from the grass-roots of our society and grown up in the dust and heat of this sacred land is symbolic of the fact that the concerns of the common man have now moved to the center stage of our social and political life," said Narayanan.

Despite his widespread support from elected officials, voices arose from both the low and high castes to criticize him. As one writer put it: "Narayanan's lifetime achievements were overshadowed by his caste. And that is pathetic."

Foreign reporters often describe Narayanan's role as largely ceremonial. But it's evident from his lifetime of words and work that he takes the role very seriously.

"Fellow citizens, India had entertained throughout its history a world vision," said Narayanan in his inauguration speech. "Our sages and seers had thought in terms of the happiness of the whole of humanity. We have a role to play in the world and a message to give to the world. We can do that effectively only if we are united and strong and in peace and friendship with our neighbors. As president of India it will be my endeavor to preserve, protect and defend the constitution in every respect, including the provision that India will 'promote international peace and security.'"

**WT**