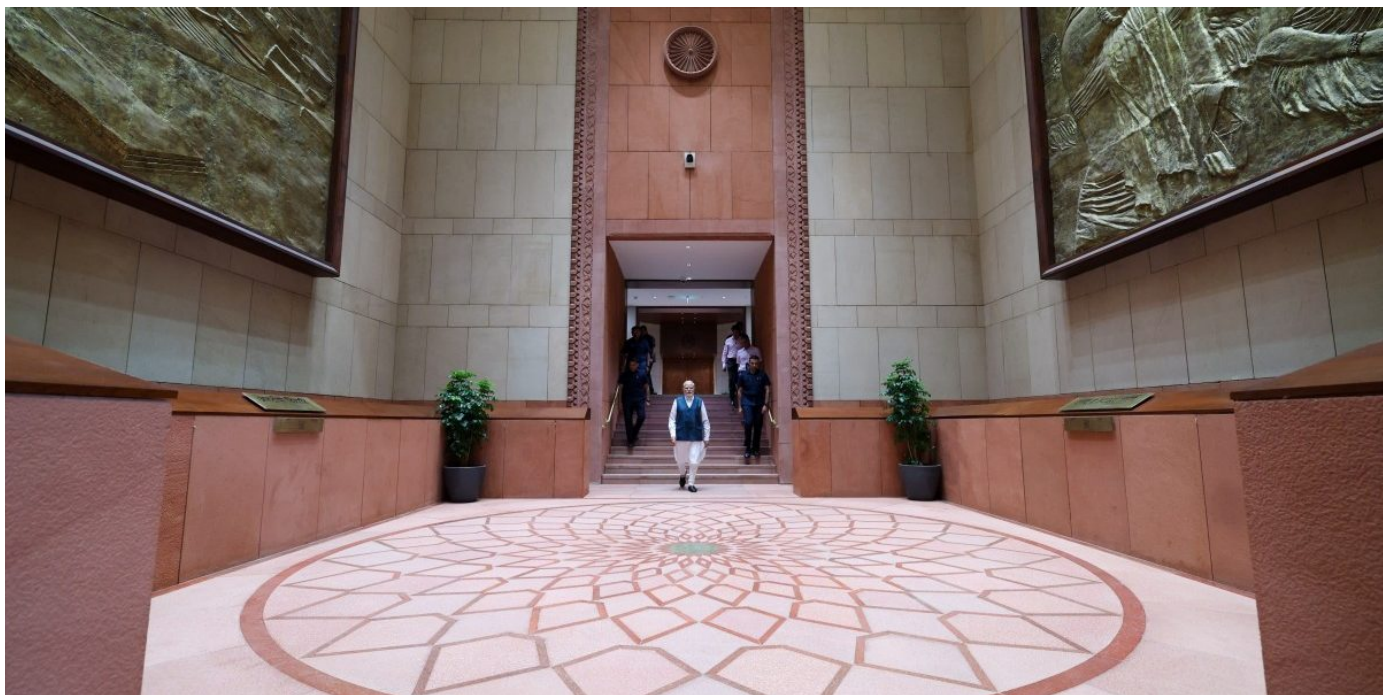


# A Highly Forgettable Day in the New Parliament Building

There is a cold, corporate sense of distancing in the new parliament building that even the imperial old parliament never conveyed. It carried an aura and a gravitas that this one can hardly acquire.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the new parliament building. Photo:X/@narendramodi

Some MPs say that a bulletin must have been issued but most of us seem to have missed it, if at all one was sent. Thus, till the afternoon before, no one knew for sure whether the entire apparatus of the parliament of India would shift, lock, stock and barrel, to the reportedly-swank new building next door on September 19. It was only when the chairman of the Rajya Sabha made a brief mention at the close of business on September 18 that the next day's business would be at 2:15 pm "in the new building" that one was sure that parliament would, indeed, shift the next day. One heaved a sigh of relief

that the suspense was finally over. It would have been much nicer if the parliamentary affairs minister could have taken the trouble to announce this in both the Houses.

Members moved across the lawn, gulping as much water as they could, to beat the dehydration. They rushed to take a seat in the packed ‘central hall’. This would possibly be the last ever meeting in this grand historic chamber where the Constitution of India had been framed, clause by clause. This been the only place where members, ex-members, ministers, former ministers and senior journalists met and discussed so many issues for the last 75 years. This is where tea, coffee and light refreshments were served as political leaders of different hues and from distant states shared *pakodas* and *samosas* — often after animated debates in the Houses. But this day was different, for we would never get a chance to sit amidst these historic yet cosy surroundings and sort more problems than any regime could ever create.

The prime minister, the vice president and chairman of the Rajya Sabha, and the speaker of the Lok Sabha trooped in, with the government’s leader in the Upper House and leaders of the opposition of both houses. The leaders spoke on expected lines but without acrimony. To everyone’s surprise, Maneka Gandhi was specially invited to speak, ostensibly as one who had been elected seven times, and also perhaps to rile another lady. Then came the prime minister’s longish speech, full of high sounding phrases and promises and a grand periscopic vision for India. So full of catch-words and buzz phrases, supplied almost certainly by high-end advertising and PR agencies, was it that anyone who was not fully aware of his role in the Gujarat riots of 2002 and the sustained lynchings from 2014 onward would surely have fallen for it. As he looked frequently at his notes (teleprompters are not allowed) and paused, loud, very loud, thumping of desks followed. It was so mechanical and unreal but one was reminded of an old party hand. He said: “Keep cheering. clapping and thumping desks, as no one know who is keeping track of your expressions of loyalty, or the visible lack of them.”



Prime Minister Narendra Modi greets MPs in the central hall of the old parliament building.

Photo: X/@narendramodi

The prime minister did make a rare reference to Jawaharlal Nehru's 'Tryst with destiny' speech, which is most unusual of him and his inspired vitriolic campaign against the first prime minister. But his orator failed to reach anywhere near its immortal status. Nehru had, after all, toiled with and for the masses for over quarter a century and had been in jail for nine long years. This was a background that Modi could never hope to match, even if one leaves aside levels of education and world views. Modi had summoned both Houses to this central hall at midnight in June 2017, once before, emulating Nehru, when he introduced GST amidst yawns – both stifled and not-so-suppressed ones. But this GST gambit turned out to be a damp squib then and caused immense problems. He made yet another attempt today, and this, too, was even more damp. Several of those who spoke appeared to be in obvious thrall of Modi — a view that is hardly shared by many others — and they owe their positions to him. Some, naturally, gushed forth with a lot of hyperbole, but they could not rescue a non-event. Unless the prime minister drops a bombshell on some other matter soon, it appears that he has called an expensive 'special session' of parliament largely to procure a

captive audience of all MPs, to witness his great event. This highly pumped-up ceremony was marking the transfer of parliament from one building to the other, just a few feet apart. There was, as expected, not a word on Manipur or other burning problems; this was Modi's narrative and he determined its trajectory.

Ceremony over, a small group of ministers were led by the prime minister into the only edifice that he has been able to thrust upon Delhi, despite his loud proclamations — other than the new *Bharat Mandapam* hall that he rushed through in Pragati Maidan to impress his G20 guests. One cannot comment on the latter building, as all one remembers is the the blinding magenta colour that the TV focused on and the **instant flooding** that one sharp shower bestowed upon it. But the thick veil over the over-secretive new parliament building was lifted on Tuesday.

As one had said before, its main entrance looks like just one more movie theatre or a mid-sized shopping complex. The 'sacred animals' sculpted (or assembled) in red sandstone at each gate, with names both familiar and bizarrely unfamiliar, are supposed to mark the several gates, most of which remained shut on the first day. There is nothing that distinguishes the corridors and lobbies in the new building from one more five-star hotel. Yes, a lot of glitz has been grafted as a substitute for aesthetics, but then, the latter requires instinct, training and upbringing. There is no central hall and the two Houses are kept far apart, with separate canteens that are no better than most ordinary cafés. The Rajya Sabha is huge, unnecessary so, and the last two long rows appeared empty. The atrium is far too high and instead of raising both the eyes and the soul upwards, they remind one of massive electric bills. The Lok Sabha is even bigger and can accommodate the Lok Sabha to double up as a 'central hall' in terms of space, but neither in warmth nor in genuineness. There is a cold, corporate sense of distancing that even the imperial old parliament never conveyed. It carried an aura and a gravitas that this one can hardly acquire.

Modi came in and gave yet another rise-above-politics speech glibly and with a poker face. It was, mercifully, shorter than the earlier sermon. But his very presence excites divisions and the Treasury benches started shouting at a remark made by the leader of the opposition. The chairman had a tough

time to maintain order. This rough and unpleasant exchange of words and charges between government and the opposition was on ‘day one’ — in the benign and somewhat indulgent presence of the prime minister. It leads us to the conclusion that one can splurge public money to seek immortality but the searing gashes in politics will remain – and it is the spirit of accommodation that constitutes the real architecture of a troubled nation.

*Jawhar Sircar is a Rajya Sabha member of the Trinamool Congress. He has been culture secretary in the Government of India and CEO of Prasar Bharati.*