

New Parliament Building | A prelude to the inaugural

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In diminishing the Parliament office, we diminish politics in its diversity emphasising majoritarianism. In majoritarianism, the Parliament is a mere census and number



Shiv Visvanathan,

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A model of the new Parliament building. Credit: PTI File Photo

Sometimes a political event shrinks in size even before it is inaugurated. The opening of the Parliament building scheduled for May 28 is one such event.

The ritual of diminishing is enacted in several ways. Most of the media dismisses the boycott of opposition parties as a comic book act not even fit for political drama. Others see the Parliament house as a technical answer to a technical question. They feel the building should be evaluated in terms of space and efficiency, and not politics. Eventually, an office is after all an office.

In such a view, the semiotic power of Parliament as a thought system and an iconography of power is lost. Parliament becomes a functional architecture rather than an architectonic of ideas. In diminishing the Parliament office, we diminish politics in its diversity emphasising majoritarianism. In majoritarianism, the Parliament is not seen as a representation of diversity, but a mere census and number. Diversity becomes the biggest casualty of debate.

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In fact, upon reading media reports one is reminded of the writings of India's greatest town planner, Scottish biologist Patrick Geddes. When Geddes visited the Madurai Meenakshi temple, he was overwhelmed and ecstatic. He wrote poetically of the link between cosmology and architecture, and especially in the city as it becomes a pilgrimage of ideas. A city without cosmos and history is impoverished. Geddes argued that it is cathedrals and temples that define the value system of the city. To the list we can add Parliament.

One must read all this in the context of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Prime Minister Narendra Modi rewriting history and redoing architecture are complementary acts of erasure. The inaugural is on May 28, which is Veer Savarkar's birthday. While wishing him happy returns, we must add that nothing Savarkar did can match the creativity of Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, or Maulana Azad. The BJP uses violence to rewrite history. The Gujarat riots were seen as an overthrow of Mughal rule. Many rapists of Muslim women legitimated their act by claiming that Padmini had been redeemed at last. The BJP's attempt to merge folklore and official history is sinister. Modi sees himself as the future, rewriting both written history and architecture as memory.

Rewriting history and redoing architecture become sibling functions in the script of Modi playing the future as erasure. What the BJP is distorting is the symbolic idea of democracy. Democracy as memory and the building as mnemonic disappears.

Architecture as majoritarian logic destroys diversity. In fact, there is a mimic view of history as Modi receives and installs the Chola sceptre which the British had given Nehru during the transfer of power. The question of security takes over from memory. Parliament is no longer about public spaces and people's memory. The ecology could be a blank sheet of erasures.

Worse, the idea of Parliament as a scene for debate, plurality, and diversity which the Congress upheld in the early years is lost. The new Parliament Office follows the ideas of majoritarianism and technocracy, linearity and efficiency are preferred over the dream of difference.

One misses Parliament as the noise of solemn assemblies. Parliament today is going to be sanitised and deodorised of any form of protest, or dreaming. I admit a toothless Opposition adds little to the halo of Parliament. The regime does not understand

communication theory. It prefers a society without noise. But as communication theorist Colin Cherry claimed, noise is unwelcome music, and we need the unwelcome music of Parliament.

But the disquiet is not just at the political level, there is an intellectual silence which is profound. Imagine you are an ordinary citizen where does one go to examine the archives of the debate. Can one find out whether other possibilities were considered? Should Parliament have invited architects, historians, and urban planners to debate the building? Or do we accept a PWD mentality even for Parliament. Today we seem to accept a Parliament House without memory and public spaces. A few souvenirs cannot take over this function. Political memory is more deeply embedded.

In conclusion, one can say the Parliament House as a project loses out both as culture and democracy. Modi is only inaugurating a fait accompli. He is playing his own chorus, erasing history, and tinkering with democracy. Parliament loses its sense of iconicity as Modi could be inaugurating a hotel or studio, it makes little difference now.

The ritual which was a pilgrimage for politics has become an empty act of indifferent tourism. The iconography of the Parliament House as a sacred archive of differences has been erased. Modi has created another monument of indifference and erasure.

(Shiv Visvanathan is a sociologist, and professor, OP Jindal Global University)

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Modi's global brand building after governance shortfall

Will his efforts at building a larger-than-life image at home and abroad win Narendra Modi support of Nagpur?



Bharat Bhushan,

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After a resounding defeat in Karnataka, the digital propagandists for Prime Minister Narendra Modi are busy churning out proof of his global popularity. They are taking cues from routine affability around the world: Joe Biden's wisecrack in asking for his autograph, Prime Minister James Marape of Papua New Guinea touching his feet in welcome and being compared in popularity by Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese to the legendary rockstar Bruce Springsteen, also known as 'The Boss'.

Further opportunities will be offered by an unprecedented line-up of foreign engagements. Modi will be in Washington DC for his first ever State visit on June 22. On July 14, he will be in Paris to meet President Emmanuel Macron and attend the Bastille Day Parade. Towards the end of July, Modi will receive leaders of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in India, among them, the Presidents of Russia, China, Iran, and several Central Asian leaders. At the BRICS Summit in August, he will meet Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping, Brazil's Lula da Silva, and South Africa's Cyril Ramaphosa. To cap it all, he will host the G20 Summit in Delhi, on September 9-10, where, if rumours are to be believed, he could get Putin and Biden to shake hands, if both indeed turn up.

Modi's international image took a significant beating with the BBC documentary on the 2002 Gujarat riots. Now, the Karnataka election is a warning that his magic with the Indian voter could be waning. Those who claim that this is a South Indian phenomenon should recall that from 2019, the BJP has lost Himachal Pradesh and could not wrest Punjab, West Bengal, Jharkhand, and Delhi from the Opposition. In Haryana and Maharashtra, the BJP's majority governments were voted out, and have been ruling as uncertain alliances. In Maharashtra, the breaking of the Shiv Sena to form a rag-tag coalition has been criticised by the Supreme Court. Modi is no longer the lucky election mascot that he used to be.

The latest NDTV-CSDS Survey of nine years of Modi's rule at the Centre adds substance to this idea. There are various ways of reading the survey, but on Modi's governance record, it presents a dismal picture. Twenty-seven per cent of those surveyed attributed Modi's popularity to his oratory, and only 11 per cent to his policies. The 21 per cent who are 'fully unsatisfied' with his work outnumber the 17 per cent who are 'fully satisfied'. On his handling of corruption, the 45 per cent who found it unsatisfactory are greater than the 41 per cent who think otherwise.

His government's use of the CBI and the Enforcement Directorate has 31 per cent responding that it was a 'tool for political vendetta' against the 37 per cent saying it was 'lawful'. On the economy, 42 per cent think their condition has not improved in the last nine years, and 22 per cent think it has worsened.

The margin is thin between the 36 per cent who believe only the wealthy have benefitted from development, against the 38 per cent who think everyone has benefitted. To this may be added the 18 per cent who think that no one has benefitted. Surprisingly, 57 per cent of people polled think the poor should get subsidies such as free water and electricity, which differs from Modi's stance against revadis or freebies. On some crucial issues the disapproval of governance is resounding — 57 per cent think poorly of his handling of price rise, and 46 per cent are critical of his dealing with farmers' issues.

While the BJP's support, according to the survey, has gone up to 39 per cent from 37 per cent in 2019, the support for the Congress has risen from 19 per cent to 29 per cent, Rahul Gandhi's popularity from 24 per cent to 27 per cent, and the Prime Minister's popularity has fallen marginally from 44 per cent to 43 per cent. These trends should give food for thought to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which uses the BJP as its political arm.

Modi has always been centre-stage, but there is something unusual with him rushing off to flag-off every new train, inaugurate every highway, bridge, underpass, launch FM radio transmitters, lay the foundation stone of many new projects, and distribute job offer letters. His inauguration of the new Parliament building is controversial as it is seen by the Opposition as stealing the thunder of the President of India.

The flurry on the international stage will perhaps compensate for his declining domestic image to the grey eminences of the RSS in Nagpur. He needs to demonstrate his superiority against all possible contenders within the BJP. The propaganda army has perforce to amplify every act of politeness and affability by world leaders into an exceptional endorsement of Modi's charisma.

On the flip side, it is increasingly clear that the spectacular events abroad featuring the Indian diaspora are organised exactly like election rallies in India, where attendees are incentivised and bussed in. In fact, a chartered 'Modi Airways' flight was organised from Melbourne to Sydney. The Sydney rally was arranged by Friends of India Australia and Indian-Australia Diaspora Foundation — organisations whose office bearers are allegedly associated with overseas Hindutva organisations.

Such mega rallies tend to overawe the host country's political leaders — leading them to confuse the enthusiasm of the diaspora with Modi's popularity back home. The prospect of winning the electoral support of Indian-origin voters, perhaps also encourages leaders to endorse Modi with unusual superlatives. Such mega events also overshadow dissent, such as protests by members of the minority community among the diaspora or the screening of the BBC documentary [in the Australian parliament during Modi's visit](#).

Will his efforts at building a larger-than-life image at home and abroad win Modi support of Nagpur? The fear could be that as the RSS promoted Modi as an alternative to L K Advani in 2014, it may consider replacing him with a more extreme Hindutva icon (such as Yogi Adityanath) or a relatively moderate one (like Nitin Gadkari). Prime Minister Narendra Modi would not want the RSS to even start thinking in that direction.

(Bharat Bhushan is a Delhi-based journalist.)

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India is once again making money a plaything

In trying to actively flush out the embarrassing debris of a near-seven-year-old disaster, India is clogging the drainpipes again



Bloomberg Opinion,

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By Andy Mukherjee

When it comes to money, ignorance is bliss. For the second time in recent years, India seems to have disregarded this maxim.

In November 2016, Prime Minister Narendra Modi shocked the world by outlawing the 500 (\$6) and 1,000 rupee bills in which the country held 86 per cent of its cash. This time, the coup de grâce has fallen on the 2,000 rupee banknote. Since it accounts for only 11 per cent of the currency in circulation, and people have until Sept. 30 to change them into other denominations, it's not as big a problem as the draconian ban back then. Besides, in recent years, India's retail payments have digitized dramatically. People with smartphones have options outside the world of paper money.

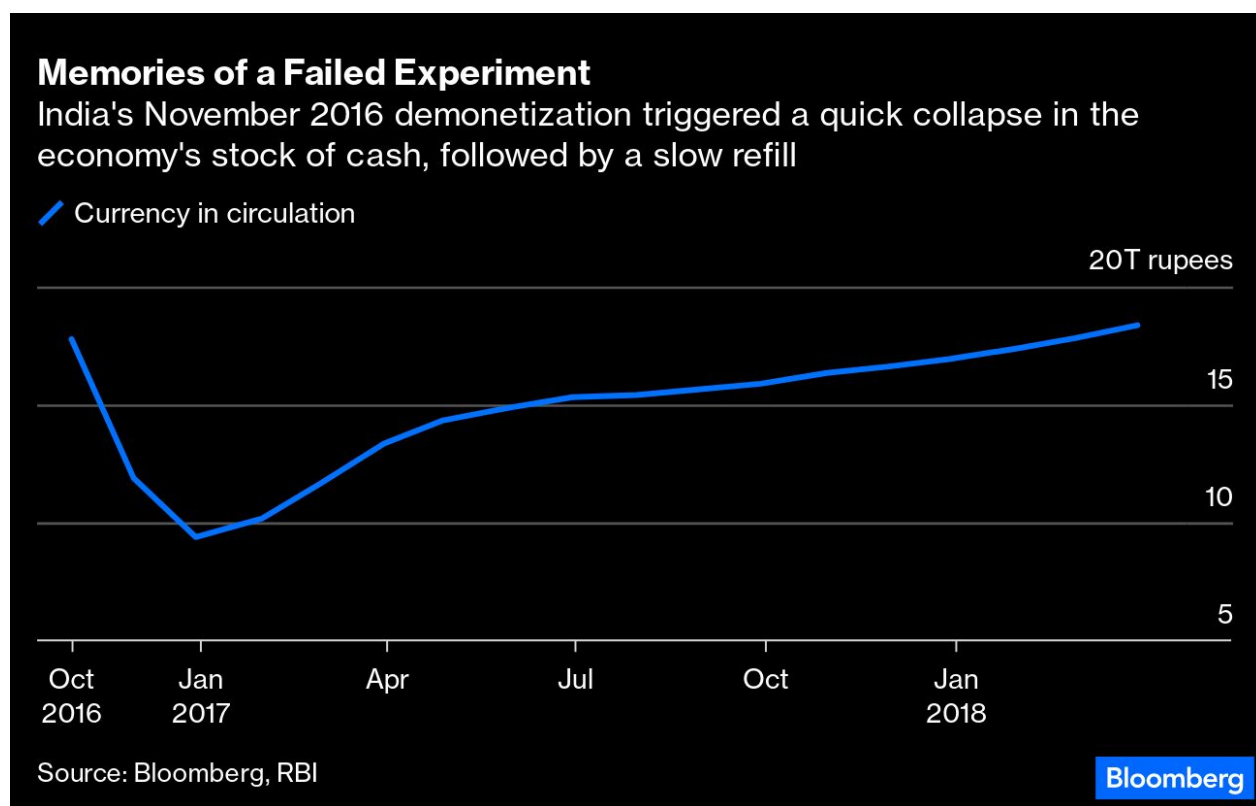
But the way the notes are being ferreted out is still frustrating enough for consumers, firms and banks to invite comparisons with the 2016 demonetization experiment.

That misadventure missed its main goal of freezing out ill-gotten wealth. But it did shake the foundation on which any nation's monetary edifice rests. Sovereign cash should have no room for questions. Its users shouldn't have to value the bills as long as they're

confident that when it's time to hand them over to someone else, they wouldn't have to provide any answers either. Ignorance is bliss.

Bengt Holmstrom, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology economist most commonly associated with that idea, won the Nobel Prize less than a month before Modi's ill-advised ban drowned people in a quagmire of uncertainty: "Can I deposit my money at the bank, and until when?" "Do ATMs have enough new cash?" "What if I don't have a bank account?" "How will I pay for groceries, buy medicines, pay the labor contractor?"

The central bank finally replenished the withdrawn currency after putting citizens through months of agonizing hardship. Informal enterprises, which back then had no digital alternatives to make or receive payments, cratered. The poor were badly hit. More than 100 people are believed to have died, waiting in queues to access their own funds; some bank tellers collapsed from exhaustion.



You would think the country would have learned its lesson? Wrong.

Once again, India wants people to look into their wallets and cash tills and do due diligence on their pink 2,000 rupees.

Other monetary authorities, too, periodically refresh their decks. The 10,000 Singapore dollar (\$7,400) note was retired a decade ago because of money-laundering and terror-financing concerns. But it remains legal tender, as do S\$1,000 bills, which went away in 2021. What it means is that the Monetary Authority of Singapore no longer issues those denominations. But if you discover them in your aunt's attic, they're still very much money and not worthless paper.

The Reserve Bank of India's handling of the 2016 chaos earned it the moniker of "Reverse Bank of India," as it changed its circulars on what to do with old cash faster than people could obtain new money. This time around, the RBI has been sparse with rulemaking. It has only said that banks will accept up to 20,000 rupees from one customer at a time until Sept. 30. Nobody has said that the currency won't be legal tender after that date, but the very presence of a deadline is making people nervous. In a Monday press conference, RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das said he would wait to see how many of the notes return. "I can't give a speculative answer as to what will happen after Sept. 30," he said.

The result has been predictable. There are reports of small firms and gas stations across the country refusing to take the banknotes. And who can blame them? If they miss one trip to the bank before the deadline, their cash could be either worth its full face value or zero. Money doesn't work well when its worth becomes a coin toss. As for following China on the road to internationalizing its currency, that dream doesn't move any closer if shopkeepers in Bhutan, which uses the Indian rupee, don't know what to do with the pile left behind by Indian tourists.

If tax cheats were hoarding their wealth in 500 and 1,000 rupee denominations, which were the biggest back in 2016, why did India even print the 2,000 rupee bill? The logic was never explained, though everyone knows it was a coping mechanism. To deal with public anger amid an acute shortage of legal tender, the central bank came up with a stopgap solution. Almost 90 per cent of the current stock of 2,000 rupee notes was printed before March 2017. The RBI's "clean note policy," the reason being given for the withdrawal, would have been just as easily served by quietly telling banks not to recirculate them. The offending currency would have disappeared over time.

However, in trying to actively flush out the embarrassing debris of a near-seven-year-old disaster, India is clogging the drainpipes again. Some banks have taken it upon themselves to ask for identity proof from walk-in clients. They fear that if they don't, the RBI might haul them up for ignoring its know-your-customer guidelines.

"No questions asked," or NQA, is a vital property of money everywhere and at all times, according to MIT's Holmstrom and Yale University's Gary Gorton. Thanks to India's latest misstep, sovereign-issued cash, the one thing in a modern economy that should be NQA, is once again surrounded by suspicion. No amount of flirting with next-generation digital currencies can compensate for this basic disrespect of legal tender.

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Making language learning compulsory is an anachronism

For the ruling DMK, Tamil is an emotive issue and one that it has consistently used to good effect at the hustings



Sumanth Raman,

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The Tamil Nadu government's decision to make Tamil learning compulsory for students of Class IX and X across the state irrespective of the Boards from the academic year 2024-25 was an expected step. State governments in the neighbouring states of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana had gone along with similar moves, and Tamil Nadu had jumped on the bandwagon in 2015-16 itself.

The government order was passed based on the Tamil Language Learning Act 2006, wherein it said that Tamil would be compulsory for all students from Class 1 to Class 10. Implementation started in a phased manner from 2015-16 itself. Predictably the order was challenged in the courts. The Madras High Court refused to stay the order while the Supreme Court has on a yearly basis been exempting students of linguistic minorities from writing the Tamil exam in Class X.

Issues remain in the implementation. Presumably Tamil will be taught as an extra subject for those who have already taken another language as their language subject. Students will have to pass to qualify, but the exams are to be held separately and a separate certificate is to be issued. If Tamil is the selected second language of the student, then they write the Board exam anyways, and so will not be discomfited.

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Parent associations in several states have in the past highlighted the plight of those who are frequently transferred from one state to another, and the problems their children face in learning a new language starting in Class VIII or IX. They point out that this will put other students at an unfair advantage — but so far language chauvinism has held sway.

There is also the issue of getting enough Tamil teachers to fill the vacancies in private schools in various Boards.

Last year in Tamil Nadu, around 47,000 students out of the 900,000 students who took the Class X Board exams failed in Tamil. This year close to 50,000, Class XII students did not even turn up for the Tamil exam. While the government does its bit to promote the local language, students increasingly prefer English medium education, and often look upon the local language as a burden that must be borne for lack of a choice. While most parents are fine with getting their children to learn the local language in the lower classes, they often find the time spent on language learning in the higher classes as a distraction from the child's focus on say, mathematics or science subjects.

The National Education Policy (NEP) also does not make learning the local state language mandatory. In fact, the NEP is silent on this issue. While the NEP bats for learning in the mother tongue in the lower classes, it remains equivocal about making any language compulsory.

The Tamil Nadu government had earlier made Tamil a compulsory paper and a pass in that paper a pre-requisite, to apply for state government jobs through the Tamil Nadu State Public Service Commission and other state government recruiting agencies.

For the ruling DMK, Tamil is an emotive issue and one that it has consistently used to good effect at the hustings. The anti-Hindi agitation of the Sixties was a movement that catapulted the DMK to greater public prominence, and the party has never hesitated to use the language card effectively to project itself as the saviour of the Tamil language. Implementation issues are hardly likely to get it to change course especially as there is a broad consensus on the issue between the party and the Opposition AIADMK which introduced this government order when it was in power. Also, Tamil Nadu is one of the few states that follows the two-language policy where there is no third language in its state board schools.

Will making Tamil compulsory for students of Class IX and X make Tamil Nadu a less desirable education destination? Extremely unlikely. Most students who shift states are those whose parents have transferrable jobs, and except for a small number of others

who choose exclusive boarding schools in other states, most students choose schools in their hometown or the nearest city in their own state. With this being unlikely to change anytime soon, making Tamil compulsory is not going to have much of an impact on majority of students. Of course, it will put those students who are not natives of the state and the linguistic minorities at a disadvantage, and will greatly affect those who need to join higher classes in the state due to parental transfers.

Making any language compulsory learning is an anachronism in today's age. Students must be given the freedom to choose. But in a hyper-politicised atmosphere where a language is deemed to be protected only by forcing people to learn it, Tamil Nadu's politicians demonstrate that they are no different from the rest.

(Sumanth Raman is a Chennai-based television anchor and political analyst. Twitter: @sumanthraman.)

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Key takeaways from G20 meet in Srinagar

Though India might have wished to present a picture of relative quietude, the abiding impression left on visitors is likely that problems continue in J&K



Ali Ahmed,

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Exercising its rights as a host state on the meetings in the run-up to the G20 Leaders' Summit, India settled on Srinagar to host the Third Tourism Working Group meeting, the earlier two being non-controversially held at the Rann of Kutch and Siliguri/Darjeeling.

The criteria of selecting scenic venues apt for showcasing India's tourism potential makes Srinagar a logical choice. Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) is a major tourist and pilgrimage destination, notwithstanding the security situation. However, since its long-standing security problem has international connotations, India's alighting on it as a choice was liable to be taken as politically loaded, and elicited a politicised response.

Consequently, as expected, some countries chose to absent themselves, the most prominent one being China. In the event, though 29 delegations were represented, along with China, absent were G20 member states Turkey and Saudi Arabia, and 'guest countries' Oman and Egypt. Indonesia sent an embassy representative.

India's relations with the latter four countries being cordial, it begs the question if India's choice — though legal and legitimate — proved good for it, or otherwise. After all, even Egypt, whose president was guest at this year's Republic Day parade, skipped the event.

India's determination to proceed even in the face of a possible terror threat shows that it believed that the benefits of showcasing Srinagar would outweigh any cons. Implicit in its choice of venue was a reassertion of Indian sovereignty. India was determined not to allow anyone veto its sovereign right, or allow itself to be self-deterred from exercising it.

India rightly assessed China would stay away, which China reflexively did, claiming it was against holding such multilateral meetings in a 'disputed territory'. In this it echoed its ally, Pakistan, which is not a G20 member. That the argument resonated with more countries than India possibly expected shows that India has been unable to fully persuade even states assumed to be close to India on its case on J&K.

On the security front, Pakistan exploited the opportunity with having its proxy groups conduct terror attacks where the security grid is relatively sparse south of the Pir Panjals. However, closer to the event, hoping to stave off allegations of terrorism, it was careful to target the military and used local groups as fronts.

In the Valley, that two out-of-Srinagar trips — to Gulmarg and Dachigam sanctuary — were cancelled for the delegates indicates that instability persists, a feature that could not have escaped attention of delegates.

Though India might have wished to present a picture of relative quietude, the abiding impression left on visitors is likely that problems continue in J&K. India's extensive security arrangements serve to betray that the seeming normality that results is only superficial. This implies that India's completion of integration of J&K through reworking of Article 370 remains a work-in-progress.

India would require working harder or doing things differently. Working harder can only be 'more of the same', at most packaged differently. Doing things differently is preferable.

That India ran the risk of holding the G20 meeting in Srinagar shows that India has the best interest of Kashmiris at heart. Kashmir was presented as a tourist destination, with Srinagar all dressed up as a Smart City. This sense of empathy must be taken to its logical conclusion in heeding the truism that insurgency is best tackled politically. India is already on course to holding elections to the assembly. If it is wary of the elections being undermined by political parties insisting that the elections be for a state assembly and not to a legislature of a Union Territory (UT), it could be more forthright with its statehood promises.

Diplomatically, Pakistan, that has been holding out ever since its umbrage at the Article 370 dilution, would likely use the opportunity to re-engage with India. China's positioning on the issue, largely forged in reference to its relationship with Pakistan, would have to acknowledge the changed facts on ground in Pakistani reconciliation with the change. Though the Ladakh factor remains consequential in relation to China, it could potentially stand separated from the J&K issue.

Since all the pieces are already in place, including delimitation of constituencies and an internally beset Pakistan, elections can be held over the summer. This is the best way to neutralise reservations expressed by the UN Rapporteur on Minority Issues when he opined that India sought to 'instrumentalise' the meeting to present a 'façade of normalcy'.

A return to rule by elected representatives in J&K by the time of the G20 Summit in early September would clinch India's image as the 'Mother of Democracy'.

(Ali Ahmed is a freelance strategic analyst. Twitter: @aliahd66.)

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