

SYMBOLS AND SUBSTANCE: ON THE INAUGURATION OF THE NEW PARLIAMENT BUILDING AND BEYOND

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The [inauguration of the new Parliament building by Prime Minister Narendra Modi](#) on Sunday was true to a style he has mastered: using every occasion to advance a form of politics that many of his critics find problematic. Mr. Modi presented the [aesthetics of the new building as a representation of India's myriad diversity](#), its rich cultural heritage and its soaring aspirations. A [multi-religious prayer was a part of the ceremony](#), but there was no mistaking that Hindu ritualism overshadowed all else. By weaving an artful tale around a Sengol, a sceptre gifted to the first Prime Minister of India by a Shaivite sect of Tamil Nadu, the current dispensation has sought to reimagine the founding principles of India's republican sovereignty. A Sengol symbolised divine right and is now installed in the Assembly of people's representatives. The symbolism strengthens Tamil Nadu's connection to the political centre of India, and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is trying to make political gains from it. It is also notable that the day of the inauguration was also the birth anniversary of V.D. Savarkar, the founding father of Hindutva. A quest to transition Indian republicanism to a new iteration was apparent in the style and substance of the ceremony.

The new building also turns the spotlight, tangentially, on an approaching challenge of representation that will be upon India within the next decade. A nationwide delimitation will reallocate representation as per the current population, leading to a significant, relative reduction of the voice of linguistic minorities of the southern States in Parliament. The size of the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha will likely expand in order to avoid an absolute reduction of representation of States that have stabilised their populations. But that may not be enough to assuage the feeling of disenfranchisement that is already palpable among many regions due to the geographical fragmentation of Indian politics. The BJP wins its parliamentary majority from its strongholds while many States remain outside its sphere of influence. On 38% of popular votes, the BJP has 55% of Lok Sabha seats currently. This imbalance will be aggravated after the delimitation. The BJP's outreach to regions and communities outside of its current catchment areas is to be welcomed. But the Centre and the BJP will have to show more seriousness, sensitivity and maturity to deal with the regional imbalances of India. For this, they will need to take recourse to more than just symbolism.

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