

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



# Old versus new elite

Putting labels on citizens may be politically expedient but will fail to deliver India's tryst with destiny

**T**he current Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi has consistently endeavoured to distinguish itself from its predecessors, including the previous BJP government under Atal Bihari Vajpayee, as a new political elite, representing a more contemporary, authentic and home-grown social and cultural Indian reality. This is reflected in the conscious and deliberate downgrading of English language felicity and education as markers of social and economic advancement.

There is a pervasive suspicion of professional expertise and skills derived from high class education and experience, particularly if this is demonstrated through the instrumentality of the English language. But this is tempered by co-opting the visible successes of India's space and atomic energy programmes, which are the cumulative outcome of the far-sighted investments made by the "old" elite and would have been inconceivable without command over the English language. Institutions, norms and processes, which were put in place by this now despised elite, are sought to be dismantled or transformed so that presumably new organisational structures and norms, aligned with the emergent elite can take their place. But we have no idea so far of what the alternative model will be like. New institutions and norms take time to establish roots.

There is inevitably a phase of ad-hoc improvisation and discretionary decision-making. For example, the constitutional role of the cabinet secretary as the head of the civil services and the chief coordinator of various arms of bureaucracy has been hollowed

out. The principal secretary to the prime minister and the national security advisor now enjoy cabinet rank and this makes the cabinet secretary a minor functionary rather than a key, constitutionally empowered authority. In the armed forces, norms which were strictly enforced in the past are being jettisoned. Senior command officers are increasingly appearing at public fora and making public declarations that go beyond functional requirements. We are confronted with a paradoxical situation — a government which prides itself on strong leadership and ability to deliver, is also beset with a lack of coherence.

Its strengths lie in tactical nimbleness, deftness in communication and command of the public space. But the resultant weakening of institutions, the impatience with any long-term strategising beyond setting aspirational, and often, unrealistic goals, may exact a heavy price in terms of national interests.

This political dispensation has been remarkably successful in deflecting public anxieties and concerns over a sliding economy and shrinking job opportunities through a high-voltage public relations campaign, which has shifted the target towards an assortment of villainous detractors, including the infamous "Lutyens elite", the "Khan Market gang", the "termites" from across the border who are eating into India's entrails, the minorities who harbour treasonous sympathies with the enemy in the West and the habitual pessimists who cannot bear to acknowledge the successes achieved by this government or take pride in the exceptional status enjoyed by PM Modi on the international stage.

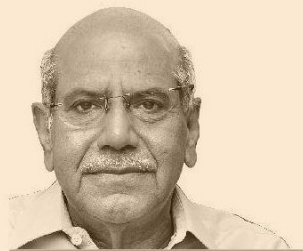
The swift and transformational change in Jammu & Kashmir has brought immediate and tangible polit-

ical gains for this government. Make no mistake, most of north India applauds the draconian measures imposed on the people of the Kashmir Valley. The constitutional and political jugglery employed to change the status of Jammu & Kashmir has been an object of admiration rather than a matter of serious concern. What is happening to fellow citizens in that unfortunate state is not seen as likely precedents that may be visited upon them, too, in a future benefit of the constitutional and institutional constraints which have been the hallmark of Indian democracy despite infirmities. How long will this strategy of political deflection continue to work? Perhaps for quite a long time but eventually its inherent contradictions may make it unsustainable.

The laudable aim of this government is for India to take its place at the front ranks in the community of nations, a country with power and prestige and its citizens enjoying respect and admiration across the world. Constant recall of past luminescence, however, is no guarantee of future brilliance though it can and should be a source of pride and self-confidence. Under Mao, China may have "stood up" but China's current power is derived from a strategy of learning and borrowing from the most advanced places of learning in the world. Chinese is a most complex and sophisticated linguistic system but tens of thousands of Chinese students and scholars learn English because that is the instrumentality through which they could acquire advanced scientific and technological knowledge. There was pride in what China had achieved in the past and the achievements were many — one only has to read Joseph Needham's classical work on the subject to appreciate them. But we live in a different world today and must acknowledge that we are and will for a considerable period of time, remain adopters and assimilators of knowledge from others even while aspiring to be generators of knowledge ourselves. In this phase of our national endeavour, familiarity with the English language and access to advanced centres of learning, even though confined to a relatively small elite, are significant assets and need to be leveraged intelligently rather than be rejected as alien imposition.

Prime Minister Modi enjoys huge popularity among the Indian diaspora and we witnessed that recently in Houston. But is the successful diaspora in the US, UK or Australia part of the old India elite or the new elite? Would they have achieved what they have by rejecting the English language? And are they not welcome in their countries of adoption precisely because they come from a country with shared political values and institutions?

The debate between the old and new elite is distracting the country from pursuing and achieving its goal of great power status. A government needs to mobilise the talents, skills and energies of all its citizens, the more varied the better, to achieve this goal. Putting labels on citizens, dividing them into pro-nationalist or anti-nationalist, demonising wealth creators but being unable to promote the welfare of ordinary citizens because the pie does not become bigger, these tactics may be politically expedient but will fail to deliver India's tryst with destiny.



SHYAM SARAN

*The writer is a former foreign secretary and is currently senior fellow, CPR*