

# Lead Us From Ennui To Enlightenment

The Needle's Eye



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We look forward to Modi's Independence Day speech from the Red Fort for a clearer, cooler declaration of intent, and a more electrifying list of goals and tasks than the ennui that pervades.

It is amusing, and not entirely surprising, that anybody sounding less than flattering of the Narendra Modi government is instantly suspected to be a member of a left-liberal pseudo-secular club of automated naysayers. There is, too, a newer class of dissidents, consisting either of frustrated right-wingers dismayed at either not partaking of the loaves and fishes of power or enraged by an agenda that they feel ought to have been decisively different from what the ideological watchdogs of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, like the Swadeshi Jagran Manch, the Bharatiya Kisan Sangh, and the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh, perceive as alien and unpatriotic leftovers from the past.

Take for instance the ruckus over English proficiency being part of the preliminary examinations held by the Union Public Service Commission. It was kicked off by the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, the Bharatiya Janata Party's student wing. Obscured by the din and mayhem about discrimination against Hindi speakers is the fact that hundreds of thousands of young candidates vie for precious few civil service jobs, and there needs to be a culling. India is not a homogeneous single-language country, just as it is not a monotheistic country. You can argue that English is a foreign language, but it is the lingua franca that works across our multi-cultural geography. And why should Hindi tyrannise those of us who speak the 21 other major Indian languages? It does not make

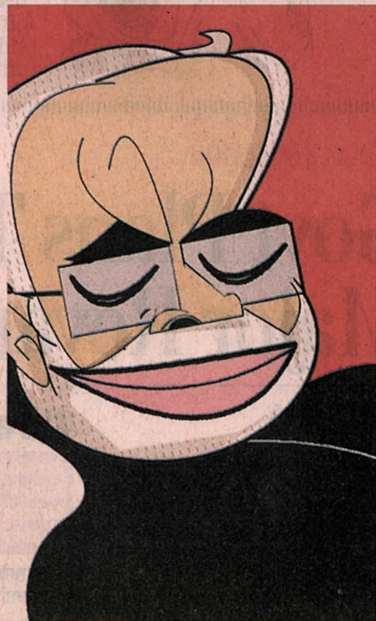
sense for a civil servant from a Gangetic state who can speak, read and write only Hindi to spend valuable time – and taxpayer money – to learn Assamese if he is posted to Dibrugarh or Tamil if he is posted to Palayamkottai. We already have state-level bureaucracies to absorb less- proficient candidates. Senior officials I have spoken with say they are alarmed at the falling standards in our bureaucracy, or in the officers' ranks in our defence services. If we are determined to degrade our prestigious institutions, then let us shut down the UPSC.

Or take the agenda outlined by Yellapragada Sudershan Rao as the head of the Indian Council for Historical Research. Professor Rao seeks to Indianise history going back a long way. The RSS mouthpiece Organiser says Rao's 'misfortune' has been to do most of his research in Telugu, and adds in typically blunt fashion: "Till date, India's social science discourse is dominated by the western perspective, by so called liberals or leftists. The research is authenticated only if it is in English language and recognized by the established lobby patronaged (sic) by the ruling party. Because of this dictum, historians constructed Indian history mostly on the foundations laid down by the British historians. Therefore, Ramayana and Mahabharata have always remained imaginary stories; Aryan invasion theory is the only truth; and, all Muslim rulers were great administrators and true seculars."

These sorts of debates are inevitable and probably healthy, too, and Modi himself showed he was sensitive to the huge wave he had ridden to power in his first speech to the Lok Sabha on June 11, when he said we are prone to a mind-set of "1,200 years of slavery".

Ironically, Modi, who has also parlayed social media very adroitly, is being targeted in a lawsuit brought by Sangh ideologue KN Govindacharya, who says discussions of policy on Twitter, Facebook or public email whose servers sit on Western soil endanger our national security.

There is no doubt that the trading of opinion, fact and innuendo is driven by fleeting stimuli that flit across our screens. Some of this feverishness could also be down to one of the capital's hottest, most humid and rainless summers. We look forward to Modi's Independence Day speech from the Red Fort for a clearer, cooler declaration of intent, and a more electrifying list of goals and tasks than the ennui that pervades. That will be one day after Parliament's Budget session ends with slow but not dazzling accomplish-



## IT'S ABOUT STANDARDS

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ments by the new government. In fact, important legislation like raising the foreign investment ceiling to 49 per cent in the insurance sector hit a decisive roadblock in the Rajya Sabha, where the Congress party has 69 members to the BJP's 42. So far opposition to the government has been fragmented, opportunistic and unpredictable. So who is the real opposition? Rahul Gandhi sprang to life on Wednesday, leading a noisy protest against a rising tide of communal unrest, but the Congress party is still largely rudderless. There is talk that Sonia Gandhi will announce organisational changes soon, but the AK Antony committee set up to investigate the disastrous election results may not make its report public. Indeed, the Gandhis seem set to consolidate their grip, with growing talk about Priyanka Vadra being anointed.

With foes like these, it is not surprising that Modi seems unperturbed. The role of the government is huge and complex, even if the United Progressive Alliance's tower of Babel has been replaced by the National Democratic Alliance's echo chamber. Both are deafening.

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