

**By Sidharth Mishra**



It's difficult to believe that Prime Minister Narendra Modi could actually speak in an adulatory tone about the nation's first premier Jawaharlal Nehru. A visibly mellowed Prime Minister, following the electoral reverses faced by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in Bihar, last week reached out to the Opposition for reconciliation and consensus to push major legislative businesses pending in the Parliament. Replying to a debate on "Commitment to Constitution" in the Lok Sabha, Modi went to the extent of eulogising Pandit Nehru. Modi's comments have been interpreted by a section of the selfie-obsessed media as a pitch for reconciliation. To your reporter, the Prime Minister's address in Parliament last Friday and the subsequent interaction with his predecessor Manmohan Singh and Congress president Sonia Gandhi are part of a tactical retreat to bring governance back on the rails.

This situation of reconciliation or tactical retreat has arisen because after winning a massive mandate, the Prime Minister in the first instance failed to show large heartedness of a victor. He refused to offer the position of Leader of Opposition to the Congress party in the Lok Sabha. Such an act of political immaturity on the part of the government set the tone for its turbulent journey in Parliament.

When Narendra Modi had delivered his first address from the ramparts of Red Fort on August 15, 2014, comparisons were made with a speech delivered by Indira Gandhi soon after the

Bangladesh war in 1971 and another one made by Rajiv Gandhi, after he won a massive mandate in the 1984 general elections. In these very columns, your reporter had then expressed caution, pointing out that both mother and the son were to lose their aura of popular mass leader within a few years of their “historical ascendance” to the office.

Next the Prime Minister decided to “belittle” the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by organising on October 31, 2014, a public run for unity to commemorate Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel’s birthday. The Prime Minister’s cheerleaders had then said, “The truth that many of Modi’s critics have been slow to grasp is that, unlike conventional politicians, the Prime Minister is very picky with his public symbolism. The usual Amar-Akbar-Antony symbolism preferred by Bollywood has given way to something that is less contrived and, more important, modern.” Unfortunately in the past 18 months, the envoys of Modi’s modernity have been the likes of Deenanath Batra, Sakshi Maharaj, Sadhvi Prachi and not to forget Manohar Lal Khattar. Suffice to say, these individuals have only frayed Brand Modi.

Coming back to Modi’s reconciliatory note and the government agreeing to a debate on intolerance in Parliament, one has to remember that it came in response to the Congress attacking the BJP for not acknowledging the contribution of leaders like Nehru in framing the Constitution. As if making amends, Modi in his address before Lok Sabha recalled the contributions of Nehru and said, “When (Socialist leader) Lohia told Nehru that his policies weren’t working, Nehru stood up and said ‘I can’t deny those facts.’ That was his maturity.” However, one cannot forget that less than a fortnight back PM had skipped the function at Shanti Van to commemorate Nehru’s anniversary.

There is some truth in the charge brought forth by the Congress that the Centre has been attempting to “manufacture a clash” between leaders of the freedom struggle like Subhash Chandra Bose, Sardar Patel, and Nehru, largely to undermine the role of the first Prime Minister. Such an attempt of the Modi government, which has landed them in the current political mess, has been part of its ideological agenda. Every ruling dispensation has the right to promote its political demigods but promoting one’s ideology does not necessarily require one to demean the opposing creed.

In fact such an attitude can turn the situation for any government cantankerous, which it should avoid if it’s playing for a larger goal. Using cricketing symbols, we can say that Modi so far has been playing too much in the T20 mould. His votaries could come back and say that this is an era of T20 and not of the Test matches. That’s not true and they should also not forget that many T20 stars have come a cropper with their limited techniques, lack of patience and long-term vision, which are necessary skills for a successful Test career.

More than making an ideological turnaround, howsoever warranted by the prevailing situation, Prime Minister Narendra Modi could do better by taking a cue or two from the book of

## Reconciliation or tactical retreat

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governance of former Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao. The leader from Andhra Pradesh ran a minority government for the larger part of his term, but that did not prevent him from introducing historical reforms in the financial sector. He never berated the word Socialism introduced in the Preamble to the Constitution but ensured that it remained of no relevance after the government gave up controls in the economic sector.

Rao could do this best by co-opting Opposition leaders. He motivated then Leader of Opposition Atal Bihari Vajpayee to lead the Indian delegation to UNHR session in Geneva, which had taken up an OIC-sponsored discussion on “violation of human rights” in Kashmir. Vajpayee with Salman Khurshid and Farooq Abdullah as his deputies had demolished Pakistan’s case. But more than Vajpayee and Khurshid, it was Rao’s truck with the Iranian leadership and his success in convincing another opposition stalwart George Fernandes to keep his Tibet agenda on the back burner for some time that had won the day for India. And Rao did not exactly go breast-beating about his success. That’s modern-day “Chanakya Niti” (Chanakya’s policy).

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