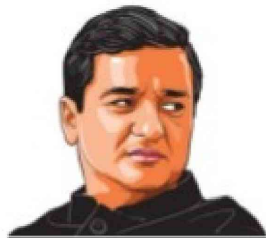


# A midnight pledge, 70 years later

PM Modi's July 1 speech, at the special Parliament session to bring in GST, was also about a nation and its tryst with destiny



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IT IS NOT common for special sessions of Parliament to take place at midnight. On such rare occasions, the prime minister's speech is looked forward to with enthusiasm. PM Narendra Modi's speech to mark the roll-out of the GST was no exception. At midnight on July 1, when India saw the birth of an economic revolution, PM Modi was the statesman par excellence. Seated between President Pranab Mukherjee and Vice-President Hamid Ansari (both elected when the UPA held office and who had close links with the Congress before that) as well as H.D. Deve Gowda (his becoming PM in 1996 prevented the BJP from forming the government at the Centre), Modi listed how the GST will usher in a new economic order that will benefit every Indian.

Minutes after he spoke, there were comparisons with speeches by other prime ministers. But the comparison with Jawaharlal Nehru's speech on August 15, 1947 was the most obvious.

How did the two prime ministers compare in their addresses at the temple of democracy at midnight, 70 years apart? The central premise of Nehru's speech — tryst with destiny — differs greatly from Modi's central idea — a pledge of determination. The hallmark of Nehru's speech was his style. Few leaders could have matched Nehru's eloquence and flair. Every word, every line, had a lesson. Modi's speech, in contrast, had the PM's style and flair but also signaled his determination and provided a direction to the nation. The PM assured the nation that the GST is a step in the right direction and also pointed to the path ahead. He led from the front in saying that 125 crore Indians will together make the GST successful and overcome all its shortcomings.

Modi expressed reverence towards freedom fighters. The names he took included M.K. Gandhi, Vallabhbhai Patel, B. R. Ambedkar, Rajendra Prasad, Maulana Azad, Sarojini Naidu and J.B. Kripalani. None of them had anything to do with the ideological movement the PM is rooted in. Nehru's speech did not name any of the great leaders of the freedom movement, who were also his colleagues.

Modi said that the GST was about the combined strength of "Team India", which consists of the Centre and the states. This includes chief ministers from parties other than the BJP or NDA. There is no mention of such teamwork in the 'Tryst with Destiny' speech.

The languages in which Nehru and Modi spoke reveals a lot about their in-

tended audience. Nehru spoke in impeccable English — his command over the language could have put the British to shame. Modi spoke in Hindi. It is undeniable that more people in India understood Modi's speech compared to those who could understand Nehru's address 70 years ago. The reasons are obvious — Hindi is understood by far greater numbers than English. In 1947, the number of those who could understand English was fewer. In the non-Hindi speaking areas, the regional languages held more sway than English.

Could it be that Nehru's intended audience was not the people of India but the British, or a more global audience in general? Would it be unfair to ask that when a prime minister is speaking from Parliament, the target audience should be the people of the country? Nehru wrote *The Discovery of India* but Modi's short but loaded speech on July 1 gives a true sense of "discovery of India". He mentioned our celebrated history and envisioned a brighter tomorrow. He spoke about our freedom fighters and also about harnessing the dreams of youngsters.

Modi spoke about the vitality of India's economic integration and why the time has come to unify the country economically. He elaborated on the urgency of delivering what the poor of India deserve, but have been denied for 70 years. He highlighted the need for India's eastern part to get the opportunity to lead the nation's economic resurgence.

The PM enumerated the advantages the GST will afford to trade and commerce, the boost it will give to the railways, the impact it will have on the ease of doing business and Digital India. These themes encapsulate the spirit of a new and buoyant India, ready to take on the world. In contrast, the speech on August 15, 1947 offered little glimpse into the strengths, aspirations and complexities of the nation, at a time when these facets should have been listed with more clarity and leadership.

The Congress boycotting the GST special session, despite other opposition parties attending it surprised every Indian. The GST has become a reality due to efforts by people across the political spectrum. Did the Congress's absence have anything to do with Nehru's August speech on August 15, 1947?

At a time when comparisons seem to make the best discourse, it was not unusual for people to compare India's first and current PM speaking in Parliament. Both addresses give a peek into the men, their temperament, their ability to credit others and their skill to combine style with substance.

On August 15, 1947 we began a journey premised on our tryst with destiny. Seventy years later, on July 1, we begin the journey of economic unification and independence not merely with the blessings of fate but with the skills and strengths of 125 crore Indians, guided by a robust and confident leadership.

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