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Narendra Modi's New New Delhi

A multibillion-dollar revamp of India's capital complex reflects the Prime Minister's vision for the country's future—and what he wants to erase from its past.

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Illustration by Nash Weerasekera

Earlier this year, I joined Jawhar Sircar, a member of the Indian Parliament, on his short commute to work. He and his fellow-M.P.s lodge in a state-owned apartment complex on a prime lot of what the locals call Lutyens's Delhi, in honor of the British architect Edwin Lutyens, who designed the heart of the Indian capital a century ago. When I arrived, a security officer was washing dishes in a hose-fed basin beside a green military tent that

had been pitched in the courtyard. Just across the street, the core government and cultural institutions of the world's largest democracy stretched out along the Central Vista, a nearly two-mile-long green space that Lutyens developed in emulation of Washington, D.C.,'s National Mall.

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Sircar, who represents the state of West Bengal, was bundled against the cold, wearing a mismatched ensemble of corduroy. (It was in the low sixties.) We squeezed into the back seat of his tiny, government-issued Suzuki sedan. As his chauffeur pulled the car out, Vigyan Bhawan, a vast convention hall, came into view. It didn't look like much: a whitewashed box, constructed during the nineteen-fifties, in the same budget-conscious, modernist style found in capitals from Berlin to Beijing. But then Sircar flagged the two entrances, which were framed by enormous peaked arches with fluted flourishes at their bases. The flowing curves and vibrant colors—the east-facing entrance was done in red sandstone, the south-facing one in polished green marble—popped with stark emphasis against the hall's white walls. These distinctive portals were inspired by *chaitya* arches, the gateways of ancient Buddhist cave temples, which, Sircar explained, constitute “the first public architecture in India.”



A security worker walks through a construction site at Kartavya Path, formerly Rajpath, on the Central Vista, in New Delhi. Photograph by Prashanth Vishwanathan / Bloomberg / Getty

Vigyan Bhawan, like many of the buildings on the Central Vista, weaves together elements from the country's rich and diverse past. It was slated for demolition. As we drove on, Sircar pointed to an office block that was topped with a *chhatra*, an Islamic-influenced cupola that resembles a helmeted sentry. (India's most famous *chhatriyan* are on the minarets of the Taj Mahal.) This building, too, would be destroyed. To its right, a vast stretch of land was ringed by a tall fence of green corrugated metal, a row of cranes visible above it. Here, several structures had already come down. So would roughly a dozen more, for a mile in each direction—all part of a multibillion-dollar plan hatched by [Narendra Modi](#), India's strongman Prime Minister, to transform the capital. A. G. Krishna Menon, an architect and conservationist based in New Delhi, told me that Modi and his supporters "want to reinscribe the history of this site because they want to rewrite the history of the country."

The Central Vista pays physical homage to India's syncretic civilization, what Mohammad Arif, a historian who has taught at Banaras Hindu University, calls "composite culture." In the centuries before British rule, India had been a patchwork of empires and fiefdoms; borders often shifted, and customs blended, in life and in architecture. Many artisans, for instance, found themselves working for rulers of a different faith. "Hindu workers would put in Hindu motifs because they thought, These are beautiful, these are auspicious," Sircar explained. "The Muslim emperor would throw his hands up in despair and say, 'Just finish it.'"

Sircar and I arrived at the Parliament building. Its core structure is circular: a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree colonnade, with a trio of interior lobes housing the two legislative bodies and the parliamentary library, with the space between them preserved as a vast courtyard. At first glance, the building, which was designed by British colonizers in the nineteen-twenties, somewhat resembles the Royal Albert Hall, in London. But Sircar noted local touches. The porte cochère featured a series of plodding, nearly rectangular archways topped with a wide eave, called a *chajja*. This distinctive ensemble echoed elements of the royal court of the Mughal emperor Akbar, at Fatehpur Sikri. Akbar, a Muslim, attempted to create a new religion that would merge aspects of India's various faiths. Modi, who leads the Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (B.J.P.), which during the past few decades has pushed a vision of Indian identity tied explicitly to Hinduism, is pointedly less pluralistic. As part of his revamp, a new Parliament building was rising next door. It was slick with kitsch—in the lower house, a massive, polished stone backdrop in "Indian agave green" would sit beneath a ceiling constructed of wooden cutouts meant to evoke the feathers of a peacock, India's national bird. The theme of the upper house would be the lotus, a native flower—and the official symbol of the ruling B.J.P. Across the Central Vista, references to Islamic elements in India's past were being expunged. The famous Mughal Gardens, atop Raisina Hill, was renamed Amrit Udyan, roughly "Garden of Immortality," in Sanskrit.



Ongoing construction of the new Parliament house, visible from the colonnade of the old one. Photograph from Hindustan Times / Getty

A few days before we met, Sircar, who, from 2008 to 2012, was the secretary of India's Ministry of Culture, gave an impassioned speech on the floor of the old Parliament, lambasting what he views as the government's attempt to rub out New Delhi's urban fabric—and the tradition of blending that has run through Indian history for millennia. "An aesthetic has been cast upon us," he said, that will "remain a permanent memory of poor art." [Modi's authoritarian rule](#) has been marked by far more acute dangers—the weaponization of tax authorities and law enforcement against critics and political opponents, the [demonization of India's Muslim minority](#), the growing cult of personality around the Prime Minister himself as he usurps responsibilities constitutionally reserved for others. Architecture might seem trivial by comparison. But, to Sircar, the new Parliament is more than just a building; it is part of Modi's plan to sideline the central institution of democracy and, as much as possible, rule without it.

In Sircar's speech, he mentioned that the new building would be far larger than the old one. "I see a plan behind this large hall," he said. On TV, it

would look “half empty,” creating a “narrative that Parliament is not required.” (Modi’s Administration contends that it needs space to accommodate more representatives in a fast-growing country, a concern that has, in the past, been raised by M.P.s in other parties, too.) Sircar pointed out to me that “the British House of Commons has barely enough room for about two-thirds of its members.” When it was destroyed by German bombs, in 1941, Winston Churchill specifically asked that it be rebuilt with the same tight quarters. “They just cram next to each other, stand in the aisle, and the very sight gives you a sense of importance,” he said. In his view, Modi’s new design is a clever bid to present a do-nothing legislature to the public.

Modi’s point person on the capital renovation is Hardeep Singh Puri, the Minister of Housing and Urban Affairs. Puri, a former diplomat who served as India’s permanent representative to the United Nations, argues that the project is meant to replace out-of-date buildings with new ones whose technological infrastructure, H.V.A.C. systems, and earthquake-safety features meet international standards. But these practical justifications seem ancillary to a political goal: what Puri has [touted](#) as the project’s power to undo the “colonial mindset.” When I went to see Puri at his office, in a building that is itself marked for demolition, he wore a pale-blue turban and sat behind an oversized wooden desk. I asked him about some of the criticisms that Sircar and others were raising. As Leonard Cohen streamed in the background, his mood quickly soured. He abruptly ended our interview and threw me out. (Through a spokesperson, Puri insisted that “the interaction was ended politely.”)

A few months after my visit to New Delhi, the new Parliament officially opened. Sircar and other members of the opposition boycotted the ceremony, during which Modi entered the lower-house chamber trailed by a retinue of shirtless Hindu holy men. In a half-hour-long speech, interrupted repeatedly by loyal M.P.s chanting his name, Modi explained what it meant for India’s Parliament, at long last, to convene in a structure designed and built by Indians. After having its “glorious past . . . snatched away by years of slavery,” he said, India was “gaining back its pride.”

New Delhi wasn't supposed to have a Parliament building; the British, who designed the city, didn't intend for India to be a democracy. When King George V decreed that India's capital be moved from Calcutta (now Kolkata) to Delhi, in 1911, the architectural mandate was to build an administrative center for a colony. To design a "new" Delhi a couple of miles from the "old" one, Raj authorities tapped Lutyens, a country-house architect who had never been to India. (Herbert Baker, an architect with experience in other outposts of the [British Empire](#), later joined.) They envisioned a central lawn, extending from Raisina Hill to the Yamuna River, that would be lined with government buildings and cultural institutions. On the capital's hill, they placed not a home for a legislature but a palace for a Viceroy.

The British had effectively been in control of India since the middle of the seventeenth-hundreds. In 1857, Indian troops staged an uprising against their white Army officers, and that erupted into a wider rebellion. The British responded by establishing direct royal control. Not long afterward, they also made a small concession, by adding some Indian representatives to the Imperial Legislative Council. It was less of a legislature than an early-warning system, stacked with loyalists and forbidden from actually legislating. One colonial administrator said that it would "hear of discontent before it becomes disaffection." In Lutyens's initial plan, the council was to meet in a small chamber inside the Viceroy's residence. In 1919, a surge in Indian nationalism pushed the British to put more Indian representatives on the council, and they agreed to build a separate structure for it, though sited in a clearly subordinated position that would allow the Viceroy's palace to be the Central Vista's focal point.

Lutyens had never taken on a project that was even remotely on this scale. To prepare, he conducted a survey of British-designed architecture around the subcontinent. Most of what he saw he wrote off as either incongruously European or overly busy, like some bizarre Orientalist rococo revival. He called an ersatz Scottish countryside retreat in Shimla, the summer capital, in the Himalayas, "folly such as only Englishmen can achieve." In the port of Bombay, he tarred the city's signature ornate Indo-Saracenic style as "half-

caste”—a derogatory term implying that the buildings combined the worst traits of the East with the worst of the West.

For the new buildings, Lutyens cultivated a sober, stripped-down style, creating European floor plans judiciously ornamented with local features, all in a red-and-cream sandstone palette that had been used by the Mughal rulers. His Viceroy’s palace was capped with a squat, Buddhist dome, inspired by archeological discoveries in central India. The wings of the Secretariat, two blocks of office buildings flanking the Central Vista, stood on structural European columns but were wrapped in stone latticework commonly found in mosques and Jain temples. Drawing on the stylistic heritage of India’s myriad religious communities was a purposeful bid to win local support for the Raj—a mandate, to some degree, imposed upon Lutyens, who dismissed the country’s Indigenous architecture as “piffle.” The British authorities also carved a dark reminder onto the Raj buildings. As the text on one Secretariat entryway reads to this day: “Liberty will not descend to a people. A people must raise themselves to liberty: It is a blessing that must be earned before it can be enjoyed.” Lutyens, for his part, seemed to understand where things were heading. After long days designing the imperial capital, he would retire to his study to read Edward Gibbon’s [*The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*](#).”

In 1931, the new capital was officially inaugurated. Just sixteen years later, India won independence. Around midnight on August 15, 1947, Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first Prime Minister, ushered in the new era, speaking of his nation’s “tryst with destiny.” In the morning, huge crowds of ordinary Indians, a mix of urbanites and villagers, flocked to the Central Vista on foot and by bicycle. Clad in white, homespun cloth, a symbol of the independence movement, they climbed the hill to the Secretariat buildings and took in views that had previously been reserved for high-ranking British officials. The Viceroy’s House would become the residence of India’s President, and the council house a real Parliament.



A cyclist rides past part of the Central Vista redevelopment project. Photograph from Getty

Unlike other former colonies, India did not build a new capital; it made the old one its own, and continued the project of syncretistic blending. Modi clearly regarded this as a mistake, and he has made it his mandate to “liberate ourselves from the slavery mindset.” He seems to have been planning to reconstruct the heart of New Delhi since the earliest days of his premiership. The previous government had nominated parts of the capital, including the entire Central Vista, to be added to the *UNESCO* World Heritage List, preserving them in perpetuity. The application was under consideration when Modi first became Prime Minister, in 2014. The following year, according to *UNESCO*, the Indian government asked to postpone it. (A spokesperson for India’s Ministry of Housing denies this.)

In 2019, after Modi was reelected, resoundingly, to serve a second term, a public announcement appeared in major Indian newspapers. It requested “Consultancy Services for comprehensive Architectural & Engineering

planning for the ‘Development / Redevelopment of Parliament Building, Common Central Secretariat and Central Vista at New Delhi,’ ” specifying that interested firms would have to transfer five million rupees of “earnest money” to an escrow account. (After backlash from architects, the monetary requirement was reduced by half.) The timeline was shockingly short. The British had taken years to plan India’s capital. The Modi government asked for a redevelopment proposal in six weeks. S. R. Sikka, an architect who fled to Delhi during [Partition](#), trained with Le Corbusier, and went on to found one of the country’s most commercially successful architecture firms, told me, “Of course, as an architect, you would wish for more time for a once-in-a-lifetime project on the most important piece of land in the country.”

That September, an informational meeting turned into a contentious affair. Representatives of interested firms crowded around a horseshoe-shaped table in a conference room at the Central Public Works Department, which has overseen civic improvements in India since 1854. When the floor opened for questions, participants took turns expressing their discontent. How could a publicly funded project of this stature not be awarded through a more open process? The earnest-money requirement insured that only established architects would be able to participate. A few attendees drew up a petition to demand a fairer competition. As they canvassed the room for signatures, just one representative from a major firm refused to sign: Bobby Desai, of H.C.P., in Ahmedabad, the biggest city in Modi’s home state, Gujarat.

In the end, only six firms—H.C.P. and five others—were considered. Their mandate was largely open-ended; the guidelines did not specify whether they should upgrade the existing Parliament or build a new one. (Either way, the old Parliament, like many Raj-era structures, would need to be protected because of historic-preservation laws.) At least two of the firms suggested putting a new Parliament in the middle of the Central Vista. Hafeez Contractor, the principal at one of those firms, who is known for his flashy designs, said that he’d sited his Parliament, which would be built in the shape of an abstracted lotus flower, “on the main axis, so if you look from all the roads of New Delhi—from anywhere and everywhere—you’ll

see it.” It would have risen five hundred feet higher than the Viceroy’s palace. “People said, ‘Oh, it shouldn’t be higher than the President’s house,’ ” he told me. “Why not? It should be higher!”

H.C.P. took a different tack. Its founder, Bimal Patel, knew Modi from Gujarat and had been doing projects with him for almost two decades. The firm called for bland sandstone office buildings lined with unadorned columns. Patel kept the Parliament sidelined, though he proposed including some of the subtler multifaith details from the old Central Vista, such as the stone latticework. Meanwhile, on a plot of land on the opposite side of the Central Vista, he proposed a new home-and-office complex for the Prime Minister. Under India’s parliamentary system, the Prime Minister is a member of the legislature, first among equals. Much as the British Prime Minister lives in a modest town house at 10 Downing Street, Modi lives in a bungalow on an ordinary street in Lutyens’s Delhi. Patel called for moving Modi onto the Central Vista, into an enormous residence that could accommodate a staff of five hundred. (According to later reports, the compound will be ringed by twenty-five watchtowers and include a V.I.P. tunnel connecting it to the new Parliament.) Building a new house for the Prime Minister was not part of the mandate for the design competition, and only one of the other five entrants had included one. Patel won.

Ahmedabad, the largest city in Gujarat, has long been an architectural hub. Shortly after independence, Ahmedabad’s textile magnates and their allies in government hired a group of renowned architects, including Le Corbusier and Louis Kahn, to construct offices, museums, and university campuses in the city. These international luminaries influenced a generation of local architects, who continued their modernist legacy. One of these locals was Hasmukh C. Patel, whose firm, H.C.P., subsequently put its stamp on Gujarat in concrete through banks, hospitals, and academic buildings.

In 1981, Hasmukh’s son, Bimal, who was nineteen years old, travelled through Europe by rail pass and by VW van. He was stunned by “how comfortable ordinary life can be for ordinary people.” Crowded yet well maintained, the urban streets, squares, and markets of Amsterdam, Paris,

and Barcelona offered everyday Europeans a quality of life attainable only by the most privileged in India. In 1985, Bimal went to the United States, where he earned degrees in architecture and city planning from U.C. Berkeley. Afterward, he returned to Ahmedabad to take over H.C.P., hoping to transform Indian cities, which he said were “starved of public space.”

In January, I met Patel at a seven-mile pedestrian promenade he’d begun building, in the early two-thousands, along the Sabarmati River, which bisects Ahmedabad. Prior to the Central Vista commission, it was his largest urban-redevelopment project. I rented us an “aqua cycle”—a Dr. Seuss-like floating bicycle for two, with bulbous outboard waterwheels. Patel, who is slight and fit at sixty-two, wore chunky black glasses and threw a canary-yellow life jacket over his green Nehru vest. As we pedalled to the middle of the river, the city’s skyline appeared above the promenade. We could see a revolving restaurant, designed by his father, that looked like a blooming concrete flower on a narrow stem, as well as many newer, taller, shinier structures that rose around it. Modi, who had been chief minister of Gujarat from 2001 to 2014, presided over Ahmedabad’s dramatic twenty-first-century boom; he used this narrative of progress in the campaign that propelled him to national power.

Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay, who wrote a [biography of Modi](#) during this period, told me that the rising Gujarati politician was inspired by—and envious of—the model of development that he had seen in China. In 1980, the economies of China and India were roughly equal in size, but India had since fallen badly behind its neighbor. On his first trip over the border, in 2006, Modi travelled to Shenzhen, which had grown from a fishing village into a metropolis of nearly ten million, and to Pudong, Shanghai’s skyscraper-studded financial district, which, two decades before, had been a mix of warehouses and rice paddies. Modi “was greatly impressed with the urban-developmental policies of the Chinese government,” Mukhopadhyay told me, “especially that there’s very little people’s participation when the government wants to take land.”

Modi had discovered politics through a far-right paramilitary organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, which teaches that India’s founders had

been wrong to embrace secularism and to valorize nonviolence. Now Modi saw another error. Gandhi had preached that “the soul of India lives in its villages” and regarded India’s cities as corrosive beachheads of Western influence that could turn Indians against their own civilization. According to Mukhopadhyay, Modi realized that urbanization had been central to China’s breakneck development and came to see India’s rise as dependent on the same.

“He’s the first Indian leader who’s understood the significance of urban public space, that this is something you can produce to build your political capital,” Patel told me. Accruing that capital comes with a cost. To construct the Ahmedabad promenade, the authorities levelled neighborhoods on both sides of the river. More than ten thousand families were evicted, Patel told me, in a process that took several years. That morning, I had visited sites where many of the evictees had been moved. Some ended up with free homes on the outskirts of the city, in towers that looked decrepit, with rebar poking out of cracked concrete walls. Others now live in a shantytown of tarps that they’d built themselves, near the municipal garbage dump. They told me that they’d been loaded onto flatbed trailers and dropped there in a giant sandlot. (The government denied this and said that it provided “proper homes” to everyone.)

The promenade, meanwhile, was almost entirely empty. More than eight million people live in Ahmedabad, but this was the only space where I saw almost no pedestrians—save for a few canoodling couples who seemed to have come precisely because it afforded them so much privacy. It has little shade and virtually no street vendors. A local professor of urban planning told me that Ahmedabadis prefer to enjoy the riverfront by congregating on the bridges, where there are clusters of stands selling chaat and other snacks. The promenade was reachable only through gates placed at inconvenient intervals. Patel and I had tried to enter through a waist-high gate, which was locked. Patel hopped it.



The Sabarmati Riverfront promenade, in Ahmedabad. Photograph by Sumit Dayal / Bloomberg / Getty

The space is particularly loved by a small but influential subset of Indians: elected officials. As Shiny Varghese, an Indian architecture and design columnist, told me, “The Sabarmati Riverfront has become a selfie point for all of the politicians.” (In 2014, when President Xi Jinping of China made his first visit to Modi’s India, the newly elected Prime Minister welcomed him not on the Central Vista in New Delhi, which he had yet to transform, but on the promenade in Ahmedabad.) The adage is that the left politicizes aesthetics, unearthing the ideologies embedded in art, while the right aestheticizes politics, turning public life into a series of jingoistic, stage-managed events. Modi was quick to sense that, in a world of social media, public space is not necessarily for the public that surrounds it.

In 2011, Modi’s state government charged Patel with renovating a portion of Gujarat’s capital, Gandhinagar, which had been built as part of an effort to move core government offices out of an increasingly cramped

Ahmedabad. In the tradition of Lutyens's Delhi, Gandhinagar had been laid out along a linear park, also called the Central Vista. In his renovation, Patel re-landscaped the grounds and constructed new buildings for the state bureaucracy. The city's convention center at the far end of the Central Vista was framed as if it were a branch of government coequal to the legislature. As chief minister, Modi shifted the focus of public life to the convention center, where he coordinated spectacles in which fawning industrialists inked investment deals with him onstage.

On the aqua cycle, I asked Patel where he thought Modi was taking India. "I'm not interested in what Modi's about," he said. "We need to improve the city, and I'll work with the government to do it." Earlier, he'd told me, "There's not a single client that I completely agree with on anything. Don't get me as a Party worker coming from his political background—that's not me." Patel may not consider himself a Party worker, but his work for Modi has helped achieve the B.J.P.'s ends. Deyan Sudjic, a critic and curator who has written many books on architecture and political power, described these ends as an attempt at "peeling away a previous, more secular and pluralist order." What I'd found being built on the Central Vista was something along the lines of a Hinduist version of Dubai.

Recently, in Varanasi, Hinduism's holiest city, Patel renovated the area around the Kashi Vishwanath Temple, one of the city's most important Hindu sites. The temple sits on a hill near the Ganges. In Hindu mythology, the god Shiva tied the waterway to Earth with his matted locks; a priest told me that to approach the temple via the tangle of pedestrian lanes that have surrounded it for centuries was to climb those locks. Patel eliminated the paths, replacing them with a vast plaza. In tandem, a privately financed effort gilded the temple in forty kilograms of gold—an amount reportedly chosen to match the weight of Modi's mother. Next to the temple is a seventeenth-century mosque, which Hindu nationalists have been working for decades to demolish; Patel built a wall between the two sites, making the mosque difficult to access.

At the Sabarmati, the early-evening muezzin calls began to rise from the Old City. Patel and I dropped off our life jackets and walked the empty

promenade until we came to a gate. It was locked, and a guard in an ill-fitting uniform told Patel that he didn't have the key.

In Delhi, near the site of Patel's new Parliament, a poster with an architectural rendering has the tagline "Accelerating India's Progress." There had been indications that the building would be completed in time for the seventy-fifth anniversary of Indian independence, in August, 2022, but a string of delays ensued; Modi's government has laid the blame for these holdups on the pandemic and materials shortages caused by the war in Ukraine. Even after the official "opening," in May, it remains fenced off and under construction.

When I visited with Sircar, we could see the top of the building peeking out from above the fence. One façade, which features a red sandstone block framed by black concrete, looked, to Sircar, "like the grille of a Mercedes." He pointed to a statue of the national emblem—four lions set back-to-back—on the top of the building. Each lion, cast in bronze, is more than twenty feet tall and weighs more than five thousand pounds. They are inspired by "The Lion Capital of Ashoka," a sculpture that had been commissioned in the third century B.C. by the emperor Ashoka, who had converted from Hinduism to Buddhism. After independence, the Nehru government paired the sculpture with a quote from a Hindu holy text—"Truth alone triumphs"—to create an official symbol of the Gandhian republic. The lions, which have friendly jowls and lolling tongues, appear to be almost smiling. Fearsome beasts depicted without ferocity were an apt symbol for a country that had made nonviolence part of its revolutionary identity.

Last year, when Modi, flanked by Hindu priests, unveiled the new sculpture, viewers were shocked: the lions were snarling. Hardeep Singh Puri, the Urban Affairs minister, insisted that these were the usual lions, tweeting a meme that called the new pillar "A Perfect Replica!" It was only because they were built on such a large scale, and because people were viewing them from below, Puri claimed, that they appeared to be different. A pair of public-interest attorneys countered that the new rendering violated the State Emblem of India Act, which regulates official use of "The Lion Capital

of Ashoka,” and filed a lawsuit. Their case was dismissed by the Supreme Court, which ruled that the passivity or ferocity of the sculpture “depends on the mind of the person who sees it.” Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay, the Modi biographer, told me, simply, “These are not the lions we’ve grown up with.”



The original version of "The Lion Capital of Ashoka." Photograph from Getty



A view of the newly built replica, on the roof of Patel's Parliament building. Photograph by Amal KS / Hindustan Times / Getty

I've been to India half a dozen times, but this was my first trip during the Modi era. Superficially, it was still the country I knew, but beneath the surface it felt radically transformed. Each morning, I got the same newspapers I'd always read, but now the coverage of the Prime Minister felt like a press release. When Modi launched a new national holiday to memorialize non-Muslims executed by a Mughal emperor in the eighteenth century, the *Times of India*, the country's highest-circulation English-language newspaper, parroted Modi's religious reference to the victims' "martyrdom." In Parliament, opposition politicians continued to give harshly critical speeches, but, increasingly, their remarks were expunged from the official record. In March, Rahul Gandhi, the leader of the opposition, was expelled from Parliament outright. (He was later reinstated.)

Some of the most chilling changes were among citizens far from the centers of power. A tech worker outside Delhi told me that he won't read critical media on his office computer for fear of being caught and branded as an "anti-national," which could destroy his career. An academic at one of India's most prestigious universities said that he stopped weighing in on public debates after receiving anonymous threats. A secular Muslim professional in Gujarat told me that a client recently offered him detailed—and unsolicited—advice about which countries offer the best "exit opportunities" to an Indian-passport holder. These erosions can feel like personal predicaments. Together, they form a pointillist portrait of India's illiberal turn.

On the new Central Vista, it will look like little has changed—just another line of ponderous, unadorned buildings. The old Parliament, now devoid of purpose, is slated to become the Museum of Indian Democracy. According to Mukhopadhyay, it will likely advance Modi's dubious theory that India, not ancient Greece, invented democratic governance. Meanwhile, Modi continues to quietly undermine India's constitutional system. As Ramachandra Guha, a historian and biographer of Gandhi, tweeted, "The

Central Vista project intends to make the existing Parliament Building a 'Museum for Democracy.' This is grimly appropriate, since Museums are for things that are dead or extinct." ♦