



## Fresh vista

A new parliament building will be celebratory if all have access to health and prosperity

Laying the foundation for a new parliament building for India should be a celebratory occasion, one that every citizen would proudly claim as another edifice of a thriving democracy. It is an opportunity for accord, reflecting a pluralistic, progressive ethos. Yet, the ceremony is now poised to take place under the shadow of litigation, with the Supreme Court allowing the event to be held but temporarily restraining the central government from making site alterations in the form of additions and demolitions of structures and continued removal of trees. The new building, which is part of the Narendra Modi government's ambitious plan to modify the Central Vista skyline of Lutyens' Delhi, will cost an estimated ₹971 crore and be able to accommodate a much larger number of MPs, 888 in the Lok Sabha and 384 in the Rajya Sabha. Just weeks ago, the Housing and Urban Affairs Ministry said the overall cost of redevelopment of the Central Vista had not been calculated, but the plan is estimated to run into thousands of crores, involving, among other things, a new Central Secretariat and the offices and residences of the Vice-President and Prime Minister. An epochal project, timed for completion ahead of the 75th anniversary of Independence in 2022, it presents a rare moment to involve citizens and build a consensus. But the government is now pressing ahead at a cheerless time when the country remains dismayed over a slowing economy and the double blow of the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is reasonable to assume that even with a strong revival of the economy in a post-vaccine era, the debilitation cannot be easily overcome. The government's interventions so far have largely been to encourage private consumption and modest revival of businesses, while its own consumption expenditure, during the first half of the year, has been below that of the corresponding period in the previous year. This in effect ensured the persistence of significant GDP contraction. Even on the question of a free COVID-19 vaccine, the government has been prevaricating, with no assurance of universal vaccination. With concerns over allocation of resources, it cannot be anyone's case that shining new Central Vista structures will add to the lustre of an Independence jubilee. There are also indications that the Centre's PWD is trying to modify the overall redevelopment plan on the go, introducing changes piecemeal after getting approvals, which the Expert Appraisal Committee has frowned upon. In a year of unprecedented distress, therefore, what is seen as grand may appear grandiose to stricken citizens, who need every rupee to stabilise their lives. They would be justified in asking the government why the house cannot be beautified after essential repairs have been made to render it safe. The weakest link, exposed by the pandemic, is health care, and the 75th anniversary should be an occasion to guarantee that. A new parliament could then be built to celebrate such an achievement.