

Policies & Perspectives



VIVEKANANDA INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION

There are four categorical elements in the recent ministerial changes that Prime Minister Narendra Modi effected. They are: Promotion, Demotion, Induction and Rejection. In doing so, the Prime Minister has sought to construct a robust ministry that will usher the Government into the 2019 Lok Sabha election. There could be some tweaking in the months to follow but the broad structure has already been shaped now. The Bharatiya Janata Party's 2014 campaign had been driven by the promise of good governance and effective leadership set as a contrast to the weak performance of the Congress-led UPA regime. In 2019, the performance of the BJP-led NDA Government will be the dominant factor in the electoral battle. The BJP as an organisation will naturally play an important role, but it will be to project the party's record of governance. The party will not have the luxury of having to fall back on the disasters of its opponents. Which is why the new Team Modi's performance in the period leading up to the election, becomes even more critical.

As has been the case with many of his major decisions, Prime Minister Modi's ministerial reshuffle has been bold, and even unconventional in some ways. The usual pandering to caste, community and regional considerations has been largely done away with. Even short-term electoral temptations were set aside. For instance, while both Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh vote in Assembly elections towards the end of this year, no faces have been taken into the Union Council of Ministers from these two States. On the other hand, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, where Assembly elections are still away, have found additional representation. Similarly, there is no pattern that exposes itself to caste appeasement. There is a fair sprinkling of both upper and backward castes, with no real tilt towards one or the other. This is in keeping with the BJP's resolve to broaden its electoral vote-bank. In various recent elections, it has managed to co-opt voters from various affinities — ranging from the higher castes to the backward classes and communities. The party was stupendously successful in this experiment in 2014, and has derived benefits in various other elections since then, with Uttar Pradesh being arguably the most prominent hit story of such an expansion in the BJP's voter base. In fact, given the Prime Minister's thrust on merit and track record, which led him to also tap career bureaucrats within the party, there was little scope for petty considerations to determine ministerial changes. Not having much to criticise, Modi's opponents have wondered whether the BJP suffered such a dearth of talent that the Prime Minister had to recruit career professionals into the Government. In the first place, they forget that these professionals have been members of the party for some time now, or have been vocal supporters of the Government since 2014. Besides, it's not sensible to argue against the inclusion of career bureaucrats, especially those who have served Governments for decades in the past and garnered valuable administrative experience. Let's not forget that while the Congress did not do enough in lateral entry of talent into the Government, it had brought in Nandan Nilekani from the corporate world to head the Aadhaar project.

The other, though admittedly half-hearted, argument has been that career professionals have been given



portfolios that are far removed from their core proficiencies. This is a rather silly contention. Politicians who have no proficiency whatsoever in any specialised field, have managed (and continue to manage) important portfolios — and quite a few of them have done so admirably well. There is no reason to suspect that career professionals, when faced with challenges that are alien to their area of expertise, will necessarily fail. It must also be remembered that having reached a certain elevated position, career bureaucrats essentially become administrators and leaders — and effective administration and leadership are the core requirements of an efficient Minister.

Before we get into the specifics of the four elements that characterise the recent reshuffle (and which had been mentioned in the very beginning of this article), there is yet another criticism that has been flung by opponents of the incumbent Government at the Centre and Prime Minister Modi in particular, that needs to be recorded. It is that the BJP has sidelined allies — new and old — because the party has been consumed by the arrogance of numbers. The reference is primarily to the non-inclusion of its newest partner, the Janata Dal (United) and the keeping at bay of its oldest partner, the Shiv Sena. On the former, Lalu Prasad, with whom Nitish Kumar's JD (U) recently broke ranks and allied with the BJP in Bihar, gloated that the Bihar Chief Minister had been taught a good and bitter lesson for having trusted the BJP. Other anti-BJP leaders gleefully quoted the Shiv Sena's statement that the NDA was 'as good as over' — in other words, the Sena's continuance in the coalition is a facade which could end sooner than later. The fact is that it's not just the JD (U) or the Sena which has found no mention in ministerial changes. The reshuffle featured only the BJP and not its allies. But it's also true that the JD (U) at least was being talked about as the newest entrant to the Council of Ministers. Hopes had arisen after Nitish Kumar's party formally decided to become part of the NDA at the Centre after it formed a coalition regime in Bihar with the BJP. It was speculated that the JD (U) would get one Cabinet rank berth and also have a Minister of State. The media speculated that talks between the BJP and Nitish Kumar's party reached a deadlock when the former was willing to part with just one ministerial position. The rumour of the unresolved friction gained further currency when the JD (U) did not attend the swearing-in ceremony of the new Ministers (incidentally even the Shiv Sena kept away). While the BJP maintained silence over the issue, Nitish Kumar later told the media that talks of disagreement were untrue because there never had been a discussion between the BJP and his party on ministerial berths for this round of reshuffle. "The JD (U) has been needlessly dragged into the matter", he said.

There is of course no apparent reason based on alleged 'arrogance' for the BJP to have deliberately shut the doors on the JD (U). The two parties had only recently come together and their bonds would have strengthened with the JD (U)'s inclusion in the Central ministry. It is possible that the decision not to have the Bihar party in this round of changes was mutual, and that the JD (U) could find a place at a later stage. And yet, the matter could have perhaps been better managed, at least in perceptual terms, given that JD (U) leaders did not attend the ceremony claiming that they had not been invited. The JD (U) can later join the Union Government from an enhanced position of strength once it tackles the internal dissension that has erupted with Nitish Kumar's decision to align with the NDA. Senior party leader Sharad Yadav has raised the banner of revolt, and has convened a meeting of party men later this week to challenge the Chief



Minister. He has been openly hobnobbing with Lalu Prasad and the Congress. On its part, the Janata Dal (United) has demanded the termination of Sharad Yadav's Rajya Sabha membership on grounds that he had gone against the party and needs to be disqualified. Yadav has already been removed as the JD (U) leader from the House and 21 Legislators supposedly owing allegiance to him have been suspended from the party. What has added to the murkiness is the claim by both the Nitish Kumar-led JD (U) and the party faction headed by Sharad Yadav that they represent the real JD (U) and have the right to the party's symbol. Both the groups have already approached the Election Commission of India for a resolution. Additionally, the Sharad Yadav camp has threatened to move the Supreme Court against the developments. Perhaps the Prime Minister thought it wise for the JD (U) to sort out its internecine war before bringing the party into the Government's fold, even as he would have made it clear that his party stood by Nitish Kumar in this moment of challenge.

Indeed, internal wrangling also came in the way of the AIADMK being admitted into the NDA fold. When the two warring factions, once led by Tamil Nadu Chief Minister E Palaniswamy and former Chief Minister O Panneerselvam, buried the hatchet and came together, hopes of a united AIADMK entering the NDA had brightened. But then the camp headed by TTV Dinakaran, who owes allegiance to V Sasikala, now incarcerated on corruption charges, spoiled the party by managing to win over the support of a sizeable number of Legislators — enough to potentially destabilise the new regime with Palaniswamy as Chief Minister and Panneerselvan as Deputy Chief Minister. There is now a sword hanging over the head of the regime in Tamil Nadu, and opposition parties in the State have been demanding a floor test for the Government to establish its majority. It is possible that once the AIADMK resolves its internal issues, it could join the NDA and hope for a ministerial berth in the Union Council of Ministers.

And now for the first of the four elements — promotion. The elevation of four Ministers of State to Cabinet rank is easily the highlight of this category. The common thread which runs through them is their performance, which in both real and perceptual terms was evident in very positive light. Nirmala Sitharaman, Piyush Goyal, Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi and Dharmendra Pradhan had all delivered on the targets that the Prime Minister had set for them. As Minister for State (independent charge) for Commerce, Sitharaman adroitly steered the country's position at various global trade forums, including the World Trade Organisation (WTO), being flexible yet mindful of the country's interests. Barely a month before her promotion, she had effectively persisted at the WTO for consensus on contentious issues such as that of stockholding food grain and a special safeguard mechanism in agriculture. She had refused to be persuaded by the lobbying of richer nations to make e-commerce the focus on the December meeting of the trade body in Argentina. Her understated style of functioning and competence to keep away from needless controversial remarks, were her positives. By all accounts, her elevation to Cabinet rank has been the most exceptional — she took over as the country's first full-time woman Defence Minister that gives her a seat at the all-powerful Cabinet Committee on Security. The challenges before her are many and she has to hit the ground running. It's a mark of the Prime Minister's trust in her ability that she has been given this onerous task. The other three Ministers of State who have got Cabinet positions were in the reckoning in the last



reshuffle too. Naqvi's promotion was imminent, given that he had been handling the Minorities Affairs portfolio single-handedly, and with success, after his senior Najma Heptullah was made a Governor. He is also a senior and prominent Muslim face of the BJP. Both Pradhan and Goyal showed results in key areas which Prime Minister had targeted for prompt delivery — the availability of cooking gas cylinders to millions of needy families at low rates or free of cost, and the overhaul of the power and coal sectors. Indeed, success in these areas played a key role in the BJP's recent electoral victories, especially in States such as Uttar Pradesh which had suffered the worst as a result of poor performance in the last decade or so. Goyal's reward was railways (he retained coal), while Pradhan was given skill development (in addition to his earlier portfolio of petroleum and natural gas).

The demotions were not as many. Uma Bharti lost the prestigious Namami Gange project (rejuvenation of the river Ganga, which is one of the Prime Minister's pet themes) to Nitin Gadkari, ostensibly because it was felt that not enough rapid progress had been made in cleaning up the river. The aim is no doubt an ambitious one which could take years, but there was perhaps not enough of a drive. The result was that the Government had to constantly face questions and embarrassment in the Supreme Court over the progress made. While Bharti retains her cabinet rank as a minister in charge of drinking water and sanitation, extraction of the more substantive part of the portfolio is perceived as notional demotion. Suresh Prabhu lost the rail portfolio, but it can be argued that he had offered to quit before the reshuffle. Besides, he had been unfortunate in that a couple of rail accidents took place in the run-up to the ministerial changes, which brought pressure on him to respond by accepting moral responsibility. He was certainly not a failure in the Railways Ministry, having initiated many reform measures, the fruition of which will be seen in the coming months. Therefore, his shift to the commerce folio as a Cabinet Minister is certainly not a demotion. One demotion which many had been expecting (for some inexplicable reason) and which did not happen was in the case of Cabinet Minister Smriti Irani. She has retained both Information & Broadcasting and Textiles portfolios, indicating the continuing trust that the Prime Minister reposes in her. It must be said to her credit that she has worked diligently and with less controversies ever since she was moved out of the Human Resource Development Ministry.

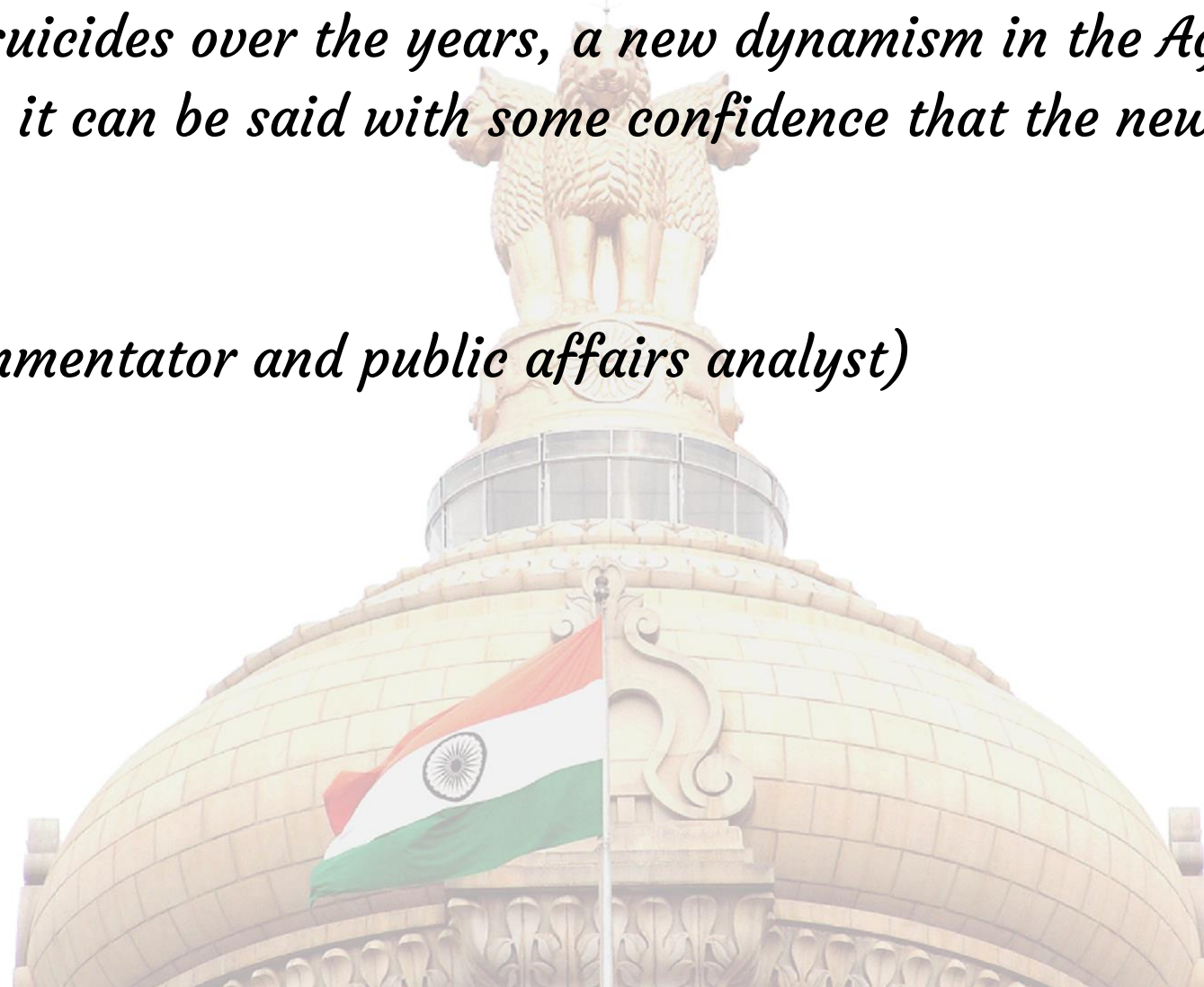
Apart from Sitharaman's rocket-like launch to the crucial and indeed high profile assignment, the other major feature of the reshuffle was the induction of four career professionals — RK Singh, Satyapal Singh, Hardeep Puri and K Alphons — as Ministers of State. Together they bring in a range of varied and deep experience in administrative, law and order and diplomatic affairs. There had been speculation that RK Singh, a former Union Home Secretary and Lok Sabha MP from Bihar, would be in the wilderness after he had raised questions on the BJP's ticket distribution for the last Assembly election in Bihar. But merit triumphed. Alphons had been in the reckoning, according to media reports, for a gubernatorial post earlier. If true, the former IAS officer who enjoys an impeccable reputation, should be happy to have been passed over then! As the topmost level police officer in Mumbai, Satyapal Singh had often fearlessly raised the issue of terrorism and its links with influential sections in society. And Hardeep Puri had been a familiar face in global diplomatic circles, having served as India's envoy at the United Nations. All said, there is little that even the fiercest critics of Prime Minister Modi can fault in these appointments. Yes, they have been lamenting that the



Prime Minister has to depend so much on Rajya Sabha members. But they seem to forget that for 10 years preceding May 2014, the country's Prime Minister was himself a Rajya Sabha member!

The rejections, like the demotions, too have not been many. Rajiv Pratap Rudy submitted his resignation prior to the reshuffle once he was given a hint that his performance as Minister for Skill Development — an area that the Prime Minister is keen on registering a success since it has a direct bearing on job creation — was not considered up to the mark. He left gracefully but said that he had perhaps failed to convey effectively to the Prime Minister and his party about his successes. Another Minister, Kalraj Mishra, who handled the Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME) portfolio with little success, had also put in his papers. He would have been eased out anyway, given his age. But there are still some glitches, and it is to be seen if the Prime Minister will fix them soon. The performance of Radha Mohan Singh as Minister for Agriculture, has, for example, been perceived as less than satisfactory. Yet he escaped being penalised this time around. With the Prime Minister promising to double farm income over the next five years, and the vast reforms that are needed in the agriculture and irrigations sectors, as well as the urgent need that exists to tackle agrarian crises which has led to farmers' suicides over the years, a new dynamism in the Agriculture Ministry is the need of the hour. Overall though, it can be said with some confidence that the new team is now battle-ready for 2019.

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