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Can Narendra Modi give a great government to this country?

ET CONTRIBUTORS Last Updated: Mar 11, 2019, 05:54:00 PM IST

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Synopsis

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Chaitanya Kalbag

The Rajyabhishek in the magnificent [Rashtrapati Bhavan](#) forecourt was a sight for sore eyes, and understandably some of us went ape even if we were not among the 4,000 people attending [Narendra Modi](#)'s oathtaking. It was still a modest event compared with the 1.8 million people who attended Barack Obama's January 2009 inauguration. Talking about the forecourt, it is a shame that in 67 years of independence we have not put up a single building anywhere in this vast nation or its capital that rivals Lutyens's imperial pile, circa 1931, or even Humayun's tomb, circa 1565.

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Anyway, back to the spectacle. The prime minister scored a major coup by inviting the leaders of our South Asian neighbours and Mauritius. Nawaz Sharif clearly defied pressure from both the Pakistani military and the jihadis to come. Sharif described his meeting with Modi on Tuesday as a "historic opportunity", but the déjà vu was palpable. While Sharif was pondering Modi's invitation, Lashkar-e-Taiba militants attacked India's consulate in Herat Afghanistan. Just over 15 years ago, on February 21, 1999, Sharif and BJP prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee signed the Lahore Declaration vowing to push for peace and to rein in their nuclear arsenals. Ten weeks later Indian soldiers were fighting Pakistani infiltrators in Kargil, and Vajpayee's ministers swore that Sharif himself had been kept in the dark by his army. Five months later Sharif was gone, overthrown by General Pervez Musharraf.

Kargil was just one of the body blows that Vajpayee's government took on the national security front. Modi's briefers must also have reminded him of the Kandahar hijack of an Indian Airlines plane on Christmas Eve 1999, the release of three Pakistani terrorists to win the hostages' freedom, the Agra summit fiasco in July 2001, and the attack on India's Parliament in December 2001. All of which are excellent reasons for the BJP, which has vowed "zero tolerance" for threats to India's security, to come up with a muscular defence strategy.

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Modi went part-way towards that goal with the appointment of former IB

chief Ajit Doval as his National Security Advisor, but his decision to give Arun Jaitley both the Defence and Finance ministries sent out the message that the BJP had laid a curate's egg, good only in parts. Jaitley did say Defence would be taken over by somebody else in a couple of weeks, but Modi had had ten days to plan his cabinet, and our defence forces have been withering in AK Antony's suffocating grip for over seven years (one of the biggest sins of commission by the Manmohan-Sonia duo). Finance needs to focus like a laser beam on growth, [inflation](#), and the Budget. But we have the unedifying spectacle of a senior minister hopping between North and South Blocks while our economy continues to be comatose.

Other ministries crying out for reorganisation have been shuffled like an old deck of cards.

Commerce and Industry has been demoted to junior minister status while our current-account deficit soars and we wring our hands about job-creation. All employment-generating ministries should have been clubbed under one Manufacturing supremo, who would also look after Corporate Affairs and Entrepreneurship and ease investments, both domestic and foreign. Our labour laws need revamping urgently, so Law and Labour could have been grouped. Modi could also have created an Education ministry, doing away with the clumsy Human Resources Development umbrella, and bringing in Employment and Skill Development.

A few months ago I was witness to a spirited discussion on India's quest for energy independence among the top bureaucrats in four different energy ministries, each convinced he was smarter than the others, with no coherent unanimity. Modi should have created an all powerful Energy ministry that took in petroleum, natural gas, coal, power and renewable energy.

Then there are all the 'transportation' ministries – shipping, civil aviation, railways, road transport and highways could be clustered. Food, Public Distribution and Fertilisers should have been clubbed with Agriculture to create a farm-to-fork behemoth. Each super-ministry could have been stocked with our brightest bureaucrats, who would in turn be measured against clear objectives and rewarded with bonuses and promotions for exceeding targets.

It is true that Modi has a 45-member team, while Manmohan had 70. But if the intention was to shrink government, and speed decisionmaking, then the creature that we saw on Tuesday was certainly not bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. Wait – we are assuming Modi has a large talent pool to fish in. He seems to be tackling the skills deficit by decreeing that the Prime Minister's Office will control "All important policy issues". In other words, tinker all you please only around the edges.

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All this over-thinking made me take another look at the soothing sunset shots of our presidential palace. And then I remembered my first sight of Tiananmen, the Gate of Heavenly Peace in Beijing, first built in 1420. Next week is the 25th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre. While we are at it let us not forget a few other anniversaries that fall this year and speak to freedom, as well as upheaval and strife: 25 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall; 30 years since Operation Blue Star, the Bhopal gas disaster, the anti-Sikh riots and Indira Gandhi's assassination; and 20 years since the Rwandan genocide. All the more reason we ought to celebrate our mammoth and peaceful transfer of power this week.

(The writer is Former Reuters Asia Editor)

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(Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this column are that of the writer. The facts and opinions expressed here do not reflect the views of www.economictimes.com.)

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