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Narendra Modi's task: To make India less affluent, more affluent

ET CONTRIBUTORS Last Updated: Mar 11, 2019, 05:53:00 PM IST

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Synopsis

Munde was a bad loss because Modi is fishing in a shallow pool of talent. 100-day agendas sound good, but 10 days have whipped past without much earth being shaken.



Chaitanya Kalbag

If you believe in signs and omens, all the days and dates this year coincide with 1947, our year of independence (I have [Amitabh Bachchan](#) to thank for this nugget). The movie "Great Expectations" was also launched in 1947. That fits in with the sentiment nationwide.

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The expectations are scary because we have dug ourselves into such a deep hole economically. We console ourselves with the relatively better Gross Domestic Product growth rate in 2013-14 (4.7%) than the 4.5% a year earlier.

We console ourselves with RBI Governor Raghuram Rajan signalling an end to interest-rate rises, although food prices go up cruelly and permanently. When was the last time you saw the Maximum Retail Price cut on milk, bread, or eggs when things got better? And we delude ourselves that economic fundamentals can't be bad if our stock markets rise and rise.

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As befits last month's strong mandate, the [Prime Minister's](#) Office website (pmindia.nic.in) is slowly taking on the busy-ness of [Narendra Modi's](#) own website. Within hours of Gopinath Munde's death in a car crash, the list of cabinet ministers was updated with a blank space next to the ministries of rural development, panchayati raj, drinking water and sanitation that Munde had been assigned. Those blanks need filling quickly.

Last October Modi had startled his supporters by declaring in a prescient speech: "I am recognised as a Hindutvavadi... but I will tell you my real thinking. In Gujarat I say with courage, "Pehle shauchalay, phir devalay (toilets first, temples later)." The BJP vowed in its manifesto that it would "transform the quality of life of women in Rural India by providing electricity, tapped

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water, cleaner fuel and toilets in every home".

The truth is that India needs to stop being an effluent nation before it can become an affluent nation.

More than 600 million Indians defecate in the open – the most on our planet. It is particularly shameful for our women; as UNICEF notes, adolescent girls frequently drop out of school in our countryside because of lack of toilet facilities. The two girls who were raped and hanged in Katra Sadatganj village had ventured out after dark because they did not have a toilet to go to.

The atrocity happened the day after the BJP government took charge in Delhi. Akhilesh Yadav's outrageous denial about the heart of darkness that UP has become is a direct challenge to Modi, who is not a man to ignore a challenge. Do not wager on the Samajwadi Party serving its full term in UP until 2017.

Munde was a bad loss because Modi needs more talent for his government and he is fishing in a shallow pool. We hear that he will expand his cabinet in the third week of June. That is a good point to bring in expert and technocrat appointments. How he will co-opt new lieutenants will be worth watching. He told me in 2011: "You can't operate outside the rules, but neither do you need a huge, extraordinary talent to run the government.

You need sweat, you need commitment." There is no honeymoon – 100-day agendas sound good, but ten days have already whipped past without much earth being shaken.

One project that will create some tremors in UP is in the constituency Modi has retained, Varanasi. He wants water resources and river development minister Uma Bharti to lead the Clean Ganga Plan. This is a feel-good assignment: he must be aware that BJP veteran Murli Manohar Joshi did nothing for the Ganga as the Varanasi MP in the last LS. The squalid and putrid mess that Varanasi has become extends beyond the river, and Modi and Bharti would do well to closely study the life and work of James Prinsep, the genius English administrator who ran Benares for ten years from 1819.

Prinsep transformed Kashi, one of the world's most ancient cities. He determined its latitude and longitude, conducted a first-ever census of its households, built better roads and gave the city an underground drainage system.

Cleaning the Ganga may be an easier win than clearing up the muck clogging the economy's plumbing. Especially with our electricity and coal sectors in

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dire shape, it fell to minister [Piyush Goyal](#) to rope in pulp writer Chetan Bhagat to motivate his senior bureaucrats. Perhaps you need to boil history down to its lowest common denominator if you want to understand it. We live in "2 States" – in one, many of us cannot still fathom the crushing victory Modi won (and let us be clear – people may not have voted in such large numbers for the BJP if Modi hadn't been its face). In another state, many of us want to believe that things are going to be just fine and dandy because 7 Race Course Road has a new occupant.

Aside from issuing an ordinance to change the law so he could hire his principal secretary, Modi has been almost ginger about exercising his new power. He extended the Cabinet Secretary's tenure by six months, did not countermand the previous government's unseemly haste in naming a new Army chief, and has signalled that he will not upend the UPA's rural employment-guarantee and land-acquisition legislation. He has also been careful and cordial with Jayalalithaa and Naveen Patnaik – he will need their backing if he wants to push legislation through the upper house of parliament.

Meanwhile Mallikarjun Kharge's appointment as the [Congress](#) leader in the LS and the party's stubborn whitewash of its defeat bring to mind what American actor-writer John Quinton said: "Politicians are people who, when they see light at the end of the tunnel, go out and buy more tunnel."

(Originally published on Jun 05, 2014)

(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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