

## The Needle's Eye



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# Hope, Hype and Heat: The Modi Baptism

It seemed like the rhyming slogans, the election jingles, and the grandiloquence of the Bharatiya Janata Party's manifesto were all that we needed to shake us out of our psychic numbing during the past few years. Alliteration hit you everywhere you turned. Narendra Modi told a small audience last Sunday that we needed to ramp up our Skills, Scale and Speed if we wanted to compete with China. The following day President Pranab Mukherjee echoed this in his speech to Parliament. He said the government would also build a Strong, Self-reliant and Self-confident India. It would revive Brand India riding on "our strengths of 5 T's: Tradition, Talent, Tourism, Trade and Technology". Indians thirsting for quick results would get them thanks to the three Ds of Democracy, Demography and Demand.

True, there is a new sense of purposefulness in government. Many of the early steps Modi has taken reflect his Chief Executive Officer style in Gujarat. He does not believe in endless meetings and buck-passing. He has asked to be briefed by senior bureaucrats. He has thrown out the previous gov-

ernment's time-pass gimmicks of (un-empowered) Groups of Ministers and Empowered Groups of Ministers. (Mukherjee himself headed 12 GoMs and 12 EGoMs before he ascended Raisina Hill to his sinecure in Rashtrapati Bhavan).

After the crescendo of elections, the business of a new government is nearly always quieter, but this

## ALL INVITED

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time Modi's takeover is probably the most keenly watched in our history, helped by Television and Twitter. Every appointment and directive is grist for the gossip mill. There is a welcome absence of grey party eminences with puffed chest sounding off about their bailiwicks. Modi's ministers have been warned not to put their feet in their mouths, be wary of the me-

dia, work long hours and be modest in their trappings. Bureaucrats have been promised more power and autonomy and ordered to buckle down. Lawyers are aghast that the Chief Justice of India wants courts to work 365 days a year to chisel down their backlog of cases. Government offices are actually getting dusted off and are a-buzz with rumours that Modi will bring back six-day weeks and that tea breaks will be frowned upon. During Indira Gandhi's 1975-77 Emergency rule buses were painted with slogans like "Work More, Talk Less". More than two-thirds of our population was born after that anushasanparva (era of discipline) and will be impatient for less government, even if Modi means more governance.

It is what Modi does not say that is concerning. He has maintained a studied silence on the mischief and bigotry that are sprouting like poison weeds on the borders of his green garden. Disconcertingly, the lunatic fringe is reinvigorated and would love to take centre-stage. The Born Agains, the Recent Converts and the Newly Emboldened have suddenly found voice, and social media are throbbing with vitriol and unconcealed

belligerence. The Pune lynching by a flash mob of zealots is one signal; so is the chilling pleasantness with which Vishwa Hindu Parishad leader Ashok Singhal spoke on television of Muslim 'in-



ARINDAM

## NEED ANSWERS

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filtrators' in the Northeast, the certainty of a Ram temple in Ayodhya, and the need for Hindus to procreate in greater numbers. Checking illegal immigration is unexceptionable, but throwing people out is non-trivial and deeply divisive.

Modi's victory was not the only scorcher this summer. High temperatures not seen since 1952, the year our first Parliament took oath, have singed ordinary mortals in north India. Two local BJP politicians were killed in Greater Noida and Muzaffarnagar in Uttar Pradesh, adding to riots over power cuts in several UP towns. Home Minister Rajnath Singh, a former chief minister of UP, will have his hands full sorting out law and order in our darkest and largest state. Elsewhere in India, sectarian crowds clashed in Tauru, Belgaum, Hyderabad, Poonch, and even Ahmedabad. We were promised by Mukherjee that the new government would draft a national plan to curb communal violence and show zero tolerance towards riots and crime.

Modi must be seen to be cracking down on such eruptions, even if he is allowing himself longer horizons for other goals. Last week I wrote about Great Expectations,

and the President promised his government would rise to the occasion to fulfil them. "In 60 months from now, we should be able to say with confidence and pride that we have done it," he said. Note that 2019 is also the deadline for the Swachh Bharat Mission, which aims at toilets and open spaces littered with garbage.

I wish. Right now I wish India were Europe, where inflation is low, nearly zero, and deposit interest rates were cut to minus 0.1 per cent, which means you are being encouraged to spend rather than pay your bank to keep your money. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development says while momentum is weakening in most emerging economies, India is at a "tentative positive turning point". India's stock markets hit more than \$1.5 trillion in value this week, weeks before Arun Jaitley unveils his first budget. The ardour has cooled only a bit as the summer grinds towards a monsoon that is certain to be the worst in four years. A severe drought and soaring food prices seem sure to grab us by our throats. More tests for Modi, and the nation is watching and waiting to Learn Leadership Lessons.