

How the Narendra Modi Government Came Through Its Baptism by Fire

The Needle's Eye



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When he won power 13 months ago, Narendra Modi promised he would reel out a governance thriller that was high on quality, aesthetics, story line, dialogues and soothing background music. He would give his jaded audience something to applaud for its sheer integrity, performance and lasting impact.

Sadly, over the past ten days the government has entertained us with lower-stall theatrics.

Take the huge ruckus over Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj's alleged humanitarian assistance for disgraced cricket czar and Indian Premier League mastermind Lalit Modi, who has been living in self-imposed exile in London since 2010. By Tuesday night, the playboy fugitive, whose Instagram account is bursting with pictures of his merry-making across Europe, had also implicated Rajasthan Chief Minister Vasundhara Raje.

We don't know all the answers yet: why did the British let Lalit Modi stay on even after his passport was revoked by the previous Indian government? He's named a string of politicians from both sides of the aisle as his friends or enemies, but so far there has been little disclosure of the quids and the quos. What kind of payoffs did all these dealers and wheelers make and get?

It is a fact that cricket, and especially short-form cricket, has made many rich and powerful Indians richer and more powerful. Big cricket money has also been entwined with politics, which is why so many politicians vie to have their names adorn cricketing bodies.

As we head deeper into this century, it is also clear that corruption need not just be about money. Favours, positions, junkets, hospitality, jobs, university admissions, travel, and even wardrobes are coinage in these high-stakes games. When the muck starts flying, and it is sent flying by a king-sized but cornered muckraker, it is bound to spatter nearly everybody who came in contact.

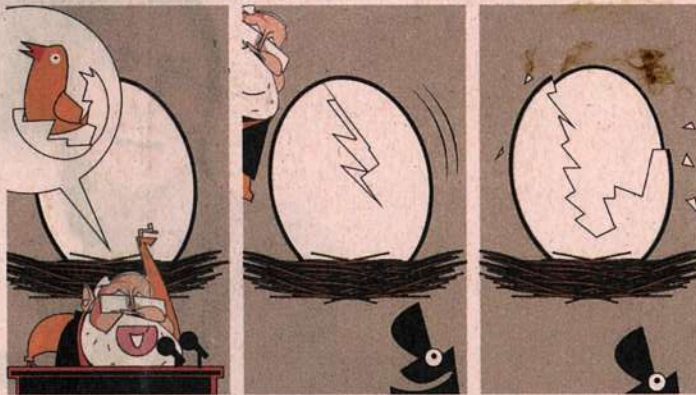
So how did the Narendra Modi government tackle its first big reputational crisis? The Bharatiya Janata Party, its spiritual mentor the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, and senior government ministers all swore that Swaraj was a thoroughbred patriot, was clean as a whistle and had only been kind to a man whose wife lay ill with cancer in a Portuguese hospital.

What bothers me though is the bluster and bravado that we've seen over the past few days. If we close our eyes, why are we hearing the same outraged tones brazening it out that we heard when the previous disgraced bunch was caught with its hand in the cookie jar?

The Lalit Modi circus is just one of the diversions keeping us from worrying about our real problems—deep-

ening rural distress, and an economy that is sputtering not roaring.

Take our "Abbottabad moment". When crack Indian commandos stole across the border to hit North-eastern insurgents in their camps in Myanmar in retaliation for the June 4 ambush in Manipur in which 18 soldiers died, the Army issued a low-key statement. This was not good enough for the government. Instead of the defence or foreign ministers speaking on the raid, the powers that be pressed the junior Information & Broadcasting minister into service as their mouthpiece. Rajyavardhan



Singh Rathore is a retired colonel and an Olympic medal-winning sharpshooter, but on June 9 he turned into a blunderbuss. On television and Twitter he boasted that the army had struck "into the heart of militants" and extolled #56InchRocks, a reference to the circumference of the prime minister's chest.

Even if the cross-border raid was staged with the tacit agreement of Myanmar's ruling junta, the fallout of New Delhi's chest-pounding was not good. The Myanmarers said stiffly that their territory was sacrosanct, and Pakistan reared up in high dudgeon in response to Rathore's clear

threat that India could send its special forces across the western border in hot pursuit of terrorists who attack Indian troops in Kashmir. In its exultation, the Modi government forgot a few rules.

Rule Number One: when you conduct lethal extra-territorial covert operations like a regional Big Brother, don't boast too publicly about it, and don't threaten to repeat it soon. A silent threat is more intimidating than a bullying rant.

Rule Number Two: Study your enemies closely and try not to make new ones. While a series of light-

rebel groups from the Indian states of Assam, Manipur and Nagaland in hideouts on the Myanmar side of the jungle border. The Myanmar military was apparently willing to conduct joint operations with the Indian army against those hideouts. But now they are sulking. So it was that National Security Advisor Ajit Doval had to travel to Nay Pyi Taw on Wednesday to soothe ruffled feathers and seek Khaplang's extradition to India.

What rang loudly was the prime minister's total silence on both the Myanmar raid and the Lalit Modi scandal. India's entire government machinery, its diplomatic missions across the world, and its armed forces are all straining every sinew to make this Sunday, June 21, an International Yoga Day that will be a galactic success. Indian Navy sailors will all perform asanas in unison Across The Oceans. The prime minister himself will lead nearly 40,000 people massed on Delhi's Rajpath in yogic exercises. Twenty-two state television cameras—more than those that filmed the Republic Day parade down the same boulevard—will record the event as Ernst & Young auditors monitor barcoded entry passes. Modi is determined to set two new Guinness Book records. A 34-page Common Yoga Protocol has been readied.

Far from being disgraced, Swaraj herself is flying to New York where she will lead the summer solstice event alongside one of the prime minister's favourite godmen.

On Tuesday, just as the airwaves were rent by screaming antagonists in apoplexy over Lalit Modi, a calm prime minister issued a tweet extolling the pawanmuktasana.

Attached was a video that told us this posture "removes constipation, gives relief from flatulence, and tones up the back muscles and spinal nerves". Indeed.

weight ministers in Modi's cabinet were celebrating the commando raids, Chinese leaders from President Xi Jinping down were assiduously courting Myanmar's opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi in Beijing. The warmth towards Suu Kyi is not accidental: Myanmar's generals have been quietly pulling away from China's orbit, and might have been more amenable to India's blandishments.

S.S. Khaplang, the Naga rebel whose guerrillas staged the June 4 ambush in Manipur, is a Myanmar citizen. He has cobbled together a ragtag coalition of

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