

# Modi Going On Three: Why Doesn't It Feel Like Party Time?

## The Needle's Eye



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While we listlessly wait in century-high temperatures for the slightly delayed monsoon, listening to Minister X or Bureaucrat Y talking up the numbers, the question again is: Who are you trying to impress?

*Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player That struts and frets his hour upon the stage And then is heard no more: it is a tale Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, Signifying nothing.*

- Macbeth, Act 5, Scene 5

Have you noticed how the sound and fury over the latest sensation vanishes from our idiot boxes at the wave of some unseen wand? Does all this signify nothing? Or are we like the frog that gets boiled alive as the temperature of the water rises gradually and relentlessly? Isn't it intriguing how huge rows erupt just before or during a parliament session, the session is rocked by noise and protest, and then it ends without a whimper?

The uproar over patriotism, over whether or not you are Indian if you choose not to chant 'Bharat Mata Ki Jai', or over who was bribed how much in the Agusta Westland VVIP helicopters scandal, all led to protests, walkouts, and adjournments. Paradoxically, the Budget session that just ended was termed one of the most productive in 15 years. PRS Legislative Research said the highest number of bills were introduced and passed within the same session in 10 years.

So is this democracy Indian style? That is a question best answered in states like Tamil Nadu, where incumbent chief minister Jayalalithaa may lose, if some exit

polls are to be believed. This, despite offering an Aladdin's cave of goodies like free cellphones and laptops, cheap rice, farm loan write-offs, an Amma (Mother) branded venture capital fund, and Amma mineral water. Truckloads of cash, saris and other inducements have been seized by election officials.

West Bengal's Mamata Banerjee might be the only chief minister among the five going to the polls who looks set to win another term. She has shrugged off allegations of political thuggery by her supporters, a chit-fund scandal that was staining her doorstep, and sundry annoyances like a collapsed flyover in Kolkata.

The next big election Prime Minister Narendra Modi will watch closely will be for the US president this November. Modi has a better chance of getting along with Donald Trump, if he wins, than with some of the state leaders who will be installed in India in the next few days. When the results roll in today, the only good news for Modi will be if the Bharatiya Janata Party wins its first clear victory in 17 months in Assam. Most exit polls forecast a BJP win in the north-eastern state, but don't be surprised if the party has to scramble to cobble together a messy coalition in a hung assembly.

Around November 2013, former prime minister Manmohan Singh's office issued an eight-page list of reforms carried out by the United Progressive Alliance government over the two previous years. The ob-

vious question then was: Who are you trying to impress?

So it was with a sense of déjà vu that on Wednesday I read a dry recitation of reforms carried out by the Narendra Modi government over the past two years, written by NITI Aayog Vice-Chairman Arvind Panagariya. Later the same day a

## NO NIRVANA

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second Arvind (Subramanian, the Chief Economic Adviser) set out a strong argument for 'Resurrecting Farmer Livelihoods'. The megaphones are being brandished.

A third Arvind (Kejriwal, the chief minister of Delhi) who gave the triumphant BJP a bloody nose last year, could well deliver another nasty shock in the Punjab state elections in 2017. Many people I've spoken to in the farming state with their ears to the ground predict that Kejriwal's Aam Aadmi party will win Punjab. Imagine Kejriwal as chief minister of a key province bordering Pakistan.

Over the next couple of weeks, after he returns from a trip to Iran, Modi will lead a battalion of cabinet ministers and BJP leaders in cele-

brating two years in power. He will launch himself into Year 3 from Saharanpur, a dusty region in Uttar Pradesh, sandwiched between the Yamuna and the Ganga, where the BJP snatched a parliamentary seat from the Bahujan Samaj Party two years ago. Saharanpur was once a power base for BSP leader Mayawati, who hopes to return to power in UP elections next year, and her mentor Kanshi Ram.

About thirty-five years ago I reported on the rope-makers of Saharanpur, who were being squeezed out of existence by a heartless government and rapacious middlemen. The politicians and traders controlled forest produce and cut off these poor Dalit and Muslim villagers from the

'bhabhar' grass that they used to find freely and plentifully.

Much has changed since then, but it is interesting that Modi celebrated one year in power in 2015 with a visit to the UP town of Mathura, and is returning to the state this month for his second anniversary. Winning UP is an article of faith for the BJP.

For now, however, you have to peer intently into the haze to spot the hills. It does not somehow feel that a turbo-charged government, the first in thirty years with a majority in parliament's lower house, is going to drag India into economic nirvana. The Index of Industrial Production grew at a limp 0.1 per cent in March, with mining and manufacturing declining. Capital goods production has shrunk by 2.9 per cent in 2015/16 after growth of 63 per cent the previous year.

Although parliament passed the long-awaited and much-needed Bankruptcy Code, which both offers troubled companies a road-map to either recovery or closure, and helps banks better marshal their bad loans, the economy's engine is not thrumming. Exports and imports both fell again in April. Consumer price inflation jumped to 5.4 per cent in April from 4.8 in March on higher food prices.

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