

# Searching For Noble Thoughts: A Wish-List For Modi

## The Needle's Eye



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*Aa no bhadraha kritava yantu vish-wataha* (Let noble thoughts come to us from all sides).

It seems fitting to look ahead at 2017 with this 3,500-year-old invocation from the Rig Veda as we try to see beyond the seismic waves of change that came at us over the past twelve months.

Terrorism. Syria. Aleppo. Brexit. Trump. The U.S. Fed rate hike. Rising oil prices. And our own *note-bandi*.

### What can we wish for next year?

Let's start with the hope that on New Year's Eve, the day after Prime Minister Narendra Modi's self-imposed 50-day deadline for the pain of demonetisation to end, the government will publish the following good-news lists:

- The quantity and value of old and newly-printed banknotes seized since November 8 across the country with

day-by-day totals compiled from Income Tax, Enforcement Directorate and Department of Revenue Intelligence records;

- The names of those who have been caught with these illegal hoards of cash – those names to be classified by category: politician with party affiliation, bureaucrat and position held, and private citizen with profession, business or source of income;

- The quantity and value of banned 500- and 1000-rupee notes that were in the possession of the Reserve Bank of India, all commercial and cooperative banks on Nov. 8 when demonetisation was launched.

- The quantity and value of banned banknotes in the hands of the public on Demonetisation Day, and an accounting of cash deposited in banks across the country, with an accompanying list of how many accounts were opened after November 8 as well as details of all accounts linked to parties and companies that received large deposits after November 8;

- The value of black money, i.e. all deposits made as part of the government's amnesty scheme, the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY), which came into force from December 15;

- The number of tax evaders turned in by citizens after December 16 when the government set up a whistle-blower website, [blackmoneyinfo@income-tax.gov.in](mailto:blackmoneyinfo@income-tax.gov.in), and the value of unac-

counted money discovered through that route. Modi in his Mann ki Baat radio talk show on Christmas Day said most tax evaders caught so far were turned in by citizen informers;

- The total of funds that have been deposited without taking advantage of the PMGKY, exceed the initial cap of ₹250,000 in old-currency cash deposits, and cannot be linked to a taxpayer's name or Permanent Account Number;

- The number of arrests made, raids conducted, and prosecutions launched against citizens with huge caches of cash and jewellery; and

- The names and towns of the lucky *grahaks* (customers) who are winning 15,000 prizes every day of ₹1,000 each under the Lucky Grahak Yojana for using digital tools to buy everything from fertilizer to *farsaan*, as well as the names and towns of the lucky traders who will win prizes under the Digi Dhan Vyapaar Yojana. The website is opaque on the winners' names (there were 60,000 until Thursday). It will also help if we are told where the ₹340 crore for these lotteries is going to come from – from taxes paid by honest citizens, or from illegal cash stashes?

Some of these lists may overlap a little bit and need a bit of triangulation to arrive at a very good idea of how effective the prime minister's campaign against black money has been. Ideally, the lists should precede the

announcement of the next steps in Modi's war against corruption and black money. Although on Wednesday the government decreed fines and jail time for anybody holding banned currency notes after the December 30, more action is expected to ban *benami* or false-name property transactions. Modi has vowed he is tireless: "I sincerely assure you that

## Name & Shame

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this is in no way going to be a full stop. This is just the beginning. We have to win this battle..."

But we are in search of more good news and noble thoughts, so here are some that could brighten our lives in the new year:

- The government, which has used a technicality to not appoint a Lokpal despite being in power for two and a half years, should finally move on the corruption ombudsman. The technicality is that the 2014 law stipulates a three-member committee that includes a leader of the opposition. Since the Congress party with 44 lower-house MPs does not qualify for that status, the law could be easily amended to allow the head of the largest opposition group (this was done to allow

appointments of other officials like the Chief Information Commissioner (CIC) and Chief Vigilance Commissioner).

- Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party shows it means business on political corruption by not resorting to subterfuge to tweak the law on foreign contributions to political parties. Last February, the Modi government amended the Financial Contribution (Regulation) Act of 2010 to re-define 'foreign' companies like Vedanta that were at least 50% Indian-owned. BJP and Congress had been found guilty of violating the original FCRA 1976 by a Delhi court by receiving Vedanta funding.

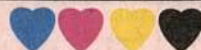
- The BJP and Congress, as well as other major parties, have flatly defied a CIC ruling that they fall under the purview of the Right to Information Act of 2005. Modi should show he is serious about transparency by making his party, to start with, subject to the fullest public scrutiny. This will put to rest allegations that political parties have sought to launder mountains of banned cash post-demonetisation.

Modi said in his radio talk that he had dearly wanted to discuss political corruption in the washed-out winter session of Parliament that ended on December 16: "Some people are spreading rumours that political parties enjoy all kinds of concessions. These people are absolutely in the wrong. The law applies equally to all.

Whether it is an individual, an organisation or a political party, everyone has to abide by law and one will have to. People, who cannot endorse corruption and black money openly, resort to searching for faults of the government relentlessly." Another noble thought.

- One senior bureaucrat, the Chief Secretary of Tamil Nadu, has been raided for black money and gold and, despite his delayed protestation of innocence, removed from his post. Not a single prominent politician or businessman has been named and shamed. The hundreds of millions of Indians who have been standing patiently in lines at ATMs and outside banks hoping to take their own savings out to pay their bills will feel their suffering and stoicism were worthwhile if they see a rogues' gallery, not a solitary trophy hanging on the wall.

In the rock garden of the Zen temple of Ryoan-ji in Kyoto, where the monks assiduously rake the serrated patterns of little, rounded river-bed pebbles every day, it is said that if you sit in peaceful contemplation on the abbot's porch and study the boulders that punctuate the pebbles, you will spy only fourteen. Only the enlightened can see all fifteen boulders in the garden. We have seen only a few of the boulders strewn across our landscape of black money and corruption. We await total enlightenment.



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