

Sticks and Stones: Modi Should Make No Bones

The Needle's Eye



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Round about this time, we ought to have been chilling our champagne and getting ready to exult in, and celebrate, a year of dramatic and positive change under the inspiring leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Vision, vim, vigour, and vitality should have been the keywords for Year One of the Modi Era.

Yet the mood is rather subdued. The Bharatiya Janata Party, despite record membership, has not fared all that well in a string of by-elections and local polls, the latest being the clean sweep by Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress in West Bengal municipalities. The opposition seems to have coalesced, at least in parliament, although the motley Janata groups may not remain united. Rahul Gandhi has got the Congress party rearing up from its tired shanks, although the horse may not last the stretch. In this noise and tumult, both the land acquisition and goods and services tax bills look to be stalled in the upper house.

The biggest change over the past year is that euphoria has made way for realism. It was never going to be easy steering a nation this large, diverse and fractious on a purely economic route, although Modi won power a year ago on the promise of universal development (Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas). There have been plenty of distractions. By month-end Modi will be the most-travelled world leader this past year: he will complete 19

trips abroad, staying out a total of 55 days (nearly the same length as Rahul Gandhi's absence, although taxpayers got far better returns). So foreign policy is a thumping success. Domestically there is a lot of grinding and gnashing about diversionary issues: Muslim and Christian scare-mongering, cultural-historical and educational cleansing, language chauvinism, and the frantic adoption of every icon the government can lay its hands on, the likes of Vallabhbhai Patel and Babasaheb Ambedkar.

The dash to woo the Dalit vote glosses over a key fact: late in his life Ambedkar, fed up of the prejudices and bigotry he had struggled against, repudiated Hinduism and embraced Buddhism. In a May 1950 conversation he explained to the writer Mulk Raj Anand (whose novel *Untouchable* we must all read): "I have felt that through the faith of the Buddha which does not believe in the Hindu God Brahma, (one) can aspire to be (a) human being, free of dogmas, obscure myths and legends! One can pursue knowledge! One can disown casteist heroes of the Hindus like king Ram, Avtar of Vishnu Bhagwan!"

Poor Narendra Modi. He came into office with a great advantage as India's first Twitter prime minister. He has over 12 million followers now; I just read that he gained an astonishing 280,498 new ones on just one day, April 7, which was a mundane, un-

ventful day. But he is now being blamed for not being communicative enough. Will his history be stitched together from 140-character thought-bursts, or is he going to mark his first anniversary with some clear, unambiguous replies to critics who say things, especially on the economic front, haven't gone far enough fast enough?

Although Modi took an unkind swipe at his predecessors in Toronto last month when boasting that Scam India was moving towards Skill India, and although the odour of corruption and mis-governance has lifted noticeably, something is holding investor sentiment in check. Maybe it is the tax bloodhounds smelling

new game, or the entrepreneur who feels that it is not time just yet to set up that mammoth factory to churn out millions of widgets, or the exporter whose cash register is not clanging. Whatever, it took an in-house critic like Arun Shourie to take the Modi Sarkar behind the woodshed last week.

Modi just cannot afford to take Shourie lightly. After all, the former editor, economist and author's April 1996 essay on Hindutva is reproduced in full on the BJP's website to explain its philosophy of "cultural nationalism". Shourie's column followed a Supreme Court ruling of December 1995 that said Hindutva does not necessarily refer to religious practices

but as "the way of life of the Indian people". After all, in August 2013 Shourie stoutly defended Modi, again in an interview to Karan Thapar, calling his rivals like Sushma Swaraj and L.K. Advani "stateless leaders". And after all, in August 2009, Shourie had lashed out against the BJP's then leadership after its second successive general election loss to the Congress party, calling it a "kati patang" (a kite without a string) and describing party chief Rajnath Singh, now Modi's aHome Minister, as "Alice in Blunderland". He urged the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the BJP's patron organisation, to drum sense into the party's bickering leadership. "RSS should crack the whip," Shourie said then. So this time around when government ministers criticised Shourie, some implying that it was a case of sour grapes because he had not been granted any official post, Modi himself stayed significantly silent. What signal did he see behind Shourie's outburst?

One of the ministers who leapt to Modi's defence was Piyush Goyal, who heads the key ministries of power, coal and new and renewable energy. One of the brightest younger members of Modi's cabinet, a former BJP treasurer and investment banker, Goyal's achievements somewhat refute Shourie's criticism.

Over the past year, Goyal told me, his government has added a record 22,500 MW of power-generating ca-

capacity and crossed one billion units of electricity generation. India's coal production grew 8.3 per cent in 2014/15, the highest in 23 years. Goyal is aiming at 100,000 MW of solar power and 60,000 MW of wind power by 2022 – targets that seem almost dizzyingly difficult. The controversial 204 coal mining blocks cancelled by the Supreme Court are being auctioned off, and Goyal says he expects revenue of up to Rs 192,000 crore from the e-auctions of just the first 29 blocks to go to private bidders.

Shourie quoted a newspaper analysis to charge that the government had hyped its revenue projections, which would only accrue over 30 years of full production by the auctioned coal mines.

Be that as it may, Modi and his cabinet are very likely to roll out a bunch of e-books, which the prime minister favours, listing their achievements since taking office. That, too, was pooh-poohed by Shourie, who said during his May Day fusillade: "Every government at any time can give you a long list." Withering words. In the end, perceptions matter and the voter is king. Indeed, late in 2013, with Modi's shadow looming large over it, the Congress-led government had put out an impressive, eight-page list of its own achievements over just two years. Did that win it re-election?

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