

# GOING STRONG

As Modi government begins its fourth year, its sheen hasn't dimmed, its success sits uncomfortably with social tensions

**A**T THE THREE-YEAR mark, the Narendra Modi government has notched a remarkable feat: It seems to have extended the honeymoon that every new government enjoys well beyond its usual expiry date. In fact, the Modi government may have done better for itself than that. In a country where, almost by rote, governments past their mid-points start losing their sheen, it is not only un-plagued by the dreaded anti-incumbency factor, but for the moment at least, could be said to have an incumbency advantage. For proof, one need look no further than its string of electoral triumphs in state and local body elections that have pushed back memories of its debacles in Delhi and Bihar. Most recently, the Modi-led BJP posted an overwhelming victory in Uttar Pradesh, where it also skilfully converted its big disruptive move of demonetisation into a political USP. Of course, the government's successes are amplified and burnished by its energetic projection of them, its masterful steering of the narrative. It is also true that its look of apparent invincibility owes much to its opposition's deshabille. Yet, even its critics must concede that on its third birthday, the Modi government is still sitting pretty, still getting the benefit of the doubt.

And there are doubts. The festivities at the government's third birthday bash are clouded by incidents such as the caste violence in BJP-ruled Saharanpur and cow vigilantism in several states ruled by the party, faltering policies, as in Kashmir, and a gathering unease about its effect on crucial institutions. It is in the tenure of the Modi regime that Dalit unrest has sought a new language of assertion. The suicide of a Dalit student on a university campus in Hyderabad, the flogging of a Dalit family for skinning a dead cow in Una, and the anti-Dalit violence in UP have joined together to script a new narrative of protest and resistance that is still outside of the party-political space and is perhaps more powerful for its abstinence. Muslim insecurities have also grown over the last three years, even as the Modi government has offered only silence as response, or slogans of unity and development that glide over the divisions sharpening on the ground. The important and consequential triple talaq debate, thus, plays out in unhospitable circumstances — in the backdrop of rising anxieties in the minority community about a government that neither speaks to them directly, nor comes down visibly on displays of majoritarian boorishness in the name of nationalism.

The stains on the government's report card also point to the return of turbulence in Kashmir, where the BJP has not been able to keep the promise of its inventive pact with the PDP. They speak of its continuing lack of acknowledgement of and sparse engagement with its opposition. And its precarious handling of executive-judiciary relations. The Modi government has two more years to show that it recognises that while majorities are needed to come to power in a democracy, a legacy in a constitutional system such as India's will demand more — it requires a mindfulness of and adherence to the higher rules of the political game.