



USUAL SUSPECTS SWAPAN DASGUPTA

Modi rule more purposeful than most other Govts

The unveiling of the *saaf niyat, sahi vikas* theme to define the commemoration of the fourth year of its administration, is calculated to raise another — and by now familiar — storm of controversy for the Narendra Modi Government.

This is not because the slogan marks any abrupt break. The theme of *saaf niyat* (loosely translated as pure motives) was first invoked by the Prime Minister during the Uttar Pradesh Assembly election to explain the moral underpinnings of demonetisation and he repeated it during an intervention in the Rajya Sabha. At the same time, the emphasis on good intentions constitutes a shift from the *achchhe din* slogan that was lavishly used during the 2014 general election. Whereas *achchhe din* signifies an end objective, much like the 'good life' encapsulates the moral code of most religious teachings, *saaf niyat* suggests that the direction of governance is laudable and above board.

Critics have jumped at the emphasis on direction and motives to argue that the Modi Government has shifted the goal post. According to them, Modi came to power by beguiling people and promising them paradise on earth. However, since the Government — for all its achievements — has not turned India into the Indic version of the Garden of Eden, Modi is citing the nobility of his motives to divert attention from his failure to reach utopia in four years or at the end of his first term in office.

In the end of it all boils down to the half-full or half-empty perception. That the Government which came to power on May 26, 2014, with an absolute majority in the Lok Sabha, has been more purposeful than most other Governments in living memory is undeniable. The sheer range of policy initiatives of the Government is not merely impressive, it is spectacular.

It would also be fair to say that the mood in India has also altered dramatically in the past four years. In 2014, when the UPA-2 regime demitted office, there was a strong perception that India had once again shot itself in the foot. The optimism over the future that was a feature of the first decade of the 21st century had dissipated and been replaced by a sense of frustration and exasperation — a feeling that we were our worst enemies, and politicians the big villains. In this climate, Modi offered hope and fuelled expectations that the country would make a serious bid to live up to its true potential. There was also an expectation that the selfishness and venality Indian politicians had displayed in the era of fractious coalitions would be terminated under a strong, no-nonsense leader.

These were realistic expectations that the *achchhe din* slogan dramatised, not least for the sake of whipping up crowds — so essential for an Indian election campaign.

As people start considering how they will vote in the 2019 general election, it is important to consider how much Modi has lived up to people's more realistic expectations.

That he has disappointed some of his more ideological camp followers is obvious. Despite an onrush of Hindu activism, those who wanted 2014 to trigger the beginning of a Hindu Republic are somewhat disappointed. Some of their pet themes such as the freeing of Hindu institutions from some of the more intrusive aspects of the Right to Education Act and the demand for the control over Hindu religious institutions to be vested in the hands of believers, have been left unaddressed. The *gau rakshaks* too have only secured a partial victory.

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Likewise, those who saw Modi as an Indian personification of Margaret Thatcher seem miffed. Far from dismantling an overburdened State, Modi has increased public expenditure dramatically. Privatisation, a somewhat casual objective these days, has been lowered in the Government's list of priorities and replaced by a commitment to make the delivery systems of Government more efficient and more technology-friendly. At the same time, the focus of governance — particularly after the election defeats in Delhi and Bihar in 2015 — has veered towards the creation of leak-proof, welfare networks — an objective that the vocal breed of pro-market ideologues find reprehensible.

One of the problems the Atal Bihari Vajpayee Government confronted was the listlessness of the party faithful. In 2004, a large chunk of the foot soldiers and party sympathisers chose to stay at home because they felt their pet concerns hadn't been addressed. Modi has been careful to not repeat this mistake. Amit Shah may well offend the sensibilities of the beautiful people with his over-bearing and blunt demeanour. However, in these past four years he has transformed the BJP into a well-oiled election machine

blessed with a single-minded objective of maximising the party's vote. More important, he has effected a major social shift. The BJP's social centre was earlier the lower middle classes and traders. Today, that centre has shifted lower down the socio-economic ladder, just as the Congress' under Rahul Gandhi has moved higher up. The nature of the vicious culture wars being fought on the social media reflect that trend.

Confronted by the possibility of the anti-Modi forces coming together, albeit at the State level, the Government in its final year has principally one objective: To drive its governance agenda relentlessly. It is only when a sufficient number of individuals are convinced that they are better off today than they were five years ago, will Modi secure a renewed mandate. Equally, if the hope that was in evidence in 2014 is sufficiently rekindled by the realisation that the Government is on the right track, will chemistry be able to override the notional arithmetical advantage in favour of the Opposition.

Every election is unique. However at this stage of the battle for 2019, the more appropriate analogy isn't 2004 but the second general election of 1957 when the Congress — the then ruling party — tally actually went up nominally from 1952.