

THE NEEDLE'S EYE The PM has adopted legacy programmes and run them better

Modi, The Last-Mile Man



Chaitanya Kalbag

They say the best way to persuade somebody is to plant an idea in their head and get them to start speaking about it as if it were their idea. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has shown he is a great persuader. Persuasion is one thing. What about implementation? Over the past four years, the BJP government's two main pillars of political consolidation have been 'economic intervention' and 'social investment'. There is a lot of politics too, and that is aimed at maintaining and expanding BJP's hold on power.

The Modi government has received a lot of flak for the implementation of its biggest economic interventions, the 19-month-old demonetisation and the introduction of the goods and services tax (GST), which will soon mark its first anniversary. Notebandi directly hit citizens' personal autonomy, and GST, although it is touted as a sign of 'cooperative federalism', is also seen as diminishing states' fiscal autonomy.

Demonetisation's short- and medium-term economic palsy (which the dictionary defines as paralysis accompanied by involuntary tremors) has still not run its course, and may never be properly medicated, especially in regard to the devastation it has caused in the informal economy.

GST's runway has also been potholed, but with repeated ministrations from the GST Council, it is airborne. The April and May gross GST revenue

totalled over ₹2 trillion, more or less on target. Electricity, real estate, petroleum and alcohol are still outside the GST net, but policy mandarins expect the single tax to smoothen and expand interstate trade, and so eventually add a few pips to gross domestic product.

Demonetisation was a 'proprietary' Modi step. Nearly all other programmes he has pushed — GST, Swachh Bharat, the Ujjwala free LPG connections, Awas low-cost housing, Mudra micro-loans, the Jan Dhan zero-balance bank accounts, and not forgetting Aadhaar — were all launched in one form or another by the UPA government. Modi adapted, re-branded, marketed and personally pushed them, focusing on execution. He is the Last-Mile Man.

Like his adroit use of social media, Modi has deployed technology as well as the growing spread of the internet to push his messages. Immediately after his government entered the final year of its term in May, Modi held a series of video interactions with beneficiaries of the Ujjwala, Mudra and Awas across the country. As always with marketing, there was a bit of hype.

It's Not Gas

Modi said under Ujjwala, more than 40 million free LPG connections have been distributed to BPL, or below poverty line, families (true), and that a total 100 million new LPG connections have been issued nationwide since he took power, compared with 130 million in the six decades from 1955 (historically inaccurate, since the first LPG cylinder was sold in October 1965, and even in urban India, was an upper middle class luxury for a long time).

Launched in May 2016, Ujjwala is a good example of how the Modi government has moved the needle from subsidies to social investment. The UPA government had tried something similar but trapped itself in a popu-



The other first-past-the-post system

list maze. It sold subsidised LPG cylinders directly to BPL families while not ending such subsidies to the urban middle class.

The BJP government first cajoled 11 million better-off LPG consumers to voluntarily surrender subsidies worth about ₹2,500 crore annually to state coffers under the #GiveItUp plan, before launching Ujjwala. By cutting back on biomass use in cooking, India will also reduce its carbon emissions as it tries to meet its climate-change target.

Modi's micro-management has played a substantial part in untangling several major infrastructure projects under the PRAGATI (pro-active governance and timely intervention) system. Here again, the Project Monitoring Group (PMG), which was set up in 2013 by the UPA government under the Cabinet Secretariat, was moved to the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) after Modi took office.

Once a stakeholder ministry, department or state government uploads details of a delayed or stalled project on the PRAGATI portal, the PMG starts intensive consultations with all sides. Grievances are heard, roadblocks cleared, and solutions offered. Since March 2015, Modi has chaired 25 review meetings. Everyone from senior secretary-level officials in Delhi mini-

stries to state chief secretaries to district and environment officials are linked to the prime minister by video-conferencing, and timelines and closures are reviewed. Many of these projects had contributed to the bloated stock of non-performing assets on banks' books.

Top-level involvement has made a big difference. Until May, a total of 234 central and state projects involving investments of over ₹11.22 trillion have been reviewed in critical infrastructure sectors like railways, highways, power, coal and civil aviation. Modi has also used PRAGATI to keep tabs on 45 flagship programmes like the Aadhaar rollout as well as Awas housing.

Infra Digging

The PMO has begun to use drones to monitor progress in hard to access projects like improvements in infrastructure at the Kedarnath shrine, or roads to the Char Dham pilgrimage sites.

Twenty-five of the largest projects worth ₹1.55 trillion that have been fast-tracked include the Mumbai Trans-Harbour Link, the Lucknow, Bangalore and Chennai metro projects, the Navi Mumbai airport, and rail-cum-road bridges across the Ganga at Munger in Bihar and the Brahmaputra at Bogibeel in Assam.

The BJP government first cajoled 11 million LPG consumers to voluntarily surrender subsidies worth about ₹2,500 crore annually, before launching Ujjwala