

'India is on a march of great growth'

LISTING ACHIEVEMENTS The senior BJP leader says Modi govt has been honest, eliminated middlemen and rejects Oppn's charges of undermining institutions

face to face

RAVI SHANKAR PRASAD, Union minister

NEWDELHI: Union minister Ravi Shankar Prasad is one of the senior most leaders of the government. He spoke to **Kumar Uttam and Prashant Jha** on the government's record in office. Excerpts:

What is the most significant achievement of the Modi government?

First, we have given an honest and transparent government. Middlemen are out and decisions are taken on merit. Second, we have raised India's global prestige and power. The PM is a global leader. We have also ensured growth with equity. India is becoming a big destination as the fastest growing economy (in the world). There is big push to infrastructure sector and highways. Then, there are novel programmes for the poor, such as sending benefits directly into their bank accounts; there are schemes such as Ujjwala scheme, bringing electricity to villages, common service centres under Digital India programme. ₹5.67 lakh crore have been disbursed to over 12 crore people under Mudra scheme. I would not say everything is complete. But, India is on a march of great growth, with great hope.

Let us begin with the economy. Has the BJP failed to create jobs?

I disagree. If over 120 million people have been given loans under Mudra scheme, and even half of them have added one more employee, how much does it come to? If roads are being constructed at great speed, are people getting employment or not? As per NASCOM estimates, 6 lakh people have got jobs in the last three years in the IT sector.

Are you shifting goal posts when you talk about self employment and not

formal jobs?

No. Government jobs cannot be there for everyone. What is important is for the government to create an enabling atmosphere. That is what we are doing. We are creating jobs in manufacturing, infrastructure, service sector and others.

Agriculture is another sector that is under stress.

We are blending technology and irrigation. There is huge flip for irrigation – worth ₹60,000 crore. Insurance to farmers, soil health card, blue revolution, white revolution are all designed to empower the farmer. I will not say there is no stress. The conventional method of loan waiver is resorted to wherever needed. But the larger narrative is of empowering farmers.

Did demonetisation cripple the economy?

No. Whatever money has come - about 14 lakh crore - has an identity. It also helped us locate, identify and cripple the parallel corporate sector. More than 2 lakh companies have been deregistered. ₹35,000 crore was deposited by a few groups of people. One company had no balance sheet, and it deposited close to ₹4,000 crore in one week's time and withdrew it. We were able to locate those fly-by-night operators. I am willing to concede it may have a tempo-

rary impact on the realty sector. But, with RERA and others, surely there is a roadmap available for more clean-up and an accountable real estate sector.

Manmohan Singh had predicted note-ban and GST will have an adverse impact on economy. Has he been proved right?

It was not the economist, but politician Manmohan Singh who was speaking. He could not lead the GST (move) successfully. Modi government could negotiate with stakeholders. Have 11 million new traders joined on the GST platform or not? There are several independent reports by bodies such as World Bank. All of them say India is the fastest growing economy. The fundamentals of the economy are strong. Foreign Direct Investment and foreign exchange reserve is at the highest level. Inflation, current account deficit, and fiscal deficit are under check. For a long term and structural change, you need to take bold decisions with

courage and with adequate preparation.

You led the charge against UPA when fuel prices shot up. Today, you are facing the same challenge.

The price has been deregulated. Prices came down 8 or 9 times in the past. Crude prices are unusually high. Government is contemplating a long-term solution. But let us not forget that all the duties on fuel are used for the country's development. There has to be a balance between those who move in cars, and need for the poor.

Is there a mismatch between government approach towards the poor and middle class?

Digital India and electronic manufacturing are creating new avenues for middle class youth. When national highways are done well, doesn't it benefit the middle class? What does a chappalwallah taking a flight under Udaan scheme indicate? It will be completely wrong to say we are ignoring middle class.

The Congress has alleged that you have systematically undermined institutions, including the judiciary by holding the appointment of judges. How do you see the larger executive-judiciary relationship?

The Congress has no face to ask questions to us. The first supersession in the history of Supreme Court happened under Congress. Justice HR Khanna, the courageous judge who ruled that fundamental rights of Indians cannot be compromised even during emergency, was not allowed to be made chief justice for even two months. What is our record? This is a government of leaders who have fought against emergency for three freedoms -- of individuals, media and judiciary. Our commitment for independence of judiciary is complete and total.

But those defeated by people repeatedly cannot

run politics of the country from corridors of court through sponsored litigations. I mean the Congress. The whole (Judge BH) Loya case was a deliberate conspiracy by the Congress. Take the whole impeachment move or the outburst in the course of hearing of Ram Janmabhoomi case. This whole narrative of Congress was designed to overawe the judiciary. This is not acceptable.

With regard to appointments, 2014-15 was lost in the NJAC battle. We brought the national judicial commission. They stayed it. In 2016, we appointed 126 high court judges, the highest in the last 30 years. Since 1989 the average appointment was 72-85. In 2017, we appointed 119 judges, about 10-15 SC judges, about 250 additional judges were confirmed. This year too, we have also appointed about 30 judges. It will continue to be done. But remember, the right to seek a reconsideration of the recommendations made by the collegium is a right available to the government.

But are you exercising this right based on the verdicts the judges have given?

I am happy that you raised this. You are referring to the Uttarakhand judgment. The allegation is absolutely wrong and untenable for two simple reasons. A BJP government has been elected with nearly three-fourth majority now. Second, that high court order was upheld by the SC. By whom - Justice Khehar; he, remember, had also set aside the NJAC and rose to become a distinguished chief justice under our government. The stand that we have taken is purely on principle that there has to be greater sensitivity towards regional representation, those who missed out and all those things.

There is also a perception that under the government, the cabinet system is undermined. All the power is vested in the PM and the PMO.

This comes from the Congress, whose ministers never cared for the PM. My leader, the PM, has been elected by the people because of his record of governance and the trust he generates. This whole argument that cabinet system is

not working is humbug. The PM permits a free and frank discussion, seeks advice, we all speak, and he works in the most democratic manner possible. Yes, the PM very effectively monitors the delivery of schemes. That's good. That's his job. He works 24X7 and expects all of us to work. What is the Congress's problem if the cabinet system has been restored with all its discipline, delivery and effective governance? I do not want to reflect upon the 10 years of the UPA, as to what kind of respect was given to the PM, that one gentleman decided to tear away the ordinance passed by the cabinet. That was the respect of the PM then.

Why haven't you appointed a Lokpal yet?

There was an issue about clarity of law; then the standing committee recommendations came. The matter went to Supreme Court and now the process is on. Meetings were held, but (Mallikarjun) Kharge (the leader of the Congress in the Lok Sabha) refused to attend. Lokpal is important, but clean governance is equally important. Despite Lokpal not being appointed for reasons beyond our control, we have given a clean government.

Turning to politics, you came to power on the basis of a wide social coalition. But are you now facing a Dalit challenge?

The BJP has the largest number of Dalit MPs and MLAs. We strengthened the SC/ST act in 2015. When we got numbers and could have got anyone elected as President of India, we chose a distinguished political leader of great respect who also came from the Dalit community. What more visual symbol can be given? We are undertaking a new narrative of Dalit empowerment even as others are doing politics.

Is the BJP worried about emerging Opposition unity?

India of 2018-19 is not the India of 90s. It is an India of aspiration and hope. They want a stable government, want it to perform, deliver, and if it doesn't, it is shown the door. The only glue for the Opposition is survival against Modi. It is a text book case of political opportunism.

