

# India's best hope for 2019

**A**S PRIME Minister Narendra Modi completes three years in office, if one takes a dispassionate look at the broader picture, one would discern considerable similarities in the basic thrust of the core policies pursued by first PM Jawaharlal Nehru and the current one. Nehru wanted to make the impoverished, brazenly plundered independent India, freed after 200 years of colonial rule, a great country — economically prosperous, socially inclusive, and embracing science and technology.

## Aspirations

In the globalised world of the 21st century, Modi has been trying to make India great using today's tools and addressing aspirations of 1.3 billion people. He has emerged as India's most popular national leader, especially among the aspirational youth. The national mood three years ago, characterised by despondency, rudderlessness and cynicism exacerbated by revelations of various scams, rising financial deficit and anti-corruption agitations, has certainly dissipated today. India is the fastest growing economy and the largest FDI destination today. There is buzz about the country again, thanks to Modi's well-thought-out, aggressive and professional marketing of 'Brand India' abroad.

On all his major trips abroad (he has visited more countries in three years than any other Indian PM), he talks of Make in India, Digital India, Stand Up India, Solar Alliance, renewable energy, smart cities, bullet trains, among others. When several major economies, including the US, China, Japan and the EU, are experiencing decline, India's growth rate appears as the shining crown of the global economy.

Embracing some initiatives of the previous UPA government such as MGN-REGA, Aadhaar, GST, and improvising and implementing them with greater vigour and introducing a series of Jan



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Dhan schemes aimed at reaching out to the poor, Modi has triggered off the financial inclusion of crores of Indians who weren't a part of India's growth story.

Thanks to Modi's pet projects Swachh Bharat, Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao, Ujjwala and crop insurance schemes, the BJP isn't perceived any longer as the party of the rich and the upper castes alone. This was clearly manifested during the recent assembly elections, especially in Uttar Pradesh, where the party performed exceedingly well.

His detractors contend that neither the black money has been brought back nor the promised jobs created; even the much publicised demonetisation move failed to achieve its stated objectives. But the masses seem more than willing to bank. His political rivals can't match his oratorical skills and have limited ability to connect with the masses. Their relentless focus on finding fault with Modi isn't cutting ice. His grand vision of making a 'New India' by the year 2022 does fascinate millions of youth. The government's failures on some counts don't dilute their support; they seem to believe that it's better to have tried and failed than never to have tried at all!

## Mantra

Modi's mantra, 'Sabka Saath Sabka Vikas', is equally significant for the conduct of foreign relations. Modi's thrust on 'neighbours first' has had mixed results. While relations with Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Sri Lanka are on the mend, relations with Pakistan and China remain strained in spite of Modi's efforts. China's persistent support to Pakistan is a major stumbling block. Modi's special gestures of inviting Nawaz Sharif to his inauguration and stopping over in Lahore on his birthday haven't sustained temporary bonhomie as the toothless

civilian government of Pakistan can't defy the army. Nonetheless, having cordial relations with China and Pakistan remain the ultimate objective. Modi's bold decision to take Kulbhushan Jadhav's case to the ICJ has paid off in the short run. With the current state of the India-Pakistan relations, SAARC can't move, so it is sensible to have sub-regional grouping involving Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh. Both Nepal and the Maldives need delicate handling, especially as China is making substantial inroads there.

## Churning

Relations with Japan, ASEAN, South-East Asia, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Israel, Africa, Central Asian Republics and Magnolia have deepened. In spite of the churning in the EU and Brexit, India's relations with Germany, France and the UK look good. The one worrying aspect, however, is Russia's slow but steady drift towards Pakistan, which needs to be reversed.

Notwithstanding concerns about H1B visas, hike in visa fee and incidences of attacks on Indian Americans, the US-India relations have never been better. As and when Modi and Donald Trump meet, they are likely to hit off well as both are capable of making deals which offer a win-win scenario for both. Trump's unpredictability and reservations about the US rebalance in Asia warrants recalibration via-a-vis India's approach. Cultivating Trump's son-in-law and daughter isn't such a bad idea.

For transforming the national mood, unveiling an inspiring vision for 2022 and initiating huge projects, Modi deserves to be applauded. For streamlining administration and nudging it into a proactive force, he should be appreciated. As for actual implementation of his dream projects, he still has to work hard. Regrettably, for restraining the hotheads and vigilantes who are creating social tension, he scores poorly.

Modi has emerged as the undisputed leader of the BJP and the government. More significantly, he remains India's best hope for 2019; no single party or a group of parties can stop him.

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