

The 'final' report card

More than *vikas* and *badlao*, PM Modi's focus is on his exploits in the 'middle miles'

NILANJAN MUKHOPADHYAY

The performance of governments cannot be assessed with the precision of examiners of objective test question papers, more so if headed by a person like Prime Minister Narendra Modi whose mention forces a vertical division in any assembly. Everybody has an opinion on him, the challenge is to ferret out grey zones where facts are separated from half-truths and critique is extricated from the cesspool of damnation. On this government's previous three anniversaries, the scope and scale of claims made regarding achievements was not as spread-out as this year and so was the extent of its criticism. This is understandable for it is the final 'report card', the same sheet which the Bharatiya Janata Party, Mr Modi specifically, will distribute to people, wholly and it parts, in speeches and handouts, on bill boards and jingle, on video and mobile apps.

The opposition too, the Congress party specifically, has released an extensive appraisal of government performance, whose conclusion is manifest in its title -- India Betrayed. But between claims and counter-assertions lies the government's accomplishment, or the lack of it, which can possibly be best described by the glass half-full analogy used to his advantage during his epochal 2014 campaign. The glass, Modi had told a group of Delhi University students, was always full for him -- half with water and half with air, it was never empty. Within a week, Shashi Tharoor, then a Union minister and already Modi's *bête noire*, retorted before the same bunch of students that his concern was what more could he put into the glass of water. What Modi's government has showcased on its fourth anniversary is in fact, not a single glass but an array of them, each filled with sufficient water to convey a sense of a job well done, time well spent. The Congress and other opposition parties have harped on those glasses which are missing and that even in those on display, air being significantly more than water.

The jury is out and will assemble after votes have been cast in 2019. Between now and then, the BJP will be unsparing in efforts to turn the



BATTLING PERCEPTIONS: The half empty glass always has air but PM Modi will face if people conclude it is nothing but hot air

narrative in its favour. Modi, more than anyone else, knows that the biggest challenging battle is for perceptions and this alone matters. He has already kick-started his campaign in Cuttack and Baghpat. With tact, emphasis has been paid in publicity material and Modi's speeches on the deliveries of the government while promises which remain forgotten, have disappeared. Possibly the biggest announcement which

universally failed. In perception, certain schemes have worked to its benefit and the BJP hopes this will continue to act as force multiplier during parliamentary elections. In Uttar Pradesh for instance, the *Ujjwala* scheme under which the government-subsidised Rs. 1,600 to be paid as security deposit, was a great hit and one of the reason for the overwhelming support to the BJP during the assembly polls in 2017. It

The BJP can be bailed out if people cynically conclude that no party can generate jobs or if the Opposition fails in presenting an alternative developmental plan and instead limits itself to an anti-Modi campaign.

has been given a quiet burial is the much-hyped Make-in-India campaign announced with great flair from the ramparts of the Red Fort. Surprisingly, MUDRA scheme, initially publicised as a job generating scheme by promoting entrepreneurship, has also been taken off the initial bouquet of achievements possibly following growing criticism that the scheme has chiefly handed 'doles' to a few; The average Rs. 23,000 disbursed to almost 90 per cent of the beneficiaries is highly inadequate to start a business with capacity to employ two or more people.

It is not that the government has

remains a premier showpiece although in recent months, critics have pointed out that it is running out of gas and failing in its objective. Moreover, social welfare schemes have not had a similar impact in states already ahead on socio-economic parameters and they have not lapped up the cooking gas subsidy with the same gusto.

More worryingly, reports also surfaced from across India, both rural and urban, of households carefully tucking away stovetops and cooking gas cylinders because it is difficult to pay for refills. With countless Indians still struggling to make both ends meet, benefits like cooking gas still

has a cost while wood-fired *chulhas*, despite emanating fumes of despondency, cost nothing save the time scrounging for firewood. No one has yet claimed, but this government would be warned that realisation of the altering narrative, most often dawns post-facto. Be it the hype over cooking gas, rural electrification or toilets, the BJP should remain alert to the possibility of these overnight heralding their Mary Antoinette moment. Highways build nations and many a leader walked the talk, Akhilesh Yadav being among them, and learnt the bitter way.

Even most sympathetic critics conclude that the Modi government has grappled with not just the last mile connectivity, most starkly in the case of toilets and village electrification, but also with regard to the first mile. The BJP is aware of this and its report card is packed with accomplishments in the middle miles -- anti-corruption measures, projection of a more muscular nation in the global arena, and of course reiterating that farm incomes would be doubled. But because this was a government voted on the promise of two magical words - *vikas* and *badlao*, while much may have altered in the past four years, people find themselves where they were in terms of their employment or unemployment woes. The BJP will hope to being bailed out if people turn cynical and conclude that no party can generate jobs. This is a distinct possibility if the opposition fails in presenting an alternate plan for growth, development and jobs and instead limits to an anti-Modi campaign.

In an election year, achievement will be distinct from what is projected to shape perceptions. Because no government can possibly accomplish all it set out to achieve or what it pledged in the electoral bid, the glass will always contain a certain quantity of air. Modi's real challenge is to ensure people do not begin concluding that it is nothing but hot air. The time for 'performing' is now in the past. The BJP's focus will henceforth solely be on public opinion management and converting the 'feel-good' sentiment into votes. For the opposition, besides sewing a credible front, the challenge is to convert initial anti-incumbency into a tidal wave against Modi.