

# Video conferences, apps help PM widen outreach

HT Correspondent

letters@hindustantimes.com

**NEW DELHI:** Prime Minister Narendra Modi has held eight video conferences in over a month with beneficiaries of government schemes. He has touched base with over 10 million citizens and an equal number through other digital platforms, government officials said.

This is a “below the radar” approach, using a format that gives him “flexibility”, which public rallies and government events do not allow, and with “personal outreach”, said a government official involved with the campaign.

Modi initiated the campaign to interact with the beneficiaries for a first-hand account of the delivery of his schemes.

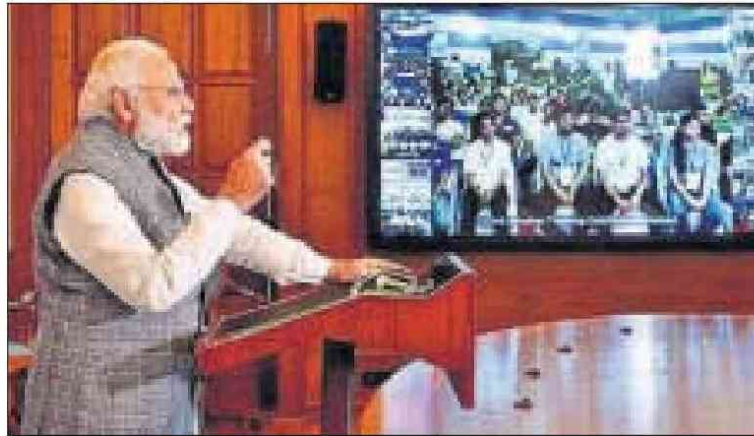
It also has a strong political and electoral subtext.

“The campaign for 2019 election will be centred around the delivery of goods, services and other benefits,” a BJP leader said. The campaign started on May 28 when Modi interacted with Ujjwala beneficiaries. The next day he spoke to beneficiaries of MUDRA Yojna. He addressed four other events covering subjects such as health, startups, housing and insurance. These six events were hosted across 700 centres of the National Informatics Centre, and each of them had 20 beneficiaries in the audience.

The next two – covering Digital India initiative and farmers welfare – were conducted through 2.70 lakh common services centres and each centre had 20 beneficiaries. “There were a million people who watched each interaction on digital platforms such as YouTube and NaMo app, and TV channels,” the official said. There was also additional viewership on Door-darshan. Modi will hold a similar interaction with women self-help groups on July 12.

“The PM’s approach to welfare delivery is symptomatic of his political style — personalised, direct and larger than life. These interactions with beneficiaries of government schemes are a manifestation of this style. While it fuses governance with politics, it also runs the risk of fundamentally undermining the core federal structure of the country by entrenching a centralised, personalised approach,” said Yamini Aiyar, president and chief executive of the Centre for Policy Research.

A government official said each beneficiary is carefully selected by the nodal ministry through local administration.



Officials say the digital format gives the Prime Minister flexibility that public rallies and government events do not allow. PTI FILE

The first level of vetting then takes place at the ministry level. In the second phase, officials from the Prime Minister’s office do a random check. They speak with beneficiaries to check genuineness. “The events are a classic case of how governance and politics can be fused,” a BJP leader said, requesting anonymity. “It helps consolidate different constituencies.” Many in the BJP feel that the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance’s return to power in 2009 was because of the rural jobs scheme and farm loan waiver, wherein the beneficiaries were directly involved.

This focus, the official said, is to reach out to maximum number of people through personal benefits. “The fundamental challenge to the delivery of welfare is weak state capacity,” Aiyar said, adding that this can only be resolved through a sustained administrative reforms agenda.

“Despite campaign claims of maximum governance minimum government, there has been relatively little effort on actually ensuring maximum governance. As a result for all the personalised push, Modi’s welfare schemes have suffered from deep implementation failures. The real lesson from four

years of Modi and welfare is that you can’t advertise your way through complex problems of state capacity. There are no short-cuts,” she said.

During an interaction, Modi said approximately 4 crore women in rural areas received LPG connections under Ujjwala. Nearly 10 crore new connections, government say, were issued since 2014, compared to 13 crore from 1955 to 2014.

Official claim 12 crore loans worth ₹5.75 lakh crore have been granted under MUDRA. As many as 28% of the loans worth ₹3.25 lakh crore has been given to first-time entrepreneurs. Of the total loans disbursed, 74% of the beneficiaries were women and 55% of the loans were given to SC/ST and OBC communities.

During his interaction with farmers on June 20, Prime Minister Modi said the budget of agriculture ministry has been almost doubled to ₹2.12 lakh crore during 2014-19, as against ₹1.21 lakh crore during the five years of the previous government. He said at an interaction on June 15 that digital skill and training have been imparted to 1.25 crore people, out of which 70% of candidates are from SC, ST and OBC communities.