

At Red Fort, 'impatient' Modi spreads 2019 **vikas canvas**

I-DAY SPEECH Talks space, farmers, women, reforms in last address before LS polls

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NEWDELHI: Prime Minister Narendra Modi reached for the skies on Wednesday, promising that an Indian would be in space before 2022 in the course of an Independence Day address in which he reached out to key constituencies — farmers, the poor, women — and touched upon key issues (development, corruption, reforms, security) even as he targeted the Opposition by comparing the present with what it was like in 2014, when he took over.

Modi's fifth speech from the ramparts of the Red Fort in Delhi, his last in his current term as PM — elections are due mid-2019 — lasted 82 minutes. Sporting a saffron and red turban, the PM reached out to multiple classes and communities by projecting his government's 'vast development canvas'; highlighted its ability to take difficult decisions, battle corruption and improve delivery; and spoke of the steps taken to create a more equal and gender-sensitive India and a more secure India. He projected an ambitious vision for the future which would entail the fulfilment of basic material needs for all; and declared that an Indian would be in space before 2022.

Devesh Kapur, a political scientist at the Johns Hopkins University and commentator, said, "The Prime Minister's speech was the opening salvo of the election campaign."

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PM Narendra Modi delivers his speech at the Red Fort in New Delhi on Wednesday.

RAJ K RAJ/HT PHOTO

This country will neither come to a standstill, neither will it bend and nor will it get tired. We have to achieve greater heights, we have to keep moving ahead.

NARENDRA MODI, Prime Minister

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And as with all speeches with an eye on elections, both the achievements of the speaker and the failures of the opposition are magnified, with no room for introspection regarding any mistakes that might have been made," he added.

The main opposition, the Congress, termed it 'hollow', and urged the PM to accept its party president Rahul Gandhi's challenge for a debate on issues such as corruption, mob lynching and Chinese incursions.

Four years (and three months) into his term, Modi also pointed out that any evaluation of where India, and his government, stood must be based on where it was in 2013 on a wide range of metrics, providing the speech a sharp political edge by comparing his record to that of the preceding government.

This was the first major theme of Modi's speech. "If you don't recognise where we started from, you won't realise how far we have come," he said. "If we were constructing toilets at the pace of 2013, it would have taken decades to complete toilet construction for all. If we were electrifying villages at the same pace as 2013, it would have taken two decades to electrify all villages."

In a recognition of India's diverse needs, Modi then segued into other elements of the development story, from rural housing to highways; from mobile phone manufacturing to food grain production; from more school toilets to more higher educational institutions. "Look at our vast development canvas," he said. Still, in what was perhaps a subtle acknowledgment that not all promises may have got fulfilled already, the Prime Minister also said that aiming high was necessary. "If you aim big, you have to be accountable for it, questions are asked. But if you don't then development gets stuck, progress won't happen."

Modi's second area of focus, in his speech, was his government's ability to take difficult, long-overdue decisions across a range of areas; create a framework to battle corruption; and the role played by citizens in this process.

He cited the examples of increasing Minimum Support Prices for farmers to one and a half times the cost of production; the implementation of the Goods and Services Tax where he acknowledged the resilience of small traders (the worst affected in the changeover); the framing of the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code; One Rank One Pension (OROP); or action on benami property, or assets held by another person or a fictitious person on behalf the real beneficiary. OROP promised equal pension to military personnel retiring in the same rank with the same length of service, regardless of the date of retirement.

All these decisions, Modi argued, had been pending for long -- but it was his government which had implemented them.

Sending an important political signal to the key middle class constituency, which was a major support base for the Bharatiya Janata Party in 2014, Modi explicitly acknowledged the contribution of taxpayers in sustaining development schemes and said their troubles were the nation's troubles.

Modi also, in a new formulation, appealed to the humanitarian and religious instincts of taxpayers -- by pointing out how their taxes fed the poor, and this was a blessing. It was to draw a contrast and place a premium on honesty that Modi said that he would not spare anyone with black money. "You do not see power brokers in Delhi. We have cracked down on nepotism and corruption." He substantiated this with the claim

that 300,000 shell companies had shut down, there was a transparent online process for environmental clearances and most significantly, improvement in welfare delivery mechanisms. The Modi government has in the past claimed that this cleaning-up of the delivery system has happened because of the opening of bank accounts or the poor, Aadhaar, and direct benefits transfer.

The third broad focus of Modi's speech was his emphasis on a gender-sensitive India, at a time when there has been an increase in reported incidents of violence against women.

In terms of representation, the PM gave the examples of three women judges in the Supreme Court, women representation in his cabinet (six cabinet ministers; the highest ever for any government), and declared that women officers who entered the armed forces through a short service commission would also now be able to get a permanent commission.

To tackle violence and the brutal incidents of rape, Modi spoke of speedy justice and the need to attack the mindset. He also cited an instance of courts handing out capital punishment, and said, "This news should be spread. There should be fear... the rule of law is supreme."

Modi also used the opportunity to reiterate his government's commitment to bringing in a legislation against instant triple talaq, and said that there were 'some people' -- a reference to the Congress -- who had blocked it in the recent Parliament session.

The PM's fourth area of focus in the speech was internal security, which has traditionally been a dominant theme of speeches from the Red Fort.

Modi suggested that the situation has dramatically improved in the Northeast. The Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), which gave the forces a substantially higher degree of legal immunity, is no longer in force in Tripura, Meghalaya and many areas of Arunachal Pradesh, he pointed out. He also claimed that the government and security forces had also been successful in reducing districts affected by left wing extremism from 126 to 90.

The PM then turned to the situation in Jammu and Kashmir, which has recently been placed under the Governor's Rule. "Atal Bihari Vajpayee showed us the way forward in Kashmir, with three fundamental values of Insaniyat (humanity), Jamhoriyat (democracy), and Kashmiriyat." He spoke of development work in all three regions of the state -- Jammu, Ladakh and the valley. "In a few months, the state will also have panchayat elections," Modi said in an important policy announcement.

Modi also used the occasion to make specific commitments.

The Ayushman Bharat National Health Protection Mission (AB-NHPM) that provides health insurance cover for hospitalisation to the country's poor will be launched on September 25, the birth anniversary of Deen Dayal Upadhyaya, he said.

India, he also declared, would send a manned mission to space by 2022, when the country completes 75 years of Independence.

Towards the end of the speech, Modi returned to the development theme and also laid out an ambitious agenda of housing, power, cooking gas cylinders, water, sanitation, skills, health, insurance and connectivity for all. He reiterated that this government's slogan would remain Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas (collective efforts, inclusive growth, as translated in the website www.narendramodi.in), the theme that had driven his campaign in 2014.

In written responses to questions from Hindustan Times recently he said: "My platform will be all-round development, quick development, and development for all."

Milan Vaishnav, senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for

International peace said: “With his last Independence Day speech before 2019, Modi has executed his second pivot in public life. The first, during the latter end of his Gujarat tenure, was transitioning from a Hindutva strongman to India’s 21st century economic moderniser. The second pivot, underway for the last two years but fully articulated today, was a shift to the welfare messiah of the Indian citizenry.”

Congress’ chief spokesperson Randeep Singh Surjewala, however, said Modi did not utter a single word that was ‘meaningful’ to the common people. “People are now tired of the fake achhe din (good days) promised by the BJP and are waiting for sachhe din (days of truth) when Modi departs as PM of the country.” He asked if Modi was ready for a debate with Gandhi on corruption, distress in farming and mob lynchings.

There is no question of stopping or relenting in the journey ahead, Modi said. “I am impatient because many countries have moved ahead and India has to go forward..I am restless because I have to improve the quality of life of our citizens..I am concerned because India has to be at the forefront of the Fourth Industrial Revolution..I am eager because I want the country to use its resources and abilities.”