



**USUAL SUSPECTS**  
SWAPAN DASGUPTA

## Three years on, India heads for New India

On May 26, the Narendra Modi Government will observe its third anniversary. For India, the experience of a stable and clearly focussed Central Government led by a person whose leadership is unchallenged and assured is a novelty after a prolonged spell of shaky and often incoherent Governments. To the extent that India voted for a spell of purposeful governance in May 2014, neither the Prime Minister nor the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has let the country down. For a change, the country is experiencing a democratic version of what, in history, was called the "Queen's peace".

The coming weeks will, predictably, witness a spate of celebratory events. The Ministers will be ready with their interim balance sheets and a list of their achievements. On the economic front and in the realms of foreign policy, there is much to be happy about. India can now boast of some real progress in both these spheres of governance including infrastructure upgradation, a great leap forward in household electrification, responsible macro-economic management, low inflation and enhanced international stature.

Of course this is just the beginning. Those who point to the long road ahead in terms of job creation, capacity building in infrastructure, cleanliness of public spaces and peace in the neighbourhood are not far off the mark. A robust public debate is needed, both within the political class and in wider civil society, on the tough choices that will need to be exercised. Like in the debate on Aadhaar, India will have to exercise important political choices on the efficiency of the State, on the quantum of State-sponsored welfare and on the means to finance these arrangements.

The scope for intelligent and informed public discussion on the various facets of policy and governance is enormous. Nor do such debates have to be guided by sycophancy or

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be politically supportive of the BJP and Modi. There is a vast space open for informed and democratic dissent that doesn't involve emulating the Maoists of the Bastar forests or the stone throwers of the Kashmir Valley. Despite their non-coverage by a media that often basks in simplistic sensationalism, some of the parliamentary debates can be very instructive, especially as they also contain a big reservoir of grassroots experience. It is my hope that the 3-year celebrations will focus sharply on the way ahead and on how to remove roadblocks in the path of the creation of what the Prime Minister has chosen to call a 'New India.' There is also a hope that some of these debates will even be hosted by a media which seems to be increasingly meandering without direction.

The debates centred on India are, however, not always hosted within the country. The summer is always the time and occasion for various bodies ranging from think-tanks and universities to literature festivals to undertake India-centric discussions. I have already participated in two such events, at Leiden University in the Netherlands and Heidelberg University in Germany. Later this month, there is the annual Jaipur Literature Festival event in London.

These are just a few of the events I know of, courtesy invitations to speak. There are many more both across the Atlantic, in Europe and even in places such as Singapore and Australia.

It is easy to be sceptical about such events and see them as purposeless talking shops involving people that are inside the charmed circle. In the past, I was not in any of these circles because my views did not correspond to prevailing academic wisdom on the subject. During the 10 years it was in power, the UPA Government had spent substantial sums of money courting foreign academics and institutions. Bodies such as the ICCR had generously funded visiting professorships in foreign universities on studies related to India. These initiatives had resulted in the creation of an eco system that viewed the political change after 2014 as undesirable developments. The Left may have ceased to be a powerful political force within India but the influence of the Indian Left at home and in the India departments of foreign universities was disproportionate.

By contrast, the Modi Government has withdrawn from the influence peddling projects. Some of it owes to the fact that anyone mildly sympathetic to the BJP never got a serious look in. The Left and their liberal collaborators have created self-perpetuating cliques in academia. The result is that there are large groups of dissatisfied academics who are waiting for their chance to strike back. In actual terms this has meant that foreign governments and multinational businesses are often over-exposed to a very negative perception of what is happening in India. Personal experience tells me that a combination of hostile reports from the foreign media — basically reproduction of the English-language Indian media — and the visceral hatred of Modi by 'eminent' historians and economists have led to a profound wariness of India. Despite much evidence to the contrary, the Modi Government is being viewed as either transient or regressively revolutionary.

It is time the Government wakes up to this intellectual challenge. It is not necessary to replicate what the UPA Government did but it is necessary to address these uniformly negative perceptions of developments in India from those who wield intellectual capital. The road ahead after three years should also take into account the need for outsiders to understand India in all its complexities. An over-ideological perception of how India 'should' move ahead must be balanced by an appreciation of what is happening on the ground.