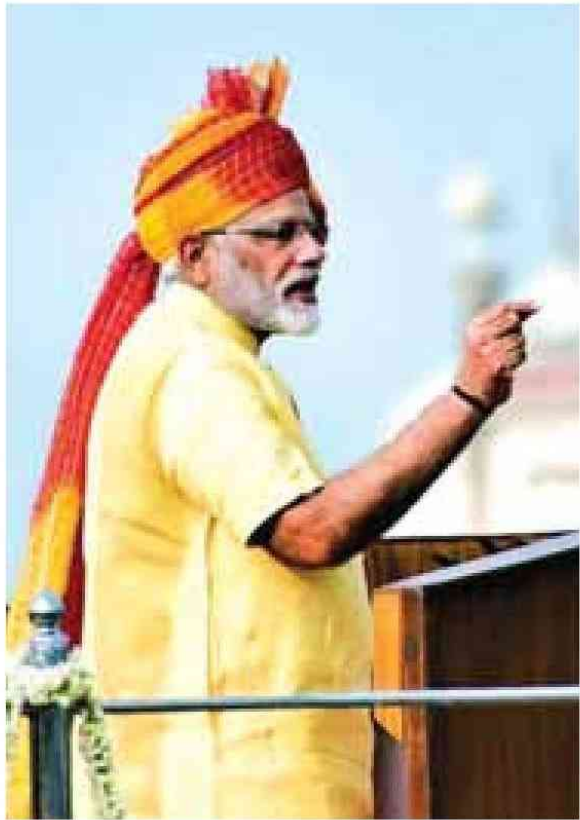


A target for 75 years

President Kovind and Prime Minister Modi have outlined some ambitious targets for India

At the traditional Independence Day address from the ramparts of the Red Fort, Prime Minister Narendra Modi kept his promise of a short speech. Indeed, after his record-breaking 96-minute speech last year, Modi received letters from readers, complaining about the length of his speeches. As promised, he delivered his shortest speech to date at 56 minutes. But despite its succinct nature, Modi outlined several objectives for his Government. Along with President Ram Nath Kovind's maiden Independence Day speech delivered the previous day, it is clear that the Modi Government has set itself several milestones for the next five years and most of those are to double-down on some key missions for this Government such as the Swachh Bharat and Digital India. Modi and Kovind's speeches referred to the main social objectives of this Government, starting with the necessity for permanent housing and addressing issues of income inequality. The Prime Minister outlined his Government's goal of building infrastructure. It is clear that massive spending on key infrastructure projects is seen as vital by this Government. Clearly, 70 years after independence, an unacceptable proportion of Indians are still poor and the Government feels that massive schemes



will be tools of economic empowerment. Crucially, Modi also used this opportunity to talk about the Government's decision to demonetise high-value currency notes. While demonetisation still has its critics, particularly given the severe economic shock it gave to the country, undoubtedly being a causation factor in the recent industrial slowdown and lowered growth projections, it also bolstered Modi's image as an incorruptible politician, who intends to go after corruption. Yet, the Government should use the next 20 months to go after big-name loan defaulters and others accused of corruption. Some steps have been taken in this direction but a resolute effort to fix the banking sector is needed.

The Government has been resolute in implementing big schemes, but there is little doubt that things are not even in third gear as yet.

However, it is clear that Modi understands some of the big challenges his Government faces. His call for support, asking the people of this country to change their *chalta hai* (anything goes) attitude to *badal sakta hai* (we can change) attitude might take some time to resonate with the public. Could Modi have been stronger with his unequivocal condemnation of violence in India today? He should have been because several parts of the country have become communal. This remains a huge challenge to this Government. Also, internal violence and the new external threat from China could have been spoken of in stronger terms. Even though Modi spoke with the confidence of someone who knows the next election is his, to lose particularly with his 'five-year plan' for 2022, he also probably knows that immense challenges facing him might make the next general election a major hurdle. Overall, both Modi and Kovind looked at the road ahead but with a very narrow focus. The Independence Day speech should have been more a 'state of the nation' address than a mission statement.