

Is It Time To Evaluate The New Government?

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The present government at the Centre came to power exactly six months ago and it is but mete and proper to give any new government a moratorium of six months as an immediate period in which it can begin to understand the minutiae of governance, review the policies of the previous government and then formulate its own policies, programmes and plans of action. Any watcher of government must put his or her critical faculties on hold for this period. Thereafter the government should expect a critical eye being cast on its performance and whilst its achievements must be lauded, its shortcomings, errors and lack of positive action must be pointed out, not with a view to condemn government but rather to caution it on where it needs to make corrections. This is the stage at which the Modi government now finds itself and those who wish it well should begin to take an objective review of how the government is functioning.

During his first address to the nation on 15th August 2014 the Prime Minister made some very interesting, positive and ground breaking points which deserve special mention. He stated categorically that his sole agenda was to put the country on the fast track to development so that its economy could improve by leaps and bounds, new employment opportunities created, there should be a concerted programme for imparting skills to the people and that the fruits of development should be equitably distributed to all. He talked about the urgent need to realise Mahatma Gandhi's dream of a clean India in which dirt, pollution and vitiation of the physical environment were all eliminated. He talked about the need for promoting communal harmony and to look at every India as a citizen of a country of which we could be proud. In particular he talked about the need to rid the Ganga of pollution so that it could become a pristine river. He talked of the need to develop a strong work culture, promote integrity and by attacking black money, to restore financial rectitude to the country. Most important of all the Prime Minister showed that after Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru the country once again had a person who was an excellent communicator and could talk directly to the people and capture their attention and imagination.

In a single paper one cannot review the entire spectrum of government and, therefore, this paper will cover a few areas which are of critical importance. Let us begin with the Prime Minister's call for cleaning the Ganga. Without going into details it may suffice to say that the Ganga basin covers an area of approximately ten lakh square kilometres and within the catchment and command of Ganga lives 40 per cent of India's population. A clean, pollution free Ganga would have a major impact on the health of the people, improve agriculture in the Ganga basin, promote city development, accelerate industrial growth and create a new economic climate in India. In Britain it took sixty years to cleanse the Thames River whose basin covers only 12,500 square kilometres of area. However, the British Government went about its job very systematically, tackled every point of ingress of pollution into the river and removed all the industrial and other activity which contributed to pollution. In the case of the Ganga will it take sixty years to make it clean? Fortunately there have been major technological advances since the late nineteenth and up to the mid twentieth centuries and, therefore, both in terms of planning and of implementation we can encapsulate the time frame so that in a much shorter span we can tackle the problems of the Ganga. Has the new government really been able to start the process?

The three major States which contribute in terms of area, population and causes of pollution to the Ganga are U.P, Bihar and West Bengal. None of these States is a role model of political will or administrative efficiency, but unless they are on board the Centre alone cannot cleanse the Ganga. The other major States which contribute water to the Ganga directly or through tributaries are Uttarakhand, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, in fact all the Seven Sisters are major contributors to the Ganga at the point of confluence with the Brahmaputra, which is the river of the North East. By now the Prime Minister should have set up a High Level Policy Commission headed by himself and the Chief Ministers of the Ganga basin States as members. Most important of these would be the Chief Ministers of U.P, Bihar and West Bengal who, at present, are hostile not only to the Central Government but to Narendra Modi personally. Nevertheless

the Prime Minister should have by now co-opted them in such a way that they would have to willy-nilly participate in the epic cleansing of the Ganga because they would have no other option. The High Level Commission would frame the broad policy and suggest the priorities which must be followed in implementing the Ganga Development Plan. Under this Commission should be a fully empowered Ganga Development Authority headed by an administrator, a scientist or a technology expert of renown. The Ganga Development Authority would be required to have a complete picture of what causes pollution where, identify the points at which intervention is needed, draw up priorities according to which the plan must be implemented, determine the technology which should be applied, prepare a timeframe, do budget estimation and allocation of funds, identify the agencies which would work in the field and also prepare a proper programme for maintenance of the works on completion. So far the High Level Commission does not seem to have been set up, nor is there an empowered Development Authority on which there is representation of the States concerned, nor is there even an outline plan which covers the entire Ganga. No plan for the Ganga can succeed unless the people at large know the plans and priorities and then are made full partners in implementation. Six months is enough time to have had the basic structure in place and unless government comes out very quickly with its plans and a programme of how it intends to implement these plans one would have to chalk this up as a deficiency on the part of the present government which could lead to a failure on the Ganga front.

The Prime Minister has made a call for Swachh Bharat. This issue has been addressed in a separate paper but the fact remains that for people to make India clean they must have access to at least the minimum prescribed norm of basic services. These would include access to clean drinking water, a sewerage system which works, storm water and effluent drainage and at least minimum road access to the core settlement. Places for dumping garbage must be designated and the municipality should have a reasonably efficient system of garbage collection. There must be a proper toilet in every house so that open defecation is no longer necessary. There has to be a time bound programme for providing these basic services so that India can be made clean by the year 2019 which has been given as a target date by the Prime Minister. There is some movement on the part of government to give effect to the construction of a hundred smart cities as demanded by the Prime Minister, but one sees no evidence at all of there being any programme whatsoever for extending basic services to every settlement before 2019. Six months is sufficient time for the government organisations concerned to come out with specific plans for universalisation of basic services and the fact that no such plan has been placed before the people or even budgeted for would suggest that there is a wide gap between rhetoric and reality. Once again unless the government wakes up the whole programme of Swachh Bharat may unravel before our eyes.

The Indian administrative system is posited on two premises. The first is that policy formulation is the job of the political executive, which means that the government should have before it the ruling ideology of the party in power, the Council of Ministers and individual ministers should lay down clear policy frameworks, the budgetary allocations and the timeframe within which the officials are required to implement the policy. The permanent executive, that is, the officers through whom the President or the Governor are required to execute the policy, must be given a free hand to work, without fear or favour and with the single minded objective of giving effect to the policy of the Council of Ministers. They should also have the freedom to point out to the political executive any shortcomings in policy, including legal flaws and they should not be brought under disapproval because of their advice. Ever since 1967, when governments fell or were formed on the basis the wholesale bribing of legislators, honest and straightforward officers have been disliked by the politicians and have been sidelined. This has corrupted the Civil Service, which is why even when, for example, in the case of spectrum allocation or coal block allocation the ministers were passing orders which were unacceptable, the civil servants complied with illegal orders because they did not want to displease their political superiors. Instead of there being genuine accountability the system now has an audit which is no longer positive and is quite often fanciful and there is increasing intervention of vigilance agencies in the day-to-day working of the administration. The net result is that most officers have just stopped taking decisions because of the fear that any decision would be subject to a negative audit scrutiny and harassment by vigilance agencies. The corrupt still continue to prosper, the honest evade decision making and there is increasing paralysis of administration. It is the people who suffer.

It has been separately suggested in other papers that if government's policies are to be implemented and development programmes accelerated Civil Service morale must be restored. The management of the Civil Service must be professionalised and not kept subject to the whims and fancies of ministers and politicians. Good work must be rewarded and lethargy or dereliction of duty must be swiftly punished. All forms of sycophancy must be suppressed. There has to be interlocking accountability in which the superior is held accountable for the manner in which his subordinate has conducted himself, but in order to enforce this accountability the superiors have to be suitably empowered so that they can take action against erring subordinates. Civil servants must be told that in doing their work they will be accountable and answerable only to their administrative superior and not to a vigilance agency. A vigilance agency may intervene only if there is criminality and a First Information Report is filed. Then it becomes a police investigation under Chapter XII, Cr.P.C. Officers should be told that at the appropriate level of competence they must take decisions and that all bona fide decisions and actions will be supported by government. Agencies such as CBI must be covered by a comprehensive legislation which lays down that their powers and functions and specifically prohibits them from entering into domains which are not within their jurisdiction. It is only when a Secretary to government is no longer accountable to an inspector of police for administrative decisions which, in hindsight, may not appear to be the best but which in context are appropriate, then alone will the Civil Service once again begin to function. Where is the legislation on CBI? Where are the specific guidelines to CBI and other vigilance agencies about their area of operation? Where are the specific directions of government, in writing, assigning interlocking accountability, or reassuring government servants on the support of government for their bona fide actions? Where are the audit guidelines which make audit a positive function which helps in proper utilisation of funds instead of being an accusatory function in which the sole objective is to find fault? Unless these issues are addressed firmly and suitable instructions in writing are brought on the statute book and the rule book, administrative morale will not be restored and government will be unable to deliver on its promises.

One area in which the government promised swift action is in the unearthing of black money and bringing back to India illegal money stashed away in foreign countries. Once again this has been commented upon at length in another paper, but the fact is that whereas through the hawala route money earned illegally has been sent abroad, a great deal of it has come back through the same route to fuel the underground market through which a substantial part of business is funded. The hunt for black money must concentrate on India and not be over-dependent on repatriation of money kept in foreign bank accounts. What is government's blueprint in this behalf? One does not want government to publicise operational details but the broad outlines of what it intends to do to ensure that people pay taxes and that the need for the parallel economy disappears, government will not be able to tackle the problem of unaccounted money which is what constitutes black money. In this behalf one would commend what U.S. Government did in the thirties of the last century when gang war was at its height. The Income Tax Act was amended, penalties ranging up to life imprisonment for certain types of tax evasion were introduced and mass murderers like Al Capone were imprisoned for life for tax evasion. We need to rationalise our tax rates so that people find it cheaper to pay tax than evade it, tax evasion is considered a serious offence and attracts very severe penalties both by way of fines and jail terms and the implementing agency, the Indian Revenue Service, is cleansed of all corruption. Once again rhetoric and reality seem to be wide apart and, therefore, unless government very quickly brings about the necessary changes the black market in money will not be curbed.

The areas where the present government has shown signs of success are foreign relations because the Prime Minister, through his communication skills, has been able to reach out to governments and people in key countries, he has reached out to our neighbours, he has made it clear to Pakistan that friendship has certain prerequisites which must be fulfilled by Pakistan and with China for a change India is speaking on a level of equality. These are extremely welcome moves and one wishes the Prime Minister more strength in this behalf. The great advantage he has is that after thirty years of coalition misrule he heads a government with a single party majority and notwithstanding the possible problems he might have regarding legislation because he still does not command the Rajya Sabha, he should be able to persuade Parliament to act in a responsible manner.

Because of his majority in the Lok Sabha the Prime Minister has no option but to govern firmly because he can no longer offer the compulsions of coalition as an excuse for poor governance.
