

Time To Govern, Mr. Modi

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The 2014 general elections have been interpreted as a vote against the Congress, for BJP and specifically for Narendra Modi. Those who think along these lines have missed the wood for the trees. Ever since the post Rajiv Gandhi era, especially after the coalition governments became the norm, for thirty years the excuse offered for the lack of government, weak government or even downright bad government was the compulsions of coalition. Fed up with this the people of India voted for a strong government in which a single party gained absolute majority and which, therefore, could not offer any excuses for bad government. Because BJP, under prodding by the RSS, decided to retire the old, gerontocratic leadership and replaced it by younger people, with Narendra Modi as the possible leader of the BJP Government, the party was able to present itself to the nation as being united, determined and, because of Modi's track record in Gujarat, capable of providing purposive government to the nation. That is why BJP is in power and Narendra Modi is the Prime Minister. This has nothing to do with anti Congress sentiments on a national scale.

It is fully understood that in a democracy a new government, having its own ideology, policy and programme will opt for change, but the change cannot be revolutionary. The policies of the previous government were also democratically arrived at and old commitments have to be honoured. Therefore, change has to be evolutionary, but that does not mean that the incoming government should not very quickly set out an agenda and a timetable within which it will implement its own programme. To give one example, the National Employment Guarantee Scheme which is aimed at providing a hundred days employment per year to every eligible person in the rural areas annually pumps about seventy thousand crore rupees into the economy. If government were to abandon it suddenly it would become hugely unpopular in rural India and would not survive. What government can do, however, is to transform the policy from muster based employment to one that creates permanent village assets. The old integrated watershed development programme was precisely aimed at asset creation and was effective in improving water availability in rural areas. Why has the present government not clarified what it will do by way of asset creation in the villages by using the employment guarantee programme? In fact why has government not come out with policy papers sectorally which set out its agenda, its work programme and the specifics of implementation so that the entire blueprint of the evolutionary change is available to us?

A few examples. The Ganga purification plan will not work until the States which are in the Ganga basin come on board. The most important States in this behalf are U.P., Bihar and West Bengal. Why has the Prime Minister not formed a high level policy and superintendence committee headed by him, with the Chief Ministers of the Ganga basin States as members? Why has a high level Ganga Development Authority not been notified, headed by an eminent administrator or technologist, with the major States being represented on it, which lays down the sector by sector priorities for work on the Ganga, frames and is granted a budget in this behalf and then proceeds systematically to implement the programme sector by sector? Twinning Varanasi with Kyoto is not enough. What we need are specifics in terms of what is to be done at Rampur, Allahabad, Patna, Calcutta, Delhi, Mathura and Agra for example. In about four and a half months the government should have been able to give us a more definitive programme about the Ganga.

Government emphasises education and skill development. Do we have a blueprint of what to do holistically from kindergarten up to and including universities, both with regard to general education and vocational education? What we have instead, is a Human Resource Development Ministry in which the Minister, Secretary, Additional Secretary and five Joint Secretaries have been changed simultaneously. Several central universities, Indian Institutes of Management, Indian Institutes of Technology, etc., are without heads and there does not seem to be any movement towards filling these posts. One is given to understand that the new minister has built a rampart of files around her in the hope that this will be a bastion which will protect her from sniping. This is not how to run a ministry. In every sector of government, health, industry, environment, agriculture, the social services, even urban development, rural development government is still groping. It

announces that there will be one hundred smart cities, but what constitutes a smart city is not defined. Government has invited foreign investment, but the potential investor will ask how he can access land (a person who is not an Indian citizen cannot buy agricultural land, not even an OCI card holder). What about power, water, transport and communication infrastructure, labour relations, taxation policy? The Prime Minister has announced that two Joint Secretaries in his office will be assigned the task of looking after foreign investors. If that be so, then will the Industry and Commerce Ministry chant Ram Bhajan, the Finance Ministry meditate and the other ministries dealing with economic issue sit and play cards? The work has to be done by individual departments, not PMO.

The Cabinet Secretary is the officer who coordinates the various departments of government. The Prime Minister's office is there only to provide secretarial support to the Prime Minister. It cannot replace a ministry or act as its surrogate. By marginalising the Cabinet Secretary and the Departmental Secretaries and centralising powers in the Prime Minister's office Narendra Modi has weakened the administration. What he should be doing is to rebuild civil service morale, encourage officers at the lowest level who have the competence and authority to take decisions at that level, ensure that officers give advice freely, help in framing policy, ensure that work is done according to rules and then quickly implement the policies of government. They need to be reassured that decision making is welcome, bona fide mistakes will be fully protected by government and that it is nonperformance which will earn the displeasure of government. Why is the Prime Minister not doing all this? This is the time for action, Mr. Modi.

One last point. The mandate of the Prime Minister is to govern at the Centre. In a federal structure it is legitimate for other parties to form government in the States. It is time that the Prime Minister buckled down to the very important task of government in detail and stop wasting his time in electioneering in the States. That should be left to the local units.
