

Time for Action, Not Speeches

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The Narendra Modi Government came to power riding a tidal wave of expectations of change and firm government, in which the indecisiveness of the last ten years would be replaced by specific policies which brought about economic development, increased employment opportunities and an environment of security and peace in which India could progress. From day one the government has been under the lens of intensive scrutiny, by the Opposition of course but also by people, experts, etc., who expected magical and miraculous changes. At this stage I decided that I would put my own critical faculties on hold for a period of six months because that is the minimum period needed for any government to formulate and put into action policies which bring about change. That holds good even now but there are certain misgivings which are impinging on my conscience and which I think it is necessary for me to articulate.

It is encouraging to note that Nawaz Sharif, Hamid Karzai, Mahinda Rajapakse and leaders of all SAARC nations came to Delhi for Modi's swearing-in and Narendra Modi reached out to them. It is equally encouraging that Narendra Modi has promised inclusive government in which regardless of ethnicity, religion, region, language or ideology, all Indians would be given equal opportunity for development, progress and happiness. However, some recent statements of Mohan Bhagwat, the Sarsanchalak of R.S.S. have given rise to apprehension. BJP has won the election single handed and is in power at the centre. Its influence is expanding. Why, then, was it necessary for Mohan Bhagwat to rake up the issue of all Indians being Hindus? According to him everyone living in India is a Hindu regardless of the religion he professes. The argument is that the concept of Hindu is one of cultural unity and, therefore, a Christian is a Christian-Hindu, a Muslim is a Muslim-Hindu and a Hindu is a Hindu-Hindu. But what about cultural diversity? The word Hindu itself has not come to us from Sanskrit but is a derivative from what the Arabs called the people who lived on the bank of Sindhu River, whom they called Hindvis or Hindu. In fact no religious text of the Hindus mentions the word Hindu, either in cultural or religious terms. The religion professed by the people of Bharat was the Sanatan Dharma, the language of which was Sanskrit which, incidentally, has no word for religion. Whence, therefore, the word Hindu as being synonymous with Indian? Mohan Bhagwat's statement is certainly designed to exacerbate the relations between the majority community and the minorities. The Prime Minister should have reacted to Mohan Bhagwat's statement and sent a clear message to all Indians that they are in fact Indians who, incidentally, may belong to a particular religion.

The second set of misgivings is about the failure of government to come out with specific papers on specific issues relating to national development in which priorities are prescribed, broad budgetary allocations made, schemes identified and the method of implementing them as also the timeframe clearly laid down. For example, if agriculture is a priority sector then government must appreciate that agriculture is not merely a matter between the agriculturist and the land. For there to be production we have to identify soil classification and the appropriate crops for that type of land, the seed requirements and the availability of good quality seed, the agriculture technology to be applied right from the time of sowing up to the time of harvest, the source of irrigation and the electric power needed for this purpose, the transport of harvested crops to a properly organised market, storage facilities, including cold storage for perishables, so that release of the harvested crops into the market is regular, well spaced and designed to cover the entire year, thus preventing a price slump when there is a glut and sharp rise in price when the flow of agriculture produce into the market is

reduced. These are all factors which call for specific action and we must know how government intends to view agriculture holistically.

About ninety percent of the work force is in the informal sector or unemployed. The formal sector employs only about eight percent of the work force, but contributes the largest part of GDP. Even when GDP growth was a healthy eight percent per annum, the major share was attributable to the formal sector. Unfortunately growth of employment is only 0.3 percent, which means that the major part of additional GDP is not being invested in developing industry or business but is either going into the black market or into the personal wealth of the industrialists and businessmen. There was no synergy with the informal sector. We need a very definite policy on how to push investment in productive activity so that there is a substantial growth of productive employment, with the formal sector achieving a synergy with the informal sector so that both grow in tandem. Even the rural employment programme has to be changed from the muster based employment programme to a programme for investment in developing village assets and infrastructure so that the rural economy gets a boost. It is about time that government came out with specific papers on how it intends to achieve these results.

Education, health and the social sector all need specific programmes. That has to go beyond Smriti Irani making statements about an IIT and an IIM in every State. What about school education? Similarly, in the health sector it is not enough to say that we will have an AIIMS in every State. What we need is a programme of primary health care for all, coupled with a programme of child nutrition. How will we achieve this?

Internal security, national defence and relationships with our neighbours, whether friendly or hostile, are all areas in which we need to know specifically what are the intentions of government and what are the programmes to achieve them. It is said that the Prime Minister will make all this clear in his speech from the Red Fort on Independence Day. With great respect the Independence Day's speech is always part of a political agenda but it cannot cover the minutiae of the administrative steps needed to implement specific policies of government. That has to be done through hard work which looks at all details of an issue and then prepares a blueprint for action. When will government settle down to that kind of hard work and tell us in unambiguous terms what it intends to achieve, how it intends to achieve and the timeframe in which we can expect results? That is the difference between good government and the mouthing of platitudes.
