

# More accountant, less visionary

PM's large narratives — corruption, growth— invite questions. His neglect of communal peace is notable



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(PTI/Atul Yadav))



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Independence Day speeches are nearly always a joint manifesto. They give an account of what has been done, and they lay out a vision for the future. This is especially true when prime ministers address the nation in the middle of their term, not at its beginning. More than three



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years into his rule, Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) today had to be an accountant and a visionary at the same time. He had to chronicle what his government had done, and outline where he wishes to go.

However necessary, accounting is nearly always a pedantic, even boring, exercise. Captivating poetic phrases can easily mark a statement of vision, but it is hard to attach poetic elegance to an account of how many toilets have been built, how much black money has been unearthed, how many villages have electricity, how farmers have produced a record pulse harvest, etc.

Even so, this I-Day speech by the prime minister had an uncharacteristically prosaic character. He is by now justly famous for his oratorical eloquence in Hindi. Indeed, since Hindi is my first language, I have often marveled at how phrases and images emerge in his Hindi speeches with masterful ease. That eloquence was missing today. Leaving style and manner aside, let us now concentrate on the substance of the two analytically separable parts of the speech — the accounting and the vision. Let us start with accounting.

The prime minister perhaps gave his most data-filled speech ever. Among other things, he gave an exact count of the following: How many villages were without electricity when he came to power and how many have electricity today; how much black money has entered the banking mainstream after demonetisation; how many income tax payers have been added to the historically slender direct tax base of India; how many fake shell companies

existed and how many have been shut down (including the statement that 400 shell companies until recently had the same address); how many tonnes of pulses the government had procured from the farmer at remunerative prices; how many farmers had used the crop insurance scheme for the first time.

The prime minister even recounted a remarkable rail track building story. For 42 years, somewhere in India, the railways department could not put down a 70-72 km track. That is how slow and cumbersome, he said, the administrative procedures were, which his government has simplified. For so many approvals, 80 forms were necessary. Under his regime, often only five forms have to be filled. When a train changes its track, he contended, it slows down before picking up speed. He said his government has taken countless decisions, changed the direction of the country, but it never slowed down.

The nation should indeed be made aware of such developments. The trouble is that as commentators, we also have to check the veracity of his statistics. It is not our job simply to accept what the government is saying. It is doubtless true that GST would enhance the efficiency of inter-state road transport. But is it true that with the arrival of GST, transport efficiency has gone up by 30 per cent, as he put it? It is too early to tell.

Moreover, some of the statistics the PM used are simply beyond the realm of possibility. Yet again, he repeated the argument that by 2022, farmers incomes will double. To double incomes in five years, we need an annual growth rate of a little over 14 per cent. I have studied agriculture, and written and published on it. At least since the early decades of the 20th century, nowhere in the world has agriculture grown at 14 per cent annually for a five-year period, unless war temporarily devastated the economy and the growth process resumed after such devastation. For a whole variety of reasons understood well by economists, industry can grow at 14 per cent per annum,

but for agriculture to grow at that rate is virtually impossible.

Let us now switch to the vision part of the speech. For many, it is the core of an Independence Day address. A sharp formulation on how to solve Kashmir will undoubtedly make the headlines the day after. Naa gaali se, naa goli se, bus gale lagaane se (neither invective, nor bullets will solve the Kashmir problem; we need a warm embrace).

Generally speaking, large narratives define a vision. Prime Minister Modi emphasised two such narratives in his speech: Corruption and economic progress. I have already commented on some economic issues above. More can be said, including a decline in growth rate, as the latest Economic Survey of the government makes clear. But let that not detain us here.

The PM repeatedly pointed to how India under his leadership was incentivising honesty in citizen and business conduct, how ab beimaani ke liye jagah nahin (no room for dishonesty any more), how an imaandari ka mahotsav (“festival of honesty”) had commenced in India. This formulation, of course, took its sharpest form during demonetisation, and has continued ever since.

That some cleaning up has taken place is beyond doubt. That the top layers of Central government in Delhi have had no corruption scandals is also clear. But two things bedevil this narrative: Little investigation of BJP corruption at the state level (for example, the Vyapam scandal in MP), and political finance (who paid for the purchase of Congress MLAs in Gujarat recently).

But most important was the relative neglect of a crying need of the hour. India badly needs communal peace. Lynchings have shaken the Muslim community. If not stopped, it is not clear what domestic peace India can obtain. Over the last two months in India, I have traveled a lot, talked a lot, listened a lot. I have not come across a single Muslim who is not feeling

insecure. The outgoing vice president publicly spoke about it — not without reason.

PM Modi spent not more than a minute on this hugely important matter in his hour-long speech. It was perfunctory. This is not a matter that grabs his attention. But it may be among the most significant emerging issues in the nation's politics. After all is said and done, in this day and age, no democracy can afford to ignore its minorities.

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