

BOOKS in review

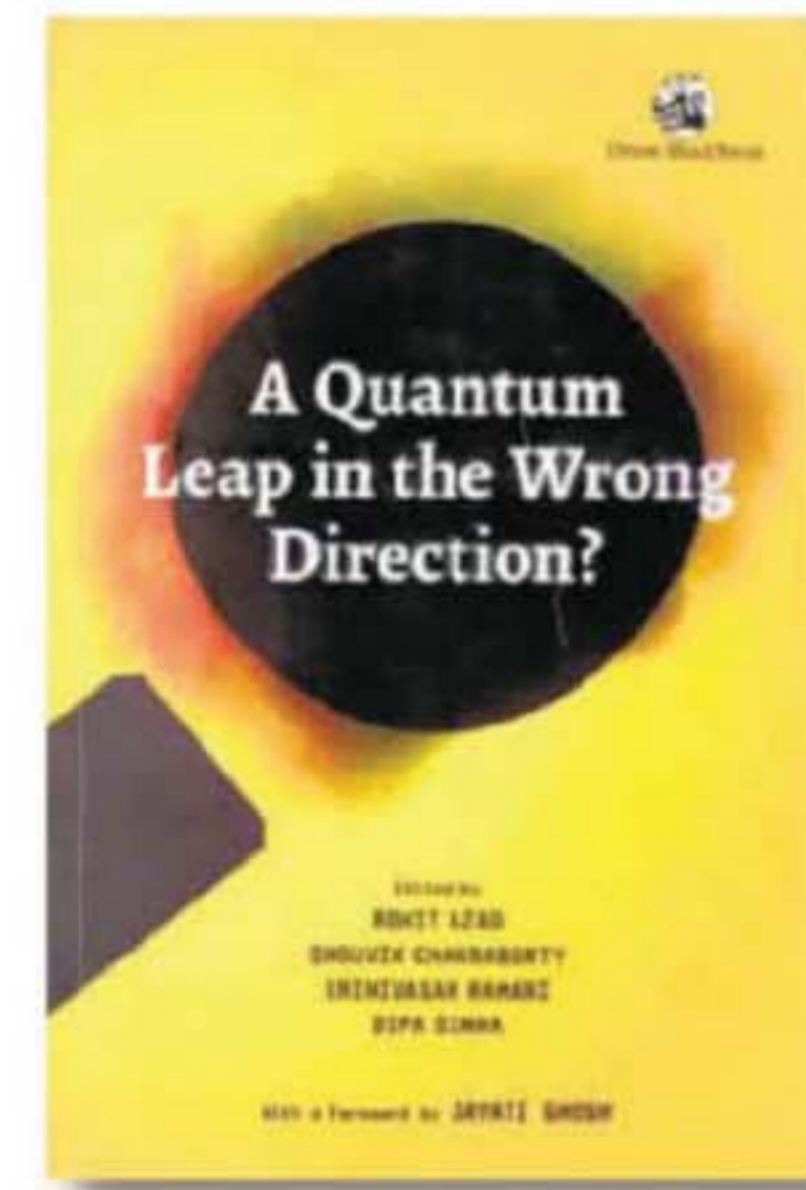
The Modi years

The book is a comprehensive audit of the Narendra Modi regime's five-year tenure and reveals an all-round failure that is unprecedented in scope and extent. BY V. SRIDHAR

THE electoral victory that propelled Narendra Modi to the Prime Minister's Office in 2014 rested on the innocent-sounding promise of *Sabka saath, sabka vikas* (with everyone, development for all) that obviously struck a chord with a large section of the people. Five years later, as Modi faces the electorate again, that slogan is strikingly missing from the campaign caravan, a measure of how embarrassing it is for the ruling party to mouth a slogan that now draws attention to its gross multifaceted failures.

The simple truth is that no government in independent India has failed as spectacularly as Modi's. In part, this arises from measuring performance against promise: the taller the promise, the more spectacular the chances of failure. Modi promised the moon and has not delivered even a morsel. Worse, in a desperate attempt to block access to details or verification of the actual economic performance of his regime, it has concealed a range of data that were always available to Indians on a regular basis or bent them to present itself in a better light.

This book has been perfectly timed. It comes



A Quantum Leap in the Wrong Direction?

Edited by Rohit Azad, Shouvik Chakraborty, Srinivasan Ramani and Dipa Sinha
Orient BlackSwan, 2019

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Pages: 315 + xxiii

just as Indians prepare to vote in an election that is widely seen as a referendum on the performance of the Modi regime. The very fact that the *Sabka saath, sabka vikas* slogan is being upstaged by the tale of Modi's stature as a muscular leader in his current electoral campaign is an admission that the *vikas* plank has slipped from under his feet.

Edited by a group of young scholars, this book is a compendium of essays on various aspects of the Modi government's performance. The essays are assembled in three sections: the economy, the performance in terms of a set of socio-economic indicators and governance. The hallmark of each essay is the data, meticulously assembled in tables and

charts, which reveal a level of attention to detail at a time when access to data on a range of subjects has been wilfully strangled by the Indian state.

MISSING DATA

One of the most notable features of the book is the remarkable effort the authors made to get around the problem of missing or insufficient data and the imaginative use of proxy data to overcome the problem. Interestingly, the chapters and sections are provocatively titled, generally deriding the tall promises made with apt pointers to the reality of actual performance. Clearly, this is for a popular audience.

The opening chapter in the volume, for instance, takes a slingshot at the *Sabka saath, sabka vikas*

slogan and argues that the Modi regime remained neither "with the people" nor did it promote meaningful *vikas*. Instead, Rohit Azad, despite being hampered by dodgy gross domestic product numbers, points out that economic growth was better during the first tenure of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) regime. More importantly, from a social justice perspective, he argues that the gains from economic growth appear to have been more broad-based and equitable, especially during the tenure of the second UPA regime.

He demonstrates this by showing that agricultural wages, possibly the floor wage for the Indian labour force, registered a significant increase compared with the overall national income during the second tenure of the UPA but declined significantly during the Modi years. It is no wonder that agricultural and rural workers fared worse under Modi if one recalls the mocking tone he adopted towards the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme in a speech in Parliament. True to his word, the scheme, once touted for its transformative potential, lies in tatters today: wages have

declined, payment for work done has been delayed and the scheme has been choked by budgetary cuts.

Using another data set, this time from the Income Tax Department, Rohit Azad points out that the share of the national income pie has become significantly skewed since Modi came to power. The income share of the top 10 per cent of Indian taxpayers increased from 56.2 per cent in 2014-15 to 57.9 per cent in 2017-18. Significantly, during this period the share of the bottom half of Indian taxpayers declined from 17.6 per cent to 16 per cent. Remark-

ably, this is as if the top 10 per cent walked away with the incomes of the bottom half of the Indian population during the Modi years. Whatever *vikas* there was, was thus clearly only for some at the expense of the vast many.

To be sure, the Indian economy was slowing down even as Modi assumed office. But it is also true that he started with several fortuitous advantages, among them low international crude oil prices. But even in this case, he frittered away the advantage by letting domestic petroleum product prices rise incessantly, evidently to boost his gov-

ernment's tax kitty. Even more importantly, in a situation of clearly slackening domestic demand, evidenced by the utter failure of Indian industry to invest in fresh capacities, he failed to initiate a significant injection of demand by promoting public investment through public sector undertakings or, for example, by investing public funds in Indian Railways, which could have had economy-wide ramifications. Indeed, the credit that the Modi government claims for reining in inflation during its tenure is actually a curse on the Indian peasantry as is proved by the dramatic

collapse of agricultural product prices, especially since demonetisation.

The precarious condition of Indian public sector banks, systematically run down by the rampant cronyism that has resulted in non-performing assets (NPAs) assuming menacing proportions, has prevented a bank-finance recovery. Instead, Modi's Mudra mantra as an answer to this has proved to be not only meaningless because of the ineffective ticket-sizes of the loans but also threatens to undermine the stability and viability of state-owned banks.

No account of Modi's



P. RAJAMMA, A CONSTRUCTION WORKER, recounts the hardships she faces because she lost her job after demonetisation. She was part of a large number of construction workers who petitioned the Madurai Collector on May 15, 2017, demanding employment.

G. MOORTHY

performance can be complete without reference to the whimsical, reckless and egregious abuse of economic policy in the name of demonetisation, which he unleashed on hapless Indians in November 2016. The economic warfare that he let loose, which has no parallel in human history, crippled livelihoods, compromised institutions and betrayed the faith ordinary Indians had in their currency, possibly forever. To worsen matters, the imposition of the goods and services tax regime soon after demonetisation hit the same vulnerable section again, and hard.

The scale of the collapse of agricultural commodity prices, unparalleled in independent India, makes a mockery of Modi's claims about doubling farmers' income by 2022. Instead of putting in place a procurement machinery to buy produce at the set minimum support price, the Modi regime is actually pressuring State governments (such as Kerala) to not purchase produce from farmers.

JOB

The Modi regime's miserable failure on the jobs front has been highlighted by its brazen attempt at concealing data on employment. The colossal failure on this front is only upstaged by the disturbing anecdotal data that pour in about wage levels and the nature and terms of employment of even those who are employed. Soon after assuming office, Smriti Irani, the ever efferrescent Minister then in charge of education, prom-



THE MAINSTREAMING of the lynch culture is a unique contribution of the Modi years. Here, members of Citizens for Peace, Justice and Democracy at a demonstration in Chennai in July 2017 to protest against rising mob violence and cow vigilantism in the country.

ised a new policy on education, the last one being of 1986 vintage. Five years later, the nation still awaits one. Meanwhile, the Modi regime scarcely concealing its techno-utopian streak is ceding ground to the ever-greedy private sector.

Instead of doing something about the state of schools, the Modi regime prefers to appeal to a wafer-thin section of the elite that is enamoured of the adoption of "Edu Tech" in schools. Thus, instead of better infrastructure such as toilets in schools, recruiting more teachers or improving teacher salaries, the regime is focussed on things such as CCTVs to monitor teachers or biometric attendance registers. In keeping with the NITI Aayog's penchant for focussing on the frivolous, it provides the "policy" justification for such adventures.

Higher education has

obviously fared badly, too, which is not surprising for a regime that has actually mounted an assault on campuses of higher learning across the country. It is certain that if Modi returns to power, his government will do away with the University Grants Commission and replace it with a centralised authority that would not only rob institutions of their autonomy but impinge on States' rights with respect to universities that they currently control.

This is not merely a book about the economy in the times of Modi. The last section, which deals with governance, focusses on how Modi assumed office with a Mr Clean image but that has been tarnished by a series of scandals, the latest being the Rafale scam, which threatens to become Modi's Bofors. Anmol Somanchi provides an account of how the "bene-

fits" of the Aadhaar project were systematically neglected, while the many ways in which it actually harmed people were hidden. Happyman Jacob's assessment of Modi's foreign policy notes that it has been shaped by the heavy hand of a right-wing "cultural nationalist agenda". While sucking up to American power by offering itself as a junior partner, it has alienated old friends. Ironically, for a party that is seeking office in the name of national security, Jacob notes that its managerial record is one of "systematic inefficiency".

LYNCH CULTURE

No account of the Modi years can be complete without reference to the manner in which the government has provided freedom for the explicit articulation of aggressive majoritarianism, which has seriously and systematically impinged on civil rights of all kinds. The mainstreaming of the lynch culture is a unique contribution of the Modi years. But the unprecedented freedom with which the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh and its affiliates have been allowed to strike at democratic processes and institutions in all walks of life is also a hallmark of the Modi regime.

This book, whose title probably comes from a remark by Amartya Sen that the Modi years have marked India's quantum leap in the wrong direction, is a must-read for all those seeking a real evaluation of Modi's tenure, not one that is coloured by the *bhakti* for one man. □