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N Bhaskara Rao: Modi scores higher than NDA

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Prime minister Narendra Modi continues to hold his sway across demographics, political divides and the states. While the NDA government's initiatives are generally appreciated, concern for increasing prices and unemployment at the grassroots continues.

A special assessment study conducted by the Centre for Media Studies (CMS) on the occasion, finds that a significant per cent of respondents do not find much difference in the performance of NDA administration compared with the previous regime. This is specific to ministries that are critical for the common man.

But, as Modi empathises with psyche of masses, he is seen in a beyond-five- year mould. As the leader of the country, Modi scores higher than the NDA government and its cabinet. Ours is not an impact study. Two years is also too short a period to come up with a "report card" given the kind of complexities the country is confronted with. Since only a sample-survey based review cannot bring out credible feedback, this CMS assessment is based on a specially devised composite methodology involving an analysis of initiatives taken, the extent of citizen interface and involvement and public record and perceptions on ground realities and implementation.

This assessment was conducted during March, and included fieldwork at 70 urban and rural clusters across the country, in the specific context of the Modi government completing two years. Twenty ministries and as many ministers were specifically assessed. This unique exercise also benefitted from consultations with eminent professionals in different fields. The significant finding is that Modi is viewed differently for his different distinguishing roles and performance. As "prime minister" Modi gets 6.2; but, overall, the "NDA government" gets 5.5.

Schemes and programmes like jan dhan, Swachh Bharat, Make in India and Digital India initiatives have caught on with the larger public. Poorly performing schemes include the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, SMART City and food security. Most of the almost 38 public schemes are not identified as better implemented.

The ministries of railways, finance, external affairs, home affairs and road transport and highways, in that order, stand out on the three parameters of initiatives, interface and implementation momentum.

As for the ministers, Sushma Swaraj, Rajnath Singh, Suresh Prabhu, Manohar Parrikar, Arun Jaitley and Nitin Gadkari, in that order, are viewed as "performing ministers". Ram Vilas Paswan, Bandaru Dattatreya, Radha Mohan Singh, JP Nadda and Prakash Javadekar do not stand up to the expectations of the larger public.

Overall, among the ministries ranking low, the ministry of labour and employment stood at the bottom. Noticeably, the ministries having greater relevance to the lives of common people are in the bottom five of the table. These include labour and employment, law, rural development, consumer affairs, food and public distribution and social justice and empowerment.

In the coming years, the Modi government would be better off focusing more on actionable

citizen centric policies and initiatives, which, in turn, would bring the much needed change in peoples' perception as well.

On corruption, a high majority view that overall corruption in government has "somewhat declined" during the Modi regime. That no minister is accused of corruption scandal has helped the government stay clear of such perceptions.

However, there appears to be no difference on the extent of "petty corruption" faced by ordinary citizens in availing certain basic public services at the grassroots level. Not much headway is perceived on bringing back black money from abroad. This, despite Modi being seen as a "zero corruption leader" himself.

Some of the other significant perceptions are the prime minister's silence on critical issues of domestic conflict, his restricted tours across the country, and, in general, the government's insensitivity to grassroots realities, our findings suggest.

Modi needs to avoid being viewed as "poll bound PM", as people see his speeches on news media more often in that context.

Appraisal of ministries

Indian Railways stand ahead of finance and external affairs in terms of overall ranking of the union ministries.

Favourable people's perception about the railways was second only to the ministry of external affairs, even though railways have not updated the citizen charter or has not uploaded annual report (2014-15) on the website.

The railways also score better on the component initiatives and action, followed by the ministries of finance, home affairs and HRD. The ministries of finance and external affairs rank higher on updating citizens, closely followed by home affairs. The ministries of external affairs and railways also lead citizens' perception.

Among the ministries ranking low overall, the ministry of labour and employment, stood at the bottom. Noticeably, ministries considered being 'lifeline' for ordinary citizens are at the bottom — urban development, rural development, social justice and empowerment, consumer affairs, food and public distribution, labour and employment.

In the coming years, the Modi government needs to focus more on concrete and actionable citizen centric policies and initiatives.

Employment, agriculture and farmers welfare, food and public distribution and social justice and empowerment ministries, despite being critical to ordinary citizens, are not viewed by respondents in the study as taking any initiatives or being proactive. There seems to be a "disconnect" with the citizens, as they do not figure among the performing ministries.

Lack of consensus on the functioning of both the houses of parliament seems to be taking away a lot of crucial time for the present government, as legislative work is important for giving a direction to policies and programmes.

The assessment shows many important ministries like agriculture, health and family welfare, power, urban development have hardly introduced any bills to give momentum to development at the grassroots.

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