

deepcut

RAJESH MAHAPATRA



WHY SUPPORT FOR MODI FLOATS ON HOPE

Three years ago, millions of aspirational Indians put their faith in Prime Minister Narendra Modi – not for advancing the Hindutva cause but for an economic turnaround that would win India back its seat at the global high table. My brother-in-law was one of them. Cogent, informed, able to build and regulate an argument, he acknowledges that the government is yet to deliver on key economic expectations. Yet, that does not have any bearing on his support for Modi. He finds reasons to be optimistic based not on what is being done but on the hope of what the Gujarat strongman can do, as this dinner-table conversation between the two of us illustrates.

Me: Three years on, how do you see the government doing?

Brother-in-Law (BIL): I am still

hopeful. These may not be the best of times, but things are getting better.

Me: Hmm.. Hopeful, not confident

BIL: I am hopeful because this government has been able to do things that touch people's lives. Take the case of the direct benefit transfer scheme and the Aadhar push. There have been massive savings. Leakages in LPG and kerosene subsidy have been plugged.

Me: DBT was the UPA government's brainchild. It was launched in 2013, when Manmohan Singh, of whom you were once an avid supporter, was the PM. How can you give all the credit to the current government? Also much of the savings came from softening oil prices in the global markets, as the government's own audit reports point out.

BIL: Yes, that may be true. But would you have had the savings if the DBT scheme was not effective, if there

was no push to link it to Aadhar, if there were no Jan Dhan accounts? This government gave it the teeth it needed. Its coverage now spans the entire country; 27 million fake ration cards have been weeded out and the Jan Dhan Yojana has been a game-changer. Every Indian now has a bank account and money in it.

Me: Don't you think this is tokenism? The real issues of creating jobs and prosperity remain unaddressed. In fact, people are losing jobs and livelihood; wages are under a squeeze.

BIL: That's not true. Jobs are being generated, perhaps, not as fast as one would like. The initiatives taken by this government, especially in the infrastructure sector, will soon start paying off. Road construction has picked up. Every day, thousands of toilets are being built. This is the first time sanitation and cleanliness find a prominent place on a government's development agenda. There is a lot happening in infrastructure. I read in newspapers that India has become power surplus.

Me: You can have surplus power when demand lags supply because the economy is sluggish and there are still more than 300 million people in the country with no access to electricity. Also, most of the new power plants that came on stream in the past five years, adding about 1 lakh MW, or 50% more

to India's power generation capacity, were either planned or built during the UPA government, led by Manmohan Singh. How can you give that credit to Modi?

BIL: That is how people see it. The perception is that this government is working. The previous government did have good plans, but was undone by scams. In this government, there is no corruption; there are no scams.

Me: Talking of corruption, the perception about demonetisation was that it will punish corrupt people and unearth black money. The reality turned out to be different.

BIL: But look at the collateral gain. It helped add 91 lakh people to the tax net. Also, the election results in Uttar Pradesh show people supported the government's decision.

Me: You are trying to tweak the argument. You are willing to be patient for this government to deliver, but you don't make the same concession for the previous government. Is it fair?

BIL: I am being objective. You have to understand a key difference. The last government was led by the UPA. This is Modi's government. He connects directly with millions and keeps their hopes alive.

Me: And you rest your hope on him because there is no one else to lean on!