



The burden of high expectations

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FALLING ICON: “Modi is today being blamed for everything wrong in Uttar Pradesh.” File photo shows a billboard of him being carried away after a rally in U.P. Photo: The Hindu

One year after it delivered him an electoral bounty, Uttar Pradesh is deeply disappointed with Prime Minister Narendra Modi

In Uttar Pradesh, Narendra Modi's stock has dipped, with deep disappointment replacing the frenzy that only one year ago had fetched him 71 of 80 Lok Sabha seats on offer from the State.

A [striking feature of Election 2014](#) was Mr. Modi's complete dominance of every aspect of it. He had stood head and shoulders above his own party, the Bharatiya Janata Party. However, as a senior bureaucrat observed, this gap had narrowed considerably in the past year. Local journalist Rajendra Kumar Gautam described the slide in Mr. Modi's popularity evocatively: “Unka TRP down hai” (His TRP has plunged). Both the bureaucrat and Mr.

Gautam felt that Mr. Modi needed to show quick results in U.P. or the BJP will have it tough in the 2017 State election.

The towering leader who got everything right in the 2014 Lok Sabha election is today at the receiving end, being blamed for everything, including failings normally laid at the door of the State government. Indeed, thanks to the fantastic promises the BJP's prime ministerial nominee made on the stump, the line separating Central and State responsibilities has virtually disappeared in U.P.

Widespread disillusionment

The complaints against the Modi Sarkar cut a wide arc, stretching from crop failure and farmer suicides to unemployment, lack of infrastructure and, even incredibly, the leak of the State Civil Services question papers. But right on top of the list is the heavy damage to standing crop from unseasonal rain. The distress is widespread and has affected morale across the predominantly agricultural State. At 18.6 per cent, U.P. has the largest share of national agricultural population. Seventy seven per cent of its own population is rural. Ironically, what is rated as the Modi Sarkar's single biggest achievement is not its achievement at all. People gratefully and unfailingly bring up the drop in diesel and petrol prices, refusing to accept its link with falling global fuel prices. "Why did this not happen earlier?" (The Modi government has since hiked fuel prices, possibly losing the goodwill on this count).

Uttar Pradesh of April-May 2014 had resounded to cries of "[Har har Modi, ghar ghar Modi](#)" (Lord Modi in every home). The iconic Prime Minister-apparent was a looming, inescapable presence in India's most politically coveted State. Mr. Modi was heard and seen unstoppably, which placed him at the centre of every conversation. But what swayed voters, especially the first-timers, was the centrality of his message: he dared them to hope, to break free and dream of the impossible. With Mr. Modi urging and hectoring, the young seemed suddenly awakened to their own potential, to exciting possibilities outside their ken. Mr. Modi's appeal cut across class, caste and age barriers but his pitch to the youth was particularly powerful; 'aspiration' or ummeeden became the defining phrase of the election.

Travelling in eastern U.P recently, I found it difficult to relate the terrain and its dispirited people to the throbbing, excited hordes that spoke breathlessly of Mr. Modi before the election.

This is not to suggest that Mr. Modi has no following today in U.P. His core supporters still defend him with passion, but almost seven of 10 people I spoke to said they felt let down by the man they had invested their hopes in. There were some harsh, scathing words for Mr. Modi but the disillusionment was most effectively conveyed in wry humour, employed with elegance and facility in these parts.

No achhe din?

The sharpest comeback was around '[achhe din](#)' (good days), [Mr. Modi's favourite concluding line at rallies](#). He would pointedly say, 'achhe din' and the crowd would roar back "aane wale hain" (are about to come). Ram Ratan, who grew wheat in Chaudhary Purva, a village on the outskirts of Lucknow, pointed to his lifeless crop: "Sab leth gaye, achche din jo aagaye" (good days are here, so my crop is resting blissfully). In Garhi Kanoura, a Pasi-Dalit dominated neighbourhood in Lucknow, the mood was almost the reverse of what it was a year ago. My visit at the time was to test the thesis that Pasis had shifted in large measure to the Modi-led BJP. Garhi residents indeed appeared mesmerised by Mr. Modi, seeing him as their passport to progress and a better life. A year on, there was disappointment, astonishment and even a lot of mirth around his duniya ki sair (world travels) and his bhashans

(speeches). Ashish, an insurance agent, said he was enchanted by Mr. Modi's election speeches but now this had become a case of 'apne muh miya mithoo bana' (repeating his own name like the parrot Mithoo).

In 2014, poet-writer and Garhi resident Rajkumar Itihaskar had led the chorus for Mr. Modi, with the argument that the community had tired of being chained to its Dalit identity and loyalty. His wife, Madhuri Devi, a college professor, said she admired Mr. Modi and felt no discomfort with his often sectarian exhortations. Other residents also said they preferred Hindutva with jobs to identity politics without any prospects for growth. The latter reference was to Bahujan Samaj Party chief Mayawati, who was seen to have opportunistically exploited the Dalit caste to build her caste coalition as well as her personal empire. In 2015, Ms. Madhuri appeared hurt that Mr. Modi had cut himself off from his voters: "His work has to be visible, impactful. Already 'achhe din' has become a joke."

Ironically, the advantage of the current inertia seems to be going to Ms. Mayawati and for two reasons: The tough administration she ran between 2007 and 2012 and the absence of incumbency worries for the BSP. By 2017, both the BJP and the Samajwadi Party would need to reckon with strong anti-incumbency.

In 2014, the BSP won no seats for a vote share of 19.6 per cent, and admittedly it won't be easy for the party to overcome that deficit. And yet even Mr. Modi's supporters say Ms. Mayawati will offer him tough competition in 2017. This is primarily because of the expectations Mr. Modi himself raised. He made every section, be it farmers, students or job-seekers, believe that their uplift would be instantaneous. As a result today, farmers want comprehensive central compensation for crop damage; students want his direct intervention in such matters as the leak of civil services test papers and the unemployed want the jobs he promised. Many quote from a gung-ho speech he made in Gorakhpur in January 2014: "Good governance means development and delivery."

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