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FEATURES

Four Years of Modi Government: Schemes: More Hype than Benefits

THE four years of the Modi government have seen a high-octane publicity campaign over various flagship schemes that have been closely associated with the prime minister. But a closer look at many of these schemes shows that the crores of rupees spent on PR mask tales of unattained goals and unkept promises. The flagship initiatives of the government - ranging from Jan Dhan and Mudra loans to Swachh Bharat, Ujjwala and Skill India - today serve as a prime example of the government's deceptive narrative. There are many features common to these schemes - a misplaced and half-baked vision, big promises, large-scale promotion, misleading numbers and goals, and ultimately, key qualitative failures that have compromised the future of the country in key areas. In essence, these flagship schemes are emblematic of the non-performance of the Modi government and its attempts to hide these failures in rhetoric and false flags.

PRADHAN MANTRI UJJWALA YOJANA

This scheme to provide

free gas connections to rural families below the poverty line was supposed to make a big difference to the lives and health of rural women who depend on use of polluting fuels like coal, wood, dung for cooking. The aim to provide 3.5 crore connections was completed by April 2018. This is being claimed as one of the biggest achievements of the Modi government. What is the reality?

In 2015, the government had commissioned a survey to work out the contours of the scheme. However, without waiting for the results, the scheme was hastily launched in May 2016 to mark the third anniversary of the Modi government. The way subsidies are given as well as its implementation have sunk the scheme and reduced it to more hype than actual benefit.

The government provides Rs 1,600 to public sector companies to provide a gas connection and fitting charges. The beneficiary has to pay Rs 1,500 for the stove and the gas cylinder. For those who cannot pay this amount, the government provides a choice of paying the amount in four or five instalments to be adjusted to the subsidy given on gas cylinder refills. So, contrary to the claims of free gas, it is only the connection that is free, not the stove or the cylinder. The fact that 85 per cent opted for the instalment scheme points to the economic vulnerability of those getting the gas connection.

The subsidy on a 14.2 kg gas cylinder refill is between two to three hundred rupees. So to pay back the Rs 1,500 for the stove, at least five to seven refills are required. Thus the beneficiaries will have to pay the full cost of the cylinder these many times. In the last three years, the price of a subsidised gas cylinder refill has gone up by a whopping 20 per cent. Which poor rural family can afford this?

That is why even though the number of connections has increased by over 16 per cent since the scheme was launched, but the use of gas cylinders went up by just 9 per cent, which is lower than the rate in 2014-15 before the scheme started. The government has refused to put out the actual segregated data of use of gas cylinders at the district or block level or even between rural and urban areas.

Ground level reports show that the burden of the high prices of refills, the poor delivery systems, the absence of safety monitoring measures have led to the failure of the scheme when the large majority of the beneficiaries have gone back to the use of polluting fuels.

PRADHAN MANTRI JAN DHAN YOJANA (PMJDY)

This was touted as a revolutionary move to bring financial inclusion to the Indian people. Yet, nearly four years after it was introduced, its main achievement seems to be having provided zero balance bank accounts to a lot of people, who already had savings accounts to begin with. A recent World Bank report indicated that nearly 48 per cent of Indian bank account holders had not operated their account in the last 12 months and India topped the world in the number of bank users with inactive accounts. An EPW paper recently pointed out that nearly 17 per cent of PMJDY accounts are zero balance accounts. Similarly, the average deposit in these accounts has lingered around a mere Rs 2,500. There was a huge surge of deposits in PMJDY accounts during the time of demonetisation. Whether these accounts were used to channel black money is a question no investigation has been able to properly answer yet.

The PMJDY promised more than bank accounts. The other key aspects of financial inclusion the scheme had targeted - provision of overdraft and insurance - have remained underutilised. As of December 2017, only 1 per cent of account holders had accessed the overdraft facility of up to Rs 5,000 while life insurance claims had been paid to only 4,500 beneficiaries. All this has led to the question of whether this much-celebrated scheme has truly led to greater financial inclusion.

SWACHH BHARAT ABHIYAN

PM Modi's favourite scheme has also ended up being an exercise of numbers and photo opportunities. The mission that was launched in October 2014 set a target of October 2, 2019 for declaring India Open Defecation Free (ODF). But so far, only eight states and two union territories have declared themselves ODF. Even in states that have declared themselves ODF, such as PM Modi's own state of Gujarat, the practice reportedly continues unabated, raising questions on the reliability of data in this regard. Similar reports of the practice continuing have come from other self-declared ODF villages in Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. At the same time, the budget for the year 2018-19 actually reduced funding for the mission by Rs 1,400 crore.

Meanwhile, the scourge of manual scavenging continues with the victims being almost entirely dalits. Over 300 people engaged in the banned practice died in 2017 alone. A measly Rs 20 crore was allotted in the latest union budget for the rehabilitation of manual scavengers and there has been no specific investment in technology on the part of the centre to end this inhuman practice. It is of course worth recalling that in a book written when he was the chief minister of Gujarat, the prime minister had called manual scavenging a spiritual experience for the Valmiki caste, adding that "It is impossible to believe that their ancestors did not have the choice of adopting any other work or business."

Meanwhile, cases of forced implementation of the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan abound with the latest instance being Puducherry Lt. Governor Kiran Bedi's order denying people free rice unless their villages were certified open defecation and garbage-free. Similar coercive measures have been implemented or proposed in various BJP-ruled states, including denial of food, photography of those engaging in open defecation and even the use of drones. There have been reports of at least one death following an altercation on this issue.

Such coercive measures lead to the risk of false declarations, which will only bury the problem instead of resolving it. It is worth noting that in August last year, the government said that at least 48 per cent of villages that claimed to be ODF-free had not been certified. Innumerable reports of unused toilets across the country lead to questions as to whether this scheme too has been reduced to a numbers game instead of being a meaningful intervention in improving sanitation facilities in the country.

MUDRA LOANS

The Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana (PMMY) was started by Modi in the fond but erroneous hope that providing quick loans to a large number of people would create self-employment and generally boost the economy. Because of the massive political push given to the Mudra loans scheme, and with all public sector banks, NBFCs, and MFIs ordered to disburse loans up to Rs 10 lakhs to applicants without the usual pre-conditions like collaterals and bankability, the scheme has given away 9.9 crore loans worth Rs 4.68 lakh crore since its inception in 2015-16.

This means that average loan per person is a meagre Rs 47,249! It is impossible to start and sustain any viable business enterprise with this amount, apart from petty shops like perhaps making and selling pakodas on the pavement. Did the PM realise this when he recently suggested that selling pakodas is also work?

A seamy side of this failed scheme was revealed earlier this year when a bank official was booked by CBI for "fraudulently" giving away 26 loans worth Rs 62 lakh "without conducting meaningful pre-inspection or physical verification of spot of business or residence and without ascertaining end use of the loan amount or creation of assets from the loan amount". This was bizarre because the whole scheme is designed to give away loans without much ado. But under political pressure, banks seem to be just doling out loans to meet targets and please their superiors. Some reports suggest that local BJP leaders and supporters are mobilising people to take the loan as a form of patronage. If true, this can only mean that the Mudra scheme has been turned by the BJP into a channel for giving money to its own supporters. Far from creating self-employment, the scheme has blown a hole in the banking system that is already under stress from all the frauds committed by the likes of Nirav Modis and Vijay Mallyas.

SKILL INDIA

The flagship scheme Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) - part of Skill India programme - aimed at providing youth "industry-relevant skills". Since its inception it has trained 41.3 lakh people, but only 6.15 lakh of them have got jobs - a mere 15 per cent. This is despite nearly Rs 12,000 crore being allocated for the scheme.

The Sharada Prasad Committee, which examined the first phase of the scheme, noted that it had not been evaluated to find out its outcome. The committee's consultations with

stakeholders, it said, revealed that "Everybody was chasing numbers without providing employment to the youth or meeting sectoral industry needs." In this rush for numbers, the question of how the trainees would be accommodated never seems to have been considered. The report also noted that the Sector Skill Councils set up during the first phase of the PMKVY that developed curricula for programmes and certified trainees "compromised in quality of training, assessment and certification." The committee's damning conclusion that "an amount of Rs 2,500 crore of public funds was spent to benefit the private sector without serving the twin purposes of meeting the exact skill needs of the industry and providing employment to youth at decent wages" demonstrates the extent to which the mission went wrong in estimating the country's requirements. The Modi government has specialised in creating an alphabet soup of schemes but as the examples of some big ticket schemes given above show, they have failed miserably. Meanwhile, other equally important existing schemes like the MGNREGS, ICDS, Mid-Day Meal, NHM etc, that address crucial aspects like job guarantee, health, education or children's nutrition are underfunded, bogged down in digital bureaucracy and floundering on the rocks of neo-liberal obstruction. Such is Modi's four years of misrule.

Courtesy: CPI(M) Booklet on 'Four Years of Modi Misrule: Why it has to end.'

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