

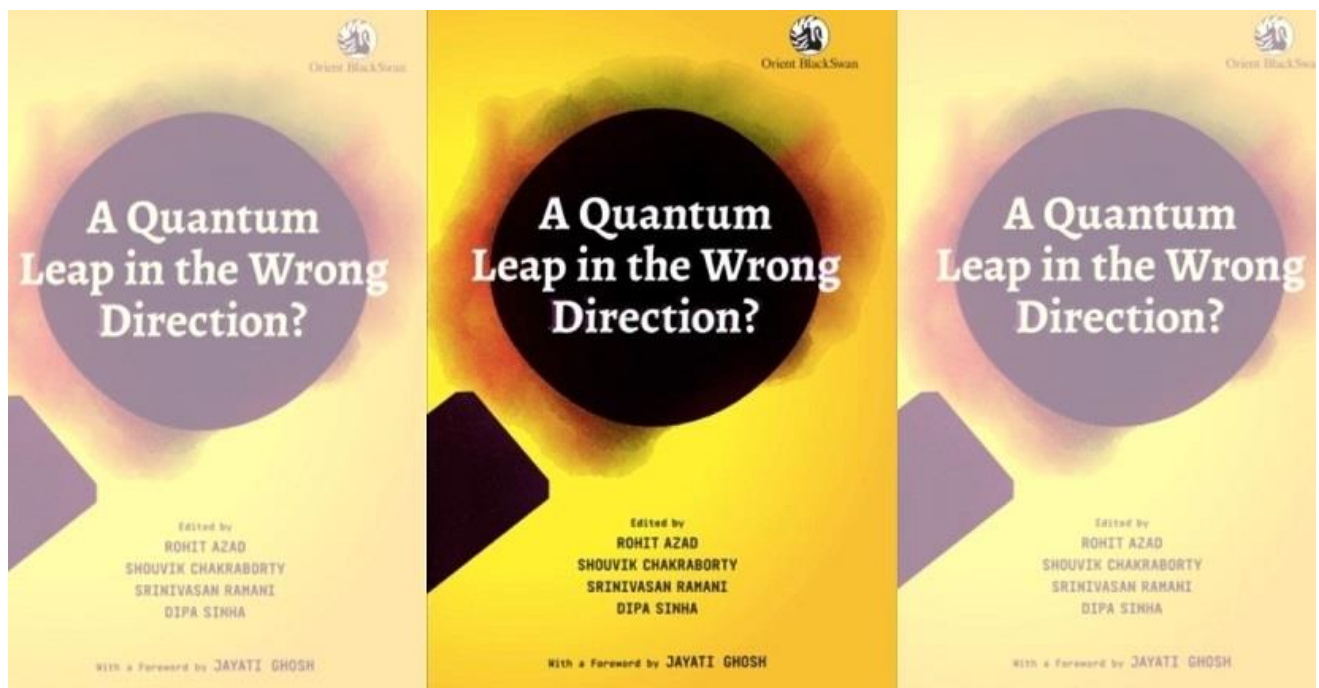
A Quantum Leap in the Wrong Direction?: A data-driven look at NDA's policies, but selective in its critique

Partha P Chakrabartty Apr 29, 2019 13:21:10 IST

When demonetisation struck, I reached out to some of the best-educated fellow Indians I knew — bankers and economists — to ask if I was missing something. From the outset, the decision sounded like a disaster to me. But nearly each and every one of them defended the move. It was only after a few months of confronting its real implications that I saw them change their minds. One of the discomfiting features of Narendra Modi's time as Prime Minister has been the willingness of educated Indians to ignore everything they know to hop on to the bandwagon. Until Modi came along, people in my ambit were of two kinds: the 'apolitical', who couldn't care less, and the 'cynical', who had little faith in politicians. These last were always ready to read critiques of politicians, and knew government was often a complex and dysfunctional mess. They were wary of promises and cautious in their hopes. They didn't readily believe tall claims of development, progress or transformation.

Perhaps it is Modi's genius for political marketing that turned our skeptical, highly-educated Indian into one who is ready to defend the government by repeating its propaganda. Since when did educated Indians start to blindly believe anything a politician or a political party says? Where has the skeptical citizenry vanished?

While the vanishing of skepticism amongst educated Indians may seem like a problem of the privileged, it is nevertheless important. Because when all the political posturing and marketing is done, there has to be a final accounting of what actually happened. If those of us who have enjoyed the privilege of education fail to conduct this final accounting, and continue to put our money and propaganda efforts in service of false messiahs, then India is truly under threat.



A Quantum Leap in the Wrong Direction? is a book that claims to provide us with just this kind of accounting. The summary at the back claims the book moves away ‘from partisan debates that resort to propaganda and provide no answers’ and that ‘the authors rely on an assessment of available official data and other reputable information, and thereby, let the facts speak for themselves.’ These claims are backed by the editors, a group of young scholars including Rohit Azad, who teaches Economics at JNU, Shouvik Chakraborty, a researcher at the University of Massachusetts (Amherst), Srinivas Ramani, an associate editor at *The Hindu*, and Dipa Sinha, who teaches at the Ambedkar University, Delhi. Further weight is added by a foreword by Jayati Ghosh, and the fact that the book was **launched** by a prestigious panel including Amartya Sen.

Strong and well-founded critique

The collection contains 14 essays by 17 contributors. The topics covered include pretty much everything the government has made claims about, and that we, the citizens, would be interested in. This includes the crises in banking, agriculture and employment; it looks at primary and secondary education, health, women’s welfare, the environment, and the rights of minorities and Dalits; and has essays on the NDA’s record against corruption, its policies on Aadhaar, its foreign policy and record on national security, and its impact on the public sphere. The two biggest policy interventions of the regime — demonetisation and the implementation of GST — are present across these chapters, as both had an impact on several of these themes.

The data points it brings up skewer the propaganda of the ruling party, and dismantle its attempts to hide its failures. The most notorious case of this is the withholding and subsequent leaking of the NSSO 2017-2018 survey data on unemployment. The chapter on employment by Subhanil Chowdhury in this book, while mentioning the leaked data, does not rely upon it to make its case. Instead, it presents data from other credible sources — the Labour Bureau’s annual and quarterly surveys (which have been discontinued by the NDA since 2016, but present data for the first two years) and the Annual Survey of Industries. For data from 2016 onwards, it turns to the Center for Monitoring the Indian Economy (CMIE). Those who argue that there is no data to show the Modi government’s failures on the count of employment will do well to read this chapter.

The Labour Bureau data shows that the number of people employed declined by 70 lakhs between 2013 and 2015. The ASI data shows that NDA’s employment generation record in its first two years was worse than either the UPA regime in the formal sector. The CMIE data shows a decline not only in total number of people employed between 2016 and 2018, but also shows a fall in the number of people looking for work — a clear sign of pessimism with regards to the job market.

When it comes to agriculture, Arindam Banerjee and Ishan Anand’s chapter exposes the Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana (PMFBY), an insurance scheme supposed to benefit farmers. Instead, the scheme has funnelled record profits to insurance companies, with premiums rising by 348 percent, prompting farmers to **exit the programme** in droves. In the first year of PMFBY, a Government study showed that insurance companies secured profits of more than 7,300 crores. (Though the chapter does not point it out, it is important to note that there may come a point when larger crop failures may lead to losses for these same firms, making their profits into reserves for future claims, though the jump in premiums may prevent that from ever occurring.) Meanwhile, agrarian distress only grows more acute, with real rural wages showing very poor growth.

Spending on education has hit the lowest mark in a decade as a percentage of GDP under the NDA. Allocations to the Ministry of Women and Child Development have also been stubbornly lower than the UPA, in spite of tall claims of working for women. Similarly, the chapter on health shows the Union government's spending on health as a percentage of GDP has declined under Modi, with sharp cuts in the successful National Health Mission and Integrated Child Development Services programs. Meanwhile, money has been funnelled into the 'Ayushman Bharat' insurance scheme, which itself is likelier to benefit private profit-seeking companies. Studies have shown that these government-financed health insurance schemes actually end up raising rather than lowering out-of-pocket costs for the poor even if their insurance claims are accepted.

...but not a 'fair' evaluation.

Unfortunately, while the book is a powerful critique of the government, with assertions backed by credible data, its claim of giving the regime a 'fair evaluation' is hard to support. Instead, it is better to see the book as a prosecution's argument pointing out all the ways in which the government has failed. Some areas in which the government seems to have performed better than previous regimes — like in the case of construction of roads — have not been discussed at all.

Other achievements, like the founding of the International Solar Alliance, have only received a brief mention, without going into details. The details included in the chapter on installed solar capacity are used to characterise India as a laggard behind China, USA and Japan — but no mention has been made of the fact that the pace has picked up considerably from before, and that **ranking fifth** in installed solar capacity in the world is not a failure — it is an achievement. Equally surprising is that the data mentioned on installed solar capacity uses a cut-off point for 2017, when the chapter itself makes mentions of news items as late as November 2018; by this time, 2018 H1 numbers, which are pretty good for the NDA, were out. A simple Google search led me to international clean energy consultancy Mercom's solar project tracker, with more details and a more balanced **analysis** than the chapter provided on this count.

I must point out that the same chapter, on Environment, has some vital and credible details on the failures of the regime. This includes a rise in the number of polluted rivers from 302 to 351 in data released by the Government, in spite of all the Namami Gange posturing, and a dramatic fall in India's rank in Yale's Environment Performance Index from 155 to 177 out of 178 countries.

While the other data that I cross-checked in the book was accurate, I also came across an error in Chapter 1, which its author has acknowledged and promised to correct. The error had to do with the figures of the delay in implementation of central sector projects. It is always a good practice, but I would recommend careful readers to use the book as a starting point and to look at the data for themselves.

This is also important to mention because the graphs and charts are sometimes poor in quality, with hard-to-decipher variations in monochrome shades and missing legends and explanations for parameters. Fortunately, the sources are clearly mentioned, so everything can be independently verified, something we see too rarely in this age of Whatsapp debates.

One small step towards a more informed citizenry

I would have liked the book more had it been more clear about its true aim, which was to point out where the current regime fell short. I would have been even happier had it been a truly

comprehensive analysis of the government's performance. My own studies into the measurement of governance have shown that it is no easy thing. For one, the government is much more complex than the PM would have us believe — it is emphatically not one man making decisions. Some of those decisions are likely to be good. If we do not take note of good decisions, we will not learn how to recognise them when they are made.

It is this ignorance of what actually constitutes good governance that has led to this pass, where a PM can claim 'nothing' has been done before he came to power. Doing harm to the country is easy for regimes, by taking unilateral decisions like demonetisation. It is much harder to build institutions and frame good policies; it takes sound planning, and years of amendment of those plans when faced with challenges in implementation; and it takes active monitoring. Showing some of these processes would have helped to more completely educate citizens on what to look for.

It would have also given the book more credibility amongst those who are now inclined to dismissing academics and journalists as urban naxals. Politicians eschew nuance because they are there to hoodwink citizens; books like this, in my opinion, should contain an abundance of it. After all, when all the dust has settled, and the politicians we passionately worship today have vanished from the public consciousness, the full truth, the extent to which we can present it, will be what matters.

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