

# **Mood of the Nation survey has 3 messages for Modi govt, Opposition —Economy, economy, economy**

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Is this the beginning of the end of Modi government? That would be a hasty and lazy conclusion.

India Today's latest nation-wide public opinion survey has three messages for the Narendra Modi government, and for the opposition: economy, economy and economy. For the ruling party, it rings an alarm bell much louder than the orchestrated noise around amrit kaal. For the opposition, this is both an opportunity and a responsibility.

This is not how everyone would read this survey. We read opinion polls for election forecast. As an ex-pollster, this troubles me. Any seats projection made in-between two elections must not be taken literally. The real stuff of a survey like the present one is what it tells us about trends in public opinion.

For the record, therefore, I must report that the latest round of India Today's Mood of the Nation Survey (MOTNS), one of the longest standing barometers of public mood in our country, projects that if Lok Sabha elections were held between 15 to 31 July of 2022, the BJP would secure 283 seats (a little short of the 303 seats it won in 2019) and the NDA would bag 307 (much lower than its tally of 353 last time).

## **A methodological disquiet**

But there are many reasons not to spend too much time on these numbers. One, because we must not take any seats forecast 20 months before elections too seriously. Two, because the survey was held before the Bihar turmoil. Although the pollsters make a valiant attempt to take this factor into account with a quick snap poll in the state. (They estimate a loss of 8 seats to the BJP and of 21 seats to the NDA as a result of Nitish Kumar's switch-over).

I must record another reason for my discomfort. Beginning January this year, MOTNS has stopped doing face-to-face interviews at peoples' homes. For the last six decades, this has been the time-tested gold standard methodology of survey research, and is still followed by credible institutions like the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS). Instead, C-Voter, the new agency that has taken over MOTNS, has shifted entirely to telephonic interviews. Now, it is well known that telephonic interviews are much cheaper and hence preferred all over the world. It is also true that mobile density is now quite high in India. Still, it is far from universal. And no matter how much you massage it with sophisticated statistical techniques, a telephonic survey is bound to leave out the citizens at the lowest rung and thus skew the responses.

It is particularly disappointing to note that India Today, a magazine that pioneered quality opinion polling in India, chose to be economic with transparency requirements and brush this methodological shift under the carpet in a coded language. (“This survey is based on CATI interviews of adult respondents across all segments”. Did you guess that CATI meant Computer Assisted Telephonic Interviews? Did you realise that researchers doing MOTNS had stopped visiting the homes of the respondents?). We get no information of the gender, caste or class profile of the sampled respondents who responded to telephone calls. Nor is there any break-up of key responses by different categories, even when you desperately need it (economic distress by economic class and gender or communal situation by religion, for example).

### **It’s economy, stupid**

Notwithstanding these limitations, the survey offers a wealth of information, especially on broad trends of public opinion. The headline finding is unmistakable: “it’s economy, stupid”. The top three responses to the question, “What is the biggest problem India currently faces?” are: price rise (27 per cent), unemployment (25 per cent) and poverty (7 per cent). Economic problems are on top of everyone’s mind. And with good reasons, if you follow the official and unofficial data on the state of the economy. Price rise tops the chart, as it often does even if the recorded inflation is low, though the level is not unprecedented. Given the gloomy figures on employment, it should not come as a surprise that 56 per cent think the unemployment situation is “very serious” against just 9 per cent who say it is not.

Yet, I was surprised that people project their assessment of the present economic condition into the future as well. Survey research over decades has shown that Indians are optimists about future economic prospects, no matter how bad their current state of affairs. So, it came as a shock to me that as many as 34 per cent expect the country’s economy to get worse over the next six months, compared to 31 per cent who expect it to get better, a near reversal of the balance six months ago. I don’t recall any other recorded phase of economic pessimism in India, except just after the second phase of Covid.

As a survey researcher, I trust peoples’ responses on their household economic condition much more than their assessment of the country’s economy. You can be fooled into believing a rosy or dark picture about the nation’s economy, but not about your own or your family’s economic condition. India Today has been asking this direct question for the last six years: “how has your economic condition changed since Narendra Modi took charge as PM in 2014?” Note that the question names Modi and, given his continuing popularity, should load the answers in the positive direction. However, 36 per cent respondents report that their condition has deteriorated, compared to 28 per cent who report an improvement since 2014. The same is extended to the future: more respondents expect their own economic condition to worsen in the near future than those who expect betterment. These are terrible figures for any government, bad enough to get the government kicked out at the hustings.

## **From economy to politics**

It all depends on whether people blame the government for their poor economic conditions or not. Here too, the news is not good for the Modi government. Positive rating of the government's economic policies is now at 48 per cent, the lowest recorded in the last six years. Negative assessment is now at 29 per cent, the highest ever. When asked to name "biggest failure" of the NDA government, the top three mentions are economy related: price rise, unemployment, economic growth. To be sure, negative assessment of economic policy has not yet overtaken the positive evaluation. And the overall assessment of the government is still quite positive, thanks to public support for its handling of other issues like Kashmir, Ram Temple, corruption, and, surprisingly, Covid. But with inflation and unemployment showing no signs of slowing down, the government has a lot to worry about.

Is this the beginning of the end of the Modi government? That would be a hasty and lazy conclusion. The PM's personal popularity is still fairly high, even though the proportion of those who rate his work as poor or very poor has touched a new high. As yet no opposition leader comes anywhere close to him in the popularity rating. While there is a marked unease about the state of democracy – those who say democracy is in danger clearly outnumber those who don't – there is no perceptible popular anger on the destruction of democratic institutions or curbs on freedom of speech. Indians get more worked up about hubris and vindictiveness of the government than about the niceties of liberal democracy.

As this column argued last week, there is little to support the idea that 2024 is a "done deal" for the ruling party. Such boasts and the media circus around it are nothing but mind-games that the BJP is adept at playing. Nor should we assume that the BJP is headed for a defeat. The changed electoral baseline after Bihar upheaval, and economic distress reported in this survey, clearly indicate that the electoral race is still open. The onus is now on the opposition to take up this historic responsibility.