

**Banyan**

# India cannot fix its problems if it pretends they do not exist

*The government's response to bad news is to stick its fingers in its ears*

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**TWO SURPRISING** results came out in India on June 4th. One was the conclusion of a six-week-long general election in which the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) expected an easy victory on the back of its hugely popular leader, Narendra Modi, the prime minister. Exit polls forecast as many as 340 of 543 seats for the BJP. Instead, the party limped in with just 240 and formed a government only in coalition.

For a cohort of 2.3m Indians it was that day's other result that was more important. A month earlier they had sat a [national entrance test](#) to compete for some 110,000 medical-college seats. Scores released on June 4th

showed a surprising—and unprecedented—67 candidates with perfect grades, including six from just one testing centre.

What followed was no surprise at all. Allegations of corruption were flung about. The government denied that exam papers had leaked. The matter reached the Supreme Court, which ruled that there were leaks but they were not systemic. But not before an exasperated chief justice sighed, “Let us not be in self-denial because self-denial is only adding to the problem...Everyone knows there was a leak.”

Denial is the first, and often the only, response of India’s government to bad news. Last month analysts at Citigroup, a bank, noted that India would at best manage to create 9m of the 12m new jobs it needs annually to absorb new entrants to the workforce. Unemployment was in part responsible for the BJP’s electoral disappointment. But the government responded with the dubious claim that it had created 20m jobs on average every year between 2018 and 2022, a period that includes the covid-19 pandemic.

That pandemic, according to official figures, killed half a million Indians. The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates the toll at ten times greater. (*The Economist’s* model puts it at between 2m and 9.4m.) The government dismissed the WHO, citing “questionable methodology”.

Mr Modi’s government has never seen a methodology it likes. Last year the Global Hunger Index, a measure of undernutrition, ranked India 111th out of 125 countries. The government said it had “serious methodological issues”. India ranks 176th of 180 countries on an environmental index. “Unscientific methods”. What about the World Bank’s human capital index, which measures health and education? “Major methodological weaknesses”. The World Press Freedom Index? “Methodology which is questionable”. The Freedom in the World Index, [EIU Democracy Index](#) and V-DEM indices? “Serious problems with the methodology”. Sometimes the government does not even like its own data. In 2019 it withheld the release of unflattering consumption numbers, promising fresh ones with “a refinement in the survey methodology”.

When there is no methodology to question, the government sometimes shoots the messenger. Several foreign journalists have been denied

permission to work in India. Last year a BBC documentary about religious riots in Gujarat in 2002, when Mr Modi ran the state, was banned from the Indian internet. In July the government demanded that YouTube remove a documentary about Indian spies in Australia.

YouTube is increasingly in the cross-hairs. A recent survey found that as many Indians now rely on it for news as upon television and newspapers. YouTubers have emerged as a [crucial source of opposing views](#) in a landscape dominated by pro-BJP mainstream media, especially during the recent election. The BJP's response is to tame them. A bill making its way through the legislative process would require content-creators to register with the government and imposes onerous compliance costs, carrying the threat of criminal liability. The intent is to drive independent voices offline or at least steer them away from topics of substance.

Yet India's problems are real. Youth unemployment stands at 16%. Among fresh graduates it is 41%. An analysis of the government's own data by the *Hindustan Times*, a national daily, found that just 56% of Indians eat three meals a day. Pretending that these problems do not exist will not make them go away.

It is also self-defeating for a party that likes winning elections. Had Mr Modi received better information, he might have run a more effective campaign that acknowledged widespread concerns. He has projected himself as an almost god-like figure, demanding fact-free loyalty. But as this year's election shows, not everyone still keeps the faith. ■

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