

The significance of the ‘there is no data’ answer

The Government’s consistent ‘no data’ declarations on important issues are a critical part of a larger political project



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It can be safely assumed that the popular American dictum, “In God we trust; all others must bring data”, is unlikely to be found in any office of the Narendra Modi government. There is mounting evidence to show that either the Government has ‘no data’ about issues that show it in a bad light, or with its ‘alternate facts’, the answer is zero. If there was a filing cabinet that citizens maintained, then the file titled ‘No Data’ would be the thickest. The desperate scenes of migrants walking back to their villages after the announcement of the sudden lockdown on March 24, 2020 were recorded by global media. A World Bank report concluded that 40 million migrant jobs were impacted/lost in India in April 2020. But when the Government was first asked how many migrants had lost their jobs, the answer was that it had no data. When asked in September 2020 on how many frontline health workers had lost their lives during the pandemic, the then Health Minister announced that there was no data.

Consumer data, other cases

Well before the novel coronavirus pandemic, the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation decided not to release the results of the all-India Household Consumer Expenditure Survey conducted by the National Statistical Office during 2017-2018. The results of the Survey would have come before the 2019 parliamentary elections. But the Government waited for after the results, offering an excuse in November 2019 that there were “data quality issues”. It is pertinent to note that leaks from the data had suggested a noteworthy slump in consumption expenditure, an ominous proposition that showed this for the

first time since data collection had started in 1972-73.

The no data declarations have continued this year. The Government told Parliament in this monsoon session that the number of deaths caused by manual scavenging were not available. On the lack of oxygen claiming lives in the second wave of COVID-19, the Government said it had no information. On the number of farmers dead during the farmers’ agitation, it has been a stubborn stone-wall of no data. On the economic loss caused due to Internet shutdowns, in which India has the world record for the most by any democracy, the Government said it had no information. On a parliamentary question on vaccine shortage, clear as day with a number of inoculation centres shutting down due to no doses, the Union Minister of State for Health declared in Parliament (written reply to the Rajya Sabha) on July 20, that there was no shortage of vaccines.

The Government understands the power of constructing a narrative using data. The power of the ₹1.76-lakh crore ‘notional loss’ due to airwaves sold during the second term of the United Progressive Alliance government was a datapoint that was used masterfully to weave a narrative. A serious attempt to comprehend why it is saying no data is important, because this is no trivial matter but critical to a larger political project.

Hands off responsibility

The first reason why ‘no data’ is to be maintained is easy to understand. If the Government were to acknowledge any data, even if these were highly discounted numbers, it would be tantamount to entering the ring and opening itself up to scrutiny as being accountable for the mess and deterioration in the state of affairs. “Thank You Modiji” has replaced *Acche Din* on Government advertisements across the board, embodying the total personalisation of governance. The flip side is that any failure by the Government would imply failure of this centralised machine that continually claims



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credit. Denial of data on important markers of governance, delivery and issues that matter to people – whether it is farmers killing themselves, people consuming far less than before, hunger rising, the mismanagement of the pandemic or the botch-up in the vaccine policy – keeps responsibility at bay. If the Government knows, it must be responsible. And conversely, if it does not, it can pretend no one died or no one lost jobs and that the failures did not occur at all.

Bounced to States

The second reason for not acknowledging facts or numbers is to deflect accountability to the only other unit of power that continues to stand and challenge the Centre – and that is State governments. The fall in the share of taxes due to States has never been so low in five years, as it is now. To continue to mesmerise citizens and keep them invested in the benefits of centralisation, washing hands off responsibility is critical for the Union government. Acknowledging data or information of failures derails the project and the creation of alternate facts is very important. This needs not just avoidance of responsibility but deflection from vital issues. So, we continually hear variants of “health is a State subject.” India was told that there was no data on deaths due to ‘no oxygen’ because States did not give the data. And if it is not the States, it must be the political Opposition or past governments that will be held accountable by the Centre.

The third reason, apart from the direct evasion of responsibility and accountability, why ‘no data’ is consistently maintained is that it allows regimes to rewrite the story of the times. This is not about re-

writing history but about retaining the power to script the present at a future date. The truth does not matter, the narrative does. Recently, crucial health data from the National Health Mission’s Health Management Information System went missing. It was only after data-watchers made a fuss that the data on the website was restored. Consider giving absolutely no data for the lack of oxygen deaths. The news cycle allows public memory to be only that long. It might be fully possible to tell the story of oxygen in the second wave in a year’s time, by writing fiction, if data on it is simply withheld now. If data on this subject were provided now, it narrows the flight of how far spin can go on to market a dismal failure as a success.

Widening information gap

Information is power and a lack of information is the absence of power. There is a gigantic and growing information gap between the state and citizens. The state is building the largest ever technology-driven structure ever built by India for identification under Aadhaar, which wants biometrics before poor people even get their food grain rations. The state wants to be able to use facial recognition tools before putting in place a legal framework to be able to do so. All this data is sought to be extracted from citizens while it is trying to maintain an effective ‘no data’ position on the biggest snooping revelations that an international consortium has exposed globally, after the National Security Agency (NSA) revelations in the United States by Edward Snowden. The asymmetry of power can only be sustained by keeping citizens in the dark while increasing the rulers’ reach to know everything about everyone else.

Moreover, there is a certain brazenness in saying with a straight face and on record, at constitutional fora such as Parliament, that the Government does not have the data. It is seen to feed the public image of a ‘strong ruler’ by demonstrating unbridled authority and unconstrained power, but this

partly is also apiece with the information skew – encouraged not only because the Government does not wish to part with data but because denying citizens the data helps to restate the emergent power equation between the Government and citizens. It is something that Right To Information activists witness routinely as they try and exercise their ‘right’ to get information. Lest the total concentration of power with the rulers get diluted, the data will not be given, shared or made easily available.

Sometimes, dead citizens speak up. At the height of the second wave of COVID-19, when poor and hapless citizens ended up burying their dead relatives on the shores of the Ganga, it was taken as the end of the matter. But being in denial did not help when it rained. Sixty buried bodies floated up on the banks of Allahabad’s Phaphamau on July 30, and the Uttar Pradesh State government was forced to perform their last rites that night.

Challenge before citizens

But those were exceptional and dramatic circumstances. Eventually, lived experiences of people, those whose kith and kin died due to lack of oxygen, or of those who died of COVID-19 begging for medical aid, will have to challenge the Government narrative. This can be a tall order, expecting citizens to hold their reality as a contrast to *sarkari* spin, that too in a situation where several institutions and a large section of the media have turned into government mouthpieces.

Denial of data is not a bug but a feature of the political ideology governing the country. In a scenario where a majority of citizens may be dead to the truth of their times, the challenge would be for them to recognise the truth and unhesitatingly push for it. It is a long road, but good and truthful information is the very basis of the quality of democracy. It matters to fight this fight.

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