

## No moral halo

As the [Narendra Modi](#) government marked a year since demonetisation, Finance Minister [Arun Jaitley](#) defended the decision as a step that was “morally and ethically correct” and hence, “politically correct”. All politics, of course, draws from a sense of morality and political action is underwritten by a moral code. Having said that, however, demonetisation was also an administrative decision, with stated aims and tangible goals, and large consequences. To argue now that it needs to be understood only, or primarily, in moral and ethical terms can be read as the government’s attempt to insulate it from evidence-based argument or questioning.

While announcing the decision to scrap Rs 500 and Rs 1,000 currency notes as legal tender overnight, PM Modi had given the reasons behind the move and spelt out its stated objectives. Terrorism, corruption and black money, he said at the time, were “festering sores, holding back India in the race towards development”. Currency notes of large denominations facilitated these transactions and demonetisation, he argued, would bring them to a close. In one stroke, the decision invalidated 86 per cent of the currency in circulation, severely stressing trade and business, especially small business. The government has since produced data to support its claims that demonetisation has been a success. It has also shifted the goal posts — it now says that demonetisation was about turning India into a less-cash economy. It is only reasonable that the claims and counter-claims be vigorously debated so that the people can arrive at an informed view of the impact of this momentous decision, and moving on, the right lessons can be learnt from it. By casting it as a moral mission, however, the government is only giving itself more room to ignore the demands of making a more credible case for its actions.

Sections of the ruling party and government had adopted a similar approach in the debate about nationalism in university campuses. A wide and nuanced discussion of freedom of expression and its boundaries in a constitutional democracy was reduced to a war of labels — “national” versus “anti-national”. Those who portrayed themselves as the custodians of nationalism and dispensers of certificates of patriotism to others assumed a moral halo. The Constitution, not the messianic vision, is the foundation on which the nation is built and government policies must pass the test of constitutional values. This calls, first of all, for a free and open public discussion. Jaitley, a fine parliamentarian, is surely aware of this. It is surprising, then, that the finance minister sought to mount his defence of demonetisation by painting it as a moral mission.

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