



## Rate your department

Ministry appraisals are a great idea,  
but we're not holding our breath

**T**HIS government entered office with fine-sounding plans about transparent, outcome-bound governance. Besides a bunch of accountability initiatives, we were promised quarterly progress cards for all the big Bharat Nirman programmes, and yearly reports on education, health, employment, environment and infrastructure. The prime minister put his own office directly in charge of delivery monitoring. And now, there appears to be some movement on that front, as the government asks all ministries to carve their own "results framework" — a customised "vision and mission document", differently-weighted priorities and finally, a five-point scale to measure their own work. These reports will be periodically evaluated by a Committee on Government Performance.

It is unclear how the Performance Monitoring and Evaluation Function (PMES) will pan out. But despite all the talk of "outcomes, not outlays", the outcomes budget (meant to shake up ministries and make sure that spending was not staggered towards the last quarter of the year) was recently criticised

for its blunt tools. Appraisals, we know, work in concept by sharpening goals, breaking down work into small, measurable units and holding up actual functioning to this standard. In practice, they often offer fantasies of control. If no straight thing was ever made out of the crooked timber of humanity, imagine how much more twisted things get when we're talking about the timber of bureaucracy. Extracting clean, usable numbers from internal assessments is a comforting thought for central planners, but we mustn't be lulled into imagining that measurement is management.

India desperately needs more responsive, results-oriented governance. This PMES could well be a spur and a goad, it could discipline departments and make them redouble their efforts. At the least, it offers us a report card that ministries can be held to. But making it more than a perfunctory ritual would involve tilting the very fundamentals of governance-as-usual. And without that shift, it risks sounding like standard Yes Minister farce, piling on administrative encumbrances in the name of streamlining administration.