



The real deal

Even a limited trade agreement between India and the U.S. is some distance away

After the backslapping bonhomie and high of Houston, it was time for a reality check in New York. Contrary to expectations that were consciously generated and managed by both sides, India and the United States failed to arrive at a limited trade deal that was to have been announced during this visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the U.S. The deal stumbled over duties imposed by India on ICT (information and communication technology) products – the U.S. wanted the 20% duty on mobile phones and ethernet switches to be reduced or eliminated. America is also understood to have demanded greater access to the Indian market for medical devices such as stents and knee implants apart from its dairy and agricultural products. These are sensitive products politically for the Indian side as Mr. Modi has often taken credit for making them affordable. Loosening price controls now is not an option for India as that would push up prices of these products in the country. For its part, India wanted the Generalised System of Preferences which gives preferential market access for its products in the U.S., restored. These are so far as a “limited trade deal” goes; a full scale trade agreement would pose bigger challenges on issues such as intellectual property, e-commerce and the ticklish subject of HIB visas.

Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhale has said that the two sides “narrowed” down their differences and made “significant progress” but it is clear that there is still a wide gulf even assuming that India is willing to go more than half the way to strike a deal. That a deal could not be struck despite Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal winging his way to New York to lead negotiations tells the story. For U.S. President Trump, even a limited deal with India will be something to talk about as he approaches election year. This is especially because trade talks with China are going nowhere. China has not only taken Mr. Trump’s punitive tariffs on its chin but has retaliated in kind, picking the products that could hurt his constituency and supporters. This explains the hectic, behind-the-scenes activity with India in the last few weeks. With its economy in the grip of a major slowdown, any concessions from India on imports of American products may not have gone down well both politically and in economic terms. Going by the limited information in the public domain, it appears that India has played tough and refused to yield to U.S. demands. Trade negotiations are never easy and for them to succeed, both sides have to believe in a policy of give and take. It does not help if one side tries to bulldoze the other into submitting totally to its interests. At this point in time it does seem that even a limited trade deal between India and the U.S. is some distance away.

Brexit Interrupted

Boris Johnson has lost his way while seeking to navigate Britain out of the European Union

The U.K. Supreme Court’s landmark ruling that the prorogation of the British Parliament was unlawful has rendered Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s continuance morally untenable. While the judges dwelt at length on the limits of executive power and the detrimental effects of the suspension on the country’s democratic process, they scrupulously steered clear of pronouncing any views on Britain’s withdrawal from the EU. Yet, eurosceptics have attacked the verdict as one that was influenced by a pro-remain establishment elite. For his part, Mr. Johnson remains defiant that he may seek another prorogation to commence a fresh session with the Queen’s address. There is no indication that he would step down. Notwithstanding its response, the government’s options over leaving the EU have considerably reduced. Above all, Mr. Johnson is duty-bound to respect the law enacted by Parliament earlier this month to prevent him from taking the U.K. out of the EU without an agreement on October 31. Failing which, he is obliged to seek a three-month extension under Article 50 of the EU treaty.

With the 21 Conservative rebel MPs sacked for defying the whip on that crucial legislation, Mr. Johnson also lost his majority in the Commons during that tumultuous week before the prorogation. His attempt to circumvent the will of Parliament by calling a general election was similarly rebuffed. Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn has in the past demanded the government’s resignation over its failure to negotiate an EU agreement that could command cross-party approval. But in the changed circumstances of recent weeks, he has rightly prioritised securing a further extension from the EU pending a definitive agreement, over moving a vote of no-confidence against Mr. Johnson’s minority government. That position does not seem to warrant modification even in the aftermath of the Supreme Court verdict, unless the Labour leader’s alternative of a national unity government – only to see through the EU extension and subsequent elections – draws wider support. Mr. Corbyn’s party is also correct about its decision to defer calls for a second referendum until it has captured power. Retaining the latter as the very last option would commend itself as a democratic alternative both to EU remainers and leavers. The Labour party’s current stance is consistent with the country’s utmost urgency to avert a costly and chaotic exit, as also to install a stable government at Westminster. The introduction of customs checks in Northern Ireland, as an alternative to a U.K.-wide customs union, is a possible item in the fresh proposals Mr. Johnson’s team is expected to unveil in Brussels in early October. If they elicit backing from the rest of the bloc, the next challenge would be to gain domestic approval. A third Brexit extension would be insurance against uncertainty on those two counts.

An award and an unholy trade-off

Being the ‘Global Goalkeeper’ stands in contrast with the government’s script of providing social goods but not freedoms



NEERA CHANDHOKE

The Gates Foundation has awarded Prime Minister Narendra Modi its annual ‘Global Goalkeeper’ Award for initiating policies to advance the cause of public health and the building of several million toilets. The Swachh Bharat Mission and policies and programmes to build toilets can hardly be faulted, even if the outcomes are disputed. The award has, however, set off a politically charged debate within and outside India. A substantial number of global human rights activists, and three Nobel Prize winners, have criticised the Gates Foundation for naming Mr. Modi as a beneficiary of this prestigious award. Under his leadership, they write, India has descended into dangerous and deadly chaos that has consistently undermined human rights and democracy. “This is particularly troubling to us as the stated mission of your foundation is to preserve life and fight inequity,” wrote Nobel laureates Mairead Maguire, a peace activist from Northern Ireland, Tawakkol Abdel-Salam Karman, a Yemeni journalist and politician, and Shirin Ebadi, an Iranian lawyer and political activist.

Freedoms at stake

This is not the first time that the trade-off between the right to life, liberty and freedom of expression on the one hand, and state provision of social goods on the other, has troubled theorists and defenders of human rights. Benevolent

dictators have accomplished precisely this feat. They grant to their people the basic preconditions of life, but take away the right to freedom. Mr. Modi’s government has followed the script faithfully. The government concentrates on the delivery of social goods. The policy reaped rich electoral dividends in May 2019.

At the same time, human rights activists have been jailed without a shred of substantive evidence, civil society organisations are denied funds and harassed, mob violence is routinely dished out to members of the minority community, 19 lakh people have been declared non-residents in Assam, media houses have to fall in line if they want to survive, prominent Opposition politicians are put into prison and humiliated without regard for due process, and an army of vicious trolls ensures that no one dares engage with the government. Above all, we see massive violations of rights in Jammu and Kashmir, from the arbitrary dilution of the provisions of Article 370, to the infringement of every fundamental right granted by the Constitution. A new question hangs heavily over the horizon. Are citizens of India, heirs of a major freedom struggle that took on the gigantic British Empire in the cause of freedom, satisfied with, in Marx’s words, ‘a mess of pottage’ instead of the right to life, liberty and freedom of expression?

An unsettling swap

An affirmative answer might well be a tragedy in the making. We witness the forging of an unholy swap between toilets, gas connections, drinking water, and freedom. The beleaguered people of J&K are offered development as balm for their wounds. But development is the original chimera.



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What constitutes development, development for whom, at what cost, who loses and who wins? Freedom is natural to human kind, it is part of the human condition, it lies at the heart of democratic theory, it is the reason why democracy exists, and it justifies the existence of democracy.

In his inaugural speech as the President of South Africa on May 10, 1994, the great statesman Nelson Mandela summarised the role of freedom in history: “Let freedom reign. The sun shall never set on so glorious a human achievement.” Mandela knew history, he knew that inglorious unfreedom motivated people to fight glorious battles for freedom. Positioning themselves against regimes bent on appropriating power to control what people thought, what their actions were, what they read, heard, wrote of, spoke of, dramatised and what transactions they participated in, democratic movements throughout history have held up the flag of freedom as the ‘absence of external impediments’. “Yes Freedom!” Lord Byron was to write in his *Childe Harold*, “yet thy banner, torn, but flying, Streams like the thunderstorm against the wind.”

The emergence of liberty as a dominant and coherent concept in political discourse during the

Different peas in different pods

Unlike IT, it would be a mistake to look at the biotechnology sector through the lens of employment generation only



BINAY PANDA

India is among the first countries to set up a specialised Agency for the development of research and human resources in the biotechnology sector. More than three decades later, it is imperative to ask: has the biotechnology sector lived up to its promise? Or was it all faux optimism? More importantly, is the sector poised to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with, if not beat, the IT sector in creating jobs for the future? One needs to go beyond the traditional indicators such as the numbers of institutions formed, students and scientists trained, and the number of patents filed to judge the sector’s performance, and its impact on the economy and society as a whole.

Modern biotechnological research is expensive. It requires a highly trained and skilled workforce and access to expensive instruments. So far, most of the high-quality research output has come from a handful of institutions with better scientific infrastructure. The rest, which forms the bulk of the research publications, is of mediocre quality. This is primarily due to a “publish or perish” culture that incentivises numbers over quality. Over the years, the focus of research has slowly shifted from fundamental to applied research. Why has India not produced another Jagadish Chandra Bose or G.N. Ramachandran despite the biotechnology research budget growing several folds? The fruits of applied research will only come when we

start investing in basic research without asking for quick returns. While continuing and increasing the share of funding in basic research, the government should encourage and incentivise the private sector to invest substantially in applied research. Compared to the developed economies (the United States), biotechnology research in India is mainly funded by the public exchequer. Unless the private sector starts supporting applied research and engages with academic institutions, the innovation in applied and translational biotechnology will be minimal.

Field-specific issues

Let us look at the creation of human resources and jobs in the biotechnology sector. In India, unlike the IT sector, a large pool of the English-speaking workforce, low wages of scientists (compared to the developed economies) and a sizeable institutional research base have not helped create more jobs in biotechnology. There may be several possible reasons. Biotechnology research often requires access to laboratories with high-end scientific infrastructure, the supply of expensive chemicals and reagents with minimum shipping time between the supplier and the user, and a disciplined work culture and documentation practice due to regulatory and intellectual property filing requirements. Additionally, unlike the products and solutions from the IT industry, biotechnology products and solutions often require ethical and regulatory clearance, making the process long, expensive and cumbersome.

As the nature of the work in the biotechnology sector is specialised, most jobs are filled with experienced and skilled scientists leaving the demand for young and inexperienced ones low. In a glo-



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bal marketplace, having a large number of young professionals hungry to work at meagre wage coupled with the need of large corporations in the West to get work done cheaper created some of the large IT companies in India.

Advantage China

However, for the biotechnology industry, the same honour went to China. Unlike India, China has many more labs with the best of scientific infrastructure; each with more number of skilled human resources trained in regimental work culture and trained to practise rigorous documentation. Chinese students and scientists outnumber Indians nearly 5:1 in most American universities in the life sciences/biology-related disciplines.

A booming economy and a higher science budget coupled with a flexible hiring system have made Chinese universities and research labs attract many overseas Chinese scientists. Our government needs to make the process of hiring in our universities and national labs simpler and flexible, not necessarily provide more salary, to attract the bright overseas Indian scientists.

Last, let us look at innovation, entrepreneurship, and technology creation. Unlike the IT sector, the biotechnology sector requires

French Revolution in 1789, signified a ruptural moment in the biography of the political. The recognition of the significance of freedom represented the acme of what John Stuart Mill called the struggle between liberty and authority. The idea of freedom is in direct contrast to paternalistic statecraft, or the belief that those who would be controllers of our destiny know better than us what we need, aspire, and strive towards. These people might be colonialists, or our own rulers. It does not matter, fight we must against unfreedom, as people have fought since the 18th century.

Challenging unfreedom

We have come a long way since then. From the last decades of the 19th century, right into the first two decades of the 21st, victims of unfreedom began to speak back to makers of oppression and exploitation. Political movements of the working classes, of the peasantry, of women denied political rights, of the colonised, and of religious, linguistic, and racial minorities directly challenged unfreedom as a violation of what is due to human beings. As this upsurge imprinted collective consciousness, it impacted both political practices and normative political theory.

Today, political theorists realise that bare concern about freedom is simply not enough. A hungry individual cannot be a free individual. Poverty and hunger which trap human beings in a never-ending spiral of want and deprivation diminish freedom. These maladies of the human condition strip her of the option to do, or not to do. A person may be theoretically free to do whatever she thinks makes her life worthwhile. And yet she may not be able to do so for other reasons – because she has never been

to school. In order to, say, write a novel an individual must have a certain amount of literary competence, she must have access to education, to books in the library or in the bookshops, she must be able to attend literary discussion groups if she wants to, to simply be a part of a community that appreciates reading and writing. If a budding literary giant cannot afford to do so, because she belongs to a poor family, she cannot be free. Therefore, there is need for social goods as prerequisites of a life lived the way we want to live.

Democratic obligation

The democratic state is obliged to provide citizens with the basic preconditions for the exercise of freedom: health, education, sustainable living wage, satisfying work conditions, food and a decent standard of life. These social goods are, however but, milestones on the road to freedom. A democratic government can hardly give people subsidised food, and take away their right to express what they desire and dream of, what they expect of their representatives, or what is owed to them as free citizens of a free country. The right to freedom tells each ruler: this is how human beings have to be treated, this is their due; below this you cannot fall. This right cannot be dispensed with.

The stand-off between toilets and the right to freedom is based on false premises. Without the provision of social goods, the right of human beings to make their own lives is neutralised. But a life of unfreedom is no life at all. Social goods are enabling, freedom is life-giving. Without freedom we are stripped of our humanity.

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years of experience in the domain, access to labs with sophisticated instruments, sustained and long-term funding to innovate. The government has been supporting biotech entrepreneurs. Initiatives through the Biotechnology Industry Research Assistance Council (BIRAC) of the Department of Biotechnology to support the innovation ecosystems have resulted in an impressive outcome. For example, the funding has helped startup companies make nearly 50 biotechnology-related products that are in the market today. Moving beyond this, however, will require a different strategy and understanding of the mature biotech-led innovation and economic ecosystems. Two successful hotbeds for biotech innovation, Boston and Silicon Valley in the U.S., may provide us some clues.

A road map

Along with the availability of funding, infrastructure and skilled workforce, the presence of top-notch research institutions and universities in the vicinity make these two places among the most attractive locations for biotech startup companies anywhere. Unlike the IT and e-commerce space, ideas for biotechnology companies are initiated in scientific research labs while their parent academic institutions work as feeders of intellectual property. Often technology is incubated, refined and tested for years in academic labs before it gets spun out. Therefore, and unlike the IT sector, a sustained innovation and product development model in the biotechnology field without enriching the academic institutions is not possible.

The government is very encouraging and promoting entrepreneurship, but the culture of institutions and scientists to be

entrepreneurial will take time. This will require a flexible policy in the institutes to allow scientists incubate startup companies in their labs while retaining their positions. Second, the government should let scientists from research institutions and universities take unpaid leave to join the industry for a fixed period. Similarly, the government should relax rules to appoint researchers from industry in faculty positions with the freedom to teach, participate, and take students. This academia-industry linkage will do the much-required communication and understanding of the problems at both ends. Without a sustained effort in encouraging and promoting science-driven innovation in our academic institutions, and a robust academia-industry collaboration, biotechnology-led innovation will not aid the nation’s economic growth.

The future of biotechnology is bright in India. However, the sector is not going to displace the IT sector anytime soon in employment generation. Discoveries in biotechnology may help us solve some of the pressing societal issues of our time: cleaning our rivers, producing life-saving drugs, feeding our growing population with nutritious food and helping us clean the air we breathe. Therefore, it will be a mistake to look at the biotechnology sector through the lens of employment generation only. The need for the use of artificial intelligence-based tools and applications of big data in biology will leverage India’s strength in IT and move biotech innovations faster to the marketplace. Till then, India needs to do things patiently and work on the right side of the ethical and regulatory boundaries.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

Defining moment

The words of 16-year-old climate activist, Greta Thunberg, at the UN climate summit in New York, that her dreams and childhood had been stolen by the empty words of leaders has highlighted in a stunning and candid manner the agony of the next generation as far as the climate crisis is concerned. If activist and Nobel winner Malala Yousafzai has risen to become the face of children’s education, Greta is sure to be the champion soon for climate change

action and a clean environment. Wise counsel must prevail now and global leaders should walk their talk first (“World” page, “Trump slammed for mocking Greta’s speech”, September 25).

Dr. D.V.G. SANKARARAO,
Nellimarla, Andhra Pradesh

Trump remark

The bonhomie between the leaders of the largest and oldest democracies is welcome. However for the U.S. President, Donald Trump to call the Indian Prime Minister as the

‘Father of India’ is in bad taste and akin to undermining the true father of the nation. India has only one “father of the nation” and no politician is deserving to be termed this. This is because the core policies of Gandhiji – an observance of simplicity, truth and nonviolence – have long been forgotten by today’s politicians.

KSHIRASAGARA BALAJI RAO,
Hyderabad

‘Intrusion’ in judiciary

One doesn’t know how far the Chief Justice of India

was right in reprimanding lawyers for questioning the recent transfer of judges; to say that they are intrusions does not augur well for the institution. Questioning cannot be called judicial interference. Justice V.R. Krishna Iyer once said that we should have enough and more criticism of the judiciary as that alone would speak about the awareness of the people. To silence criticism is not democracy or a part of the rule of law. If lawyers who are an integral part of the judicial system do not

question it, then who else will do it? Not to do so would be dereliction on their part. In recent times, there have been cases of two judges resigning to protest unjust transfers; in one instance it was a case of executive interference which is the real intrusion. It should not be forgotten that some Supreme Court Judges themselves questioned decisions by the Supreme Court Collegium. There has to be a nationwide debate as preservation of the Constitution and the rule of

law is the need of the hour.

N.G.R. PRASAD,
D. NAGASAILA,
K.K. RAM SIDDHARTHA,
Chennai

Balakot camp

Is it a case of indiscretion on the part of the Indian Army chief, Gen. Rawat? With credible information of this kind, the best thing would have been is to be quiet. The group may have shifted by now.

DEVRAJ SAMBASIVAN,
Alleppey, Kerala

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