

Opinion

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CLIMATE CHANGE & CONFLICT

German chancellor Angela Merkel

If we fail to protect the climate, then in view of the growing world population, increasing conflicts are inevitable because resources are becoming scarce



Loan waivers won't really help small borrowers

They vitiate the credit culture & will restrict loans for those getting waivers; better to focus on more pressing issues

WITH THE INSOLVENCY and Bankruptcy Code (IBC) catering for bigger companies rather than micro enterprises the ministry of corporate affairs (MCA) is doing well to focus on finding solutions for very small businessmen. Media reports say the government is working on a relief package for very small borrowers, essentially small farmers, businesspeople, traders or artisans. These would be individuals with an annual income of less than ₹60,000 and who owe lenders up to ₹35,000 each. Essentially, the government is understood to be planning a loan waiver package for these borrowers.

There is no doubt that this community has suffered badly over the past few years with the economy turning distinctly sluggish; the distress in the farm sector, for example, is well documented. At a time when a very large number of promoters of big corporate houses have each defaulted on loans of ₹30,000-40,000 crore or much more, a sum of ₹20,000 crore being spent on ten million underprivileged people—assuming an average loan size of ₹20,000—would appear insignificant. Indeed, viewed from the perspective of the government's annual expenditure of over ₹20 lakh crore, ₹20,000 crore is a tiny fraction. Also, in the current context, where promoters of large companies appear to have no qualms in defaulting, it would seem churlish or even callous not to come to the rescue of an individual whose monthly earnings are ₹5,000 or less. From that perspective, the MCA is right in attempting to find a solution for them. MCA secretary Srinivas Injeti's point that the IBC does not provide any special dispensation for small borrowers and that the personal insolvency chapter may need some amendments is well taken. These underprivileged cannot be subjected to the same rigorous as corporate borrowers, apart from the fact that they cannot afford the long-drawn procedures involved in the IBC process; indeed, hiring lawyers and Resoluition Professionals may not even be worth it for the banks given the small size of loans.

However, waiving their loans altogether might not be the best way to help these borrowers because it vitiates the environment and ruins the credit culture. While the government will compensate the banks for loans taken by these small borrowers, given they borrow so much from NBFCs, if this loan waiver encourages them to default on the NBFC loans, this will end up choking off future loans. Instead, the government should, through various agencies, work with the small enterprises/individuals to help boost demand, which is their biggest problem area. Under a scheme planned some years ago, between the central government ministries and PSUs, a fifth of all purchases had to be made from MSMEs; that alone implies annual purchases of around ₹120,000-130,000 crore, but what is being achieved is a small fraction of that. Similarly, popularising trading of receivables will boost credit flows; and, despite all these years of industrial estates, both land and other infrastructure costs like electricity remain prohibitively expensive, as are labour costs. Given the size of the loans being considered for waivers, what is being discussed is a small one-time benefit; what is needed is a longer-term solution.

Bt brinjal a wake-up call

Unfounded anti-GM fears spawn dangerous subversion

B TBRINJAL BEING illegally cultivated in the country—the National Bureau of Plant Genetic Resources has just confirmed this for a Haryana farmer's crop—should hardly shock anyone. In 2002, the government had to allow Bt cotton cultivation since farmers started growing this, in spite of the lack of approval. In the Bt brinjal case, paranoia trumped scientific rationale, and it was the farmer that suffered. While the crop cleared the Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee's (GEAC's) biosafety-test in 2009, the government yielded to pressure from the anti-GM lobby and declared a moratorium in 2010 on the transgenic crop developed by Mahyco. The decision not only hurt Indian farmers—the Fruit and Shoot Borer, the pest that is controlled by the introduction of the Cry1Ac gene in the plant, affects 30-50% of the brinjal crop—it let Bangladesh capture the benefits. In 2013, Bangladesh approved genetic varieties that carry the Cry1Ac gene, and now nearly 20,000 farmers in the country grow the crop. Indeed, many media reports suggest the crop being illegally cultivated in Haryana could have links to the Bangladeshi variety. Studies by the Bangladesh Agricultural Research Institute (BARI) show that the genetically-modified brinjal performed far better than the traditional varieties—zero borer infestation was reported in 2017 and farmers cut pesticide use by upto 60%. A study by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) found that farmers saw incomes from the crop rise by 55% since the introduction of Bt brinjal.

India has done little to remedy unfounded scepticism of GM technology—even as Bangladesh moved on Bt brinjal, India waited for Mahyco to approach GEAC for a review of the crop's biosafety data instead of doing this proactively. GEAC asked the Indian Institute of Horticultural Research to obtain relevant data from BARI in October last year, but, with this still pending, the cultivation/contamination in Haryana was reported. In fact, the anti-GM lobby in India is so strong—the PM may talk of lab-to-farm being a part of agri-growth, but there are some within the Sangh parivar who oppose GM technology—that, in 2017, the government shelved plans for the commercial release of the indigenously developed GM mustard. Ironically, while anti-GM argues that private companies push GM tech without the biosafety of such crops being fully studied, GM-mustard was developed by the public sector, by Delhi University researchers including former vice-chancellor Deepak Pental. A GEAC sub-committee, found the crop has 'nil' or 'negligible' impact for all the criteria it was examined, including toxicity, allergenicity and potential as a weed. Not only was it deemed safe for human and animal consumption, it was found environmentally safe (including for bees and soil microflora). Such rigorous and exhaustive scientific testing chronically losing to fear-mongering in India has spawned potentially dangerous subversion—with no certified GM crops that can be monitored available, farmers could turn to unapproved knock-offs that don't conform to accepted biosafety standards. The Haryana contamination should be food for thought—activist pressure thwarting scientific evidence neither helps agri-growth/food security, nor does it ensure safety.

SafetyPATH

Road safety audits will help bring down the number of accidents, good that MoRTH is focussing on this

EVERY YEAR, 1.5 lakh people die in India because of road accidents, and some 5 lakh suffer serious injuries. Among the many reasons, poor infrastructure and safety protocol are two. The ministry of road transport and highways (MoRTH), until 2014, did not have a road safety audit (RSA) mechanism—a mechanism which came into being with the World Bank financed initiative, National Highways Interconnectivity Improvement Project. The changes that came about with this were installation of speed reduction methods, improvements in the geometric design for better sight-distance, crash barriers, markings, pedestrian facilities and more. If India reduces road accidents by 50%, it may add 1.4% to its GDP over 24 years.

However, RSA and many such governmental efforts fail to yield positive efforts if they are not implemented for a long time. In order to make such audits sustain over time, the MoRTH made certain protocols mandatory for construction. First, it will make sure that RSA happens for all the road projects that cost \$800,000 or more. It also made a manual wherein an agency and people involved with the construction can follow step-by-step guidelines for implementing proper RSA. The MoRTH has trained around 2,000 staff with the help of external educational institutions on road safety and road safety audits. Road safety audits also help in ensuring that the contractors are held accountable. In order to do so, MoRTH has drafted contracts wherein contractors have to conduct road safety audits and have a safety consultant on-board. Amongst other mandates, the contract also builds in contractors maintaining a monitoring and evaluation mechanism of the projects. A road safety audit is a significant step for ensuring road safety across India, and if it is implemented at a large scale from national highways to block levels, the number of accidents will surely go down.

BETTER FLOW

EVEN WITH A GIVEN NUMBER OF PLUMBERS, MORE FORMALISED TRAINING AND PLACEMENT, WITH DIFFERENT GRADATIONS IN LEVEL OF TRAINING, IS A MUST

Skills training for the plumber pipeline

BIBEK DEBROY

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HERE WAS A case in Calcutta High Court in July 1947, an appeal. "One Dinesh Chandra Guha is alleged to have effected alteration in the water pipe of his house by persons who are not plumbers licensed by the Municipality." Hence, Mr Guha violated the provisions of municipal laws. "The learned Magistrate trying the case has found that the alteration was effected by Dinesh Chandra Guha employing certain Oriya mistries. The Magistrate also found that the Oriya mistries were not licensed plumbers." At least in Kolkata, plumbers from Odisha are not a new phenomenon. Migration studies for Kolkata, around the time of Independence, report Oriya workers employed in plumbing, gas and electrical works. There is a suggestion that Muslim plumbers emigrated to East Pakistan after Independence and the vacuum they left was filled by Oriya plumbers. I can't figure out if this was statistically large. In any event, there have been plenty of Oriya plumbers in Kolkata and there are plenty of Oriya plumbers everywhere in India now. Every plumber you encounter seems to be from Odisha. Indeed, one can refine further and say every plumber is from Kendrapara, refine further still and say every plumber is from Pattamundai.

Pattamundai is a tehsil, a block (meaning revenue block) and also an urban local body/municipality. The population of the notified area committee (for our purposes, synonymous with town) of Pattamundai was 36,528 in 2011 Census. Pattamundai tehsil, with 155 villages, had a population of 219,063. There are figures floating around, suggesting 100,000 plumbers from Odisha work in dif-

ferent parts of India, not including those who work abroad, such as in the Middle East. It seems implausible that all of them are from Pattamundai. Indeed, they are not. They are mostly from Kendrapara, but also from tehshils like Aul (population 139,628 in 2011), Rajkanika (140,807) and Rajnagar (163,450). There was a 2015 outmigration study for Odisha and for Kendrapara district, it gave an outmigration rate (defined as percentage of households who had a migrant) of 47%, an absolute figure of 143,782. True, all of them aren't plumbers. But the migration study also said they were generally skilled workers in construction, especially plumbers and masons. Therefore, the 100,000 figure is believable. Why are there so many plumbers from Kendrapara? This is usually ascribed to the State Institute of Plumbing Technology (SIPT) in Pattamundai. But that's at best a partial answer. This was established in 2010 and plumbers from Odisha predate this institute.

"You reach a customer's place and he tells you that the sink in his bathroom is draining water at a very slow rate, but tub and toilet are draining normally. Which of the following will you check first to diagnose this problem? (A) I will check if the main drain or the sewer line is blocked causing the water from sink to drain slowly; (B) I will check if the faucet of the bathroom sink is leaking;

(C) I will check if the underground piping near the bathroom sink is leaking; (D) I will check if the drain pipe connected to the bathroom sinks is clogged." This is from a test "Aspiring Minds" administered in 2015 to 3,000 plumbers who had already gone through 4-8 weeks of training. Only 43.6% of trained plumbers got the answer right. This question is more about analytical skills, less about plumbing skills. The "Aspiring Minds" study concluded 80% of candidates possessed knowledge of basic plumbing skills, but 55-66% couldn't handle real-life plumbing problems. At least, these candidates went through some training. Indian Plumbing Skill Council (IPSC) tells us 90% of Indian plumbers don't have formal training. Typically, one joins as a helper. With self-learning and on the job training, one graduates and becomes a plumber and perhaps even a supervisor or foreman. We shouldn't be surprised. This is true of most skill acquisition.

IPSC's estimate is 70% of plumbers come from Kendrapara and there are 800,000 plumbers. If both numbers are correct (I suspect they aren't), you get 560,000 plumbers from Kendrapara, not 100,000. Lack of formal train-

ing doesn't mean plumbers lack skills. (Out of eight hundred thousand, 352,000 are estimated to possess informal and uncertified skills.) It does mean those skills lack requisite quality and certification. This was the Kendrapara model. However, let's also not forget the Kendrapara model also provided access to placement networks, even though those too were informal. That's the reason it worked. Kendrapara and SIPT now have competition, with specific plumbing training institutions in Gurugram, Vijayawada, Bengaluru and Manesar and training labs and training programmes in several places. But that should be fine. First, even with a given number of plumbers,

An ordinary graduate earns ₹10,000 per month. A plumber earns ₹20,000 per month. There is the broader issue of whether the education system delivers marketable skills

one needs more formalised training and placement, with different gradations in level of training. Second, for a variety of reasons, demand for plumbers is bound to increase. Apparently, we will have 1,200,000 certified plumbers by 2022, courtesy IPSC and National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC).

I did a random search on salaries of graduates and plumbers in Kolkata. Such small sam-

ple searches are always unreliable, but nonetheless indicative. An ordinary graduate earns ₹10,000 per month. A plumber earns ₹20,000 per month. There is thus the broader issue about whether the educational system delivers marketable skills. But partly, this also seems to be an international phenomenon. For instance, I find the average salary of a graduate in London is 27,000 pounds, while that of a plumber is 34,885 pounds.

No strategy in Trump's tariff push

His nascent trade war with China is a reminder that some things for the president are always personal

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As China and the US dig in for what may become a protracted and possibly very painful trade war, a lot of time is being wasted trying to divine whether president Donald Trump has a strategy. If we're defining "strategy" as a cohesive, premeditated plan designed with clear goals in mind—goals that go beyond "gotcha!"—then no, the president doesn't. "I'm going to teach China a lesson" isn't a strategy. Slapping rounds of tariffs on Chinese imports is punitive, of course, and may ultimately convince the country's leaders to open their markets and stop stealing intellectual property from the US. It's unlikely to convince them to significantly reshape what has thus far proven to be a wildly successful, government-brokered industrial policy that has turned China into an economic powerhouse.

Meanwhile, Trump has been tweeting a series of bonkers and factually-challenged insights recently about what he thinks the impact of his tariffs will be and how US consumers will respond to the likelihood of tariff-induced higher prices. None of this is knitted into a broader geopolitical argument about how best to deal with China on the world stage and challenge it militarily on the high seas and elsewhere.

Don't expect most of that to change in a meaningful way. The president doesn't have a sophisticated trade strategy any more than he has a thoughtful immigration strategy or a wily political strategy. What he has are resentments—resentments that are so deeply felt that much of Trump's fuming can come across at times as the words and bile of someone who has been personally affronted. Trump's fear and resentment of "the other" is profound and ubiquitous and speaks to sentiments he's been harboring for much of his life.

Trump's father Fred was a successful New York developer before a pair of government hearings in 1954 and 1966 revealed that he had been bilking taxpayers by overcharging the federal and New York State governments for construction costs relating to publicly-sub-

sidised housing. Fred was booted from federal and state housing programmes and essentially stopped being a major builder after that. Within the Trump family, the lesson drawn was not that Fred had transgressed and undermined his own business by being unethical. Instead, Trump and his siblings came to understand it as an example of an over-reaching and meddlesome outside force—the government—reaching into the family business and taking away part of Fred's livelihood. Trump's view of government was forever shaped by those two episodes.

Trump's own business philosophy also became marked by a heavy dose of paranoia. "I deal with the toughest, smartest people in the world," he told a *Washington Post* interviewer in 1987. "If they think Donald Trump can be walked on, if they think Donald Trump is a rollover, like most people are, the litigation will increase tenfold. It's very important in life to establish yourself not to be a patsy, and if you don't, you don't end up sitting in this chair." That same year, in an interview on CNN, he inveighed against Japan and its trade policies, noting that he believed that the country was getting the best of the U.S. and describing the problem in a way that was markedly similar to how he currently speaks about China.

"You don't have free trade. We think of it as free trade but you right now don't have free trade," he said of Japan. "But they laugh at us. They're laughing at this country and the way the country's being managed."

When Trump launched his presidential bid in 2015 he invoked images of immigrants pouring over the southern border as unwanted outsiders toting crime and drugs in their wake. He also campaigned on a promise to withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, citing the trade agreement with several Asia-Pacific countries as "another massive international agreement that ties us up and binds us down."

Once Trump became president, he pulled the plug on TPP without having a

policy or approach in place designed to replace it. (A move that doesn't ring "strategic" to me.) Trump gave the North American Free Trade Agreement an overhaul after becoming president, but that pact really changed in name only. The final agreement was a sop tossed to a president more interested in showing that he could tame unruly outsiders than engineer great policy overhauls.

Trump might have tried to strike new trade deals with Japan and Europe first so he could have isolated China in a later round of trade talks but that would have involved strategic thinking. Instead, he went to war. Part of his incentive for doing so comes from his longstanding belief that he harbors special insights into China.

"I've read hundreds of books about China over the decades," Trump said in *The Art of the Deal*, his non-fiction work of fiction. "I know the Chinese. I've made a lot of money with the Chinese. I understand the Chinese mind." He's not really sure about that though, and sometimes his insecurity is transparent. "China has total respect for Donald Trump and for Donald Trump's very, very large brain," Trump said last fall.

All of this presidential sharing is sort of interesting to observe but I wouldn't put it in the "strategic" bucket. It may go in the "needs therapy" bucket. And this certainly goes in the "resentment" bucket (and echoes his thoughts about Japan from back in the 1980s): "China is laughing at us," Trump told his White House aides nearly two summers ago, according to Axios. "Laughing."

What remedy did he demand then to make the laughter go away? "Tariffs. I want tariffs."

Now Trump has his tariffs and his nascent trade war. While his advisers may be developing policy built on his impulses, don't go searching for strategy in the president's own actions. This, after all, is personal.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Kamal Hassan must watch his words

Actor-turned-politician Kamal Hassan wants to hog the limelight by making all sorts of comments without realising its repercussions, and "Godse 1st Hindu terrorist" kicking up a political row is any indication shows this. The actor is on a sabbatical and is testing the political waters by forming his own party. All that is fine, but he will have to watch his words in his own interest. Politics is altogether a different ball game, learning its rudiments needs maturity and sagacity; these are the most important qualities that will help remain in the arena. It is an established fact that terrorism has no colour or religion, but Kamal Hassan's remark will only boomerang on his outfit. A political novice needs to grow up; political maturity and sagacity are basic tenets. Hope he watches his words before uttering anything in public. — HP Murali, Bengaluru

Managing inflation

The Opposition cannot be faulted when it highlights the demonetisation exercise involving high value currencies and the hasty implementation of GST regime as examples of poor management of the country's economy by the BJP-led NDA government. But the BJP-led ruling dispensation deserves credit on the front of retail food inflation, since it had brought down the same from double-digit to low single-digit levels in its five-year rule. While low food inflation had benefited consumers, it had a devastating effect on farmers with sustained low produce realisations. As the term of the BJP-led government comes to an end, prices of a host of commodities have risen. Droughts in Maharashtra, Gujarat, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh and structural reasons may have been contributing factors. Under these circumstances, the next government must ensure food inflation remains manageable while farmers enjoy improved price realisations for their produce. — M Jeyaram, Sholavandan

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Fuelling innovation in med-tech

How to maximise return on public investment in medical device innovation

INDIA'S INNOVATION AND start-up ecosystem has seen tremendous growth in the healthcare sector, especially over the last 7-10 years. The Department of Biotechnology's initiatives—the School of International

Biodesign and the Biotechnology Industry Research Assistance Council (BIRAC)—have resulted in the creation of 300-plus healthcare start-ups. The innovation and entrepreneurial drive has further been accelerated by Start-up India

and Atal Innovation Mission. With these initiatives, a huge amount of public money is being pumped into early-stage technology creation, making India the second-largest start-up destination. However, it is imperative that clinical/user need be clearly articulated before these start-ups are funded to minimise overuse of redundant technology.

Over the past few decades, manufacturing has evolved from a labour-intensive set of mechanical processes into a sophisticated set of advanced smart manufacturing, leading to what is being called as the Fourth Industrial Revolution. The fab lab maker movement is paving way towards advanced manufacturing. The fab lab concept was first introduced by MIT's professor Neil Gershenfeld. These are modern-day garages, empowered by low-cost and rapid prototyping tools such as 3D printers, CNC machines, injection moulding, laser cutters, computer-controlled milling machines and so on. They harness both physical and digital worlds, and are globally creating a culture of 'manufacture your own' product.

Over the last 3-4 years in particular, India has also been catching up with the maker movement. Medical device start-ups are beginning to partner with fab labs, to catalyse their product development and pilot manufacturing. It is a

Medical technology start-ups can enter the public procurement system by innovating the existing government procurement process and by leveraging global best practices

based model, and thereby establish a specialised national task force to drive centralised bulk procurement to address high priority public health needs, and ensure optimal usage of medical devices. This will also enable the central government to become the first buyer for high-priority medical devices, creating a smooth pathway for their scale up. It is time to adopt bold and disruptive approaches and contribute towards the development of a new India.

huge opportunity for the government of India to create an institutional framework, by potentially investing in world-class fab labs, which can evolve into mini-factories of manufacturing. The government should follow a public-private partnership model to democratise high-end manufacturing by inviting large corporations to establish dedicated manufacturing hubs in India, thereby enabling start-ups to transition from early stage to growth stage, and supporting the Make-in-India movement.

To further accelerate the scale up of medical device start-ups, the Department of Health Research, ministry of health and family welfare, has established the Medical Technology Assessment Board (MTAB), a central agency for undertaking health technology assessment (HTA) studies, for innovative medical device technologies in India, though the Indian Council of Medical Research. HTA is an international gold standard to assess economic viability, scalability and sustainability of new innovations for public health. HTA includes studies on clinical effectiveness, cost-effectiveness, social and ethical feasibility, and enables a more transparent, inclusive and evidence-based decision-making. The new innovative technologies that successfully qualify HTA may be recommended for bulk public procurement.

Although favourable policy shifts have been introduced in the last three years—to enable domestically-manufactured technologies to participate in public procurement—the uptake of innovative technologies still remains a challenge. It requires moving away from 'price-only' based procurement to a more holistic 'value-based' approach. The United Nations follows 'best value for money' as one of its key guiding principles for bulk procurement, instead of a price-only model. Value-based procurement takes into account life-cycle costs and looks at the health outcomes and overall efficiencies at the system level, which can be obtained from HTA studies. Additionally, the European Union recently launched its new directive on medical device procurement, and this involves smart procurement process—the most economically advantageous tender (MEAT)—involving procurement based on quality, product life-cycle cost, best price-quality ratio and broader socio-economic considerations.

India must learn from such global best practices of democratising high-end manufacturing and procurement based on a value-based model, and thereby establish a specialised national task force to drive centralised bulk procurement to address high priority public health needs, and ensure optimal usage of medical devices. This will also enable the central government to become the first buyer for high-priority medical devices, creating a smooth pathway for their scale up. It is time to adopt bold and disruptive approaches and contribute towards the development of a new India.

From edtech to enabling tech

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INNOVATION HAS DISRUPTED every sector, including education. With learning outcomes dominating discourse on educational reform, technology is being relied upon to improve student-teacher dynamics. But the unwavering focus within edtech has been on tech-enabled pedagogy and in-classroom activation. While these fulfil a definite need, more resources and thought must be directed towards using technology to improve education governance and upgrading administrative systems, thereby making a large-scale impact on the quality of education.

States like Himachal Pradesh have realised this potential. Supported by Michael & Susan Dell Foundation, the state has invested in creating enabling technology that helps the administration to deliver quality education. It includes developing technology platforms that help improve teacher training, strengthen review and monitoring, and streamline procurement processes. This has resulted in more efficient allocation of resources, and empowerment of teachers and administrative officials at all levels.

The state has created a dashboard called Samarth that captures student assessments and competencies in a standardised and understandable manner. It enables teachers to pinpoint learning gaps of each student. Also, complementary training content has been developed for teachers that is delivered to them through the TeacherApp. The content is designed for remedial teaching to address learning gaps. The delivery of training material on teachers' smartphones is better than the traditional, once-a-year offline training, which was unable to account for the varying skills and qualifications of its participants and required teachers to spend time away from their schools and students. The training received through the TeacherApp, in contrast, is customised, and does not take teachers away from schools.

Similarly, to empower its administrative staff, the state has developed the Shiksha Saathi app. It aids block officials in on-ground data collection in schools using evidence collection with pictures, real-time data capture and geolocation marking. This on-ground digital collection of data has started giving rich information on the state of schools, which, when aggregated, identifies systemic issues in education administration. This data is then used by officers at district and state-level review meetings to come up with solutions. This intervention has ensured that accountability mechanisms have been put in place at various levels of the bureaucracy, with regular follow-up and action-taken reviews. The result: In the last two years, over 240 review meetings have been held, where more than three-fourths of the identified issues through the Shiksha Saathi app have been resolved.

Besides deploying mobile apps and dashboard, Himachal Pradesh has relied on WhatsApp to streamline communications between teachers, block-level officials and the education department. Where communication would take weeks, it has been cut down to a few hours. To ensure organised communication, each of the 128 blocks and 12 districts have separate WhatsApp groups, and two state-level WhatsApp groups have also been created.

User-friendliness has been the underlying theme for the state all along its efforts to adopt technology in education. The earlier version of the Samarth dashboard was a complicated and time-consuming process. The state simplified it by making minute changes, such as using standard OMR sheets in place of typed excel files. It cut down the time for the process to about two months, and allowed for timely gathering of quality data, in a standardised format, from across schools, sans human errors due to manual entry. The education department could thus draw analytical insights from the assessment data of over 5 lakh students from the state's 15,000 schools, immediately after their assessment examination. Also, the same data was publicly available to both teachers, and school and block-level officials, allowing for simultaneous course correction in education.

Taking a leaf out of Himachal Pradesh's experience, other states can also impact educational outcomes on a large-scale through adoption of technology in administration. While enabling technology sometimes draws less attention than technology that reaches the hands of students in classrooms, it can have a much larger impact by improving the overall ecosystem in which classroom interactions are rooted.

While enabling technology draws less attention than technology that reaches students, it can have a much larger impact by improving the overall education ecosystem

The little teachers that can

MAMTA SAIKIA

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KIDS CERTAINLY HAVE untapped potential. I recently visited schools in a few Haryana villages to meet village elders who had been made literate by school students. We met adult learners, along with their children and grandchildren, who were their tutors.

The visit made me realise the limitless

possibilities of role reversal that, at times, even well-drafted reports cannot convey. Children can be quite effective at a task when provided with the right tools, and if they are made to believe they have the power to make a difference. In this case, empowered with mini-workbooks and basic training, students of class IV and above undertook the task of teaching adult family members at home during summer holidays. This approach, it turns out, is not only cost-effective, but also self-sustaining, because after the little booklet is over, kids continue to teach their parents at home, sometimes

through the year. So, as a child gets promoted from one class to another, family members also graduate with them.

The purpose of narrating this experience is not to talk about yet another model of adult education. It is to present a case that quality education is the one that aims at holistic development of a child, by providing them real-life opportunities where they learn and create simultaneously by taking action—in this case teaching adults. Such an opportunity can make kids more responsible, patient and disciplined.

Therefore, the approach to education

in schools must revolve around building life skills, value system and character through simple initiatives like these. Numerous reports (including from WEF) have pointed out that the new world is innovation-driven, and the competencies that will be in demand include collaboration, creativity and problem-solving, as well as character qualities such as leadership, empathy, persistence, curiosity, initiative, and social and cultural awareness. It's time we focus on practices that lead us towards a holistic education ecosystem, to make students not just work-ready, but also good human beings.

US COMMERCE SECRETARY Wilbur Ross recently visited India to raise the issue of supposedly high barriers to trade erected by India. This visit was preceded by a series of measures announced by the US against India, including putting India on the Priority Watch List in its annual Special 301 Report, terminating Iran's oil sanction waivers available to India along with other countries, highlighting data localisation requirements in India as a key barrier to digital trade in the USTR National Trade Estimate report, announcement to terminate India's designation as the beneficiary developing country under the Generalized System of Preferences, among others.

The visit was immediately followed by the US announcement to increase H1B visa fee, which will affect Indian IT services exports to the US. Although many of these measures are not exclusively for India and include other countries too, they are intended to kill two or probably many birds with one stone.

The American tactic of announcing these threatening measures is to hit economically hard and arm-twist India so as to bring it to the negotiating table, and compel India to accept the American demands of increased market access through reduced tariffs on dairy products, wheat and Harley-Davidson motorcycles; removing the price caps fixed by the Indian government on medical devices of

Uncle Sam's desperation to arm-twist India

The US is trying to suppress the rising stature of India in the global trading system

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interest to US producers; change in India's domestic IP laws for protecting windfall monopoly profits of the US IP holders, particularly in the pharmaceutical sector; no restrictions on cross-border data flows; roll-back measures pertaining to data localisation in financial services taken by RBI; and not to finalise the policy for its evolving e-commerce sector along the lines of the main elements contained in the draft e-commerce policy.

The US is also apparently unhappy with India's submission in the World Trade Organisation (WTO) this February, cosponsored with the European Union and

other WTO members on reforming the dispute settlement mechanism of the WTO. The US has been blocking new appointments to the Dispute Settlement Body (DSB) of the WTO, arguing over its role and leaving it with the bare minimum needed to function. The suggested reforms in India's cosponsored paper widely differ from the position taken by the US on the functioning of the DSB and the reforms proposed by the US.

The US cherry-picked data to portray India as a highly protected country and described it as 'tariff king'. But it is contrary to the fact. The highest tariff in India is



150% on alcoholic beverages, whereas in the US the highest tariff is 350% on tobacco products. Some other items having high tariff in the US include peanuts (163.8%), washing machine and parts (50%), footwear (48%), among others.

Not only this, India's highest tariff is much lower than applied by many other countries such as South Korea (807% on sweet potato, quinoa and some cereals), Japan (73.6% on cereals and preparations), Australia (163% on transport equipment), to name a few. Even from the average tariff perspective, India's average applied tariff is 13.4%, much below its average bound

tariff at the WTO.

Apart from this, while talking about protectionism, why only for goods? Why not for services also? Going by the analogy used by the US, it should be called 'visa fee king' as the US imposes very high visa fees on H1B and L1, the two most prominent visas used by service providers to deliver services in the US through temporary movement of their employees.

This is not the first instance of the US cherry-picking data to put forth its interests. In its submission 'An undifferentiated WTO: Self-declared development status risks institutional irrelevance' in the WTO

in January 2019, the US used selective data to claim that India and some other developing countries had made great development strides over the years and hence should not be allowed to take benefits of the special and differential (S&D) provisions of the WTO.

This is again contrary to the facts. While there is no denial that India and other developing countries have made progress over the years, the development divide is still very much present between developed and developing countries, and hence the need for continuance of S&D provisions.

The US is well aware that if there is any country after China that can challenge the hegemony of the US in the future, it is India. Therefore, the US is using these threatening and other tactics to suppress the rising stature of India in the global trading system, and to curtail the potential of the country to grow economically.

India has so far stood firm on most of these issues in its dealings with the US bilaterally as well as at the WTO. There is no reason to depart from this firm approach now. The government response and policy formulation should be driven by domestic requirements and not by any dictate from the US. At the same time, track II economic diplomacy through chambers of commerce and industry lobby groups could be encouraged to make the US aware of the losses that will incur to both sides, if such posturing by the US against India continues.