



Visa power

While mounting a diplomatic offensive, India should be more accommodative of criticism

The government has explained its decision to detain and deport British Labour MP Debbie Abrahams, saying that she had attempted to enter India on an “invalid visa”, as the government had revoked her e-business visa three days prior to her travel. It also seems clear that the decision to revoke the visa was prompted by her frequent criticism of India on the issue of human rights in Jammu and Kashmir, and a proclivity towards echoing Pakistan’s line on the issue. After the government’s amendment to Article 370 in August, Ms. Abrahams, who is the Chairperson of the U.K.’s All-Party Parliamentary Group on Kashmir, had stepped up her campaign, and raised the issue of J&K in the British Parliament as well. The government has not explained, however, how someone it considers so inimical to Indian interests received a one-year business visa in the first place in October 2019, and why it took four months to cancel it. Eventually, its reaction to her arrival in New Delhi, detaining and questioning her before deporting her was nothing short of ham-handed. To be clear, the government is well within its rights to deny entry to anyone that it desires to. However, if its plan was to avoid public criticism of its actions in J&K or of its democratic values, then its treatment of the MP has only ended up having spotlighted its actions even more. Parallels will also be made to the response to criticism from the U.S. Congresswoman Pramila Jayapal, who like Ms. Abrahams has family ties with India, and co-sponsored a House resolution critical of India on J&K. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, in Washington in December, cancelled a meeting with the influential House Foreign Affairs Committee as a snub to Ms. Jayapal, instead of trying to engage her at the meeting. The government is apparently banking on the fact that Ms. Jayapal and Ms. Abrahams are from Opposition parties, and hence it will not face adverse consequences from the Trump administration or the Johnson government.

Where governments like those in Turkey and Malaysia have themselves been critical, India’s response has been equally sharp: the *démarche* to the Turkish Ambassador this week and travel advisories issued earlier to Indians travelling to Turkey, or the trade restrictions on palm oil imports, most of which are from Malaysia, are notable examples. New Delhi’s anger over negative comments by Turkish President Erdoğan or Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad on India’s “internal affairs” would seem more valid if it was not at the same time organising groups of envoys to visit J&K and encouraging them to express their positive opinions on the situation there. In the same vein, the boycott or deportation of politicians, visa denials to foreign journalists, all appear to be a part of a pattern of whimsical behaviour not suited to a democracy like India that prides in its traditions of openness and debate.

Birds hit

Bird diversity in India must be protected for cultural and ecological reasons

Birds are under increasing pressure from human activity, struggling to survive as habitat loss, pesticides, hunting and trapping for the pet trade push them closer to the edge. Once-thriving endemic or migrant bird populations have been decimated over the past quarter century in India, as the scientific report, ‘State of India’s Birds 2020’, points out. The analysis, produced by 10 globally influential organisations, is a major addition to ornithology. It is a rare synthesis of scientific understanding and citizen-led initiatives, using over 10 million observations made by over 15,500 bird watchers, achieving what would be difficult for small groups of researchers working alone. What emerges is an alarming picture of long-term declines of several species for which enough data is available over a 25-year period, as well as a more recent trend of annual losses. Data inadequacies have led to the exclusion of many species. Some bird species assessed as ‘least concern’ by the IUCN, were found in peril in India. Remarkably, in spite of having a rich ornithological tradition, only 261 species out of 867 spotted qualified for a full analysis, based on robust long-term data; 52% of them are now classified as being of ‘high concern’. The heartening news is that sparrow numbers remain stable overall, although the bird has largely disappeared from some of the big cities. But the Western Ghats offer bleak prospects, and the abundance index of 12 endemic species there has dropped by 75% since 2000. The fortunes of the Nilgiri Pipit, Nilgiri Thrush and several Sholakilis are tied to the survival of the high shola forest-grasslands. Equally critical to some species, such as the Hodgson’s bushchat wintering away from Mongolia, is the protection of terai grasslands in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and the northeastern States.

India’s conservation community expects the Environment Ministry, which released the status report at the global conference of the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals at Gandhinagar, Gujarat, to secure a future for birds. Resolute steps to protect forests and other habitats will confer multiple benefits, protecting other myriad species too. The latest report is refreshing as it taps into citizen science for good data and should serve as a foundation for further collaborative work. It is essential to revive the Great Indian Bustard, now pushed to precariously low numbers. Coursers and floricans need help with their delicate habitat, as do neglected small birds such as the Green Munia that is widely trapped. Bird diversity makes India, Kerala in particular, a birdwatching destination. That variety must be protected not just for cultural reasons, but to improve the health of forests, wetlands, open country habitat and high mountains.

In U.S. trade action, an Indian counter-strategy

Indian interests would be well-served by maintaining a reasonable level of tariff protection



BISWAJIT DHAR

Last week, the United States officially designated developing and least-developed countries for the purposes of implementing the countervailing measures provided by the Agreement on Subsidies and Countervailing Measures (ASCM) of the World Trade Organization (WTO). According to the ASCM, developing countries are allowed to grant higher levels of subsidies as compared to the developed countries before countervailing duties (CVD) can be imposed.

The agreement stipulates that any countervailing duty investigation for a developing country must be terminated if the subsidies granted are found to be *de minimis*, which is defined as less than 2% of the value of imports of the product being investigated. For a developed country the *de minimis* is 1% of the import value of the investigated product. The United States’s annual exercise of designating developing, and least developed countries has assumed importance for India this year: it has been dropped from the list of developing countries. In other words, in its future countervailing duty investigations, the U.S. would treat India as a developed country.

India as target

Under the WTO rules, any country can “self-designate” itself as a developing country. In fact, the WTO does not lay down any specific criteria for making a distinction between a developed and a developing country member, unlike in the World Bank where per capita in-

comes are used to classify countries. But despite this clearly laid down criteria in the WTO rules for making a distinction between developing and developed countries, the United States Trade Representative (USTR) employed an arbitrary methodology that took into consideration “economic, trade, and other factors, including the level of economic development of a country (based on a review of the country’s per capita GNI) and a country’s share of world trade” to exclude India from list of designated developing countries.

This is the second instance in less than a year, when the U.S. has refused to extend to India the benefits enjoyed by developing countries under the multilateral trade rules. On May 31, 2019, U.S. President Donald Trump had announced that India would be taken off the list of beneficiary-developing countries under its scheme of Generalised System of Preferences (GSP). The GSP is a special window provided by the U.S. and several other developed countries, through which they import identified products from developing countries at concessional rates of duties. Importantly, GSP confers non-reciprocal benefits, implying that the developed countries cannot expect reciprocal market access from the beneficiary developing countries. Yet, the U.S. denied GSP benefits to India arguing that India was unwilling to offer better market access to its products.

Excluding India from the lists of developing countries for the purposes of using countervailing measures or denying benefits of GSP are but two of the more recent initiatives that the U.S. has taken to challenge India’s status as a developing country in the WTO. Over the past years, the U.S. has been arguing that the emerging economies, especially Brazil, China and



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

India, have performed much better than those in the developed world and therefore they should no longer enjoy the slew of benefits that they have as developing country members of the organisation.

The impact

What are the benefits that developing countries enjoy in the WTO and what could the potential impact of the exertions that the U.S. is making to deny India the status of a developing country be? Potentially very large, for India would then lose the ability to use the special and differential treatment (S&DT) to which every developing country member of the WTO has a right. In short, S&DT lessens the burden of adjustment that developing countries have to make while acceding to the various agreements under the WTO. Besides, when the WTO finalises an agreement in a specific area, developed countries are allowed longer implementation periods. This measure helps developing countries to introduce a new agreement in phases and are thus required to deploy resources beyond their capacities. S&DT has been particularly beneficial for India in two critical areas: one, implementation of the disciplines on agricultural subsidies and, two, opening up the markets for both agricultural and non-agricultural products.

The WTO Agreement on Agriculture (AoA) provides an elaborate discipline on subsidies. Subsidies are classified in three

categories; but two of these are virtually outside the discipline since the WTO does not limit spending on these categories of subsidies. The discipline exists in case of price support measures (minimum support price) and input subsidies which is the more common form of subsidies for most developing countries, including in India. For developing countries, spending on price support measures and input subsidies taken together cannot exceed 10% of the total value of agricultural production. In contrast, developed countries are allowed to spend only 5% of their value of agricultural production.

Shifting to DBT

India is a major user of price support measures and input subsidies, and given the constraints imposed by the AoA, the government has spoken about its intention to move into the system of direct benefit transfer (DBT) for supporting farmers. A shift to DBT is attractive for India since there are no limits on spending, unlike in case of price support measures and input subsidies. Further, faced with ongoing farm distress, the government has had to rework its subsidies’ programme in order to extend greater benefits, especially to small and marginal farmers.

However, implementation of DBT in agriculture has several insurmountable problems. Targeting potential beneficiaries of DBT seems difficult at this juncture for a number of reasons, including inadequate records of ownership of agricultural land on the one hand, and the presence of agricultural labour and tenants on the other. This implies that in the foreseeable future, India would continue to depend on price support measures and input subsidies. Given this scenario, the government needs the policy space to provide

adequate levels of subsidies to a crisis-ridden agricultural sector, and therefore it is imperative that continues to enjoy the benefits as a developing country member of the WTO.

Issue of tariffs

The issue of market access, or the use of import tariffs, is one of the important trade policy instruments. It has some key provisions on S&DT, which the developing countries can benefit from. The most important among these is the undertaking from the developed countries that they would not demand reciprocal tariff cuts, and this reads as follows: “The developed contracting parties do not expect reciprocity for commitments made by them in trade negotiations to reduce or remove tariffs and other barriers to the trade of less-developed contracting parties.”

Over the past two years, the government of India has been extensively using import tariffs for protecting Indian businesses from import competition. With increasing use of tariffs, almost across the board, India’s average tariffs have increased from about 13% in 2017-18 to above 17% at present. The 2020-21 Budget has enhanced the level of protection of the domestic players in several key sectors, thus pushing the average tariffs even higher. Developed country members of the WTO have generally maintained very low levels of tariffs, and, therefore, India’s interests of maintaining a reasonable level of tariff protection would be well served through its continued access to S&DT, by remaining as a developing country member of the WTO.

Biswajit Dhar is Professor, Centre for Economic Studies and Planning, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

Powering the health-care engine with innovation

There is potential for private care providers, innovators and start-ups to be partners in the Ayushman Bharat scheme



AMITABH KANT & INDU BHUSHAN

It has been close to 18 months since the Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, launched the country-wide implementation of Ayushman Bharat-Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PM-JAY), or the national health protection scheme; the initial momentum has been very encouraging. The scheme is currently being implemented in 32 of 36 States and Union Territories. It has provided 84 lakh free treatments to poor and vulnerable patients for secondary and tertiary ailments at 22,000 empanelled hospitals, country-wide. Under PM-JAY, there is one free treatment every three seconds and two beneficiaries verified every second.

Expanding the supply side

As the scale of this scheme grows, a key area of focus is to expand the secondary and tertiary hospitals empanelled under PM-JAY and ensure their quality and capacity while keeping the costs down. At present, there is one government bed for every 1,844 patients and one doctor for every 11,082 patients. In the coming years, considering 3% hospitalisation of PM-JAY-covered beneficiaries, the scheme is likely to provide treatment to 1.5 crore patients annually. This means physical and human infrastructure capacity

would need to be augmented vastly. Conservative estimates suggest the we would need more than 150,000 additional beds, especially in Tier-2 and -3 cities. While a comprehensive long-term strategy will focus on expanding hospital and human resources infrastructure, an effective near-term approach is needed to improve efficiencies and bridge gaps within the existing supply and likely demand. A strong, yet under-tapped lever for accelerating health system efficiency and bridging these gaps is mainstreaming innovation in the Indian health system.

Transformative solutions

India’s burgeoning entrepreneurial spirit combined with a systematic push for the development of a start-up ecosystem has led to a plethora of innovations in health care. It is estimated that there are more than 4,000 health-care technology start-ups in India. Today, start-ups are working to bring innovative technologies and business models that leapfrog infrastructure, human resources, cost-effectiveness and efficiency challenges in Tier-2 and -3 cities. Artificial Intelligence platforms that aid in rapid radiology diagnoses in low resource settings, tele-ICU platforms to bridge the gap in high-skilled critical care personnel, centralised drone delivery of blood, medicines and vaccines to reach remote locations cost-effectively and reliably are all no longer just theoretical ideas. They are real solutions that are ready to be tested on the ground and potentially implemented. It is high time for transformative solutions to make their way into our hospitals,



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

especially in Tier-2 and -3 cities, to turbocharge the way health care is delivered at scale.

This mainstreaming of health-care innovations, is lined with challenges at every step. The friction in their path to market often stems from multiple reasons.

Addressing the constraints

One challenge is non-uniform regulatory and validation standards. Regulatory requirements, specifically for biomedical start-ups, are still evolving in India. As a result, hospitals often rely on foreign regulatory certifications such as FDA and CE, especially for riskier devices and instruments. In addition, it is difficult for a start-up to understand the minimum necessary validation requirements in order to qualify for procurement by hospitals. Lack of standards in this area leads to a huge variation in validation requirements at States and hospitals, forcing the start-up into a spiral of piloting studies. The government is now pushing ahead to overhaul Indian med-tech regulatory standards and product standards which will help bridge this trust-deficit.

Another problem in promoting start-ups is the operational liquidity crunch due to a long gestation period. Health-care start-ups

spend long periods of time in the early development of their product, especially where potential clinical risks are concerned. The process of testing the idea and working prototype, receiving certifications, performing clinical and commercial validations, and raising funds, in a low-trust and unstructured environment makes the gestational period unusually long thereby limiting the operational liquidity of the start-up.

Another hurdle is the lack of incentives and adequate frameworks to grade and adopt innovations. Health-care providers and clinicians, given limited bandwidth, often lack the incentives, operational capacity, and frameworks necessary to consider and adopt innovations. This leads to limited traction for start-ups promoting innovative solutions.

Start-ups also face procurement challenges in both public and private procurement. They lack the financial capacity to deal with lengthy tenders and the roundabout process of price discovery. Private procurement is complicated by the presence of a fragmented customer base and limited systematic channels for distribution.

To accelerate this process of mainstreaming innovations within the hospital system in India, we need to focus on identifying promising market-ready health-care innovations that are ready to be tested and deployed at scale. There is a need to facilitate standardised operational validation studies that are required for market adoption, to help ease out the start-up procurement process such that these solutions can be adopted with confidence. This, in

effect, will serve the entire ecosystem of health-care innovators by opening up health-care markets for all. A strong theme in mature health-care systems in other parts of the world is a vibrant and seamless interface between hospitals and health-care start-ups. Through Ayushman Bharat, India has the unique opportunity to develop a robust ecosystem where hospitals actively engage with health-care start-ups by providing access to testbeds, communicating their needs effectively and adopting promising innovations. Start-ups can be effective collaborators for the most pressing health-care delivery challenges faced by hospitals, as opposed to being mere suppliers of technology or services.

We believe that the launch and expansion of Ayushman Bharat-PM-JAY is a watershed moment for the Indian health-care service delivery ecosystem. The government has taken a big step by rolling out world’s largest and most ambitious publicly funded health-care assurance programme. We are now calling out to private sector health-care providers, health innovators, industry and start-ups to become equal partners in this movement. The dream of an accessible, affordable and high-quality health-care system for all, will be achieved when we work in alignment to complement each other and jointly undertake the mission of creating an Ayushman Bharat.

Amitabh Kant is CEO, NITI Aayog. Indu Bhushan is CEO, Ayushman Bharat-PM-JAY and National Health Authority. The views expressed are personal

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.

Trauma narrative

A country can be judged by how it treats its children. Looking at the recent chain of events, from Kashmir to Karnataka, it is anybody’s guess where India stands on this issue (Editorial page, “India’s disturbing trauma narrative,” February 18).

With growing reports of children across India experiencing trauma, we often ask ourselves whether we have reached a low, stretching our threshold of tolerance. The time is ripe for citizens to say enough is enough.

A. VENKATASUBRAMANIAN, Tennur, Tiruchi, Tamil Nadu

Women officers

Talk of empowerment of women to enable them to live with a life of dignity, honour, equality, recognition and respect have been making waves in recent years (Page 1, “Women Army officers eligible for permanent commission: SC”, February 18). Gender bias based on physiological features is baffling in an environment where women continuously outperform men in various fields. Considering that woman officers constitute only a fraction of the total number of officers in the Indian Army, the Court order would be an incentive

for more women to join the forces. The watershed judgment, by opening up new avenues for women, has dispelled the wrong notions about their ability to sparkle in an area earmarked specifically for men in the past.

V. SUBRAMANIAN, Chennai

■ One must be wary of drawing sweeping and unqualified conclusions from the Supreme Court’s verdict, ordering the provision of permanent commission to women army officers (Page 1 and Editorial, “Women-at-arms”, both February 18). The facts do not justify the

construction of any moralising narrative about a tussle between a progressive judiciary and a patriarchal and misogynistic government. Having announced a policy to provide a permanent commission to women officers in 10 streams of the “Combat Support Arms” and “Services” sections, there was no reason for the government to convey the impression that it did not intend to walk the talk. A judicial pronouncement is not merely about what it finally says. It should ideally involve a process of consultations with various stakeholders, either directly

or through legal counsels, to ensure that justice is seen as done. More than the abstract notions and superior legal knowledge of judges, it is the mundane and first-hand knowledge of those working on the ground that should matter in approving changes in policies, especially those relating to battlefield conditions. The question is, did the court seek direct feedback from the Indian Army instead of merely relying on affidavits drafted by bureaucrats?

V.N. MUKUNDARAJAN, Thiruvananthapuram

Fact-finding in Kashmir
I truly wonder why the

government is taking teams of foreign delegates to Kashmir. Why waste taxpayer’s money on a PR exercise? Every delegate should be given the freedom to interact with people, students, businessmen and politicians and present the ground situation either in a press conference or as a written report. The branding of those who question the government as “anti-national” appears to be spreading from Indian citizens to a British MP and even Turkey.

T. ANAND RAJ, Chennai



To read more letters online, scan the QR code