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US-India: Ambition & Achievement

We coordinate closely on defence. We need the same ambition in the economic sphere

Kenneth Juster, [The writer is US Ambassador to India]



There is no bilateral relationship in the world that is as broad, complex, and rich in substance as that of the United States and India. We cooperate on defence, counterterrorism, cybersecurity, trade, investment, energy, the environment, health, education, science and technology, agriculture, space, and so much more. While our strategic partnership has been on an upward trajectory over the last two decades, the past four years stand out as a time of ambition and achievement.

Our diplomatic coordination flows from the US commitment to support India's rise and our shared vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific region. While the concept of the Indo-Pacific has been many years in the making, it is in the past four years that our countries have shown the ambition to turn it into a reality. For the United States, the Indo-Pacific means that, at a time of great change and challenge, we see India as a critical partner in preserving and expanding the peace and prosperity that have underpinned this dynamic region.

We have begun coordinating with like-minded countries to build out the architecture of this region, while supporting Asean centrality. Our Trilateral Summits (with Japan in 2018 and 2019) and Quadrilateral Ministerials (with Japan and Australia in 2019 and 2020) have led to greater cooperation, including on maritime security, pandemic management, regional connectivity, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and cybersecurity. Our mission over the next five years and beyond should be to give this endeavour further form and substance to enable all countries to prosper from a region that respects sovereignty and a rules-based order.

As democracies, the United States and India are committed to peace and diplomacy. In the past four years, we have purposefully deepened our defence and security cooperation to keep our nations safe, and to provide security beyond our own borders.

Our bilateral defence and security partnership reached a new level in September 2018 with the inaugural 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue of US and Indian defence and foreign policy leaders. We have held three such Ministerials and signed pivotal defence agreements at each, increasing the interoperability of our forces and defence industries. We have also expanded the complexity of a robust series of military exercises, including the first-ever tri-services exercise in 2019 and Australia's participation in the Malabar naval exercise alongside Japan.

Reflecting on these and other achievements, I believe that no country has as strong a defence relationship with India as does the United States, or does as much to contribute to the security of Indians. Our close coordination has been important as India confronts aggressive Chinese activity on its border.

We need the same level of ambition in the economic sphere, where our trade and investment ties have continued to grow but are still not reaching their full potential. In 2019, bilateral trade in goods and services had grown to over \$146.1 billion, significantly up from \$20.7 billion in 2001. Approximately 16% of India's total exports now head to the United States. The United States is India's largest trading partner, and India the twelfth largest partner of the United States. The bottom line is that no other country contributes as much to job creation, consumer choice, technology diffusion, and economic improvement for Indians.

Another key pillar of our partnership is energy, where we have achieved significant results over the past four years. We launched our Strategic Energy Partnership in 2018 and, with support from both governments, the United States is now an important source of energy for India. By 2019, India had become the largest export destination for US coal, the fourth-largest destination for US crude, and the seventh-largest destination for US liquefied natural gas. All of this has helped diversify India's energy sources. Today, there are over 100 US companies involved with energy in India, working across all elements of the sector.

Health and biomedical innovation has also been a top priority for both countries. Our history of successful cooperation shaped our joint response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Experts from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have supported India's efforts with technical guidance and training, including on contact tracing, diagnostic testing, and infection prevention and control at health facilities. Hundreds of Indian graduates of CDC training programmes have been at the forefront of India's response to this virus.

In addition, US and Indian scientists have collaborated to develop vaccines and treatments for Covid-19. There remains enormous potential for further work between our health sectors, including to develop more secure medical supply chains. Our health cooperation has improved lives not just in the United States and India, but for people around the world.

In great democracies such as ours, governments listen to public sentiment. Our people-to-people ties form both a strong foundation and a driving force for our relationship. Leaders in both countries have recognised that getting this relationship right is important for us and for a free and open Indo-Pacific region. As a result of their actions, the US-India Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership is strong, positive, and on an upward trajectory.

I am proud of what we have accomplished over the past four years, and am confident that the next US administration will continue this trend with our Indian partners – as each recent US administration had successfully built upon the work of its predecessor in enhancing ties with India.

THE ECONOMIC TIMES

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Towards efficient pricing of natural gas

ET Editorial

Last month's regulatory green signal for Indian Gas Exchange (IGX), the first national-level gas trading platform, is welcome reform that would shore up transparent price discovery in natural gas, the cleanest and most efficient fossil fuel. IGX would provide more efficient price signals for market participants and, hence, facilitate growth and attendant investments in the gas value chain.

India aims to boost the share of gas in its overall commercial energy mix, from just over 6% now to 15% by 2030. Recently, Petroleum Minister Dharmendra Pradhan announced \$60 billion worth of investment in gas infrastructure by 2024, to step up the gas market nationally. An online platform for imported liquefied natural gas (LNG), IGX would enable buyers and sellers to trade on the spot as well as the forward market, with physical hubs at Dahej and Hazira in Gujarat, and Kakinada in Andhra Pradesh. Currently, about half of domestic gas usage constitutes imported LNG. However, LNG supplies tend to be via long-term contracts, which implies price rigidities and heightened risks that hamper market development. Even short-term LNG contracts tend to be for 6-12 months. Now, IGX would provide day-ahead and weekly gas price contracts, to bring about more efficient price discovery in a fragmented and quite opaque market.

Domestically produced gas is price-regulated and benchmarked with those in the mature gas markets abroad. In fact, IGX price signals can well reveal the extent to which domestic gas is mispriced. Efficient prices are surely required to rev up investments both upstream and downstream. It would also incentivise coal gasification. In tandem, we also need to rationalise gas transport tariffs for an efficient national gas market.

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About women, work and wages

Community action, with a focus on women's well-being, can fight malnutrition

Uma Mahadevan Dasgupta, [The writer is in the Indian Administrative Service, and based in Bengaluru]



On an MGNREGA worksite in Kolar, Karnataka, a male worker came up to me and said that men ought to be paid more than women. I asked him why. "Adhu yaavaagalu hange," he replied: That was how it always was. Not so in MGNREGA, I told him.

With equal wages for women and men, and direct payments to workers' bank accounts, MGNREGA helps to increase women's incomes. Another major programme which can improve women's livelihood, their social empowerment and their lives is the National Rural Livelihood Mission

(NRLM). Increased incomes give women more voice in family decisions, and the ability to care better for their families and themselves.

Data from the fifth round of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) shows gains in some important areas. In most of the 22 states and Union territories surveyed, infant mortality rates and under-five mortality rates have fallen; and institutional births and child immunisation rates have increased. Access to improved drinking water and sanitation has increased in almost all areas surveyed

On child malnutrition, the NFHS's findings are worrying. Beyond behaviour change communication and regular monitoring, direct nutrition interventions are key, especially during pregnancy, breastfeeding and in the early years of a child's life. Pregnant women, lactating mothers and young children need hot cooked meals with adequate protein, milk, and green leafy vegetables. States like Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana have replaced take-home rations for mothers with daily hot cooked meals

While providing hot cooked meals frontline health workers also have the opportunity to give pregnant women iron, folic acid and calcium tablets. They are also engaged in early childhood stimulation activities and parenting sessions. Instead of frontline workers going to each woman's house, women coming to the anganwadi makes it easier to provide all women with appropriate services and counselling. Mothers' lunch groups at the anganwadi can also function as informal social networks. A study by the Public Health Foundation of India (PHFI) of Karnataka's Mathrupoorna programme for pregnant women and

breastfeeding mothers found a reduction in anaemia, improved gestational weight gain, improved birth weight, and reduced depression among women participants.

Beyond the “first thousand days”, the intergenerational cycle of malnutrition and its social determinants call for a life cycle approach. Such an approach should address the complex social ill of child marriage. One of the best ways to prevent child marriage is by supporting girls to stay in high school. Grass roots social empowerment programmes should focus on increasing girls’ enrolment, access and retention in secondary education. The nutritional status of adolescent girls could be improved by extending the mid-day meal programme to secondary educational institutions, as some states have done.

Malnutrition should also be understood in the context of women’s work. Childcare enables women to earn a livelihood. Longer working hours for the anganwadi, such as in Karnataka where it runs from 9.30 am to 4 pm, will help women go out to do paid work, including on MGNREGA worksites. Mobile creches for younger children at these worksites and construction sites will help women to work without anxiety about their children’s safety and well-being.

The anganwadi system needs strengthening. Anganwadi supervisors can be supported with interest-free loans and fuel allowance for two-wheelers, enabling them to provide regular guidance to their cluster. Their skills should be upgraded with certificate courses on nutrition and early childhood stimulation. Online training at scale has been the discovery of the pandemic year. Anganwadi workers and supervisors can be supported for professional development through live online sessions on nutrition, growth monitoring and early childhood education.

Anganwadi infrastructure needs attention: Sturdy buildings, kitchens, stores, toilets, play areas and fenced compounds, functional water connections and arrangements for handwashing are urgent imperatives. To cater to multiple meal requirements, anganwadi kitchens need double-burner stoves, gas cylinders, pressure cookers and sufficient steel cooking vessels. Kitchen gardens should be planted with drought-resistant and highly nutritive plants like moringa.

The most effective platform for community action on the ground is the gram panchayat. We often talk of the “last mile” for communication services. The panchayat should be the first mile for social welfare services. There are around 2,50,000 gram panchayats in India, and nearly 14 lakh anganwadis, the majority in rural areas. The anganwadi committee, chaired by a stakeholder mother and including other parents, grandparents and the panchayat ward member, should be a subcommittee of the gram panchayat. It should meet every month on a fixed day, and its discussions should be presented to the gram panchayat for action.

Exclusion and convergence are two major challenges in social welfare programmes. Local governments are the best placed to address the problem of exclusion. They can ensure coverage of the poorest women and children, especially nomadic and semi-nomadic communities, and seasonal migrants such as brick workers and sugarcane harvesters. Panchayats are also the best forum to prevent child marriage and ensure that all girls stay in school.

Convergent action on the ground is one of the strengths of gram panchayats. Anganwadi workers, ASHAs, ANMs and anganwadi supervisors can work together with panchayat members to ensure that all children and mothers are covered with immunisation, antenatal care, maternity benefits and nutrition services. Gram panchayats can use their funds, converged with MGNREGA, to strengthen anganwadis. They can engage women’s collectives under NRLM for anganwadi and school needs, and provide panchayat

services such as end-to-end solid waste management, water pump operations, surveys, bill collections and management of fair price shops. Such steps will increase women's individual and group incomes in sustainable ways. They will also lead to greater social and economic empowerment of women, their participation in local governance, and, eventually, better nutrition for all.

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A Wider Canvas For India-US

With Biden at helm, Delhi and Washington can enhance economic, commercial ties

Arun Kumar, [The writer is chairman & CEO of KPMG in India. He was formerly Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Global Markets in the administration of President Barack Obama.]

When Joe Biden takes the oath of office as the US's 46th president later this month, he would be taking charge of a nation embroiled in a health crisis, economic crisis and race crisis. The priorities induced by these crises will dictate that the new administration's initial focus be on domestic matters. Foreign policy will have to play second fiddle, and this could inform the Biden administration's stance on India in the economic and commercial domain.

A major geopolitical reality that will shape the Biden administration's approach to India will be its position towards China. There is a bipartisan change in the US's attitude to China. The Biden administration's tone of engagement may be different from that of the Trump regime, but one must expect continuity in major trade goals — reducing the trade deficit, ensuring a level-playing field, reducing market distortions created by the dominance of state-owned enterprises and keeping a keen eye on technology rivalry.

One can thus see immediate parallels in the concerns of the two countries — invigorating the domestic economy and dealing with a rising rival. These concerns can translate into opportunities for both countries.

Domestically in the US, and in India, healthcare and job creation need to be priorities. Healthcare is clearly an area that India can play up in bilateral relations, with its vaccine and pharma manufacturing capacity. The COVID-19 pandemic offers significant opportunities for the new administration to strengthen global health leadership. The two countries can also work with multilateral agencies across the spectrum of vaccine development, logistics and distribution.

India produces around 20 per cent of the global requirement for generic drugs by volume and every third tablet of generics consumed in the US. The President-elect has indicated his commitment to providing better and affordable healthcare. This could be an opportunity for the Indian pharma sector to play a role in reducing health costs of the American consumer. And, India can benefit from advancements in medical technologies, devices, new medicines and R&D capabilities, presenting opportunities for American companies.

Trade and exports are critical for the expansion of job creation. Biden has set an ambitious target for US-India trade and there's quite a distance to go in this respect. Some sectors could be natural focus areas. Businesses in both countries are also aligned to diversify their manufacturing supply chains. This portends well for the creation of employment in manufacturing. An area where strategic considerations and imperatives of job creation converge is defence, especially since India has been designated a Major Defence Partner of the US.

Infrastructure will need to become an increased area of focus in both countries. For the US, this can mean opportunities in India in transportation, power and other urban amenities. The US's renewed focus on climate change should lead to greater cooperation with India in energy-related areas, from more efficient energy dissemination and management (such as smart grids) to renewable energy technologies. There is potential to enhance mutual opportunities in the 5G tech sector. Increased partnership between the two nations can accelerate the development of technology solutions, promote vendors in the 5G open ecosystem and drive economic growth. The two countries should engage in shaping the rules of a new order in this space. This also has an important strategic element related to infrastructure and connectivity, when seen in the light of developments in the Indo-Pacific as well as China's Belt and Road Initiative.

We should expect a return to multilateralism once the Biden administration assumes office. The Trans-Pacific Partnership aimed to create a rules-based order that all parties could subscribe to. With the ascendancy of the Indo-Pacific paradigm and the Quad and Quad Plus, a successor to the TPP could include a wider canvas. For India, this could mean cooperation beyond defence and security, including economics, technology and developments pertaining to the regional order.

Finally, I would hope that the economic and commercial dimension is treated with as much priority as the strategic dimension. Both governments should embrace the prosperity-creating potential of such an approach.

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India's UNSC opportunity

Delhi faces a different dynamics at UN Security Council since its last stint. It must integrate its UNSC engagement with broader national goals while adapting to changed realities

C. Raja Mohan, [The writer is director, Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore and contributing editor on international affairs for The Indian Express]

As it enters the United Nations Security Council for the third time since the end of the Cold War, India finds a very different dynamic than the one it encountered during the earlier stints in 1991-92 and 2011-12. India, too, has changed over the last decade. The range of Indian interests has expanded and so has the circle of India's international partners.

Delhi's attitudes have also shifted from the reactive to the proactive. That, in turn, should make India's new stint at the UNSC more purposeful and pragmatic. Purposefulness is about tightly integrating its UNSC engagement with India's broader national goals. Pragmatism demands adapting to the changed conditions at the UNSC and avoiding overly ambitious goals.

During 1991-92, Delhi saw the collapse of the Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War and the new Russia's turn to the US and the West. The People's Republic of China was focused on getting its house in order, opening its economy and keeping a low profile in the unipolar moment. India, too, had good reasons to keep its head down. Delhi had to fix its broken economy, put out political bushfires across the country and rejig its foreign policy to cope with the post-Soviet world.

The West could not resist the temptations for geopolitical overreach at the UN. Liberals across the Atlantic sought to transform the "inter-national" forum into a "supra-national" institution that would actively reshape the domestic structures of different societies. For India, it was a moment to hunker down and resist external imposition of solutions to its manifold problems — especially on the Kashmir question and the nuclear issue.

Fast forward to 2011-12. A revived Russia and a rising China began to demur against the sweeping Western agenda at the UN. India's own relative position improved in the first decade of the 21st century, thanks to rapid economic growth. Delhi was certainly less defensive than in the 1990s, but struggled to turn its new strengths into practical outcomes.

A decade later, India has walked into a far more contentious UNSC. Differences between the US, China and Russia have become intractable. China has risen to be a great power and is making expansive claims and trying to redeem them. Meanwhile, Washington and Moscow have drifted apart and Russia has moved closer to China.

This tension among the US, China and Russia has been reinforced by sharpening disagreements between Washington and its European allies, amidst President Donald Trump's questioning of America's traditional alliances. Although President-elect Joe Biden wants to work closely with European allies in the global arena, not all wrinkles can be smoothed over.

As India looks for a productive tenure at the UNSC, five objectives present themselves. One is about making the UNSC "effective". Delhi, however, might be sensible to pare down that ambition. The UNSC is becoming less effective today thanks to the deep divisions among the major powers.

The UNSC system was designed to function as a concert of five powers. Unanimity among the five permanent members with veto powers was rare during the Cold War decades. After a brief moment of great power cooperation in the 1990s, we are now back in an era of contestation. But there will be enough room for India to carve out a larger role for itself amid renewed great power rivalry.

The UNSC offers room for sustained diplomatic interaction between the major powers, who could minimise tensions and create new opportunities for cooperation. Much like the US and USSR that cooperated on issues relating to nuclear proliferation at the height of the Cold War, the US and China could explore potential common ground even amidst their broad-based confrontation. All other powers, including India, will, of course, want to be sure that the US-China cooperation is not at the expense of others.

Two, making the UNSC more “representative” has been one of India’s demands since the end of the Cold War. Pessimists would urge Delhi to curb its enthusiasm. China has no interest in letting two other Asian powers — India and Japan — join the UNSC as permanent members. Optimists would suggest Delhi’s campaign, in partnership with Brazil, Germany and Japan, to expand the UNSC must continue. For the campaign is about an important principle and revealing the nature of political resistance to it.

Three, Delhi has no choice but to deal with China’s growing hostility to India. At the end of the Cold War, India had bet that cooperation with China on the multilateral front was valuable in its own right, and would also help generate the conditions for resolving the boundary dispute and expand the areas of bilateral cooperation. Delhi, which was eager to build a multipolar world with Beijing, now finds itself in a unipolar Asia that is centred around China. Meanwhile, the boundary dispute has worsened over the last decade. India now joins the UNSC amid a continuing military standoff between the two armies in the high Himalayas following the Chinese aggression in the Ladakh region.

Senior Indian officials have promised to “work with” China with an open mind. Sceptics would discount that sentiment. China has repeatedly tried to get the UNSC to focus on India’s constitutional changes in Kashmir. On the question of cross-border terrorism, Beijing protects Pakistan from the international pressures that India has sought to mobilise at various fora. On the nuclear front, China continues to block India’s membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group.

Four, the engagement with peace and security issues at the UNSC will allow India to strengthen its new coalitions such as the Quad — which brings together Australia, India, Japan and the US. India could also use the UNSC tenure to deepen collaboration with its European partners like France and Germany in the security arena, and find common ground with “Global Britain” that is carving out a new international path for itself after breaking away from the European Union. Delhi must also sustain an intensive dialogue with Moscow on all international issues, notwithstanding Russia’s worsening problems with the West and closer ties to China.

Fifth, Delhi needs to revitalise its engagement with its traditional partners in the “global south” by articulating their peace and security concerns in the UNSC. Two sub-groups of the global south should be of special interest. The numerous small island states around the world face existential challenges from global warming and rising sea levels. They also struggle to exercise control over their large maritime estates. Supporting the sovereignty and survivability of the island states is a crucial political task for India.

Africa is the other priority. Nearly half of UNSC meetings, 60 per cent of its documents, and 70 per cent of its resolutions are about peace and security in Africa. The continent has three seats in the UNSC (Kenya, Niger and Tunisia) and there is regular consultation between the UNSC and the Peace and Security Council (PSC) of the African Union (AU). The UNSC tenure is a good moment for Delhi to intensify India’s engagement on peace and security issues in Africa at bilateral, regional and global levels.



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Quality gigs, a solution to urban unemployment

With no urban equivalent to the NREGA as yet, there must be a focus on supporting new forms of employment

Vineet John Samuel, [German Chancellors Fellow based out of the Hertie School of Governance, Berlin]

With the Indian economy gradually finding its feet after a historic contraction of negative 23.9% in the April-June quarter, economic commentators have busied themselves with debating the need for fiscal expansion and the viability of a “V-shaped recovery”. These debates, however, have shifted focus away from the employment question, considered resolved after a sharp rally following the collapse in employment numbers in April. More recent data from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (<https://bit.ly/3hEnl7Z>), however, point to a gradual slowdown in employment recovery from the month of July, with the latest numbers pointing to a sharp rise in the national unemployment rate from 6.51% in November to 9.06% for the month of December.

NREGA outlay

For labour flocking back to rural India, employment support came in the form of an increased outlay for the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGA), which witnessed a 243% increase in person workdays. This increased dependency on NREGA, has seen the Rural Development Ministry spend nearly 90% of its increased ₹86,4000 crore allocation by the month of November, while still being unable to fulfil demands for nearly 13% of the 75 million households that demanded work.

In several Indian cities however, shuttered businesses have meant that millions of workers have either had to leave or have had to take up new forms of work, with some finding the burgeoning gig economy to be their only source of employment. It is here that the Fairwork Foundation’s annual review of platform labour gains prominence.

The metrics used

The report (<https://bit.ly/2X5nZSu>) evaluates the well-being of gig workers on 11 digital platforms and does so by evaluating them on five metrics of Fair Pay, Fair Conditions, Fair Contracts, Fair Management and Fair Representation. In its findings however, only two firms (Urban Company and Flipkart) score greater than five (out of a maximum of 10) while seven score only 2 or less. Most concerning perhaps, is the fact that the bottom of the rankings are rounded off by India’s four largest platform giants, namely, Uber, Ola, Swiggy and Zomato.

With no urban equivalent to the NREGA on the horizon, there must be an increased impetus on evaluating, regulating and supporting new forms of employment that may currently be serving as an informal safety net for those desperately in search of work.

The first and most critical task at hand remains evaluation. Our current understanding of gig work and workers remains constrained to the limited disclosures made by the platforms themselves. Furthermore, with very few independent studies evaluating the scale and impact of these platforms, most regulators continue to remain in the dark on basic questions surrounding platform labour. As of now there exists no authoritative estimate on the total number of gig workers in India, though the centralised nature of the platforms, and the larger platform labour market should make the collating of this data relatively straightforward for the Labour Ministry.

Issue of regulation

The next step is significantly more sensitive and involves regulation. The reason for the sensitivity primarily revolves around the varied nature of gig work. While some workers use these platforms as a “side hustle”, for others it continues to serve as a primary source of employment. This dynamic is further complicated by the risk of a one-size-fits-all regulatory strategy unintentionally hurting the similar, yet distinct, market for highly skilled (and highly paid) freelancers, that continues its rapid growth due to pandemic related full-time staff layoffs.

Perhaps a more viable strategy then would involve conditional government partnerships with platforms under some of its flagship schemes. Here, the successful pilot (<https://bit.ly/3pMNggC>) of Swiggy’s Street Food Vendors programme under the PM SVANidhi, or PM Street Vendor’s Atma Nirbhar Nidhi scheme, may prove to be an illustrative example. While Swiggy has announced the onboarding of 36,000 street food vendors onto the platform under the scheme this month, it has also looked to ensure that each vendor is registered and certified by the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India. The simultaneous creation of jobs, alongside the voluntary adoption of quality standards is an example of a mutually beneficial partnership between the state and a platform that creates jobs while incentivising greater levels of compliance.

Urban employment

Similar collaborations on urban employment, that require labour platforms to comply with disclosure norms and worker compensation standards to access government support, could be one way for the government to kill two birds with one stone. Current proposals for an Urban Employment Guarantee peg daily worker wages at approximately ₹300 (<https://bit.ly/2Mt1moR>), at a cost of ₹1-lakh crore to the exchequer. Collaborating with platforms to employ workers, would not only bring down costs significantly (for both the state and their partners) but it would also create an environment where firms would be more likely to cooperate with the state, as opposed to adopting an antagonistic position in what could prove to be a long-winded legal battle.

Symbiotic ties

As the new year rolls in, and India looks to convince the world that it has turned the corner on its economic woes, it must look to step outside the box to tackle the challenge of urban unemployment. Limited fiscal space and a growing need to fuel the country’s consumption base, must push the government to build symbiotic relationships with new partners. With Industry 4.0 platforms absorbing

increasing numbers of the urban workforce, evaluation, collaboration, and regulation must be the government mantra. As the pandemic forces India to define its own understanding of the future of work, it falls upon the state to ensure that this future is defined not only by the quantity of jobs it creates but also by the quality of livelihoods they provide for .

बिज़नेस स्टैंडर्ड

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अफसरशाही की सराहना में बरती जाती है कोताही!

अजित बालकृष्णन

देशव्यापी लॉकडाउन लागू होने से ठीक पहले की बात है, हम कॉलेज के दिनों के कुछ मित्रों के साथ घर पर थे। हम सभी साथ में खाते-पीते हुए गर्मजोशी और खुशमिजाजी के साथ ऐसी कहानियां साझा कर रहे थे जो केवल पुरानी दोस्तियां ही तैयार कर सकती हैं। तभी दरवाजे की घंटी बजी और दरवाजे पर दो और मित्र नजर आए जो महिलाएं थीं। मैंने चकित होकर कहा, 'आखिरकार हमारे ब्यूरोक्रेट (अफसरशाह) दोस्त भी आ गए!' इतना कहने की देर थी कि दोनों महिलाओं के चेहरे पर मौजूद गर्माहट भरी मुस्कान अचानक ठंडी पड़ गई!

उनमें से एक ने बुदबुदाते हुए कहा, 'ये आईएएस लोग हमारा नाम खराब करते हैं।' मैं वहां जड़वत खड़ा रहा और दोनों मित्र मेरे बाजू से निकल कर मित्रों के समूह में शामिल हो गईं। मैं सोच रहा था कि मैंने आखिर क्या गलत कह दिया। मैंने जिन दो मित्रों का कथित अपमान किया था उनमें से एक हाल ही में एक बड़े राज्य के पुलिस महानिदेशक के पद से सेवानिवृत्त हुई थीं और दूसरी एक प्रमुख यूरोपीय देश की राजदूत रह चुकी थीं। क्या कॉलेज के दिनों के मित्रों और उनकी पत्नियों के समूह में किसी को 'अफसरशाह' कह देना इतना अपमानजनक था? बहरहाल, उसके बाद शाम पहले की तरह खुशमिजाज हो गई और मैं एक कोने में पड़ा यह सोचता रहा कि आखिर भूतपूर्व आईपीएस और आईएफएस अधिकारियों को मेरा मजाक में 'अफसरशाह' कहकर पुकारना इतना नागवार क्यों गुजरा? मैंने अपनी किस्मत को सराहा कि मैंने मजाक में उन्हें 'बाबू' कहकर उनका स्वागत नहीं कर दिया!

मैंने याद किया कि 'अफसरशाही' यानी 'ब्यूरोक्रेसी' शब्द यूरोप में दो शब्दों फ्रांसीसी भाषा के 'ब्यूरो' यानी डेस्क या ऑफिस और ग्रीक भाषा के 'क्राटोस' यानी 'शासन' से बना है। यानी अफसरशाह एक ऐसा व्यक्ति था जिसे अपने कार्यालय में बैठे-बैठे दूसरों पर शासन करने का अधिकार प्राप्त था।

मुझे अपने आईआईएम अध्ययन के दिनों की संगठनात्मक व्यवहार के पाठ्यक्रम की बात भी याद थी जिसमें मुझे पढ़ाया गया था कि सन 1920 के दशक में जर्मन समाजशास्त्री मैक्स वेबर ने कहा था कि एक ऐसी अफसरशाही संगठन का सबसे सक्षम स्वरूप है जहां श्रम का उचित विभाजन हो, एक पदसोपानिक ढांचा हो, जहां सभी निर्णय नियमों के आधार पर हों और जिसके सदस्यों का चयन नियुक्ति के माध्यम से होता हो, न कि चुनाव के माध्यम से। दूसरे शब्दों में

अफसरशाही का अर्थ था सक्षमता और आधुनिकता। एक मध्यवर्गीय भारतीय परिवार से आने के नाते मुझे याद है कि लोग अपने बच्चों को आईआईएम (जैसे कि मैं) या भारतीय पुलिस सेवा, भारतीय विदेश सेवा अथवा भारतीय प्रशासनिक सेवा में जाने के लिए प्रेरित करते थे। अक्सर बच्चों के करियर का निर्णय हाई स्कूल के स्तर पर ही करने का प्रयास किया जाता था और उन्हें इंजीनियरिंग कॉलेज, मेडिकल कॉलेज या लॉ कॉलेज जाने को कहा जाता। उस समय ये तमाम पेशे काफी प्रतिष्ठित माने जाते थे और अतीत को याद करके मैं यही कह सकता हूँ कि उस वक्त कोई व्यक्ति इनमें से किस पेशे का चयन करता था यह काफी हद तक तकदीर पर भी निर्भर करता था।

ऐसे में आखिर क्या वजह रही कि हमारे समाज में आईएस अधिकारियों को अफसरशाह कहा गया और इतना ही नहीं यह शब्द भी अपमानजनक माना जाने लगा? सरदार वल्लभ भाई पटेल के उस सपने का क्या हुआ जो उन्होंने 1947 में देखा था और कहा था कि आईएस देश के लिए इस्पात का ढांचा साबित होंगे। यह ऐसी सेवा होगी जिसमें शामिल युवक-युवतियां निष्पक्ष और ईमानदार होंगे और वे बिना किसी पुरस्कार की इच्छा के देश की सेवा करेंगे। उनका मानना था कि यह वर्ग शासकों के बजाय जनता का सेवक होगा।

कोलंबिया विश्वविद्यालय के अर्थशास्त्री अरविंद पानगडिया जो नीति आयोग के उपाध्यक्ष भी रह चुके हैं, ने अपनी हालिया पुस्तक, इंडिया अनलिमिटेड: रीक्लेमिंग द पास्ट ग्लोरी में कुछ बातें कही हैं। उनका मानना है कि नरेंद्र मोदी सरकार ने सुधार संबंधी जो पहल कीं उनमें से कई की राह अफसरशाहों ने रोक दी। वह उदाहरण देते हैं कि सन 2016 में प्रधानमंत्री कार्यालय ने नीति आयोग से कहा कि वह निजीकरण के लिए सरकारी उपक्रमों की पहचान करे। पानगडिया कहते हैं कि सूची बनाकर प्रधानमंत्री कार्यालय को भेजी गई, उसे मंत्रिमंडल की मंजूरी भी मिली लेकिन जब इसे निवेश एवं सार्वजनिक परिसंपत्ति प्रबंधन विभाग को भेजा गया तो यह वहां अटक गई। उन्होंने पुस्तक में यह भी बताया है कि कैसे अफसरशाह प्रधानमंत्री मोदी के कदमों तक में अड़ंगा डालने के तरीके तलाश लेते हैं। पानगडिया कहते हैं कि एक समझदार अफसरशाह कभी ना नहीं कहता। वह बस ऐसे संकेत देता है कि काम प्रगति पर है और इसके साथ ही काम को तब तक धीमा किए रहता है और इस दौरान या तो वह सेवानिवृत्त हो जाता है या फिर सरकार बदल जाती है।

व्यक्तिगत तौर पर मेरे लिए इन आईएस विरोधी प्रमाणों पर यकीन करना मुश्किल है। आईआईएम-कलकत्ता के संचालक मंडल के चेयरमैन के रूप में बिताए गए 10 वर्षों के दौरान मानव संसाधन विकास मंत्रालय (शिक्षा मंत्रालय का तत्कालीन नाम) के सचिव स्तर के अधिकारियों से मेरा नियमित संपर्क और संवाद हुआ करता था। मुझे ऐसी एक भी घटना याद नहीं आती जब किसी सचिव ने उच्चतम स्तर का पेशेवर व्यवहार न किया हो। कभी किसी सचिव ने कॉमन एडमिशन टेस्ट (कैट) को प्रभावित करने का कोई प्रयास नहीं किया। न ही कभी किसी शिक्षक की नियुक्ति या पदोन्नति को लेकर ऐसा कुछ देखने को मिला। सूचना प्रौद्योगिकी मंत्रालय के सचिवों/आईएस अधिकारियों के साथ संवाद के दौरान भी मुझे कभी ऐसा कोई अनुभव नहीं हुआ। उनसे मेरा संपर्क तब था जब मैं सूचना प्रौद्योगिकी अधिनियम को उन्नत बनाने वाली समिति तथा आईआईटी और आईआईआईटी में शोध परियोजनाओं को सरकारी धन मंजूर करने वाली समितियों में शामिल था।

परंतु मुझे एक चिंतित करने वाला रूझान नजर आता है: आईआईएम कलकत्ता में 10 वर्ष के दो कार्यकालों के दौरान मैंने देखा कि शिक्षा मंत्रालय में नौ लोग सचिव बने जबकि सूचना और प्रौद्योगिकी मंत्रालय में मुझे पांच सचिव देखने को मिले। स्पष्ट है कि इतना छोटा कार्यकाल होने के कारण इन सचिवों के लिए शिक्षा और सूचना प्रौद्योगिकी जैसे जटिल

क्षेत्र में काम करना मुश्किल हो जाता है। यदि हमें अखिल भारतीय सेवा में आने वाले इन प्रतिभाशाली लोगों की क्षमताओं का सही इस्तेमाल करना है तो शायद इनके कार्यकाल पर ध्यान देना होगा।
