

“Be the change you want to see in others.” Mahatma Gandhi

INTERNATIONAL AND BILATERAL

INDIA FACES A STERN TEST OF ITS COMMITMENT TO RCEP

The government has set up a four-member group of ministers (GoM) headed by trade minister to advise PM on whether to continue with or withdraw from the 16-member Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) negotiations.

The GoM will find a way forward from the current deadlock.

ASEAN's aggressive push to dismantle tariffs on about 90-92 per cent items and reduce tariffs to below 5 per cent on an additional 7 per cent of items is worrying for India.

It would expose sensitive items, including farm and dairy goods, automobiles and steel products, to tariff cuts.

For investment too, there are contentious areas such as liberalizing based on a negative list (wherein all items are to be included except those specifically mentioned in a list) and the inclusion of an Investor State Dispute Settlement mechanism.

This could lead to India getting involved in costly legal suits filed against it by corporate.

There is concern across ministries that joining the accord could severely dent local manufacturing and jobs.

China's \$60-billion trade surplus with India will swell even further as it floods the market with cheap goods at zero tariffs.

India has a trade deficit with as many as 10 RCEP countries, including China, South Korea and Australia, among others.

Way Forward:

It has so far maintained that a speedy and successful conclusion of the agreement would be possible only with the inclusion of a higher level of services and investment in the India-ASEAN trade basket.

India is not part of any major trade group and wouldn't want to get left out of this one,

especially when the future of WTO is under a cloud due to global trade wars.

Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP):

It is a proposed free trade agreement (FTA) between ASEAN and six Asia-Pacific states.

Members: ASEAN Members (Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam) and the six Asia-Pacific states (Australia, China, India, Japan, South Korea and New Zealand).

RCEP negotiations were formally launched in November 2012 at the ASEAN Summit in Cambodia.

The FTA is scheduled and expected to be signed in November 2018 during the ASEAN Summit and Related Summit in Singapore, after the first RCEP summit was held on 14 November 2017 in Manila, Philippines.

RCEP is viewed as an alternative to the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a proposed trade agreement which includes several Asian and American nations but excludes China and India.

NATIONAL

REFORMING THE CIVIL SERVICES

A recent move by the Centre seeking applications from 'outstanding individuals' to fill in 10 posts of Joint Secretary has caused consternation.

The response from applicants, however, has been overwhelming.

Need for Lateral Entry:

In our Cabinet system of government with collective responsibility, the Secretariat plays a crucial role.

The concept of a 'generalist' higher civil service can be contextualized against technical/specialized bodies on one side and the lay political executive on top.

Higher bureaucracy in the secretariat often has to examine proposals received from specialized departments/corporations.

They prepare a cohesive note in consultation with other ministries/departments like Finance, Personnel and Law to facilitate the Minister concerned or the Cabinet to take a final decision.

To steer a proposal through this labyrinth requires both expertise and experience.

The key officials in the secretariat, from the Joint Secretary to the Secretary, are the point persons guiding this consultative process and advising the political executive to take a final call.

A Joint Secretary to the government has this crucial "line" function to perform in policy formulation and its implementation.

The final decision rests with the Joint Secretary/Additional Secretary, the Secretary and finally the Minister/Cabinet.

Secretaries to the Departments of Atomic Energy, Science & Technology, Scientific and Industrial Research, Health Research, and Agricultural Research have always been scientists of eminence.

In departments like the Railways, Posts, etc., all senior positions are manned by Indian Railway or Postal Service officers.

Positives:

Concerted efforts should be made to help IAS officers, after their first decade of "immersion" in districts, acquire specialization in broad sectors like social, infrastructure and financial, based on their qualification, aptitude and preference.

The government must ensure that only candidates, the likes of whom are not available in the existing system, are appointed.

If they turn out to be truly outstanding, there should be provisions to induct them permanently in the government, with the approval of the UPSC, and consider them for higher postings.

IAS and other officers can be allowed to gain work experience, for a limited period, in the private sector.

Way Forward:

The government should have the best people at the helm of affairs and if there is a need to supplement the existing stock of talent by attracting fresh blood into the system, the IAS should welcome such an inclusionary move.

The lateral entry scheme, if implemented properly, may foster more competitive spirit, break the complacency of the higher civil servants and eventually prove to be a pioneering initiative in public interest.

INDIA'S WRONG APPROACH TO PAID MATERNITY LEAVE

A common concern for India and the US is the decline or stagnation in female labour force participation in recent decades.

In India, not only have female LFP rates been lower than other comparable economies, the trend reveal declining rates over time.

Adverse consequences:

While India has had a maternity leave policy on the books since 1961, it recently expanded the law in 2017.

Now, there are increasing concern and speculation that the law may have the unintended consequence of worsening the labour market for women, who already deal with social stigmas often associated with working women.

India's maternity benefit amendment offers new mothers 26 weeks of paid leave from their workplace, with an average wage replacement rate of 100%.

The policy is problematic because it is imposed as an employer mandate.

Employers have to bear the entire cost of providing leave to employees.

This is in terms of both continued pay while on leave, as well as the indirect cost of having to get the work done by employing other workers to finish the work of the absent employee.

This raises the concern that employers will begin to discriminate against women of childbearing age, both in hiring as well as in salaries, since this group is entitled to the benefit of paid family leave and is most likely to use it.

Need of an employee payroll tax:

The solution could lie in imposing the cost of the paid leave policy on employees through a tax

While employers would provide job-protected leave, the wage replacement could be funded through an employee payroll tax

The tax should be levied only on employees to minimize any additional costs on the employer when providing paid leave

Gender neutrality:

An important aspect of the design of such a policy is gender neutrality.

It is critical in today's day and age that any paid leave law be gender-neutral and thus available to both fathers and mothers.

This ensures that the onus of childcare is not placed solely on the mother, and instead places it on both parents.

At the same time, it recognizes the important role that fathers can play in the early years of a child's birth.

Way Forward:

What India gets right about the maternity leave law is that it is a federal law guaranteeing uniform access to paid leave to all eligible employees across the country.

But there is much that can be improved about the design of the policy to ensure that it works well not only for workers but also businesses.

KHANGCHENDZONGA BIOSPHERE RESERVE HAS BECOME THE 11TH BIOSPHERE RESERVE FROM INDIA

The Khangchendzonga Biosphere Reserve has become the 11th Biosphere Reserve from India to be included in the UNESCO designated World Network of Biosphere Reserves (WNBR).

This decision was taken at the recently concluded 30th Session of International Coordinating Council (ICC) of Man and Biosphere (MAB) Programme of UNESCO held at Palembang, Indonesia.

India has 18 Biosphere Reserves. With the inclusion of Khangchendzonga, the number of internationally designated World Network of Biosphere Reserves (WNBR) has become 11, with 7 Biosphere Reserves being domestic Biosphere Reserves.

Launched in 1971, UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Programme (MAB) is an Intergovernmental Scientific Programme that aims to establish a scientific basis for the improvement of relationships between people and their environments.

MAB combines the natural and social sciences, economics and education to improve human livelihoods and the equitable sharing of benefits, and to safeguard natural and managed ecosystems, thus promoting innovative approaches to economic development that are socially and culturally appropriate, and environmentally sustainable.

The first of India's reserves to make it to UNESCO's list was Tamil Nadu's Niligiri Biosphere Reserve in 2000.

Protection is granted not only to the flora and fauna of the protected region, but also to the human communities who inhabit these regions, and their ways of life.

Khangchendzonga Biosphere Reserve:

Kanchenjunga Biosphere Reserve is a National Park and a Biosphere Reserve located in Sikkim, India. The park is named after the mountain Kangchenjunga, which with a height of 8,586 metres (28,169 ft), is the third-highest peak in the world.

The core zone – Khangchendzonga National Park was designated as a World Heritage Site in 2016 under the 'mixed' category.

BIOSPHERE RESERVES:

A Biosphere Reserve is a unique and representative ecosystem of terrestrial and coastal areas which are internationally recognized, within the framework of

UNESCO's Man and Biosphere (MAB) programme. The biosphere reserve should fulfill the following three objectives:

- In-situ conservation of biodiversity of natural and semi-natural ecosystems and landscapes.
- Contribution to sustainable economic development of the human population living within and around the Biosphere Reserve.
- Provide facilities for long term ecological studies, environmental education and training and research and monitoring.

In order to fulfill the above objectives, the Biosphere Reserves are classified into zones like the core area, buffer area. The system of functions is prescribed for each zone.
