



Resilient supply chains as a pandemic lesson

Crux: A key lesson learnt by the world during the COVID-19 pandemic has been the importance of creating resilient supply chains that can withstand disruptions and ensure reliability for the global economy.

COVID-19 led supply Chain Disruption

1. When the novel coronavirus pandemic broke out, it had an immediate and telling effect on supply chains emanating from China. In India, several companies felt the disruption in the automotive, electronics and white goods sectors.
2. India excels in the pharmaceuticals sector but the over-reliance on Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients (APIs) from China still creates vulnerabilities in the value chain.

A new initiative

1. Geo-politics and geo-economics can never be truly separated.
2. Greater weaponization of trade and technology is here to stay. It is in this context that India, Japan and Australia initiated the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI) in September this year, focusing on automobiles and parts, petroleum, steel, textiles, financial services and IT sectors.
3. The SCRI may be bolstered by the future involvement of France, though this might depend on the European Union's position. The United Kingdom has also shown interest in the SCRI.

Moves by Australia, Japan

1. China has often used its economic leverage to weaken an opponent's resolve on contentious issues. Facing such a dilemma, Australia has demonstrated strong political will in countering arbitrary Chinese sanctions imposed on its key exports of grain, beef, wine, coal and much else.
2. This is a price that a democracy such as Australia finds worth paying, for demanding an inquiry into the origins of the coronavirus and advocating a robust Indo-Pacific vision.



India's vulnerabilities

1. A large emerging economy such as India can ill-afford the shocks of disruption in supply chains. Nor can it allow itself to be held hostage due to an over-reliance on imports.
2. For instance, the pandemic caused a breakdown in global supply chains in the automotive sector since most global manufacturers in China abruptly went offline.
3. For India, which imports 27% of its requirement of automotive parts from China, this quandary was a wake-up call, given the sudden shortage of braking components, electrical components, interiors and lighting fixtures.
4. What is noteworthy is that despite being the fourth largest market in Asia for medical devices, India has an import dependency of 80%. Given the renewed thrust in the health-care sector, this is the right time to fill gaps through local manufacturing.

Caution pays

Caution to be continued:

1. That the U.K. variant of the virus has now been found in India underscores the point that easing off on testing, tracking and containment could prove dangerous.
2. The Home Ministry has recalled the orders of the Supreme Court in a suo motu writ petition on December 18, calling for strict adherence to COVID-19-appropriate behaviour, especially during the New Year celebrations.
3. The Court wanted deployment of more police personnel at places where people are likely to gather, such as food courts, eateries, vegetable markets, and bus and train stations.
4. It made the valid observation that careless people infringed other citizens' right to life by ignoring the use of masks and social distancing, while various protocols had failed to stop the virus spreading "like wildfire" due to lack of implementation.



The broken bonds of democracy

Electoral Bond

A recent order by the Central Information Commission (CIC) has again revealed the inherent problems surrounding the Electoral Bond Scheme (scheme) of 2018. This order passed in an appeal against the State Bank of India (SBI) has effectively shut the door to seek any details about donors and donors relating to electoral bonds under the Right to Information (RTI) Act. With no other recourse available, the Supreme Court is the only surviving arbiter on adjudicating the vires of electoral bonds.

An illegal scheme

1. The scheme creates banking instruments for the donation of funds to political parties facilitated by the SBI. It conceals the identity of the donors and donors as well as the amount of donation. In effect, the scheme is not transparent, promotes arbitrariness and is therefore illegal.
2. The scheme facilitates undisclosed quid pro quo arrangements between donors, who are likely to be corporates, and political parties. Such an arrangement goes against best practices of electoral democracy and is repugnant to the freedom of speech and expression.
3. In *People's Union for Civil Liberties v. Union of India* (2003), the Supreme Court held that the freedom of speech and expression also contained the fundamental right of a voter to secure information about the candidates who are contesting the election.
4. Section 8(2) directs that when public interest outweighs any harm to protected interests, the information sought may be accessed.
5. The public interest in the present matter is indisputable. The CIC, in an earlier order, deemed political parties to be public authorities under the RTI Act.
6. The funds received by parties from donors would naturally be of interest to voters in order to understand their financing and functioning. Donations by corporate entities would also be of interest to their shareholders and potential shareholders.
7. Therefore, the failure of the CIC in appreciating the present issue as one of high public importance.

Way Forward:



The public scrutiny of parties and political candidates is an essential and inalienable part of a free and fair democratic process. By suppressing knowledge of political financing, we are breaking the basic bonds of democracy holding the country together. An unsettled law is as dangerous as bad law. The Court must conclusively settle the questions around the constitutionality of electoral bonds.

The tragedy of conservation

CruX: Isolating the indigenous people from their natural habitats in the Western Ghats to protect biodiversity is unproductive

Protected areas and Displacement

1. In 2012, 39 areas covering national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, and reserved forests in the Western Ghats were declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. These sites are crucial for their biodiversity value. Ten of them are in Karnataka.
2. Since the time the Ministry of Environment and Forests began identifying the potential heritage sites, there has been unrest among the indigenous people. When the exercise began, they feared for their existence in lands that they had inhabited for decades.
3. The restrictions on movement following the declaration of these territories as ecologically sensitive areas aggrieved them further.
4. Against the backdrop of the enactment of the Forest Rights Act of 2006 in India and the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People in 2007 by the United Nations, the people residing in the Western Ghats did not anticipate that they would have to deal with the uncertainty about their future following the announcement of the World Heritage Site.
5. The indigenous people of the Western Ghats eke out their living by collecting 'minor forest produce' such as cinnamon and kokum from the forest.

A dismal record

Karnataka has a dismal record in implementing the Forest Rights Act compared to other States. According to the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, as of April 30, 2018, the State had recognised only 5.7% of the total claims made. Notably, 70% of the claims were disposed of.



The wrong approach

1. Assuming that denying tribals or other traditional forest dwellers their rights in the forest would serve the purpose of conservation is far from the truth.
2. As per the law, only those lands are recognised where people prove their occupation not later than December 13, 2005. Moreover, the combined stretch of land claimed by them is comparatively smaller by any account than what has been taken away for building dams, mining, laying railway lines and roads, power plants, etc.
3. The government records also reveal that 43 lakh hectares of forest land encroached both legally and illegally until 1980 when the Forest Conservation Act came into force. Sadly, there is no significant conservation even after this landmark law.
4. Invariably, an approach adopted to isolate the indigenous people from their natural habitats to protect biodiversity is the root cause of conflict between them and conservationists. The latter think that resources have to be controlled and managed.
5. However, this theory is fast proving unproductive. The Global Environment Outlook Report 5 mentions that there is decreased biodiversity across the globe even as 'protected areas' have been expanding. People living in nature's surroundings are integral to conservation as they relate with it in a more integrated and spiritual way.

The way forward

Declaration of the Western Ghats as a World Heritage Site is as important in preserving the rich biodiversity of the region as the recognition of the rights of the people who depend on the forests. As confirmed internationally, preserving biodiversity requires the legal empowerment of the people living in those areas. The Forest Rights Act is an ideal instrument to push forward the objective. To realise it on the ground, the government must make an effort to build trust between its agencies in the area and the people who depend on these forests by treating them as equal citizens like everyone else in the country.