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The India Conversation: Views on India from the stars Community



India is the world's largest democracy and one of its largest economies. With more than 1.3 billion people, it is often considered a potential global superpower. Yet India still struggles with poverty and many other challenges of a developing economy. To better understand India's domestic developments and global ambitions, we have invited a few experts from the stars community to start the conversation by sharing their views on India.

*stars Alumnus **Prateep BASU**, Co-Founder and CEO of SatSure, highlights the huge growth spurt in the Indian agriculture technology (AgTech) space and the urgent need to bring together all stakeholders to build innovative solutions and to transform India's agriculture sector so that it can sustainably nourish a growing population.*

*stars Alumnus **Ashok RAMACHANDRAN**, CEO and President of Schindler India and South Asia, shares what the pandemic taught him and, at a time when many of his employees across the country started falling prey to the deadly virus every day, how he took the situation into his hands to handle the second wave of COVID-19.*

***Urs SCHOETTLI**, Member of the stars International Board, sees the main culprit for India's backwardness and now for the COVID-19 disaster in its bureaucracy and the feudal mindset that goes with it. India therefore needs nothing less than a second break with the past, a total rupture with the stifling legacy of colonial rule in the shape of India's civil service.*

***Philippe WELTI**, former Swiss Ambassador to India, writes that despite all its private market economy and free trade rhetoric, the Modi government reveals more and more how much it is driven by ideologically motivated domestic priorities – standing in stark contrast with its newly found geostrategic position as cornerstone of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific.*

Open Data for Innovation in Agriculture and Climate Change

Author: stars Alumnus **Prateep BASU**, Co-Founder and CEO of SatSure, Bangalore



Innovation plays an essential role in the progress of an individual and society as a collective. In business, innovation helps organizations grow and keeps them relevant by helping them stand out against other industry players. Every product in existence today is the result of experimentation, which forms the basis for innovation.

Innovation, traditionally, has always followed a controlled method where the organization itself developed, manufactured, marketed, and distributed the service themselves. The heavy investment in internal R&D led to organizations capturing the market with their innovative product, which in turn led to profits, control of their IP and the cycle continued. This process worked for many years until organizations started looking outwards along with their in-house ideas to build products, realizing that whatever their size, most of the talents in the market aren't working for them. And thus, open innovation was born.

Agriculture and Innovation in India

In India, there has been a huge growth spurt in the number of start-ups working in the Agriculture – Technology (AgTech) space over the last three years. Today there are more than 500 active players working to improve several aspects of the agricultural value chain. Beyond start-ups, there are organizations like value chain lenders, insurers, academicians, researchers, and policymakers who are working on solving the problems in agriculture. Every decision about agriculture, policies, credit access, insurance and so on needs access to good quality information about various agricultural parameters. Organizations tend to rely on public data sets which don't provide the required granularity of information and have questionable accuracy levels due to the lack of a scientific approach to data collection.

Most value chain players are today working, to an extent, in silos and utilizing their internal expertise to solve the challenges. There is a lack of inter- and intra-domain expertise and information exchange in the Agri community, leading to limited innovation taking place. The

absence of an open innovation platform where people from different sectors can come together and solve the problems at both a micro and macro level are limiting co-innovation opportunities.

An Open Innovation Platform would thus help solve critical problems prevalent in the Agricultural Sector of by providing access to data and information, and co-innovation opportunities for innovative solutions. SatSure has taken up this challenge by launching its flagship product “SatSure Sparta” – an open innovation platform for the agriculture community. This multifunctional platform provides access to specific analysis ready datasets that any remote sensing or agriculture researcher, academician, and AgTech player can use to build innovative solutions for the agriculture sector in India.



The infographic above shows the variety of analysis ready datasets that SatSure Sparta hosts. Currently available only for India and over specific time periods, these datasets provide users with the much-needed quality information required to not only innovate but also form business critical decisions.

Climate Change and Agriculture

As highlighted by the World Economic Forum in their report on “Incentivizing Food Systems Transformation”, there is an urgent need to transform food systems so that they can sustainably nourish a growing population while providing economic opportunities in an efficient, environmentally friendly way. One of the four pathways highlighted in the report, talks about the need for business model innovation in organizations where companies redesign their models to prioritize environmental, social and financial outcomes. SatSure Sparta ascribes to many of the suggestions given in the report – specifically those that talk about investing in shared data solutions, sharing key learnings with the global community and knowledge transfer with other industry players and thought leaders.

The datasets available on this open innovation platform provide essential analytics on crop health, soil moisture, rainfall, air quality and pollution data, as well as market and warehouse locations. There exists a need to understand the vicious cycle of how climate change impacts agriculture and how agriculture in turn impacts climate change. The difficulty in accessing quality ground data by decision makers leads to inaccurate policies being created which don't address the on-ground realities and instead provide solutions which solve only a fraction of the problem.

Through the philosophy of open innovation, we aim to arm researchers, key AgTech players and decision makers with the right information at the right time so that they can form accurate solutions that benefit every rung of the agriculture value chain. We believe in

collective efforts to enable the democratization of ideas and solutions for the agricultural ecosystem.



Prateep BASU is Co-Founder and CEO of SatSure, a decision analytics startup leveraging advances in satellites remote sensing, machine learning and big data analytics to provide answers to large area questions across the domains of agriculture, banking and financial services, infrastructure and climate change mitigation. Prateep is a seasoned space industry professional with work experience on both the business and technology front. He received a Bachelor of Technology in Aerospace Engineering from the Indian Institute of Space Science and Technology and a Master of Science in Space Studies from the International Space University in Strasbourg.

Covid and Our Family

*Author: stars Alumnus **Ashok RAMACHANDRAN**, CEO and President of Schindler India and South Asia, Mumbai*



Schindler India is a well-known name today, not just in the elevator industry, but also in industry-agnostic corporate circles. Besides our product, we are respected as an ethical business associate and a great employer. But this was not always the case. Schindler entered the Indian market roughly two decades back when it was dominated by huge existing brands. The penetration was very difficult but with quality products, excellent service and persistent efforts of our people, Schindler India carved out space in the market for itself. This space grew steadily every year and today we are among the top elevator and escalator brands in the country.

A lot has changed in the last twenty-three years for Schindler India, our revenues, size, complexity and technology but what has remained intact is our culture of caring and loving each other. Schindler India has always been a close-knit family. Today due to our growth and size we are operating at distances but are still connected and affected by each other. Last year when the news of Covid-19 broke, our first concern was the safety of our people and their families. We proactively asked our employees to start operating from the safety of their homes and strengthened our IT infrastructure in almost no time to support this new way of working. As elevator maintenance is an essential service some of our employees had to be out in the field to support the public who depend on our products to move, especially hospitals or buildings where aged people stay. Schindler India provided all the field employees high-quality essential PPEs for protection against Covid-19. Our employees adapted faster than anyone could expect, and we saw no dip in our productivity. We were very happy to also notice that very few cases of Covid were emerging in Schindler India. Those affected too were regaining their health fast. All the support in terms of leave and medical benefits was extended to support them. Things were looking under control for the first three months but gradually some of us started experiencing a different kind of fatigue. Something that none of us had experienced

before. Working from home had diminished the boundaries of work timings for many. This was detected well in time by the Schindler HR team. The team created policies around separating work timings from personal time and communicated with rigor. We also got mental health specialists for sessions to help our employees develop awareness around taking breaks, learn skills to relax their minds, and mastering personal productivity hacks. The managers played their part by being compassionate, understanding, and appreciative throughout the journey.

By November 2020 we had conquered all obstacles. Covid cases were at an all-time low, personal productivities were at a peak and morale was high. This reflected clearly in the business performance of December 2020. It went through the roof. We were delighted.

In January 2021 the world seemed to be moving towards normalcy. With people stepping out regularly and markets getting crowded many organizations started operating from offices but we chose caution. Schindler India continued working from home and excelling at it. All seemed to be going well until March 2021 when the second wave of Covid struck India. Unlike last time Schindler India was hit on the face this time by Covid-19. Many of our employees across the country and their family members started falling prey to the deadly virus every day. Hearing such news shook me beyond my imaginations. My management team and I took the situation into our hands and institutionalized some policies overnight to handle the second wave of Covid 19. We decided that Schindler India will:

- Suspend all operations requiring people to step out from home except emergencies till situation improves
- Review the status of Covid among the employees every day
- Provide additional medical cover of 1 lac rupees for corona-related treatments to all employees
- Pay for any RT PCR tests and vaccinations of all the employees
- Provide 7-day additional leaves for employees affected with Covid-19
- Take collective break from work for two days (10-11 May 2021) to rejuvenate in these tough times

The situation seems to be coming under control now as the positive cases in Schindler India have started plummeting. I am grateful to the grit and resolve of our people to have endured through such a tough time. The last year has taught me that tough teams last longer than tough times and Schindler India is beyond a tough team. We are a family.



Ashok RAMACHANDRAN is CEO and President of Schindler India and South Asia since July 2019. Ashok joined the company in 2006 and has spent over a decade at the company in various roles within the Schindler Group. He started his career in Schindler at Australia in the quality department, post which he was appointed as Managing Director of Schindler Vietnam in 2012. After a successful stint there where he achieved a complete turnaround of the business in Vietnam, he was assigned the role of Managing Director of Schindler Malaysia in 2016 and was then appointed the CEO at Schindler India in 2018.

India: A Monumental Crisis – Historic Opportunities

Author: **Urs SCHOETTLI**, Member of the stars International Board, Tokyo/Mumbai



India is best described as a Third World country of continental dimensions with a number of islands of the First World. This description holds true at the best of times and is in the present monumental crisis of particular significance.

The large majority of the Indian population lives in poverty or even destitution. At the same time India produces some of the best professionals, entrepreneurs, and researchers of the world. When you follow American TV news shows you will notice that almost every second expert doctor being interviewed is of subcontinental descent.

While India's literacy rate is a dismal 74%, the country harbours excellent institutions of higher learning, most notably the outstanding Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT). While large segments of India's rural population survive in medieval conditions, in Mumbai and Chennai, in Delhi and Bangalore you find outstanding lawyers, architects and engineers.

It is the huge discrepancies in the living conditions that have come to the fore during the monumental crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nowhere are the deficiencies of India more evident than in healthcare. The overwhelming majority of Indians does not have even the basic health provisions. In recent weeks the world has witnessed the collapse of public health care even in India's most developed metropolises like the capital Delhi and the financial centre Mumbai. One shudders to think what conditions prevail deep in the countryside of the most backward states of the Indian Union like Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Bihar.

What has led to the monumental crisis? There can be no doubt that the current government committed gigantic mistakes in dealing with the COVID-19 crisis. After an initial success in containing the pandemic the central government, a number of state governments and the public in general fell into the most dangerous of all traps, hubris!

People believed that the crisis was over, even that India was showing the world how to deal with the pandemic. This nationalist pride had a devastating price. The guards went down and the disease began to spread like wildfire.

It would be wrong to put the blame solely on the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi as has been the case in many prominent media both in India and abroad. Often the same commentators that are calling on the government to order a nation-wide lockdown during the second wave, had been condemning the government when in the early phase of the pandemic it had decided to issue a severe lockdown.

But the monumental crisis that has befallen India does not only show the blatant incompetence of today's authorities to deal with the pandemic. It has also unveiled deep seated failures of the Indian state. In fact, India has neglected its health services since a long time. The Congress government before Modi became prime minister has been equally incompetent. He inherited a woefully underdeveloped public health sector. If India claims today to be an emerging world power it is nowhere near such a status, particularly when it comes to material, political and social infrastructure.

The shocking pictures from India that have gone around the world have been a shocking setback for all those who believed that in not too distant a future India will be able to catch up with China. In fact, the pictures revealed a reality that leaves no doubt that India has a long way to go to have the basics for even being a creditable regional power. The debate about how the virus came to India and why it led to the catastrophic second wave will go on for a long time.

However, one thing is already clear: the disaster need not have reached the dimensions it has evolved into, if India had a public health service worthy its status as an emerging economic power. Of course, the size of the population has always been and will always be the major explanation of the dimensions of the pandemic on the Subcontinent. But if one wants to prevent future disasters and if there is a clear readiness to learn from recent events, one has to understand the true reasons for the extent with which covid-19 has struck India. In fact, one will come to a conclusion that reaches far beyond the current crisis and that is at the bottom of the general backwardness of a number of sectors in Indian society. The true nature of India's backwardness is its prevailing and all-pervasive feudalism, most incarnate in the stifling bureaucracy, which extends its tentacles into every corner of public life.

Whoever has tried to do business in India and to participate in the remarkable potential for growth and improvement in this vast country, will find a people of great talent and readiness to work and study hard. Nevertheless, it is extremely difficult to be successful in India, as there are tremendous bureaucratic hurdles to be overcome.

The main culprit for India's backwardness and now for the COVID-19 disaster has been and continues to be its bureaucracy and the feudal mindset that goes with it. Not only is the scale of Indian bureaucracy on all levels of government humongous, the bureaucrats also see their roles traditionally in making things difficult for the applicant, in making him and her feel impotent by making everybody run from pillar to post!

The Indians had inherited all the evils of the British bureaucracy and, once in power in independent India, had enhanced the bureaucratic stranglehold on every aspect of life. The culmination came under India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, who, a

socialist at heart, promoted the development of the Indian economy under the “commanding heights” of the public sector.

While the two political systems of China and India cannot be compared and while neither of the two countries can reasonably think of introducing the other’s political system, when it comes to bureaucracy, there is and should be ample scope for comparisons.

There can be no doubt that in terms of implementation of government policies China is miles ahead of India. In fact, the Chinese concept of the “mandate of heaven” is at the roots of China’s rapid modernization during the past four decades.

Traditionally, China’s rulers have the task to ensure the wellbeing of the people, the wealth of the country and its security. If they are amiss in fulfilling these duties, they lose their divine right to rule. The subjects have the right to remove the regime. Today, the mandate of heaven is to make China’s economy strong and to make China well respected in the world.

In the feudalistic world of Indian bureaucracy there is no space for a revokable mandate of those ruling the country. While politicians can be removed through the verdict of the electorate, bureaucrats generally serve for a lifetime.

The Indian subject has to put up with a gigantic maze of red tape! Perennially, he/she is the supplicant and most of the time to get what should be rightfully his/hers, is only accessible through corruption and nepotism.

There can be no doubt that, even if there were substantial errors and failures by the policy makers when dealing with Covid-19, the responsibility for the mess within which the country finds itself not only today, but since a long time, squarely rests with the bureaucracy.

Looking at past records one has to come to the conclusion that even after gigantic disasters India climbs back. Its people are of an extraordinary resilience. It would, therefore, be wrong to end this overview on a negative note. There are enough human and material, technical and financial resources for the country to get back on its feet.

Therefore, we conclude with a look at historic opportunities we perceive to be at the horizon. We have identified a callous state machinery as the main culprit for the disaster. This means that a new beginning, which is urgently called for once the pandemic has subsided, has to cleanse the country from the ancient scourge of red tape and a corrupt bureaucracy. When if not now, is the need for drastic action more evident!

In the past, most notably in 1991, when the dire straits of the Indian economy called for drastic economic reforms, India has proven that it can change course if required. The monumental crisis can engender some positive results if it ends in a radical overhaul of India’s government machinery.

India needs nothing less than a second break with the past. The first break had been independence from Britain, the second break must be the total rupture with the stifling legacy of colonial rule in the shape of India’s civil service. From the foreign service to the ministry of finance, from the prime minister’s office to the ministry of health etc. etc. nothing and nobody should be spared when the drastic cleaning of the corridors of power

takes place. India needs its own version of the bold reforms launched and undertaken by the great pragmatist and statesman Deng Xiaoping!



Urs SCHOETTLI was appointed Secretary General of the Liberal International in 1978. In 1983, he joined the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (NZZ) and became its South Asia Correspondent in New Delhi. From 1986 to 1994, he served in various roles for the Friedrich Naumann Foundation in India, Spain and Portugal. In 1996, he returned to the NZZ and successively served as its Correspondent in Hong Kong, Tokyo and Beijing. Schoettli has published widely on topics of liberalism, development policies and international security and he is the author of numerous books on South Asia, citizenship and environmental issues. Schoettli studied philosophy at the University of Basel.

India in Geopolitics and at Home: Two Worlds

Author: **Philippe WELTI**, former Swiss Ambassador to India, Zurich



The picture of India's geostrategic position is moving these days. Over recent months, China's geopolitical behaviour and accompanying diplomatic rhetoric have become more assertive. But in the logic of cause and effect, international resistance against China is growing, too. US-President Biden has recently called for a digital summit of the rejuvenated Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, Quad, that loose strategic grouping which is assembling the US, Japan, Australia and India and is directed against China's expansion in the Indo-Pacific. India under PM Modi is now explicitly admitting that it is part of the Quad because of China's aggressive expansion. This political confession is new and marks an important step in the region's evolving strategic landscape determined to impede China's outreach. The most recent moves do not come as a surprise. Over recent years, changing Indian governments have continued to pursue their slow rapprochement to the West, the specific bilateral relationship with the USA being the core element of it. On the US-side, all Presidents from Clinton onwards, have patiently prepared and nurtured India's eventual turn to Western dominated forums, the most recent, apart from the Quad-relation, being the invitation to participate in the G-7 meeting in London this summer. The London meeting will possibly be the starting point for the creation of a "Democracy of Ten" or D-10, assembling the ten leading democratic states of the world. Of particular importance was, half a year ago, the initiative to consult with the Five Eyes, a very tightly knit sort of alliance of the Intelligence Services of the five Anglo-Saxon countries USA, Canada, Britain, Australia and New Zealand, which serves as a sign of growing confidence in India as a strategic partner in world affairs. Undeniably, India has become a central cornerstone in the concept of the Indo-Pacific as an integrated strategic area and of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific as a political and ultimately military strategy. Modi stands for most of India's official determination to come closer to working with the West in the global arena.

At the same time, however, India in the last minute stepped out of the nascent large free trade area called Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, RCEP, which includes China and excludes the USA. Heavy weight trading economies like China, Japan and South Korea will most probably be profiting from the world's coming largest free trade area, while the USA for not having been invited to join and India for having refused to be part of it, will be the losers once the economic impact can be measured. Obviously, Modi's India is putting the risk of having to absorb more Chinese exports above the chances to profit from new and growing export opportunities within RCEP for its own industrial goods. With all its private market economy and free trade rhetoric the Modi government reveals more and more how much it is driven by ideologically motivated domestic priorities, this in contrast with its newly found geostrategic position in the Indo-Pacific. Smart geostrategic moves make you assume that the concept behind them is free from ideological burden. In its seventh year in office, India's leadership, however, has developed into a biased Hindu-nationalistic rule which overtly discriminates against non-Hindu minorities especially against Muslims, who, after all and with some two hundred million people, represent the third largest Muslim community in the world and constitute almost one sixth of the Indian nation. This, in itself, is already a tragic betrayal of Nehru's strictly secular Republic.

What comes in addition is Modi's now evident incompetence to manage the nation under the stress of a health disaster. When the pandemic started to ravage the world, it could be foreseen that the Indian government would have great difficulties to cope with the disaster. Now it has become a fact that India is experiencing the world's sharpest increase of COVID-19 infections and deaths without any hope that it will be able to control the recent surge anytime soon. Other countries who had been negligent at the beginning of the pandemic, like the US and Britain, appear to be successful now in containing a further rapid spread of the virus. India, however, seems to be set for the worst. After promising beginnings in the field of promoting Indian interests in the world during Modi's first term in office, the prospects have turned sombre for the Subcontinent. If the health crisis continues to damage the economy, the consequences for the development of the country's strategic means will ultimately impact India's capacity to promote its international interests and its role as a relevant partner for others.



Philippe WELTI is Co-Founder of Share-an-Ambassador / Geopolitical Coaching and Member of the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). He retired from the Swiss Diplomatic Service after accomplishing missions as ambassador to India (including Bhutan) and to Iran. Prior to those two missions, he was seconded to the Swiss Defence Ministry in Berne in the capacity of Political Director with the rank of ambassador. In that position, he was in charge of strategic affairs, security policy and the minister's international relations and he represented the minister at NATO Ministerial Conferences as State Secretary. Earlier diplomatic postings abroad included Bonn as Deputy Chief of Mission, London and New York.

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stars insights are exclusive contributions by business leaders and experts who scan the horizon to discuss geopolitical, economic, technological and further trends and developments which will impact society and business in the next few years.

Impressum