

Opinion | OP-ED COLUMNIST

Forget Trump and Discover the World

Thomas L. Friedman NOV. 28, 2017

Mumbai, INDIA — In a recent MSNBC interview I described President Trump as a “brain-eating disease.”

I did so because his indecent behavior, and nonstop outrageous tweets and actions, force you as a commentator into a terrible choice: either ignore it all and risk normalizing Trump’s excesses or write about him constantly and risk not having the time to learn and report about the big trends now reshaping the world — trends that one day will surprise your readers and leave them asking, “Why didn’t I know this?”

To inoculate myself against Trump eating my brain, I occasionally get as far away as I can. This time it was to India, where I learned a ton that I didn’t know: I found India trying to leapfrog out of poverty and catch up to China by engaging in a rapid digitization of its entire economy and power grid.

Yes, while our president has been busy playing golf, tweeting about LaVar Ball and pushing an anything-that-will-pass tax plan, China has been busy creating a cashless society, where people can pay for so many things now with just a swipe of their cellphones — including donations to beggars — or even buy stuff at vending machines with just facial recognition, and India is trying to follow suit.

These are big trends, and in a world where data is the new oil, China and India are each creating giant pools of digitized data that their innovators are using to write all kinds of interoperable applications — for cheap new forms of education, medical insurance, entertainment, banking and finance.

I was blown away by one big change in India in particular. In 2009, my friend Nandan Nilekani, the tech entrepreneur, led a team of experts that helped the then-Congress Party-led government launch a national digital identity system, known as Aadhaar (Hindi for “base”).

Every Indian, rich or poor, goes into a field office, has fingerprints and irises scanned into a biometric database and then linked to the individual’s 12-digit ID number with basic identifiers: name, address, date of birth and sex. When the Congress Party left office in 2014, and Narendra Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party took over, Modi continued and impressively energized the Aadhaar project, bringing it today to 1.18 billion users, out of a population of about 1.3 billion.

In a country where many poor people lacked any form of ID, like a birth certificate or a driver’s license, this has been a revolution, because they can now open a bank account and get government aid sent directly to them — rather than having bureaucrats, bankers or postal workers skim off 30 percent each year through the mail — and then link their bank account to their mobile phones, from which they can buy, sell, transfer money and receive payments digitally anytime anywhere.

The digital network platforms that have broken the one-billion-plus user mark — like Facebook, Google and WhatsApp — all came out of the private sector. Aadhaar, noted the Harvard Business Review, is the only non-U.S. platform “to have broken the one-billion-user threshold and the only such system to have been developed by the public sector.” It also has the distinction of “having reached one billion users the fastest.”

When the British laid railroads in India it led to the more efficient extraction of natural resources. Now the Indian government, through the combination of a trusted unique ID platform — tied to cellphones and mobile bank accounts — is creating a kind of digital railroad enabling the more efficient empowerment of human resources.

“It’s transforming the lives of ordinary people,” explained Alok Kshirsagar, a McKinsey partner based in Mumbai. “Millions are already benefiting from digital payments and credit. There are already more than 30 percent productivity gains when digital capabilities are used in agriculture, transportation and

manufacturing. We are in the early stages of a transformation that could generate as much as \$1 trillion in economic value over the next seven to 10 years.”

Now any Indian farmer can just go to one of 250,000 government community centers — each with a computer, Wi-Fi and a local entrepreneur who manages it — log into a government digital services website with the farmer’s unique ID and instantly print out a birth certificate or land records needed for transactions.

An Indian friend told me: “My driver has two bank accounts, and he has given one debit card to his wife and another to his son. And now he tells me he puts X amount of his salary into one account and Y into another, using his cellphone, so his wife is empowered and not asking her mother-in-law for money, because she has her own debit card, and the son, who is off in school training to be a doctor, can be independent.”

Nilekani and his wife, Rohini, have built a foundation, EkStep, to create mobile education apps to help parents, teachers and students — armed only with cellphones — to learn faster, using these new digital networks. As Shankar Maruwada, an EkStep co-founder and its C.E.O., explained: Unlike, say Facebook, whose business model is to “retain your attention,” EkStep, Aadhaar and other such “societal platforms” are designed to “restore your agency,” particularly to the poor.

The West got economically rich “before it got data rich,” added Pramod Varma, EKStep’s chief technology officer. “So when data came along, it just became a better way to sell you things. They could target you better; you became a better customer for them. But in a country like India, where per-capita income is \$2,000, today you can get data rich before you get economically rich. And if you empower people with their data, they can use their data to get better loans, get better skills, and build a digital repository that captures their skills to get better salaries.”

Similar innovations are going on in energy, explained Mahesh Kolli, president of Greenko, India’s largest renewable power provider. Theft of electricity from state-owned distribution companies amounted to some 20 percent of their output, as people strung wires to siphon from the grid, or the companies couldn’t identify users.

Now the government “can link my unique ID to my electricity bill” and then directly and digitally connect my government subsidy, if I am poor, to that electric bill, said Kolli. Greenko just built the largest solar project in the world — a 3,000-acre field of Chinese-made solar panels generating 800 megawatts powering over 600,000 homes in Andhra Pradesh. Two more such fields are on the way up, all connecting to the national grid.

Oh, and by the way, for those of you who want to preserve coal jobs, this 800-megawatt solar farm “was built with over 5,000 skilled and semiskilled workers,” said Kolli. “We believe the renewable energy sector will create over one million new generation jobs to meet the 175-gigawatt target set by Prime Minister Modi.”

Greenko builds these plants, he added, “in five months using Chinese panels and European inverter-grid integration technologies made in India.” (Notice the absence of U.S. technology in that loop.) Greenko is also making huge strides in battery technology to store solar energy, so it can be used when the sun is not shining, and the company is now in the midst of building the first grid-connected battery storage system integrated with its solar farms.

“No new coal or gas power plants are being built in India today,” he added, “not because of regulations, but because solar, wind, hydro are all now able to compete with coal plants without subsidies.”

Bottom line, the Indian energy economy is rapidly transitioning to a “decarbonized, digitized and decentralized” system, said Kolli, enabling better quality of life while meeting big energy needs — without the government having to deal with all the protests that come with building coal- or gas-fired plants.

So while we’ve been following Trump’s tweets about bringing back “beautiful coal,” India built a billion-user ID network bigger than Twitter and giant solar power plants that are cheaper than coal.

That’s what you missed — and that’s just one country. Are you tired of winning yet?

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