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Challenge to exit mediocrity

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Taking scientific, logical challenge with passion at the individual, collective and country levels makes a country innovative. Many Western business associates ask me whether “Make in India” is a marketing gimmick or a real drive from India’s Government. Their doubt seems to stem from past slogans like “Incredible India.” My response is always positive because in this column earlier, as well as in my books, I have advocated that India should have a strong, high skill driven manufacturing base, that our millions be trained to develop skills in different areas to both advance their livelihood and better our economy in the global field.

“Make in India” is the start of solving our country’s major problems. It will drastically shorten the poverty line, increase lower income people’s wages, equip them for better jobs through skill development, open entrepreneurial export opportunities making the country self-dependant and invite the world to make India their high value manufacturing hub. To overcome our biggest lacuna of not having the challenge-taking mindset, let’s look at those who have taken scientific, logical challenges.

Cisco CEO John Chambers started his address in Jacksonville, USA by inviting the thousand-strong crowd to challenge him. At this global digital technology conference I participated in,

Chambers said he won’t be an isolated spectacle on stage. Unless challenged, he said, it would mean his subject or delivery was so banal it impacted nobody, and nobody would register his words. The audience felt really easy throwing bold questions at this multi-billion dollar Cisco founder who responded with scientific and logical aplomb, opening a healthy debate in the memorably vibrant session.

Challenge by inventors: People with self-initiative challenge the world in new dimensions. Did you know Thomas Edison with over 1000 patents is a school dropout? Just his voice recorder changed the world, subsequently creating a huge entertainment industry and several adaptable innovations. Neither did “flying machine” inventors, Wilber and Orville Wright, who flew the first airplane, pass school. The American attitude of going to the garage with the mentality to invent is a total challenge to society. Although the US has large, sophisticated, scientific laboratory establishments, many important American inventions after 1880 came from the unconventional garage “self-laboratory.” The top 6 famous garage start-ups are Amazon.com by Jeff Bezos, Apple by college-dropout Steve Jobs, Disney by Walt and Roy Disney, Google by Larry Page and Sergey Brin, Harley Davidson by William Harley and Arthur Davidson, HP by Bill Hewlett and Dave Packard. With scarce means, minimalistic way of living, little physical comfort, these garage inventors spectacularly challenged the world to exit mediocrity while inventing something out-of-the-box. Their individual power, motivation and passion were so strong that

without taking any establishment support, their challenge resulted in greenfield inventions.

Challenge from devastated countries: I can never support Germany or Japan's Axis military force of World War II, but hugely admire their challenge to rise above defeat. The Allied Army devastated Germany, of course to wipe out their devilish Nazi regime. Trounced Germany bounced back bravely to take on entrepreneurial challenges, and continues to be best in high quality precision manufacturing and innovation. Engineering workmanship accuracy and invincible quality of German SMEs have made the country robust enough to overcome global recessionary periods to become Europe's most stable economy. Japan's rebound from atomic bomb devastation was to challenge sophisticated Western developed countries by producing the world's best quality in every domain. Upto 1970s, Japan suffered the poor quality reputation. Even I remember small, cute bad quality Japanese products in my childhood. We'd always heard that German pianos are the best due to superior acoustic engineering. Taking the piano platform as a global challenge, Japan is mesmerizing the world today by perfecting their skill-set for the delicate exactitude that piano-making requires. You see more Yamaha pianos in classical music or rock concerts than any other country's piano. Destruction from war made them challenge their victimization to win in diverse industrial spheres.

Creative industry challenge: Conquering the Wild West is pride and nostalgia for all Americans. Macho actors like John Wayne, who shot into fame in John Ford's 1939 directed "Stagecoach," symbolized the American cowboy. Several gun-happy Westerns were made in the US which distinguished them as typically American cowboy films.

Italy, another War ravaged Axis power, had started Neo-Realism films to forget being devastated. When such films started declining in 1950s, Director Sergio Leone cheekily challenged big-time Hollywood studios. Just imagine, from traditional European culture,

he dared to portray American cowboys in A Fistful of Dollars (1964), For a Few Dollars More (1965), The Good, the Bad and the Ugly (1966) that became global box office hits. These lower-budget films were shot in Italy and Spain, hence nicknamed Spaghetti Westerns. In this creative challenge, Spaghetti Westerns have overtaken American-made Westerns in popularity. Americans sitting in the US prefer imported Westerns, while globally, Sergio Leone, rather than John Ford, is recalled as the symbol of cowboy movies. Don't forget, Sergio Leone's challenge was so gigantic that even Bollywood's highest grossing \$50 million blockbuster Sholay was inspired to imitate his most famous Once upon a time in the West 1968 film.

Among many scientific, logical and creative challenges that changed mediocrity, can "Make in India" be one? The Government says many administrative areas will be facilitated, which must be happening. But how will Government help to raise people's skill-set? Overall, several skill-set gaps need plugging in manufacturing, such as lack of hygienic and civic sense, lack of entrepreneurial challenge and innovative mindset, poor learning curve, non-conductive value of time, low capability. Only private industry, from MSMEs to middle and big enterprises and the self-employed can bring the change if they imbibe logical, scientific and passionate challenge to kill mediocrity in their work culture like Germany, Japan and now Korea have done. I can only refer you to the terrific words of American President John Kennedy: "Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country."

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