

Visit to Cradle of Innovation and Entrepreneurship

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Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi received a “rock star” like reception in New York’s Madison Square Garden when he last visited the U.S. in 2014. Looking at the details for his upcoming visit later this month, Modi’s visit promises to be even bigger and more productive.

In addition to meeting with many Fortune 500 CEOs in New York, Modi’s itinerary includes a two-day visit to the San Francisco Bay Area—the first time in more than three decades by an Indian premier. The last such visit to the Bay Area was in 1978 by then Prime Minister, Morarji Desai. The SAP Center at San Jose, with a capacity of approximately 18,500, has been fully-booked well in advance, given the more than 270,000 population of Indian origin in the Bay Area.

India needs to find many engines of growth to provide employment opportunities to its population. The country is expected to add more than 100 million employable workforce to the global labor pool in the next decade. Mr. Modi understands this very well—hence his slogan “Make in India.” This visit is a very clear message of his understanding of the interlinkage Indians have with the Bay Area, and the “win-win” potential businesses can have with India as a market. Over the last decade, investments in India by U.S. companies have increased, and the Bay Area has many companies founded by people of Indian origin—about one fifth by some estimates.

While visiting the Bay Area, Modi plans to focus on innovation and entrepreneurship with a special attention towards digital and renewable industries. He will be meeting with CEOs and founders of businesses like Apple, Facebook, Tesla, Google, Adobe and Microsoft. At Googleplex, Modi will be able to see the start of a 15-hour hackathon, where programmers and developers will be collaborating intensively on software projects relevant for “Digital India,” an initiative by India’s government to digitize its public services. He will also attend an event called KONNECT, where a number of Indian startups will be able to showcase their business to U.S. investors. He will spend time with Tim Cook, CEO of Apple, which could perhaps stimulate technology manufacturing investments in India—something others firms are also contemplating based on several announcements made this year. Mr. Modi will see Tesla’s factory with renewable batteries and “Powerwall,” a wall mounted home battery charged by solar panels—an area of utmost importance as India deals with its energy needs. Spending time with Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook may result in providing Internet connectivity to millions of Indians through Facebook’s “internet.org” initiatives which makes Internet accessible to more people via drones and satellites. Google’s very many innovations, such as the Google lens which can track glucose levels for diabetics, can have applicability in India. These are only a handful of areas which Modi will have an opportunity to assess.

In my view, interactions between motivated politicians and brilliant technologists / scientists only have the potential to unleash unimaginable productivity. India has been producing talented scientists, engineers and doctors for decades. A large part of this is attributed to early investments made in various engineering / research institutes in the 1950-60s in India. Over the years, that productivity has not been harnessed well by India and the potential has only led to a “brain-drain” phenomenon. However, over the last decade or so we have seen a few industries in India, e.g. IT services and pharmaceuticals, become globally competitive on the back of this talent pool. In addition, various entrepreneurs in India and Indian nationals returning from the West have started incubating innovative businesses in multiple cities like Bangalore and Hyderabad. Returnees have enabled foreign investors to follow entrepreneurs back into India and the phenomenon is now being termed as “brain-gain” by some.

There is a lot of optimism around Modi’s visit to the San Francisco Bay Area, and rightly so. Spending his valuable time in the cradle of innovation and entrepreneurship may perhaps take the effort of many to the next level. He has shown his acumen in understanding technology in various initiatives. This visit and the level of interactions he is planning to have with the Bay Area stalwarts tell me that he understands productivity enhancements that the technology industry can unleash, thereby creating significant opportunities for Indians and for the companies involved in that journey.

