

The Hindu & BL Editorials

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WhatsApp woe



WhatsApp's privacy policy offers a fait accompli to users in India. We need a data protection law soon

WhatsApp's updated privacy policy essentially takes away users' choice of not sharing their data with other Facebook-owned and third-party apps. If users do not agree with the updated privacy policy of the messaging platform, they will have to quit WhatsApp by February 8 — when the new terms of service are set to come into effect. The 400 million WhatsApp users in India are faced with an unenviable choice: to either put their data at risk by agreeing to the new norms or opt out of WhatsApp and suffer social and economic exclusion, given the network hegemony and market dominance of the social media behemoth. WhatsApp's move comes amidst a disturbing backdrop: millions of Facebook's Indian users are still in the dark about how their data was misused in the data breach scandal by Cambridge Analytica in 2018. There is no clarity about the impact on Indian journalists and human rights activists who were among some 1,400 WhatsApp users globally spied upon using a surveillance technology developed by Israel-based NSO Group.

Even as Facebook's credibility to protect user data is waning, the Indian Government's response to concerns around data privacy has been underwhelming. In 2018, after Facebook disclosed the data breach by Cambridge Analytica, it was forced to pay \$5

billion by the US Federal Trade Commission for deceiving American users. In India, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology issued a strong statement promising stringent action, including summoning Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg. Three years later, not even a token fine has been imposed, although data of Indian users were compromised.

Indian lawmakers must put in place a strong data protection law at the earliest. An expert committee chaired by retired Justice BN Srikrishna had submitted its recommendations for drafting The Personal Data Protection Bill in 2018. Three years on, the proposed law is stuck in Parliamentary wrangles, even as the Supreme Court in 2017 declared privacy a fundamental right. In contrast, Europe put in place the General Data Protection Regulation in 2016, as a result of which there is constant scrutiny over how Internet companies treat user data. WhatsApp's latest updated privacy policy guidelines won't be applicable for an individual residing in Europe. Both US and EU have initiated a number of anti-trust lawsuits against Facebook and Google. Google has been fined a combined \$9.5 billion since 2017 by EU antitrust regulators. The Federal Trade Commission and 46 state attorneys general have initiated an anti-trust suit against Facebook calling for separating Instagram and WhatsApp from the parent firm. Tech firms offer their products and services for free, collecting customer data and selling them to advertisers. Platforms which have been accused of not doing enough to protect users' data, and generate billions in profit in the bargain, cannot be trusted to do their own policing. The Centre should place checks on WhatsApp and enact a robust data protection law.

A safety net: On Union Education Ministry's directive

The pandemic has upended schooling, and the effort should be to help the hardest hit

The **Union Education Ministry's directive to the States to launch a mission to avoid large-scale dropouts** in schools in the coming year, partly by relaxing the detention policy, should end the anxiety of millions of students about their academic prospects. **Managing schooling during COVID-19** has been a challenge, with UNESCO estimating that at the end of 2020, about 320 million students were locked out of schools globally. South and West Asia are among the regions where students are at highest risk of not returning to schools and tertiary institutions, along with sub-Saharan Africa. Assessing the problem is key to planning for 2021. The Indian school education system remains top-down in making policy, which may not advance educational reform, but the vast administrative resources can be used to quickly assess the pandemic's impact on students, teachers and schools. The pandemic year has thus far witnessed apprehensive governments keeping the majority of school

instruction online, and treading carefully when it comes to reopening campuses. They must prioritise the door-to-door surveys needed to identify students who are not in a position to return to classes when schools reopen, and whose economic circumstances have changed due to the pandemic's impact on their families. Clearly, the priority should be to draw up a database, to plan incentives that will prevent dropouts. Education continues to be covered by a cess on tax, and the funds could be deployed in 2021 towards this objective, through the Centre's Samagra Shiksha scheme and other **COVID-19** relief plans.

The irrevocable role played by examinations in determining the fate of students, who come from varied backgrounds and preparation, has long been criticised for its rigidity, and these arguments were raised afresh when the Centre removed the no-detention policy under the RTE Act a couple of years ago. In the year of the virus, asymmetries among groups of students stand aggravated, and any detention would be illogical and unjustified. Particular mention should be made of the situation for girls, whose enrolment in higher numbers has been achieved over the years with considerable effort, as well as children in less-urbanised States where access to schools is weak. When the pandemic had still not swept India in February last year, Education Minister Ramesh Pokhriyal said, among the reasons for children remaining out-of-school or dropping out were poverty, economic reasons, and ill-health. The economic factors have, over the past dozen months, been exacerbated by COVID-19, while the digital divide witnessed in online education became an unprecedented cause of deprivation. Moreover, vaccination cannot cover the bulk of the population quickly, and education can possibly achieve a semblance of normality only well into the next academic year. This is the time to create a safety net for education, letting no student fall through.

Bridging the Gulf: On Gulf reconciliation summit

Saudi Arabia, now rebuilding ties with Qatar, should learn not to threaten its neighbours

The Gulf reconciliation summit, in Al-Ula, Saudi Arabia, where the kingdom and its allies decided to end their blockade of Qatar, has brought to an end, for now, their long feud. In 2017, Saudi Arabia, under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt imposed the blockade and severed diplomatic ties, accusing the tiny Gulf country of supporting terrorism. They also issued 13 demands for it to be lifted, which included shutting down the Qatar-funded TV network, Al Jazeera, closing a Turkish military base and reducing diplomatic relations with Iran. Qatar did not budge despite the heavy economic cost. When the Saudi and Emirati airspaces were closed, Iran offered Qatar global connectivity. Al Jazeera is still live. And, Qatar has invited more Turkish troops, bolstering its ties with

Ankara, which is eager to play a bigger role in West Asia. Moreover, it played an important role in the U.S.-Taliban deal and continued to host talks between Taliban representatives and the Afghan government. If the original Saudi plan was to isolate Qatar and make it kneel, it has backfired. And in the last weeks of the Trump administration, MBS and his allies seem to have realised their strategic folly.

Qatar has made few concessions to reach the reconciliation. The 13 specific demands were replaced by a broad agreement on non-intervention in other countries' internal affairs and cooperating to ensure regional stability and security, which can be open to different interpretations for different sides. After the summit, Qatar's Foreign Ministry has said that the country had no intention of altering ties with Iran and Turkey. In practice, the Saudi side stepped down from its demands and made amends with an unshaken Qatar as a new President is going to assume power in the U.S. The Saudi U-turn could be the result of a genuine tactical rethink. The rift in the Gulf helped Iran and Turkey, Riyadh's main rivals, while it failed to scuttle Qatar's standing. Iran, reeling under U.S. sanctions, also got some financial relief from Qatari payouts for using its airspace. By lifting the air and sea blockades, the Saudis and the Emiratis could deny Iran of those funds and also try to put up a united Arab regional front as Joe Biden is preparing to renegotiate the Iran nuclear deal. The Saudis may also be hoping that bridging the Gulf between two American allies would help them warm up to the Biden administration. While ending the feud is welcome, it cannot be overlooked that this unnecessary crisis was born out of an ill-thought-out Saudi-Emirati strategy of coercion. It reflects poorly on them. They should learn from the mistakes and build ties based on mutual interests and cooperation, not on threats and coercion.