

# US trade talks: Govt needs to explain to Parliament

The Opposition must question the government on what transpired during Commerce Minister's US visit

Poornima Joshi

Parliament reconvened after recess on Monday to take on the remaining business of the Budget Session. From the onset, the preoccupation in the Opposition benches seems to be with issues that are either very localised or serve different partisan interests.

Trinamool Congress appears to be focused on the question of faulty electoral rolls while the DMK is busy with Hindi imposition through the National Education Policy (NEP) and delimitation.

The Congress does not seem to have a coherent strategy with different sections raising a variety of issues — from ASHA workers strike in Kerala to problems in digital disbursement of social welfare benefits. The first intervention of the Leader of Opposition, Rahul Gandhi, was on the issue of faulty electoral rolls during the Zero Hour.

The government must be secretly relieved with the proceedings

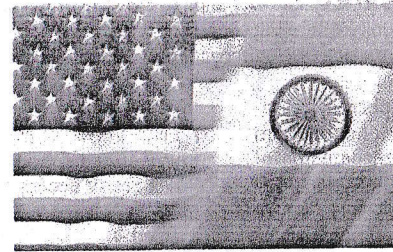
considering that it is not being cornered on the critical issue of India's negotiations with the US on trade and tariffs.

Barring senior Congress MP Manish Tewari who gave a notice for adjournment of the business of the House to discuss Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal's negotiations with the US, neither any other Congress leader nor the INDIA bloc as a whole seem overly concerned with what should have been a priority for the Opposition.

## TRUMP'S ASSERTION

During the recess in the Budget session, the US President Donald Trump targeted India for what he characterised as "very high tariffs". In fact, he publicly declared that India has agreed to cut tariffs "way down" because the country was "exposed".

"...India charges us massive tariffs, massive, you can't even sell anything into India. It's almost restrictive. It is restrictive. We do very little business inside... They've agreed, by the way, they want to cut their tariffs way down now because somebody's finally exposing



TRADE. Tough times ISTOCK

them for what they've done," President Trump said.

The statement was made while the Commerce Minister had just concluded his Washington visit. In the three days that the Commerce Minister was in the US, between March 3 and March 6, Indian media and the public were kept entirely uninformed about the negotiations.

Besides the Ministry of External Affairs making a general statement about the Commerce Minister having visited the US, the Indian government chose to keep absolutely mum while the US President openly declared that we

have agreed to cut tariffs "way down".

The US Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick was even more specific, pushing for a broad agreement and that India should open up its agriculture market. Agriculture is a line in the sand for India which protects its farmers from being swamped by agri imports from the developed world. The US is openly asking India to "open it up".

These statements indicate that India is being intimidated. If the government has succumbed to the US pressure, as President Trump is openly suggesting, it has to explain the precise nature of these concessions to the Indian people and industry. It is even more critical in the light of the US Commerce Secretary's proclamations about opening up Indian agriculture market.

As Parliament is in session, it is imperative that the government does this explaining on the floor of the House. If the Opposition does not pin the government down on the US tariff concessions in the days to come, it can then be legitimately asked whether they are being deliberately obtuse or generally inefficient.