

India's twin gripes about a U.S. mogul

MUMBAI, INDIA

Bezos has become a target because of newspaper's coverage and over Amazon

BY VINDU GOEL

Jeff Bezos' ownership of The Washington Post has complicated business for his much bigger company, Amazon, in Trump-era Washington.

Now the same thing could be happening in New Delhi under India's prime minister, Narendra Modi, who has increasingly sought to rein in both the international news media and foreign technology companies.

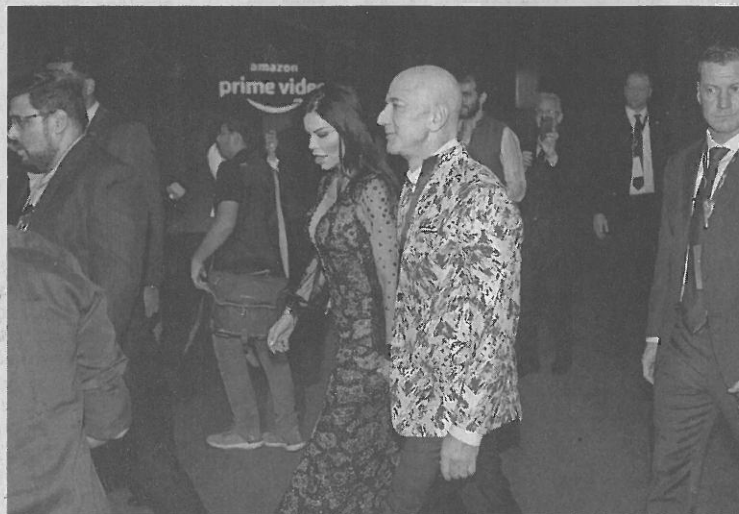
Last week, a senior official of Mr. Modi's governing Bharatiya Janata Party criticized The Post's coverage of the country during a visit by Mr. Bezos to announce new investments in India, one of Amazon's fastest-growing markets.

The official, Vijay Chauthaiwale, urged Mr. Bezos to return to Washington and "impart some wisdom" to Post employees about the bright prospects for India that Mr. Bezos was touting in New Delhi.

"Otherwise your charm offensive is likely to be waste of time and money," Mr. Chauthaiwale wrote in a tweet last week.

On the same day, Mr. Modi's commerce minister, Piyush Goyal, dismissed Mr. Bezos' announcement of a fresh \$1 billion investment to help small businesses in the country. "It is not as if they are doing a favor to India," Mr. Goyal told reporters. He then referred to the antitrust investigation of Amazon and its chief rival that Indian regulators opened the day before Mr. Bezos arrived.

Although both men later tempered their remarks, the double-barreled assault on The Post and Amazon is reminiscent of President Trump, who has repeatedly attacked Mr. Bezos, The Post's coverage of his administration, and Am-



FRANCIS MASCARENHAS/REUTERS

Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon, and his partner, Lauren Sanchez, at a company event in Mumbai, India, last week. Amazon faces an antitrust investigation in India.

azon — often all in the same tweet.

Amazon filed a lawsuit against the United States government late last year, arguing that a multibillion-dollar federal contract for cloud services had been awarded to Microsoft because of Mr. Trump's personal animus toward Mr. Bezos. The Trump administration has denied that the president's feelings influenced the decision.

A Washington Post opinion editor, Eli Lopez, responded to Mr. Chauthaiwale's comments on Twitter: "Just to clarify: Jeff Bezos doesn't tell Washington Post journalists what to write. Independent journalism is not about charming governments. But there's no question the work of our correspondents and columnists fits within India's democratic traditions."

An Amazon spokeswoman in India declined to comment.

In an interview, Mr. Chauthaiwale said that India was not trying to link its policies toward Amazon with concerns about The Post's news coverage. "I don't think the Indian government will do these things," he said. "We also know

that business is different from journalism."

But he said that The Post's coverage of India, particularly in its opinion pages, had been unfairly biased against the government. "The Washington Post does not want to give its readers both parts of the narrative," he said.

The Post said in a statement that it had "covered India fairly and accurately, even when the government has imposed tight restrictions on the flow of information, as it did with Kashmir." The news organization added that its Opinion department published a variety of viewpoints from India and around the world.

Over the past year and a half, the Modi government and its B.J.P. allies have grown increasingly strident in their criticism of foreign news media. That criticism swelled into a cacophony over international news coverage of the government's decision in August to strip away the statehood of the predominantly Muslim region of Jammu and Kashmir, send in troops, shut down the internet and arrest community leaders

and opposition politicians. The Post and other news outlets, including The New York Times, published numerous reports contradicting the government's claims that all was peaceful and normal in Kashmir.

In response, senior officials like the external affairs minister, S. Jaishankar, have complained in Washington and New York about the reporting. Mr. Jaishankar also canceled a meeting with members of the United States Congress after leaders refused to exclude Representative Pramila Jayapal, Democrat of Washington, who has sponsored a resolution urging the Modi government to lift restrictions in Kashmir.

In India, the government has increased limits on foreign news outlets, including shortening the duration of journalists' visas and preventing them from going to Kashmir or Assam, the center of a fight over a new citizenship law that is perceived as anti-Muslim.

In the realm of business, the government has also taken a nationalistic approach, seeking to rein in the power of foreign technology giants like Facebook, Google, Amazon and Flipkart, an Indian e-commerce site purchased by Walmart in 2018.

Some business leaders see the effort as counterproductive as India struggles to reverse a deepening economic slump and rising inflation.

Others suggested that the rhetoric is tougher in public than in private.

"I've been in touch with our member companies," said Mukesh Aghi, the chief executive of the U.S.-India Strategic Partnership Forum, a business group whose members include PepsiCo, Cisco, Mastercard, Boeing and Disney. "Over all, we are not experiencing any change in sentiment with regard to investment in India."

Mr. Aghi said that the United States and India were working to improve their relationship, with the hope that Mr. Trump and Mr. Modi could sign a long-awaited trade deal during a possible visit by the American president to India at the end of February.

"There will be positive changes for U.S. companies in India," Mr. Aghi said.