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K O V I E W

## Trump's Visit

US president Donald Trump's visit kept India riveted to television for two days. It was Trump's first visit to India. And since 2001 when Bill Clinton made his game-changing trip, there have been five US presidential visits to India - including the one by George W Bush - all contributing to a deepening India-US relationship. One of the salient achievements of the Trump's visit was the signing of the \$3 billion worth defence deals, including the purchase of what Trump said were the "most feared weapons". Among the defence purchases are Apache and MH-60 Romeo Helicopters. India is procuring 24 MH-60 Romeo helicopters at a cost of \$2.6 billion and six AH-64E Apache helicopters for \$800 million. The focus of the two countries, US President also said, was on having a comprehensive trade deal.

Overall, the optics of the visit have been predictable. Two leaders have engaged in a show of comradery complete with hugs, smiles and lavish praise for each other. Trump said, and perhaps rightly so, that the relations between the two countries have never been as good as they are now. Beyond the symbolism and the photo-ops of the Modi-Trump hugs and the much talked about chemistry, the growing Indo-US closeness is taking the shape of a long term strategic partnership.

Interestingly, Trump initially didn't publicly raise Kashmir as was widely anticipated. But later during the press briefing he did bring up Kashmir, offering once again to mediate between India and Pakistan over the issue. He said if there was anything he can do about the issue, he will do. But in saying so, he showed due deference to New Delhi's sensitivities and didn't press the issue as strongly as he used to do.

If anything the two-day visit of Trump has signaled that India may have eventually put the fallout of its Kashmir action behind it. True, Trump has raked up Kashmir on several occasions over the past six months and made repeated pitches for mediation between India and Pakistan over the region, but it hasn't reflected forcefully in the US policy stance towards India. And as Trump's two day stay in the country amply demonstrated, the optics and discourse were about a deepening bonhomie between the two nations and about the defence and trade deals.

US president's muted mention of Kashmir has been emblematic of the global reaction to withdrawal of Article 370 in August last. From hereon it appears that the world's attention on the region is unlikely to sustain if the situation in Kashmir doesn't change dramatically. Up until now, New Delhi has been able to largely maintain calm in the troubled UT by imposing security lockdown and communication blackout, now partially eased. In addition, the government has also arrested the major political and civil society leaders. This has made it difficult for the protests to be organized explaining, in part, why New Delhi has so far resisted the pressure from the international community to fully restore the internet in the UT. But with Trump visit turning out to be hugely successful, New Delhi should further ease the restrictions in Kashmir and give an opportunity to businesses in the region to function smoothly.

OTHER OPINION

## Birds are dying, and dying fast

The skies are falling silent. The State of India's Birds 2020 — a study jointly produced by 10 organizations with the help of citizen bird-watchers — has revealed that over a fifth of India's bird diversity has suffered sharp long-term declines over a 25-year period, with a drastic 80 per cent loss annually among several common birds in recent years. The study plugs important gaps in data that are key to conserving several avian species — for instance, some species categorized as being of 'least concern' by the International Union for Conservation of Nature were found to be at risk in India. But even more significantly it taps into citizen science for collecting a rich trove of data that no single organization could have amassed by itself. The success of conservation efforts often hinges on involving the public, especially when it comes to protecting avian species as their interactions with humans are far more frequent and unregulated compared to most other creatures. The primary threat to birds in India that emerges from the study is habitat loss from agricultural expansion, industrialization and urbanization. In a country that is still heavily dependent on agriculture, bird populations can be put at risk because of the damage they cause to crops. Awareness about crucial links in the ecological cycle — birds can be the farmers' friends by ridding fields of insects and pests, but the mass eradication of the latter with insecticides causes birds to turn to crops instead — is thus vital to the discourse on conservation.

But the more potent threat to rare avian species — such as birds only found in the Western Ghats — is posed by the insatiable appetite for land. Protection of fragile ecosystems like the Eastern and Western Ghats and the Terai grasslands can save myriads of species, including birds. Other trends not explicitly explored by the study need to be probed further — take, for example, the fact that the peafowl, a dry land bird, is flourishing in Kerala, a wet state. This could indicate changes in habitat, signalling the need to conserve remaining tracts of natural habitat and restore degraded lands to counter the effects of climate change. But species like the common house sparrow, which after almost disappearing has now grown in number and is holding stable outside big cities, show that nature is resilient and can spring back to life given a chance.

The Tele Graphindia

# The Poverty Of Media Discourse



SEVANTI NINAN

On Sunday morning, during the panel discussion chatter on the occasion of the chief minister's swearing-in, yet another anchor was making disapproving noises about a freebie-infrastructure strategy. Kejriwal's counter at the Hindustan Times Leadership Summit in December: "The cost of free bus rides for all women commuters in the city of Delhi is Rs 140 crore. The Gujarat chief minister bought a Rs 190 crore helicopter for himself. Paise yahan se aata hai." (That's where the money comes from.) Anybody fact checking that?

Television studios have little patience for news which is not driven by politics, and religion-centred politics at that. The Delhi election has been a classic example of how TV anchors drove the discourse to keep it on protests against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act. There was far less interest in discussing governance as an election issue. As NDTV India's Ravish Kumar pointed out on the day the Delhi election results came in, in the last month of the campaign every question from journalists became about terrorism and Shaheen Bagh.

It is tempting to reduce governance to politics because it sells better. Media coverage was more about what Arvind Kejriwal did not say, and where he did not go, than about what he and his government did on the ground. And when it focused on the latter there was an obsession with "freebies". There is substantially more to the Aam Aadmi Party's performance than populism or freebies but that is not what the commentariat and reporters seize on. And indignantly at that. A Bharatiya Janata Party parliamentarian frequently derided the contest as a bijli-pani election on panel discussions. (Better a bijli-pani election one would imagine, than a Hindu-Muslim one.) Somebody else called it a "freebie wali jhoothi rajniti" (misleading politics of freebies) in a TV studio. A formidable woman anchor was huffing, "Free bijli pani is not really development. Infrastructure — roads, flyovers — that is development."

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And then there is the question of what constitutes infrastructure. At the same forum, Kejriwal listed what his government's achievements in infrastructure amounted to. In 2015, he said, there were 1,797 colonies in Delhi without internal roads, or pipelines for water and

sewage. Of these, 1,281 colonies now have streets and water and sewage connections. But provision of sewage connections to 'kuccha' colonies is not your TV studio panelists' idea of infrastructure.

He also said that when the last AAP government was formed, 58 per cent of the population had access to piped water supply. At the end of five years, he claimed this had gone up to 93 per cent of the population. Again, a claim worth fact checking.

Do the media have any constructive role to play in governance? There is so much space-filling journalism when there is so much accountability reporting needed in our civic space. In February 2019, Kejriwal commissioned a fleet of 200 sewer cleaning machines as a measure to end manual scavenging. There has been remarkably little follow-up on the deployment of these in the city's many dailies. Even as there have been continuing incidents of sewage-cleaning deaths in the months following the flagging off of those machines. Most recently there was one this month, just a few days before the Delhi polls began.

You report those deaths without asking what happened to those machines. The deployment of these machines is a complex process involving engaging contractors and procuring bank loans: it is easy for a government to win brownie points for the announcement and let the rest slide. That is where city reporters and city editors come in, if they care enough about the issue. Caravan and Newslandry, to their credit, have done some tracking of whether the machines are being sufficiently deployed.

Schools and mohalla clinics are what the AAP government chose to sell itself to the electorate on. No mean achievement that, but working class issues such as those relating to sewer cleaning stay beneath the media radar all year around until deaths occur. The Delhi government keeps announcing revised minimum wage rates for unorganized labour. There are no labour correspondents any more to track how many labour inspectors the city government actually has to enforce the revised wage rates.

And given that this was budget season: in a season of intense discussion on economic issues it is remarkable how little there has been in the press on labour and social security.

Finally, there was Shaheen

Bagh. Delhi is the capital and national issues matter in an election here, not least because of the agenda-setting the principal Opposition party was doing. But the daily barrage on Shaheen Bagh in TV and print, made easy because of its proximity to the capital, did no justice to the movement that was unfolding across the country.

A mailing list of women journalists saw its members put together a list of 78 CAA/NRC/NPR protests that they were tracking or had heard of — at eleven locations across Delhi other than Shaheen Bagh, at 39 locations in districts across the length and breadth of Bihar, and several others in Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Gujarat, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan. Add to this all those protests happening in the South which do not figure in this list. Surely the sheer spread merited wider and deeper coverage on a regular basis?

Elections are a godsend for all media, generating reams of print analysis and TV talk chatter before and after the polls. As soon as the election results came in, TV anchors lost no time in moving on to speculation about Kejriwal going national. Channels were also predictably convulsed over the chief minister-elect's thanksgiving visit to a Hanuman temple. And on the morning of the swearing-in, one channel was replaying its previous day's programme on hate politics, while the owner-anchor of one of Narendra Modi's favourite channels was asking combatively, is Kejriwal trying to be a Chota Modi?

Which is a pity because a performance-conscious government that is accessible to journalists could be challenged on a daily basis if media outlets chose to do their homework.

Since the Union budget announced just a few days before the polls made an allocation towards air quality of Rs 4,400 crore, at least one or two of the long interviews with Kejriwal carried in the Delhi papers on February 6 could have had some questions for him on air quality in his city and how he would lay claim to these funds. But perhaps that is too much to ask for. All of them pretty much asked the same questions and led with similar headlines on Hindu-Muslim versus development.

The poverty of the media discourse is worrying.

The Tele Graphindia

## Gaming At The Surgery

HEMA NAIR

Advait, 8, had a hole in his heart. During the summer holidays, his parents and doctor brought him to see a cardiac surgeon and was slotted to get a patch sewn on to his VSD — our fancy name for the hole.

Apart from a few painful pokes by the nurses, it was not a bad experience for him. Then one day, things seemed a bit different and his mother appeared distracted. He wasn't given any food in the morning. When he started to get a little cranky from hunger, his dad let him have his cellphone.

I found him sitting cross-legged on the operating table, amid the beeping monitors and under a brilliant overhead light, poking on the phone screen without a care in the world. I said hello



and admired his gaming skills before asking him if I could put the face mask with oxygen on him. He nodded, his demeanour being "Do what you

got to do, just let me play my game." In truth, it's a volatile anaesthetic gas mixed as vapour with the oxygen. My smile may have reassured him, because he soon went back to his game.

He was sliding his fingers swiftly on the screen, notching up points, while I held the mask covering his nose and mouth, careful not to obscure his vision. He kept scoring well, judging by the stars flying around on the screen. Then as I scanned his vitals, I heard an alarm, with the word "Fail" flashing on the screen. That was Advait falling unconscious.

If all goes well, he will go home at the end of the week. We get annoyed at our children for playing with gadgets but on that day, this gizmo was on my side.

The Hindu