



Rocky summit

Donald Trump did enough, and more, to mess up his meeting with Vladimir Putin

A summit between the leaders of the world's strongest nuclear powers, which fought the Cold War for decades, is an opportunity to discuss areas of shared interest, find ways to dial down mutual tensions and work together to address global issues. But well before Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin sat down for their first formal summit meeting, in Helsinki, there were concerns that it would be overshadowed by allegations of Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The uproar in Washington over Mr. Trump's remarks on the Russian meddling scandal – with even accusations of treason – and his subsequent U-turn suggest that such concerns were valid. Mr. Trump could have certainly managed the summit better by addressing genuine concerns in the U.S. over allegations of Russia's election meddling. Days earlier, the U.S. Justice Department indicted 12 Russian intelligence officials for hacking and leaking emails of top Democrats. It therefore seemed surreal when the President accepted the Russian version over that of his own intelligence agencies and the Justice Department. Away from the controversy, the closed-door meeting between the leaders can be evaluated only on the progress made on a number of contentious issues before both.

The new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) is set to expire in 2021 and Russia has shown interest in extending it. For a consensus, high-level talks between the U.S. and Russia are needed. From the crisis in Ukraine to the civil war in Syria, Russia-U.S. cooperation is vital to finding lasting solutions. The Iran nuclear deal, for which Mr. Putin and Barack Obama worked together despite differences, is in a shambles. Most of these issues, including the threat posed by nuclear weapons and intercontinental ballistic missiles, were discussed at the summit. But it's not clear whether the talks will lead to any significant change in policies. Since the Ukraine crisis, the West has tried different methods, including sanctions and pressure tactics, to isolate Russia and change its behaviour. But those methods have proved largely unsuccessful as Russia is now a far more ambitious foreign policy power with an enhanced presence in Eastern Europe and West Asia – even if its sanctions-hit economy is struggling. Instead of continuing a policy that has failed and ratcheted up global tensions, the Western alliance should junk its Cold War mentality and engage with Russia; Russia, in turn, will have to shed its rogue attitude and be more open and stable in its dealings. The stakes are high and the bitterness of the past should not hinder U.S.-Russia relations. That should have been the message from Helsinki.

A fishy matter

Concerns over formaldehyde contamination of fish need to be addressed – scientifically. Reports of traces of the chemical formaldehyde in fish in several States highlight both the uncertainties of science, and the importance of clear risk communication. In June, the Kerala government found formaldehyde-laced fish being transported into the State. Soon after, *The Hindu* carried out a joint investigation with the Tamil Nadu Dr. J. Jayalalithaa Fisheries University to look for formaldehyde in Chennai. The study revealed around 5-20 ppm of the chemical in freshwater and marine fish in two of the city's markets. Next, Goa reported similar findings. But its Food and Drugs Administration later said the levels in Goan samples were on a par with “naturally occurring” formaldehyde in marine fish. This triggered suspicions among residents, who accused the government of playing down the health risk. The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India has banned formaldehyde in fresh fish, while the International Agency for Research on Cancer labelled the chemical a carcinogen in 2004. The evidence the IARC relied on mainly consists of studies on workers in industries such as printing, textiles and embalming. Such workers inhale formaldehyde fumes, and the studies show high rates of nasopharyngeal and other cancers among them. But there is little evidence that formaldehyde causes cancer when ingested orally. A 1990 study by U.S. researchers estimated that humans consume 11 mg of the chemical through dietary sources every day.

So, why is formaldehyde in fish a problem? For one thing, fresh fish should not have preservatives, and the presence of formaldehyde points to unscrupulous vendors trying to pass off stale catch as recent. Two, the lack of evidence linking ingested formaldehyde with cancer doesn't necessarily make the chemical safe. At high doses, it causes gastric irritation. Plus, the lack of data could merely mean that not enough people are consuming formaldehyde regularly enough for its carcinogenic effects to show – the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. There is a third complication. When certain marine fish are improperly frozen during transit, formaldehyde forms in them naturally. But this formaldehyde binds to the tissue, unlike added formaldehyde, which remains free. And so, measuring free formaldehyde versus bound formaldehyde can be one way of distinguishing a contaminant from a naturally occurring chemical. In this context, the Goan government must clarify its claim. Did the Goan FDA measure free formaldehyde or bound formaldehyde? If it measured the sum of both, on what basis did it conclude that the chemical came from natural sources? Some formaldehyde consumption may be unavoidable for fish-lovers, and it may not be a health risk either. But the line between safe and unsafe consumption should be drawn by experts, in a transparent manner. The Goan claim doesn't meet this criterion. This is why, instead of allaying the fears of consumers, it is stoking them.

Getting the language count right

Recent Census data appear to inadequately reflect India's linguistic composition, and are inconsistent with global ideas



G.N. DEVY

The story, “Death of Jagmohan, the Elephant”, by Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi, is about the death of an elephant. For a reader, the story may appear to be about a rather “big death”, but what the writer wanted to say was that there are also many “small deaths”. They include the deaths of Dalits and tribals who are trapped by hunger and humiliation. Anonymity surrounds them and our lack of compassion gives them finality.

The death of a tree or a forest sacrificed at the altar of development is mourned but not spoken about. Similarly, the death of a language is literally shrouded in silence. Because of its nature, a language is not visible and fails to move anyone except its very last speaker who nurtures an unrequited hope of a response. When a language disappears it goes forever, taking with it knowledge gathered over centuries. With it goes a unique world view. This too is a form of violence. Large parts of culture get exterminated through slight shifts in policy instruments than through armed conflicts. Just as nature's creations do not require a tsunami to destroy them, the destruction of culture can be caused by something as small as a bureaucrat's benign decision. Even a well-intentioned language census can do much damage.

Over the last many decades, successive governments have carried out a decadal census. The 1931 Census was a landmark as it held

up a mirror to the country about the composition of caste and community. War disrupted the exercise in 1941, while it was a rather busy year for the new Indian republic at the time of the 1951 Census. It was during the 1961 census that languages in the country were enumerated in full. India learnt that a total of 1,652 mother tongues were being spoken. Using ill-founded logic, this figure was pegged at only 109, in the 1971 Census. The logic was that a language deserving respectability should not have less than 10,000 speakers. This had no scientific basis nor was it a fair decision but it has stuck and the practice continues to be followed.

Hits and misses

The language enumeration takes place in the first year of every decade. The findings are made public about seven years later as the processing of language data is far more time consuming than handling economic or scientific data. Early this month, the Census of India made public the language data based on the 2011 Census, which took into account 120 crore speakers of a very large number of languages. The Language division of the Census office deserves praise but the data presented leaves behind a trail of questions.

During the census, citizens submitted 19,569 names of mother tongues – technically called “raw returns”. Based on previous linguistic and sociological information, the authorities decided that of these, 18,200 did not match “logically” with known information. A total of 1,369 names – technically called “labels” – were picked as “being names of languages”. The “raw returns” left out represent nearly 60 lakh citizens. And because of the classifica-



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tion regime, their linguistic citizenship has been dropped.

In addition to the 1,369 “mother tongue” names shortlisted, there were 1,474 other mother tongue names. These were placed under the generic label “Others”. As far as the Census is concerned, these linguistic “Others” are not seen to be of any concern. But the fact is that they have languages of their own. The classification system has not been able to identify what or which languages these are and so they have been silenced by having an innocuous label slapped on them.

The 1,369 have been grouped further under a total of 121 “group labels”, which have been presented as “Languages”. Of these, 22 are languages included in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution, called “Scheduled Languages”. The remainder, 99, are “Non-scheduled Languages”. An analysis shows that most of the groupings are forced. For instance, under the heading “Hindi”, there are nearly 50 other languages. Bhojpuri (spoken by more than 5 crore people, and with its own cinema, theatre, literature, vocabulary and style) comes un-

der “Hindi”. Under Hindi too is the nearly 3 crore population from Rajasthan with its own independent languages. The Powari/Pawri of tribals in Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh too has been added. Even the Kumauni of Uttarakhand has been yoked to Hindi. While the report shows 52,83,47,193 individuals speaking Hindi as their mother tongue, this is not so. There is a similar and inflated figure for Sanskrit by counting the returns against the question about a person's “second language”.

English use

As against this, the use of English is not seen through the perspective of a second language. Counting for this is restricted to the “mother tongue” category – in effect bringing down the figure substantially. Given the widespread use of English in education, law, administration, media and health care, a significant number of Indians use English as a utility language. To some extent it is the language of integration in our multilingual country. Therefore, isn't the Census required to capture this reality? It can, given the data on the language of second preference, but it does not for reasons that need no spelling out. So the Census informs us that a total of 2,59,678 Indians speak English as their “mother tongue” – numerically accurate and semantically disastrous.

The language Census may not attract as much attention as news about fuel prices. But in the community of nations, the Indian census is bound to be discussed. A body such as UNESCO will look at it with interest. From the 1940s, when its General Council decided to establish a Translation Bureau to years later, in 2008, when its Executive Board debated “Multilin-

gualism in the Context of Education for All”, UNESCO has progressively developed its vision and deepened its understanding of global linguistic diversity.

Focus points

From time to time, UNESCO tries to highlight the key role that language plays in widening access to education, protecting livelihoods and preserving culture and knowledge traditions. In 1999/2000, it proclaimed and observed February 21 as International Mother Language Day, while in 2001 the ‘Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity’ accepted the principle of “Safeguarding the linguistic heritage of humanity and giving support to expression, creation and dissemination in the greatest possible number of languages.” In pursuit of these, UNESCO has launched a linguistic diversity network and supported research. It has also brought out an Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger, which highlights the central place of language in the world's heritage. Is our language census consistent with these ideas and principles?

One expects that the Census in India should adequately reflect the linguistic composition of the country. It is not good practice when data helps neither educators nor policy makers or the speakers of languages themselves. The Census, a massive exercise that consumes so much time and energy, needs to see how it can help in a greater inclusion of the marginal communities, how our intangible heritage can be preserved, and how India's linguistic diversity can become an integral part of our national pride.

G.N. Devy is a literary critic and a cultural activist. E-mail: ganesh_devy@yahoo.com

The tough road to academic excellence

Though not unusual in the Indian context, 'greenfield' experiments in higher education face significant challenges



PHILIP G. ALTBACH & RAHUL CHOUDAHA

The winners of the “excellence contest” of the Institutions of Eminence (IoE) have been announced by the Ministry of Human Resource Development. While 10 institutions were supposed to have been chosen, apparently only six were affordable – a telling reality, especially since only three will receive any government funds. And none of the winners is actually a public university – a multidisciplinary institution at the heart of any academic system. The three public institutions chosen (the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, and two Indian Institutes of Technology, at Mumbai and Delhi) are all technologically-oriented institutions. The three in the private sector are the Birla Institute of Technology and Science (BITS) at Pilani, Rajasthan, the Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Karnataka, and the “greenfield” Jio Institute, at Karjat in Maharashtra – Mukesh Ambani's as yet unspecified “world-class” university.

While the public institutions

will receive ₹1,000 crore (\$150 million) over five years, the private ones get none at all but will be provided significant freedom from government regulations and institutional autonomy. While ₹1,000 crore is “serious money”, it is by no means transformative. The increased funding will help the institutions with innovations or perhaps the ability to raise academic salaries to better compete internationally but will not permit fundamental changes. If the IoE institutions focus mainly on making the changes that will help them improve in the global rankings, they will be missing a huge opportunity for key reforms – and they are unlikely to achieve the result of a high ranking anyway.

The greenfield context

“Greenfield” experiments are always risky but in fact almost all of India's top academic institutions are the result of such initiatives. The first few Indian Institutes of Technology were established in the 1950s, with the help of foreign partners, in order to quickly build top schools without having to deal with the entrenched bureaucracy of the traditional universities. Both BITS Pilani (1964) and Manipal (1953), private start-ups, were greenfield efforts at the time.

So, the Jio initiative is not unusual in the Indian context. But it faces significant challenges which



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includes clarity on the basic organising principle. How does it plan to differentiate itself from other universities in India and abroad, and at the same time match up to the best academic practices elsewhere? While the Reliance empire is the largest private business in India, the cost of creating a competitive world-class university is daunting especially when starting from scratch. For example, King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) Saudi Arabia, established in 2009, spent \$1.5 billion on its facilities and has an endowment of \$10 billion for a current enrolment of 900 master's and doctoral students.

World-class concept

While each world class university is unique there are three essential ingredients: talent, resources, and favourable governance. These will of course be necessary for all the IoEs. But let us focus on the specif-

ic needs of Jio Institute since, in our view, it faces the greatest challenges. We have mentioned resources already (a daunting challenge), especially since no public funds will be made available to Jio or the other private institutions. Let us focus on talent (faculty and students) and governance.

Faculty are at the heart of any university, affecting every aspect of realising and implementing the university mission. In the case of rankings ambition, research output is a key metric. So, attracting top research-oriented academic talent will not only require financial resources to pay faculty at global compensation rates but also providing an attractive quality of life for their families on and off campus. Would Karjat be able to provide an ecosystem of soft and hard infrastructure critical for attracting the best international talent?

Factor of student choice

Student demand for quality education in India remains strong, and the Reliance brands and an innovative curriculum would make it relatively easy to attract top students. However, the real challenge would be in attracting international students. International student decision-making process is complex, with many global choices available to the best students. For example, an “institute” does not

command as strong a recognition among international students and faculty as a “university.” Can the Reliance, Ambani or Jio brand impress the global market and influence student choice towards India and the institute?

A positive element of the IoE programme is the high degree of autonomy and freedom from government policy and regulatory constraints. However, Jio (and the others chosen for IoE) need to have creative ideas for the organisation and governance of the institution. For example, to what degree would the decision-making process be collaborative with faculty involvement as compared to a top-down mandate? Traditional corporate management styles do not align with the governance expectations of a creative university.

Building world-class universities is a resource-intensive and highly creative endeavour which will be a test of patience and persistence. Indian higher education is in dire need of exemplars of excellence. We await the specific ideas and programmes necessary to realise these ambitions from Jio, and the others.

Philip G. Altbach is Research Professor and Founding Director, Center for International Higher Education at Boston College, U.S. Rahul Choudaha is Executive Vice President of Global Engagement and Research at Studyportals, U.S.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

Lynching and a law

The Supreme Court's nudge to Parliament to make lynching a separate offence is perhaps oblivious of the ground realities (“Make lynching a separate offence, SC tells Parliament”, July 18). Tightening the laws has never achieved the desired purpose of acting as a deterrent to crime. Morever, the recent incident of a Union Minister being seen with persons accused of lynching shows how deterrent action can be affected by the acts of the political class. Whether it is sexual assault or lynching, change is possible only if linked to a consistent campaign of awareness by the government and NGOs.

V. SUBRAMANIAN, Chennai

It is very unlikely that a new law by itself would be a panacea. The existing laws, which are adequate, need to be effectively enforced

without being unduly influenced by external forces. Unfortunately, in several cases, those accused of lynching have been put on a pedestal by the political class. When an environment has been created where elements are emboldened by a sense of immunity, no amount of (new) laws will prevent such incidents.

S.K. CHOUDHURY, Bengaluru

It is a tragedy that the government requires to be advised by the Supreme Court. It is a shame that there has been a wave of lynchings across India targeting minority communities and marginalised sections. The fact is that neither the ugly spectre of cow vigilantism nor incidents of lynching under the guise of child-lifting has declined. While the abuse of social media platform for spreading false information needs to be

curbed, there must also be a crackdown on fringe groups trying to sabotage social harmony.

P.K. VARADARAJAN, Chennai

India-Iran ties

It is some consolation that at least for now, New Delhi is not buckling under U.S. pressure to “zero” out oil imports and end its engagement with Iran (“India, Iran pledge to maintain trade levels”, July 17). As Pakistan has been denying India overland rights to Afghanistan, it has invested heavily on building the Chabahar port in Iran. India had also promised to build a railtrack connecting Chabahar to other Iranian rail networks. Rather than let these projects hang in limbo, New Delhi should pursue its independent foreign policy. America's agenda is a self-serving one.

NALINI VUJARAGHAVAN, Thiruvananthapuram

Wait and watch?

U.S. President Donald Trump has stirred up the geopolitical pot once again (Trump faces fire for Putin summit”, July 18). Perhaps the U.S.'s volte-face comes at a time when Russia is seen going into China's fold. This entente cordiale could keep the prospects of a multipolar world alive which might work in the favour of developing countries. Also, the threat from an ominous “Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions” Act might fade away. Could India soon have more than a few takeaways from this summit?

UTKARSH AGRAWAL, Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh

Water management

Reports on flood alerts being issued in a number of States as a result of a vigorous monsoon have only shown how ill-prepared we are (“Floods hit life in Kerala, toll rises to 15 and “Rain lashes

Gujarat, over 3,000 people evacuated”, both July 18). The loss of rain water could have been averted had State Governments ensured desilted tanks, deepened reservoirs and rainwater harvesting. We should take full advantage when the rain gods are generous. The inter-linking of rivers must also be pursued as to avoid wastage of precious water.

JANAKI MAHADEVAN, Chennai

Phone gift

Even if the Karnataka Water Resources Minister says he paid for the iPhones – as a gift to each MP from Karnataka ahead of a meeting with the State's Chief Minister – the point is is it a necessity? (“iPhones as gifts sparks row in Karnataka”, July 18). All the MPs concerned are sure to have a fancy smartphone. A public servant or people's representative should always

keep in mind that money must be spent productively. There is also the issue of ethics at a time when the State is facing financial crisis.

JOSEPHIN SUSAN J.J., Pallam, Nagercoil, Tamil Nadu

Spar over statue

The Maharashtra Assembly seems to have reached a new low with the ruling party as well as the Opposition deeply engrossed in arguing about what the correct height for the proposed Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Memorial off the Mumbai coast should be. Had they showed half the zeal and willingness to pour in taxpayer's money into civic infrastructure, Mumbai would not be grinding to halt every monsoon. It is high time people pressure the political class to move away from optics and start confronting the real issues.

TAHIR ABDULLA, Kozhikode, Kerala

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