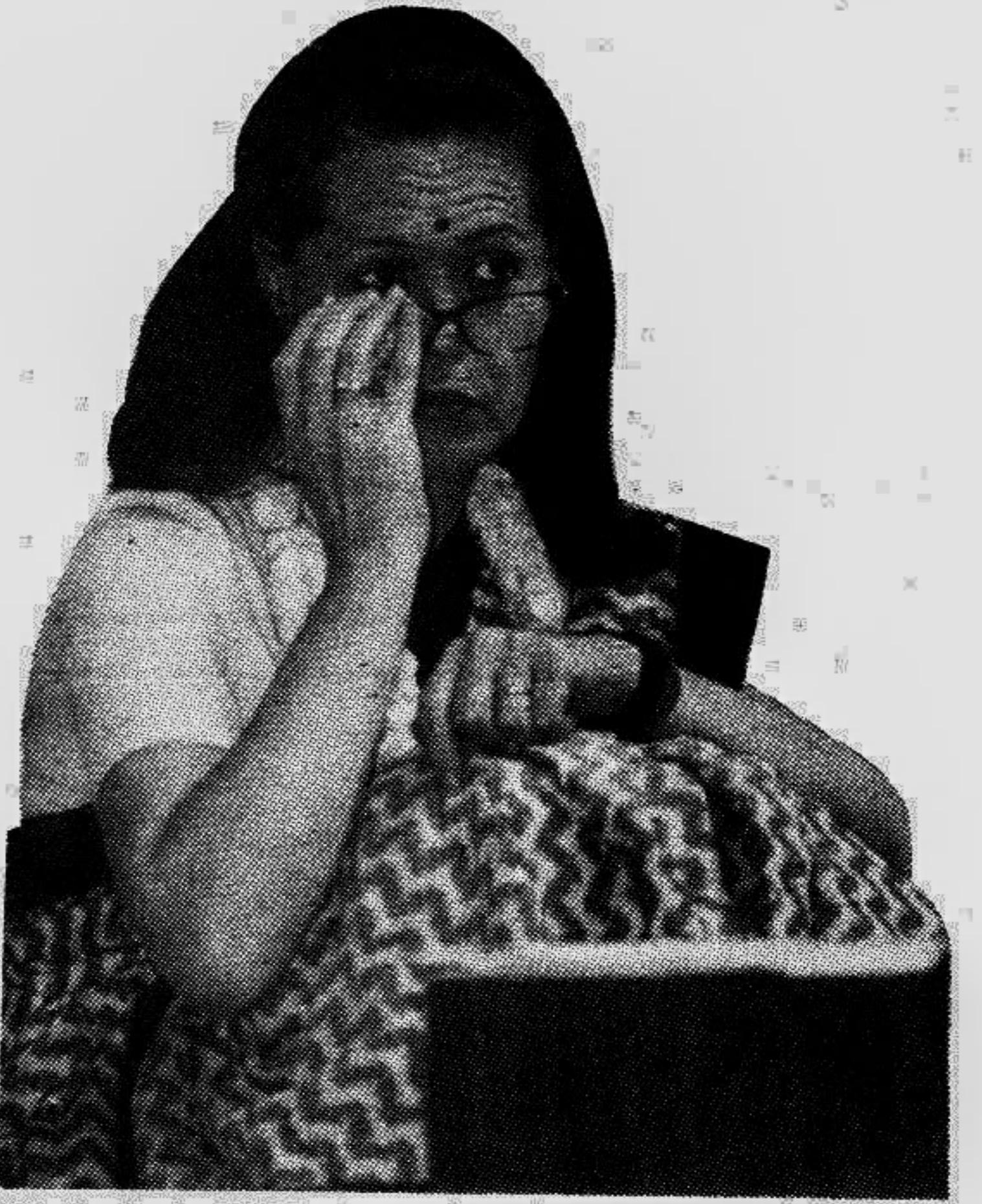


Indian Election: Rising Curve for BJP?

The BJP seems to have introduced new dynamics in Indian politics, but will that be of any help in the upcoming elections? **Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz** analyses



Thinking leader: Will Sonia be at the top?

After the BJP-led coalition government in India fell in March last it was at once accorded a kind of martyrdom and there was a spate of sympathy for its embattled leader, Mr Atal Behari Vajpeyi. The public perception was that he had been wronged by being pulled down so unceremoniously. Obviously the BJP wanted an early poll so that it could ride the sympathy wave so spontaneously created.

On the other hand, the opposition Congress which could sense the prevailing mood after

its failure to provide an alternative government favoured delay so that the unsavoury chapter of its politics was forgotten by the electorate. The Election Commission, for its own reasons however, scheduled it rather late — in the months of September-October — thus affording BJP an opportunity to head the longest ever caretaker government. For the BJP it was a blessing in disguise which the party never anticipated earlier.

But it is not only this blessing but also the party's political skill which has contributed

In the next general election

to the BJP's success in the State Assembly elections last year has re-emerged with confidence almost from its ashes. It has been able to burnish its image as the sole custodian of Indian pride — thanks to the outbreak of Kargil conflict which provided it a godsend chance to wash off its dark spots. Not only has its *Hindutva* been reinvented, but it has also been given a new gloss with jingoism aroused in the wake of Indians' war against Pakistani intruders in Kargil. Making use of information technology the BJP could project the Kargil conflict — truly a television war — to its full advantage. As a result, the BJP now seems poised to notch up its tally even higher this time.

The BJP has introduced new dynamics in India's politics with its full control over them. In less than two decades it has come to be the most powerful political force in the country. It has swept through the political space vacated by a century old Indian National Congress and smashed the attempts of any third force taking shape in the country.

Born in the early 1980s out of the remnants of disintegrated Janata Party of Late Mr Morarji Desai, the BJP came a cropper in 1984 election by winning just two seats in Lok Sabha, the lower house of Indian parliament. By adopting an aggressive *Hindutva* stance and throwing in its lot with the Ram Temple movement of VHP, Lal Krishna Advani, the party's redoubtable hawk put the outfit on the first track of India's politics.

Moreover, the BJP's strategy

in alliance making and favourable seat sharing is by

far the best among the major political formations. Although the BJP's vote base has all through been smaller than that of Congress, it is, with its adept handling of the allies, able to get disproportionately larger number of seats.

BJP has made full use of its extended incumbency. Taking advantage of myriad ambiguities of rules and conventions with regard to caretaker government of such a long duration, the party has taken a plethora of steps to reap electoral benefits.

Seizing on post-Kargil patriotic passions, it has introduced policies that suit only the permanent incumbent. Unlike any interim government it has introduced Agni II, talked of neutron bombs and drawn up nuclear doctrine for India ostensibly to win over Indian public hungering for national honour. Obviously, the BJP will be the sole beneficiary of all these during the 13th Lok Sabha poll.

In the meantime, the Congress, BJP's main contender, is in bad shape.

In spite of the promises it showed in last year's State Assembly elections, it soon stumbled with the secular forces disintegrating.

It is an irony that many of the hardcore secularists have today switched over to the BJP camp.

The Congress itself has split in several places. Elsewhere it is

victim of severe infighting.

The central leadership is sub-

jected to ineptitude. The minority votes, traditionally the Congress' preserve, is divided.

The *India Today* and *Out-*

look have already conducted opinion polls showing the BJP comfortably ahead of the Congress. In the electoral race lasting two weeks more it will be difficult for any other party to overtake the BJP.

The whole world is eagerly

watching how the contenders

will be reaching the finish line

in the world's largest democ-

racy.

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The officials said the firing was

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—India Abroad News Service

Fire Exchange Stops

Indo-Bangla border quiets after skirmish, writes
P. Jayaram from New Delhi

INDIAN officials say the situation is quiet on the India-Bangladesh border in Tripura after the exchange of fire between the security forces of the two countries.

"We haven't received any report (of firing) since Tuesday afternoon," a Border Security Force (BSF) spokesman here said as the commandant of the paramilitary force and his Bangladesh Rifles counterpart prepared to hold a flag meeting to defuse the tension.

Officials pointed out that incidents of firing were not unusual along some sectors of the 4,000-km-long border. The latest exchange took place near Bejonia in south Tripura, bordering Nowkhali district of Bangladesh. Additional BSF forces had been sent to the area

and prohibitory orders banning gathering of people promulgated.

Though incidents of this nature are not unusual, the intensity of firing this time, & continuing for three days had surprised officials. India considered the situation serious enough for the External Affairs Ministry to call Bangladesh Acting High Commissioner Alimur Haque for a meeting where the need for a halt to the firing was stressed and a flag meeting between the two sides suggested.

Officials said the firing was a sequel to a squabble over a disputed island on the Mauhar river, which separates the two countries. Farmers from both countries cultivate on the island, leading to disputes, and usually officers from the two

sides hold flag meetings to defuse the situation.

They noted that many sectors of the India-Bangladesh border were porous and smuggling was an occupation for settlers on either side. From India, food-grains, sugar, kerosene, diesel, cycle parts and medicines are smuggled into India.

The officials said the Belonia border was known for smuggling of small arms and ammunition into India. In view of the coming general elections and reports of intensified activity by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) in Assam and other border states, there was stepped up patrolling of the area, they added.

—India Abroad News Service

National Heroes and a Culture of War

Ritu Menon writes against the culture of militarism

THE aftermath of war in our times has generally been an elusive peace. "Low-intensity conflict" is almost insidious now in much of the subcontinent and we have learnt to live with it, much as we live with the daily crime in our cities. This, too, is low-intensity, and persistent.

The last few weeks I have been seeing and reading the coverage of Kargil in our national press and television, with a growing feeling of alarm and alienation. The high-pitched hosannas to our "brave boys" who gave up their today so that we may enjoy our tomorrow, the thousands of hopefuls waiting to enlist the glorification of guns, arms, tanks and even, the deadly accuracy of the ancient Bofors: the half-page ads extolling "us", decrying "them", the emotive coverage of heroes' funerals, attended by lakhs of ordinary citizens: page after page of battle photographs and lists of those who have contributed money or raised funds for the war effort; the Kargil Consensus shared by artists, dancers, writers, sportsmen, film stars. Even school children.

What are we glorifying? Have we forgotten what one chronicler has called "the private life of war"? That it doesn't take long for brutality to get internalised and hideous violence to take place. (If this were not the case, there would be no such thing as war crimes.) That those millions of survivors who have lived through war are seldom able to understand or come to terms with the reasons for waging it. That war is one of those events that defies assimilation, by its very nature. Yes, our soldiers have "recaptured" strategic heights, turned back the intruders and fought with valour. But they have also killed and that is the logic of war: kill or be killed.

And yet here we are actively promoting a culture of militarism. For all those who believe that this is a necessary, temporary phenomenon, there is reason to pause. Militarism has a way of seeping into the very dailiness of our lives. No longer are we surprised by a military presence in our towns and cities — indeed, many of us go so far as to say "What we really need is the army" to ensure discipline, security, law and order. No longer are we dismayed by increasing levels of violence and the easy availability of firearms for use in peace-time against each other. Machine-guns, AK 47, revolver, pistol — all part of our urban landscape, all accessible. To each according to his means. And in our drawing rooms we watch reports from frozen heights, full of drama and spectacle. Truly, a theatre of war.

The cult of the warrior finds its nurture in a culture of war. In a climate of insecurity, in a paradox of "patriotism" which acknowledges only one kind of allegiance — unconditional assent, unreserved support. Anything else is, at best "demoralising", at worst, treasonous and anti-national. To talk of peace is to risk ridicule.

The other glimmer of hope is seen in the east, in Kanglung's Sherubtsi College, where a first batch of 13 students are taking a degree-level course in computer programmes.

There were more advanced

and flexible software available

but they were also much more expensive," said the Managing Director of the BNB, Kichu Tshering. "To ensure cost-effectiveness, the skill in turning public office to private advantage, the drugs-and-guns legacy of the Afghan war, the disaster of Kargil.

While these are powerful impressions, they are a great deal of emotional content in them, they are of no use unless they are of no use unless

Courtesy : The Dawn of Pakistan

stantial increase in its current defence expenditure of Rs. 41,000 crores a year.

Two of the five countries in the region have had extended periods of military rule, one had had internece war for over 15 years and all have suffered grievously as a result. This we know, and in a more sombre moment, recognise as a reality. We also know that the only enduring settlement we can hope for in the subcontinent is a politically negotiated one rather than a "decisive military victory".

But militarism does not allow for negotiated settlements because battle-lines have to be very clearly drawn. There is a real danger that these lines then get drawn in peacetime too, between all the "others" in our own countries. And these "others" can as easily be you or me. If we don't donate our blood for Kargil or raise funds for it, we have failed in our "patriotic duty" to those who "laid down their lives" for us.

Contrary to current euphoria but true to our experience in the subcontinent, the greater the level of militarisation, the more vulnerable is our citizenry. Women within and outside the women's movement, and peace groups everywhere, have for decades called for an end to all kinds of violence.



especially an end to the use of violence to resolve conflict. Women have fought against the presence of military bases in their countries and against rest and recuperation facilities that make such an easy transition to sex tourism. They have learnt through painful and bitter experience that for women, the weapons of war are not very different from those of peace: violence and the abuse of superior power. And those who work among refugees across the battle lines, whether in Sri Lanka or Kosovo or Bosnia or Montenegro or anywhere else have firsthand knowledge of how deep the wounds of war can be.

It is sad that at the close of a century that has seen so many disastrous wars, we still seek military solutions to political problems, whether in Kosovo or Kargil. Let us try at least, not to make of them such a cause celebre.

The author is co-founder of Kali for Women, a feminist publishing house based in New Delhi and author of many books and articles.

grates in itself other revenue and customs systems.

The CSC strategy is to float tenders so as to attract about 15 non-national firms and as many local firms and then awarded the contract to a competent joint venture firm formed between companies in the two groups.

Giving preference to joint ventures is one way of fostering effective transfer of technology to the local partners," said Mani Pradhan. "Eventually, we will be able to design advanced programmes."

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and flexible software available

but they were also much more expensive," said the Managing Director of the BNB, Kichu Tshering. "To ensure cost-effectiveness, the skill in turning

public office to private advantage, the drugs-and-guns legacy of the Afghan war, the disaster of Kargil.

Having paid a whopping amount for one of the lowest priced software the BNB has no choice but to make do with it through the next seven-eight years.

The Bhutan National Bank (BNB) paid a branch of a large

multi-national bank in India, about \$100,000 (about Nu 4.2 million) to use their Mi-

crobanker system and has spent another \$100,000 on up-

grading, repairing and main-

taining the system.

Although Microbanker is

said to be used by banks in 60

different countries BNB offi-

cials are of the opinion that the</