

## South Asia

Remembering  
Neelan

A wide cross-section of intellectuals met in Colombo to commemorate the life and work of Dr. Neelan Tiruchelvam. V.S. Sambandan reports



SIX months after Sri Lanka lost one of its foremost political thinkers in contemporary times, intellectuals from across the globe gathered in Colombo in the first week of February to commemorate, and in the process celebrate the life and contributions of Dr. Neelan Tiruchelvam.

Assassinated by a suicide-bomber on July 29 in the Sri Lankan capital, Neelan Tiruchelvam was a person who believed not in the glorification of death but in the celebration of life. And in a befitting honour, the organisers, the International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES), the Law and Society Trust (LST) and Tiruchelvam Associates, celebrated the life of Tiruchelvam with a three-day programme that highlighted his intellectual and cultural essence.

Inaugurated by former Indian Prime Minister I.K. Gujral, the programme comprised a two-day workshop that discussed diverse topics that had a direct bearing on the course of the separatist conflict which has plagued the island since the early 1980s. Human Rights, Diversity and Plurality, Constitutionalism, and Civil Society - issues on which Neelan contributed immensely, not only in the tear-drop island but also across the globe - were deliberated upon. His pursuit of excellence was also reflected in performances by singer M. Bala-

the twin internal conflicts the nation has faced since the 1970s - the continuing northern separatist conflict and the aborted southern insurgencies by the Left-radical Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) in the 1970s and the 1980s.

The JVP experience and the crackdown by the state continue to create nightmares for the southerners. Horror tales are narrated of midnight knocks and tyre-pyres. In the northern conflict, tales of disappearances haunt the minds of civilians.

In this backdrop of continued mistrust, Eide's suggestion came as a fitting tribute to Neelan, who saw human rights violations in any form as being objectionable. The suggestion for a Truth Commission in Sri Lanka would have to be seen in the backdrop of several internal political compulsions in a sharply polarised polity.

Yet another concept mooted at the workshop, by Pakistani Human Rights activist Asma Jehangir, was for a cross-border approach to human rights violations. Human rights, she said, should not be the exclusive prerogative of only the nations involved, but should engage the attention of civil societies across the region.

The suggestion, viewed in the backdrop of continued Indian-Pakistan tensions, requires deft handling. The issue of human rights violations and the

With the Government currently involved in working out a southern consensus to address the conflict, a fitting tribute by the nation to Tiruchelvam, the pacifist and the constitutional expert, would be for it to arrive at a practical way to see the Constitution passed in Parliament. Recent public postures in the south favouring joint movement on this count provides for optimism, albeit guarded.

muralikrishna and dancer Alamelvalli.

In what was perhaps the most significant contribution that emerged from the workshop, Aisbjorn Eide, chairman of the United Nations Sub-committee on Minorities and a Sri Lanka watcher since the outbreak of the conflict, mooted the formation in the country of a body similar to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of South Africa. (This suggestion apart, a significant departure, not missed by the discerning audience, was Eide's open criticism of the Tigers for acts of terror against the civilian population.)

Tracing the fierce and until now intractable nature of the conflict to mutual mistrust, Eide said that the creation of such a body would go a long way in rebuilding trust within the nation. Moreover, with most of the killings in the earlier days targeted at Tamil civilians, the need for such a body was seen as being even more crucial.

Commenting on the South African experience, Justice Albie Sachs of the South African Constitutional Court observed that the TRC there had helped in bringing to the surface buried emotions and providing a sense of relief to the relatives of victims. While the TRC was not empowered to pass sentences, the very act of public acknowledgment of crimes committed against civilians was seen as the beginning of a process of self-healing.

The move for a similar apparatus for the island-nation is also to be seen in the context of

concerns raised at international forums are also to be seen in the backdrop of the recent posturing by the United Nations on questions of sovereignty and human rights. Clearly, with external military interventions rationalised along human rights lines, the suggestion for a cross-border approach to human rights violations would have to be addressed in the more immediate neighbourhood and in regional contexts.

With constitutional reform forming the core of the Sri Lankan peace initiatives, the workshop saw considerable exchange of opinion on issues ranging from the nature of the state to the steps involved in rewriting the laws of the land. With the Government currently involved in working out a southern consensus to address the conflict, a fitting tribute by the nation to Tiruchelvam, the pacifist and the constitutional expert, would be for it to arrive at a practical way to see the Constitution passed in Parliament. Recent public postures in the south favouring joint movement on this count provides for optimism, albeit guarded.

While he continues to be remembered by intellectuals from the nation and in many parts of the globe, the ultimate celebration of the life of Neelan Tiruchelvam - who lived and died for the cause of a united Sri Lanka - would be the coming together of the divided nation.

By arrangement with the Frontline magazine of India.

THE US President Bill Clinton will certainly feel frustrated. One of the main reasons for his ensuing safari to South Asia, as he had earlier explained, was to use his influence and his country's clout to restrain both India and Pakistan from their frenzy of rushing to their Armageddon as well as to bring them to a stage of negotiated settlement centring the issue of their half-a-century old dispute over Kashmir.

Clinton had described the current scenario in South Asia as almost akin to the dangerous flash point because of unabated chauvinism and jingoism being equally displayed by these two countries. It portends greater danger as both the countries are armed with nuclear capability and threatening to go to the extreme of retaliating with nuclear weapons against each other. After initial hesitation President Clinton has almost decided to make a brief stopover in Lahore despite Indian lobby's intense pressure and hectic publicity that this will tantamount to accord recognition to the military regime of General Pervez Musharraf and in the words of Delhi a "terrorist state".

Only weeks before Clinton is to undertake his much-publicised trip to India the BJP-led government in Delhi announced its annual budget which clearly goes against the spirit of the US administration policy vis-à-vis South Asia, at least at its face value. The new Indian budget for the fiscal 2000-2001 stipulates an increase of twenty-five to twenty-eight per cent increase in defence spending over that of the last year. This is highest increase for defence in a year and it came as no surprise to India watchers.

Announcing the new fiscal measures in the lower house of parliament - the Lok Sabha - on February 29 Finance Minister Jashwant Singh strongly defended his government's stand on beefing up his country's defence capability. He said the government is determined to do everything possible to strengthen the country's defence potential and to safeguard the security of every inch of the soil. The Kargil encounter in May last year, Singh said, has come as an eye-opener for India. It provided the wake-up call that Pakistan could no longer be dismissed as no major irri-

tant to its security.

Quoting from the Subramanyalam Commission Report which probed into the circumstances leading to India's being caught unaware in Kargil by Pakistan's offensive, the Finance Minister said intelligence network would need to be strengthened and a balance of power will have to be maintained so that Pakistan is effectively deterred from future "adventurism". The staggering amount of increase in defence

spending. He said this is for the first time that a government in India has made allocation to defence sector at a certain ratio of the country's GDP. Economist and a front ranking leader of Trinamool Congress, an alliance partner in the Centre, Dr Nitish Sen Gupta admitted that fiscal deficit would pose to be a big problem but he asserted that in view of Pakistan's war-mongering and incitement of terrorists' incursions there was no choice before India. He

on the day the budget was announced claiming that it was done at the behest and dictat of the imperialists and their organs like the World Bank. The new budget, he said, is anti-people and has totally ignored the interests of the poorer sections, who will be hard hit by further price spiral.

"When the teeming millions in India are languishing in abject poverty and are deprived of basic necessities of life, it is no doubt a crime to divert the

where its strength has come down to only two from six in the past legislature. In West Bengal, however, the CPI(M) registered two surprised victories winning over from Trinamool and the Congress. For Momota Bondapadhy, the central Railway Minister and the Trinamool Chief, who set her eyes on the Chief Ministership of West Bengal hoping to unseat the CPI(M) led left front government in the state elections scheduled for March next year, has reasons to

the BJP.

How Pakistan is going to take India's unprecedented defence increase? Islamabad is also equally likely to gear up its war machine and go for increased allocation for defence. Consequently, arms race in South Asia is almost certain to assume further intense form to the detriment of peace and stability in the region. Pakistan has been persistently calling for negotiation, for a summit level meeting between the leaders of the two countries. But India has brushed aside all such propositions with contempt. It would not even allow the SAARC to hold its regular summit presumably for avoiding a meeting with General Pervez Musharraf.

CPI(M) leader and Lok Sabha Member Biplob Das Gupta opposing the defence increase in the budget suggested that the government should have instead prioritise diplomacy for ending the possibility of war with Pakistan. Citing the examples of European Union and the ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) he called for activating SAARC and through it to economically integrate all the South Asian nations which alone can act as an antidote to confrontation with Pakistan. In fact, SAARC was designed to meet this objective and in fact made progress towards that end through such programmes like SAPTA, SAARC Fund for Development and collective approach aimed at poverty alleviation. But the Kargil encounter between Pakistan and India and the subsequent army takeover in Islamabad coupled with deterioration of relation between the two countries following the skyjack of an Air Indian plane have pushed the SAARC into limbo.

In such a boiling situation, a situation of cold war and verbal dual between the two traditional enemies how far President Clinton's much-vaunted visit will be able to bring about a thaw and melting of the ice has evidently become doubtful. Highest ever increase in India's budget spending on defence is indeed indicative of unabated arms race with its debilitating impact on the overall South Asian scenario with no sign of silver linings in the dark clouds that is hovering over the horizon of the region.



Catch-22?

spending is likely to push the government's fiscal deficit to the tune of one lac eleven thousand crore (1,11,000) rupees, the highest so far in the history of independent India.

It will obviously give rise to inflationary tendencies. The president of the Associated Chambers Anjan Roy wondered how the government will be able to tackle this huge deficit. Retired General Ashok Mehta is however all praise for what he described as the government's realistic approach to defence

said attempts would be made through a measure of austerity and resource mobilisation to meet the crunch.

On the question of a highly sensitive issue like defence the major parties usually do not come up with strong criticism for fear of being branded as soft towards Pakistan. The initial reactions of both the Congress(I) and the CPI(M) appeared muffled. Most vociferous were the Naxalites. Two Naxal splinter groups together held an instant rally in Calcutta

money towards defence spending," said veteran Naxal leader Kanu Sanyal. He said very soon the Naxalites will build up a strong movement all over India to protest against the reactionary budget.

The BJP has emerged stronger in the recently held state elections particularly in Orissa and Bihar. The Congress has been totally routed and is currently licking the wounds of its continuous poor performance. The CPI(M) could not also fare well in Bihar

be concerned. The sailing in the fray is not going to be as easy as she and her supporters contemplate.

Taking the state elections as a clear indication of people's renewed confidence in the BJP, the government of Prime Minister Vajpayee will be tempted to take a more war-like posture against Pakistan and fan up Hindu nationalism. The erosion in the popularity of the secular forces and their failure to unite or enter into electoral alliances have further lifted the spirit of

## Saffron Comeback?

With RSS' grip tightening on the BJP government, India is slowly but inexorably going to be saffronised, says M Abdul Hafiz

EVEN a year before when Mr Atal Behari Vajpayee was still through his first inroads it could be a wild dream. The turning point came, however, during Kargil and his stature went up dramatically making possible for him to achieve anything from winning war to sweeping a national election. Mr Vajpayee craftily turned his defeat in the parliament in April last year into a resounding victory in electoral battle, six months later. But no one thought him to be capable of carrying his triumphal march anywhere beyond that.

Belying those notions his BJP could make impressive showing in recently held Assembly election in four important states. Although it had no sweeping victory in those elections the BJP could make through them its Pak-Indian spread a possibility - henceforth the preserve, only of Congress party. The corresponding Congress rout in these election made BJP's modest electoral gains in the state assemblies glaring.

This is only what one sees on the surface. There are much more than that meet the eye. Surprisingly and in a subtle way the BJP's 'hidden agenda' is

also at work totally transforming the polity. Since the BJP-led government came to power in early 1998 all of its cautious and calculated steps from rewriting history, changing curricula, introducing Saraswati vandana in educational institutions to reorganising institute of historical research and arousing anti-conversion hysteria either by the government or BJP's front organisations were all directed towards that transformation.

The compulsions of running coalition government did force the BJP to play down some of the strident issues like construction of Ram Temple, uniform civil code and repealing of the constitution's Article 370 but they could not dissuade the vast army of Sangh Parivar from spitting fire and brimstone on those issues. It was in spite of occasional protests from the secular constituents of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) like DMK, Trinamool Congress and Telegu Desam Party who categorically warned the Prime Minister against raising of issues central to Hinduva identity.

But as an old member of the RSS Mr Vajpayee has his own commitment to its ideology

notwithstanding his constraints also as a coalition Prime Minister. It is evident from his endorsement of the action in which Gujral government has served the nation on the public servant's joining the RSS. He lightly dispensed with the matter by calling the RSS simply a cultural organisation immersed in great patriotism. He however likes to draw a Lakshman Rekha which he will not trespass as the head of NEA.

LK Advani, the Home Minister goes further in defending the role of RSS in influencing government decisions. He argues that the Sangh Parivar is sentinel for safeguarding either and values in public life. It is therefore legitimate for the Sangh to extend its moral authority on the functioning of the government in which also there are swayasevaks. Gujral Chief Minister Keshubhai Patel remorselessly said that he only removed an aberration by lifting the ban. To great majority of people however RSS' self-perception of being a 'cultural body' remains.

What are then the bounds of RSS cultural parameter. The government functionaries awkwardly find it extended even into the micromanage-

ment of the administration. In last two years of BJP rule there are numerous cases of RSS compelling the administration to accept its suggestion. The most glaring was the case of Jagan Singh in which Mr Vajpayee was coerced into appointing him the Finance Minister in 1998. The experiences were prickly even when the RSS prevailed upon the government for small little things of routine administration and tried to impose their preferences on the government. For example, the RSS-affiliated Kisan Sangh pressed Gujral government to pursue its anti-cow slaughter policies more rigidly and enact a new law against conversion, making it punishable by three year's Jail term.

In 1999 the RSS hardliners wanted the government to induct primary school teachers with a parivar background, K S Sudarsan, known to be the RSS political point man conceded that he pressed for the removal of anti-Sawadeshi Montek Singh Ahluwalia and NK Singh from the Finance Ministry in March 1998 and his demands were met. Thus with RSS' grip tightening on the government the country is slowly but inexorably going to be saffronised.

The BJP ministers are naturally reluctant to either censor the RSS' intrusive stance or stop the ominous process. The experience of both Kalyan Singh in Uttar Pradesh and Bhairon Singh Sekhawant in Rajasthan shows that displeasing the RSS has a direct fallout on electoral mobilisation for BJP candidates during the election. Although the BJP as a party has grown phenomenally, the BJP still critically depends on the electioneering skill of 4000 RSS full timers. During 1999 Lokshava election even a formidable BJP candidate like Madan Lal Khurana had to beseech the blessings of RSS before whom he appeared in sacks and ashes in Delhi. It is just not possible to flourish in the BJP with an antagonistic relationship with the Sangh.

Although the RSS has, of late, been developing its fangs and trying to hold the reins of the BJP government's overall policy in its hand the organisation under its veteran head Ramesh Chandra Singh alias Rajju Bhaiya is still amenable to the advice from BJP's senior leaders. During the last tenure of Vajpayee's prime ministership the government and the RSS seemed to be on a collision

course but the present tenure is marked by a spectacular bonhomie between the two. It is said that the NBA government and the RSS are working in tandem on a number of issues which stem from their common ideology. The fundamentals of their relationship were resolved last October between the Prime Minister and Rajendra Singh and many differences of approach were ironed out in a meeting between RSS organising Secretary Sudarsan and L K Advani.

But the other elements of Sangh Parivar like the VHP, Swadeshi Jagaran and boisterous Banjrang Dal lack the subtle touch of some of the RSS stalwarts and are always on look out for confrontation. The 'Water as well as Fire' episodes and anti-Pope agitation during Pop's visit in November last are examples of asserting the unwritten writs of those extremists leaving the government looking foolish and even ridiculous. In the prevailing melee the nation will have to be wilyly baptised to the RSS' brand of an extreme form of Hindu nationalism.

The author is a former Brigadier of Bangladesh Army.

## Laloo Won and Lost

V. Krishna Ananth writes on rise and fall of Laloo Prasad Yadav in India

AFTER having controlled the political setup in Bihar for a decade, Mr Laloo Prasad Yadav seems to be having a tough time. Barring any success in post-poll manipulations and mustering support from among a section of the NDA, Mr. Laloo Yadav may find it difficult to retain his hold over the State.

On the contrary, the NDA, even if its performance has been far below expectations, can "manage" a majority in the manner in which the BJP did in Uttar Pradesh. Patna, in the next couple of days, could turn into a trading centre with both the RJD and the NDA leaders displaying their "ability" to surpass all hitherto-established standards of brazen political behaviour. As it appears, the NDA seems to have an edge insofar as the game of managing the numbers is concerned.

Bihar could also witness a "churning" in the Congress(I) Legislature Party on the lines witnessed in Uttar Pradesh. And the Gangetic plains look like returning to the era where the upper castes held sway over all walks of life, particularly the political and administra-

tive setup. This, in short, is the message of the poll results that are now out.

It is indeed true that the Laloo era witnessed much social churning, pushing the traditional rulers - the land-owning Bhumihars and the Rajputs - to the margins. Yet, a lot was left to be desired. For instance, the concept of land to the tiller was a far cry throughout these ten years. Social justice was reduced by Mr. Laloo Yadav to a mere slogan.

This was the period when the notorious Ranbir Sena, the private army of the land-owning Bhumihars and the Rajputs, was born in Bhojpur (in 1993). At least 300 Dalits - all of them landless agricultural labour - were killed by Sena mercenaries. That the state machinery under Mr. Yadav failed to even apprehend the killers is a tell-tale comment on the reality that prevails in Bihar.

The only "crime" committed by the poor men, women and children of Bihar, Batani Thola, Lakshmanpur Bathe and other such villages was that they rallied behind the CPI (ML-Liberation), a party that was determined to root out the vestiges

of the feudal order.

It is true that Mr. Laloo Yadav ensured pickets of the Bihar Military Police in all these villages after the Ranbir Sena "accomplished" its task of terrorising the Dalits. But there was nothing he would do to ensure that the Bhumihars and the Rajputs - who still consider it infra dig to till the soil and yet insist on owning the land - were alienated from large tracts of land. The fact that there was no way they could lawfully own such large tracts did not lead Mr. Laloo Yadav and his social justice brigade to effect meaningful land reforms. For them, social justice began and stopped with "empowering" the intermediate castes (the Yadavs, Kurmis and Koeris). The Bhumihar-Rajput contractor lobby was replaced with Yadavs and other intermediate castes.

A quick look at the socio-economic changes that Bihar witnessed before the Laloo era began would be pertinent. In the Seventies, the socialists and communists campaigned in their own way against the feudal socio-economic order, the outcome of which was the emergence of Karpoori Thakur as

Chief Minister in 1977 (when Laloo Yadav, in his late twenties, was just another of those young "boys" elected to the Lok Sabha thanks to JP's insistence that 30 per cent among the Opposition candidates have to be from among the youth).

But the social churning initiated by the socialists in Bihar, based on the foundations laid by the powerful peasant movements that were carried out in North and Central Bihar under the leadership of Swami Sahajanand Saraswati (Mahatma Gandhi's contemporary), forced the landlords to leave their lands behind with the tenants (belonging to the intermediate castes) and "settle down" in Patna. Here they managed to obtain civil contracts and also manipulate the state apparatus through their kith and kin who had by then entrenched themselves in the bureaucracy. Young boys, sons of rich landlords, were sent across to Delhi and other places for "better education" and thus managed to corner a chunk of postings in the IAS and IPS and were able to return to Bihar and control the civil administration. It was this Congress(I)-man-

aged balance that was disturbed by a decision of the Union Government on August 8, 1990 the implementation of the Madal Commission recommendations. And Mr. Laloo Yadav as Chief Minister would confer to the intermediate castes and ensure that they were placed alongside the direct recruits (mostly from the upper castes) so that the administrative setup was not reduced into "their" private fiefdoms.

Thus began the process by which the Bhumihars and Rajputs were edged out of the category called civil contractors. Now, you had to belong to Laloo's inner circle to obtain civil contracts. These contracts simply meant money-making enterprises and their "services" were expected at times of elections. It is this process - set rolling in the beginning of the Nineties, reaching its peak by 1995 - that now stands shaken. Despite Mr. Laloo Yadav not wanting, the sheer dynamics of the social justice slogan becoming popular, the complete lack of any developmental activity and the oppressive social order

that still prevails leave Bihar on the brink of another kind of social churning.

It is this popular consciousness that has rendered parts of Bihar into strong centres of influence for extreme-Left platforms such as the CPI (ML-Liberation), the Maoist Coordination Committee (MCC) and the People's War Group.

Courtesy: The Hindu of India.

The Laloo era witnessed much social churning, pushing the traditional rulers - the land-owning Bhumihars and the Rajputs - to the margins. Yet, a lot was left to be desired.