

South Asia

India

Who's Afraid of Mamata Bannerjee?

Sakyasen Mitra in Calcutta



SIXTEEN years ago, on a cold February night, the phone rang at midnight in Subrata Mukherjee's residence. The caller was Pranab Mukherjee.

from Delhi. "Subrata, we have found the right candidate for the Jadavpur constituency. Her name is Mamata Bannerjee." A sleepy Subrata reacted. "Who is this Mamata?"

He had every right to react that way. The Jadavpur Lok Sabha constituency had always been a stronghold for the CPIM. Their candidate for that particular election was Somenath Chatterjee. A very influential figure in the rise of the Red Brigade in West Bengal. Against such an opposition, a virtual unknown opposition, Subrata Mukherjee had the right to react. "Couldn't you get someone better," he retorted. Mukherjee never knew at that time, that a new star had just been born on the Indian political scene. A star that would trouble all that went against her.

Mamata Bannerjee duly won the 1984 contest against Somenath Chatterjee. A victory that was termed fluke by the CPIM leaders of the state. It turned out to be for a brief while. She lost to Malini Bhattacharya in 1989, but since then has never looked back. In the process, she has shifted her constituency from Jadavpur to South Calcutta, has formed a new party by the name of Trinamul Congress and has become a Minister with a very important

portfolio. But her margin of victory has simply increased. The margin of 1,75,000 votes against her nearest candidate has increased to over three lakhs during the last Lok Sabha election in 1998. Each and every opposition that had threatened her have fallen behind. What is the secret behind Mamata Bannerjee's success. The lady who started her political career way back in 1971 as a student leader has a simple answer. "I try to be as close to the people as I can," is her short and succinct reply. Then as an after thought she adds, "The voters love to have their elected representatives amongst themselves. That is why, I remain that way." In fact as a Minister. Ms. Bannerjee has not changed much. She still stays in the 12 by 10' set room at Harish Chatterjee Street in South Calcutta. A small house, which even the Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee visited recently and had to exclaim "I had never thought that a Minister could live without the usual luxuries that come with the job." Such is the paucity of Mamata's living that even when there are power cuts, the members of the family still use wooden home made fans for comfort. Some of the critics of Ms. Bannerjee say that it is a deliberate ploy on her part to attract attention. But then it is a ploy that has certainly worked.

The Shantiniketan bag still hangs from her shoulders and she still wears the same rubber hawai slippers that she used to wear during her college days. The saree usually is half-ironed. But with all these, the lady creates a storm wherever



she goes. During the last 18 months of her Ministry, Mamata Bannerjee, has shown the entire country that she means business. She has done so much of work that even her detractors have been forced to say that she is functioning positively. According to her on declaration, she says, "I am here to look after the interests for the people of West Bengal and I will do that

under any circumstances. That is why they have elected me."

But has Ms. Bannerjee attained national importance. The answer is both 'yes' and 'no'. Ms. Bannerjee is important as a national politician as long as she helps the Vajpayee Government to stay in power at Delhi. Her national importance is related to this factor only. Probably she does not aim for

more. Simply because her goal is to sit in the Chief Minister's chair in West Bengal. There are two types of people who attain importance in a political scenario. The first is those that are in the government and those that are against it. Ms. Mamata Bannerjee is in the second group. Her success lies in the fact that she has been able to maintain it. There came a period starting from 1991, when leaders with the state unit of the West Bengal Congress tried to corner Ms. Bannerjee. Leaders who had vested interests and who were also close to some of their counterparts in the Left Front government in West Bengal. The anti-Mamata movement within the Congress reached its crescendo in 1996. More than 60 per cent of Mamata's close associates were denied tickets during the 1996 Assembly elections in West Bengal. The results were there for everyone to see on August 9, 1997. As the 14th Plenary of the Congress was in motion at the Netaji Indoor Stadium, Ms. Mamata Bannerjee announced the formation of a new party, the Trinamul Congress at a huge gathering approximately half-a-kilometre away from where the plenary was on. It was this move that catapulted her into a national limelight. It was her first step in establishing herself as the main opposition to the CPIM in West Bengal. In Ms. Bannerjee's own words, "Something needed to be done. If I had stayed with the Congress it would have sent wrong signals to the voters. My political identity would not have been a huge crisis. I was not being given the space to function as an anti-CPIM force. So I de-

cided to form a new party with like-minded people."

She has. The CPIM and its other allies are worried about Mamata Bannerjee. She has hurt the CPIM where it hurts the most. Places like the Panskura Lok Sabha constituency and the Calcutta Municipal Corporation bear ample testimony to this fact. These were places, where the CPIM had ruled probably since time immemorial. Mamata has turned the tables in these particular areas.

She has repeatedly stated that she would win a particular fight and has done it. Her political adversaries naturally are spending sleepless nights. Her direct intermingling with the voters, and her courage to defy the state administration whenever it has been partial, has paid off in no uncertain terms. The crux of the matter is that the people like somebody with whom they can identify their pains. Mamata is one of those. She has been beaten up in 1991 by Laloo Alam (then a CPIM leader, now a Trinamul Congress worker), been heckled by the police (a large number are now turning to support her), ridiculed by the CPIM leaders (some of them now agree that she is the real threat and some have joined hands with her). Amongst all this she has maintained her stand. No doubt, they look up to her.

Subrata Mukherjee, sixteen years ago, had said "Who is this Mamata?" Now he sits as the Mayor of the Calcutta Corporation and says repeatedly everyday, "She is the leader who has fulfilled my dream of sitting on this chair." The wheels of motion have turned the full circle.

● Died
● Rajesh Pilot
 Member of Congress working Committee (CWC), Rajesh Pilot died in a bus accident.

■ Awarded
● The Chief Executive of
 Pakistan, General Pervez Musharraf awarded Nazir Sabir who became the first Pakistani to

scale the world's highest peak the Mount Everest.

● Aziz Siddiqui
 Pakistan's leading human rights activist and a leading journalist died at the age of 66.

● P.L. Deshpande
 Well-known Indian playwright P.L. Deshpande died at the age of 81

■ Appointed
● India appointed Gopal
 Krishna Gandhi, the grandson of Mahatma Gandhi as the Indian High Commissioner to Colombo. ■

The Region This Week

The new decree

THE military leader of Pakistan, General Pervez Musharraf, has issued a new decree reviving Islamic provisions in the country's suspended constitution. Hardline Islamic groups have been demanding the move since General Musharraf suspended the constitution after the military coup last October.

More killing

POLICE in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir say militants have shot dead a leader of the state's governing National Conference party. Munshi Kudratullah, the head of the party's district wing, was killed outside his home in Doda town on Saturday evening. He died on the spot and his security guard later died in hospital. No group has claimed responsibility so far.

Train blast kills nine

A bomb has ripped through a crowded passenger train in the southern Pakistani city of Hyderabad, killing at least nine people and injuring another 25. Officials said the bomb exploded minutes after the train pulled out of the station at about 0700, bound for the city of Karachi. Troops quickly cordoned off the area and local residents helped take victims to a nearby hospital.

Aid pledge

INDIAN opposition leader Sonia Gandhi has promised new houses for survivors of a Bombay landslide which killed at least 80 people. Mrs Gandhi was speaking on a visit to the teeming shanty town in the northern suburb of Ghatkopar which was flattened by the landslide on Wednesday.



Air crash

INVESTIGATORS have recovered two black boxes from the wreckage of the Boeing 737 Alliance Airlines plane, which crashed near the eastern Indian city of Patna on Monday morning. India's Civil Aviation Secretary AH Jung said the cockpit voice recorder and the flight data recorder would provide crucial information on the cause of the crash.

Rights abuse in Lanka

TWO British members of the European Parliament have strongly criticised the Sri Lankan Government's human rights record. The MEPs, Richard Howitt and Robert Evans, say the government has not done enough to protect civilians caught up in the war against Tamil Tiger rebels and is covering up their suffering. The men accuse the authorities of implementing an oppressive press-censorship policy and of not allowing essential supplies, including baby food and medicine, to be distributed in areas controlled by the Tamil Tigers.

Sri Lanka price protest

THOUSANDS of people have taken to the streets of the Sri Lankan capital, Colombo, to protest against rising prices. The rally was part of a nation-wide protest organised by the main opposition United National Party (UNP). Demonstrators carried placards criticising the increase in the prices of food products, diesel, cooking gas and electricity.

Breaking the ice

THE chief minister of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir has held what he described as ice-breaking talks with Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, on the issue of greater autonomy for the state. "The ice is broken but you cannot achieve everything in one meeting," Farooq Abdullah said after his 30-minute meeting with Mr Vajpayee. "We will meet again to find out the solution to this complex problem."

Ex-monarch in peace moves

AFGHANISTAN's former monarch, King Zahir Shah, has sent a delegation with a peace proposal to Islamabad, to meet both Pakistani and Taliban officials. The proposal calls for a convening of a traditional assembly of tribal elders to restore peace in the country. Zahir Shah has been living in exile in Rome since he was overthrown in a coup in the early 1970s, but he has remained keen to help resolve the conflict in Afghanistan.

A Taliban cut too far

A Taleban official has condemned the religious police who arrested 12 Pakistani footballers for wearing shorts and shaved their heads. Under the Taleban's strict dress code, wearing shorts is banned. But the head of the Taleban sports authority said the religious police in the southern Afghan city of Kandahar had used excessive force when they stopped the match, and detained the players.

Assam attack on tribals

NON-TRIBAL militants in the north-east Indian state of Assam have attacked a Karbi tribal village near the town of Baithalung, killing at least six people. Police say the attack—the first of its kind—may have been in retaliation for the killing of ten non-tribal people in a nearby village on Sunday by Karbi rebels. Meanwhile officials in the neighbouring state of Manipur say four policemen were killed when their patrol was ambushed by rebels near Henglung area.

Ship sinks off Calcutta

A cargo ship has sunk after ramming a sandbank at the mouth of the Hooghly River near Calcutta. Calcutta port officials said seven sailors had been rescued, but another 15, all of them Filipinos, were still missing. The MV Prime Value was sailing from Singapore when it ran aground off the port of Haldia, while it was waiting for permission to dock.

— Compiled by Navine Murshid

Nepal

Bold and the Beleaguered

By Ekram Kabir

It must have been a taste of freedom for 36,000 people in Nepal

when the government in Kathmandu announced the abolition of bonded labour. The government's announcement, expected to be implemented with immediate effect, is a big victory for the agitating workers, human rights organisations and social activists who have been backing the campaign, which started two months ago in Kailali, west of Nepal, where the practice is concentrated, and reportedly spread to four other neighbouring districts.

The practice of bonded labour had been going on for decades, but this was the first time that the bonded labourers took to the streets demanding freedom. "People who were forced to work as bonded laborers will be free from today (Monday)," Nepal's Minister for Land Reforms and Management Sushila Raj Ojha was quoted by Reuters.

Under the system, which has been prevalent for decades in the five districts in west Nepal, poor people are forced to work for landlords or moneylenders because of indebtedness. They receive far lower wages than the 25 US cents fixed by the government as daily minimum wages for farm labourers. The wages are never enough to repay the loan and the labourers remain trapped in the vicious debt cycle.

Anyone found guilty of employing bonded labour, as reported in *The Kathmandu Post*,

could be imprisoned for up to 10 years under the provisions of the Public Offence Act. The government had set aside 14.1 million rupees (\$199,000) in fiscal 2000/01 (July 16-July 15) for training and other activities to support the labourers.

Nepal's constitution prepared in 1990 prohibits slavery, serfdom or forced labour but the practice remained in absence of adequate attention from the government. But the latest move is indeed a good news as the Nepal Congress party has vowed to fight and end the practice.

Moreover, this agurs good for the region that has often been criticised to have denied rights to people, especially the children. Women are often lured into the sex industry, children are becoming victims of war, trafficking of people and child labour and abduction are going on unabated etc. And yes, young children are found doing hard work in countries of South Asia. This is a litany of violations suffered by children in South Asia - often at the hands of the authorities.

A quarter of the world's children live in India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Children here experience widespread deprivation, whether in state custody or with their families. According to a recent Amnesty International report, nearly 5 million children under the age of five die in South Asia every year from preventable, curable diseases like diarrhoea. As well as ill health, children are suffering at the hands of governments

and armed opposition groups, who are said to be abusing and ignoring their human rights on a wide scale. Abuses include arbitrary detentions, punishment and torture by police and other state authorities.

There are numerous instances of children being forced to join rebel groups, or sold into prostitution or bonded labour. The use of child labour in dangerous and unhealthy environments is also criticised. Girls face particular disadvantages. Gender-selective abortions, acid-throwing, honour killing and infanticide are still commonplace.

These violations, however, stem from the lack of economic and social rights in the region. Urbanisation, poverty and the breakdown of family structures have left millions displaced or forced to fend for themselves on the streets, where they are vulnerable to violence and exploitation.

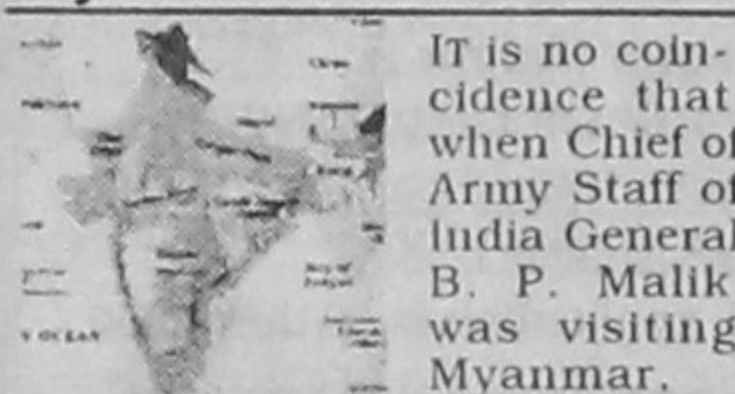
Though governments in the region have launched initiatives to improve the situation, but much more needs to be done. There are many systems - injurious to human development in the region -- need to be abolished or overhauled. We need to care for the interest of the majority who are poor, and of course, who are also citizens of this region. Unless we take bold initiatives to emancipate the peoples of the region from various inflicting woes, we won't be able to stand up, like other places in the world, as a regional power.

Nepal has done something highly praiseworthy. Others should follow suit in their own ways.

Indo-Pak

Wooing Myanmar?

By Mansoor Mamoon



IT is no coincidence that when Chief of Army Staff of India General B. P. Malik was visiting Myanmar, the Defence Minister of the State Council for Peace and Development in Yangon undertook a trip to Pakistan. Analysts maintain that it is part of well-planned foreign policy strategy of Myanmar not to be involved in any way in the bitter strife between the two South Asian rivals. The army junta in Myanmar wants to maintain equally friendly and non-partisan relations with both India and Pakistan.

The Junta is also trying to shake off its traditional xenophobia and appears to be keen to spread its wings to the outside world. It has already become a member of the Association of South-east Nations (ASEAN) and is attracting European and US investment for the development of its infrastructure to tap and commercially use its vast resource potential.

Myanmar's foreign minister has already undertaken a visit to Russia and then hopped to Sarajevo. It has already improved its relations with Korea. Sources said Indian Army Chief of Staff's visit is linked with the festering problem of insurgency in his country's north-eastern region, popularly called the "seven sisters". Most of the camps of these insurgents are located in the deep jungles of Myanmar which also has a similar problems of tribal and ethnic insurgency. General Ma-

lik is reported to sought co-operation from Myanmar in containing the problem of insurgency in the bordering region in the north-east which taking a serious turn. India is already providing helicopters, army boots and other military provisions for Myanmar. Both the countries are thinking in the line of increasing cooperation so that together they could curb insurgencies in their respective countries.

The Junta in Myanmar are intensely nationalistic. They also want to lessen their countries heavy dependence on China which is using Myanmar for its easy access to the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean. In the sixties and early seventies relations between China and Myanmar had not been friendly. Rather their relations soured due to China's support to the Myanmar's communist insurgents. Ties between them, however, improved after the death of Chairman Mao Zedong and Deng Xio Ping's adoption of open door policy. The two countries signed a border trade between them and economic co-operation and collaboration increased. When the generals stifled democratic aspirations in their country, it was China which stood beside it with outstretched hands of friendship and support. Since then both the countries came closer together. But on their country's heavy dependence on China the Generals seem to be divided. They want to lessen it through balancing their ties with India.

India's support to the pro-democracy leader Aung Sung Su Chit, conferring on her the Nehru Award and condemnation of the military crackdown on the movement for the

restoration greatly angered the generals in Myanmar in the late eighties and early nineties. But to their strategic advantage and the urgency for curbing insurgency their relations has normalised.

Myanmar's Defence Minister's visit to Pakistan has been described as designed to bolster commercial interest between them. Both Pakistan and Myanmar are under army rule which abhors liberal democracy. The commonality between them however ends here. Pakistan supplies guns and other military equipment for the Myanmar troops.

Myanmar views Pakistan with suspicion due to the widespread report of Islamabad's reported connections with the Rohingya's whom the junta detest. Rohingya's are often persecuted by the junta. A large number of them were evicted and driven to Bangladesh. Pakistani secret service Agency - ISI, alleged to have established connections with the Rohingya's and harboured insurgencies inside Myanmar's territories. Islamabad has, however, consistently denied the allegations claiming it as an Indian propaganda.

Analysts do not attach much importance to Myanmar's Defence Minister's visit to Pakistan. But it is however agreed that Pakistan would not like a friendly neighbour in India's insurgency infested north-eastern region.

General Malik's visit, however, can not be dismissed as such. The interests for improving their relations is evidenced in both the sides on the counts of insurgencies and on the Myanmar's side to offset heavy dependence on China.

Kashmir

Economy is the Real Need

By C. Subramaniam

THE DEBATE on the National Conference's autonomy resolution detracts from one thing that is absolutely essential for a peaceful resolution of the Kashmir issue - rapid economic development in the State. External forces are no doubt seeding, funding and fanning militancy and secessionist sentiments. But more than any other factor, the slow pace of economic development has been providing the fuel for discontent in the Valley especially among the educated unemployed.

To some extent the perception in the Valley that Jammu and Kashmir has been economically neglected does not tally with facts. Its 4.4 per cent compound annual growth rate from 1991 to 1997 was only slightly less than that achieved by Haryana, Punjab and Delhi and is far higher than the performance of Bihar, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh and most of the north-eastern States. The per capita Central assistance to the State in the 1990s averaged roughly 10 times the level of Tamil Nadu.

Nevertheless, the sense of economic deprivation is not without foundation. The rise of militancy after 1988 has devas-

tated the tourism industry in the Valley. There is very little of large and medium industry and little sign of new manufacturing activity. Today there are about 1,50,000 educated unemployed youths in the State. For most of them the economic prospects look bleak. This group has been the source of many of today's Hurriyat leaders. By one estimate more than 20 per cent of the educated unemployed are joining militant groups.

The most effective strategy to combat militancy in Kashmir is neither an increase in security forces nor more autonomy. It is to create more opportunities for higher education and better employment.

The challenge today is to build confidence among the Kashmiri youth about their economic future as part of the Indian Union. The best strategy is to evolve a five-year plan to generate employment opportunities inside and outside the State for at least 50,000 youths and higher educational opportunities outside J&K for another 25,000.

The right economic goal is integration rather than autonomy. Kashmir cannot thrive either economically or politically on its own. But it can do so by linking its development potential with the rest of India's rapidly expanding economy.

Thus far, Centre-State relations have fostered economic dependence in the form of highly subsidised transfers, which is both degrading and counterproductive. There is a widespread belief that much of this money has been siphoned off by politicians and bureaucrats. It has failed to release the entrepreneurial initiative of the people or provide sufficient benefits to the community. A strategy that will release local enterprise and initiative is needed.

The IT revolution which has spread like wildfire throughout the south has not even been felt as a distant tremor in J&K. Yet the rapid growth of India's software industry certainly offers attractive opportunities for unemployed engineers and science graduates. The government should encourage the proliferation of private computer training institutes and software houses for creating at least 10,000 software jobs within five years.

Considering that it will take time to attract and establish a significant local software industry, a job placement programme should be launched to help qualified trainees find jobs in software companies outside the State. This will strengthen integration with the Indian economy. Those who get higher education and find jobs

outside will form a valuable pool of talent from which a local software industry can sprout over time.

The government should also establish major technology parks fully equipped with high speed, broadband telecommunication linkages and provide incentives to major software companies for opening production centres in the State. The State Government can attract IT firms, accelerating its efforts to computerise government operations and requiring private software contractors to employ a majority of local programmers.

Software represents only the highest echelon of opportunities in the IT industry. IT-enabled services offer even greater potential. Here the main requirement is only of English-speaking graduates who can provide back office data processing, accounting, customer service on the telephone and the Internet, legal research and medical transcription for major clients in the West.

Electronics is not the only field which offers attractive employment. An even greater employment potential lies in transforming agriculture. The application of advanced farming methods can double or triple yields of commercial and orchard crops. One of the most important areas is soil im-

provement focussing on ensuring supply of micronutrients. Given the Valley's climate, there is no reason why high yields of a wide-range of temperate fruits and vegetables cannot be achieved for local consumption, domestic sale and export. The key is to inject greater knowledge into the agricultural sector. The right candidates for the job are unemployed agricultural graduates who have acquired book knowledge but have no experience applying it. An effective strategy would be to establish and conduct a training programme in hi-tech farming methods to produce 1000 agricultural entrepreneurs in five years. After completing the course, each entrepreneur should be equipped to establish and operate a private, for-profit school consisting of 10 acres of agricultural land leased out by local farmers. The entrepreneur could cultivate a range of crops, earning a minimum net profit of Rs. 50,000 per acre per annum. Additional income would also come as fees from the local youth who join the school for training.

Our leading educational institutions are a grazing ground for large Indian and foreign corporations seeking talent. The Centre can also foster economic integration and enhance youth confidence by earmarking a few thousand seats a year for Kashmiri youth in leading universities and professional colleges and providing special financial assistance as part of the package.

The above measures can be undertaken even in the context of the present stalemate in Indo-Pakistan relations to generate prosperity in the Valley and lay the foundation for peace and stability. But Kashmir possesses a greater potential to transmute itself from a source of conflict into a source of peace. The Kashmir dispute has been a convenient instrument for politicians on both sides of the Line of Control to distract attention from domestic problems and rally popular support against an external enemy. People everywhere are easily aroused by such calls and are ready to support their leaders in the name of national security.

The Kashmir problem has been with us for half a century. We are stuck in a syndrome of violence. The human, financial and goodwill costs as well as the lost opportunity costs have been mind-boggling. More of the same will not do. Let us have the wisdom and courage to chart a new course.

Courtesy: The Hindu of India.