

People

Matinee Idol Kidnapped



The forest brigand, Veerappan, on Sunday night struck at the farmhouse of the Kannada thespian Rajkumar, at Gajanan in Tamil Nadu and kidnapped the actor and three others. The abduction of the matinee idol sent shock waves throughout Karnataka and mobs went on the rampage on Monday. Four Tamil newspaper offices in Bangalore were attacked while one person was killed in the violence. Schools and colleges in the city were closed and a 10,000-strong police force began patrolling the streets.

Mum and Dad

In 1972, in Karachi, a 15-year-old boy, Muni, and his father, Dad, were consecutive sixes on the last three balls, when the team needed 18 runs to win. Nor that young man, neither this world knew then that he would be known as the Muni & Dad of cricket. Next year, the same youngster scored a triple hundred while playing for Karachi Whites against the Pakistan Railways at the age of 16. This world record has still to see a contest. By the mammoth

With and without Rafi

HAUNTINGLY popular and the heartthrob of millions of cinegoers and music buffs both in the subcontinent and abroad, the vocalists Muhammad Rafi, died on July 30, twenty years ago. His mellifluous and cathartic-inducing songs, recorded for thousands of films since 1944, continue to provide succour to millions of broken hearts.

Sardar Jafri passes away

All Sardar Jafri, the last of the titans who reigned supreme in the literary arena of the South Asian subcontinent for over half a century, died in a Mumbai hospital on Tuesday. He was 87. He survived by his wife, two sons and a daughter. With his death comes to an end a glorious period of Urdu literature. Along with his illustrious friends, he gave a new sense of direction to Urdu poetry and criticism. Death came to him slowly as he had lost all strength to fight against it. The poet, whose commitment to life was exemplary, at last succumbed to the inevitable. The voice of the eloquent and forceful orator was silenced forever.

India

The Gatekeeper

By Mansoor Mamoon



"A political leader is like a seasonal flower. He blooms and blossoms, spreads fragrance and then a time comes for him to wither away." This was stated by Pakistan's executed Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto as he was languishing in his country's dungeon after his meteoric rise as a charismatic leader of his people in the early seventies. His quotable quote appears to exactly fit in the case of Jyoti Basu holding the rein of power in the Indian state of West Bengal for over 23 years. He has been able to set a record as the longest timeserving Chief Minister not only in West Bengal but in the whole of India.

But the tragedy of Basu is that along with his failing health he is finding that his sway is gradually crumbling down and the Left Front that he held together for such a long time is increasingly being threatened by a relatively young articulate woman leader Momota Banerjee, who had broken away from the Congress and founded her own political party the Trinamul Congress three years ago. Little did Basu realise that coming from political wilderness Momota, whom he always derides as a "four twenty or cheat lady" will in no time gather strength and pose to be a challenge before the continued Left Front rule in West Bengal. Both print and electronic media have already started to project Momota as the next Chief Minister with her personal stamina, strength, and clout together with the back up of the central government. Her party is a coalition partner of BJP-led NDA government in which she holds the important portfolio of railway ministry. After Trinamul captured the Calcutta City Corporation held by the Left Front for the last 15 years, Momota's target is now the Writers' Building the seat of state power.

Jyoti Basu, who is 85, has already made the announcement that he would step down after state elections scheduled for next year and has nominated Bhuddadev Bhattacharjee as the Deputy Chief Minister and as his likely successor. He would have very much liked to retire earlier but due to party pressure he agreed to continue till the next elections. His party - the CPIM and the left alliances desperately want to use whatever popularity Basu still has to prevent Momota from winning the polls. But will his magic, his vote catching attraction work as it did in the past? The result of the Calcutta City Corporation and Salt Lake civic body polls has been described by analysts as a wake up call for the CPIM-led Left Front whose leaders are worried that the trend is going to have impact on the coming state elections. Trinamul-BJP alliance bagged a total of 61 seats (Trinamul 57, BJP 4). The Left Front also bagged equal number of seats but the tally was the lowest and with the support of the independents Trinamul-BJP captured the corporation. Earlier, Trinamul wrested left stronghold Panskura in Midnapur district in the Lok Sabha by-election in Midnapur district. A visibly disappointed Basu admitted, "We have failed to live up to people's expectations". Concerned about the Front's future at the fast erosion of its vote bank in the urban areas he has promised to work for the party "till death".

He said a communist does not retire. Even though he may not continue as the Chief Minister he will work for the victory of the party and the front in the next state elections.

Born in an affluent feudal educated family in erstwhile East Bengal, to be exact in Narayanjan district, Jyoti Basu was indoctrinated with the communist ideology at an early age. His father reportedly disinherited him from his property but made his daughter-in-law (Basu's wife) the inheritor. With his background in legal education and trade union activities he is an excellent strategist. Highly educated he is gentle, suave and soft-spoken and is acceptable to the masses

because of his amiable disposition. He rose quickly in the party hierarchy and became Deputy Chief Minister in the United Front government led by Ajoy Mukherjee. The party split and CPI(M) (Naxalites) broke away under the leadership of the firebrand revolutionary Charu Majumdar who initiated the liquidation of class enemies. The State Congress and the government under Siddhartha Sankar Roy as well as youth congress with Priya Ranjan Das Munshi and Subrata Mukherjee unleashed a reign of terror by coming to power through manipulating the 1972 state elections.

Basu united the leftist and left leaning parties namely CPIM, CPI, Forward Block etc., under the banner of Left Front and registered a comfortable victory in the 1977 elections. Since then the winning spree of the Left Front continues. Despite stiff opposition from all the subsequent central governments except those of Deve Gowda and I. K. Gujral, the anti-Communists dominated media and the capitalists and feudal classes he could change the overall state scenario - economic and political. Road buildings even in the remotest areas, literacy missions which substantially raised the rate of literacy in the state, land reform under which land was given to the landless and real fillers, social forestry and fisheries sponsored for generating income among unemployed rural youths, successful implementation of the Panchayat projects etc., initiated by Left Front government have considerably lifted the living standard of the common people. Communal harmony prevailed all along the left front rule. Effective rural based Kissan Sabhas garnered support of the peasants. Calcutta city which was literally dying before the Left Front government took over was also given a face-lift. Metro rail was introduced, new bridge was built over the river Hooghly and improvement of commuter services greatly eased Calcutta's perennial traffic congestion. All these and many other welfare-oriented steps contributed to Jyoti-Basu and for that matter Left Front's continued popularity.

Buddhadev Bhattacharjee is not equally acceptable to all the front partners. Momota's spectacular rise within the brief span of only three years demonstrated that the traditionally vacillating middle class, particularly the youth - called the electronic generation, is shifting its allegiance to Momota. To continue the legacy of Jyoti Basu as well as the Left Front rule what is needed is - a new leader, new slogans and new programmes. Under the influence of Momota's Trinamul, the Congress is virtually tottering and breaking up and the BJP is no force at all. Her alignment with BJP has proved to be a liability as she failed to attract the Muslim voters. The Left Front is still powerful with wide support bases in rural areas and it cannot be safely predicted that Momota can score easy victory. Knowing her limitations Momota has currently resorted to terror tactics and is indulging in inciting violence to destabilise law and order situation in the state. What the left front needs most is another Jyoti Basu and a new magic spell to stop erosion in its popularity and effectively counter the encroachment of Momota. Will the Left Front be able to find a proper replacement of Jyoti Basu? Only time can say.

The Region This Week

Mending walls

NEPALESE Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala is beginning a week-long visit to India on Monday. In the hope of improving relations between the two countries. Relations between the Himalayan mountain kingdom and India were derailed in dramatic fashion at the turn of the year when an Indian Airlines plane was hijacked by pro-Kashmiri militants soon after leaving Kathmandu.

Priest killed in India

A local church leader was killed by three unidentified men in the town of Guntur, in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. Police have stepped up security measures in the town in the aftermath of the killing. The victim was the president of the Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church, Pastor G. Emmanuel.

India halts fight

INDIAN troops have been ordered to stop fighting the main Islamic separatist group in Kashmir, the Hizbul Mujahideen, after it declared a unilateral ceasefire earlier in the week. A senior Indian army officer, General J.R. Mukherjee, said his troops had suspended all operations against the group, but would continue fighting against other militant forces.

Slicing opposition lifeline

AFGHANISTAN's ruling Taleban has struck a major blow against opposition forces by cutting off a vital international supply route. An opposition spokesman said that Taleban forces had captured the town of Nahrin early on Saturday. The town has been a crucial link for opposition leader Ahmad Shah Masood, providing a supply route for food and military supplies from the border with Tajikistan.

Network failure

BROKERS at the Dhaka Stock Exchange in Bangladesh have lost large sums of money because the computer system failed and electronic trading was suspended. Automated trading began at the Dhaka Stock Exchange two years ago, but critics said the system was already outdated at the time. The Chairman of the Stock Exchange, Shaukat Khan, said that a dramatic rise in the volume of trade had put enormous pressure on the computer network.

Speight sent to prison

DETAINED rebel leader George Speight and several of his key aides have been transferred to a prison on a small, uninhabited island. The move comes as the military authorities attempt to restore law and order under a new government, issuing an ultimatum to rebel supporters occupying a military barracks.

Cutting off north-east

THE blast derailed a goods train and damaged a long stretch of the rail tracks in India's north-eastern state of Assam on Sunday. No one has claimed responsibility for the explosion but police said they suspected the involvement of either of the two major separatist groups active in Assam.

Afghan drought

THE Taleban have told the Afghan people that they are to blame for the severe drought affecting the country. The Taleban leader, Mulla Mohammed Omar, said it was God's punishment for the people's discontent with Taleban rule, and neglect of their religious duties.

Peace plan push

THE Sri Lankan Government has called an emergency session of parliament to present the new draft constitution. The contents of the final draft are not known, but the constitutional reforms which have been discussed include measures to devolve power to the regions, including the north east, in a bid to end the long-running civil war.

Afghan mines

AN emergency mine clearing operation is beginning in an area of northern Afghanistan, the most heavily mined country in the world. About 30,000 families were forced to leave their homes in the Alburz mountains and head down to the plains after the harvest failed and drinking water supplies dried up.

Lower caste for BJP

INDIA's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party has for the first time chosen a lower caste member to be the party's new president. Bangaru Laxman, junior Minister for Railways, is the first member of the low caste Dalit community to head a major party. He is also the first party leader from south India.

-- Compiled by Navine Murshid

Caged in Kashmir



A wave of violence which has swept through Indian-administered Kashmir is now known to have claimed at least 101 lives. Many of the dead were Hindu pilgrims or labourers who were massacred by suspected Muslim militants in at least five villages across the province. The violence began only hours after an alliance of militant separatist groups publicly rejected the idea of joining a ceasefire called by the largest group, Hizbul Mujahideen.

Nepal-India

Loyalty Counts

By Ekram Kabir

"THE Nepalese Prime Minister, Girija Prasad Koirala, is on a weeklong visit to India. His visit will certainly improve relations between these two inter-dependent neighbours. More importantly, given their strained ties since an Indian Airlines plane was hijacked by pro-Kashmiri militants, soon after leaving Kathmandu at the turn of the year, mending ties has become a must for both the countries."

Koirala, reports say, is also expected to discuss claims by India that the Pakistani intelligence - ISI - agents are active in Nepal. He would also seek assurances from Delhi about the activities of Maoist militants in Nepal, who according to Kathmandu enjoy support from certain elements in India.

Dams are also likely to feature on the agenda. The Nepali opposition says that the Laxmanpur dam, built in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh in 1998, has inundated many villages in Nepal. Another controversial project, reportedly, is the Indo-Nepal dam at Tanakpur in the far west of the Himalayan kingdom which, critics say, will benefit India more than Nepal. The trade balance between the two countries will also come under discussion, as will taxation issues. Koirala said it was time to review half a century of relations between India and Nepal.

"I am going there to restore the lost confidence between our

two nations," he was quoted to have said on the eve of his departure from Kathmandu.

Koirala's country with an area of 140,800 square kilometres and nearly 25 million people, is surrounded by the Chinese controlled Tibet on the north and India on the three remaining sides. The Nepalese were able to restore the monarchy in 1951 with India's moral support. Again, prior to this, the members of Nepal's Rana family had ruled the kingdom for more than a century in the garb of hereditary prime ministers after having stripped the royal family of its powers. The monarchy, after experimenting with democracy dispensed with it by dissolving the parliament and banning the political parties in 1961. It is because of intense Indian pressure applied through a border blockade in 1989, the king restored the democratic multi-party system and resumed the role of a constitutional monarch.

However, Nepalese economy is largely dependent on India. New Delhi has contributed, to a great extent, to developing Nepal into a modern state. Indian economic assistance has helped in building most of Nepal's highways, communication system, airports, educational institutions, power stations, industries and several other establishments including the military. The nation's elite have been mostly educated in India. The Indian army recruits a considerable number of youth for its famous Gorkha Regiments every year. They, along with thousands of army pen-

sioners settled in various parts of the kingdom, contribute substantially to the Nepalese economy.

But India needs Nepal, too. Friendly relations have helped India to pursue its strategic and security interest in the region. India's relations with Pakistan are already bad. So the last thing India needs, according to observers, is yet another hostile neighbour. Again, Nepal and India have had an open border for centuries. About six million Nepalis - a quarter of the country's population - find seasonal work in India each year. Indians, too, travel to Nepal to work as farm hands, masons and carpenters.

But relations between the kingdom and India were derailed dramatically last year when an Indian Airlines plane was hijacked by pro-Kashmiri militants. As a result India stopped its Airlines flight to Nepal for five months. The dispute about security also brought about a more public airing of India's claim that the Pakistani intelligence agency, ISI, is active in Nepal and able to take advantage of the long and highly penetrable border between the two countries.

When New Delhi suspended Indian Airlines flights, Nepal's lucrative tourist trade was badly affected. The cancellation of the Indian Airlines flight to Kathmandu was a losing proposition for both countries. The Himalayan mountains in Nepal are a favoured destination for a large number of Indian tourists and flights to and from Kathmandu are full on

Says...

Sheikh Hasina, Prime Minister of Bangladesh: "We are in a transition, we need some more time and all problems including bureaucratic delay will be removed," while calling upon the businessmen in Malaysia to explore the prospective areas of investment and facilities available in Bangladesh.

Atal Behari Vajpayee, Prime Minister of India: "It now is absolutely transparent that after the steps taken by the Hizbul Mujahideen to end violence to restore peace in Kashmir, groups owing allegiance to Pakistan or groups directly ordered by Pakistan have risen to derail the peace process by the massacre of innocent people."

Khaleda Zia, Opposition Leader in Bangladesh: "I want to say that we do not believe in the politics of killing. But it was proved that the prime minister herself was involved in the politics of killing."

Parvez Musharraf, Chief Executive of Pakistan: "So I am only voicing the concern... and the impression of the people of Pakistan that Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif have been tested, tried and they have failed. They have failed the country and they have no place in Pakistan's politics."

Budgeting in the Region - 2000-2001

Recently, most of the South Asian countries have announced their budget for fiscal year 2000-2001. Following is a brief analysis:



Bangladesh: BUDGET 2000-20001 is the last budget presented by Awami League government as its term expires next year. It is also the first budget of the new century. Though Finance Minister Shah AMS Kibria, claimed that the new budget is aimed at reducing poverty by creating employment opportunities in the country. On the other hand according to the figures released by the State Minister for Planning 44.68 per cent of the populace are living below the poverty line.

According to analysts, poverty has reduced only marginally (not even one per cent during the last four years) and that the government does not have any definite strategy for the alleviation of poverty. The Fifth Five-Year Plan (1997-2002) stipulates that poverty will be brought down to 32 per cent at the end of the Plan period. But at the rate it is being reduced, the target will continue to remain elusive and difficult

to achieve in the foreseeable future. Whatever is being done in this sector is at the behest of the donor countries and agencies.

The 42,859 crore Taka deficit budget for the next fiscal, containing the biggest-ever outlay in Bangladesh, is a testimony of lack of discipline and budgeting controls, is incongruous with the recognised framework of financial coordination between revenue earning and expenditure. In 1999-2000, there had been a huge deficit in revenue earning (14 per cent), which compelled the government to borrow from public accounts (financial institutions) at the rate of over 3 per cent of the GNP, which is not pragmatic in view of the fragile state of the country's economy.

In the new budget the Finance Minister while announcing Annual Development Plan (ADP) said that there might be recurring shortfall and deficit in revenue earning and the government would be required to procure financing through international mobilisation of resources and foreign loans. An amount of 3,500 crore taka will

be required to be loaned to the government by the banks for meeting ADP expenditure. This certainly indicates that once again investors will have to face the same problem, while seeking bank loans. If there is no domestic investment, foreign investors will not feel encouraged and without investment, the government cannot hope to expand the job market.

The Finance Minister claimed that in the new budget (revenue and development combined) the highest allocation has been made to the education sector followed by the transport sector (in the development budget). Though some progress has been made at the primary level in respect of enrolment of students, the quality has however, fallen abysmally low.

Defence expenditure in the new budget has been raised to the tune of 7.5 per cent. Those who argue that defence expenditure needs no increase, are not fully aware of the current geopolitical situation and the realities obtaining in our immediate neighbourhood.

The expansion of VAT (value added tax) and its imposition on retail prices are going to hit

hard the fixed income earners, particularly the poor and the middle classes, who are already pushed to the wall. There is no tangible measure to ensure social justice by reducing income disparities. The number of billionaires has risen to 1800, while it was only four after independence. The galloping rise in the number of billionaires has not in any way matched the number of people being freed from poverty trap and the rate at which the country is being developed. The proposal for Taka 180 crore bond to facilitate investors to borrow from banks at lower rates is no panacea for realisation of default loans which last year stood at about 23,500 crore taka having less possibility of their realisations. This default culture is at the roots of countries present predicament and a recent seminar was held to blame the government for this ailment.

What is, however, tragic is that only a paltry sum of 15 crore has been earmarked for the rehabilitation of the destitute freedom fighters (FFs) and this government is fooling the

FFs by claiming that it is liberation force. It is the FFs who served out Bangladesh and deserves better treatment. But budget will continue to be a futile exercise if government's revenue earning and development expenditure could not be effectively synchronised.

Some are apt to term the new budget as an election-oriented one and has been designed to meet the election pledges of the ruling Awami League. But a dispassionate analysis will show that it is yet another stereotyped budget having much ado signifying virtually nothing.

Maldives: PEOPLE'S Majlis (parliament) in Maldives, unanimously approved government's budget for the year 2000. President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom who also holds the post of finance and treasury minister, members highlighted the government's commitment to balance its budgets.

Majlis members also observed that the government's fiscal policies were being formulated in a manner that would sustain the momentum of economic and social progress of the country. Members were of

the view that the budget proposed for the year 2000 was one that would lay the foundation for achieving the Maldives Vision 2020.

President Gayoom said that the government budget for the year 2000 would enable Maldives to step into the new millennium on a sound and successful footing and will consolidate and maintain economic stability. President Gayoom regarded the country's economic progress as satisfactory.

Total government expenditure proposed for the year 2000 is Rf. 991,049,432. Recurrent expenditure is estimated to be Rf. 700,000,000 and capital expenditure is estimated to be Rf. 123,000,000. The biggest outlays from the budget proposed for the year 2000 will be made on social development and on the improvement of the quality of general services. Expenditure earmarked for social development is Rf. 200,000,000 and for general services is Rf. 939,000,000. Outlay on education, which will come out of the allocation for social development, is estimated to be Rf. 539,000,000. Expenditure on health and welfare

services will be Rf. 360,000,000. Allocation for economic development in the year 2000's budget is Rf. 323,000,000 the largest share of which will be spent on harbour development and electrification. The capital investment programme in the budget has been set at Rf. 639,000,000.

Government expenditure on fisheries next year will be Rf. 25,000,000.

In his budget statement, the President said that the proposed budget was based on economic and financial reality and was aimed at sustaining economic growth. The budget will also facilitate making the current five-year presidential term a period of result-oriented and successful national endeavour.

Nepal: NEPAL Budget, 2000-01, could be a dream budget for more than 100,000 government employees who got increment by up to more than 90 per cent in their basic salaries. The budget also doubled the sum (to Rs. one million) at the discretion of the MPs to be spent in their respective constituencies. It also continued central allowances amounting to Rs. 500,000 for nearly 4,000 village develop-

ment committees all over the country.

The Rs. 91 billion - plus budget estimates for the next fiscal year 2000/01 presented by Finance Minister Mahesh Acharya in the joint session of the Parliament on May 30. "The budget has aimed at alleviating poverty, increase employment opportunities, check corruption and ensure a sustained economic growth," said the minister.

Out of Rs. 91.62 billion budget estimates, Rs. 43.51 billion has been allocated as regular expenditure and Rs. 48.10 billion as development expenditure. The total size of the budget is 35 per cent bigger than the revised estimated budget for the present fiscal year. The budget has allocated whopping Rs. 5.27 billion - up from Rs. 3.25 billion allocated in the present fiscal year - to Nepal Police. The sum will be spent to procure sophisticated arms for the Police to combat the more than four-year-long Maoist insurgency.

Compiled by Ekram Kabir