

INDIA

No photo-finish this time



SAKYASEN MITRA in Kolkata

It has all the ingredients of a one-day finish with two balls to go and five runs to get. A position from where either side can emerge victorious. The CPIM-led Left Front alliance and the Trinamool-Congress combine are in the fray with the former in a slightly advantageous position. As it has ruled the state for the last 24 years and has a certain section of the administration on their side. The results are very difficult to predict. The Mamata Bannerjee wave is allegedly sweeping the state. Everywhere she has visited the mass have simply engulfed her. Demanding that she lead them to a new era.

The same however, has happened with Buddhadev Bhattacharya. In the rural areas that

he has visited, the Chief Minister has also managed to inspire the voters. It has been difficult to judge the mood of the voters. Take for example a village called Paharpur in the North 24 Parganas. When Mamata visited the place, the entire village was on her feet cajoling her to do something against the atrocities of the CPIM. A few days later when Bhattacharya reached the village, the same villagers invited him over to their 'Garibkhana' to have a cup of tea with them. It is this nature of the electorate in this state that has made prediction so difficult.

There are plenty of topics going against the CPIM. The first is their failure to keep pace with modernisation. Then the transformation of the education system of the state into a Red-ruled regime. The flourishing of the real estate and promoters close

to the CPIM. The development of the cadre-raj in the rural areas, the forcible occupation of land by the CPIM workers in the villages - the list goes on.

Similarly, there has been complaints against the main opposition, the Trinamool Congress also. The party is run, without a trace of democracy, by a single person. It does not have enough competent men to administer a government. The whimsical attitude of some of the leaders and finally the alliance with the Congress. The Trinamool Congress could have been giving examples of the by-elections to the Panskura Lok Sabha Constituency and the elections to the Municipal Corporations in Kolkata. But then Kolkata has never been a red bastion. The only creditable achievement that she can boast of is the

In West Bengal, in the last Assembly elections, the Left had a share of 38.74 per cent of the votes. The Trinamool Congress had 25 per cent, the Congress 13 per cent, the BJP 6.5 per cent. Approximately 15 per cent of the total population of the state are considered to be floating voters. In the last Lok Sabha elections about 10 per cent of these floating voters voted for the Trinamool Congress. By ditching the BJP, the Trinamool Congress may have gained the 13 per cent of the Congress votes. But subsequently it has lost the 6.5 per cent of the BJP votes. So the neat gain has been another 6.5 per cent.

However, if the floating voters revert back to the CPIM, then definitely the advantage gained from the extra-Congress votes will be nullified. West Bengal has 42 Lok Sabha constituencies, which become 294 Assembly segments. If the results of the 1999 Lok Sabha elections are taken on an Assembly basis the Trinamool Congress had led in 82, the Congress in 37 while the Left Front candidates had managed to lead in 156. This basic difference will also probably exist this time. The Trinamool Congress leader, Mamata Bannerjee has been giving examples of the by-elections to the Panskura Lok Sabha Constituency and the elections to the Municipal Corporations in Kolkata. But then Kolkata has never been a red bastion. The only creditable achievement that she can boast of is the

victory of her party candidate at Panskura. However, one Lok Sabha constituency does not make up the entire Assembly segment in West Bengal.

The CPIM will no doubt suffer in some of the industrial areas like Durgapur, Asansol, Haldia. The Trinamool Congress will also make some gains in the areas of Burdwan and Bankura and Midnapore. However it is doubtful whether they will be able to wrest the initiative at Midnapore which has the largest number of constituencies in West Bengal. And will play a very crucial role in the results. The CPIM has managed to take back the district which had slipped away from them. There is one statement from Buddhadev Bhattacharya that sums up all when he says, "We would have been in trouble because of the anti-incumbency factor.

However, people will still vote for the Left Front simply because they do not have a better alternative." Probably, this has been the most significant political statement that has been made during the build-up to the elections.

The question that now arises is why will the Left win again. Simply because, just before the elections, the Trinamool Congress has been affected by the Ajit Panja factor. His daughter is contesting. However, not a single top-notch Trinamool leader has campaigned for her. They are hanging over a constituency that they had won for the last three times.

The CPIM has managed to bury all its problems. Yes, they have the Party for Democratic Socialism (PDS) to reckon with. However, history is on their side simply because in the past all those who have left the CPIM have lost their political entity. So the PDS will not be able to really trouble the CPIM. The poll-conducting machinery of the CPIM is far more competent than the opposition. They have the ability to jam the booths thereby preventing the regular voter from casting his vote.

In the end, however, one has to make a prediction. This correspondent will also do the same with a huge risk of being forced to eat his own words later. But the situation is that Left Front will probably emerge victorious by the narrowest of margins. They will win between 160 to 170 seats, the Trinamool Congress-Congress combine between 115 to 120. The result will be taken up by independents. The BJP may just win a couple of seats. If one goes in for the percentage of chance that the Trinamool Congress has of forming the Government in West Bengal, the figure is 15 per cent. The odds are stacked against them. But then Mamata Bannerjee has always been managed to overcome the odds. Whether she can do so at the most critical juncture of her political career now remains to be seen.

BHUTAN

Media sets the goals right

AKHTAR SULTANA

I recently visited the *Kuensel* office which incidentally happens to be the only newspaper in Bhutan. I had made prior appointment with the Editor-Chief, Kinley Dorji. Tall, slim and elegant, Dorji exuded confidence. Educated in the United States with a Masters from the prestigious School of Journalism, at the Columbia University, Kinley Dorji has been with the newspaper for a long time. Dorji explained that the concept of mass media in Bhutan is relatively new. The reason was because Bhutan maintained a policy of isolation. It was only in the 1960s that the modernisation of Bhutan began. Consequently, the initial development thrust was the building of the infrastructure within the country

Kuensel or clarity, as it means first started in the mid-'60s as a four-page official bulletin listing promotions and transfers of government officials. It was published every two weeks. Later it became a weekly bulletin, published every Saturday. In 1986 *Kuensel* assumed its present 12-page tabloid format and was produced on an Apple Mackintosh-based desktop publishing system. With a new face uplift, *Kuensel's* circulation in six months shot up from 500 to 2500 copies. Within a span of 10 years, circulation rose to 10,000 copies, and is now being published in three languages - English, Dzongkha (the national language) and Nepali.

In October 1992, a Royal decree brought a significant change in the Bhutanese press. An autonomous Kuensel Corporation was set up which freed the newspaper from all official control. Since then, according to Bhutanese journalists, there has been no interference from the government.

The newspaper focuses on development news. The Editor-in-Chief feels that Bhutan's priorities are different from the rest of the world. He strongly believes that the developments taking place in different sectors should emphasised. The newspaper's agenda should be

more development oriented news. However, Dorji observes that other interesting news should not be left out. Therefore, *Kuensel* carries all kinds of items covering a wide range of topics which include housing, education, corruption, health, drug abuse etc. The opinion page is very popular as it reflects the views of the readers. The editorial which is very strong and vocal is written by the Editor-in-Chief himself.

The present *Kuensel* setup has one editor-in-chief, one news editor, two language editors, six reporters, three translators for Dzongha, three translators for Nepali and four layout staff. It has two bureaus with full-time correspondent to cover eastern and southern parts of Bhutan. Besides these, *Kuensel* also has photographers to cover important events.

Bhutanese women are not lagging behind. Some time back, the number of women reporters was equal to that of the men, but due to personal reasons, two women have left. Young graduates are taken in as reporters. They are given three months' training. Then they are sent to Singapore to work as apprentice in the *Strait Times*. "For better journalism exposure, they are sent either to Bangkok or Calcutta or Delhi for attachment", said Dorji. The starting salary for a young journalist is 7500nu which is equivalent of Rs. 7500 in Indian currency. *Kuensel* received a huge amount of financial assistance from the Danish government which helped the newspaper to reach its present state.

In response to a question as to what extent the newspaper enjoys freedom, Dorji said "there is absolutely no interference from the government. My news editor decides what goes in the newspaper." He however, adds that Bhutanese culture being different, direct criticism is neither expected nor appreciated by the people. Therefore, the newspaper has to be careful in criticising the government or its policies. Dorji believes that they (press people) are satisfied as long

as the message has reached the people. "We can be politely critical", he adds.

Tenzin Rigden, the young and dynamic news editor is the man behind the news. About the style of news writing, Rigden who holds a Masters in Journalism from an Australian University complacently says: " You have got to first understand Bhutan. Life in Thimphu is not as fast-moving as in Dhaka. There is no rush here. People read *Kuensel* in a relaxed manner. Therefore, our news stories are written in the manner that appeals to our readers."

The English and the Dzongkha editions of the newspaper comprise 16 pages and the Nepali one is of 12 pages. *Kuensel's* total circulation is 16000. The English version has a circulation of 10,000. Public buses are used for distribution throughout the country. Messengers are used to deliver the newspaper in remote places inaccessible by buses. This sometimes causes a delay of two to three days for the newspaper to reach its readers.

Kuensel does not depend on government subsidy. It has two sources of income, advertisements and the printing press. Fifty per cent

of its income comes from ads and another 50 per cent from its printing press which publishes text books for country's educational institutions. Since the Corporation's printing press is used for commercial purpose also to meet Bhutan's printing requirements, *Kuensel* only uses good quality paper that turns out cheaper for them in the long run. Since all the raw materials are imported, the cost of production is high. The price of one copy of *Kuensel* is 10nu.

I also visited Bhutan Broadcasting Service or the BBS. BBS comprises both the television and the radio. It is an autonomous corporation headed by the Executive Director. It is totally funded by the Bhutanese government. BBS initially comprised of the radio. It was started in 1972 or 1973 by a group of youngsters, the National Youth Association of Bhutan as weekly programme for the young people. Its target audience were the youth. This programme became very popular and was taken over by the Ministry of Communications in 1980 and developed as professional broadcasting service.

On week-days, the radio transmission is for nine and a half hour

beginning from 7am to 12 noon and 2pm to 6.30pm. On weekends it is a five hour transmission from 10am to 5pm. Various kinds of programmes are broadcast which include news, advertisements, information and discussions on different topics like agriculture, education, health, religion and entertainment. Religious programme forms an important item. Entertainment includes songs, dramas, and children's programme. Broadcasts are in Dzongkha, English, Nepali and regional languages.

Television on the other hand is a late comer in this country. It began broadcasting on 2 June, 1999 which corresponded with His Majesty's 25 years of rule. It is a one hour programme from 8 p.m. to 9 p.m.. 30 minutes is devoted to news and another 30 minutes to information and entertainment. News is both in English and Dzongkha, each being allotted 15 minutes.

Fresh graduates are appointed by BBS and later sent abroad for training ranging from two weeks to six months. There are no separate set of reporters for television or radio. The same reporters shuttle between the two media.

What fascinated me most was

the active participation of women in the BBS. In fact, in the news section, women outnumbered the men.. Bold and confident they seemed the go getter sort. Completely devoid of inhibitions, they were a bunch of young women who were not afraid to compete with either the men or the impediments of the surroundings. When I inquired of a very young, pretty reporter if she ever felt hesitant to be out where the action was or if there was any kind of sleazy remark from the public, she quipped in "no, never, women reporters are very well accepted by the public".

The impressions that I carried back home were very positive. Bhutan and the Bhutanese media have set their goals right. In a short span of time there has been a significant progress. I can certainly say with conviction that in the years to come, Bhutanese media will flourish in the right direction.

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At a glance

RANKING BY GDP GROWTH	Bhutan	Bangladesh	India	Maldives	Pakistan	Sri Lanka	Nepal
GDP growth	6.0%	4.4%	6.0%	6.8%	4.5%	5.3%	3.3%
Per-capita GDP (PPP)	\$1,762	\$1,410	\$2,167	\$3,545	\$1,774	\$3,105	\$1,219
Per-capita GNP (nom.)	\$510	\$299	\$452	\$1,230	\$492	\$833	\$230
Population (millions)	0.8	132.9	1,005.3	0.3	142.2	19.1	23.4
Population growth	2.3%	2.2%	1.9%	3.0%	2.6%	1.2%	2.3%
Inflation CPI	9.2%	2.8%	2.7%	1.5%	4.8%	10.8%	2.1%
Exports 12 months	\$0.1b.	\$5.5b.	\$41.9b.	\$0.1b.	\$8.5b.	\$5.3b.	\$0.7b.
Cur. acct. balance	-\$0.1b.	-\$0.3b.	-\$5.3b.	-\$0.07b.	-\$1.8b.	-\$1.0b.	\$0.01b.
Reserve excl. gold	\$0.3b.	\$1.3b.	\$36.3b.	\$0.1b.	\$1.2b.	\$1.2b.	\$1.0b.
GDP (PPP)	\$1.2b.	\$181b.	\$1,710b.	\$0.9b.	\$219b.	\$59b.	\$25b.
People per sq. km.	66.5	293.2	37.6	12.5	46.4	26.6	112.9
Life expectancy	61	60	62	67	63	73	57
Literacy rate	42.2%	38.1%	52.1%	92.6%	37.8%	89.3%	27.5%
Urban Pop.	7%	28%	28%	32%	35%	23%	14%

Countries	US Dollar	Japan Yen (¥)	Hong Kong Dollar	China Renminbi	Saudi Riyal	Britain Pound	France Franc	German Mark	Europe Euro
Bangladesh (Taka)	54.15	47.30	6.94	6.54	14.44	79.48	7.73	25.93	80.71
India (Rupee)	46.40	40.53	5.95	5.61	12.37	68.28	6.82	22.22	43.45
Pakistan (Rupee)	39.15	51.66	7.58	7.15	15.77	87.04	8.44	28.32	85.39
Sri Lanka (Rupee)	88.00	76.86	11.28	10.63	23.47	129.49	12.56	42.13	82.40
Nepal (Rupee)	74.15	64.76	9.51	9.06	19.77	109.10	10.58	35.50	69.43

Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is the value of all goods and services produced in one year. Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) based on World Bank ratios takes into account price differences between countries, for a more accurate measure of national wealth. Gross National Product (GNP) is GDP plus payments from abroad from investments and labour, minus similar payments to foreigners. Infant mortality is the number of deaths under age one per 1,000 live births.

NEPAL

The unbearable sadness of being

The only way to revitalise the blood-soaked earth is to seed it with faith, hope and effort

C. K. LAL in Kathmandu

THE head is heavy. The eyes sting and water. There is a lump in the throat. The heart thuds. Muscles ache. Even nature reflects the deep despair inside. The dismal dryness and power cuts bring on a yearning for rain to wash the gloom. It has been three weeks, but the smoke from the funeral pyres of Rukumkot and Naumale still hangs thick over our conscience.

I had long forgotten the name of the Japanese film, or the context of the snippet that suddenly resonated in a flashback: "When words are shining and bullets are flying, the need is even more to read, in order to save the seed." The only way to revitalise the blood-soaked earth is to seed it with faith, hope and effort. The source of all that energy lies in books.

Domestic Conflict and Crisis of Governability in Nepal should help make sense of our present state of ungovernance. In separate chapters, the book delves into what ails our democracy, the shortcomings of our political institutions, and the fatal flaws of our elite. The book then peers at extant and possible conflicts: insurgency, ethnicity, minority politics, economic dependency, resource rights, and geo-political compulsions of an India-locked state.

So, you start reading, hoping for that spark that will illuminate the darkness. But, as with all edited anthologies of this genre, this book too lacks coherence. There is nothing in the windy verbiage of Lok Raj Baral that prepares you for the common sense of Krishna Hachhethu. After the racy polemic of Krishna Bhattachan about possible ethnic revolution, the bland reporting of Pancha N Mahajan on the Maoist insurgency is a bit of a let down. The commentary by Kapil Shrestha on minority politics in Nepal doesn't psyche you for the heavy dose of political economy in the wordily-titled "*Mahakali Impasse: A Futile Paradigm's Bequested Travails*" by Dipak Gyawali and Ajaya Dixit. This is a collection of seminar papers, and it reads like one.

Dhruba Kumar seems to have taken his responsibility as the editor of the volume rather lightly, and opted to pay more attention to writing his own two pieces. But despite its patchiness, the book takes readers back on a roller-coaster ride of our immediate past, and helps us make some sense of the predicament we are now in. From the contemporary relevance of a collection of commentaries, the journey to the soul of a man who straddled the Nepali political scene like a colossus is like getting down from a rickety bus at the foothills, and then commencing the journey of self-discovery along a lonely trail up the mountains. BP Koirala's Atmabrittanta is the first-hand account of an epoch by its defining figure. The roots of many of the political complexities examined in Dhruba Kumar's volume go back to the days when a clash between traditional values represented by King Mahendra and aspirations of becoming a modern nation spear-headed by BPresulated in three socially stagnant decades.

It is said that geniuses get along as well as dynamite gets along with fire. Through his Atmabrittanta, BP succeeds exceedingly well in giving a glimpse of how the fire of ambition

in King Mahendra courted the dynamite of confidence in BP. The ensuing explosion set off an inferno that smoulders to this day in the ashes of dictatorship and democracy. King Mahendra read poetry and played piano for BP, but had no compunctions in incarcerating him two days after showering him with expensive gifts. The palace is like fire: it seems to be a dangerous friend, and a devastating enemy. Prime ministers play with it at their own peril. Girija Prasad Koirala, please take note.

Then there is Indiatath all-present reality in Nepali politics. Reading *Atmabrittanta*, you realise why BP could never befriend the all-powerful Indian bureaucracy. While Indian officials, including their ambassadors in Kathmandu, expected to be treated like latter-day viceroys, BP accorded them no more courtesy than his friend Ram Manohar Lohia would render a babu in Banaras. This infuriated the self-appointed guardians of democracy at Lanchauk no end, and they decided to ditch the Nepali Congress and hitch the wagons of India's strategic interest to the powerful engine of the royal palace. Introducing *Atmabrittanta* to English readers would be incomplete without mentioning the excellent translation by Kanak Mani Dixit. The prose flows with the easy fluidity of BP's original spoken Nepali transcription.

The third book takes us back two millennia to the Kiratas and Lichchhavis who laid the foundations of an urban civilisation that flowered as Newar culture during Kathmandu Valley's Malla period. This book has grown out of Sudarshan Raj Tiwari's doctoral dissertation, but (at least the first half) almost reads like a historical novel. Apparently Tiwari does not suffer from the widely prevalent fallacy among Nepali scholars that intelligibility is damaging for the reputation of academics.

Tiwari's thesis reminds you of what Lewis Mumford, an American planner and social commentator, once suggested: that the history of civilisation could be written in terms of the kinds of containers that given cultures created for themselves containers for the storage of grain, water, or wine, for the channelling of irrigation water or the control of floods, for the cartage and movement of goods and people, for the containment and shelter of kings and prelates, soldiers and servants, tradesmen and artisans.

One wonders what Dr Babu Ram Bhattarai, the ideologue of the Nepali Maoists would have to say about this book written by his former friend and fellow-architect, planner and teacher. Suffering from edifice complex in the grand tradition of most Nepalis in positions of power, the Maoists too erect gates in honour of their dead comrades.

After that torturous journey over the millennia through three volumes, the realisation suddenly dawns that convulsions of history can't be wished away. Agony is an inevitable part of being, pain an inextricable stage in the process of becoming. One way to reduce the torment is to engage in creative pursuits. Read. It may help save your sanity in these uncertain times.

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SRI LANKA

The war goes on; so does suffering

EKRAM KABIR

MORE exchanges of artillery, more dead bodies to count. The recent transfer of dead bodies by Sri Lankan army and the LTTE across the battle line last month came as a grim reminder to both sides that the war is not over and hope for peace is still remote. The LTTE has returned bodies of 93 army officers and men killed in late last month's 'Agni Kheela' offensive in Jaffna, while the army gave back bodies of 64 LTTEers, said a press report on May 6.

The latest upsurge in fighting between the government and Tamil Tiger rebels has set back the peace process once again. Government forces, without much success, are reportedly trying to push the LTTE from Elephant Pass, a strategic rebel-held land corridor linking the peninsula with the rest of the country.

Despite talk of a truce and attempted intermediation by a peace team from Norway, the government in Colombo seems to seek a military solution to the 18-year ethnic war. With overwhelming forces poised to launch land and air strikes on rebel positions, the military may try to drive the guerrillas back into the jungles.

Although President Chandrika Kumaratunga thinks that her government has only one problem - meaning LTTE rebels - to solve, yet since 1983, this particular problem has already left more than 64,000 people dead and severely hampered economic growth and development in Sri Lanka. Kumaratunga's determination to see through a negotiated constitutional settlement, military developments, international pressure, and Norwegian facilitation may be praiseworthy, but in the process the people of Sri Lanka are suffering - both in terms of economic and human costs.

Poverty, malnutrition, disease widowhood etc., have hit the country so hard that it'll take the administration in Colombo to recover from the loss.

For example, by 1998, 15 years after the conflict had ravaged Sri Lanka, the worst hit areas of the country - the North and the East - had seen the per capita outcome come down to 40 per cent of what it was in 1982. About 800,000 people have been displaced by the conflict and they belong to all communities: Tamil, Muslim and Sinhalese. Worse, the war has ravaged children, including girl and boy combatants, orphans and those traumatised by brutal violence. Around 2,00,000 of those displaced by the war are under 14, says a study - The Cost of War. The National Peace Council (NPC) of Sri Lanka, along with the MARGA Institute and International Alert did the study.

It was estimated that during these 15 strife-torn years, in the northern and eastern parts of the country, the output of paddy had come down by 27 per cent, onions and potatoes by 64 per cent and fisheries by 63 per cent. The capital assets destroyed, said the study, were worth approximately Rs 50 billion - about 125 per cent of the total value of output of the North and East in 1982.

Summarising the cost of the war up to 1998, in terms of expenditure, damages and loss of output, the study said that the direct government expenditure on the war was Sri Lankan Rs 213.32 billion, with Rs 40 billion being additionally spent on public order and safety. On the other hand, the LTTE's expenditure was estimated to be Rs 42.6 billion, and the expenditure on refugees and displaced persons Rs. 38 billion. The total added up to a staggering Rs 333.92 billion. The direct military expenditure on the war by the government and the LTTE amounted to Rs 295 billion.

The war had devastated the economic infrastructure of the North and had extensively damaged the East. One of the industries worst affected by the raging conflict was the tourism industry. In any country the number of tourist arrivals is related to the perceived security situation. Between 1975 and 1982 tourism in Sri Lanka had annually grown at an impressive

rate of 22 per cent, but after that it had fluctuated markedly. The study estimates a net loss in tourism earnings at Rs 120 billion.

The social and human cost of war was much greater. The war is truly a brutal one. Prisoners of war are rarely taken. While accurate figures are difficult to ascertain, estimates put the total number of people killed at between 50,000 and 60,000, up to 1998. Of these, around half were civilian. According to the Association of Disabled Ex-Service Personnel in Sri Lanka, the number of disabled soldiers is 10,000 to 15,000. Widows and female-headed households are an ever-growing and vulnerable group. While many widows receive some kind of financial compensation, they are subject to social exclusion.

The war has its political cost too. The island, or parts of it, have been in a more or less continuous state of emergency since 1984. Under the emergency powers, the government has used the increased power to proscribe political parties, ban rallies and censor the media. Many political leaders and prominent party members have been assassinated.

The above are a striking indicator of the burden that the people of all communities in Sri Lanka have had to bear to sustain the capabilities of those engaged in the war to inflict death and destruction on each other.

However in her latest initiative, President Kumaratunga has briefed her ministers at the weekly meeting on Thursday last on the outcome of the talks held between Norway and the LTTE regarding peace moves. A likely announcement of a date and venue of the peace talks scheduled this month has also been sent. It's high time that parties involved in Sri Lankan crisis took this opportunity seriously. The war has already inflicted the country way too much; therefore no one can afford to have the luxury to see the war to go on.