

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 Buddha and 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 easy winners on the anti-incumbency factor had they stuck to the BJP. However, even though, they have gained on the Muslim vote, the Trinamool Congress has lost a substantial chunk of the floating votes. 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 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 managed to overcome the odds. Whether she can do so at the most critical juncture of her political career now remains to be seen.

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 handing over a constituency that they had won for the last three times.

At a glance

RANKED BY GDP GROWTH	Bhutan	Bangladesh	India	Maldives	Pakistan	Sri Lanka	Nepal		
GDP growth	6.0%	4.4%	6.0%	6.8%	4.5%	5.5%	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%	4.6%	10.8%	2.1%		
Exports 12 months	\$0.1b.	\$5.5b.	\$41.9b.	\$0.1b.	\$8.5b.	\$3.3b.	\$0.7b.		
Cur. acc. 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 tel.	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%	20%	28%	32%	35%	23%	14%		
SOUTH ASIAN CURRENCY RATES									
Conversion rates	US \$	Japan Yen (100)	Hong Kong Dollar	China Renminbi	Saudi Riyal	Britain Pound	France Franc	Germany Mark	Europe Euro
Bangladesh (Taka)	\$4.15	47.30	6.94	6.54	14.44	79.68	7.73	25.93	50.71
India (Rupee)	46.40	40.53	5.95	5.63	12.37	68.28	6.62	22.22	43.45
Sri Lanka (Rupee)	59.15	51.84	7.58	7.15	15.77	87.04	8.44	28.32	55.39
Nepal (Rupee)	58.00	76.86	11.28	10.63	23.47	129.49	12.56	42.15	82.40
US \$	74.35	64.76	9.51	8.96	19.77	109.10	10.58	35.50	69.43

GNP Domestic Product (GDP) is the value of all goods and services produced in one year. Purchasing-Power Parity (PPP) based on World Bank ratio 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.

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-in-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 Macintosh-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.

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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 is 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 to 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 10 rupees.

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. Their 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 8pm to 9pm. 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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PAKISTAN

Elections are not going to be held, says Nisar Khuhro

STAR REPORT

"GENERAL PERvez Musharraf will not hold general elections as he has ambition to remain in power," declared Sindh Pakistan People's Party, while giving an exclusive interview to *SOUTHASIA* magazine, published in its May 2001 edition.

When asked, if he thought Gen. Musharraf had private ambitions, he said: "Of course, he does. He can give him extension (as the Chief of the Army Staff), he can become president, he can impose martial law, he can do anything."

The senior leader of the PPP said

he was sure the elections that scheduled to be held in October 2002, may not be held. He emphasised his point of view by further saying that had it not been the case, Gen. Musharraf would have held the elections in three months after the military takeover in October 1999. "Elections take only three months; in fact the process takes only 45 days," he added.

Khuhro was of the view that the political vacuum "deliberately created" by the government was going to be detrimental to the political interests of the country.

Khuhro also accused the government of launching a campaign to harass PPP chairperson Benazir Bhutto who wanted to return to the country to fill the vacuum.

end of the year.

When the *SOUTHASIA* magazine asked him which of the two large PML groups he supported, he said:

"We have the ARD now. And the Muslim League, led by acting president Javed Hashmi, is with us in the ARD (the Alliance for Restoration of Democracy). How small or big (Mr. Sharif's group is, is yet to be seen."

He observed that the country

should have had a government based on national consensus to hold free and fair elections under an independent election commission.

"That is out demand, that is the demand of all the political parties."

SRI LANKA

The war goes on; so does suffering

EKRAM KABIR

MORE exchanges of artillery, more dead bodies to count. The latest 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 Bhava' offensive in Jaffna, while the army gave back bodies of 64 LTTEs, 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.