

# Cry for Reform at UC Berkeley Seminar on Indian Democracy



India's Panchayati Raj Minister Mani Shankar Aiyar (r) seen with UC Berkeley Prof. Pranab Bardhan at a two-day seminar on local government and empowerment in India at UC Berkeley. (Ashfaq Swapan photo)

Academic seminar as gripping as a Bollywood blockbuster

By ASHFAQUE SWAPAN  
Special to India-West

BERKELEY, Calif. — Big celebrities, passion, even a bit of argument and drama — a recent seminar on democracy here was at times as gripping as a Bollywood blockbuster, but at the end of the day, it was also an academic seminar, with top experts on India presenting densely argued, thoughtful papers on the state of

(Cont. on page A44)

A44 — June 22, 2007 — INDIA-WEST

National — U.S.

## Cry for Reform at UC Berkeley's Seminar on Indian Democracy

[Cont. from page A1]  
local governance in the world's largest democracy.

Two union ministers, Panchayati Raj Minister Mani Shankar Aiyar and Urban Affairs Minister Jalpal Reddy, were on hand who were responsible for the very topic: the two-day seminar addressed, "Local government and empowerment."

Two union ministers, Panchayati Raj Minister Mani Shankar Aiyar and Urban Affairs Minister Jalpal Reddy, were on hand who were responsible for the very topic: the two-day seminar addressed, "Local government and empowerment."

Between the reformist zeal of IAS bureaucrat-turned-governance activist Narayan's blistering critique of local governance,

Aiyar's equally articulate celebration of the achievements in local empowerment, and Berkeley development economist Pranab Bardhan's eloquent presentation of the stark contrasts in India, attendees had an opportunity to gain a thorough insight into the state of governance in India.

The nuts-and-bolts-challenges of local empowerment were discussed by people who had actually been there: the gentle, soft-

spoken former Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Digvijay Singh, much praised for his role in implementing local self-government programs in that huge state, while Thomas Isaac, the cerebral, bespectacled Kerala finance minister and architect of one of India's most successful local government programs, presented his take on the challenges to local governance.

In the wrap-up session, public



Former Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Digvijay Singh

Interest legal activist Rajeev Dhavan added a dash of color with his flamboyant, rapier wit, not even sparing the organizers. "The purpose of a conference is to plan the next conference," he quipped, quoting British novelist David Lodge.

In one of most compelling presentations of the seminar, Narayan offered a damning indictment of the present state of governance in India.

"Is anybody running India?" he thundered. "We have a classic system of alibis...because authority is completely divorced



Kerala Finance Minister Thomas Isaac

from accountability in the country, because power has become dysfunctional in India.

In an impassioned jeremiad peppered with historical anecdotes and statistical figures, Narayan told the audience of an incident in 1934, when in British India S. Das, the newly elected Chief Justice of Calcutta, asked the governor to let him appoint a commission to study the state of governance. He refused to accept the governor's suggestion of appointing a member of the elite Indian Civil Service and instead appointed a "27-year-old youngster," who did an outstanding job. When the commissioner was in jail due to participating in the freedom struggle, Das demanded — and got — from the colonial government permission for the youngster, later to be celebrated as Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, to oversee city files.

"That's what happened in 1924. Eighty-three years later, there is not a city in India, let alone great cities like Kolkata or Delhi or

(Cont. on page A46)

46 — June 22, 2007 — INDIA-WEST

National — U.S.

## Cry for Reform at UC Berkeley's Seminar on Indian Democracy

[Cont. from page A44]

lumbini or Chennai, not even a grade municipality which would be allowed to have its own executive. It's as simple as that."

He threw a challenge at the audience. "I dare this group here to name the mayor of any one city of India today. Need I say more?"

India's colonial institutions of city government had stood it a good stead, he said. Leaders like Vallabhbhai Patel, Dadabhai Naoroji and Jawaharlal Nehru came up from city politics. "They became national leaders because they worked in the local governments effectively, and because local governments were schools of democracy in that early phase," he said.

Today, he said, "There is a deep crisis in governance."

"There is no good governance in India, even in the so-called good governments," he said. "The heart of the matter is political reform," Narayan said. "As long as we have autocratic political parties, as long as we have kleptocratic politics and bureaucracy... it would be completely wrong to expect local governments will be



UC Berkeley chancellor Robert Birgenome welcomes attendees to the seminar on Indian local government as Center for South Asia Studies chair Rana Iyengar looks on.

empowered." What was to be done? His answer was blunt. "Ultimately the enlightened citizenry must take charge," he said. "There's nobody else to take charge."

True to his word, after 17 years as an elite bureaucrat and 10 years as a government reform activist, Narayan has started a party, the Lok Satta Party.

However, the situation isn't all that bleak, according to Aiyar, the

Panchayati Raj minister, who sees a lot to be proud of.

"What we have actually succeeded in doing — to put it in a single sentence — is operationalizing the greatest experiment in democracy that has ever taken place in history or to be taking place anywhere in the world," he said.

India has in place around 250,000 institutions of local self-governance in rural and urban



Foundation for Democratic Reforms in India board member Vinod Khanna (l) with grassroots-formation-activist Jagprakash Narayana at the seminar on Indian local government. (Ashfaq Swapan photo)

India of which approximately 238,000 are in rural India, he said.

"In these 238,000 local institutions... we have elected through open democratic process that is at least as transparent as any similar anywhere process in the world... no less than 3.2 million elected representatives."

Aiyar did concede that there are problems. "We have a design for institutions of devolution," he said. "We don't have a design for devolution."

India's complex reality is such that shortcomings and achievement seem to live cheek-by-jowl, and IUC Berkeley economics Prof.

"Contrast (that) with a recent change in a very remote part of India," he said. "The government of Nagaland in 2002 changed the system and made the salaries of health officials, education dependent on the local village committees and the performance immediately improved." In fact, school performance improved so much that lot of poor people moved their kids back to private schools.

Bardhan said the conference's focus on local government was timely. "We've taken an important step in the right direction."

Earlier, UC Berkeley chancellor Robert Birgenome welcomed



Sridhar Iyengar, president of the Foundation for Democratic Reforms in India, speaking at the seminar on Indian local government while FDR board member Vinod Khanna looks on.

Pranab Bardhan made that point with feeling.

"Of course we are all proud that India is a vibrant and resilient democracy, but let me add to that, that at the local level, India still is not a democracy," he said. "Except in three or four states, in most of India at the local level we have local oligarchy."

Bardhan said that economic growth provided only a partial picture of India. "Many of us are carried away by the euphoria of economic growth," he said. "We often overlook that in many respects of public services we are among the worst in the world."

"Malnutrition statistics for Indian children were worse than sub-Saharan Africa, and in many health indicators, India is worse off than Bangladesh," he said.

"India is the world's largest illiterate country," he added.

attendees to the two-day seminar, jointly hosted by the U.S. nonprofit Foundation for Democratic Reforms in India.

"Today, India is a model for economic success. However, as we celebrate these economic successes, it's important that we remember that India's real success — and we hope these two are connected — is in maintaining a vibrant democracy across so many divides, including religion, class and region," he said.

FDR president Sridhar Iyengar said that after assisting grassroots groups in India, the nonprofit is ready to enter the second stage "where our role is really... (to) contribute to the debate which is happening in India with regard to political reforms, and bring groups like this together. We hope that this will become an annual conference in Berkeley."