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Commerce and Industry Minister Kamal Nath with U.S. Trade Representative Ambassador Susan C. Schwab at the Fifth Meeting of the India-U.S. Trade Policy Forum in Chicago on February 19.

Minister Kamal Nath visits Chicago for Trade Policy Forum Dialogue

Â Information and communication tech market to touch $24.3 billion by 2011, says Gartner.

Â Global chipmaker Intel will invest more than $1 billion in India over the next three years.

Â Tata Industries Ltd. (TIL) will form a joint venture with Boeing to work in the aero-space sector in India.

Commerce and Industry Minister visits Chicago for Trade Policy Forum Dialogue

Commerce and Industry Minister of India Kamal Nath visited Chicago for the Fifth Meeting of the India-U.S. Trade Policy Forum (TPF), co-chaired by U.S. Trade Representative Ambassador Susan Schwab on February 19.

Discussions covered the five jointly identified key areas: agriculture; innovation and creativity (which look at the broad gamut of IPR-related issues); investment; services; and, tariff and non-tariff barriers.

The two Ministers welcomed the progress made since the last TPF meeting in April 2007, including the initiation of exploratory dialogues on a Bilateral Investment Treaty and on a Totalization Agreement.

Minister Nath said: "We have been able to resolve a variety of issues and find mutually acceptable solutions through a dialogue under this Forum. This milestone by milestone approach should be maintained to ensure continued progress, including in our bilateral discussions on a Social Security Totalization, which were initiated in December 2007, and in our efforts to foster private sector collaboration between professions."

The delegations were meeting with the U.S.-India Private Sector Advisory Group (PSAG) to the TPF for the second time. The PSAG presented its Vision Statement on key policy areas on which the Governments of India and the United States could enhance their engagement and bolster the India-U.S economic partnership.

The intermediate targets, which PSAG identified in this document for the two Governments, include negotiation of a mutually agreeable Bilateral Investment Treaty by the end of 2008, and the promotion of regulatory cooperation.

The PSAG was created in April 2007 to provide strategic direction to the TPF as India and the United States seek to chart a path for greater mutual economic integration in the next five to ten years.

From left: Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley, U.S. Trade Representative Ambassador Susan C. Schwab and Commerce and Industry Minister Kamal Nath during his visit to Chicago on February 19.

The PSAG's membership includes key voices in India and the United States on international economic and trade policy. Representatives from India include Dr. V. Krishnamurthy, Chairman, National Manufacturing Competitive Council; Dr. Isher Judge Ahluwalia, Chairperson, Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER); Sunil Mittal, President, Confederation of Indian Industry (CII); Habil Khorakiwala, President, Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI).

U.S. representatives include Ambassador Carla A. Hills, former U.S. Trade Representative; C. Fred Bergsten, Director of the Pete G. Peterson Institute for International Economics; John J. Castellani, President of the Business Roundtable; and Ron Somers, President of the US-India Business Council.

The PSAG's first meeting took place in New York on September 24, 2007.

On February 19, Ambassador Schwab and Minister Nath addressed a luncheon gathering at the Executives' Club of Chicago. Hon'ble Richard Daley, the Mayor of Chicago, was also present. Minister Nath remarked on the common values of "plurality, and respect for law and order" that linked Indian and American democracies. Speaking about India's economic liberalization, he told the gathering of 350 businessmen that India had had to develop its own specific model, which capitalized on its "capacity to adopt and capacity to adapt". He pointed out that India's economic growth was driven not by exports but by its own domestic demand and domestic savings. "India's demographic dividend with more than 50 percent of the population under the age of 25 years provides great synergy with the advanced technology base of the U.S. and creates an enormous potential for collaboration between the two countries. India greatly values this partnership, which benefits not just the two countries but could also help the world face the challenges of 21st century," the Minister concluded.

US Defense Secretary Robert Gates visits India

The U.S. Secretary of Defense, Dr. Robert Gates, arrived in New Delhi on February 26 on a two-day visit to India. It was Secretary Gates's first visit to India since assuming office on December 18, 2006. Secretary Gates's visit is part of an unprecedented acceleration in India-U.S. engagement and qualitative transformation in the relationship, particularly in defense cooperation.

The Defense Secretary led a 50-member official-cum-business delegation.

India and the U.S. have in place a framework of defense cooperation established by the 2005 Defense Framework Agreement and a comprehensive institutional framework of exchanges.

U.S. Defense Secretary Dr. Robert Gates with Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh in New Delhi on Feb 26.

During his stay, Gates called on Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh, External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee, Defense Minister A.K. Antony, National Security Advisor M.K. Narayanan and Leader of the Opposition L.K. Advani.

Apart from the India-U.S. Civil Nuclear Initiative, Gates discussed with the Indian leaders his country's desire to expand defense ties with India across the spectrum, including joint military exercises and defense trade.

He informed the Prime Minister that the U.S. government was prepared to pursue the next steps in the civil nuclear initiative after India wrapped up its safeguards pact with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

He also discussed the proposed Logistics Support Agreement aimed at facilitating smooth exchange between the armed forces of the two sides.

"The civil nuclear initiative is a very good deal for both India and the U.S.," the Pentagon chief underlined. However, Gates stressed that the U.S. was committed to expanding military-to-military and defense trade with India regardless of the outcome of the civil nuclear initiative.

"We have an ambitious agenda of military-to-military exercises and interactions that are increasing in size and sophistication," he said.

"I am impressed that India-U.S. defense relations have grown since the defense framework agreement was signed in 2005. I am looking at ways to expand this relationship," Secretary Gates said.

"We probably have as wide-ranging set of interactions with the Indian military as we have with any military in the world, perhaps more so, from increasingly large and sophisticated exercises to defense trade. And I think that there is every opportunity for this range of military contacts and working together to proceed in a positive direction," he said.

Responding to a question on the context of the relationship, Secretary Gates said: "Well, I don't see our improving military relationships in the region in the context of any other country, including China. I think that when you look at the kinds of activities that we're engaged in and the kind of exercises that we conduct, it covers a range of activities from dealing with piracy and terrorism and crime to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. These expanding relationships don't necessarily have to be directed against anybody."

He complimented India on the size of its non-military efforts in Afghanistan, its economic development and civic reconstruction efforts.

"I expressed our pleasure, obviously, with the purchase by India of the six C-130Js," he also added.

Top US Senators visit India

A three-member U.S. Congressional delegation (CODEL) visited India on February 20, as part of a three-nation tour of India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. The Senators visited India after observing the elections in Pakistan on February 18. The delegation comprised Senator Joseph Biden (Democrat-Delaware), Senator John Kerry (Democrat-Massachusetts) and Senator Chuck Hagel (Republican-Nebraska). Senator Biden is the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Senator Kerry is the chairman of the SFRC's Sub-committee on Near East and South and Central Asian Affairs. At a press briefing before the delegation's departure, Senator Hagel said: "So we have got a very significant universe of common interests here with India that we need to enhance and we need to build on and try to strengthen as we go forward. And these kinds of visits and exchanges help do that."

In New Delhi, they called on Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh and discussed with him the entire spectrum of bilateral relations, including the civil nuclear initiative, and regional developments. The Senators expressed support for the broad-based relationship between India and the U.S. They also shared their assessment of the schedule for the consideration of the India-U.S. civil nuclear agreement by the U.S. Congress in the context of the Congressional calendar for 2008.

Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh meeting with a group of U.S. Senators who called on him in New Delhi on February 20. (From L-R) U.S. Ambassador to India, David C. Mulford, Senators Chuck Hagel, John Kerry and Joseph Biden. National Security Advisor M.K. Narayanan and Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister T.K.A. Nair are also seen.

Indo-US HTCG meeting held in New Delhi

The Sixth Meeting of the India-U.S. High Technology Cooperation Group (HTCG) was held in New Delhi on February 28-29, 2008. The Indian delegation was led by Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon and the U.S. delegation by Under Secretary of Commerce for Industry and Security Mario Mancuso. The architecture of the HTCG involves private sector participation as an integral part of its working format. The industry engagement on the first day, with wide participation of a cross-section of Indian and U.S. industry, identified the areas of common interest requiring specific action by both sides for enhancing high technology transfers to India. These were considered by the two government delegations who agreed on a comprehensive plan to respond to the industry's recommendations.

Highlights of the action plan include a timetable for reviewing export controls in respect of India while building on innovative efforts already underway for simplifying export controls. India recognized and welcomed the U.S. Administration's announcement of their Dual Use Export Control Reform Initiative. On the Validated End User Program which was notified by the U.S. Government on October 2, 2007 as a U.S. initiative to simplify export licensing requirements for Indian companies, both sides agreed that further discussions were required as U.S. export control polices should keep pace with the transformed relationship between India and the U.S. On nanotechnology, the two sides agreed to focus on commercial applications of cost-effective solutions for the benefit of society in the areas of health, energy, potable water and sustainable development.

Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon with Under Secretary of Commerce for Industry and Security Mario Mancuso during the Sixth India-U.S. HTCG meeting in New Delhi.

On biotechnology, both governments agreed to support advanced technology transfers that would stimulate capacity building in life sciences. They also agreed to engage in harmonization of regulatory systems in medical devices, pharmaceuticals and biotechnology with the ultimate objective of improving market access. On IT, the two sides agreed to focus on further collaboration in trade on advanced electronics and software, high performance computers, encryption and next generation technologies. In defense, the Group agreed on an ambitious plan to give an impetus to high technology transfers and trade that would address all issues related to licensing and India's defense offsets policy, encouraging collaborations at all levels including small and medium enterprises. The two sides looked forward to a series of time-bound actions in these areas to raise high technology commerce to the next level of bilateral cooperation.

In his keynote remarks on the Industry Day of the HTCG, Minister of Science & Technology, Kapil Sibal said, "The strategic partnership between India and the U.S. is a truly global partnership. It holds the potential of benefitting humanity by helping the world face up to emerging challenges of the 21st century — such as global warming, terrorism and economic security of the masses — through cooperation in frontier areas of technology."

The High Technology Cooperation Group constituted in 2003, had identified four broad areas of priority focus for promoting and facilitating bilateral commerce in advanced technology items between India and the United States: Defense and Strategic Trade; Biotechnology; Information Technology; and Nanotechnology.

Social sectors gain, current fiscal to see 8.8% growth

With a major step-up in allocations in education, health and agriculture, Finance Minister P. Chidambaram concluded Part I of his budget speech on February 29, hoping for an 8.8 percent growth in this fiscal ending March 2008.

Finance Minister P. Chidambaram

Chidambaram proposed additional allocation in the fiscal year 2008-09 for several social sector schemes, including those for education, health, job guarantee, urban renewal and rural development. In education, he said, the outlay was being stepped up by 20 percent, even as new Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) were proposed in Andhra Pradesh, Bihar and Rajasthan.

He also announced an allocation of Rs. 312 billion for the Bharat Nirman program, Rs. 344 billion for education and Rs. 131 billion for the Sarva Siksha Abhiyan and said the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) would be extended to all 596 rural districts of the country.

On the farm front, he said that the growth of just 2.6 percent expected this year in agriculture was disappointing and was responsible for the retardation of the overall expansion of the Indian economy, which was otherwise on a high-growth trajectory."The economy is expected to grow by 8.7 percent," he said, referring to the projections of the Economic Survey tabled by him on February 28. "But I personally think, the growth would be slightly higher at 8.8 percent."

The Finance Minister began his speech with concerns over inflation, on account of both domestic and global factors, and said that the intention of his government was to make growth "more inclusive" with a focus on social sectors and agriculture.

He said that some areas within the broader farm sector, such as irrigation, would get a heavy dose of investments, even as 500 new soil-testing laboratories would be set up across the country over the next five years. He said agriculture credit would have doubled by March this year, even as he announced a complete waiver of loans for small and marginal farmers holding up to two hectares under a rural debt waiver scheme. "In respect of other farmers there will a one-time settlement scheme," he said, adding that some 30 million farmers were expected to benefit from the announcement.

Chidambaram said that the weather-based crop insurance scheme would continue, along with an allocation of Rs. 200 billion for irrigation, Rs. 400 million for a special tea fund.

He also introduced a health insurance scheme for the poor, an additional allocation of Rs.14.55 billion for the development of north-eastern states and more funds for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and minorities.

Expressing concern in his speech over rising prices, Chidambaram said, "management of the supply side of food articles will be the most crucial task" in the next fiscal.

"Keeping inflation under check is one of the cornerstones of our policy," he said, adding that the large inflow of money from overseas was posing problems of adding to money supply.

"The solution lies in increasing the absorptive capacity of the economy in the medium term. In the short term, it is our responsibility to manage the flows more actively," he said.

The Minister said the country's finances were also in good shape and noted that the revenue deficit for the current fiscal would be 1.2 percent, against budget estimates of 1.5 percent, while fiscal deficit was 3.1 percent, against 3.3 percent.

Highlights of Union Budget 2008-09

Â No income tax on annual earnings of Rs.150,000
Â Rs. 4,000 relief for all tax assesees
Â 10 percent tax on income between Rs.150,000 and Rs. 300,000
Â 20 percent tax on income between Rs.300,000 and Rs. 500,000
Â 30 percent tax on income over Rs.500,000
Â No income tax for women with annual income up to Rs.180,000
Â No income tax for senior citizens with annual income up to Rs. 225,000
Â Over 8 percent growth for 12 successive quarters starting January 2005 till December 2007
Â Maintaining growth with price stability
Â Farm growth low at 2.6 percent
Â Gross budgetary support rises to Rs. 380 billion
Â Education gets 20 percent more to Rs.344 billion from Rs. 286.8 billion
Â Rural infrastructure scheme Bharat Nirman to get Rs. 312.8 billion
Â Midday meal scheme for school children to get Rs. 80 billion
Â School enrollment scheme Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan to get Rs.131 billion
Â Government and Reserve Bank of India to manage capital inflows
Â 16 new central universities
Â 3 new Indian Institutes of Technology
Â Government to raise additional resources worth Rs.100 billion
Â National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme extended to all 596 rural districts
Â NREGS to get Rs.160 billion, more money will be provided on need
Â Jawaharlal Nehru Urban Renewal Mission to get Rs. 68.66 billion, up from Rs. 54.82 billion
Â Northeast development to get Rs.14.55 billion
Â Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, minorities get special allocations
Â Rs. 5.5 billion for minority districts
Â HIV/AIDS prevention to get Rs.9.93 billion
Â Complete loan waivers for farms up to 2 hectares
Â Weather based crop insurance scheme to continue fund
Â Rs.200 billion for irrigation
Â Total plan spending of Rs.2.4 trillion
Â Farm credit target at Rs.2.8 trillion
Â Health spending to rise 15 percent
Â Loan waiver to benefit 40 million farmers
Â Farm debt waiver scheme to cost Rs. 600 billion

Union Minister Kamal Nath launches "Investing in America: The Indian Story" in Chicago

Commerce and Industry Minister, Kamal Nath launched the "Investing in America: the Indian Story", a joint initiative of the US-India Business Council (USIBC) and Federation of Indian Chamber of Commerce & Industry (FICCI) in Chicago on February 19. The initiative aims at highlighting the multiple contributions made by Indian companies to the U.S. economy.

'The Indian story' tells the stories of some of the top Indian companies operating in America including the Tata Group, Ranbaxy Laboratories, HCL Technologies, Mahindra U.S.A., Satyam Computer Systems, Essar Group, Wockhardt, Thermax, ITC Group, Bharat Forge America, Kotak Mahindra, and Jet Airways, among others. The audience learnt about the value that these companies of Indian origin were adding to the American economy through technology innovation, employment generation and in many other ways.

Commerce and Industry Minister Kamal Nath speaking at the launch of roadshows. Ron Somers, President USIBC, Ambassador Ronen Sen and USTR Ambassador Susan C. Schwab (seated from left to right) are also seen.

In his remarks on the occasion, Minister Nath highlighted the impressive growth in Indian investments in U.S. This was complemented by a rapid increase in U.S. exports to India, which had grown much faster than India's exports to the U.S. in 2007. "India was not worried about this because trade and investment has to be a two-way street. We are glad that the traffic is increasing on this street — in both directions," Minister Nath said. U.S. Trade Representative Ambassador Susan Schwab was also present at the event and congratulated the Indian companies for their contribution to the U.S. economy.

Ambassador Ronen Sen also spoke on the occasion and welcomed the growing vigor and diversity of the India-U.S. partnership. "From mangoes to the moon — its scope is indeed varied and limitless. Last year, we witnessed the arrival of first Indian mangoes in United States. Soon, for the first time, NASA equipment will be carried to the moon on an Indian space vehicle", he said.

First India-US SME Summit takes place in Chicago

To promote further economic and commercial co-operation between their Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) sectors, a U.S.-India SME Summit was jointly organized on February 20 in Chicago by Federation of Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), U.S.-India Business Council (USIBC) and the Chicago Council on Global Affairs.

The inspiration for the event came from Commerce and Industry Minister Kamal Nath and U.S. Trade Representative Ambassador Susan Schwab and it was timed to coincide with the fifth meeting of the Trade Policy Forum, which they co-chair.

In her key note remarks on the occasion, Ambassador Schwab said that she and Minister Nath "saw that the smaller companies — with their incredible entrepreneurial potential — were not as involved in trade" between the two countries as they could be and wanted to find a way to help. This summit provided the answer as was aimed at addressing the many unique challenges that the SMEs faced in trying to globalize.

Ambassador Sen, who gave the opening remarks at the summit, pointed to the two-way nature of trade, investments, and job creation between India and the U.S. He said:

Ambassador Sen

"This is as it should be and these healthy two-way trends will reinforce the long-term stakes in taking the partnership between our two countries to its natural level. The SME communities on both sides have an important role in expanding the scope and impact of this collaboration."

The summit's content was designed to generate awareness of further opportunities for SMEs in both the countries, especially in the manufacturing sector through leveraging the opportunities offered by global supply chains. It sought to address the question of how SMEs could amplify the global competitiveness of firms of all sizes. Besides case study presentations on 'SMEs — Indian and U.S.' — which had successfully leveraged the global supply chain, there were panel discussions on 'A Vision for Future Opportunities'; 'Enhanced SME Partnerships: Engineering and Manufacturing' and 'Financing SME Competitiveness in a Global Economy'.

Over 50 businessmen from 45 Indian SMEs participated in the summit, covering a wide range of sectors including agriculture and food processing, automotive components, engineering goods, chemicals/fertilizers, electrical goods, bio-technology, pharmaceuticals, medical equipment, logistics, water treatment/waste management, plastics, IT/consultancy, wood products, textiles, gift items, leather, financial services and consultancy/trade advisory services.

Indian SMEs are already doing well, contribute 40 percent of the country's manufacturing sector output, 6.75 percent of GDP, and provide employment to about 20 million people. More than 50 percent of the Indian exports are contributed by SMEs of which about 15 percent are through indirect exports.

With India's manufacturing emerging as a new engine for growth, New Delhi looks at U.S. an excellent partner to consolidate its position as a global manufacturing hub in the coming years. Chicago and mid-western states of U.S., which together form the manufacturing hub of the U.S., can play a special role in exploiting the synergies.

The summit concluded with about 150 matchmaking meetings on February 21 connecting Indian and U.S. SMEs and major MNCs to each other for new business opportunities.

Information and communication technology market to reach $24.3 billion by 2011: Gartner

Driven by the increasing use of technology by small and mid-sized businesses, the country's information and communication technology market is estimated to grow 20.3 percent annually to reach $24.3 billion by 2011, industry research firm Gartner said recently.

"The growth will be driven by chief information officers (CIOs) continuing to build and consolidate the basic IT infrastructure, in addition to small and mid-size businesses increasingly leveraging technology to drive business growth and efficiency," it said.

The total Indian ICT market was $9.6 billion in 2006, including hardware and software.

Though worldwide IT budgets are expected to increase by 3.3 percent in 2008, slightly higher than 2007, Indian firms would report stronger-than-average IT budget increases of around 13 percent.

"This increased spending by Indian CIOs is directed primarily toward building new business capabilities, with 30 percent of IT spend allocated for business growth and 19 percent toward business transformation," the firm said.

The Indian technology landscape was evolving rapidly, driven by sustained growth in the offshore services sector with strong domestic growth.

Indian firms are spending their budgets more on hardware and software than on people, Gartner said, adding this is significant as Indian firms continue to build on their infrastructure.

The HR component of the IT budget would grow as the emphasis shifts from implementing standard (generic) solutions to creating unique products and services, it added.

IBM launches delivery center in Noida

IBM India expanded its operations in the northern State of Uttar Pradesh with the inauguration of a new Global Delivery Center in Noida. This is IBM Global Business Services' first such center in Noida.

In a second phase of the expansion, IBM will open another center in the vicinity, which is expected to be fully operational by mid-2008. Both the center will house around 3,000 employees once fully staffed, the company said in a release.

These centers will enable IBM to increase its existing application services portfolio to support a growing global client base. With the addition of these centers, IBM's global delivery operations will be provided from six locations — Bangalore, Hyderabad, Pune, Chennai, Kolkata, Gurgaon/Noida in India.

The center will be an integral part of IBM's global delivery network, spread across three dozen countries around the world.

"IBM will increase its operations in Noida by hiring technology graduates and IT professionals with skills in IT strategy and architecture, business consulting, enterprise solutions (SAP, Siebel, and Oracle), testing, and business intelligence," said Rajesh Nambiar, general manager and vice-president, Global Delivery, IBM India.

DuPont hires 600 scientists for Indian R&D facility

The Rs. 1 trillion U.S.-based science and technology company E.I. du Pont de Nemours and Co. has chosen Hyderabad to set up its first research center outside the United States.

Being set up with an investment of Rs. 2 billion, the center will start its first phase of operations in April.

"India has a top quality science and technology talent. We are looking at leveraging this talent for our next level of growth," said S.T. Tsay, regional director, Asia-Pacific, Human Resources, DuPont.

While the center's primary focus will be on research in the biotechnology sector, other research work will be focussed on biofuels, renewable energy and life sciences.

The company has already signed up 100 engineers, scientists and research associates in disciplines across biotechnology, chemicals and material sciences. "India is strategic to us in terms of human capital. The Indian education system produces high quality engineers and scientists. And the fact that these people are fluent in English is an added advantage," said Tsay. He is overseeing the hiring activity for the knowledge center.

DuPont has more than 5,000 scientists working for it in different locations across the world. The Indian team will work closely with them. A number of new hires have been sent to the Central Research and Development Center in the U.S. for initial training.

India to buy six Lockheed transport aircraft

The U.S. defense and aerospace giant, Lockheed Martin, has signed a deal with the Indian government worth an estimated $1.1 billion to sell six Super Hercules C-130J military transport planes.

"We are proud India chose the C-130J to meet its airlift needs," Orville Prins, vice-president for business development in India for Lockheed Martin Aeronautics, told reporters at the recent defense exposition held in New Delhi.

"They will soon join the ranks of seven countries who experience first hand the outstanding capabilities of the C-130J Super Hercules," Prins said, even as the company made a strong pitch for its F-16 multi-role fighters.

He said the aircraft's heavy-lift capa-

bilities, advanced cockpit avionics and versatility in adverse terrain and flying conditions will help it exceed India's unique requirements for an advanced tactical air lifter.

The C-130J model is the latest version of the Hercules C-130 that has been configured for landing and take-off from a grassy field or dirt patch the size of a football field. It can climb and get out of a threat area fast. Named after the mythical Greek figure, the four-engine Hercules is one of the oldest transport aircraft in the world that was introduced in the 1950s and is being used in 67 countries.

The cost of the Super Hercules deal has not been disclosed but indications from Washington place the package at nearly $1.1 billion, which outstrips the cost of the two earlier deals put together. The U.S. government will guarantee supplies of equipment and infrastructure under its foreign military sales program but not commercial details such as offsets that is left to the manufacturing company. Both the F-16IN warplane and the C-130J have inherent capabilities to meet the long-term requirements for military aircraft in India, Prins said.

US firm Astonfield to build energy projects in West Bengal

Astonfield Management Ltd, a U.S.-based infrastructure project management company, will begin construction of renewable energy projects in West Bengal this year.

The firm has received official allotments from the West Bengal Renewable Energy Development Agency (WBREDA).

The first three projects granted to it are a 10 MW biomass unit at Gangarampur in South Dinajpur, a 5 MW solar-PV unit in Bankura district and a 1 MW manure-to-power unit at Kalyani in Nadia.

Of the three projects, the 10 MW biomass project will cost approximately Rs.600 million while Rs.1 billion would be spent for the 5 MW solar power unit and Rs.80 million for the 1 MW of manure-to-power project. When completed, the 5 MW solar PV installation in Bankura will be the largest solar facility in India. The group intends to spend Rs.20 billion on renewable energy projects over the next two years in India. Astonfield had earlier announced their India presence in Bangalore last year and begun their work in West Bengal.

US firms keen to explore oil and gas in India

A road show that the Indian government organized in Houston recently, to showcase the 57 exploration blocks currently on offer for bidding, elicited enthusiastic response from international oil and gas companies, according to an official statement.

"ENI, Total, British Petroleum, Statoil Hydro and Harvest Natural Resources were key among the oil and gas companies that participated in the Houston road show," it said.

According to the petroleum ministry, of the 57 exploration blocks being offered this time for bidding, 19 are in deep water, nine in shallow water and 29 on land.

Mindteck acquires US company

Mindteck (India) Ltd., a global technology and IT services company, has acquired the U.S.-based Infotech Consulting and plans to acquire three more companies in the U.S., Europe and Asia by the end of March, a top company official said recently.

The Pennsylvania-headquartered Infotech Consulting is a small company with around 200 staff and valued at $21 million by consulting firm Ernst & Young.

The acquisition is through cash and share swap, Mindteck marketing manager Jaideep Sikdar said. Infotech Consulting has revenue earnings of $31 million. Mindteck paid $1.5 million in cash for the deal and the rest was through the offer of around 785,000 shares at Rs. 98 per share. "We got a premium as our share closed at Rs. 55 on the Bombay Stock Exchange," he added.

Earlier, Mindteck group chief executive officer Pankaj Agarwal, who founded Infotech Consulting in Pennsylvania in 1996, said at a press meet that Mindteck would buy one more IT firm in the U.S., one in Britain and a third one in Singapore.

Investments in the four acquisitions will come to $30.6 million and will help raise the company's revenue to $75 million from the present $27 million, he said. Acquiring a British firm is part of the strategy to expand the company's presence in Europe to reduce dependence on the U.S.

Intel to invest over $1 billion in India

Global chipmaker Intel will invest more than $1 billion in India over the next three years as it seeks to prepare light-weight personal computers in partnership with Indian and foreign hardware firms. "We are focussing on a number of new initiatives for enabling easy availability of personal computers (PCs) and broadband Internet in India," Intel Technology India marketing and operations director John A. McClure said in Mumbai recently.

The company is partnering with leading foreign and Indian computer hardware brands like ASUS Technologies, HCL, Wipro and Zenith for preparing light weight easy-to-use internet platforms.

The company is working on different designs for specific market segments. It is also preparing to introduce Wimax technology in India, the fastest wireless BB technology available at lower cost than optical fibers. "This is the best technology to bridge the PC-broadband internet gap in India," he said. Intel's biggest role in India would be to continue to develop affordable internet platforms with the latest technology, McClure added.

"Today, India is the seventh or eighth largest PC market, poised to become the third or fourth largest by 2012," McClure said. According to him, only the BPO industry had benefited from the "flattening of the world".

Tata Industries, Boeing to form joint venture in India

Tata Industries Ltd (TIL) will form a joint venture company with aerospace giant Boeing Co. to work in the $500-million defense-related aerospace sector in India and also supply Boeing's international customers. Under the agreement signed by Boeing and Tata, the joint venture company will be established by June 2008 and build Boeing aerospace components.

"This joint venture between Tata and Boeing is an important part of our strategy to build capabilities in defense and aerospace," said Ratan Tata, chairman of Tata Group. "I look forward to the joint venture becoming a world-class facility in India."

In the first phase of the agreement, Boeing would potentially issue contracts for work packages to the joint venture company involving defense-related component manufacturing on Boeing's F/A-18 Super Hornet for the U.S. Navy and Royal Australian Air Force, CH-47 Chinook and/or P-8 Maritime Patrol Aircraft.

Venture capital firms invest $543 million in 2007

Venture capital firms invested $543 million across 98 deals in India during 2007, according to a study by Venture Intelligence in partnership with the U.S.-India Venture Capital Association. The amount invested during 2007 was slightly higher compared to 94 deals amounting to $500 million in 2006.

"With early stage investments accounting for about 66 percent of all investments during the year, the resurgence in seed and first round investments has been a key highlight of 2007," said Arun Natarajan, Founder & CEO of Venture Intelligence, a firm that tracks venture capital and private equity investments. Over 50 percent of the VC investments during 2007 were below $5 million including 23 percent below the $2 million threshold, the US-IVCA/Venture Intelligence study showed. With 65 investments worth about $377 million, the IT and IT-enabled services (ITeS) industry retained its status as the favorite among VC investors during 2007, the study indicates.

Equifax Inks Indian Credit Partnership

Equifax Inc. has recently partnered with two Indian companies to establish a credit-scoring firm in India, where a blossoming economy offers fertile opportunity.

The Atlanta-based credit research company has teamed up with a subsidiary of the Tata Group conglomerate and CRISIL Ltd., a ratings and research company in India, to sell credit research to banks. The partnership submitted an application to India's central bank, Reserve Bank of India, which in April had asked for applications to register credit-information businesses.

The Indian economy was ripe for the types of services this partnership would sell, Equifax said. Banks were lending more as the Indian economy grew 6 percent to 9 percent a year, the company said, while people were earning more and adopting more expensive lifestyles. Equifax, with $1.84 billion in annual revenue, sells credit research and other analytics to businesses.

India's exports up 21.7%

India's merchandise exports were up 21.7 percent during the first three quarters of fiscal 2007-08, growing to $111.05 billion from $91.20 billion in the corresponding period of last fiscal.

Official trade data released on February 1, however, showed that in rupee terms, the growth was significantly lower at 7.74 percent during the period under review, indicating the sharp appreciation of the Indian currency this fiscal.

Imports were up 25.97 percent during the first three quarters, growing to $168.87 billion from $134.05 billion. In rupee terms, the imports were up 11.54 percent, the data showed.

Tata Chemicals snaps up US firm for $1 billion

Tata Chemicals Ltd. (TCL) has acquired U.S.-based soda ash-maker General Chemical Industries Products Inc., (GCIP) for $1.05 billion, to become the world's second-largest producer of soda ash.

The announcement was made exactly a year after Tata Steel, another Tata Group company, acquired British steel major Corus.

TCL is now the third-largest manufacturer of soda ash and sodium bicarbonate in the world, with a production capacity of close to three million tons per annum (MTPA). The acquisition

will add another 2.5 MTPA to take total capacity to 5.5 MTPA, next only to the U.S.-based FMC Chemicals. The company had bought 63.5 percent stake in the U.K.-based Brunner Mond Group for about Rs. 5.08 billion in December 2005. It also holds a 33 percent stake in Indo Maroc Phosphore SA (IMACID), Morocco, which makes phosphoric acid.

The latest acquisition will help Tata Chemicals make half of its soda ash from natural soda ash, which costs only half the production cost for manufacturing synthetic soda ash. TCL is one of the largest synthetic soda ash producers in the world, along with a few players in China.

Soda ash is mainly used in glass and detergent production and it contributed 40 percent of TCL's revenues of Rs. 45.63 billion for the first nine months of 2007-08. The rest of the revenues are from its fertilizer and other inorganic chemicals business.

CII: Enterprise support industry set to boom

The Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) said on January 31 that India's enterprise product support services export would rise to $10.7 billion by 2012 from the current $1.4 billion.

"There is a significant growth momentum. The support services industry in India will grow to accommodate 15 percent of the global enterprise product support workforce by 2012, requiring 60,000 employees in comparison to approximately 9,800 employees in 2007," CII said in a statement.

The CII Mission on Knowledge and Skills announced the launch of Global Enterprise Product Support (CII-GEPS) Forum, to facilitate India's transition to a preferred destination for enterprise support services. The forum has been formed with the support of companies such as Avaya, CA, EMC, IBM, Microsoft, Oracle and Yahoo. Formally announcing the launch of the CII-GEPS Forum, its spokesperson Rajeev Shroff said: "The forum has been formed to maximize the potential of the enterprise product support industry in India."

Insurers' annual IT bill to triple to $9 billion by 2012, finds new study

After having relied on traditional ways of doing business for long, insurance companies are now embracing information technology in a big way and their IT expenses are expected to rise three-fold to over $9 billion by 2012.

According to a new report by global consultancy firm Celent, the Indian insurance companies would spend close to $3 billion on IT in 2008, with life insurers alone accounting for nearly $2.6 billion.

Matching the rate of growth in premium collection, the IT expenses would also grow to $9.4 billion in the next five years.

In its report titled 'Insurance market in India: Market and IT Overview', Celent said that companies needed to invest heavily in technology in the coming years as they would need to replace their core systems while the operational expenses for IT would start declining only after this transition is completed.

As of now, "insurers are very reliant on traditional ways of selling to the end customer through the broker and branch network", Celent said.

According to the study, a large part of the budget would go for hardware and software, while staffing and telecom would also attract significant investments on this front. Hardware and software would see 34 percent and 31 percent, respectively, of the total IT budget, telecom and staffing would see 14 percent each, while services would attract 7 percent.

NY firm to invest $250 mn in Bharti Infratel

New York-based private equity firm Kohlberg Kravis Roberts has said it is investing $250 million in Bharti Infratel, a subsidiary of leading telecom service provider Bharti Airtel in the towers business.

The investment will be made by KKR's Asia dedicated private equity fund and its global private equity fund, the company said in a filing with stock market authorities.

Bharti Airtel said the investment will be in addition to the $1 billion invested in Bharti Infratel by Singapore's Temasek Holding, The Investment Corp of Dubai, Goldman Sachs, Macquarie, AIF Capital, Citigroup and India Equity Partners.

Warner Bros in pact with Prime Focus

Warner Bros Motion Picture Imaging, the Hollywood studio's 4k post production facility, with films like 'Ocean's 13' to its credit, has entered into a strategic alliance with Prime Focus, the India-based post production house with operations in U.K., U.S., Canada and India.

The tie-up will allow both companies to move content seamlessly from facility to facility, using the most cost-efficient method, enabling them to process work in the time zone that most closely meets individual filmmaker's needs and schedules. Prime Focus has 1,500 people and operations out of facilities in India, London, New York, Winnipeg, Vancouver and Los Angeles.

Bioinformatics market to double by 2010

The Indian bioinformatics market is poised to double by 2010 — from $32 million to $62 million by 2010, according to a report by research firm ValueNotes Outsourcing Practice.

Bioinformatics means the application of information sciences to biology. It deals with creation and maintenance of extensive electronic databases on various biological systems.

The survey — Bioinformatics Outsourcing for Life Sciences: The India Opportunity — noted that the need to optimize costs and enhance research had led to increasing adoption of bioinformatics tools and services.

The global bioinformatics market is expected to grow at a CAGR of 16 percent over 2007-2010, which will catalyze the Indian bioinformatics outsourcing market to grow at 25 percent per annum during 2007-2010. Around 90 percent revenues of the Indian bioinformatics market is derived from outsourcing activities, the report said.

"Outsourcing agreements generally include software and database development and support services. Overseas clients usually conceptualize the product and outsource parts of product or database development," said Arun Jethmalani, managing director, ValueNotes.

More people to have mobile phones

India, with its high economic growth and immense disposable income, will play a crucial role in global telecom explosion, with the number of mobile users set to overtake those without it for the first time in 2008.

According to International Telecommunications Union, a U.N. agency, the global mobile penetration rate is set to reach 50 percent in early 2008, from just about 12 percent in the year 2000. Going by projections by the U.N. agency, the worldwide mobile subscriber base would cross the 3.3-billion level this year. This means that every 10th mobile user across the world will be an Indian, where the domestic industry is eyeing a total of more than 300 million subscribers in 2008.

"At current growth rates, global mobile penetration is expected to reach 50 per cent by early 2008," ITU said in its January newsletter.

Wal-Mart to source IT expertise from India

U.S. retail giant, Wal-Mart Stores Inc., on February 20 said it will continue to source technological expertise from India by working with the country's leading tech firms.

"Today IT is truly a global business and as we deepen our relationship with India, it only made sense that we take advantage of the 24-hour development cycle that India offers," Michael T. Duke, vice-chairman, Wal-Mart Stores Inc., said in a statement.

Last year, Wal-Mart entered into a joint venture with India's Bharti Enterprises for wholesale cash and carry operations, a segment where India allows 100 percent foreign direct investment.

Satyam to expand ties with Microsoft

Hyderabad-based information technology company Satyam Computer Services on February 19 announced various strategic initiatives to expand the scope and scale of its multi-dimensional relationship with Microsoft Corporation, including the setting up of a 350-seater dedicated delivery center in Hyderabad to deliver futuristic solutions using Microsoft technologies. The center was inaugurated by Moorthy Uppaluri, chief executive officer of Microsoft IT-Global.

Satyam is a strategic service partner to Microsoft's global IT sourcing and product development outsourcing. Satyam's engagement involves building Microsoft IP and solutions in futuristic products and yet-to-be-released versions. Satyam also collaborates with Microsoft to address the needs of common enterprise customers and provide enhanced business value.

In September 2006, Satyam launched two business intelligence (BI) facilities on a Microsoft platform, in Singapore and Shanghai.

BT sector to occupy 140 mn sq ft by 2010

The Indian biotech industry is set to grow and occupy 140 million square feet by 2010.

"Even though the country presently holds a minimal market share of 2 percent of the global biotech market, it has immense potential to develop as a key player by 2010 and is expected to generate $5 billion revenues, creating employment for a million by 2010 through its products as well as services," said international real estate consultants Cushman & Wakefield in its 'Bio Reality in India Report 2008'.

In addition to Bangalore, Hyderabad, Chennai, Pune and Mumbai, tier-II and tier-III cities like Vadodara, Coimbatore, Goa, Mysore, Madurai, Kolkata, Gurgaon, Thrissur, Nagpur and Thiruchirapalli have emerged as the preferred destinations for biotech facilities. But tier-I cities (Bangalore, Hyderabad, Chennai, Pune and Mumbai) with better infrastructure and talent pool, the two most important factors in setting up a biotech facility, score over others.

Ashok Mago chairs National Urban League

Ashok Mago, Chairman of the Board of National Urban League of Greater Dallas participated in its Annual Meeting Luncheon on February 22. The event was held at the Hilton Anatole Hotel. The theme of the Luncheon was •The Legacy Continues: Passing the Torch•.

Mago is the only Indian American ever to serve as a Chair of any of the affiliates of National Urban League.

The Urban League is the oldest and largest community-based movement in the United States devoted to empowering African Americans and others to enter the economic and social mainstream. The mission of the Urban League of Greater Dallas is to enable African Americans and others to secure economic self-reliance, parity, power and civil rights and others to enter and enhance their position in the national mainstream.

Indian American doctor gives $1 mn to US college

An Indian American neurosurgeon of Michigan has donated $1 million to a local college toward improving facilities and supporting needy students. Harish Rawal, 59, who practises in Jackson, announced the donation in December for the Jackson Community College (JCC) to help pay for its renovated allied health and nursing classrooms, and an endowed scholarship for financially weak students. The donation, one of the biggest in the college•s history, will rename the new facility as the Rawal Centre for Health Professions. A graduate from B.J. Medical College, Ahmedabad, Rawal studied surgery in Chicago before moving to Jackson 28 years ago and founding the Great Lakes Brain & Spine Institute.

Eight Indian Americans reach Intel science talent final

Eight Indian American high school students, five of them girls, have been named among 40 finalists for the Intel Science Talent Search 2008 contest.

Avanthi Raghavan, Shravani Mikkilineni, Hamsa Sridhar, Shivani Sud, Isha Jain, Vinay Venkatesh Ramasesh, Ashok Chandran and Ayon Sen get at least $5,000 in scholarships and a laptop. They will next compete for 10 scholarships „ including the top award of $100,000 „ in March in Washington, DC. The eight talented students were selected from over 1,600 individual entrants for the nationwide competition, often called the •junior Nobel PrizeŽ, administered annually by the Washington based Society for Science & the Public. •A high proportion of Indian American finalists speaks well for the community, and we welcome their participation,Ž Rick Bates, spokesperson for the organizers, said.

The project, Ashok Chandran, 17, of Nesconset, New York, submitted for the competition, studied the link between smoking and breast cancer. He tested the hypothesis that nicotine would alter mammary cell gene expression, creating a cellular environment akin to that of a breast cancer cell.

Isha Himani Jain, 17, of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, has identified a cellular mechanism underlying bone growth spurts in zebra fish, similar to the way children•s bones grow. She had also won, in October, a $100,000 scholarship topping the Siemens Competition in Math, Science and Technology for the same study, which has been published in a journal.

Avanthi Raghavan, 17, of Orlando, Florida, submitted a project studying the mechanisms of protein transport critical to the survival and virulence of the malaria parasite, which accounts for over two million deaths every year.

The project of Shivani Sud, 17, of Durham, North Carolina, focuses on identifying stage-II colon cancer patients at high risk of recurrence and the best therapeutic agents for treating their tumors. Hamsa Sridhar, 18, of Kings Park, New York, developed a low cost optical tweezer system that uses laser light to trap and suspend microscopic particles.

Institute on Religion and Public Policy appoints Priya Abraham

The Washington-based Institute on Religion and Public Policy on February 7 announced the appointment of India-origin journalist Priya Abraham as its new director of communications. Priya has a successful career in print journalism.

•Priya•s journalistic abilities are well known and well regarded, and will be a tremendous asset to the Institute on Religion and Public Policy and to the issue of religious freedom,Ž the institute said in a statement. Most recently, Priya spent four years as *WORLD* magazine•s Washington-based international affairs reporter, where she covered global politics, culture and U.S. foreign policy. She has interviewed prominent world leaders such as Southern Sudan President Salva Kiir Mayardit and Zimbabwe•s opposition leader, Morgan Tsvangirai. Along the way, she developed specializations in human rights, religious freedom and Africa.

Priya holds a bachelor•s degree in International Communication from Texas Christian University, and her early professional experience includes an internship at *The Oregonian* and a Pulliam Fellowship at the *Indianapolis Star*

She was born and raised in Zambia to Indian immigrant parents and moved to the United States in 1998.

India plans new supersonic cruise missile

The BrahMos supersonic cruise missile, one of the most successful products of Indo-Russian military collaboration, is about to get a successor.

The new missile in its hypersonic version will fly much faster than BrahMos. After the successful development of BrahMos, both India and Russia will develop the missile jointly.

Though in the conceptual stage, the new hypersonic missile will have great kinematic energy, range and a powerful scramjet engine to make it a precision lethal weapon. Kinematics is the study of pure motion without regard to force, momentum or energy.

The kerosene-fueled missile is believed to be much cheaper than the

design concepts worked out in many western countries.

"The hypersonic missile will have a speed of Mach 5 (five times the speed of sound)," A. Sivathanu Pillai, CEO and managing director of BrahMos Aerospace, said during the defense exposition held recently in New Delhi. "Today we are flying BrahMos at Mach 2.8. From that we are going to increase to Mach 5. So, the program involves developing a new scramjet engine to gain that hypersonic speed."

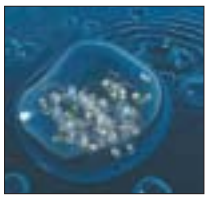
"It is not against any particular country. We are a peace-loving nation and we are developing missiles under the Integrated Guided Missile Development Programme (IGMDP) to protect ourselves from aggression."

When asked about the export potential of the BrahMos, he said: "Various countries are interested in buying it, but we have not made up our mind whom to sell it to."

The unique feature of this missile is that it can collect air from the atmosphere during its flight stage, liquefy it, separate the oxygen and store it on board for subsequent flights.

Online protein encyclopedia pioneered

An international team led by an Indian biologist has pioneered an online encyclopedia of human proteins that will help accelerate biomedical research and drug discovery.



The February 2008 issue of the prestigious journal *Nature Biotechnology* describes how the scientists' creation, dubbed "Human Proteinpedia", would help biologists around the globe by serving as a community portal for sharing and integration of human protein data. "This is an encyclopedia by the scientists, for the scientists," said Akilesh Pandey, a scientist at the Johns Hopkins University of the U.S. who led this effort in collaboration with the non-profit Institute of Bioinformatics in Bangalore, which he founded six years ago.

Like Wikipedia — the online encyclopedia that anyone can edit — the Human Proteinpedia will be an online encyclopedia that any biologist with proteomic data can edit.

However, unlike Wikipedia, the contributors are expected to provide experimental evidence for the data. "All the public data contributed to Human Proteinpedia can be queried, viewed and downloaded," Pandey said.

Indian firm promotes science learning with insects

Very soon kids will be learning science with the help of creepy-crawly bugs. A Pune-based software company Harbinger Group has partnered with Entomological Foundation, a not-for-profit organization in the U.S., to teach science through insects with the help of innovative game-based multimedia content.

The product will be designed for third and fourth graders.

April Gower, executive vice-president of the Foundation, said: "This is a special initiative because educating children about the exciting world of insects and their role in our environment through the use of interactive multimedia activities is quite a challenging task."

Test tube baby center inaugurated in India

Health Minister Anbumani Ramadoss on February 7 inaugurated a test tube baby center at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) in New Delhi. This is the country's first such center in any government-run institution. The test tube baby center, medically known as an In-Vitro Fertilization (IVF) center, will help tens of thousands of women suffering from infertility to conceive at "an affordable price".

"Nearly eight percent of couples in India suffer from infertility and this center will certainly help them in getting a baby," Ramadoss said after inaugurating the center. "This is the first IVF center in the public sector and another milestone for the prestigious AIIMS," he added.

He said the center would also carry out research in areas like embryonic cell and stem cell therapy.

Suneeta Mittal, head of the department of gynaenecology, heads the center.

"This is an important facility at AIIMS, which will not only help the poor people of the country who suffer from infertility but also serve as a platform for comprehensive research in the field," Mittal said.

Ambassador hosts luncheon for members of Woodrow Wilson Center, gives keynote speech at Japan Society

Ambassador Ronen Sen addressed the Members of the Board and Council of the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars at a luncheon hosted by him at his Residence on February 4, on the occasion of the annual meeting of the Council. Those present included The Honorable Joseph Gildenhorn, Chairman of the Council, David Metzner, Vice-Chairman, The Honorable Lee Hamilton, President of the Wilson Center, and Sam Donaldson, President of the Council.

On February 8, Sen had a brief meeting at the Embassy with senior executives of major U.S. defense companies proceeding to India to attend the annual DEFEXPO 2008. The meeting was organized at the initiative of Ron Somers of the U.S.-India Business Council.

The annual Mid-Winter Gala of the Washington National Opera was held on February 9, at the Carnegie Mellon Auditorium under the patronage of the Ambassador and Mrs. Sen. The theme of the Gala was the 'Taj Mahal by Moonlight' and featured spectacular settings and colorful presentations from India.

Gala Chair Caroline Boutte, Women's Committee President Mandy Delk, Ambassador Sena dn Gala Vice Chair Kim Nettles. ***Photo: Russell Hirshon***.

The Members of the Board of the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) hosted a dinner on February 11, in honor of Ambassador Sen and Deputy Chief of Mission, Ambassador Raminder S. Jassal. AIPAC President Howard Friedman and President-elect David Viktor were among the speakers on the occasion.

Sen addressed a Roundtable on 'International Collaboration to Combat Terrorism and Insurgencies' organized by the George Washington University on February 12. The session was moderated by Frank Cilluffo, Director of the Institute of Homeland Security Policy, and Yonah Alexander, Director of the International Center for Terrorism Studies, Potomac Institute for Policy Studies.

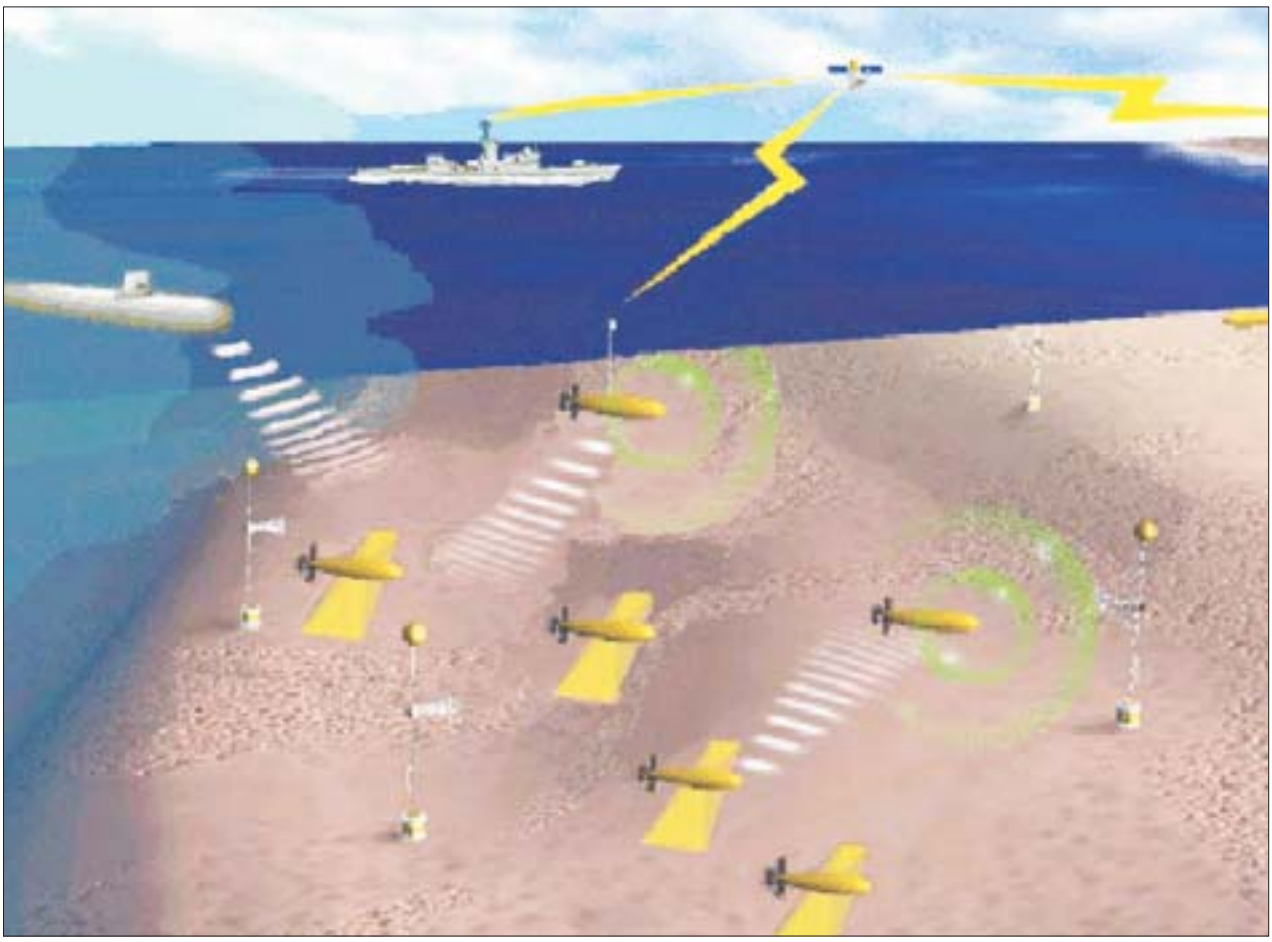
On February 15, Sen was the keynote luncheon speaker at the Japan Society. He spoke on India-Japan relations and India-Japan-U.S. trilateral cooperation. The event was presided over by President of the Japan Society, Richard Wood, and Chairman of the India Policy Forum, Bal Das. The event was attended by around 50 senior corporate representatives, the Consul-General of Japan, Motoatso Sakurai, and the Consul-General of India, Neelam Deo.

On February 20, the Ambassador spoke at the inaugural session of the first India-U.S. Summit on Small & Medium Enterprises in Chicago, organized by FICCI and USIBC in collaboration with the Chicago Council on World Affairs. The previous evening, he addressed a roadshow called 'Invest in America — The Indian Story', also held in Chicago.

Sen addressed a large dinner meeting of the World Affairs Council of Orange County in California on February 20.

On February 21, Sen was the Chief Guest at the inauguration of the exhibition entitled Rythms of India: The Art of Nandalal Bose (1882-1966) at the San Diego Museum of Modern Art. This was a pioneering project, marking the first comprehensive traveling exhibition of the legendary painter, who led the renaissance of art in India and enjoyed the patronage of Rabindranath and Abanindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi, and is known as the Father of Modern Indian Art. The Museum's Director, Derrick Cartwright, read out messages from the Hon'ble Speaker of Lok Sabha, Somnath Chatterjee, and the Minister of Tourism and Culture, Ambika Soni. He acknowledged the valuable collaboration of the Ministry of Culture and the National Gallery of Modern Art in India. The large gathering of distinguished guests, including Ambassador Sen, Consul-General B.S. Prakash, President of the Museum's Board of Trustees, Pam Cesak, the painter's grandson and Harvard Professor Supratik Bose, were shown around the exhibition by the Curator Sonia Quintanilla.

During the month, the Ambassador had meetings with Senators and Congressmen, most notably a call on the Nancy Pelosi, Honorable Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, on February 26.



INDIA: The hub of innovation

Indians have been innovators since time immemorial. Experts attribute the growth of India's innovation quotient to various factors, including the innate abilities of its people, the vast opportunities that are available in the country and the role played by the government in promoting indigenous products.

Aryabhatta, Bhaskara, Lagadha, Panini, Madhava, Nilakanta and Pingala have shaped human thought through their innovative works. Lagadha wrote the world's first ever astronomical text in 1300 BC. The greatest contribution of ancient India was made by Pingala, who in 400 BC invented the binary numerical system, which incidentally now happens to be the basis for all computing devices.

Cut to the present: Information technology giant Hewlett Packard (HP) chose Bangalore, India's Silicon Valley, to produce the next generation of products for the world market. Incidentally, a majority of the researchers in Hewlett Packard's lab are Indians. Microsoft selected Hyderabad to locate its research lab, which is developing software for local languages around the world, including Indian languages.

It is not just the IT sector though. A number of traditional industries are relocating their research and development facilities to India because of the immense talent available in the country. For instance, energy major Royal Shell Group has its second-largest research and development unit, Shell Technology Centre, in Bangalore, a testimony to India's power of innovation.

At HP's research center, a team is working on a product called Script Mail, a device that makes electronic communication easier for people, who speak languages that cannot be typed on a standard keyboard.

It contains a pad with a small monitor attached to it. A user has to position a piece of paper on the pad and write in any language with an electronic pen. Script Mail immediately recognizes the language and the words written are displayed on the monitor. This device eliminates the role of the keyboard.

It is not just foreign multinationals who have encashed on

India's innovatory capabilities. The Indian Institute of Technology-Mumbai has developed a 'compact media center' for schools, which do not have adequate computer equipment. It puts a range of home entertainment systems and a personal computer into a single black box of about one cubic foot in volume.

It has a 120-gigabyte hard disk, a Pentium 4 processor, a modem, a hard disk, a DVD drive, USB ports to connect external devices, and a television tuner.

It is a television and a personal computer rolled into one, but it does not have a monitor. The black box contains a projector with SVGA resolution, which can beam a 300-inch high image sharply on the wall.

Infrastructure Leasing and Financial Services of India are now marketing the device, consisting of a wireless keyboard and a mouse, to educational institutions under the brand name 'K-yan'.

Priced at $3,200 per unit, a single 'K-yan' can tutor a large classroom of nearly 100 students in schools which cannot afford multiple personal computers.

The Hyderabad-based Institute of Information Technology is also attempting something new. It is developing a software that translates English into Indian languages. Termed 'Shakti', the software has the power to translate English prose into three Indian languages — Hindi, Marathi and Telugu. Work is on to develop the software to recognize other languages.

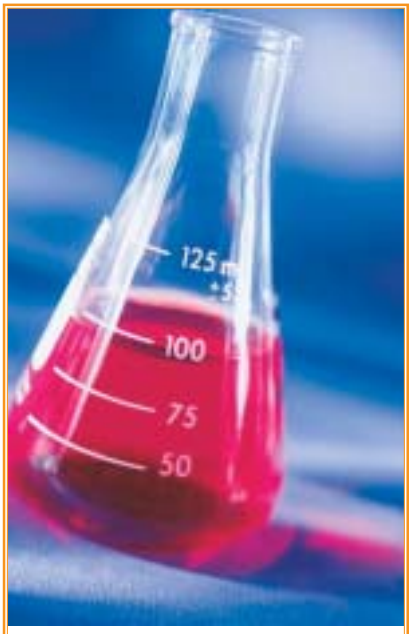
Even in medicine, India is spearheading innovation.

The Aravind Eye Care Centre, in Madurai, has developed an inexpensive cataract surgery method. Designed by ophthalmologist G. Venkataswamy, the center can carry out a cataract surgery for as low as $50 to $300, compared with over $2,000 in the U.S. The price includes the cost of a locally made intraocular lens that is inserted during the surgery.

It seems Indian innovators have a penchant for computing devices. So much so, the government has embarked on an ambitious project to develop a sub-$100 laptop for the masses.

The Union Human Resources Development Ministry is working with a group of experts from the IITs, the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) and the Vellore Institute of Technology to help develop this low-cost laptop.

The aim is to at least get the manufacturing cost reduced to the maximum possible extent since marketing costs will not be involved. A Bangalore-based firm has already made a mark at the international level with its innovative hand-held computer called 'Simputer'.



A number of industries are relocating their R&D facilities to India because of the immense talent available in the country. Energy major Royal Shell Group has an R&D unit, Shell Technology Centre, in Bangalore, a testimony to India's power of innovation.

Conceptualized at the Indian Institute of Sciences (IISc), Bangalore, this 'simple and low-cost' computing device made it from the drawing boards to the production stage in 2002.

It was developed by Encore Software, one of the teams working to commercialize the 'Simputer', and make it relevant to the millions on the wrong side of the digital divide, kept out by high cost of computers.

Each Simputer, which sits comfortably in an adult's hand, uses a 'smart card' device. This could even be used for micro-banking applications to help the common man. A 'soft modem' would enable the Simputer to dial-up a centralized server (and download relevant information like vegetable prices) or connect to the internet.

Priced at around $200, the Simputer is versatile and inexpensive. This innovation could drastically change the way the common man does his computing.

There has been growing interest from countries like Cuba and the Philippines, for this product designed by a team of computer scientists at IISc. It will be useful for the average Indian's educational, communication and entertainment needs.

There are a number of other highly successful indigenous products developed by India. They include the $200 suitcase-size voting machine; the Skybus and an anti-collision device developed by Konkan Railway Corporation; construction feats such as the Delhi Metro Rail, and the Bandra-Worli Sea link project, now underway in Mumbai.

With an army of talented scientists, engineers, technologists and even graduates, well-versed in science, math and English, India has an enormous pool of skilled researchers and qualified personnel, who will ensure the continued flow of innovative products and services over the coming years.

Shadow

By Brinda Charry

The story is about two women who are socially very far apart, but whose lives are in fact remarkably similar.

Brinda Charry is a writer and broadcaster. Besides short stories and essays published in leading newspapers, she is the author of the novel, The Hottest Day of the Year. Her stories have been selected as winners in contests orgainsed by the Asian Age 1999, Hindu-Picador, 2000 and the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association, 2001. Shadow was first published in Katha Prize Stories-12 in 2002.

Long ago, when I'd been newly married, there'd been sparrows on the rooftops, and many more crows, and sometimes I could see the ground covered with pigeon droppings. Now there was only the wind tugging at the sheets and *veshtis* from my hands, making the saris billow boisterously.

But when I finished and went downstairs I knew someone else would follow me, also carrying a pile of freshly folded clothes in her arms.

Sometimes, in the middle of the morning, long after the boys and their father left home, as I stood by the stove, the flame hot on my face, I could feel her standing behind me.

"Who's there?" I would ask sharply when I saw a shadow behind my reflection as I combed my hair before the mirror — "Is anyone there?" But when I turned around there would only be the looming shapes of the furniture and the silence of the familiar rooms.

Later that day, I went down the road to get the clothes ironed. The man who did the ironing wasn't there, nor was his pushcart, and the streets were unusually deserted. Someone raced by on a bicycle. "What are you doing outdoors, *amma*?" he shouted as he passed me. "You'd better get home soon!" an old man limping hurriedly somewhere warned.

As I retraced my steps I wondered what the matter was. We lived just off the Muslim quarter. When the four of us sat down to dinner I learnt that there had been trouble in the city. It wasn't yet very clear what started it — an intercommunity love affair, a quarrel between neighbors, or a casual insult, which had grown into a communal riot. That night I started awake at the sound of shouts and running feet and wondered if it was only another drunken brawl or part of the riot.

Once a week, I would go to the little shed in the garden to fetch coconuts for the week's cooking. That morning when I entered it, my feet were wet with dew from the grass. I went further into the room wondering why there were no cobwebs blocking my way as I knelt down to grope for the bags. There was a rustle behind me — someone else was crouching in the corner of the shed.

"Who's there?" I asked. My voice sounded unexpectedly loud in the silence. The rich smell of *champa* and jackfruit floated in through the open door. "Is someone there?" I heard a sound somewhere between a snarl and a sob and turned around. A log slid off the woodpile behind me. It cowered large and trembling in the darkness, dressed in what looked like a black sheet. My shadow had come alive.

We stared at each other in silence for a minute and then she whispered, "Please. There is no need for you to be frightened."

Her voice was low and harsh and she herself was a large woman, much taller than me, not fleshy, but big-boned and broad-shouldered. Her *burqa* was splattered with mud. She'd flung the veil behind and I saw that her face was brown, slightly marked with smallpox scars and what looked like nail marks. Her eyes were hard with fear as she stared at me, a forty-year-old brahmin woman, small and pale, wrapped in a crumpled home sari.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, but she did not reply.

"If you don't tell me what you are

doing here I will have to call the police." I realized that my voice was trembling.

At the word police she looked up and after a moment's silence said sullenly, "There's no need for you to do that. I'm only taking shelter."

"From what?"

"Last night there was trouble where I live." She jerked her head in the direction of the slum. "Many huts were burnt. I was alone. Frightened that I too would be killed." She looked away, hard stony tears suddenly filling her eyes.

There was nothing I could think of to say. I stared at the ground in discomfort. "So you came here?" I asked after a moment's pause.

"Yes."

"But how did you get into the compound?" She had climbed over the back wall. It was over seven feet high.

"Someone is calling you," she said. I realized that the doorbell was being rung. The sound traveled through the house, the kitchen and the garden and reached us as a faint tinkle.

When I returned after picking up the packets of milk that had been left on the doorstep and stopping in the kitchen to collect slices of bread and some water for her, I almost expected her to be gone. But she was still there, her burqa now drawn close around her. I noticed she'd tried to smooth her uncombed hair.

I stood at the door. "Are you going to stay here tonight?" I asked.

"If you let me." She looked at me, her gaze unwavering.

"You can stay if you want to," I said. I sometimes wonder now at how easily I said that.

As I turned to go she caught the edge of my sari. "Will you tell them I'm here?"

"You don't have to worry about that. I hardly ever go out of the house."

"Don't even tell your family." She was trying hard to keep the note of urgency out of her voice.

I hesitated for a second. "I won't tell them," I promised though I didn't quite understand why she wanted it to be kept so absolutely secret.

"God will bless you," she whispered after me as I stepped out into the sunshine, and I was filled with a strange gratitude, which again I didn't quite understand.

Mukundan and Srikanth didn't return home that night. The trouble that began near our house had spread through the city and they telephoned to say that they were staying with friends who lived close to their college.

Are you married?" I asked her on the third day. She had finished her meal, had a bath and changed into one of my saris, looking large and awkward without her black *burqa*, which hung on the washing line I had strung up between the coconut trees. Today she seemed relaxed, less anxious, as she sat leaning against the kitchen door.

She shrugged and smiled wryly. "I was married when I was fourteen," she said, "He was nearly forty."

When I was fourteen I was playing hockey for the school team. I had worn short skirts and my legs had turned finely muscled and brown after a couple of months.

"I lived with him for six years," she continued.

"And then?"

"And then I had enough."

"Did he ill treat you?"

"A couple of days after marriage I discovered he was not right in the head. It ran in his family. My parents had known this long before."

She'd sold vegetables and worked in a couple of houses to feed him and her.

> I heard a sound somewhere between a snarl and a sob and turned around. A log slid off the woodpile behind me. It cowered large and trembling in the darkness, dressed in what looked like a black sheet. My shadow had come alive.

"He was incapable of much else but I found that he was crazy about women," she said. "Pawing at all the women in our layout, following them down the streets, his mouth open, staring with his great big watering eyes. And then, one day, he tried to do god alone knows what to an eleven-year-old. A mere child whom they had thought unnecessary to put in purdah."

"They stopped him before it was too late — thank god. But they nearly beat him to death. They didn't tell the police only for the sake of the girl's reputation and also because he was an idiot. But they beat me after they finished with him. "Can't you keep him satisfied?" they asked. "That's your job — to keep him satisfied. Keep him away from our women and girls."

"I had had enough," she repeated. "So I took him to the interstate bus terminal and bought him a ticket to Bombay. You're going to Mysore, I told him, 'go pray at the shrine of the saint Habib for your well-being'." He was excited, he loved bus-rides and I had given him fifty rupees and a packet of cigarettes. I didn't see him again."

I stared at her in horror but her face was expressionless.

That was twenty-four years ago, she said. Her daughter was born a month later. She now lived in Mysore with her husband. "She's happy I think," she added contentedly.

What of my own marriage? I had been married when I was twenty to my husband — a young businessman who was just beginning to do very well.

It had been good at first. We would roam the city by bus; I would wait for him to come home in the evenings. But gradually, I don't quite know when, possibly at that time when his business went through a slightly bad patch, he'd begun spending more and more time at the shop. When he was home he took to poring over his account books. And that went on even after things began to go well at work. About ten years ago I'd said that I wanted to get back to college or to find a job. "Rubbish!" he'd responded. "There's no need for you to make money!" Fifteen years and two sons later I began sleeping downstairs.

So for twenty-two years now it had been only the house, the little street, the two boys who communicated less to either of us, as they grew older, and a loneliness, which yielded shadows that, tiptoed behind me.

Mukundan and Srikanth came home after two days. The newspapers said that the situation was under control — after fifteen people had been killed and many more injured. "Amazing how these things get so crazy," Srikanth remarked over dinner. Mukundan shrugged. "Can't live with people too different from you, you know. Look everywhere, all over the world." Since when had he begun to sound so very confident, so absolutely sure of himself.

Are things better now?" was all she asked me that night. "That's what they say," I replied.

"Maybe I should go now...," she added.

For the first time since so many years I have a friend visiting, my very own guest. Please stay as long as possible.

"I will have to take a bus out of the city," she continued.

I was surprised. "But why? You live just behind here, don't you?"

"Yes, but I will have to leave the city."

"Why?"

"I've killed a man."

He'd become her lover a short while after her husband had gone. "I was still young then. I needed a man," she explained. He was her uncle's son. They didn't stay together for any length of time.

"Were you happy with him?" I asked. She ignored the question.

Of late he had begun to complain that she was getting old. But no, he hadn't stopped coming. In fact he began coming more often because he had taken to gambling and needed money.

"Did you give him any?"

At first nearly everything she'd earned, living on yesterday's leftovers and discarded clothes. Only in memory of the stray moments of pleasure and happiness he had given her when she was younger. But soon she'd had enough. He began stealing the money she forgot to lock away, and the radio someone had given for safekeeping disappeared.

He'd come that night when the riots started. She didn't want him to stay, but let him in because he said that there was trouble out in the streets. He'd soon begun asking for money.

"I have nothing," she had said though she had fifty rupees knotted in her sari.

"Bloody whore," he had spat, "who got rid of her husband and slept with another man."

She'd shrugged. "How does that matter now?" she'd asked. "After all this while. I am going to be a grandmother in two months' time."

"I'll tell your son-in-law," he'd said.

"I'll tell him I slept with both mother and daughter."

She'd struck him then. The blow had been stronger than intended and he'd fallen over, his head hitting the door.

"He died immediately," she said, looking up at me bewildered. "His head fell to one side like a doll's."

I remained silent.

"Is it so easy to kill someone?" she asked.

"I don't know. Perhaps he didn't die at all."

"Oh no. I know. He was dead."

She'd then stepped over him and run out of the house. The streets were seething with people struggling to get home, people looking for trouble. There was a policeman at the street corner who'd looked at her curiously. So she'd turned into a lane. It was a dead end and she had climbed over my compound wall.

It was dark. I lit a candle for her. She would put it off when they came home. I had to go back and get things ready for dinner. Later I would slip out and fetch her a plateful of food.

"Will the police come for me?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said helplessly. Her life was too big for me. Her shifting shadow on the wall was that of a giant heroine in some epic story.

"But don't worry," I added, "many people have been killed in the riot in the last few days. They may not find out."

"The best thing to do might be to stay a little longer," I said when I reached the door. Her eyes were large and softer than usual in the candlelight. Her hands, which were spread out on her lap, were trembling slightly but they were large powerful hands — strong enough to cook and clean, to embroider her daughter's wedding clothes, to hew stones at construction sites, to caress, to kill.

I sometimes wondered if we had seen each other before. Surely so many years could not have passed by without us meeting?

When I was about eight years old, the marriage of the goddess at out local temple was to be celebrated. My mother and I were to take part in the celebrations. I was dressed in red and my hair was fragrant with jasmine and coconut oil. I had twirled around the front room of our house as my mother got ready, my heart as light as my silk *pavadai* which caressed my ankles.

The *devi* was a proud, confident bride and I was certain that I too would look like her on my wedding day. I waited for her to flick out her fiery red tongue and slyly lick off the droplets of *ghee* and honey, which had accidentally landed on her cheek.

After the celebration while my mother and her friends sat down leaning against the pillars of the temple, I had wandered out to the narrow lane outside. A little girl had stood in tattered *salwar kameez* at the gates of the temple, one nail-bitten hand twisting the discolored sequins off her clothes. As I stared at her she had looked up at me and smiled.

"You want to come inside?" I had asked, eager for a playmate and she had nodded.

We had played in the dark coolness behind the temple hiding and seeking each other behind the gods and demons whose names neither of us knew. Because I was sure that no one else would be there now, I had taken her into the innermost shrine to see the goddess. My new friend's eyes shone with wonder in the dying flame of the lamp. And because she looked so splendidly beautiful then and because I wanted to look as much like her as possible, I took the red *bindi* off my forehead and stuck it on the temple wall.

When I heard my mother and the other women calling out for me, she scrambled out through a side entrance and as I walked away holding my mother's hand, I saw her running in the opposite direction, her face flushed with the heat, her head uncovered as we had lost her *dupatta* somewhere in the darkness of the temple.

Twelve years later I had paced up and down the hospital corridors, my stomach tight and smooth with pregnancy. I marveled at the little dot of life which had been growing inside me and which would soon lie in my arms, warm and moving.

A woman had then been wheeled into the labor room, mountainous under her white robe, her fair face grown paler, her earlobes and wrists glistening with gold.

"Ya Allah!" I'd heard her scream behind the closed doors and I felt the first pains dart up my thighs to my hips. As she moaned and writhed her child into the world, I had stood outside listening, trying to pray for both of us, and after a while her agony and her hope had driven me into labor.

The next two days were long ones. The boys stayed home because colleges hadn't yet reopened after the trouble. She could not leave her room and I couldn't visit her except to give her food. I was worried. Would they discover she was here and come? Had someone seen her killing the man and reported to the police? I started at every knock on the door. The house was large and lonely again. I felt restless — like a young girl separated from her lover.

"What happened to my cricket bat, Ma?" Srikanth asked me.

"I don't know. Isn't it there in its usual place behind your bed?"

"No," he said impatiently, "I'm looking for my old bat. My high school bat."

"It's probably been thrown away."

"Can't be. You don't ever throw anything away. You've probably put it in the shed."

Last week when she and I had cleaned the place, a bat had been leaning against the door.

"There's no bat there," I said firmly.

He didn't hear me. "It's probably been eaten up by termites by now," he grumbled and strode out into the afternoon.

"I've just cleaned that shed. There's no bat in there!" I called out after him.

"I'll look anyway."

"There is no need for you to go in there." I said, hurrying after him. "I've just cleaned it." I caught at his arm and tried to stop him.

He had grown much taller than me and looked down, his jaw set stubbornly, frowning, just a little puzzled. "I can go look if I want to, can't I?" he asked.

"No, you can't."

"Why not? This is my appa's house. And my house too, isn't it?"

"It's also mine."

I knew I was sounding quite unlike myself, almost ridiculous. But I hoped our raised voices would wake her up; prepare her for the sudden burst of sunlight that would stream in when he pushed open the door.

Mukundan came to the kitchen door. "What are you doing here?" he asked his brother. "There's a phone call for you — Aruna I think. I've been yelling out to you for the last five minutes."

Srikanth stopped mid-stride and went into the house brushing past me.

When I went into her room to get the bat before he came back, we did not speak to each other. I carried the dusty old bat upstairs to the boys' room. But Srikanth had left home to see his friend, Mukundan said.

"Really Amma," adding irritably, "why on earth did you have to make such a fuss when Srikanth wanted to look for his bat? I could hear the two of you up here."

I could feel his eyes looking at me curiously as I walked out of the room without responding.

It was hot that night and I couldn't sleep. I stood by the kitchen window. All of a sudden the house seemed smaller. Its walls had moved silently inwards threatening to close me in. I'd never quite felt that this alien space truly belonged to me or I to it. But somehow, over the last few days the garden had become mine. A thin sheet of lightning suddenly lit up the sky and I noticed a shadow slipping out of the room and towards the toilet. Just when it was returning, quietly, like a silent ghost flitting through the trees the kitchen light behind me was switched on and its orange glow swamped the garden.

"What are you doing here at this time of the night?" my husband asked me.

"Nothing."

Could he too see her standing frozen by the door of the shed? My heart beat fast. After a minute he turned and pouring himself a glass of water, switched off the light.

"Go to sleep," he said sharply. "It's ridiculous, standing here at this time of the night. I just can't understand you anymore."

I waited to make sure she'd got in before I returned to bed.

It was dark when she left for her daughter's place. She had been with me for nearly a week. I led her through the house. "There's no need to climb over the wall this time," I'd said.

Our twin shadows danced on the ceiling and the walls amidst the other strange shapes made by the night. The front door creaked and rattled when I opened it for her, but they didn't wake up. As we stood for a minute on the doorstep she clumsily took my hand.

"I'm homeless for now," she whispered, "but maybe you will come to me sometime."

"Maybe I will," I said.

She hurried into the street, unafraid, defiant. There was a very slight drizzle but I stayed at the doorstep further into the night.

George Clooney visits India as UN peace messenger

Oscar winner Hollywood actor George Clooney recently accompanied U.N. Assistant Secretary for Peacekeeping Operations, Jane Holl Lute, to India.

On January 28, Clooney attended a party hosted by Vivek Katju, Additional Secretary, (International Organizations), Ministry of External Affairs, at Villa Medici in the Taj Mahal hotel. Well cosseted with his own security detail, as well as an entourage, he dropped in next door to shake hands with some journalists.

In a casual gray suit, with an open-necked white shirt, Clooney lived up to his suave leading-man image.

Later, along with Lute, Clooney called on Defense Secretary Vijay Singh.

Clooney has been actively involved in calling for a solution to Sudan's Darfur crisis. He traveled to China and Egypt in 2006, when he asked these countries for greater pressure on the Sudanese government to force them to find some way out of the refugee problem. With 9,357 troops engaged in U.N. missions, India is the third-largest supplier of peacekeepers, behind Pakistan (10,610) and Bangladesh (9,856). India also hosts the Secretariat of the International Association of Peacekeeping Training Centers at the United Service Institution of India's Center for United Nations Peacekeeping (USI-CUNPK).

Clooney said he was too new to the job of a U.N. messenger of peace to talk about it. "I do not want to talk, I want to listen first," he said, as he pointed out that he was the "son of a newsman". He then swept out as smoothly as he had come in, smiling with the familiar crease on his forehead.

Tom Cruise in Viveck Vaswani's next film?

Producer-director Viveck Vaswani is believed to be in talks with Hollywood superstar Tom Cruise for his next project. After completing his current film, 'Dulha Mil Gaya', Viveck plans to begin work on an English film called 'Hotel, Motel and Patel'.

A source close to the director said that Vaswani had approached the actor's agents who had shown a positive response. "The film is basically about a family called Patels who move into a motel where a Hollywood star — which would be played by Tom if he agrees — would move in."

"Viveck would need Tom for a very little time. He explained that to Tom's agents who then asked for the entire script to be sent across for Tom and his people to go through. And it all seemed to be going well till the writers' strike began in Hollywood," adds the source. Vaswani has confirmed the fact that he had been in discussion with Cruise over the film. But he remained tight-lipped about the film and the actor's contract.

Schwarzenegger to act in Bollywood film

Producer Sajid Nadiadwala has roped in Hollywood actor Arnold Schwarzenegger and singer Beyonce Knowles for his next magnum opus 'Kambakth Ishq'. 'Kambakth Ishq' will be directed by newbie Sabir Khan in Los Angeles in May.

Apparently the producer has a few surprises up his sleeve. Says a source, "Sajid has managed a casting coup in 'Kambakth Ishq'. Schwarzenegger has agreed to play an interesting cameo in the film. And that is not all. Pop sensation Beyonce is all set to do a bootylicious act in the film. The film stars the super hit pair of Akshay Kumar and Kareena Kapoor."

"Akshay plays a Hollywood stuntman and hence the presence of Arnold. Our desi action hero will be seen with the international action icon. Everything is almost finalized."

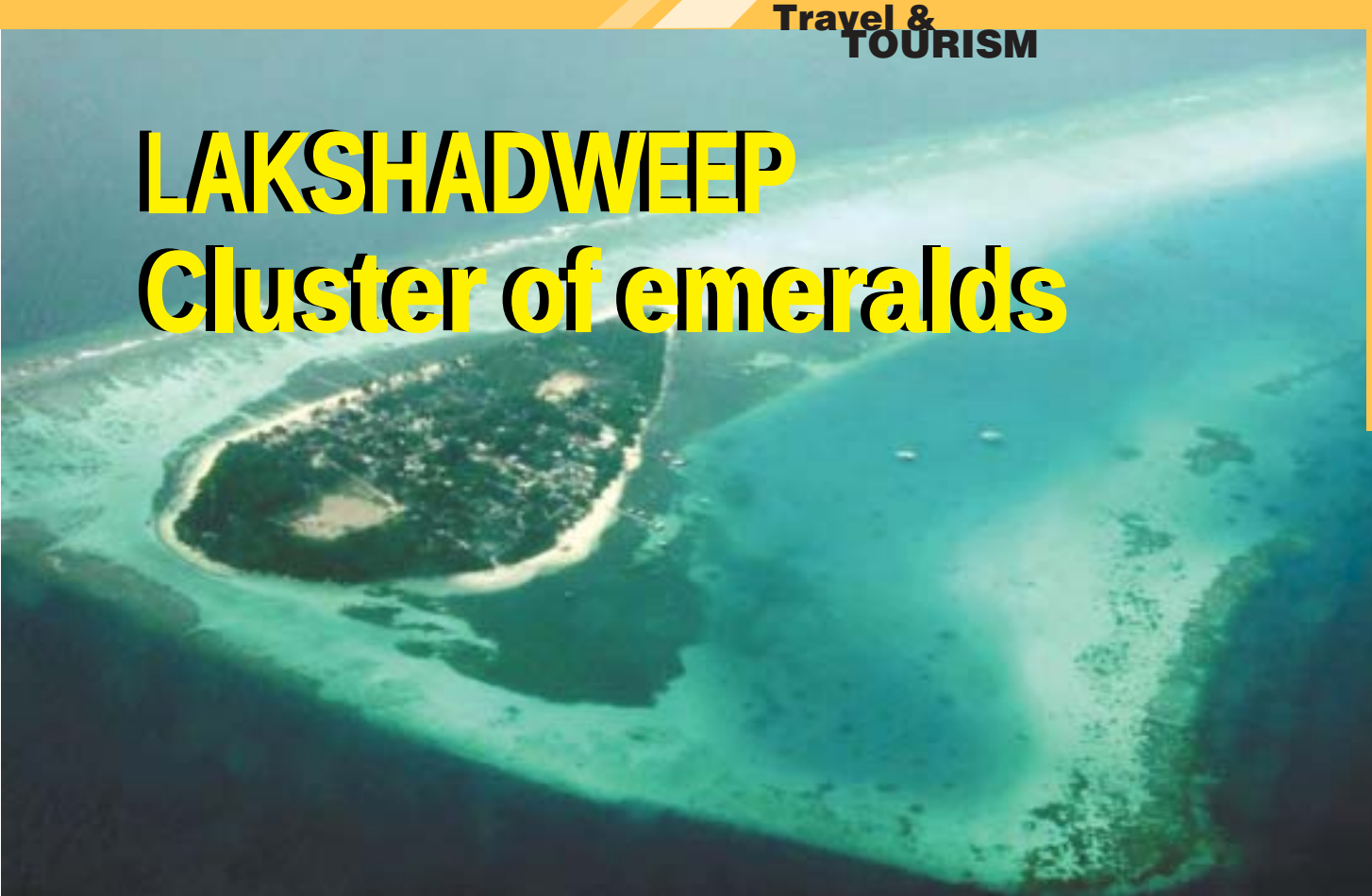
Aishwarya and Mallika among most desirable women in the world

Bollywood glamour queen Aishwarya Rai Bachchan and sultry actress Mallika Sherawat have been named in the "Top 99 Most Desirable Women" list of the online *AskMen* magazine.

Aishwarya at No. 27 and Mallika at No. 66 are joined by Indian-American model and food show host Padma Lakshmi at No. 66.

Over five million AskMen.com readers cast their votes to identify the females from the worlds of music, fashion, sport, and entertainment who have the characteristics they value in a potential companion, like intelligence, humor, charisma and ambition.

Katherine Heigl, Emmy winning actress of the 'Grey's Anatomy' TV series, and the star of box-office hit 'Knocked Up', takes the top spot for the 2008 list that was released on January 31.



LAKSHADWEEP
Cluster of emeralds

Known as the smallest Union Territory of India, Lakshadweep consists of 36 islands, 12 atolls, three reefs and five submerged banks. About 300-400 km off the coastline of the south Indian State of Kerala, Lakshadweep has a lagoon area of about 4,200 sq km, 20,000 sq km of territorial waters and about 400,000 sq km of economic zone.

ISLANDS

ANDROTH is the nearest island to the mainland. It has an east-west orientation unlike other islands lying in the north-south direction. It is the largest island of Lakshadweep. Thick vegetation, mainly coconut groves, add to the beauty of the island.

MINICOY is the southern-most island in Lakshadweep. It has one of the largest lagoons. In terms of culture, Minicoy is quite different from the northern group of islands. The islanders are mostly seamen. The island has a village system known as 'Avah', meaning a cluster of houses headed by an elected elderly man.

KADAMATH is 8 km long and 550 meters wide at the broadest point. Lagoons on the east and the west and sandy beaches on the southern tip make it an ideal spot for tourists. Kadamath is famous for its aesthetically-built tourist huts amid coconut palm groves. Kayaks, pedal boats, yachts, skiing boats and glass-bottomed boats are available. The scuba diving center in the island has become a major attraction for water sport enthusiasts.

KALPENI is known for its scenic beauty, the small islets of Tilakkam and Pitti and an uninhabited island on the north called Cheriyam. A huge shallow lagoon encloses all of them. A peculiar feature of this atoll is the huge storm bank of coral debris along the eastern and south-eastern shorelines.

KAVARATTI has been the headquarters of the Union Territory Administration since 1964. Do not miss the marine aquarium and the Dolphin Drive Center.

BANGARAM is an uninhabited island ranked among the best gateways of the world. It has emerged as a water sport destination with facilities for scuba diving, beach games, swimming, snorkeling and deep-sea fishing.

Â WINTER GAMES

Indian Army recruits from the High Altitude Warfare School (HAWS) practise at the ski resort of Gulmarg in Kashmir. The ski resort was abuzz with activity as the National Winter Games kicked off from February 18-22 in Gulmarg amid heavy snowfall.

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