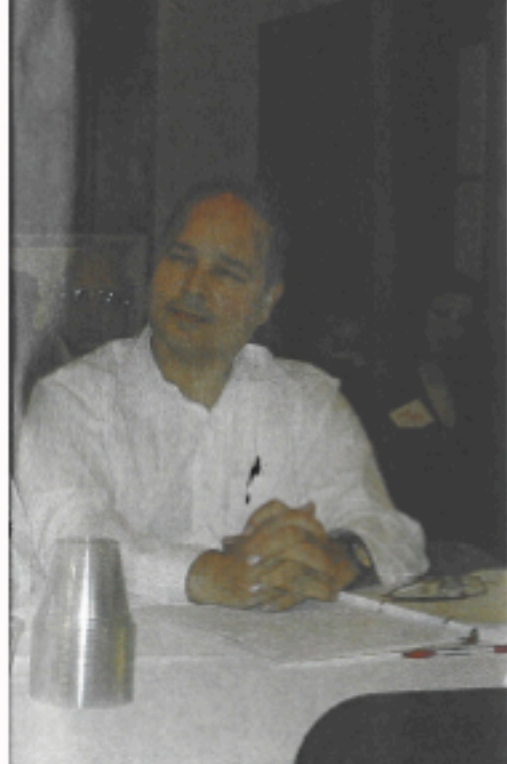


seminar



In terms of the participants alone, the seminar on Indian democracy in Berkeley in May was something to write home about. It's hard to think of any seminar outside India—even in India, for that matter—which has brought together so many distinguished people together.

Two Union ministers, a state minister, a former chief minister, some of the better known citizen activists of India, and a host of academics weighed in at the Bancroft Hotel in Berkeley at a two-day seminar on local governance and empowerment jointly hosted by the University of California's Center for South Asia Studies and the U.S. nonprofit Foundation for Democratic Reforms in India.

"India is unique in history in having a sustained democracy in a poor country with a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural society," the seminar's organizers said in a statement. "Today, its economic strength is also widely recognized and celebrated. The role democratic processes play in the sustenance and diffusion of this economic strength into the wider reaches of Indian society is a central question that must be

SEE NEXT PAGE

# WHAT IS TO BE DONE? DEMOCRACY IN INDIA



Ministers and activists rubbed shoulders with academics at a very special conclave at a two-day seminar hosted by the Center for South Asia Studies at the University of California at Berkeley. A Siliconeer report.

(Opp. page, top): San Francisco Consul General of India B.S. Prakash speaking at a two-day seminar on India in Berkeley. (Above): Union Minister for Panchayati Raj Mani Shankar Aiyar flanked by veteran journalist Chandan Mitra (l) and Foundation for Democratic Reforms in India member Venkatesh Shukla. (Opp. page, left): UC Berkeley chancellor Robert Birgeneau welcoming attendees as Center for South Asia Studies chair Raka Ray looks on.

FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

engaged. In order to create an environment in which such crucial questions can be discussed and alternative solutions offered by politicians, policy makers, thought leaders, NGO activists, and scholars, the Center for South Asia Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, together with the Foundation for Democratic Reforms in India, are launching a high-level annual seminar series hosted on the Berkeley campus."

Two days of intense discussion included Indian federal Urban Affairs Minister Jaipal Reddy, Panchayati Raj Minister Mani Shankar Aiyar, Kerala's Finance Minister Thomas Isaac and former Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Digvijay Singh. Activists included Arvind Kejriwal and Jayaprakash Narayan. Infosys incoming CEO Kris Gopalakrishnan was chimed in.

A slew of academics — this was, after all, an academic seminar — joined in, many of whom have a worldwide reputation.

The whole seminar was open to the public, a nice touch.

Two days of presentations brought forth passionate discussion, scholarly assessments, and some debate, which clearly brought out the reality of India's stark contrasts. The rather clichéd description of India as the land of the missile and the bullock cart, it turns out, is not too wide of the mark even today.

Notwithstanding its blistering economic growth and admirable record of democracy, its role in delivering public services remains appalling and the accountability of public officials is minimal.

Almost as interesting and intriguing as the seminar itself is one of its organizers, The Foundation for Democratic Reforms in India. Many of its key members are products of Silicon Valley whose entrepreneurial success has led them on to broader socio-economic goals.

FDRI was formed in 1998 "to promote electoral, democratic and governance reforms in India," according to an announcement of FDRI itself. "If India is

to emerge as a prosperous country where all its citizens have the opportunity to develop their full potential, FDRI believes that such reforms are essential."

FDRI certainly has its work cut out. Indians tend to bristle at being offered nostrums from abroad — many Indian activists take a particularly dim view of expatriates pontificating while they fight on in the trenches back home.

From appearances, though, it seems like FDRI activists have mastered the humility and grace to make a go of it — they seem to be in touch with many activists and the grassroots representation in this seminar was impressive.

Policymaking can be an unwieldy beast, and it is unrealistic to expect anything earthshaking to come out of a single seminar. What this conference did was set off a sober, substantive discussion on local governance — although some of the academic stuff was admittedly pretty heavy going for all but the most committed policy wonks.



Former Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Digvijay Singh

Whether it will lead to something more enduring remains to be seen.

There'll be another seminar next year, but will anything more substantive come out? It's a bit early to tell, but organizers should guard against this effort ending up being all talk and no action. ■