

Nirupama Rao Becomes India's Foreign Secretary

New Delhi: (IANS) Nirupama Rao took charge as India's foreign secretary recently and stressed that she will focus on upgrading the foreign service to enable



New Delhi to play "an even more prominent role in world affairs".

"I have before me a complex and yet fascinating assignment," Rao, the second woman to head India's foreign service, told reporters after moving into her new office in South Block.

"Today, in a rapidly evolving world situation, the task is to further augment our diplomatic and professional capabilities as we are called upon to play an even more prominent role in world affairs....," she said.

Rao succeeded Shivshankar Menon at a brief ceremony in South Block. Chokila Iyer was the first woman to serve as India's foreign secretary in 2001.

A topper of the 1973 Indian Foreign Service batch, Rao became the first woman spokesperson of the external affairs ministry in 2001. She then went on to become the Indian envoy to Sri Lanka and then China before returning to New Delhi.

In her 36-year-long career, she has served also as ambassador in Peru and deputy chief of mission in Moscow.

Nilekani Starts Work On Unique Identity For Every Indian

New Delhi: (IANS) Nandan Nilekani took charge as the chairman of the Unique Identifica-

tion Database Authority of India last month and started work on the government's ambitious project to provide a single identity number and card to each of the country's 1.17 billion people.

Mr. Nilekani, who met with reporters briefly after assuming office at Yojana Bhavan, the headquarters of the Planning Commission here, said the main task of the authority would be to create a database that will help in issuing unique identity cards.

"This will be a nationwide system of authentication," said the 54-year-old co-founder of Infosys Technologies, who was personally selected by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to head the project with the rank of a cabinet minister.

"Identity is important for everyone, especially for the poor. Getting an identity is a tough job. We will provide a database of residents. We will have a very simple database in biometrics. We

will only have very basic information," he said.

Mr. Nilekani said that the authority will not

issue the biometric cards itself — but the database it is creating will help government agencies to undertake that task.

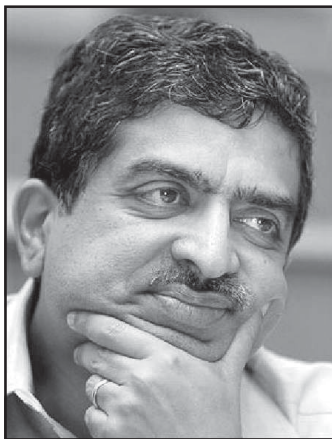
The main purpose of the project, he said, was to avert the need for multiple proofs of identity for citizens while availing any government service, or for private needs like opening bank accounts or seeking telephone connections.

It is also expected to enhance national security by helping to identify illegal aliens.

Mr. Nilekani has already met Communications and Information Technology Minister A. Raja and

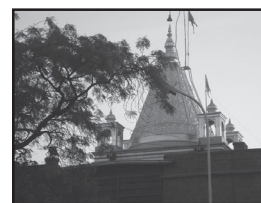
Planning Commission Deputy Chairman Montek Singh Ahluwalia, seeking their support for the project.

Over the next few weeks, he intends to create the requisite administrative infrastructure to deal with the ambitious project. "We will pick up talent from both government and outside. We will also have biometric experts and others for security and identity management," he said.



World's Largest Solar Steam System Comes Up In Shirdi

Shirdi (Maharashtra): (IANS) Hindu and Muslim pilgrims visiting the shrine of Sai Baba in this town will be served food cooked with the help of a solar steam system, that officials say is the world's largest.



The solar steam system can generate 3,500 kg of steam every day - enough to cook food for 20,000 people. It has been designed for cooking food for devotees visiting the shrine devoted to Sai Baba, a 19th century Sufi saint who was revered by Hindus and Muslims alike.

The total cost of the new system at Shirdi, some 90 km from Nashik, is estimated at Rs.1.33 crore for which a subsidy of Rs.58.4 lakh has been provided by the new and renewable energy ministry.

The system will result in annual savings of 100,000 kg of cooking gas. It has been designed to generate steam for cooking even in the absence of electricity to run the feed water pump for circulating water in the system. Some of the large solar steam cooking systems installed include those at Mount Abu in Rajasthan for serving 10,000 people every day, and at Tirupati in Andhra Pradesh and Satyabhama university in Chennai, which cater to about 15,000 people a day.

Gayatri Devi: People's Princess Who Loved Lilies & Horses

New Delhi: (IANS) The feisty princess Ayesha, daughter of the erstwhile maharaja of Cooch Behar, shot her first panther at the age of 13, stunning everyone. Six years later, the beautiful woman who came to be known as Maharani Gayatri Devi stunned her family again by falling in love with prince Sawai Man Singh of Jaipur.

She called him 'Jai' and insisted on marrying

him, never mind that he already had two wives and that her own family was against the match.

complications caused by an intestinal endoscopy that she underwent two months ago. She died in a Jaipur hospital.

She had one son of her own, who died a few years ago, and three stepchildren. Gayatri Devi, who was maharani of Jaipur state from 1939 to 1970, was an excellent marksman, a tennis player and a keen rider, with a deep knowledge of horses. She was attached to all her children, fond of flowers like lilies and gladioli and birds.

She spent the last three decades of her life after her husband's death in 1970 at the picturesque Lilypool — an elegant sprawling bungalow surrounded by greens and a lily pond that she had built with her husband on the premises of Jaipur's Rambagh Palace.

A few years ago, a visit to Lilypool in search of the maharani — who it turned out was spending her summer abroad — was a revelation. It was like a simple and warm Bengali home from Cooch Behar peopled by a retinue of servants and staff from her home state, West Bengal. They spoke Bengali and entertained visitors with glasses of chilled water and lemonade even in the mistress' absence.

"Those are the rajmata's orders that nobody goes from here without a glass of water in the maharani's absence. She has done so much for her home state by giving so many of us from Cooch

Behar jobs in the palace,' an elderly butler told this correspondent in chaste Bengali.

Her airy home was like a family archive full of family photographs and memorabilia. Rambagh Palace was close to her heart, he said.

It was there that Gayatri Devi was first brought and presented to the local nobility in Jaipur after her wedding in Europe. A discerning fashionista, who chose



the best brands of the day, she was often compared to former US first lady and style icon Jacqueline Kennedy, whom she had met.

The maharani, who spent the early years of married life in luxury hunting, partying and holidaying in Europe, forayed into politics in 1962 by contesting and winning Lok Sabha elections from Jaipur. She took interest in social activities, built an exclusive school for girls in Jaipur and promoted the traditional blue pottery of Rajasthan.

She won the Jaipur seat again in 1967 and 1971 on a Swatantra Party ticket against the Congress party. This angered Indira Gandhi, who hit back by accusing the queen of breaking tax laws. Gayatri Devi was arrested and spent five months in Tihar jail.

She subsequently quit politics and wrote her memoirs jointly with Santha Rama Rau in 1976. She was also the central character in a movie, 'Memoirs of a Hindu Princess' directed by Francois Levie.

Gayatri Devi was related to a number of erstwhile royal families in India. Her maternal grandparents were maharaja Sayajirao and maharani Chimnabai of Baroda and she was related to the royal families of Jodhpur, Dewas, Tripura and Pithapuram.

Says lifestyle writer Roopa Bakshi: 'The maharani was devout. She regularly visited a Shiva temple atop Moti Dungri in Jaipur. Perhaps, she was the first people's princess who could have easily become the leader of the Swatantra Party that was founded by freedom fighter C. Rajagopalchary in the fifties.'

She chose to give it up. But this was one queen who with her beauty and charm always reigned over the hearts of many Indians.

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him, never mind that he already had two wives and that her own family was against the match.

Just before the wedding, her brother told her: 'The maharaja likes girls and just because he is marrying you, one must not expect him to give up all his girls.' Gayatri Devi shot back that since he was marrying her, and not the other way round, 'there would be no need for him to have other girls'. All this is now famously recorded in her memoirs for posterity.

Gayatri Devi — the grand queen mother or 'rajmata' of the Jaipur royal family in Rajasthan who was listed as one of the most beautiful women in the world by Vogue — remained spirited till the end of her colourful life.

Her death Wednesday — barely two months after her 90th birthday May 23 — came after

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