

## Fare Freeze, Service Quality Focus Of India's Rail Budget

New Delhi: (IANS) According to top priority to social commitment as opposed to economic viability, Railway Minister Mamata Banerjee presented her ministry's budget for this fiscal with no fare hikes and proposals to introduce 57 new trains, improve passenger amenities and upgrade some 300 stations to global standards.

A freeze on passenger fares and freight rates, non-stop trains between a host of key stations, air-conditioned double-decker trains for inter-city travel, sale of tickets at 5,000 post offices and automatic vending machines at 200 stations were the highlights of her budget.

"People all over the country have high expectations from the railway budget,"

Banerjee told the Lok Sabha, the lower house of parliament, in her 65-minute speech setting the tone of the third budget of her career and the first for the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government.

"Time has come when our economic and social philosophers have to change their old mindsets of economic viability and replace it with social viability and uplift," she said, proposing a plan expenditure of Rs.40,745 crore (Rs.407.45 billion/\$8 billion).

"Railways is an organisation with twin responsibilities - commercial and social. It will be our endeavour to render all commercial services with a human face," she said, quoting a couplet of Nobel Laureate Rabindra Nath Tagore.



Banerjee said her focus would be on some basic but important areas of railroad services such as tasty food at affordable prices, clean toilets at stations and inside trains, availability of potable water and comfortable waiting rooms for passengers. Her proposals will result in 57 new train services, extension of 27 trains, and increasing the frequencies of 13 others, besides the introduction of double-decker trains between some stations. All passenger trains will henceforth have a doctor on board, ticketing and reservation systems will be expanded to cover 800 new locations in addition to 800 existing ones, along with automatic vending machines at 200 locations.

The "tatkal" or instant ticketing scheme, under which people could buy tickets five days before journey, can now do so three days before departure. The service charges under the scheme have been lowered from Rs.150 to Rs.100. The railway minister also announced a new scheme "izzat" for passengers to travel with dignity. Under this, people in unorganized sector with monthly income of up to Rs.1,500 can get monthly seasons ticket at Rs.25 for travel up to 100 km.

The minister also announced that 50 stations will be made world class and 375 others will be upgraded into model facilities improved amenities. "Multi-functional complexes with shopping facilities, food stalls, budget hotels will be constructed at 50 railway stations that serve as centres of pilgrimage, tourist and industry," she said.

## Shiney In Judicial Custody Till July 16

Mumbai: (IANS) A Mumbai court recently extended till July 16 the judicial custody of rape-accused Bollywood actor Shiney Ahuja.

He was produced before the court this afternoon after his 14-day judicial custody ended, a police official said. He had been lodged in the Arthur Road Jail.

Early this month, the police had received the DNA test reports which confirmed that Shiney had sex with his teenaged domestic help.

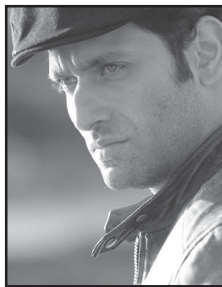
Police had said that the DNA samples of the accused matched the samples taken from the 18-year-old victim, who had also suffered scratch marks on her body. Investigators had also taken samples of other articles from Shiney's residence in the posh Versova area of Andheri west for evi-

dence. The actor was arrested after she alleged that he raped her June 14.

A week before, Shiney's blood sample reports had nailed his claim that he was drunk when he raped his domestic help. The report mentioned that he was fully in his senses at the time of the incident.

If the charges against him are proved in court, Shiney faces a minimum seven-year jail sentence.

A team of the National Commission of Women (NCW) rushed to Mumbai and met all the concerned parties, including the victim and her family members. Following the NCW visit, Chief Minister Ashok Chavan had announced that the Shiney rape case would be transferred to a fast track court soon.



## Only A Dalit Will Be My Successor: Mayawati

Lucknow: BSP national general secretary Satish Misra may continue to remain her confidant, but Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Mayawati has no intentions of letting him don the mantle of her successor as she said only a Dalit will succeed her.

Making this clear at a meeting of party ministers, MPs, legislators and district coordinators at the BSP's state headquarters here, Mayawati said: "I am aware that everyone was wondering who I would nominate as my successor in the event I rode on to become prime minister. I was also told that



other than Satish Misra, the names of Naseem Siddiqui and Swami Prasad Maurya were doing rounds.

"But let me clarify that while I would accommodate these prominent leaders in key positions at the centre, a committed Dalit alone would be my successor as chief minister here," she said. Announcing a new role for Misra, who was so far projected as the architect of her "social engineering" initiative, Mayawati reportedly said: "He will now devote his energies to fighting all court battles for me and for our government."

## Gay Sex Legalised In India, Religious Leaders Protest

New Delhi: (IANS) Gay sex early this month won legal sanction in India after the Delhi High Court passed a landmark ruling that was hailed by gay rights activists but denounced by religious leaders as an assault on God.

In a judgment that followed eight years of judicial battle, the Delhi High Court read down section 377 of

discrimination anti-thesis of the right to equality, the judges added: "Equality should not be read literally, but in true spirit."

In a judgement of over 100 pages, the judges said that section 377 should be amended and any sex between consenting adults should be legalised. They underlined, however, that this would not apply to those under 18 years.

Many of the gay rights activists from India and abroad present in the court broke into tears as the order was passed. In no time, they trooped out of the court room screaming "We have won, we have won!" and "Justice has prevailed". Simultaneously, they handed out pamphlets explaining what homosexuality is all about.

The reaction from Hindu, Muslim and Christian leaders was swift and bordered on anger and disbelief.

"The Arya Samaj can never accept this. This cannot be applied to Hindu society or our beliefs," Ganesh Tripathi, a senior priest of Delhi Arya Samaj Mandir, told IANS.

All India Muslim Personal Law Board's Kamal Farooqi said: "This is a sad day for civilised society. It is not acceptable. They are playing with the future generations and civilised society."

Father Dominic Emmanuel added: "We are against legalising (gay sex)... This is because what they do is unnatural and against the design and will of God."

From now on, police will no longer be able to arrest adult homosexuals having consensual sex.



the Indian Penal Code (IPC), quoting Jawaharlal Nehru to emphasize that the constitution guaranteed homosexuals rights equal to what other citizens enjoy.

In a courtroom packed with around 100 people, half of them activists, Chief Justice Ajit Prakash Shah and Justice S. Muralidhar said that if not amended, section 377 would violate article 21 of the Indian constitution, which states that every citizen has equal opportunity of life and is equal before law.

"Equality and inclusiveness are the tenets of the constitution," they quoted India's first prime minister as saying. Calling any

## Michael Jackson The Kind Boss A Driver In Kerala Remembers

Payyanur (Kerala): (IANS) Amongst the millions who watched Michael Jackson's funeral in far away Los Angeles was the grief stricken Ramesh family here — a tearful M.V. Ramesh, who was the pop icon's personal driver, and his eight-year-old son Tanuj who held tightly on to the toys gifted to him by music world's ultimate star.

Ramesh, 38, was one of Jackson's three personal drivers when he lived in Bahrain for a year from 2005 till 2006. He drove Jackson's 2006 model Rolls Royce.

"He was really nice and so friendly with all of us. He told me that I could be free with him and could share our joys and sorrows with him,"

Ramesh told IANS from his home in this Kerala town, about 500 km from the state capital Thiruvananthapuram.

"Jackson's three children, Prince, Paris and Blanket, also lived with him," he recalled fondly.

Remembering the job interview before he was taken on, Ramesh said he was questioned by Jackson himself as well as his secretary and manager in March 2006. He stayed on in the job till Jackson and his family left Bahrain by the end of the same year.

The link with showbiz's brightest and most mercurial star did not break even after that.

"Even after he left Bahrain, he called me twice. The last call came when he wished me Happy New Year in 2007," said Ramesh, who

now works as a shopkeeper in Bahrain and is home on leave.

Tuesday night was tough for Ramesh. The family gathered around the television set to bid adieu to the former boss, who was revered as much as he was reviled, as his funeral was broadcast alive to millions around the world.

"My son Tanuj was holding a few toys that Jackson gave me for him just before he



left Bahrain.

All of us watched TV and we were sad. I can't believe he is no more," Ramesh said, remembering how the strange star covered his face every time he stepped out with his children.

With MJ, as he was called, no more, Ramesh's image of the man is not the much written about music genius as much in the news for his songs as his eccentricities but the kind boss who gifted toy cars and dolls to the children of his employees.