

## CNG price rise

The fallout needs to be tackled carefully

A great sense of relief motorists and transport owners have so far derived amidst high prices of octane, petrol and diesel from the low CNG price tag. But that relieving spot has been somewhat taken away by the doubling of CNG price now. Some upward adjustment in CNG price was inevitable, if the books of Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC), or for that matter, the subsidy budget of the government, were to be balanced. Yet raising the price by hundred percent by one single stroke is something that can have a shock effect on the road transport sector that is associated with environment-friendly use of fuel.

Admittedly, even after the CNG price hike it remains affordable at less than half the cost of octane which previously was one fourth of the gasoline cost overall.

Since the CNG price is not subsidised by the government and a realistic price is being charged from the consumers, they would now demand their money's worth in terms of services. They will pay the higher price and still stand in queues for long hours wasting is not the predicament they would like to suffer any more. The government must offer permission to the private sector to open more CNG filling stations to be in steps with the speed with which conversion to CNG is taking place. Let's not forget that the rapid increase in CNG use had already eased pressure on the fuel import bill of the government. We can see that the CNG fuel station owners have been directed by the government to procure generators to ease the plight of CNG users, so badly compounded by frequent power failures. This step needs to be followed up on to ensure compliance by the owners of filling stations.

The communication ministry has plans to increase the fares of the CNG three-wheelers and taxicabs 'proportionately', but such transport operators are likely to defy the notion of proportionality judging by their past conduct. To our knowledge, they have already started charging abnormal fares following announcement of new gas rates.

The Special Assistant to the Chief Adviser on Energy M. Tamim rules out any increased fares for CNG-run buses and trucks as 'these have already been charging much higher fares compared to their fuel costs for long'. Actually, the CNG-powered buses had been charging either equal or more than the diesel operated buses, even though the latter's fuel cost is four times that of the former. The communication ministry's job is cut out here to enforce rationality in the fare structures.

## The lethal lucre of jobs abroad

Victims of cheating multiply

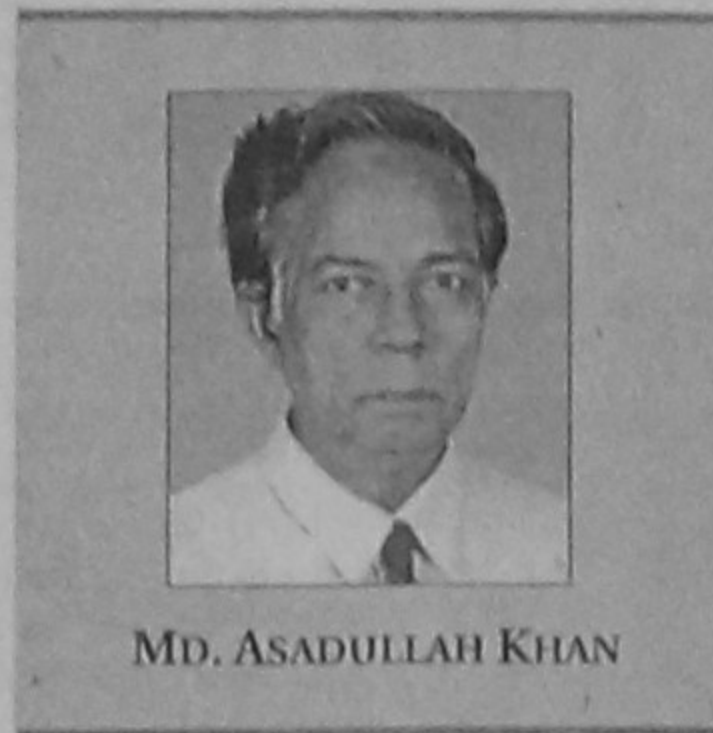
EVERY other day, we hear the sad tale of fortune seekers returning home from a totally frustrated pursuit of the El Dorado -- physically and mentally ruined with nothing to subsist on and up to their necks in debts. There is hardly any place in the world our youths cheated by manpower frauds have not been repatriated from. Many have landed in jail, requiring counsellor assistance that was hard to come by.

The traffickers' long hands in which the lives of gullible job seekers are put, spread from within the borders of the country over to inhospitable territories, clandestine routes and strange lands. Driven by grinding poverty and unemployment, our young men and women fall prey to traps laid out by so-called manpower agents painting a rosy picture of a career abroad they cannot resist. Our deceived youths have been stranded and dying in deserts, seaports, airports and along hostile land routes. The height of it was the story of freezing to death of Bangladeshis in an iced container.

With each passing day, a new destination is being added to the long list of countries from which Bangladeshi youths are being repatriated through courtesy of Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) programme of International Organisation for Migration (IMO). The last batch of 42 Bangladeshi immigrants who had bought visa, most probably from fraudulent agents for Iraq found themselves dumped in Kurdistan, a place for which no manpower export is authorised by our government. They had to be brought back home by the IMO.

Successful governments' efforts at streamlining manpower export notwithstanding, the menace has grown into a hydra-headed monster undermining the image of the country and ruining lots of young people. We suggest a special cell comprising experts from public and private sectors, foreign office and IMO, if possible, be formed to devise ways and means for a fail-safe export of our manpower. Simultaneously, an awareness building move must be made by the government, local bodies and the print and electronic media to warn job seekers of the consequences of taking a plunge in the dark and making sure of being on the right course before leaving the country.

# Overcoming the bleak power generation scenario



Md. ASADULLAH KHAN

THE power generation scenario with the onset of this summer season is going from bad to worse. It has been learnt from the PDB sources that the country's average power generation capacity has come down to 3700 megawatts as against the demand of 4350 megawatts. But unofficially the demand curve exceeds 5000 megawatts. Special Assistant to the Chief Adviser on Power and Energy Professor M. Tamim said in a recent press briefing that the shortage of power at the moment is more due to transmission problem than generational. It has been further learnt that constraints in supplying gas from Bibiyana and Jalalabad gas fields to power plants at Ghorasal, Siddhirganj and Chittagong now stands in the way of enhancing power generation. Shockingly, as Professor Tamim said, the move taken in 2005 to install 4 (four) compressors at the national grid with the assistance of ADB for increasing gas pressure did not materialise. Compounding the problem is the sudden drop of gas extraction from the only offshore gas field Sangu which Cairn Energy plc, the operator of the gas field, failed to ascertain earlier. Further, their effort to extract gas from other wells including Moghna and Hatia has not met with success.

The country now needs 190 crore cft of gas and production at the moment goes to the extent of 177 crore and 50 lakh cft out of which 68 crore cft is being provided for genera-

tion of power but for the power sector to operate without disruption, there is need to raise the gas supply to at least 78 crore cft. Moreover, if the rental power plants, as planned earlier, add up another 200 megawatts to the national grid in the next month, power sector will need another 11 crore cft of gas. But the snag in the distribution channel has possibly shattered all hopes for a brighter future.

Undenably true, energy plays an important role in accelerating economic growth as much as it serves as

education and electricity, considered most vital for any country to rise above the depths of abysmal poverty situation.

Bangladesh is different. Unfortunately for us, the trauma experienced during the liberation war and the hope and optimism exhibited during the initial years did not ignite us to rebuild the country with meticulous planning and vision. In consequence the country lurched from one crisis to another.

Shockingly, it was because of bad governance, closed vision and

small power plants and the government would purchase electricity from these plants at a negotiated tariff. But objections were raised by the WB about the selection process on the issue of transparency as the selectors were given discretionary power to qualify or disqualify a sponsor. Even these days as reports published in the newspapers indicate the rental power plants that were supposed to add 260 megawatts by May, 08 are unlikely to meet that demand. Only a lone 20 MW plant at Bogra might go into operation dur-

advanced designs are likely to stave off another cent.

American technology in wind power dates back to 1900, when most of the electricity on US farms was provided by windmills. To meet an ever increasing demand due to increasing number of households as well as to safeguard the entrenched interest of the administration in oil business, these were replaced during the 1930s when Rural Electrification Board wired the countryside. But the technology staged a comeback when oil embargoes and environmental

from dams. Interestingly, India has switched over to second position achieving production capacity of more than 3000 MW through harnessing wind power. Encouragingly, technological advances that are now available are likely to make wind power more appealing. Engineers plan to boost the tower so that machines can escape ground turbulence and tap more consistent winds. Lighter materials that are now available could reduce the cost of building the towers. And researchers are looking into ways to store excess energy produced during windy periods so that it could be used during calmer days or during peak energy demand.

Speaking about solar energy, it has already gained acceptability. During my visit to Sidr-hit areas namely, Shyamnagar, Gabura, Patakhali and Neel Dumur in the Sakhira district bordering the Sundarbans last November, I found houses and shrimp hatcheries powered by solar panel provided by Grameen Shakti. Millions of rural homes in developing countries get electricity from solar cells. "The potential is enormous," says Anil Caabral, an energy specialist for the World Bank, which has helped finance 500,000 residential solar systems from Argentina to Sri Lanka. It is true the wattage is low and price structure is still very high, but left with no other alternatives affluent people and business communities have gone for it.

Undenably true, problems of power are not created in just one summer but are an accumulation of years of neglect and bad performance. If the government of the bygone days has failed to realise it, the government that be or the people or parties that are vying for power must realise that energy or power is the prime mover of a modern state and investors from home and abroad will be shying away as long as the state of our energy has not improved.

Md. Asadullah Khan is a former teacher of physics and Controller of Examinations, BUET.

## BITTER TRUTH

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an important tool in providing basic needs like food, shelter, health care, safe water, sanitation, education and access to job for either an individual, or the whole community. 'Sustainable human development' that means economic growth through equitable distribution of benefits can only be ensured through the availability of energy needs of the nation. Reports have it that in developing countries where per capita commercial energy consumption is below 1000 kg of oil equivalent (KGOE) per year, poverty predominates with the concomitant vices of illiteracy, population growth and infant mortality.

It is worth recalling the planning process that leaders of most of the advanced countries including Soviet Union adopted after the revolution. Soon after the Russian Revolution, the Soviet Union declared that education and electricity -- the two E's -- were the eyes of the country. In a similar vein, most countries in Africa and Asia after their liberation from the colonial rulers in a bid to rebuild their countries waged war on two fronts:

sinister greed of the functionaries in the past, specially in the last five years that the whole country turned into a crisis zone with people crying for power to irrigate their fields. And now Munshiganj and Chandpur people find no ways to save their potatoes from getting perished for lack of power in the cold storage. Appallingly, it is only due to inadequate supply of power and frequent load shedding that a sizable portion of the 20 lakh metric tons of potatoes already put in the cold storage will be wasted, let alone another 50 lakh metric tons that would perish on the road side. The situation came to such a pass because the country's power generation and more specifically the distribution system, as Prof. Tamim has said in a recent press briefing, remains very poor at almost all the places because the immediate past government never undertook a timely project to upgrade either the generating plants or the transmission system.

As per the plan of the government at that time, the private sector sponsors were expected to set up about 45

ing this time frame.

With fossil fuel becoming scarcer and its price shooting up almost every day, the planners and decision makers must look for alternative source of power to keep the present decrepit and stagnant economy running. And the answer is perhaps blowing in the wind.

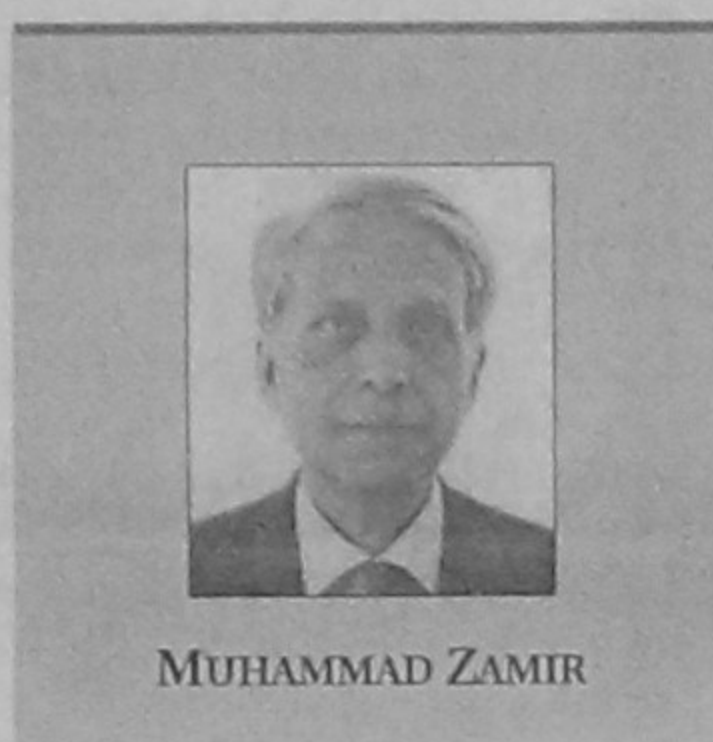
Wind is now the world's fastest growing power source -- a high tech challenge to the coal mines, oil rigs, gas wells, nuclear reactors and hydroelectric dams. Experts say wind could provide up to 12 per cent of the earth's electricity within two decades. J. Michael Davis, chief of the renewable Energy programmes at the US Department of Energy said enthusiastically at the beginning of the new millennium "Today's models in the US are capable of meeting 10 per cent of America's energy demand and within 30 years, newer versions could provide for a quarter of the US's power needs. Reports have it that machines that produced energy at 7 cents per KW in California in 1996 have now brought down the cost to 4 cents. More

concerns prodded the politicians to look for alternative sources. With trials one after another, California in particular became the nursery of advanced technology.

In their case it is the choice of technology, in our case it is the desperate need to opt for alternative source of power when oil import price continues to shoot up every day and indigenous gas resources do not seem to be as promising as touted in the 90s. At the moment exploitation of wind energy or at the farthest end tapping of solar energy seems most feasible and a viable option in view of the availability of vast coastal areas of the country that offer bright prospect of harnessing power through setting up of wind mills in those locations.

The promise that wind offers is tantalizing. Windmills generate renewable power, so called because the source of the energy, wind is continually renewed by nature. So is the case of solar cells, which are powered by the sun -- geothermal systems which use the earth's heat and hydroelectricity which flows

# ASEAN and SAARC: Need for closer ties



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

MEMBERS of SAARC hold ASEAN in high esteem. We admire the cohesion and stability that this regional organisation has brought for its members in Southeast Asia over the last forty years. We compare SAARC with ASEAN and discover many areas where we lag behind. I shall first try to enumerate the areas where ASEAN has stolen a march over SAARC.

ASEAN as a regional cooperation has helped to consolidate peace and stability in Southeast Asia. It is true that there is still the lingering problem of Myanmar, but ASEAN is playing a constructive role in encouraging the government and the opposition in that country to move towards dialogue and reconciliation and to find common denominators in the roadmap towards democracy.

The second notable attainment of ASEAN has been its important role in maintaining the strategic sea-lanes that pass through Southeast Asia. We have to remember that nearly half of the world's oil supply pass through the Straits of Malacca and Singapore. These two straits are classified as "straits used for international navigation" under the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. Indonesia, an archipelagic state, also hosts important archipelagic sea-lanes, such as Sunda and Lombok. ASEAN cooper-

ates with the International Maritime Organization (IMO), in keeping the straits suitable for international navigation and the archipelagic sea-lanes safe, secure and clean. This is indeed an important accomplishment.

ASEAN's third major achievement has been its attempts to create a single market and production base. They have not completely succeeded as yet, but have definitely moved forward. Eventually, ASEAN's population base of 550 million and its rising economy will

are not only integrating but also producing new patterns of intra-Asian trade and production, that are outward looking and compatible with the requirements of the global economy.

ASEAN's fourth success has been the creation of its important paradigm of multiculturalism. There are still some problems in the south of Thailand, in the Philippines, in Myanmar and in Malaysia, but generally, ASEAN member states have been able to show that all their citizens can live together better than in South Asia. As compared to

between India, Australia and New Zealand, and Northeast and Southeast Asia, it became logical subsequently for ASEAN to launch the East Asian Summit (EAS) which has brought together ASEAN and the plus six-China, Japan, Korea and Australia, India and New Zealand. In addition to its economic connotation, the matrix of the EAS forum has now assumed great strategic significance because analysts believe that Asia's peace will depend greatly on the ability of China, Japan and India to live at peace with one another.

good governance and constitutional government. To assist this process, it was also decided to empower the ASEAN Secretary-General and the ASEAN Secretariat and create new institutions, such as the three Community Councils and the Committee of Permanent Representatives. Another interesting feature related to the streamlining of ASEAN's structure and decision-making process pertaining to economic affairs. It was significantly decided that the Economic Ministers could retain their practice

to make SAARC more cohesive, efficient and effective. It could also make SAARC a more people-oriented organization, with stronger engagement with parliamentarians, business organizations, scholars and think tanks, and civil society. It would also transform SAARC into a more rational, coherent and dynamic regional organization.

SAARC Member States need to also carefully study and monitor how ASEAN Dialogue Partners are facilitating integration efforts and the narrowing of development gaps to deepen and broaden cooperation and to achieve a stable, prosperous and outward-looking region. The SAARC Secretariat, in this context, should also identify the steps that are being taken by ASEAN to enhance the region's competitiveness, and to reap the benefits of globalisation while minimizing the social impacts.

Relevant policy planners within South Asia should monitor the steps being taken by ASEAN towards the establishment of a comprehensive post-2012 international climate change arrangement, based on the principles of equity, flexibility, effectiveness, common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities. This will enable South Asia to focus on how to intensify cooperation in a wide range of activities, including combating transboundary environment pollution, and ensuring the conservation and sustainable management of natural resources. There is also scope to learn about the safe and sustainable use of alternative energies, such as hydropower, biofuel and solar power.

I believe there is need for a more inter-active engagement between SAARC and ASEAN. Such a relationship will bring the two regions closer and definitely contribute towards required socio-economic development.

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## POST BREAKFAST

SAARC could learn a lot from ASEAN's exercise. It would help to make SAARC more cohesive, efficient and effective. It could also make SAARC a more people-oriented organization, with stronger engagement with parliamentarians, business organizations, scholars and think tanks, and civil society. It would also transform SAARC into a more rational, coherent and dynamic regional organization.

be a significant foil for the rising giant economies of China, India and Japan (which remains the second largest economy in the world).

Professor Tommy Koh of Singapore in this context has correctly pointed out that "ASEAN is already the fifth-largest trading partner of the United States, after Canada, China, Mexico and Japan. By the year 2015, the ten economies of ASEAN will become a single market and production base, with the free flow of goods, services, investment, business, professional people and skilled labour, and the freer flow of capital. Not only will Southeast Asia become one integrated economy but it will also be linked, through free trade agreements and comprehensive economic partnership agreements, to the economies of China, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia, New Zealand and the European Union. This is indeed a success story and assumes greater significance when one sees such efforts against the background of a resurgent ASEAN whose economies

ASEAN, we are surrounded by conflicts and misunderstandings involving ethnicity, tribalism, languages, cultures and religions. Islam as practiced within ASEAN has also historically emerged as more moderate and tolerant.

ASEAN is now a crucial facilitator and 'regional architect'. ASEAN took the initiative in the early 1990s to launch the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). This process brought together all the regional and extra-regional powers. Tangible progress in the ARF has not been exceptional, but right now it is the only security forum of the Asia-Pacific, just as APEC is the only economic forum which links the two shores of the Pacific.

The 1997 Asian financial crisis made it clear to all Asians that Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia are interlinked. That provided the rationale for launching the ASEM (ASEAN plus China, Japan, South Korea) process. With the rise of India and the growing connectivity

ASEAN, in that regard, according to Koh has played the vital role of convener, facilitator and the architect of the evolving regional architecture.

ASEAN has moved forward over the last four decades but there are still several areas where there can be improvement. This was fortunately focused upon during its fortieth anniversary Summit meeting held at the end of last year in Singapore.

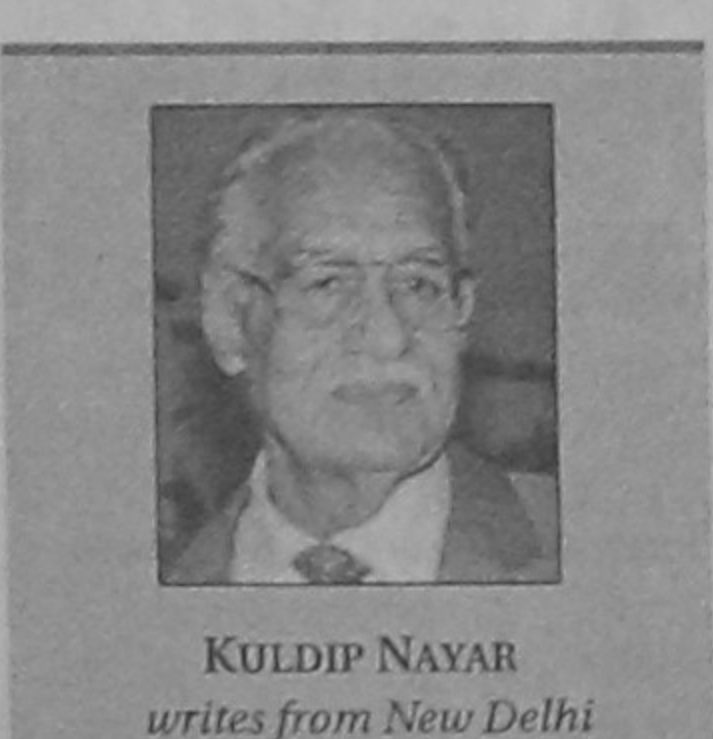
ASEAN's leaders signed the ASEAN Charter that inter alia decided to transform ASEAN from a loose association into a rules-based organization, which will follow an agreed procedure for monitoring compliance and a common system for dispute settlement. It also agreed to establish an ASEAN human rights body and promote integration in the ASEAN security community and the ASEAN socio-cultural community. The Charter also committed ASEAN to certain principles such as democracy, human rights and fundamental freedoms, rule of law,

of taking decisions, not necessarily by consensus, but by such methods as "ASEAN minus X" -- a procedure that could also be adopted by SAARC.

Implementation however will be the key to the realization of the vision outlined in the ASEAN Charter, particularly in interrelated and complex areas like energy security, environment, climate change and sustainable development. These are issues that represent a serious global challenge that must be addressed in a comprehensive manner through individual, regional and concerted international action. In particular, the adverse effects of climate change, such as rising sea levels and changing weather patterns, will need careful handling as they will have direct impact on the security, livelihood and well-being of the peoples of the region.

I think SAARC could learn a lot from ASEAN's exercise. It would help

# Unending quota politics



KULDEEP NAYYAR  
writes from New Delhi

AFTER Jawaharlal Nehru assumed power as India's first Prime Minister it was expected that he would build it up as a welfare state. But when it came to writing the Constitution, even the word, socialism, did not figure in the 395-Article document. His daughter, Mrs Indira Gandhi, added the word, socialism, in the preamble of the Constitution and that too during the emergency in 1975 when fundamental rights had been suspended.

It is strange that Nehru opted for caste, not class, while spelling out benefits for the economically backward. The achhut (untouchables),

## BETWEEN THE LINES

The quota does not fit into a democratic system. There has to be an equality of opportunity. India should probably adopt what America has done: the affirmative action in favour of blacks. The yardstick should be a person's economic conditions. In any case, the criterion to backwardness should not be assessed on the basis of either colour, or caste or creed. A poor is a poor, whatever his religion.

presently called the 'dalits' were at the lowest rung and given along with tribals a quota of 22 per cent in jobs, admission to educational institutions and the legislatures. Still there was nothing given to Other Backward Classes (OBC), including Muslims, who were in no better shape than the dalits except that they did not face unsociability. Some 40 years later, the OBC too got the same concessions but without reservations of seats in state assemblies and the Lok Sabha. Nor did they have any quota in high technical and management institutions.

A few days ago, the Supreme Court has upheld the law to extend to the OBC reservations in top institutions of high learning. The

court accepted the plea to treat the dalits and the OBC at par. Total reservations have now come to 49.5 per cent. This has hit merit. The upper castes are angry but getting reconciled to the situation. No political party has made it an issue. Since this is the election year, none wants to take the risk of alienating the dalits, tribals or other backward classes which include Muslims and Christians. If they are all put together, they command more votes in the country than the upper caste Hindus.

Yet, social reforms which are carried out through law courts have legitimacy, not conviction. The society becomes more unequal. This is the biggest challenge that

India has faced for centuries. It has banned discrimination but the 3000-year-old caste system still allows the practice and the press is full of atrocities against the dalits even today.

Despite the dismal scenario, an optimistic phenomenon is emerging. A dalit is no more on the defensive to own his identity. He has come to assess the value of his vote and has begun to believe that he is in a position to swing the balance in favour of the party which delivers him goods. For years, the Congress had the dalits as its vote bank. But the party has more or less lost it. Now he wants the party of his caste to win. He has already returned Mayawati, a dalit, to power. She is

the first dalit chief minister of UP, the largest state in the country. Other backward classes too have asserted and installed in five states their own men as chief ministers.

This may well be India's silent revolution, integrating the different castes and creeds into a democratic system. True, the upper caste is unhappy because mediocrity has suppressed merit. But in a society of 1.2 billion, the anger of comparatively few does not disturb the rhythm of progress, especially when they are the leading beneficiaries of development. The problem will arise when the demand for reservations in private sector takes shape.

In any case, the disparity in eco-

nomic terms has come to matter, not so much the caste. If only Nehru had the vision to realise this when the Constitution was introduced in 1951, he would have known that the pattern of poverty in India was woven in such a way that caste and class were coterminous. He could have laid the foundation for a real welfare state without the stigma of caste, socially and economically.

Dr B.R. Ambedkar, then Law Minister, is a Gandhi for the dalits. He did not want reservations because he considered them crutches. After a lot of persuasion, he had the quota system included in the Constitution with a proviso that all types of reservations would end within a decade. But the electoral politics in India took such a shape that reservations became a necessity for the then ruling party, the Congress, to win. The Constitution is amended unanimously every 10 years to extend reservations for another 10 years. All political parties have developed their own leaders in different castes. All of them treat reservations like a holy cow. More than four decades have gone by without any serious challenge to reservations. As of today, the concessions will not go

even in the next 50 years. Vested interests have developed to keep the caste and OBC quotas intact.

The Supreme Court's judgment has done one thing: It has stopped reservations to the OBC creamy layer in higher learning institutions. For reasons best known to the Supreme Court, the creamy layer among dalits and tribals has escaped any mention in the judgment. The OBC creamy layer, at present ministers at the centre and in the states and civil servants occupying high positions, wants it to continue to get what the general run of its community is entitled to. This is not fair because concessions are not reaching the lower layers. The Supreme Court's decision to peg the creamy layer down to an annual income of Rs 2 lakh is not low as the OBC creamy layer argues. In a society where 70 per cent of people earn less than Rs 5,000 a year, the limit is quite high.

The larger question which India faces is the duration of reservations. According to the Constitution, they should have ended in 1960. How long more? The youth outside the orbit of reservations is increasingly getting agitated and even desperate.

No doubt, prosperity will one day span disparities. This means many, many years to come. The quota does not fit into a democratic system. There has to be an equality of opportunity.

India should probably adopt what America has done: the affirmative action in favour of blacks. The yardstick should be a person's economic conditions. In any case, the criterion to backwardness should not be assessed on the basis of either colour, or caste or creed. A poor is a poor, whatever his religion.

In fact, it is time that Pakistan and Bangladesh introduce the affirmative action. They can argue that Islam does not recognise any caste. This is not true in practice. In any case, they have to find space for a person who is extremely poor. He has to be helped to stand on his feet. Islam may not recognise caste, but what does it do about the poor? Zakat, a share of income which Muslims give annually, is at best charity. The poor want to live as equals. No religion can deny them their right to do so.

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