

TALKING POLLS AND BEYOND

'Convicts must not be given nomination'

Fifteenth president of the country, Prof Dr AQM Badruddoza Chowdhury was born in November 1932 in Bikrampur. A renowned professor of medicine, he entered politics as the founder secretary general of BNP. He was elected MP for several times and served as cabinet minister during 1979-1982, 1991-1996 and 2001 till he was elected President on November 12, 2001. After resigning as President on June 21, 2002, he formed Bikalpa Dhara Bangladesh (BDB) which later merged into Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) on October 26, 2006. However, Chowdhury and his allies left LDP and reestablished BDB after eight months. Wasim Bin Habib and Suranjith Debnath took this interview.

Do you have any confusion over the next parliamentary elections even after the announcement of the detailed schedule?

Confusion still prevails as the BNP-led four-party alliance is yet to give assurance that they will participate in the polls. Whenever they assure about their participation the confusion will automatically fade away. Besides, some measures need to be taken in this regard. Confusion will be over if people can see neutralisation among the government officials. The administration will have to function neutrally and people directly and indirectly involved with election need to be neutralised immediately.

Security of the voters, candidates, campaigners and poll officials need to be ensured before the election and on the day of election. In addition, media has an immense role to play. Media especially the electronic ones need to play a neutral role to remove confusion from the people's mind as well as to establish an honest and democratic government completely free from corruption.

How do you evaluate the caretaker government (CG)'s decision to hold the elections amidst emergency?

Now we, the political parties, can hold meeting and bring out procession due to relaxing five and six clauses of emergency. The CG should take more steps especially towards relaxing more clauses of emergency during the polls. Advisers of the present CG should be more cautious refrain-

ing themselves from any contradictory statements. Actually they do not have sufficient practical experience, which is needed to run a country.

Do you think political parties will resume "blame game" and refuse election results again?

The previous elections were held on the basis of very incorrect voter lists. In the last election, 12 percent was false voters compared to the new voter list. This time the number of voters could cross 10 crore if this new voter list was prepared in the way it had been prepared last year. That is why there were surely some errors in the results. If errors are found to such extent how can the political parties accept the vote? There were some reason to refuse the voting result but the political parties could not explain it as both the parties had false voters. But this time the voter list is quite correct and real and if the voters are allowed to vote properly without any fear, threat and detriment, and in accordance of the voter list, little scope of grumbling will remain.

Many political parties opposed local observers in the coming polls. Do you support it?

It is a mixed matter. It is likely that those who come from outside of the country for observing the election are more neutral, but it is a shame for us if we have not been able to create neutral observers locally. Unfortunately we have more faith in people from outside of the country compared to our own. This is also a shame.

Should the upazila elections defer or not?

There is no objection if EC can hold the Upazila

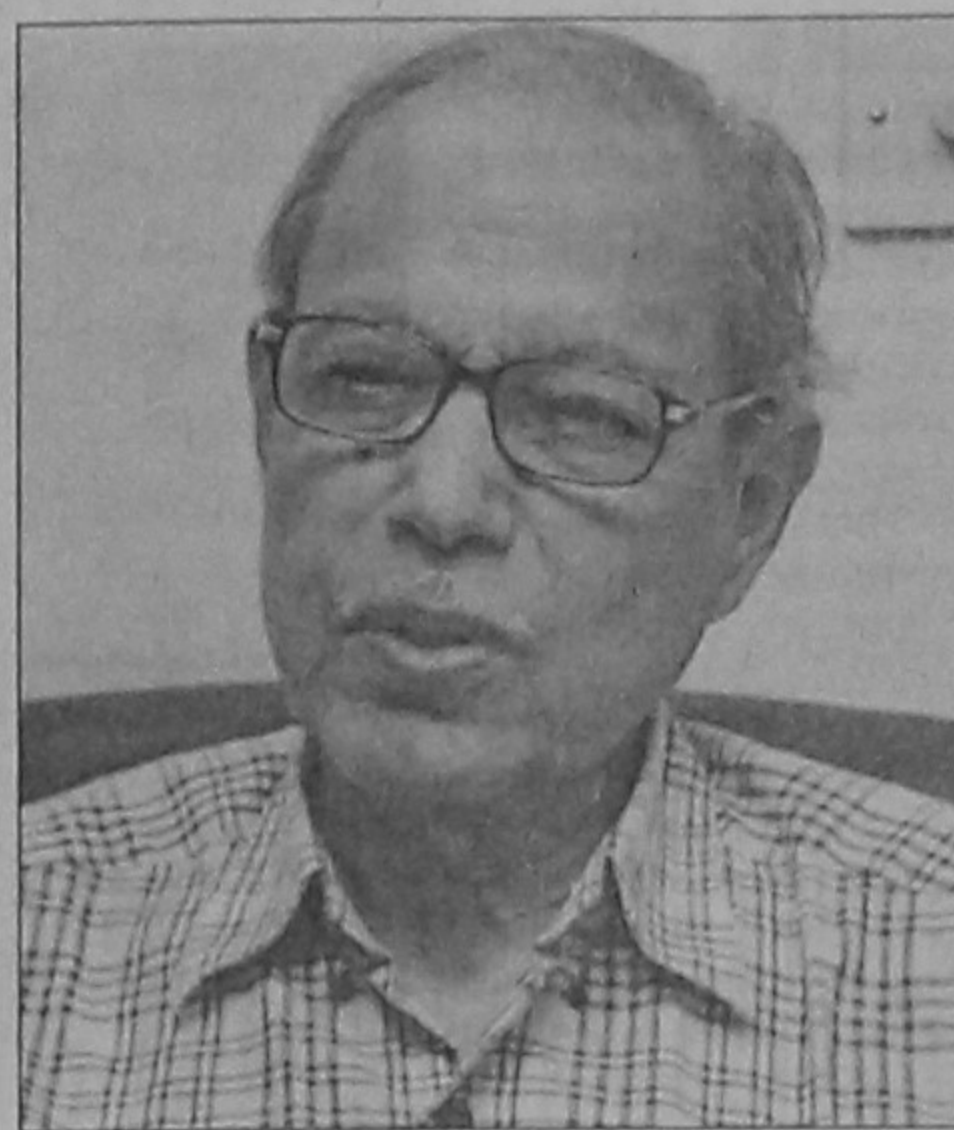
election only ten days after the parliament election. But, people will be confused on different issues especially symbols of the candidates when candidates will start election campaign during the same period.

What may be the post-election scenario in the country?

In spite of all the checks and balances so far been made, the situation will be different if the election is rigged and grossly flawed. But if the election is held in a free and fair manner, peaceful atmosphere will prevail in the country.

How do you evaluate the reform measures undertaken by the CG?

No doubt that all the advisers of this government are learned and so they did not do any mistake like many others. They are quite polite and honest. Though they have done some technical errors but accepted it politely and tried to improve that with new efforts. They did not do any gross mistake. The activities of the 10 advisers of the government have shown that they did not need 60 ministers. They have made a good EC, separated the judiciary, tried the criminals and the corrupt and taken many other steps which was quite hard for a political government. Besides, they have tackled the situations nicely during the period of Sidr and two floods. When the flood crisis became a major problem all over the world they tackled it in a quite good way. But we would be happy if they could control the price of essentials. They perhaps did not appreciate the



methods of income generation.

The failure of this government is sudden eviction of the hawkers which affected about one crore people. The steps they took to improve power situation has also seemed inadequate. They should have taken more measures to improve electricity supply. I am in favour of reform but it is true that it cannot be imposed. The politicians should realise the emotions and reactions of the people.

BDB merged into LDP. Why did it split?

We had started with the philosophy of doing liberal politics with democratic norms and it has always been told that LDP does politics of different trend. But after some days of our formation, we observed a philosophical difference between us. The way they talk was against our ideology. Secondly, they wanted to divide the country into 10/11 provinces but we were and are always in favour of making a united Bangladesh. In addition, the post of chairman and executive chairman did not work together. Basically it split for ideological reasons.

Which political alliance will your party join ahead of the election?

Election approaches nearer. The Awami League (AL) President is just back from abroad. Alliance is made on the basis of talks and discussions with different parties. So, it would not be proper to say anything before discussion with the AL party Chief.

How many seats are you going to demand from the grand alliance?

I won't say it right now. Two years have passed since we made the alliance last time. Now we have developed in a big way. We have good organisations and people in half of the total parliamentary constituencies, so we cannot say it promptly. We will take our final decision after observing attitudes and moves of other political parties. The main target of participating in the election is to win. We want to win and want to form a government. We will try for it and we will take all the measures needed to do so.

Is there any possibility of forming alliance with the BNP?

The present BNP has derailed from its ideology. So how can it be possible to make an alliance with them. We want to establish good governance in the country and will do everything for it.

Is there any possibility of forming alliance with the LDP?

The main problem to make alliance with LDP is ideological. We do not want to divide the country into 10 provinces; we want a united Bangladesh. But in the politics of greater unity it (alliance) may be formed and if they believe in our ideology.

Do you believe the RPO will be able to bring change to political culture?

It is the sole responsibility of the politicians. None can bring any instant reform. It is the duty of politicians and unless they learn to hate corruption and terrorism and learn to do politics of responsibility, it will not change. Moreover, there is a big force -- press -- which can do a lot in this regard. If the media work for the country in real sense and do not get politically biased it would help a lot.

Do you support student politics?

We wrote in our party constitution that students will do politics for solving institutional and education related problems, nothing else.

Do you think there is a need to bring a balance of power between president and prime minister?

When I was the President, I had to sign many files but did not know about the files. Besides, many officials including those from army were removed from their jobs and I had to sign. But I did not know why those officials were removed. Personally, I think the power of president should be extended to a large extent. For this purpose, I suggested to establish separate secretariat for president where prime minister cannot interfere.

Do you support religion-based politics and political parties?

What will happen if somebody wants to do politics on the basis of religion? Let them do if they like to do so. But it should not be done.

What is your opinion about the minus-two formula?

We don't believe in minus or plus. If somebody commits corruption or crime he should be tried through the legal system.

Should political parties nominate war criminals or communal people?

Not at all. Anybody committed such crime and if it is proved, he should be removed from the party. But those who are not proved as war criminals should not be treated in the same way.

Should political parties nominate the convicts or the graft accused?

Convicts must not be given nomination and the government can fix a timeframe for the convicts that they should not do politics for a certain period. But it is different in case of the accused.

How do you see release of corrupt individuals on bail?

We are depressed about the anti corruption drive. We don't want to say anything about the bail of the corrupt individuals as the matter lies with the court.

Concern for credible election

STRAIGHT LINE

The time has come when citizens must wrest the leadership from the less committed professional politicians and insist upon persons of knowledge, vision, and character to be chosen as candidates for parliamentary and local body election. Such persons can usher in a government which will be strong without being authoritarian and humane without being weak.

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

THE next general election stated for 18th December 2008 will be different from others held since at least 1971. While there may be worries that democratic elections will be taking place under restrictive arrangements, there is definitely greater concern as to whether our hard-earned freedom's foundation will stay. Such concern assumes significance on account of worldwide economic crisis, political unrest, constitutional erosion, and moral degradation in public life. We may take comfort in the fact that the unrest is worldwide but it would be unwise to deny or ignore that we have a sizeable problem at hand.

The resilience of democratic polity varies from place to place and the timing of political breakdown depends upon the strength of political institutions. Our political institutions have not, unfortunately, acquired sufficient durability through either experience or tradition. This is a sad reality with which we have to grapple. We have an economy that cannot meet the rising expectations of the people along with fragile institutions and a constitution that is bent by the whims of the ruling party.

The informed public know that a reasonably peaceful and fair election depends largely on the goodwill of the general population, strengthened and encouraged by the mainstream political parties being supplemented by the enforcement arrangements of an over stretched administration. This, however, does not detract from the urgent need of strict enforcement

of electoral laws for empowering the election commission with a view to conducting a fair election.

Most elections in independent Bangladesh have experienced various kinds of malpractices. The worrying part, however, is that over the years the nature and intensity of the irregularities and illegalities have assumed such a fearful dimension that there are justifiable premonitions about the holding of an acceptable and credible national poll. Admittedly, there are causes for concern as the viability of a democratic polity affecting the quality of life of the citizens across our political divide is at stake.

Looking back one may find that small level forgery, forcible closure of voting through muscle flexing by bullies of the party, voting by impersonation in some constituencies were resorted to by a section of the political party, particularly in the sensitive or remote areas of the country. By and large these did not attract serious attention as it most often did not significantly affect the national polls. The situation, however, changed ominously as extra-constitutional rule descended on the body politic and the period between 1982 to 1988 saw some of the worst electoral malpractices that were legally punishable and morally reprehensible, to say the least. Sadly for the nation, the public services of the country that included subordinate magistracy and the enforcement apparatus, amongst others, played a pathetically energized and

ignominious role in the shameful stage managed election at the behest of a malevolent autocrat. Expressions like 'Media Coup' became known for the first time in our part of the world where despite the economic adversity the general population and the election managers could be proud of tolerably healthy electoral practices.

All public servants entrusted with election duties come under the control and supervision of the Election Commission during a fixed period. That is the official position. However, posting of loyal and pliable officials in key positions by the party government prior to relinquishing power to the caretaker government did create administrative complications. In 2001, thirteen Secretaries to the government were transferred on the very first day the caretaker chief assumed charge of office. Later on, there was large-scale transfer of Deputy Commissioners and Superintendents of Police of districts along with wholesale transfer of all officers-in-charge of the police stations of the country. Whether such massive exercise, entailing huge expenditure of the public exchequer was in the real interests of impartial conduction of national election, has not been established beyond doubt.

A particular political party complained in 2001 that officials hostile to them were deliberately posted to key positions and that such officials acted in a very partisan manner during the election. Many such officials were allegedly rewarded with prize post-

ings after election. Whatever be the merits of such officials, the allegations of the particular political party could not be brushed aside under the circumstances.

The key question, however, is the criteria of selecting and posting an impartial public official during election time. Officially, all public servants are regulation-bound to act in a neutral and non-partisan manner. The ground reality, however, is that officials appointed and posted by a particular party government are not considered trustworthy by the other party. This issue would be very crucial because public servants in key positions have considerable influence on the election process. Without doubt, there would be demands and counter demands, allegations and counter allegations about the suitability of a particular public official. The Election Commission and the CTG would have to do serious homework to work out their strategy to face such eventuality and come up with reasonably satisfying solutions. The quality of law enforcement prior to and during the election will depend significantly on the handling of this issue.

The deployment of armed forces personnel has had without doubt a salutary effect on the election process in Bangladesh. However, there were occasions when the political government was reluctant to deploy armed forces personnel even after repeated requests from the Election Commission. There were differences of opinion even on the manner of their deployment between the two

authorities. The Election Commission conducts and manages the national election with the support of caretaker government, but the decision to deploy the armed forces personnel for election, including its timing, rests exclusively on the President of the Republic, who, however, will have the benefit of advice of the council of advisers and chiefs of the services. Past experience indicate that political parties have differing views on the time and manner of actual field placement of Armed Forces Personnel.

The time and the manner of the above deployment will come under intense public scrutiny during the next election. Prudent and efficient handling of this issue will have immense impact on the law enforcement. The Election Commission and the caretaker government will be hard-pressed to make appropriate decision on this sensitive aspect.

Every democratic society needs to have an aristocracy of talent, knowledge, and character. It is this aristocracy which must take to public life, however discriminatory and unpleasant it may sound, if democracy is to have a solid foundation in Bangladesh. We have to go all out to accord the highest recognition to ability, knowledge, and integrity. Our constitution was framed on the basis that our citizens, including the best, would be willing to take a continuous and meaningful part in public life. So if the thoughtful and the committed fail the country at this juncture, the next alternative would be to invite extra-constitutional authoritarianism of the worst type.

The time has come when citizens must wrest the leadership from the less committed professional politicians and insist upon persons of knowledge, vision, and character to be chosen as candidates for parliamentary and local body election. Such persons can usher in a government which will be strong without being authoritarian and humane without being weak.

Muhammad Nurul Huda is a columnist for The Daily Star.

A tribute to Dr Zohra Kazi

MUHAMMAD MURAD LATIF

THE first Bangali Muslim lady doctor of the then undivided Bengal Professor Dr Zohra Begum Kazi was born on 15th October, 1912 at Rajnangan, Madhya Pradesh, India. Her father late Dr. Kazi Abdus Sattar was also a renowned physician and a political personality of the Subcontinent who hailed from the famous Kazi family of Gopalpur village under Kalkini Upazila of Madaripur district. He was a close associate of Mahatma Gandhi, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Maulana Shaukat Ali, Jawaharlal Nehru, Ballabhai Patel, Sher-e-Bangla AK Fazlul Haq and many other renowned personalities of that time.

Prof Dr Zohra Begum Kazi was married to late Razuddin Bhuiyan MLC and MP of Hatridia under Raipur Upazila of Narasingdi district, a dedicated social worker and a renowned politician. Her eldest brother late Prof. Kazi Ashraf Mahmud was a famous Hindi poet and a close associate of Comrade Muzaffar Ahmed, Ramdas Gandhi, son of Mahatma Gandhi, and our national poet Kazi Nazrul Islam, and a founder member of All India Communist Party. He retired as Professor of Botany Department, Dhaka University. Her only younger sister later Dr. Shirin Kazi was also a renowned physician, English poet and columnist.

Prof Dr Zohra Begum Kazi had her early education from different places of the then undivided India. She matriculated with distinction from Muslim Girls' Collegiate High School, Aligarh in 1928. After passing Intermediate with distinction from Aligarh Muslim University & College in 1930 she obtained MBBS degree in 1935 from Lady Harding Medical College for Women, Delhi. She stood First class first and was awarded "The Viceroy's Medal" for her meritorious achievement in MBBS final examination.

Prof Dr Zohra Begum Kazi served in different Hospitals of the then India as Assistant Surgeon for



long 13 years. After the partition in 1947 she came back to her ancestral home and joined Dhaka Medical College & Hospital in 1948 as Resident Surgeon (Gynae) and settled in Dhaka. She was a cyclist, table tennis and a badminton player. Other than her mother tongue, she could also read, write and speak Hindi, Urdu, Arabic and English fluently.

Prof Dr Zohra Begum, Kazi received stipends and full scholarships throughout her educational career up to post graduate studies in the UK. She was awarded scholarship in 1955 and successfully obtained DRCOG degree from London, and completed her FCPS from Pakistan. She also successfully obtained FRACOG & MRACOG degrees from London, and joined Dhaka Medical College & Hospital as Professor and Head of the Department of Obstetrics & Gynecology. During her long and illustrious career she served the noble profession also as Senior Consultant of Holy Family Crescent Hospital, CMH, Dhaka Cantt. (with the rank of honorary Colonel), Bangladesh Medical College (as Honorary professor) etc.

During her long service in Dhaka Medical College & Hospital Prof Dr Zohra Begum Kazi was shocked and disturbed at the plight and sufferings of female patients who were ignorant of modern allopathic medicine and treatment. They were

usually very shy and not accustomed to seek outdoor medical assistance in male dominated hospitals. Mortality rate amongst female patients was extremely high during that time. To mitigate their sufferings she often went door to door and motivated them to leave behind age old superstitions and encouraged them to come out of their house to seek medical treatment and assistance to save both mother and child which eventually yielded positive response from the then neglected women folk of the then backward society. She was a pioneer in women education and emancipation and played a pivotal role in imparting education to women folk in Medical Science which substantially increased the number of enrollment of girl students in MBBS course.

Prof Dr Zohra Begum Kazi, with highest degree of professional excellence, was honest, sincere, devoted and very punctual to her sacred duties. Her philosophy was "humane behavior, benevolent approach, patience, friendly caring, devotion and dedicated service to mankind" which she professed, taught and maintained throughout her long professional life. She was awarded "Taghma-e-Pakistan" in 1964. She was also awarded the "Begum Rokeya Padak and Ekusba Padak".

Prof Dr Zohra Begum Kazi passed away on November 7, 2007. A social reformer like her may not come on and often. She came like a ray of light to enlighten the backward Bengalee nation in those dark days. By dint of her selfless, devoted, dedicated and relentless effort she reached the pinnacle of fame. She never ran after wealth, name and fame. She used to say to her pupils, "Don't run after money, money will run after you and be sincere to your noble profession." She will be remembered by the nation for her unforgettable contribution. For her selfless and dedicated service to humanity she had also been called the "Florence Nightingale" of Bangladesh.

Bleak power generation scenario: Alternative source is a must

BITTER TRUTH

By the year 2015, our requirement would be in the neighborhood of 9000 MW. Without contradiction, the country needs to increase the production of electricity in order to achieve poverty alleviation and other socio-economic goals. That calls for tapping the alternative source of energy like wind and sun ray through allocation of funds to gear up research in these areas.



Md. Asadullah Khan

ENERGY plays an important role in accelerating economic growth as much as it serves as an element in providing basic needs like food, shelter, healthcare facilities, safe water, sanitation, education and access to job. "Sustainable human development" that means an economic growth through equitable distribution of benefits can only be ensured through meeting the energy needs of the nation. This brings into focus the interrelation between per capita energy consumption and per capita GDP, emphasizing the fact that improvement of human development status contributes to increase in per capita energy consumption. 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.

Against the backdrop of such indispensable need, the power generation scenario in the country is perhaps going from bad to worse causing a shortfall of 1200 MW per day against a demand of 5000 MW. The demand, as analysts estimate, grows by 30% every year. The net addition to the national grid during the 5 years of the alliance rule was a small 110 MW obtained through barge mounted plant at Khulna. Ironically true, in less than a decade the utopian story based on poor survey work that put a claim that Bangladesh had a huge deposit of

natural gas and the country needed hardly to look for alternative power source has proved to be hollow. Rather it is now learnt that inadequate supply of gas accounts for a daily shortfall of 300 to 500 MW of power in the country.

Two E's -- Education and Electricity are two important tools for distributing the gains of development in the countryside. The ills plaguing the power generation and distribution front are too many to be mentioned and all these can be attributed to the system of bad governance during the past regime. The immediate past Prime Minister who headed the power ministry during the last three years of the alliance rule owe an explanation to the nation as to why she failed to add even a watt of energy

to the national grid.

Electricity being the driving force or prime mover behind economic progress, there is hardly any sector that can do without it. Even illiterate, desperately poor peasants will tell you that if they could have regular supply of power their lives would change.

Unhappily, even if all the previous governments had expressed their determination to explore all possibilities for tapping alternative and benign sources of energy like solar, wind and waterpower, all these talks had just been a wish list. Although other countries of the region, like Nepal and India and some countries in Europe, have successfully tapped wind energy, we have hardly moved away from the seminar room. As people know, wind energy is the kinetic energy associated

with the movement of atmospheric air. It has been used over hundreds of years for sailing, grinding grain, and for irrigation. Wind energy systems convert this kinetic energy to more useful forms of power. Happily, since the beginning of the 20th century it is being used to generate electric power. Wind mills for water pumping have been used particularly in the rural areas in many countries.

Five nations -- Germany, USA, Denmark, Spain and India -- account for 80% of the world's installed wind energy capacity. Wind energy continues to be the fastest growing renewable energy source with worldwide wind power installed capacity reaching 14,000 MW. India ranks 5th in the world with a total wind power capacity of 1080 MW out of which 1025 MW have been used in commercial projects. Another important development has been the offshore (i.e. in the sea) wind farms in some regions of Europe, which have several advantages over the onshore ones.

Experts in the power sector have time and again voiced concern about the high energy bill due to import, and depleting gas resources in the face of growing energy needs. It will be almost imperative for the elected government that would come to power after the election scheduled to be held in December to devote its full

attention to the cause of exploring wind energy on a commercial basis. And for that to happen the next government must allocate more funds for research and development efforts to build an infrastructure for renewable energy application programme and must therefore urge the developed countries and inter governmental agencies like UNDP, the World Bank, and the Asian Development Bank to help Bangladesh with technological and financial assistance for studies, pilot projects and training for manpower with regard to the development of such an infrastructure.

After making a comprehensive study of the speed and direction of the winds in the coastal areas, it is possible to meet local and even national needs to a great extent. We have reasons to feel optimistic about harnessing renewable, alternative sources of energy, because the off shore islands, the coastal belts and relatively inaccessible areas beyond the reach of the national power grid, have already been identified as possible zones for solar photovoltaic (PV) and wind energy projects. In the meantime solar power has gained sufficient acceptability. For the moment, power from solar thermal systems costs less than that produced by photovoltaic cells, which convert sunlight straight into electricity. Advocates of PV cells

point out, though, that the gap is narrowing and PV cells have other advantages. Solar-thermal systems require direct sunlight, whereas PV cells can work in cloudy weather. With costs projected to be a bit higher per kW-h, PV cells are economical for delivering small amounts of power in remote places. A survey made by Flavin, President of the World Watch Institute at Washington have found PV cells to be cost effective also in urban homes, if new installations require expensive upgrading of transformers and power lines.

About 20 lakh families in the rural areas of the country are using solar energy and according to one survey made public in recent time the number of people opting for solar power increases by one million in every two years.

Ironically, power has so far been provided to 15 per cent of the total population in the country. By the year 2015, our requirement would be in the neighborhood of 9000 MW. Without contradiction, the country needs to increase the production of electricity in order to achieve poverty alleviation and other socio-economic goals. That calls for tapping the alternative source of energy like wind and sun ray through allocation of funds to gear up research in these areas, especially in the universities of the country, both

technical and general, research institutes like BAEC and BCSIR. Remembering the fact that unlike oil, gas and coal deposits, renewable energy can't be exhausted, at least not until the sun burns out billions of years from now and the earth goes cold.

The real growth market lies in the developing world like Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Solar power systems offer villages the opportunity to leapfrog developed nations and move directly into the new millennium. Mason Willich, vice chairman of the U.S. Department of Energy's Task Force on Strategic Energy Research and Development, commented in the late 90s that developing nations gain a double benefit from renewable power because they can manufacture the components of their energy supply system, thus expanding their industrial base.

With a new design unveiled for PV cells by two noted scientists Martin Green and Stuart Wenham at the university of New South Wales, Australia the cost of photovoltaic electricity is likely to come down by 80% bringing it to levels competitive with conventional power.

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