

Solving the power crisis

Electricity is something, which impacts the life of the people in one way or the other. Farmers will come out on the streets to demand electricity and face police brutalities, but they will not stop demanding electricity. We can hardly forget what happened in Kansat.

SHAMSUDDIN AHMED

It appears that the government has its hands full with problems, some have been handed down and some have been created by the government itself. The electricity crisis is one problem that the BNP-JI alliance government can be squarely blamed for because during its 5 year rule not a single mega-watt of electricity was added to the national grid although the country was reeling under severe power outage.

Much water has flown down the Padma during the last seven years or so and the molehill has become a mountain. Not only has the demand for electricity shot up, the chronic shortage of electricity and the concomitant sufferings of the people have also increased manifold.

It isn't good enough for the government to say that the power crisis was

created by the BNP-JI. It is not good at all if the energy minister says that the power crisis can't be solved overnight and the people must have patience.

People whose children have to use candles to study at night, and businessmen who can't run their businesses for want of electricity, would not like to be told by the government how they should cope up with frequent power outages. They would like to know what the government is doing to mitigate their sufferings.

There is no electricity and water for the residents in this sprawling metropolitan city and in other urban areas. Power outage also means that gas stations stop supplying fuel to vehicles, resulting in long queues of transport around the gas stations.

While we know that the government has no magic wand to bring electricity to

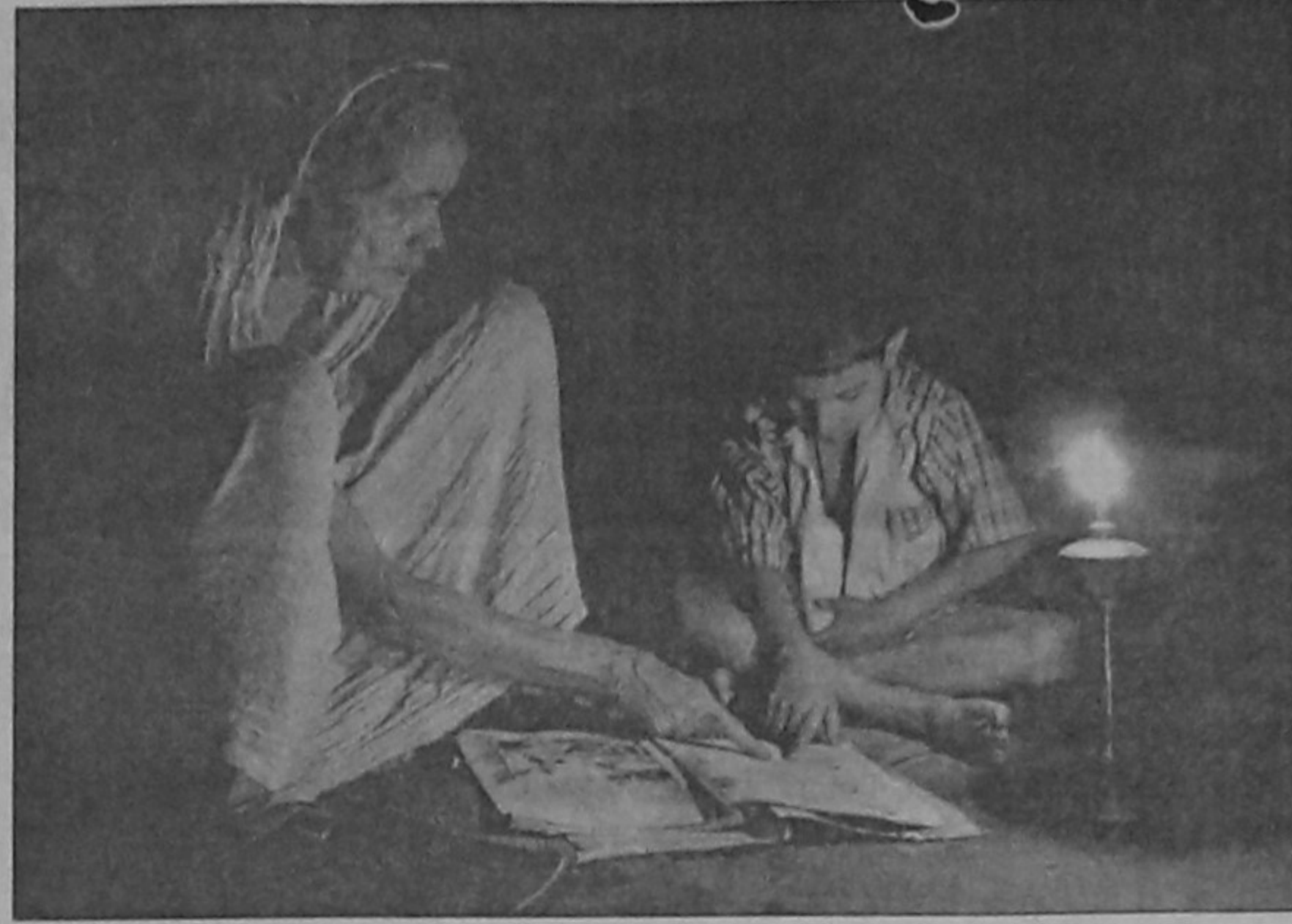
every house and factory, it must not sit back and do nothing -- as the last BNP-JI government did and got routed in the election.

Electricity is something, which impacts the life of the people in one way or the other. No government can get away with doing nothing to provide electricity where it is needed most. Farmers will come out on the streets to demand electricity and face police brutalities, but they will not stop demanding electricity. We can hardly forget what happened in Kansat.

The government must come out with a definite plan to augment power supply. It must have both short term as well as long term plans to increase the capacity to generate electricity and supply it all over the country. We can even import electricity from neighbouring countries to meet the crisis.

The government can divert funds from other sectors and start a crash program for augmenting the production capacity. There must be a target fixed for the quantum of electricity to be produced during the next five years, and the people must be told what the government is doing to alleviate peoples sufferings.

Most importantly, the people must be convinced that the government is doing



Seeking enlightenment in the dark.

what is doable. Otherwise, it will be difficult to prevent people's unrest and contain their outbursts on the streets, no matter how tough the home minister may sound about maintaining law and order.

The government has been in power for over three months. We have a full-fledged energy minister and an energy advisor on

top of him. Some plan should have come to light by now considering the importance of the energy sector.

At the moment, this government's priority seems to be to increase the fringe benefits and privileges of MPs. We hear of a government plan to buy 300 cars for MPs. We hear of MPs heading

parliamentary standing committees being given the privilege of flying flags on their cars.

Are these the bounties and frills our politicians do politics for? In an impoverished country like ours, where the majority of our people live below the poverty line, where people can't have safe drinking water and live in darkness at night for want of electricity, it is a crime using state funds for the luxuries of a selected few in the name of politics.

In a democracy, those who run the government as elected representatives of the people will not have lights dazzling in their house at night and will not live in the luxury of an air conditioned room if the majority of the people they rule over suffer from power outage day in and day out.

Unfortunately for us, our elected rulers have behaved in the past and still behave as if they were the uncrowned kings and queens of this country. The sooner they change their attitude and the sooner this government wakes up to the reality vis-à-vis the on-going power crisis and come up with a plan to solve it in the next five years, the better it will be for them and for the country.

Brig. Gen. Shamsuddin Ahmed (retd.) is a former Military Secretary to the President.

Green technology

The production of bio-fertiliser and biogas on a large scale would result in efficient waste management and reduction in environmental pollution. Since the raw material is free and plentiful, and the equipment required can be produced locally and cheaply, the cost of production would be very low.

AHMED A. AZAD

ON the way to its stated aim of becoming a self sufficient and technologically competent country by 2021 Bangladesh will first need to eliminate poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy and massive unemployment. This will be a difficult task in the face of the current international economic downturn, expanding population and decreasing land mass, meagre and dwindling energy resources, and worsening environmental degradation caused by global warming and climate change. In spite of all these obstacles it is possible for Bangladesh to meet its immediate and long-term development objectives. However, no development will be sustainable if it destroys the environment and does not directly benefit the rural and urban poor.

Three groups of workers who have made significant contributions to our relatively healthy economic growth are also those who are among the most economically disadvantaged in our society and are most likely to be affected by the global economic downturn. The demand for cheaper food is driving farmers further into poverty. Increasing numbers of unskilled and semi-skilled migrant workers are being laid off due to recession and many are being forced to return home.

The RMG export sector remains competitive mainly because labour is paid the lowest wages among all RMG manufacturing countries. These workers, and those who have casual or no employment, need immediate relief through social safety net programs and employment opportunities.

The recently announced stimulus package is welcome and rightly directed mainly to the agricultural and power sectors but, unfortunately, does not address widespread unemployment or provide any relief for migrant workers forced to return home. Job creation initiatives that result in infrastructure development and use environment-friendly technologies will be the most effective recession busters and will also provide sustainable and long-term gains.

Even though the bulk of our people live in rural areas and are employed in the agriculture sector most development activities and associated jobs are concentrated in the major cities. The population of Bangladesh has doubled since independence, and without the untiring efforts of our farmers and agricultural scientists we would have experienced persistent famines. However, the production of high yielding varieties of food crops has resulted in excessive use of chemical fertilisers and chemical pest control agents that cause extensive soil and water pollution. These need to be replaced with



Energy for free.

environment-friendly alternatives.

There are drought-like conditions in the north and salinity in coastal areas, causing severe loss in food production. This is expected to become more widespread with global warming. These conditions have led to alarming levels of rural poverty and untenable migration to already crowded cities. This needs to be reversed by initiating new development initiatives in rural areas, in mainly

agriculture-based industries that use or produce gas or electricity from renewable energy sources.

Bangladesh is experiencing acute electricity shortage. Besides inconvenience to domestic, office and retail activities it also severely disrupts industrial and agricultural production. Industries are only operating at 50% capacity due to constant load-shedding. Most of our electricity is generated from

coal-fired and gas-fired generators. These produce greenhouse gases that contribute to global warming. The reserves of coal and gas in Bangladesh are very limited and much of it may not even be available for domestic use under agreements signed with multinational companies. It will be a struggle to even power the three new generators that are expected to become operational in the next three years.

The government could consider importing electricity on a temporary basis from neighbouring countries that are producing excess hydroelectricity. This very clean energy could become available on a more permanent basis if agreements could be reached on sharing and use of river waters. Immediate shortfalls in electricity supply are being partially met through diesel-fired generators. This is an inefficient, expensive and polluting exercise.

Importing liquefied gas or highly polluting coal to meet energy shortages can also not be a permanent solution. A number of environment-friendly measures could be scaled up to relieve pressure on the national electricity grid and on our gas reserves.

Solar energy is abundant, free and non-polluting. Locally assembled solar panels are already being used to produce electricity for personal use. The government could sponsor R&D at universities and the BCSIR to develop more efficient and cost-effective solar panels. Mass production of cheap and efficient solar panels in regional areas would create more jobs, and more extensive use could help to meet most of the lighting needs. Larger solar turbines for electricity generation could also be built for irrigation and commercial needs.

Replacement of urea with bio-fertiliser produced from plant and animal waste

and production of biogas from animal waste will reduce pressure on our gas reserves. The production of bio-fertiliser and biogas on a large scale would result in efficient waste management and reduction in environmental pollution. Since the raw material is free and plentiful, and the equipment required can be produced locally and cheaply, the cost of production would be very low.

New chemical and enzymatic methods for digesting cellulose will allow the production of bio-fuels from post-harvest agricultural waste, making this a viable alternative for imported diesel oil. The unique biodiversity of our country could also be exploited as a source of less harmful pest control agents and new drugs. The BCSIR and the university departments of biotechnology, microbiology, chemistry and chemical engineering, in collaboration with NRB renewable energy experts, could help the government to make all the above green technologies economically viable and to scale up the production processes.

The establishment of regional SMEs for the production of environment-friendly bio-fertilisers, biogas, bio-fuels, biological pest control agents, and electricity from solar energy and biogas, would lead to industrialisation in regional areas and employment opportunities for the rural and urban poor. The elected local governments could drive this new green revolution with the support of the department of industry and NGOs already involved in alternative energy projects. These initiatives could be kick-started by allocations from the interim stimulus package, and further developed through public-private partnerships.

Ahmed A. Azad is a Fellow of the Academy of Science of the Developing World (TWAS) and a TWAS Research Professor at BRAC University. E-mail: a_azad05@yahoo.com.au

Bihar diary

The JD(U)-BJP alliance led by Nitish Kumar is ahead in the battle because the government has restored Patna to the comforting sphere of the ordinary after its extraordinary collapse of confidence during the Lalu regime.

M.J. AKBAR

THE really swish thing to do for visiting journalists is report Patna by night. No, the story isn't Patna's radical transformation into Beirut or Paris or even into the latest



visitor at sundown with unerring inevitability. The done thing is to sear notepads with observations and conversations on change, report the tinkle of rickshaws through city streets as night cools the city, and tape the guffaw of after-dinner chatter at the paanshop.

Five years ago, when Lalu Yadav was famous merely for being a chief minister of Bihar rather than a management guru of Harvard, voices sank to a whisper at night as fear of kidnapping emptied Patna's streets. Normalcy, that collection of minor amusements and sedate details of daily existence, is the big story of this Bihar election. The JD(U)-BJP alliance led by Nitish Kumar is ahead in the battle because the government has restored Patna to the comforting sphere of the ordinary after its extraordinary collapse of confidence during the Lalu regime.

A hot lively wind was blowing through the bright dust-flecked afternoon when I landed. This is the famous north Indian *luh*, which seems to boil the body beneath the skin. We drove out of the city, southwards through the second Lok Sabha constituency of the capital, Patliputra. So far, only one of the city's two seats, Patna Sahib, was worth a photographer's attention.

Making predictions is always a slippery business, but the consensus is that the contest between Shatrughan Sinha and Shekhar Suman is over bar the voting. Sinha is an authentic star, Suman has the look, feel and language of an also-ran. Sinha has the combined wind

of a working alliance behind him.

The confidence level of a campaign is always evident from the behaviour of its campaign. My trusted informant was my driver, who had done four days of duty for Suman Shekhar. Laws of libel prevent this item of an election diary from being more comprehensive.

In comparison, the gentle manners and soft demeanour of Shatrughan's wife, Poonam, who is in Patna Sahib while her husband tries to stoke his party's fire across the country, evoke admiration. "This is Patna," says my driver. "I may be in the front of this car and you at the back, but you have to treat me with dignity. I do a much more honest job than the politicians, don't I?" Right, on all counts.

The second Patna seat was fated for an anonymous destiny until April 16, when polling ended in Chapra-Saran, where Lalu Yadav was given a sharp reminder of the temperamental nature of democracy. As we have noted, predictions are perilous, but a candidate gets some hint of the news in his gut during the evening's post mortem. If the gut begins to feel hollow, it's bad news.

The first clue comes from those manning the polling booths. Party volunteers read the telltale signs as voters arrive and depart. An effective indication of allegiance is which party's workers a voter has sought assistance from. Unwilling to be messengers of disaster, the volunteers feed a gradual drip of alibis during the conversation. No one can gauge the

precise numbers, but experienced politicians know instinctively when they need to take out an insurance policy.

Lalu Yadav was lucky, since the spread of elections across three phases in Bihar gave him just enough time to bid for a second constituency. He chose Patliputra not because of its urban segment, but because its rural hinterland is a Yadav stronghold.

Warning: It would be a mistake to write off Lalu. News of his setback in Chapra could instigate a Yadav reaction in his favour. Lalu altered the momentum of his campaign as well after the first phase, shifting gear to attack the Congress as a co-accused in the demolition of the Babri mosque because he discovered that the Congress, while unable to find support from any other community, was attracting the Muslim vote that would have consolidated behind Lalu's lantern. There is nothing sentimental about an Indian election.

Our politics does not function with the easy split-and-rotate spirit of an amoeba. We talk glibly about UPA partners regrouping effortlessly after the polls. Politics is a human endeavour. Candidates fight elections with a ferocity that non-participants can barely envisage.

This ferocity leaves scars. Scars can bleed. Lalu's outburst against Congress may have been festering for a bit, but the explosion came when Congress put up a last-minute candidate in his second constituency that would do maximum

damage to his chances. That was personal.

The "Third Front" and the "Fourth Front" may not agree on much, but they seem to be suggesting that even if they get together to patch a post-poll alliance, they will not accept a Congress prime minister. The Left is particularly bitter about Dr. Manmohan Singh, who has recently begun to find virtues in those he scorned not too long ago.

Precisely one year ago Dr. Singh told the country, from the floor of the Lok Sabha, during the debate on the nuclear deal, how delighted he was to be rid of the Left, which had apparently treated him like bonded labour. I suppose it is a reasonable trade-off; no harm in returning to bonded labour if the prime ministership comes along with it. But Marxist politburos have longer memories than Congress prime ministers.

Much merriment among tense politicians desperate for some light relief over a district magistrate's decision to arrest and jail an elephant in Uttar Pradesh. Reason? The elephant is Mayawati's election symbol.

Why the jollity in Bihar? Lalu's symbol is a lantern, a more reliable source of light in many parts of Bihar than the tepid electricity that filters through the faltering grid. A wit wondered what the election commission proposed to do with everyone's hands on the day of the vote; a hand, after all, is the Congress symbol.

M.J. Akbar is Director Publications, Cover.