

Dhaka-Moscow nuclear cooperation

A bold, realistic step that promises dividends

THE agreement between Bangladesh and the Russian Federation on cooperation in the peaceful uses of nuclear energy is certainly a milestone in the history of Dhaka-Moscow relations. The five-year deal comes at a time when Bangladesh happens to be going through a severe crisis in the power sector. Obviously, this deal will go a considerable way in reducing our critical dependence on gas-fuelled electricity. Considering the difficulties Bangladesh has been passing through in the power sector for years together, the deal is a bold and feasible step that promises dividends in our energy sector. Given that nuclear cooperation with Moscow is not a new phenomenon in our part of the world (one recalls the deal reached by the former Soviet Union and the then Pakistan in 1960), the Dhaka-Moscow agreement surely introduces a new dimension to bilateral cooperation in our part of the world. For Dhaka, it signifies a new direction in energy policy prioritization and diversification.

The details of the agreement comprehensively spell out the important aspects of the projected cooperation. In essence, Moscow's assistance in helping Dhaka develop and operate nuclear power and research sectors as also develop innovative nuclear reactor technologies in line with the standards set by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) are a crucial underpinning of the deal. Cooperation in such areas as prospecting and developing uranium and thorium deposits and nuclear fuel cycle services are crucial in the sense that they will provide Bangladesh with a stable framework on which to base its projected fulfillment of energy requirements well into the coming decades. Nuclear energy, be it noted, is in our times a relatively safe and sure method of ensuring power and, by extension, promoting socio-economic development. It is in such a context that the Dhaka-Moscow assumes significance for the two countries but especially for Bangladesh.

A highly reassuring point about the nuclear cooperation agreement relates to the disposal of Russian nuclear fuel waste, handling radioactive waste and adhering to nuclear and radiation safety standards. Such precautions are absolutely vital given some disasters which have threatened lives. We believe that the deal, which will be supervised by the governments of the two countries through a joint coordination committee, will in the stages of implementation be firmed up by the guarantees noted in it.

With our acute need for power, not just for domestic consumption but, more crucially, for industrial purposes, the agreement reassures us about a way out of the woods. More to the point, it is a sign that in its enlightened national interest, Bangladesh can and must strike deals with nations willing to do business with it in a cooperative manner and with full understanding of the principles governing relations between nations.

Parliamentary Committee reprimands BTV

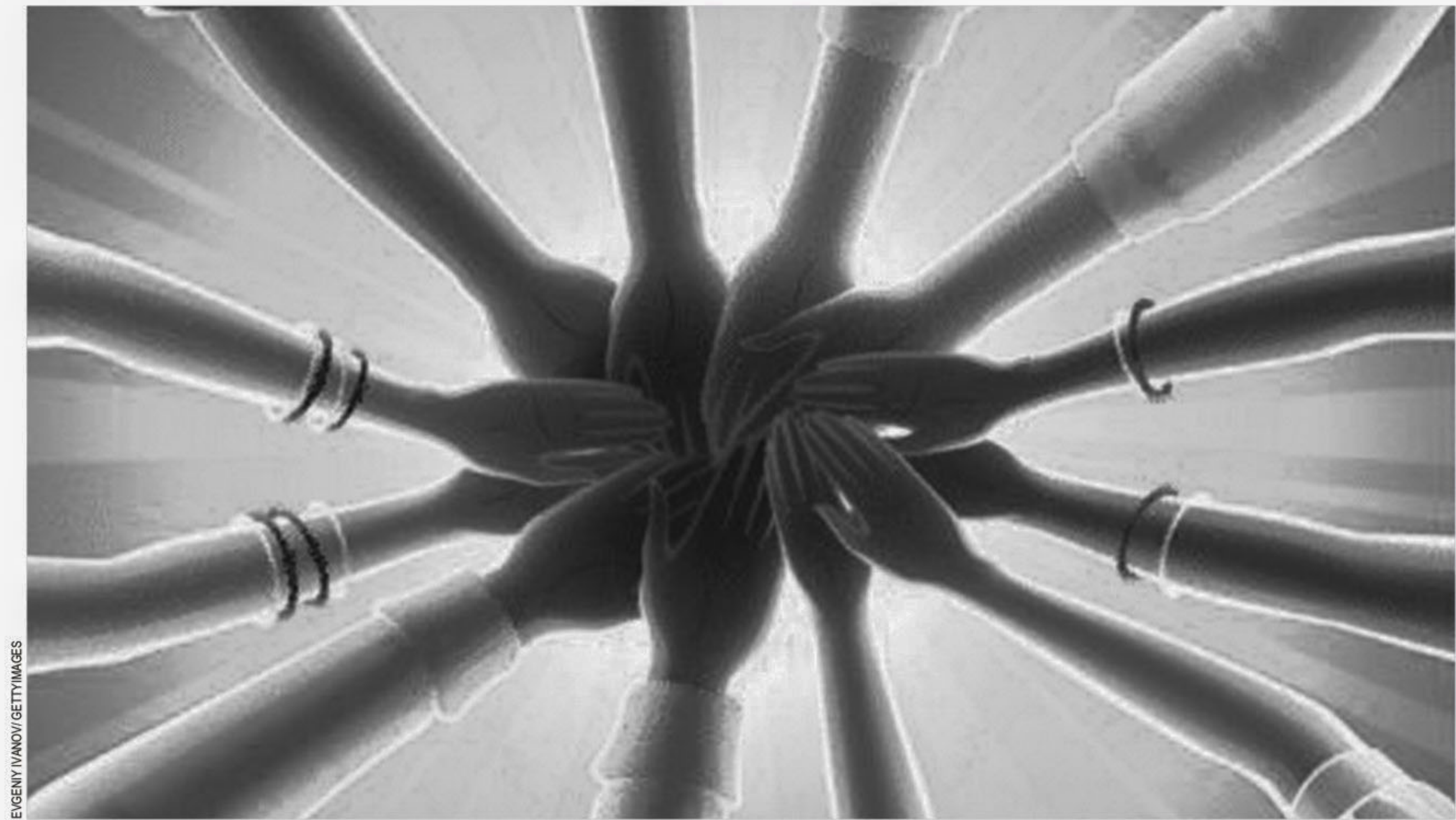
It has hit the nail on the head

THIS is a long overdue piece of admonishment that had to be sounded to the government-controlled electronic media the BTV which is financed by public money to serve public interest. And that it has come from none other than chief of the parliamentary standing committee on information ministry Obaidul Quader makes the censure authentic and appropriate on the interpretation of the information ministry's role as well as that of BTV authorities which have been rightly put under the legislative microscope. BTV newscasts are for the most part made up of longwinded speeches of government party leaders in a monotonous and predictable refrain.

In spite of 20 years of restored democracy in the country, BTV could not break out of its government or ruling party pandering image. It couldn't even attain an autonomous status in all these four decades. Still, that shouldn't have been the reason for it to be carrying, as the parliamentary standing committee chief mentioned, "28-minute long speeches" of leaders. It is imperative for the sake of its own survivability based on credibility that BTV's news coverage and treatment showed an acceptable level of professional integrity. Let it not forget that it's enmeshed in competition with ten private television channels.

It is rather unexpected in our political culture though, for somebody sitting on the power-wielding side of the fence to come forward and make a candid admission of such a fact in an exemplary act of self-criticism. We felicitate him for his forthright views that instantly strikes a responsive chord with most people in the country who are equally as irked as the chief of the parliamentary standing committee, if not more. Indeed, the broadcasts and commentaries are sycophantic. Not only do the news bulletins carry very little news value and, more importantly also, these crowd out news items that are in public interest to be telecast and disseminated.

After the parliamentary standing committee's words of counsel for the information ministry and the BTV to 'change the mindset', all that we look forward to is a paradigm shift in the policy direction of BTV underpinned by concrete steps towards attaining autonomy for the state-owned TV channel.



Creating a tolerant society

We have to admit, perhaps, that we are rather less tolerant. Even under the best election arrangement, the defeated party will allege that it was rigged. Immediately after the new government starts, the common people become frustrated if the government fails to reach their level of expectation.

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

NO doubt we Bangladeshis sacrificed many lives, and even the honour of our womenfolk, for attaining a free, democratic and secular country. We must not, however, hesitate to admit that, though the vast majority of our people participated in the struggle, the majority of us were ignorant about the concept of democracy because of our low level of literacy, high level of poverty, and lack of religious teachings and dictates.

Thus, the hard-earned freedom was attained in a political scenario that was not appropriate for development of democracy. There was, however, no doubt that the majority of our common people wanted to establish democratic order, though they hardly understood the concept of democracy, its requisites, and the need for responsible behaviour.

The people of Bangladesh dislodged the dictatorial regime of H.M. Ershad in 1990 and democracy was reestablished in 1991 through a national election.

From 1991-2006, the country was run by democratic regimes of Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina (who is now the prime minister). There was, however, an interruption of two years due to setting up of a caretaker government and imposition of emergency (2007-08).

During the regimes of Begum Zia and Shiekh Hasina not enough attention was paid to developing the concept of tolerance in the society. Instead, we saw the development of confrontational politics, which has divided the society to such an extent that there is no mutual respect amongst the followers of BNP and the AL. The feeling of suspicion and hostility between these two biggest parties enabled the Islami fundamentalist groups to flourish.

On the other hand, people in general consider AL as the champion of democracy in Bangladesh. It is unfortunate that the high command of both the parties cannot tolerate each other. They do not have the spirit of respect for each other and tolerance for each other.

We expected that after the sad experi-

ence of 1/11 there would be a change in attitude of these parties. Unfortunately, nothing has changed. Not to speak of getting support in major issues, the government does not get any cooperation from the opposition even in simple issues.

If the party in power really ignores the opposition because of its overwhelming majority in the parliament, and if the opposition thinks that by launching various destructive programs against the government it would be able to dislodge the government, both of them are wrong. In fact, both the parties should change their attitudes, not for the sake of their parties but also for the sake of strengthening democracy in the country.

The opposition, we are certain, is aware of its strength and weakness. Launching of any major program of agitation or negative politics like hartal needs unity in the party. The BNP appears to lack unity, as seen in Sylhet, Rajshahi, Barisal, Khulna, Chittagong and some northern districts.

So long as the grassroots leaders of BNP jointly support the central leaders, so long as the common people do not forget the mistakes and misdeeds of the four party alliance during its regime in 2001-06, it is extremely doubtful that any program of the BNP to dislodge the AL-led government from power will be successful because any premature action is bound to fail.

The present crises facing the government, like electricity, gas, water and student politics, may be solved within a rea-

sonable time. We must be more patient. In this political scenario, with the opposition threatening a strong movement, it is heartening to know that Bangladesh has been placed in sovereign rating above Sri Lanka and Pakistan by US Standard and Poor's and Moody's Investors Service ratings. This is great news in view of the current global economic depression and the existing problems relating to gas, electricity, water crisis and student unrest.

Bangladesh is no longer a bottomless basket; instead, it is a country with immense possibility. Had there been uninterrupted democracy after liberation the progress of Bangladesh would have been better. No doubt, in matters of development, what is possible for politicians in a democracy cannot be done in any other form of government.

What is actually needed is stable democracy with strong political commitment.

We have to admit, perhaps, that we are rather less tolerant. Even under the best election arrangement, the defeated party will allege that it was rigged. Immediately after the new government starts, the common people become frustrated if the government fails to reach their level of expectation.

For a successful democracy the opposition must give enough time and find big issue/issues for dislodging the elected government. Tolerance is essential for smooth progress of democracy.

A.B.M.S. Zahur is a former Joint Secretary.

UPA-2's litmus test at year one

Growth, or rather development, must become participatory, inclusive and equitable. Sustainable development must be need-based, green and gender-just. It must never fail to defend the interests of the poorest of the poor -- not even temporarily.

PRAFUL BIDWAI

IT'S no coincidence that the first anniversary of the United Progressive Alliance's return to power should witness nationwide protests against its industrialisation policies, which are massively dispossessing vulnerable people.

Last week, large-scale demonstrations were organised against South Korea-based steel company Posco's land acquisition plan in Orissa's Jagatsinghpur district. The police imposed prohibitory orders, opened fire, injured over 100 protesters, arrested a Communist Party of India MP and burnt down homes in nearby villages.

Orissa's non-UPA government is pushing the Posco project even more ardently than the UPA. The Posco Pratirodh Sangram Samiti leaders aren't extremists. The CPI has sustained the agitation for years. The Samiti has been on a dharna near Paradip port since January 26. Recently, even the Congress and Bharatiya Janata Party joined/ backed the protests.

The Orissa police are brutal towards protesters. They killed 14 people agitating against a Tata Steel plant at Kalinganagar in Jajpur in 2006. They indefensibly used landmines -- against civilians. On May 12, they again opened fire at Kalinganagar, killing one. As the Orissa events unfolded, Maharashtra's Ratnagiri district saw a powerful march through several villages against another destructive UPA-promoted project -- a nuclear park, with six 1,600 MW reactors, to be built at Jaitapur by Areva, a French company.

Areva is currently being investigated by French, Finnish and British nuclear regula-

tors for the safety of a "new-generation" reactor it's building in Finland. Construction is late by three-and-a-half years and over budget by 60 percent.

This is the first reactor contracted in Western Europe after Chernobyl (1986). If it fails or is abandoned, it could sound the death-knell of the nuclear industry in the developed world. Yet, oblivious of this, and of the generic problems with nuclear power, the government is acquiring land for the Jaitapur project under the emergency provisions of the colonial Land Acquisition Act 1894. This when no contract has been signed, no project report prepared, and no environmental clearance granted to the site.

The people oppose the Jaitapur reactors because they'll routinely emit radioactivity and could even undergo a catastrophic accident. People have torn up the "compensation" cheques they received for loss of land and livelihoods. The government's plan to build nuclear parks at other coastal sites -- including Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal -- will spark nasty confrontations.

This raises grave questions: does local democracy, for which the UPA claims credit, going back to Rajiv Gandhi's 73rd and 74th Constitutional amendments, mean anything? Should the government force a costly, high-risk, exhausted energy technology upon unwilling people? Millions have also questioned Special Economic Zones, petrochemicals investment regions, and projects in extractive industries like coal, bauxite, metallurgy and cement.

The government and promoters cannot

convince the people that their fears of livelihood destruction and inadequate compensation are imaginary. "Development" projects in independent India have displaced 45 million, the population of more than three-fourths of the world's nations, with little rehabilitation.

Even the Supreme Court has deplored such violations of the right to life, questioned land acquisition for purposes unrelated to public welfare, and asked that the Land Acquisition Act be revisited. "Why subject such a large number of citizens to such traumatic experience?" Under way in India is a process of "enclosure" of land, similar to that in Europe three centuries ago, but much more compressed. This follows a prolonged agrarian crisis, a 10kg decrease in monthly per-capita food grains consumption over three decades, and the suicides of 200,000 farmers since 1997 -- unprecedented anywhere.

Small-holder agriculture has become unviable in two-thirds of India. Farm incomes haven't kept pace with rising input costs. Agriculture has become more energy, water and capital-intensive. It suffers from falling public investment, monoculture, high water use and rising imports. It has also run up against major ecological barriers.

Instead of addressing these issues, and promoting equitable growth and defending vulnerable livelihoods (promises that won't it the 2009 election), the UPA is blindly pursuing destructive neoliberal approaches. These will undermine the subsistence of underprivileged people, further distort growth processes, aggravate inequalities and disparities, and thus sharpen social conflict. This is the surest recipe for breeding Naxalism where it doesn't exist, and of exacerbating social divisions.

Regrettably, few UPA leaders demand a radical policy review and correction. Congressmen such as Messrs. Mani Shankar Aiyar and Digvijay Singh, and sometimes Mr. Rahul Gandhi, express

concern about persistent destitution, rising inequalities, and the state's loss of popular credibility.

Ms. Sonia Gandhi has decided to re-establish the National Advisory Council, which might produce good ideas on food security and healthcare. The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) too has had a positive impact.

However, this isn't enough. People like Mr. Gandhi want vigorous GDP growth, which will boost state revenues, which can fund schemes like the NREGA. This approach is flawed because it uses the fruits of rapid GDP growth to redress problems made worse by the growth process itself. The approach disregards neoliberalism's inequality-enhancing nature and its sleazy roots and ignores the double injustice of further dispossessing the already deprived. The solution is to radically change the content and direction of growth.

Growth, or rather development, must become participatory, inclusive and equitable. Sustainable development must be need-based, green and gender-just. It must never fail to defend the interests of the poorest of the poor -- not even temporarily.

The Congress leadership must debate these issues. Or, it will drift into the same policy frame that eventually brought about the BJP's exit from power. Regrettably, this decade is probably the first time that the Congress is in power without a Left-of-centre pressure group or think-tank within, like the Nehru Forum or the Young Turks, which is sorely needed.

This is a void that far exceeds the government's political management errors, which have attracted all the media attention as UPA-2 completes its first year in power. The NAC could bring progressive intellectual inputs into policy-making if Ms. Gandhi broadens its membership and shifts its ideological centre of gravity Leftwards.

Pratul Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist. Email: bidwai@bol.net.in.