## RELIANCE PETROLEUM RETAIL OUTLETS: DIED IN SMOKE! REBORN IN FOG!

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### Abstract

The Reliance Industries Ltd. (RIL), which had recently made a giant leap in the retail petroleum market in India, had launched its new venture in retail petroleum market during 2004 in an unprecedented style with nearly 1500 petroleum retail outlets throughout India with ever tested strategy of guaranteed quantity & quality.

But, dream to be pioneer in this new arena where public sector units are nearly enjoying the absolute advantages of government continuous favor in many forms of direct and indirect supports; scattered down within 3 years. Thus the RIL looked and tried for its other alternatives which can at least make huge investment working to give some sigh of relief to the stake holders. But, again the proposed alternatives did not turn up as per the expectations. This was another setback for the company. In 2009, the Government of India (GoI) decided to go ahead with the Kirit Parikh panel's recommendation to have free market pricing in petrol which gave a new ray of hope to overcome from the turmoil of 'to be' or 'not to be' with the challenging front of subsidies still being given to the PSUs in the market. This paper discusses this strategic dilemma of the RIL.

Keywords: forward integration, oil bonds, deregulation, autonomous price variations, trade parity price, import parity price, externalities etc.

#### 1. HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

India has large reserve of manpower at a relatively much lower cost compared with advanced countries. Further, with a large population base and a currently very low per capita consumption of petroleum products, India is amongst the fast emerging markets. The country has also acquired enough experience in the installation and efficient operation of petroleum refineries in the last 35 years. It is, therefore, considered that the operating cost will be low and the valueaddition in Indian refineries will be of a very high order and that the setting up of refineries in India for the domestic market as well as for exports would be economically attractive.

Reliance Petroleum Limited was set up by Reliance Industries Limited (RIL), one of India's largest private sector companies based in Mumbai (India).

With the mission statement of "Refining life, redefining growth." and sited goal of "To harness an emerging value creation opportunity in the global refining sector", Reliance industries set up a new subsidiary, Reliance Refineries Private Ltd in 1991.. The subsidiary later changed its name to Reliance Petroleum Limited, and in 1993 launched a public offering, which at that time was India's largest ever IPO. Reliance continued to pioneer financing channels in India. In 1993, for example, the company became the first Indian company to raise capital on the foreign market, through a Global Depositary Receipt (GDR) issue in Luxembourg. The company completed a

second successful GDR issue in 1994. The company used the new-fangled capital in part to expand its petrochemicals wing, building the world's largest multi-feed cracker at the Hazira site. The company also added production plants for monoethylene glycol, polyethylene, and purified terephthalic acid. The new units launched production in 1998. Reliance's opportunity for entry into petroleum refining came in 1997, when the Indian oil industry reached a state of near collapse. Unable to fund further exploration operations, and lacking the capital to expand its existing production, the government was forced to liberalize the sector. In that year, Reliance announced a plan to build one of the world's largest and most modern petroleum refining complexes in Jamnagar, Gujarat, at a cost of some \$6 billion. The government agreed to the plan, and granted the company the right to import petroleum directly, rather than going through Indian Oil, which helped Reliance greatly drive down operating costs. Constructed in record time, the Jamnagar site was commissioned in 1999. The site's production capacity was double that of any other Indian refinery and ranked among the top five in the world. The addition of the new facility also placed Reliance at the top rank of the country's private-sector companies. In 2002, Reliance Petroleum was merged into Reliance Industries, which then became one of the country's top three companies, including state owned entities.

India and Reliance Industries rely on each other. The company is India's largest petrochemical firm and among the country's largest companies along with Indian Oil and TATA Group. Oil refining and the manufacture of polyolefin (polyethylene, polypropylene, PVC, etc.) account for nearly all of Reliance's sale.

Principal Competitors		
Indian Oil Corporation Ltd.; Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Ltd.; Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd.; Indian Petrochemicals Corporation Ltd.; Mangalore Refinery and Petrochemicals Ltd.; Kochi Refineries Ltd.; Chemiai Petroleum Corporation Ltd.; Parker Agrochem Exports Ltd.; Essar Oil Shell		

#### 1.1. MANAGEMENT AND PROMOTERS

The RPL is headed by Dhirubhai Ambani's son, Chairman Mukesh Ambani. It also benefits from a strategic alliance with Chevron India Holdings Pte Limited, Singapore, a wholly owned subsidiary of Chevron Corporation USA (Chevron). Reliance Industries Limited (RIL) owns 70.38% & Chevron India owns 5% of the equity share capital. An offer in 2008 made to Chevron to increase its share in equity share capital further by 5%.

#### Corporate Achievements-

- It featured in the Fortune Global 500 list of 'World's Largest Corporations' for the fourth consecutive year.
- Ranked 269th in 2007 having moved up 73 places from last year.
- Featured as one of the world's Top 200 companies in terms of Profits.
- Featured among top 50 companies with the biggest increase in Revenues.
- In September, 2008 it was the only Indian Company which was featured in forbe's top 100 list.

The consolidation of RPL's refining assets with RIL's existing refinery in Jamnagar gives RIL a capacity of 1.24 MBPD, which is about 1.6% of the world's refining capacity.

What set RIL apart in the context of global refining, are the complexity and the scale of its refineries. The two Jamnagar refineries that RIL operates are not only among the largest in the world, but also are the most complex, with an average complexity of more than 12.0 on the Nelson Complexity Index. Following the merger, RIL now owns 25% of the world's most complex refining capacity and has become the world's largest producer of ultra-clean fuels at a single location.

To support India's strong growth with a drop in global demand, RIL surrendered the Export Orientated Unit (EOU) status for its 660,000 barrels per day refinery. This has maintained high utilisation.

Since inception a decade ago, the RIL has been able to outperform the benchmark Singapore complex refining margin. Margins have been comparable with other complex refiners globally and significantly higher than refiners in China, where margins are regulated by the Government.

There are two ways in which RIL has been able to outperform the benchmark index. The complexity of the Jamnagar refineries allows the company to process heavy and sour crude from all over the globe reducing its feed costs. RIL also has the ability to place products in the markets of Europe, Asia and USA to generate the best margins.

#### 1.2. DEMAND SIDE

From financial year 2009-10 to financial year 2010-11, the demand for petroleum products in India increased from 130.5 MMT to 134.4 MMT, reflecting a growth of 2.9% while from financial year 2008-09 to financial year 2009-10, the domestic demand for petroleum products increased from 124.1 MMT to 130.5 MMT reflecting a growth of 5.1%.

The Indian refining capacity also increased to 184.1 MMT from 179.9 MMT from financial year 2009-10 to financial year 2010-11.

In recent years, a significant increase in per capita income led to higher penetration of personal vehicles (cars and two-wheelers) which resulted in double digit growth in gasoline demand. Higher economic activities resulted in higher diesel demand as well as increased air travel. Incessant increase in availability of natural gas resulted in reducing demand for naphtha while improved distribution of LPG and lower domestic production impacted sales of kerosene.

Details of product-wise demand and growth during the last year are as follows:

Table-1.2.1: Demand for Petroleum Products [in Kilo Tonnes]

Products	Financial Year (2010-11)	Financial Year (2009-10)	Financial Year (2008-09)	Growth (Financial Year 2008-09 to Financial Year 2009-10)	Growth (Financial Year 2009-2010 to Financial Year 2010-2011
Diesel	59,869	56,148	51,649	8.70%	6.60%
Gasoline	14,200	12,818	11,258	13.90%	10.80%
ATF	5,078	4,627	4,454	3.90%	9.70%
LPG	13,679	12,516	11,935	6.60%	9.30%
Kerosene	8,928	9,304	9,303	0.00%	-4.00%
Naphtha	8,951	9,014	NA	NA	-0.70%
Others	23,674	26,131	NA	NA	-9.40%
Total	134,378	130,559	124,171	5.10%	2.90%

#### 1.3. SUPPLY SIDE

During 2010-11, the RIL processed 66.6 MMT of crude and achieved an average utilization of 107%, which is significantly higher than the average utilization rates for refineries globally. Exports of refined products were at \$29.3 billion. This accounted for 38.6 MMT of product as compared to 32.8 MMT the previous year.

In 2009-2010, the RIL processed 60.9 million tonnes of crude and clocked an average utilisation of 98.3% and exports of refined products were at \$ 20.9 billion.

Viewed in the context of market conditions, this is a vital achievement and reflects RIL's ability to produce and place high quality, value-added products in a challenging market environment.

#### 2. BEGINNING OF THE BEGINNING-

Retail business, in India, is no doubt one of the most thriving sectors in India. As for as petroleum retail market is concerned, it is highly dominated by the public sector units. Recognized as highly profitable avenue, the RIL also started making strategies to enter into this promising sector and to challenge the monopoly status of the PSUs.

CNBC: What is the kind of Reliance brand, what's the value I am likely to feel as a consumer? I also want to ask you about the Reliance petrol pumps, your retail presence and how big is that going to be?

Mukesh D.Ambani: By 1st April 2004, we would have nationwide presence and our objective would be to fully integrate our 30 million ton Jamnagar refinery and take all the transportation fuels and integrate them with nationwide retail marketing so that we can offer our own fuels to consumers at our own retail pumps and that will be in place before 1st April, 2004.

CNBC: And are we looking at 2000+ network of petrol pumps?

Mukesh D. Ambani: We are looking at a substantially large network of petrol pumps that can have a capacity to actually distribute and attract customers to dispose or to market 100% of our production at Jamnagar.

-An Extract of the Interview of Mr. Mukesh D Ambani on CNBC-Cutting Edge; August 4, 2002

#### 3. THE BEGINNING

RIL had invested about Rs 5,000 crore (Approx. US \$ 1 billion) in setting up close to 1,432 retail outlets for selling petrol and diesel in the country. Of the 1432 outlets, 500 were company owned and rest were dealerowned. It had obtained approval for a total of 5,849 petrol pumps and emerged as the biggest and strongest private player in Indian petroleum retail market.

Reliance's first petrol pump in the country was inaugurated at Hazira near Surat on July 5,2003 as the petrochemicals giant, which had set up the world's largest grassroots refinery in Jamnagar, gets into retailing. Since then score started running in leaps and bounce; and within two year it crossed the three digit figure.

## 4. THE MIDDLE

The RIL achieved a fair amount of success in the petroleum retail market, gaining a market share of over 14% in no time and created a stir among other state owned oil marketing companies. RIL's outlets were selling almost four times the average sales of PSU outlets till May 2006. Over 5 million customers were patronizing the RIL's petroleum retail outlets as these outlets were known for their quality and quantity assurance. The RIL had a minimum premium for the brand, quality and services offered along with the premise. Truckers, who could have a stopover at any outlet, were offered a hot shower for Rs 5, a good meal for Rs 25 and even resting places while his vehicle got serviced...

#### 5. THE END

In September 2007, when crude prices had shot up to \$ 80 per barrel, the RIL started struggling to sustain itself in the petroleum retail market as it failed to match the heavily subsidized prices offered by public sector oil retailers. The sales volumes of RIL outlets fell significantly after the price increase. Reliance was selling its petrol at Rs.6 and diesel at Rs.14 more than PSU companies. The customers who had been patronizing RIL outlets, switched to other outlets.

Of the 1432 retail pumps, it was decided that all those outlets which are owned by Reliance would close down gradually while those operated by dealer would continue to function. But in absence of any viable business plans, dealer owned outlets also decided to shut shop.

Eventually, around September 2007, the RIL decided to close some of the 1,432 outlets across India and eventually all by April 2008.

Reliance and Essar were making huge losses on selling petrol and diesel at prices higher than Indian Oil, Bharat Petroleum and Hindustan Petroleum. On an average, fuel at private outlets was costlier by Rs 4 to 5 a litre for petrol and Rs10 to 14 a litre for diesel than the PSU pumps.

By the time, public sector retailers too were loosing Rs 10.93 on sale of every litre of petrol and Rs 14.66 per litre on diesel but the losses were made up by issue of oil bonds by the government and discounts from ONGC, GAIL and Oil India.

Commenting irately on this issue, a source close to the development told "We are kept out of the ambit of the government-sponsored survival package. We have decided to close all our company-owned retail outlets. It has become unviable to transport fuel from our depots to retail outlets as the throughput from our retail outlets has almost become zero. We are not going to re-fuel any of our retail outlets and this will eventually lead to closure of such outlets till stocks last," (The Economic Times March 25, 2008).

The government was in a fix over closure of petrol pumps by Reliance Industries over denial of subsidy on par with public sector companies while oil minister Murli Manohar Deora admited that dealing with the situation was not easy.

"You don't expect the government to give subsidy to (private retailers like) Reliance and Essar (Oil). But you also cannot expect them to be penalized," he said. "It's a big problem," Deora said indicating that the government had no ready solution to deal with the situation. He, however, said," No one had approached him demanding subsidy."

When a question mark was put on Reliance' strategy, one of the spokespersons said, "We were looking for the forward integration in order to provide the best to the consumers. The contemporary business environment was good enough and the future is still bright for petroleum retail market......We had a strong notion that the government would withdraw the subsidy gradually and we would be competitive enough to get through but it didn't turn up. Actually we are bitten by the government's biased behavior."

#### 5.1. JOSEPH'S STORY

In 2005, Kerala-based Siju Joseph became the first Reliance Industries fuel outlet franchisee in India. A dental surgeon by profession, Joseph was lured by the "profitable and professional" nature of the venture. His prime land near the highway at Koothattukulam in Ernakulam district in Kerala and an investment running into a couple of crores paved the way for his first business venture.

As the outlet took shape, Joseph congratulated himself for going along with India's largest company. Each litre of petrol would get him Rs 1.35, as against a maximum of Re 1, and each litre of diesel, around 87 paise, as against 60 paise by public-sector oil marketing companies (OMC). He had a target to sell about 180 kilo litres every month, which would have recovered his investment in a few years. Joseph got off to a flying start selling an average of 300 kilo litres, with diesel accounting for the bulk of the sale. "Quality of the fuel and the quantity were the attractions," Joseph said. However, the overheads, including minimum staff and their salary and basic amenities at the premise, as per the company's operating manual were very high. By late 2007 as the international crude prices started the northward journey, Reliance was forced to hike retail prices while public-sector OMCs kept fuel prices artificially low as per the government's instructions. This compounded losses for private sector players, including Essar and Shell. Reliance's petrol and diesel, which were already Re 1.50 and 80 paise per litre higher than public-sector OMCs, increased to almost Rs 4-6 per litre (depending on duties at state levels) on petrol and Rs 2-3 per litre on diesel. At peak, Reliance sold petrol at Rs 55-56 per litre while state-owned OMCs sold at about Rs 48.

When crude hit over \$80 per barrel, Joseph was told that though Reliance would not be able to supply fuel from its plants in Gujarat, as they had converted into exportoriented units (EOUs), his margins would be protected. However, the market share of the company dwindled

from 14 percent to 6 percent at which point it became a loss-making proposition for everyone, according to dealers.

RIL, however, could not cut prices, telling dealers to turn away truckers for the high prices but not for the lack of quality services. Obviously, the strategy to weave a market around a fuel outlet did not work in such a price-sensitive market.

The RIL had been paying compensation to franchisees at the rate of 12.5 percent per annum on their investment, around Rs 200 crore in total which is, again, not enough to treat the wound of the retail dealers.

# 6. IN THE HEAVEN (HUE & CRY BETWEEN CLOSING AND REOPENING)

It was a very unparalleled and outthought for the RIL to withdraw the business idea of petroleum retail outlets for what it has invested huge money and approximately five years of time. It did not only hang the RIL's brand image on the stake but gave birth new challenges also. The main challenges were-

- i) What is to be done at closed outlets' infrastructure as they have consumed heavy investment? This issue was equally crucial for both- company owned and dealer-owned outlets.
- ii) How to take into confidence the dealers for 'Wait and Watch' without any viable plan and assurance as they were the front victims?

After taking a beating in its front-end petroleum retail venture, to meet the challenges, the RIL planned to convert the closed outlets into malls and multiplexes. Of the 1432 outlets closed, Reliance planned to develop around 300 dealer owned properties along with its own ones which were situated at strategic locations.

The properties would be developed through Reliance Industrial Infrastructure with an investment of Rs.5,000 crore and includes buying out of some properties owned by the dealers. The malls would house all the Reliance Retail brands along with its hypermarket formats Reliance Mart and Reliance Super. The multiplexes may be a joint venture with Manmohan Shetty and Yash Raj Films.

The idea may work out well for the affected dealers and the company too as it would give them a justifiable exit option for their loss making investment. However, the success of the project may be doubted, as Indian consumers are still not averse to the idea of going out shopping outside the city limits as there are constraints of transport, cost and safety. Such type of concepts of highway malls is popular in western countries where people go on weekends to shop. But, in Indian context, it would be a while before the concept catches up and it is to be noted that most of the Reliance pumps were situated on highways.

There were some other linked vital issues which added again fuel to the situation. In Reliance's retail chain,

transporters had invested over Rs 524 crore in a transport fleet of nearly 3,745 trucks, who after the closure would idle. Over 55,000 jobs which had been created by Reliance retail operations at outlets, transporters and within the company were hanged. The shift of huge volumes from Reliance outlets to PSU outlets would increase the burden of support on the Government to the tune of nearly Rs 4,000 crore.

The RIL had earlier sounded out HPCL and Indian Oil, offering to sell its outlets or operate them under a JV. While HPCL had declined the offer, Indian Oil conducted internal consultations but did not pursue it thereafter.

## 6.1. HAJI MUZAFFAR ALI MOLLAH'S STORY

Haji Muzaffar Ali Mollah is a mild-mannered man. But ask him about Reliance Industries Ltd; and all the mildness vanishes. "They've given us a raw deal," alleges Mollah, whose petrol station was in Maheshtala, in the southwestern suburbs of Kolkata.

The RIL claimed time to time that they had merely stopped replenishing its outlets and suspended operations indefinitely; and insisted they had not been shut down.

Reliance's distinction between "suspending operations" and closing down the stations was no comfort for Mollah, who had not only seen sales at his pump dwindling since May, 2007.

Mollah had been approached by the RIL with a buyout offer which, he claims, adds insult to injury.

"Sales had stopped for the last month-and-a-half, and now Reliance is offering a price (for the pump) which is barely one-third of the market price for the land," says Mollah, who claims to have invested around Rs. 2 crore in the outlet. He adds that he had spent almost Rs. 1 crore to buy the one-bigha (a third of an acre) plot, and Rs. 1 crore more on the design and infrastructure of the outlet as mandated by Reliance.

In early 2006, he had borrowed around Rs 7 million from State Bank of India (SBI), India's largest lender, at a discounted rate of 7.5% - 3% below the bank's prime lending rate (PLR) at that time under a special scheme that the RIL had worked out for its franchisees. Mollah was now unable to repay the loan.

An SBI executive of the bank who did not wish to be identified told- "SBI had lent to some 450 Reliance's petrol stations across the country, and 60 of them have already stopped repaying. But we aren't worried because these pumps are sitting on prime properties. What is more, Reliance has assured us that these NPAs (non-performing assets or bad loans) will be regularized-it's planning to buy out the pumps in distress,"

Mollah, however, had spurned the RIL's offer. "I would have made a huge loss if I had agreed to sell out at the price offered by Reliance," says the angry petrol pump owner, whose hands are pretty much tied because he has signed a 20-year lease agreement with the firm and cannot retail the products of other oil refiners.

#### 7. THE REBIRTH

Due to continuous and potholed fluctuations in the prices of crude oil in international market which was again adding the intense fiscal burden on the GoI, a debate started taking place on relevance of the regulated petroleum market and subsidy on it. As pointed by Morris, Varma & Barua (2010) "Reform of the oil sector is long overdue. The problems in the sector emanate from the structure of central taxes and the system of subsidization through prices. Solutions to the problems necessarily have to address both tax and subsidy simultaneously. The social losses include, misuse / wasteful use of scarce petroleum resources, diversion, adulteration, other avoidable negative externalities, improper substitution between products, tax arbitrage, distortion of consumer preferences and input choices of industries, and international cross hauling of petroleum. Nearly all these costs, and problems arise not because of subsidization per se but due to the use of varying retail prices that are used to subsidize. Prices for the same product vary for different consumers besides. They also vary across products. These tax /subsidy variations are the root cause of nearly all problems in the sector. Autonomous price variations (i.e. those resulting from the actions of firms (under a regime of non-distortionary subsidies) would be small and not subject to 'arbitrage' i.e. to the realization of rents through diversion and adulteration. Tax reform - viz casting all taxes in the form of value added taxes has not taken place in the sector despite the passage of nearly 15 years since such reform was put in place in nearly all other sectors of manufacturing. Complete deregulation of the sector allowing oil producers, oil refiners, marketing companies, and integrated operators to price their products as they deem fit."

Realizing this many committees had been appointed e.g. Rangarajan Committee, Chaturvedi Committee; and recently Mr. Kirit Parikh's Committee which strongly recommended the deregulation of the market.

Private refiners Reliance, Essar and Shell planned to reenter the petrol pump business in a big way if the government goes ahead with the Kirit Parikh panel's recommendation to have free market pricing in petrol and diesel. The private refiners had shut their pumps down when crude oil jumped to \$147 a barrel and the state-owned refiners compensated for selling fuel below costs by the government. Private refiners are closely watching the government move. Free market pricing of petrol and diesel now is the most appropriate as it is around \$70 to \$80 a barrel. The first indication of their aggressive intent came from Essar group chairman Shashi Ruia who said - "Essar Oil planned to increase its petrol pumps to 2,000 in the next few months from

1,450." Terming it a landmark, Credit Analysis and Research (CARE) Limited has called for the immediate implementation of the Kirit Parikh Committee report that has recommended freeing of petrol and diesel prices and a steep hike in LPG and kerosene rates. This was the key to cutting subsidies. "The government needs to strike a balance between reducing the subsidy burden on the public sector companies, reducing the fiscal deficit and managing the current inflationary scenario, given that the economy is in the process of revival and is attempting to restore its buoyancy," CARE said in a statement here. "In the past, the entry of private players in the retail fuel market had resulted in an erosion of about 10 percent in the market share of the public sector companies." The RIL decided to re-enter the business if the government provided a level-playing field to the private players. Thus, it reopened about two-thirds of its 1,432 petrol pumps in the country and is selling about 2,000 kilolitres of auto fuel per day. \*

The RIL President (Refinery Business) P Raghavendran said- "We are selling about 2,000 kilolitre per day from 900 petrol stations, mostly in the Western and Southern markets," He said, adding to it at many of these stations, it is selling the fuel at rates on par with the heavily subsidized price of its public sector rivals. Reliance had shut its 1,432 filling stations in March 2008 after sales dropped to almost nil as it could not match the subsidized price offered by the government-owned Indian Oil, Bharat Petroleum and Hindustan Petroleum, who got compensated from the government for selling fuel below cost. "We are selling where we can match PSU price," he said. The three state-run retailers sell petrol at Rs 3.85 a litre lower than cost of production and diesel at Rs 3.71 per litre lower." Raghavendran said-"We are the only nation that is so heavily dependent on imports to meet oil needs yet subsidies the fuel heavily. Unlike sectors like fertilizers, the oil subsidy is limited only to public sector firms." He also pointed out that in the 2008-09 fiscal, the government issued oil bonds worth over Rs 103,000 crore (Rs 1,030 billion) to PSU fuel retailers for selling petrol, diesel, domestic cooking gas and kerosene below cost. "The model of permanently adopting such a large subsidy programme is not sustainable for the economy." -he said. Reliance surrendered its only-forexport status for one of its refineries in Jamnagar which is now being used to supply fuel to its outlets.

But the challenges for the RIL are still severe as the subsidies are not fully withdrawn from the petroleum market. Beside this, other competitors are also entering in the market aggressively adopting more or less same strategy.

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#### 9. QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1) Discuss the business environment under which Reliance opened its petroleum retail outlets.
- 2) Find the reasons of closure of Reliance petroleum retail outlets. Also discuss the alternatives which Reliance had proposed to meet the situation. Are there any other alternatives, you can suggest, for Reliance' closed petroleum retail outlets?
- Discuss the consequences of closure of Reliance petroleum retail outlets with special reference to Indian economy.
- Discuss the various issues of Kirit Parikh panel's recommendation.
- 5) Analyze the business environment under which Reliance reopened its petroleum retail outlets. Also discuss the future of private retailers in the petroleum markets.
- 6) Does 'Opening to Closing to Reopening' of Reliance petroleum retail outlets reflect a strategic failure and business dilemma of RIL? How? Explain it by using SAP analysis.
- Perform Porter's Five Forces Model of Industry Analysis for petroleum retail industry keeping Reliance petroleum retail outlets in view.