

It is three in the morning in downtown Dhaka. Under the glitzy billboard of the World's Local Bank, enunciating the London-based financial institution's years-old expertise in handling its client's money, Honufa, a 65-year-old beggar, makes her bed on the pavement. She gives conflicting facts regarding her actual age; Kariman, a fellow-beggar who sleeps on the same pavement, believes Honufa was born during the heydays of the Raj. Honufa is not sure though; with the advent of old-age complications, she has even forgotten how she lost her left limb: it was while descending a train, Honufa says, squinting her eyes, groping down memory lane. At times she blames it on her dead-husband, who, given the faintest excuse, used to beat her up. People like Honufa and Kariman, who constitute the majority of the city's populace, have been hit hard by the recent price-hike of oil, which for its turn, have made the prices of essentials far beyond the grasp of many.

For their dinner, both the women had had a handful of puffed-rice and half a bottle of mineral water that Kariman picked up from the wayside garbage. A week ago, when the nearby makeshift restaurant offered a meal of a plate of rice and bhaji for Tk 8, both of them could afford a decent dinner. With the prices of rice, kerosene, vegetables and pulses going up, the restaurant that they frequented to, has closed down. The restaurateur, a wiry man in his late twenties, is planning to change business. "The Ramadan is breathing down our neck and I do not think the market will calm down soon," Haroun says, sitting on the footpath where his hotel used to stand. "I had to bribe the police every month," he says; now he does not have savings for a rainy day.

"I have only Tk 200 left, by the end of the month which will go on house rent," Haroun says. The balance sheet of the youth's life cannot get clearer, for a roaring Lexus passes by; beams of red, green and yellow pour from the nearest MasterCard-Visa signboard and Haroun's face, sad and ironic, glistens for a while.

In a city where some spend thousands on designer clothes, Honufa and Kariman, hungry and haggard, meanwhile, try to get some sleep before another cruel dawn descend on them.

Life Lost in Living

With the prices of essentials skyrocketing and the government playing a pococurante bystander, how are general people coping with life?

AHMEDE HUSSAIN

