

Why energy price hike again?

REYAD HASNAIN

ONCE again the government is considering energy price increase. Who gains if the prices go up? Who ends up paying for the system losses, wrong decisions and bad negotiations? Who suffers if shortage of electricity and gas continues? A definite answer to these questions is, it is us, the general people, who take on the burden at the end of the day. And who gains out of this is a matter for debate.

However, the important question is: has the government no other options in hand?

Bangladesh receives an average daily solar radiation of 4-6.5 KWh/m, which is at the highest end of global average. Germany receives 2.2-3.0 KWh/m and in China it is 3.3-4.4 KWh/m. While Germany produced 7 GW through solar energy in 2011 alone, which is 20% of its total electricity production, we in Bangladesh produce only 80-100 MW. This is less than 2% of the country's total electricity production.

So, why is production of electricity through solar energy so low in Bangladesh? There may be many opinions around this, but it is certainly because of the policy that we have in place. We do not have a favourable policy which attracts investment in the solar or renewable energy sector. Renewable energy has not been given much weight by the government so far.

One can argue that solar energy is expensive and takes a lot of space and is thus not feasible for a country like Bangladesh. Wrong idea! Yes, solar energy is expensive, but how much? Is it more expensive than quick-rental plants that are now flooding the country? Certainly not.

Though it takes two to three times higher investment to generate electricity through solar energy, if we take total life cycle cost such as fuel cost, operation and maintenance cost, decommissioning cost and equipment lifetime into account, then producing electricity through solar power is more profitable.

If we can plan it properly solar energy can even be cheaper than traditional energy supply mix. While the government is paying Tk.17-20 per unit for electricity from quick-rental plants, solar energy can be produced at Tk.12-14 per unit. And with some subsidy it could come down to Tk.8-10 per unit and stabilise over the next twenty five years.

Because oil price is increasing day by day and solar energy will remain the same for next twenty years, it is evident that solar energy will be more cost effective than the current energy supply mix.

Moreover, space is not an issue. Rooftops have the potential to change the face of power generation in Bangladesh. It is for the power companies and government to understand the implications and importance. To produce 1KW with standard module, it takes only 8 sqm area. We can easily accommodate many small



LITON RAHMAN/DRINKNEWS

Many countries have implemented alternative energy programmes, and it is time that we introduce a favourable renewable energy act which will incorporate policies like feed-in tariffs, net metering and introduction of smart grid instead of traditional grid system.

projects on the roofs of the big buildings. Moreover, there are many innovative solutions available to use the land we have without hampering any ongoing activities. So, neither space nor the cost is an obstacle for solar or any renewable energy. We just need to plan it right.

We know there is a huge power crisis in our country, but the various short-term solutions being offered are not the answer. The money spent on import of fuel for power generation is an enormous drain on the economy. Gas based projects are also not the answer as the country's gas supply is limited. So, a home-grown energy solution based on solar, wind and hydro can be used in Bangladesh.

Many countries have implemented alternative energy programmes, and it is time that we introduce a favourable renewable energy act which will incorporate policies like feed-in tariffs, net metering and introduction of smart grid instead of traditional grid system.

Feed-in tariffs are a policy mechanism designed to accelerate investment in renewable energy technologies. Adopting such a policy will open up this sector in

such a manner that people can generate power from their roofs for themselves and put surplus power directly into the grid, without storing in batteries first. This way, power generation through solar will become much more cost effective, and since the surplus power can be fed into the grid it will attract more investment as the return on investment will be much faster.

Similarly, net metering is a special metering and billing agreement between utility companies and users. When a net metering customer produces more power than is being consumed the electric meter runs backward, generating credits. When a net metering customer uses more power than is being produced, the meter runs forward normally. Net metering customers are charged only for the "net" power they consume from the utility company.

Only 42% of our people have accessibility to electricity, and with consumption of 146 kwh per capita Bangladesh is one of the most electricity-deprived countries in the world. Compared to 8,010 kwh per capita for developed countries and 1,170 per kwh for developing countries, we are far behind, and need to address this in a cost-efficient manner. Power price has increased in

six rounds in last four years. Behind this rise is a huge concentration on energy mix of thermal resources, with oil and gas accounting for roughly over 90% of primary energy supplies. Then there is huge power supply deficit, in peak hours the gap is about 3,000 MW. If energy production capacity stays at the current level of roughly 6,000 MW, the supply deficit will likely reach above 5,000 MW by 2015.

How do we close this gap? Part of the solution lies in harnessing renewable sources. Not only are they cost-effective, they also reduce emission of pollutants and thus have a positive impact on our environment, and on the earth as a whole. Asian giants India and China are aggressively pursuing renewable energy and are already among the top five wind power producers in the world. Clearly, the future belongs to renewable energy.

So far, a slew of initiatives have been announced by the government to promote renewable energy sector. Although Bangladesh government formulated a Renewable Energy Policy in 2008, and the parliament has drafted a new law to set up a "sustainable and renewable energy development authority," progress on this front has been anything but satisfactory. The government has to play an enabling role to propel this industry from its infancy.

Unavailability of data and necessary information, lack of local expertise and government funded research and development wing, unavailability of trained personnel, and lack of support industries are some of the barriers to the rise of renewable energy in the country. On top of these, lack of proper financing is also blocking the proliferation of renewable energy in Bangladesh.

Since none of the existing relatively big projects has been past the pilot phase and the return on investment is not secured through an established feed in tariffs, prospective investors and financiers are shy of these opportunities. So, there is a need to introduce incentives aiming at involving private sector and foreign investors in development of renewable resources. And the government has to take these initiatives.

The renewable energy market has become a multi-billion dollar industry in recent years. Therefore, it would not be too difficult to attract investment in this sector as more than 80 million people have no access to electricity. Moreover, the United Nations has shown interest in developing renewable energy sector in Bangladesh. It will be foolish if we cannot tap this opportunity and develop the sector in a way that would solve the country's energy crisis to a certain extent.

The writer is a director at a multinational company. E-mail: hmreyad@hotmail.com.

Violent economic "reforms" and the growing violence against women

VANDANA SHIVA

A couple of days ago, the brave and courageous survivor of the Delhi gang rape breathed her last. This blog is a tribute to her and other victims of violence against women.

Violence against women is as old as patriarchy. But it has intensified and become more pervasive in the recent past. It has taken on more brutal forms, like the murder of the Delhi gang rape victim and the suicide of the 17 year old rape victim in Chandigarh.

Rape cases and cases of violence against women have increased over the years. The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) reported 10,068 rape cases in 1990 which increased to 16,496 in 2000. With 24,206 cases in 2011, rape cases jumped to incredible increase of 873 % from 1971 when NCRB started to record cases of rape. And Delhi has emerged as the rape capital of India, accounting for 25% cases.

The movement to stop this violence must be sustained till justice is done for every one of our daughters and sisters who has been violated.

And while we intensify our struggle for justice for women, we need to also ask why rape cases have increased 240% since 1990's when the New Economic policies were introduced. We need to examine the roots of the growing violence against women.

Could there be a connection between the growth of violent, undemocratically imposed, unjust and unfair, economic policies and the growth of crimes against women?

I believe there is.

Firstly, the economic model focusing myopically on "growth," begins with violence against women by discounting their contribution to the economy.

The more the government talks ad nauseam about "inclusive growth" and "financial inclusion," the more it excludes the contributions of women to the economy and society. According to patriarchal economic models, production for sustenance is counted as "non-production." The transformation of value into disvalue, labour into non-labour, knowledge into non-knowledge, is achieved by the most powerful number that rules our lives, the patriarchal construct of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which commentators have started to call the Gross Domestic Problem.

National accounting systems which are used for calculating growth as GDP are based on the assumption that if producers consume what they produce, they do not in fact produce at all, because they fall outside the production boundary.

The production boundary is a political creation that, in its workings, excludes regenerative and renewable production cycles from the area of production. Hence, all women who produce for their families, children, community, society, are treated as "non-productive" and "economically" inactive. When economies are confined to the market place, economic self sufficiency is perceived as economic deficiency. The devaluation of women's work, and of work done in subsistence economies of the South, is the natural outcome of a production boundary constructed by capitalist patriarchy.

By restricting itself to the values of the market economy, as defined by capitalist patriarchy, the production boundary ignores economic value in the two vital economies which are necessary to ecological and human survival. They are the areas of nature's economy, and sustenance economy. In nature's economy and sustenance economy, economic value is a measure of how the earth's life and human life are protected. Its currency is life giving processes, not cash or the market price.

Secondly, a model of capitalist patriarchy which excludes women's work and wealth creation in the mind deepens the violence by displacing women from their livelihoods and alienating them from the natural resources on which their livelihoods depend their land, their forests, their water, their seeds and biodiversity. Economic reforms based on the idea of limitless growth in a limited world, can only be maintained by the powerful grabbing the resources of the vulnerable. The resource grab that is essential for "growth" creates a culture of rapetrape of the earth, of local self reliant economies, the rape of women. The only way in which this "growth" is "inclusive" is by its inclusion of ever larger numbers in its circle of violence.

I have repeatedly stressed that the rape of the Earth and rape of women are intimately linked, both meta-

phorically in shaping worldviews, and materially in shaping women's everyday lives. The deepening economic vulnerability of women makes them more vulnerable to all forms of violence, including sexual assault, as we found out during a series of public hearings on the impact of economic reforms on women organised by the National Commission on Women and the Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Ecology.

Thirdly, economic reforms lead to the subversion of democracy and privatisation of government. Economic systems influence political systems. The government talks of economic reforms as if they have nothing to do with politics and power. They talk of keeping politics out of economics, even while they impose an economic model shaped by the politics of a particular gender and class.

Neoliberal reforms work against democracy. We have seen this recently in the government pushing through "reforms" to bring in Walmart through FDI in retail. Corporate driven reforms create a convergence of economic and political power, deepening of inequalities, and a growing separation of the political class from the will of the people they are supposed to represent. This is at the root of the disconnect between politicians and the public which we experienced during the protests that have grown since the Delhi gang rape.

Worse, an alienated political class is afraid of its own citizens. This is what explains the increasing use of police to crush non-violent citizen protests as we have witnessed in Delhi. Or in the torture of Soni Sori in Bastar. Or in the arrest of Dayamani Barla in Jharkhand. Or the thousands of cases against the communities struggling against the nuclear power plant in Kudankulam. A privatised corporate state must rapidly become a police state.

This is why the politicians must surround themselves with ever increasing VIP security, diverting the police from their important duties to protect women and ordinary citizens.

Fourthly, the economic model shaped by capitalist

patriarchy is based on the commodification of everything, including women. When we stopped the WTO Ministerial in Seattle, our slogan was "Our world is not for Sale."

An economics of deregulation of commerce, of privatisation and commodification of seeds and food, land and water, women and children unleashed by economic liberalisation, degrades social values, deepens patriarchy, and intensifies violence against women.

Economic systems influence culture and social values. An economics of commodification creates a culture of commodification, where everything has a price, and nothing has value.

The growing culture of rape is a social externality of economic reforms. We need to institutionalise social audits of the neo-liberal policies which are a central instrument of patriarchy in our times. If there was a social audit of corporatising our seed sector, 270,000 farmers would not have been pushed to suicide in India since the new economic policies were introduced. If there was a social audit of the corporatisation of our food and agriculture, we would not have every fourth Indian hungry, every third woman malnourished, and every second child wasted and stunted due to severe malnutrition. India today would not be the Republic of Hunger that Dr. Utsa Patnaik has written about.

The victim of the Delhi gang rape has triggered a social revolution. We must sustain it, deepen it, expand it. We must demand and get speedy and effective justice for women. We must call for fast track courts to convict those responsible for crimes against women. We must make sure laws are changed so justice is not elusive for victims of sexual violence. We must continue the demand for blacklisting of politicians with criminal records.

And while do all this we need to change the ruling paradigm which is imposed on us in the name of "growth," and which is fuelling increasing crimes against women. Ending violence against women includes moving beyond the violent economy shaped by capitalist patriarchy to nonviolent peaceful, economies which give respect to women and the Earth.

The writer is with Nadanya/Research Foundation for Science Technology & Ecology. E-mail: vandana@vandanasshiva.com