

Power price hike again?

Unjustified rationale

AS feared, the Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPDB) has asked for a massive hike in bulk rate of power by 14.78 percent to Tk 5.59 per kilowatt-hour unit from the present rate of Tk 4.87 which, in effect, will trickle down to retail consumers ultimately. Understandably, it has drawn the ire of consumer groups and businesses alike.

It has become customary for BPDB to cite losses due to increased use of furnace oil and diesel in power generation, both of which are bought by the utility company from Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) at prices higher than what the private sector power-generating companies pay for. So, why should consumers have to pay for these added costs? Why aren't policies changed to give relief to consumers?

Other pertinent questions have also been raised at the public hearings at Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC) on the issue of power tariff hike. We do not see any concrete steps being taken to raise the efficiency levels of these state-owned plants nor have we seen any intention by the government to move away from generating electricity by using cost-intensive plants that use imported liquid fuels.

It is hard to believe that costs will reduce with such monopolistic ideas dictating energy policy in the country where making unheard-of profits by publicly-owned companies at the expense of consumers is an accepted norm! It is not clear to what extent BERC will accept arguments put forth by BPDB and other entities for price hike, but we must accept that prices will keep going up periodically until we are willing to take some tough decisions on how we generate power.

Bio-organic fertiliser developed

A commendable accomplishment

WE congratulate our soil scientists at the Bangladesh Rice Research Institute (BRRI) who have developed a bio-organic fertiliser mostly by using decomposable household vegetable waste. It is hoped that in time this fertiliser would eliminate 100 percent usage of triple super phosphate (TSP) and also reduce urea usage for rice production by 30 percent.

At present, the government is providing a huge subsidy for fertiliser production. But this newly developed fertiliser, if produced commercially, would cut the government's yearly fertiliser subsidy of Tk 9,000 crore. And while long-term use of chemical fertilisers such as TSP and urea has a negative impact on soil quality, this newly developed fertiliser will rather improve the health of the soil. Not only that, this fertiliser would also help reduce carbon emissions as during the production and use of this fertiliser, no greenhouse gas will be emitted to the environment. In addition, it will help recycle our kitchen waste because it is the main ingredient of this fertiliser.

Thus, on all accounts, it is a major innovation by our scientists. As we know, the field test of this fertiliser was successful and it is now being used on a trial basis in the paddy fields of Barisal, Patuakhali, Rajshahi and Kishoreganj. If we get satisfactory results in those areas, the government should immediately go for its commercial production and also make sure that this green fertiliser is affordable to all farmers of the country.

Madrasa students and the myth of incompatibility



BADIUZZAMAN BAY

NOT so long ago, I wrote a piece about the misconceptions and cultural othering that madrasa students are subjected to and why it is important to accept diversity. After

it was published, there were mixed reactions. While some readers acknowledged the need for efforts to integrate these students into the mainstream society, others shrugged off their education system as obsolete. Following the arguments in the comments thread, interesting as it was, I was disturbed to notice a pattern to sabotage the debate with vague, unfounded claims and insinuations.

Last week, after reports surfaced that Dhaka University would accept madrasa students in seven departments that were previously off-limits to them, I noticed the same pattern trying to dismiss pro-diversity voices as humbug. Apparently, some people are allergic to healthy debate when it comes to Islamic education and the system that provides that education.

What happened in Dhaka University was the result of long, passionate activism for the rights of madrasa students to sit for admission tests in those departments—including English, Bangla, International Relations, Women and Gender Studies, and Linguistics—which require 200 marks each in Bangla and English in HSC or equivalent exams to be eligible for admission. Madrasa students can now fulfil that requirement, thanks to a curriculum change made in 2013 by the Bangladesh Madrasah Education Board.

This change, which also removed barriers in other universities with similar mark discrepancies, is partly a response to concerns about institutional discrimination facing the madrasa students. How we view and respond to these changes, and the conditions in which these were set in motion, will determine the likelihood of their success.

As fresh madrasa graduates rejoice at the news of admission eligibility, there is room for reflection for students from previous years who just as well could have had the same opportunity if not for a precondition that has long eluded us. To say that it was to guard against infiltration of theo-fascist elements would be erroneous, as evidence suggests that madrasas, especially those following the Alia system, aren't necessarily breeding grounds for theo-fascism.

It's strange that the vice-chancellor of DU would use this very occasion to boast about his institution's openness to students from all backgrounds. However, the fact that it took our policymakers so long to eliminate these discrepancies only reinforces the "us versus them" narrative and the manipulative interpretation of madrasa education not being compatible with modern education.

It was also disturbing to read some of the reactions to the news of eligibility, some of which clearly bordered on bigotry. Some people, in the absence of anything better to say, unleashed profane rants against madrasa students. Some were more guarded in their reaction,

being caused by those self-styled liberal thinkers who sit in judgment of a group of students they have absolutely no idea about.

A friend of mine, Rashed Saifuddin, who had studied at a madrasa, once described how he was treated during his entrance interview at Dhaka University's mathematics department. One professor told him that he should have gone for a Fazil degree (equivalent to Hon's). That was just a preamble to the kicker: "We're afraid of you guys. Why do you want to study math? You won't be able to finish your course, and a valuable seat will be lost."

Rashed, needless to say, did finish the four-year course and went on to pursue

result of some bad people doing bad things. It is mostly a tool of manipulation used to manufacture consent for creating a condition in which only the literary mainstream will have the final say.

That said, fear—real or imagined—unless addressed, can grow to be a threat. I have no problem with healthy scepticism, and if there indeed is any concern about complexity and incompatibility being an issue for madrasa students, it should be dealt with I think the best way to do this is by accommodating students from diverse backgrounds, so that they can interact more, learn about each other, thereby preparing themselves to meet the

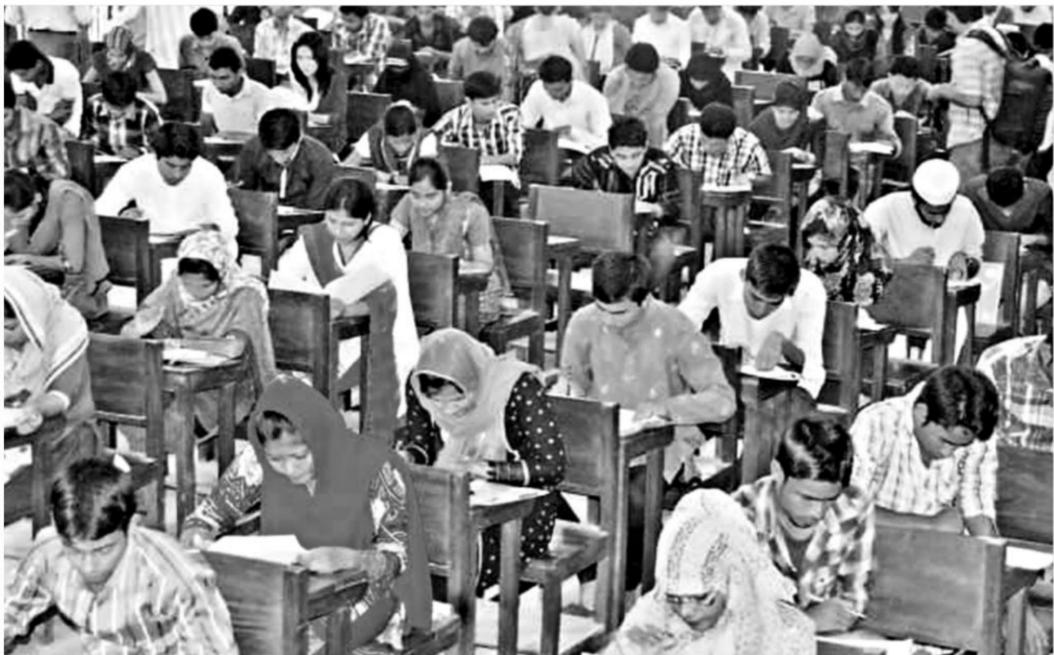


PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

however, focusing on the banality of the situation. While talking to a national daily, a well-known commentator, whose views on political and religious affairs are often sought and cited, said that he doesn't support this "attempt to adjust modern education system to a religious one" because the mixture of students from madrasa and general boards "may cause complexity."

He, however, stopped short of explaining what kind of complexity that might be. I wonder what he meant by that. From what I know of former madrasa students now studying in different universities, if there is any complexity to be worried about, it is

his PhD in applied mathematics at the prestigious University of New South Wales in Australia. But that one single encounter haunts him to this day.

But why would anyone be afraid of madrasa students in the first place? Fear takes hold when logic is replaced by paranoia. Fear takes hold when you refuse to face it. And fear can be irrational. In the West, the same kind of fear was attributed to Muslims in the aftermath of 9/11 and one maybe susceptible to that fear—the so-called "Islamophobia"—until one looks at the evidence. In our academia, fear or dislike or doubt about those from madrasa backgrounds is not the organic

demands of a pluralistic society. Shutting out one group for the sake of another is not the answer.

When a student leaves madrasa to pursue a degree in university, he/she doesn't just leave behind a badge of identity. They leave behind a certain way of life in order to embrace a totally different one, with a dream, like every high-school leaver, to broaden their horizon and explore the endless possibilities of a university education. It's a matter of choice that can change their life forever. Let's respect that choice.

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Loss and damage from climate change

Ensuring compensation for victims

POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE



SALEEMUL HUQ

THE recent succession of hurricanes in the Caribbean and floods in South Asia have taken the world over the tipping point in acknowledging that human induced climate change is not only real but is happening already.

Of course there are still some deniers like US President Donald Trump and his environment chief Pruitt, but they lack credibility.

Thus, the issue of attribution of such events to human induced climate change is now generally acknowledged in the public

hurricane Harvey and Florida from Hurricane Irma, there will be compensation payments made from the Federal Government to the states as per US law. However, there is still no such mechanism for compensation under international law.

Under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), what has already been agreed is to set up the Warsaw International Mechanism (WIM) on Loss and Damage which was agreed in Warsaw at the 19th Conference of Parties (COP19) held in December 2013. Two years later, in December 2015 at the COP21 held in Paris, the Paris Agreement on Climate Change was adopted with an article (Article 8)

onset events (such as cyclones and floods), as well as non-economic losses (such as psychological impacts). There are also two important elements which have now become more urgent, namely the issue of forced displacement and migration due to climate change, and the need to provide financial support to such affected and displaced people around the world.

I will describe the current state of play with regard to these two issues of migration and funding.

First, let me address the issue of forced displacement and migration due to human induced climate change under Loss and Damage. This issue is now recognised as a genuine problem that we will have to address in the future as the

presidency of Fiji, the issue of Loss and Damage is going to be high on the agenda as declared by the Prime Minister of Fiji.

This also means addressing the issue of assigning liability and providing compensation which has so far been avoided. In fact the words "liability and compensation" have been made taboo in the climate change negotiations by developed countries (hence the use of "Loss and Damage" as the accepted euphemism instead of liability and compensation!).

The second issue of providing finance from the global community to those suffering loss and damage from climate change has also had some recent developments. The first is the acceptance of the use of climate index-based insurance as a tool to provide compensation to those suffering loss and damage. This has been piloted in the Caribbean for hurricane damage and in Africa for droughts. There are also some pilots being developed in Bangladesh for floods.

The other element is a civil society led advocacy effort, that is now gathering momentum around the world, which calls for the major global fossil fuel companies to provide compensation from the profits that they are making to those suffering from adverse impacts of climate change. This would be a practical application of the polluter-pays-principle. Of course this claim for compensation will receive strong resistance from the companies themselves as well as the countries that want to protect them.

Hence, at COP23 there will be an opportunity for the vulnerable countries, including Bangladesh, to support Fiji in its desire to make Loss and Damage the major issue and to "un-taboo" the issue of liability and compensation. At the same time we must also support civil society led efforts to make the fossil fuel companies pay compensation for such loss and damage.

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PHOTO: AFP

sphere. At the same time the issue of compensation to those people and communities who have suffered loss and damage from these climatic events is also being discussed. At the national level within the United States, for the losses suffered by the states of Texas from

on Loss and Damage.

Under the WIM and Article 8 of the Paris Agreement, there are a number of elements that are identified under the issue of Loss and Damage. These include slow onset events (such as salinity in coastal areas due to sea level rise), rapid

impacts of human induced climate change intensify. However, this has now become a much more urgent issue with the recognition that the climatic events of 2017 reflect such attribution. Hence in the upcoming COP23 to be held in Bonn, Germany in November 2017 under the

LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR

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Should Suu Kyi bear all the blame?

This letter refers to the article titled "Suu Kyi's shocking fall from grace" by Peter Andre Globensky and Iqbalur Rahman published in this newspaper. The authors demanded that "she immediately instruct the Myanmar military to cease and desist from their murderous actions against the Rohingya minority."

Do they really think that the Myanmar military will listen to her? Burmese generals didn't even listen to the previous president Thein Sein of the party supported by them while doing the same thing to other ethnic groups in upper Myanmar.

The military allowed Rohingya into Myanmar many decades ago. The ongoing operations against the Rohingya are, in my opinion, a part of the military's plan to defame Suu Kyi and make the country unstable so that it can be in power again. It's sad to see that everyone is trying to put the blame on a nascent government, which still shares power with the military.
Gladiola, New York

Load-shedding in Rajshahi

The weather in Rajshahi is humid and hot these days, but we hardly have electricity in our locality.

Too much load-shedding hampers our normal life. There are students in almost every house, but they are not able to study due to this. Some people have IPS, but even that does not suffice because load-shedding continues for hours. Ironically, the electricity bill has even been increased irrationally several times within the same year without considering the average and marginalised people.

We therefore urge concerned authorities to reduce the duration of load-sheddings to a tolerable level.

Mawduda Hasnin, Rajshahi