

Another round of power tariff hike

Why do consumers always shoulder the burden?

THE energy advisor informed us that the latest hike in power prices is “negligible” and it won’t hurt much. His sentiment was echoed by the state minister of power that consumers who use up to 200 units of power will be dishing out a mere Tk 20–25 more per month, which according to our minister and advisor is a measly amount.

The real question is why consumers are being subjected to the eighth power hike in eight years. We are told that such adjustment is necessary to meet the revenue requirements of power distributors. And we would like to reiterate what we have said countless times before: Why should consumers, both businesses and retail consumers, pick up the tab because of inefficiencies of power distributors?

We are sorry to say that we cannot share the position of our policymakers when it comes to raising power tariff, no matter how negligible. The power pricing policy of the country is inevitably stacked against the consumers who are expected to pay more and more because of inefficiencies that exist at distribution level.

Where are the government initiatives and drives to increase the efficiency of these bodies? What steps has the government taken to curtail the “system loss” of the various distribution companies? What long-term steps have authorities taken to reduce the cost of electricity generation? One would think that authorities have decided to pass the burden of price hikes on to consumers and consumer groups permanently, whose protests fall on the deaf ears of the Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC) public hearings.

Spike in violence against women

Forge social movement to stop it

WE note with concern that the number of reported incidents of violence against women has risen in the country. Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), a human rights organisation, reported that as many as 1,378 women in the country have become victims of different kinds of abuses this year so far—nearly 15 percent increase compared to the same period last year.

The report by ASK also reveals that incidents of rape and attempted rape make up nearly half of all the reported cases. A large number of women reported having suffered domestic violence. These statistics are shameful. That a woman is not safe even in her own home is unacceptable.

Indeed, the fact that more women now speak out about the repression they undergo at home and outside and many cases of such incidents have garnered widespread public attention owing to social media, is relieving. However, many cases still go unreported because of the stigma attached to it. Thus we fear that even the daunting picture portrayed by ASK does not reveal the full extent of what our women face—be it at home, workplace or outside.

If anything, the data speaks volumes about our inability to curb violence against women. We must encourage women to come forward and speak up. We must break the so-called societal taboo that leads to women being shunned when they do not stay silent. The more women have to remain silent the more impunity the perpetrators will enjoy. Our collective efforts to counter this deplorable phenomenon must include creating an environment in which a woman feels welcome to break her silence.

LETTERS
TO THE EDITOR

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Bhashani's memorabilia

This is in reference to the news titled “Maulana Bhashani memorabilia” which appeared in this newspaper recently. It comes as a shock to learn that the memorabilia of one of our greatest national leaders are in such bad condition due to lack of care and preservation.

Prior to independence, Maulana Bhashani rose to the occasion whenever the nation was in the throes of a political crisis. Let's also remember that he led the mass movement that eventually forced the Pakistani regime to free Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and other political detainees charged with treason.

The state of Bhashani's memorabilia is a sign of disrespect to the memory of a great national leader. I urge the government to preserve the memorabilia of all our important national leaders. That is the least they deserve.

AKM Ehsanul Haque, Dhaka

Repeal PSC and JSC exams

JSC exams for class VIII students have just concluded, and class V students are gearing up for PSC (PECE) exams. My Facebook feed abounds with posts of parents seeking blessings for their children. Guardians are anxious, and we can only imagine how terribly tensed the students are. One can't help but ask: What is the justification for holding two public exams over a span of three years?


As a teacher, I know these unnecessary exams are putting tremendous pressure on students. They are way too young to shoulder the burden of this huge syllabus and these exams. If this prevailing system continues to exist, our children will become devoid of all creativity. It is high time the government reformed the education system that victimises students.

Shibli Chowdhury, Assistant Professor, Parbatipur Cantonment College

How India became a growth generator

Lessons for other nations

OPEN SKY



BIRU PAKSHA PAUL

ADDRESSING Rabindranath Tagore, the American philosopher Will Durant once pronounced, “You alone are sufficient reason why India should be free.” Durant underscored the necessity for India's independence for its cultural and intellectual development which also leads to economic advancement.

Durant was right. Education and institutional progress has been the centrepiece of policymaking that has built India up to what it is today. Hardly did Mahatma Gandhi think of such a scientific Bharat, nor did Nehru dream of a globalised India. But its founding fathers tried to usher in universal literacy to get rid of poverty and launch an uninterrupted journey towards democracy.

India is a shining example of how institutions can act as the vanguards of development. India thrived under Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence and the spirit of liberty of Netaji Bose. While fighting the British, the great pioneers defined secularism as the integral mantra for the nation because of India's great diversity in ethnicity, race, religion, language and culture. And the subsequent leaders kept this candle alight for the greater interest of India's existence. This political principle paved the way for the continuation of British institutions on Indian soil, leading them to flourish under the visionary premiership of Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi.

Their adherence to socialist planning was not based on their personal commitment to communism, but the inclusive development of Indian society. Debates continue as to how successfully that goal has been achieved.

Indira Gandhi had many dreams but even more reasons for despair. Her diplomacy and foresight in supporting Bangladesh's independence gave her extra mileage in being recognised as a world class leader; but economic failures in the 1970s slowed India's pace. She was a different person after her defeat in the late 1970s and emerged as a new leader who supported the gradual opening up of India's economy to the world. Her policies continued in that direction until she was assassinated. Indira's son, Rajiv Gandhi, took the helm in the mid-1980s and embarked on a new era of liberalisation which is why India is an emerging giant in the world today. All the subsequent governments of Rao, Vajpayee, Singh and Modi have just pressed the gas pedal to accelerate the economy through a coherent set of public policies on openness, globalisation, and finally, a technological revolution.

While democracy is India's greatest possession, income inequality is its worst liability. The first 40 years set the nation on a number of blunders: excessive control of the state, license raj, central socialist planning, massive nationalisation, saint-like self-reliance and a virtually closed-door policy. The country needed the entire 1950s to settle on which ideas and policies to pursue. During that time, India witnessed the shocks of license raj—a system that requires licenses for export, import, or any other business enterprise. The initial attempts to make India an industrial nation at

least laid the foundation for creating a number of big entrepreneurs, and economic growth in the 1960s was close to four percent—not bad for a country with a fledgling democracy.

India's contemporary story, however, has been all about GDP growth. The main reason for its robustness has been the rise in its per capita income, the growth of the middle class and its increased levels of consumption which again propelled the wheels of investment further forward. Long after China, India realised that its population growth is detrimental to all its achievements. It had been particularly true in the 1970s when India's average population growth of 2.3 percent almost entirely eroded its average output growth of 2.9 percent, leaving only 0.6 percent for per capita income growth. As we know, per capita income

contributed to the six percent growth of India's per capita income—which was unimaginable until the 1990s.

The 1980s gave India its turning point when its per capita income growth exceeded three percent, rising from less than one percent in the 1970s. The country consistently increased its average per capita income growth by one percent in every decade since then; now reaching more than six percent.

Starting from USD 0.16 trillion in 1966, India's GDP now has almost reached USD 2.5 trillion, making its per capita income around USD 2,000 in 2016. It took the Indian economy almost two decades to double its GDP from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s. But since the mid-1980s when India embarked on liberalising its economy, the country took only one decade to double its GDP till now, showing that its last three decades



Labourers work at the construction site of a bridge being built for a metro rail in New Delhi, India, November 30, 2015. PHOTO: REUTERS/ANINDITO MUKHERJEE

growth is approximately equal to GDP growth minus population growth.

China, whose population growth was higher than India's until the early 1970s, brought the number down to one percent by the mid-1990s when the corresponding figure for India was just double. As a result, China's double-digit GDP growth was almost entirely translated into no less than double-digit per capita income growth. Per capita income eventually matters for consumption, investment, education, health and the elevation of living standards. Bringing success in birth control to a country with a population of one-billion-plus—the second highest after China—is a formidable task. But the central government's incredible commitment made it happen. Population growth in India has come down to 1.2 percent in recent years when its GDP growth of seven-plus percent has

have been inherently different from previous times.

As a share of GDP, India spends double that of Bangladesh on its infrastructure. The same is true for education. The country continues to build Patal Rail in all its major cities one after the other to make growth centres dynamic and functional. Privatisation and outsourcing—once unpopular in India—are now the main strategies for drawing in foreign investment and expertise. India, being one of the oldest civilisations on earth, has now turned into a growth generator for the world, leaving many lessons for those nations which dream of growing fast to learn from.

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Safeguarding our interests in Rooppur

ABM NURUL ISLAM

AS an engineer who joined the Atomic Energy Commission in the early sixties in the hope of operating the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant (NPP), it gives me great pleasure to note that the dream is finally coming true. Setting up a NPP anywhere has become a mammoth and expensive task due to the ever-increasing demands in nuclear safety.

The Rooppur NPP is the largest ever project undertaken in the history of our country. It is therefore imperative that the contracts that are being drawn up safeguard our national interest.

Even the famous company Westinghouse recently had to file for bankruptcy as the cost of several of its projects went way beyond their estimated budget and greatly exceeded the targeted project completion periods. For example, the VC Summer units 2 and 3 project (2,500 MWe total) in South Carolina has been halted after USD 9 billion was spent in construction work (about 67 percent complete). Originally estimated to cost USD 9.8 billion for the two units, it is now estimated to cost an additional USD 16-23 billion if revived, while being years behind schedule. It is our sincere hope that no such calamity of radioactive substances to the outside in case of nuclear accidents. However, as Murphy's law states, “If something can go wrong, it will.” Nobody can say for sure how the next nuclear accident would be initiated.

As this claim (no evacuation required) is crucial for the safety of the surrounding regions of Rooppur and its emergency response plan, I would urge the government to request an IAEA expert to review (probable risk assessment) this claim and set up the Emergency Response Action Plan accordingly. Russia should welcome the IAEA vetting of their design.

One needs to remember that

tragic Bhopal industrial disaster) that reactor designer/supplier share the mitigation costs in case of a nuclear accident.

Rosatom, interestingly, has signed up to set up two more VVER 1,000 MWe units for the Kudankulam 5 and 6 units at Tamil Nadu, India, in June this year, aside from the first four units at the site that are already operating or under construction. It would be of interest to know from the Indian authorities as to what provisions have been incorporated in the contracts to hold the reactor designer/supplier responsible for any design fault and incorporate the same in the Rooppur contracts.


This should not be a problem as we already have a bilateral agreement with India for cooperation in the nuclear field. Rooppur is only 50km from the Indian border. So it would also be in India's interest for the plant designer/supplier to bear a part of the accident mitigation cost, keeping in mind that radioactive clouds do not respect international borders.

Plant performance

The completed plant needs to deliver the guaranteed net electrical power at the required efficiency level and demonstrate its ability to consistently operate for a predetermined number of hours on full load. Appropriate formulae need to be incorporated to hold the supplier accountable for any deficiency.

Transportation of heavy equipment

Heavy equipment has to be transported from Mongla and Chittagong via inland river routes to the Rooppur site. The government has drawn up a scheme to dredge the rivers to keep these routes navigable. Any hiccup in transportation of the heavy pieces (the largest weighing around 400 tonnes) will have a serious impact on the construction schedule. Responsibility for this job lies mainly with Bangladesh. I hope that the BAEC has studied the feasibility of this critical issue in collaboration with BIWTA and BIWTC. After all, it won't be a pretty sight to have a barge carrying a 400-tonne piece of equipment that is stuck in the middle of the river.



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Within budget, on-time

The two-unit 2,400 MWe Rooppur NPP being built by Rosatom, Russia is expected to cost USD 13.5 billion with the first unit to go into production in 2022 and the second in 2023. How firm is the current estimate of USD 13.5 billion? Is this a fixed priced contract? What happens if both cost and time exceed estimates due to the supplier's fault? What penalty clauses have been incorporated in the contract?

befalls the Rooppur project.

No evacuation required?

In a presentation to the IAEA in Vienna in November 2013, the designer of VVER-1200 (the type being installed in Rooppur) claimed that evacuation of people living near the NPP would not be required in the case of a serious accident. Under normal circumstances the thick concrete dome over the reactor protects it from external threats like an aircraft crash, hurricanes, etc., and prevents leakage

Rooppur and its surroundings no longer consist only of remote villages like it did in the sixties when the location was first selected. Safety of the people living nearby and the environment must come first.

Builder's responsibility for design

When India opened up its nuclear market to foreign investment, a lot of countries entered into bilateral agreements to share a piece of the lucrative pie. However, western nuclear vendors balked when faced with India's demand (prompted by the