

POWER GENERATION IN BANGLADESH

Important facts to look at



BADRUL IMAM

BANGLADESH now has a power generation capacity in excess of 21,000 MW. On the other hand, power demand and generation in mid-February this year were in the range of 9,000 MW, less than half of the overall capacity. Even last summer the peak demand and generation hardly reached 12,000 MW. Considering the fact that the ideal power generation reserve margin for most countries is 10-20 percent, the excess capacity in Bangladesh is a mismatch with the demand, for being "overly fatty" so to say.

And like an overly fat person who has health issues, the power sector has them too in the form of capacity payment. This is the payment which the government has to make as a penalty to the power producers from whom it is contractually obliged to buy electricity, but does not because of a lack of demand for power. For example, in 2018-19, the government had to give Tk 9,000 crore to the power producers as capacity payment. This amount had to be shouldered by citizens through power price hike.

It was the opposite story just a little more than a decade ago when the present government took office. In 2009, the new government found the power generation sector "overly thin" and frail, so to say, with a power generation capacity of only about 5,500 MW for a population of 150 million. The consequence was frequent and chronic load-shedding which most people don't like to remember. One may wonder how could a sickly thin body rebound and go past a healthy state to become overly fat and sick again? In reality, this is what happened to the power generation sector in Bangladesh.

According to the BPDB's annual report, the nation's power utilisation has fallen to just 40 percent of the generation capacity in the financial year 2020, down from 43 percent from the previous year or the pre-pandemic time. Records suggest that over the last several years power utilisation has remained below 50 percent of the generation capacity. During the last decade, as per media reports, the government has paid a massive Tk 60,000 crore as capacity payment penalty to the power producers for simply keeping their plants idle. In simple words, power plants are built and fat penalties are paid for not utilising them.

USA based independent watchdog the Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analyst (IEEFA) has recently reviewed the situation of over-capacity of power generation in Bangladesh. It refers to BPDB sources to point out that, at present,

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about 15,300 MW of new power capacity is under construction and around 21,000 MW production capacity will be added by the end of 2025; over the same period, only



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PHOTO: STAR

5,500 MW of old capacity is to be retired. The IEEFA suggests that under-utilisation of power capacity and hence the overcapacity status of power may worsen in 2025 unless power generation growth recovers quickly and remains at a high level. It points out that even if the generation growth immediately recovers to 10 percent per annum and remains at that level, overall capacity utilisation will drop to below 40 percent during the early 2020s before recovering back up to just 40 percent in 2025-26. The IEEFA in its review expects that the capacity payment will continue to rise in the short-term. Moreover, the current long-term power capacity addition plan looks certain to lock in a remarkably high level of overcapacity till at least 2030.

The question is, why is the power utilisation in the country so much lower than the generation capacity? Was the power demand forecast

on which the generation planning was made overestimated, or has the expected industrial growth not taken place? Whatever the cause may be, the net result is that huge amounts of public money are being drained, adversely affecting the economic health of the country. Worsening overcapacity raises the per unit cost of power generation which could result in the need for higher government subsidies to bail out BPDB's losses and consequently prompt the government to increase power tariff on consumers.

The energy mix for power generation in Bangladesh is passing through a crossroad of major transition. For a long time, it has maintained a gas based mono energy fuel supply system. As late as 2010, 90 percent of the power used to be generated by local gas-based power plants, a much more climate friendly fuel if compared to neighbouring India and China where dirty coal has

been the largest contributor to power generation. But Bangladesh could not continue its dominance of cleaner gas fuel option because of depleting local gas reserves. The nation has to adapt to an energy mix with multiple sources like coal, oil, LNG, nuclear, cross border power in addition to a reduced supply of local natural gas.

Interestingly, coal has historically been a very minor fuel component for power generation in Bangladesh. When the Power Sector Master Plan (PSMP) was prepared in 2010, coal contribution in power generation was lifted from about 3 percent at that time to a projected 50 percent by 2030. It took the policymakers five years to understand that a jump in coal consumption to that high level is impractical in terms of environmental and economic consequences. The revised PSMP of 2016 brought down the projected coal contribution for power generation to 35 percent. Natural gas contribution was

projected to be 35 percent, while nuclear, renewable and power import took the remaining 30 percent. Lately, the government has realised that even 35 percent coal power generation cannot have a smooth sail in a world that is overly concerned with environmental and climate change issues. The government's concern is perhaps over the issue of having less and less donors supporting dirty coal for power plants. Whatever the reason is, the government's decision to scale down the planned coal fired power plants is a move in the right direction.

There is one black spot though. If coal power has to be scaled down, the very controversial Rampal mega coal power plant project (1,320 MW) should go first. There is no denying of the fact that Rampal has been criticised by national and international scientists, the UNESCO and many other international organisations for being too close to the Sundarbans. The world's largest mangrove forest, the Sundarbans, will be endangered by major pollutants emitted from the Rampal coal fired power plant if implemented. Interestingly, the National Thermal Power Company, the largest state power company of India and the mastermind and co-sponsor of Rampal power plant, keeps its distance from coal fired power plants in India. Instead, the NTPC is a prime promoter of solar and wind power and plans to be the biggest renewable power generation company in India. By 2022, NTPC plans to set up 10 thousand megawatt of renewable capacity which will be increased to 32 thousand megawatts by 2032. If NTPC is a champion of renewable power in India, why is it building a dirty fuel-based power plant in Bangladesh?

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Empowering communities through culture

LIUBNA MARIUM

A unique feature of folk performative practices across Bangladesh is the *bondona* or requisite invocatory prelude, dedicated to the Guru, to Allah, to Goddess *Sarasvati*, and to other deities of diverse "Pantheons of Gods", pronounced all in one

of belief systems from far and wide. These are age-old practices that are well-documented and corroborated. In 1917, Rai Saheb Dineshchandra Sen, in his "Lectures delivered to the Calcutta University" asserts, "*Songs of Manasa Devi are sung by professional Muhammadan minstrels in Mymensingh and other districts [of Eastern Bengal].*"

"market" operated by transnational capital. These threats are a matter of urgent concern. From our history, we know that the State is a cultural construct. Any threat to culture adversely effects cultural attributes like tolerance, plurality, etc. which inform and help to achieve a State's goals of social progress, national unity, and diversity. Under these circumstances, safeguarding culture is of utmost importance.

To Bangladesh's credit, our Constitution provides sufficient mechanisms for the preservation of culture. Article 23 states that "the State shall adopt measures to conserve the people's cultural traditions and heritage", while Article 23A says that "the State shall take steps to protect and develop the unique local culture and tradition of the tribes, minor races, ethnic sects, and communities". Additionally, Bangladesh is a party to the "UNESCO Convention for Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) 2003", signed by our State in 2009. The convention encourages Member States to safeguard ICH practices with the aim of empowering communities. The convention also provides guidelines for integrating ICH safeguarding processes with the "action and delivery" efforts to achieve Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of 2030.

The truth though is that in spite of the infrastructure for safeguarding communities being in place, Bangladesh is far away from the practical implementation of the tenets of the ICH Convention. Truly, there are many slips between the cup and the lip, especially if the hand which holds the cup is both unaware and unwilling.

The first stipulation of the 2003 ICH Convention is that signatory States, as

an initial measure, must prepare an inventory of all ICH practices inside their territories within two years of signing the Convention. In 12 years, Bangladesh has failed miserably to do so, in spite of a generous capacity-building donation of USD 200,000—from the government of Azerbaijan in 2016.

The next requirement is the recognition of specific cultural contexts—what may be termed as the "cultural localisation"—of the SDGs. This involves translating the universal language of the SDGs into the individual and collective lives of citizens inhabiting specific communities, cities and regions. To achieve this, a comprehensive understanding of "cultural knowledge and resources" as enablers of sustainable development is required to facilitate a much-awaited overhaul of our 2006 National Cultural Policy.

Given the technical proficiency necessary to accomplish the above requirements of the Convention, UNESCO encourages the State to collaborate with professionals, academics and community members for its enactment. To this end, UNESCO has accredited NGOs in various countries to work hand in hand with the State for the successful implementation of the Convention.

Fortunately, Shadhona—a Centre for Advancement of South Asian Culture, the only UNESCO ICH Committee accredited NGO in Bangladesh—has an impressive decade-long history of safeguarding ICH practices. This includes revitalisation of Lathikhela, Bangladesh's very own martial art; support of the ritual performances of Manasamangal; and conducting Manipuri dance training for the

Manipuri communities in Srimangal. In 2018, Shadhona, at the request of the Dhaka Office of UNESCO, did not just prepare an "Assessment Report" on Bangladesh's inability to prepare an inventory of ICH practices, but it also went ahead and constructed an online, digital inventory in the format of an ICH-pedia. In the next two years, inexplicable bureaucratic constraints have prevented the various agencies of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs from accepting Shadhona's offer of support. Finally, in June 2020, the NGO initiated the formation of an informal, multi-organisation consortium, for inventorying all ICH practices of Bangladesh with the support of young students and academics, which it hopes to inaugurate on March 26, 2021, which will be the 50th Independence Day of Bangladesh. Most importantly, the ICH-pedia will be made entirely by the various communities, and with their full consent. To this end, the consortium has trained around 1,000 community members, students, academics, and cultural activists to work on the ICH-pedia. It now appeals to the public to join this participatory process of inventorying ICH practices within Bangladesh.

Cultural practices convey forms of expression, creativity and identity-building that relate to the core of human dignity, and as such embody people-centred, sustainable development. The consortium firmly believes that respect for diverse cultural practices of all indigenous communities makes a nation liberal and compassionate, giving it the ideal groundwork to grow from strength to strength.

Liubna Marium is Artistic Director, Shadhona.



Lathikhela in Manikganj.

COURTESY: SAYMON ZAKARIA

breath, by the folk performers. This cross-religious invocation stands as testimony to the inherent pluralism of this deltaic region, which is not just a confluence of rivers from the east, the west, and the north, but also a land that has witnessed the convergence

Unfortunately, we cannot deny the fact that culture is now a primary "site for struggle", with plurality, as mentioned above, and cultural diversity coming under the two-pronged threat of fundamentalist forces and the

QUOTABLE Quote



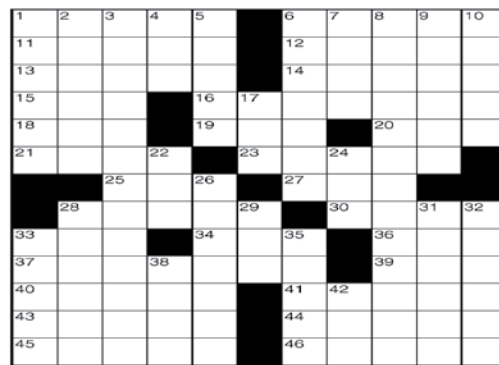
LEBRON JAMES, American basketball player (December 30, 1984)

I like criticism. It makes you strong

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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| 1 Sping flora | 30 Clumsy ones | 6 Object of fear |
| 6 Jazz genre | 33 Cork sound | 7 Jacob's twin |
| 11 Friend of d'Artagnan | 34 Young one | 8 Dog full of air, say |
| 12 Grammar topic | 36 Right away | 9 Lecherous ones |
| 13 Girder metal | 37 Magic setting | 10 Green sauce |
| 14 Ticks off | 39 Hot blood | 17 Course number |
| 15 Director Burton | 40 Past its best | 22 Important age |
| 16 Shoulder ornament | 41 Crack up | 24 Tango need |
| 18 Quarterback Manning | 43 Fork features | 26 Gym goal |
| 19 Saloon bill | 44 Saw | 28 Shakespearean heroine |
| 20 Spanish gold | 45 Fills completely | 29 Silent assent |
| 21 Track event | 46 Graf rival | 31 Seek food |
| 23 Old newspaper sections | | 32 Uppsala natives |
| 25 Pound sound | DOWN | 33 Bed parts |
| 27 Hold title to | 1 Chair wheel | 35 Forum garments |
| 28 Unadorned | 2 Hun head | 38 Out of the wind |
| | 3 Industrial facility of a sort | 42 Lyric poem |
| | 4 Sock part | |
| | 5 Key | |

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THURSDAY'S ANSWERS

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BEETLE BAILEY



BABY BLUES

