

Fuel price hike: A raw deal for economy and people

SAIFUR RAHMAN TAPAN

WHAT recently happened in the transport sector of Bangladesh after the prices of diesel and kerosene were raised by Tk 15 per litre was truly unprecedented. Except for trains and planes, all public transports disappeared from the streets: buses and trucks stopped running on the roads; launches and steamers were also taken off the river routes. The government announced the fuel price hike on the night of November 3, 2021, and the transport owners' decision to suspend their services came into effect the very next day.

On November 5-6 (Friday and Saturday), there were tests in Dhaka for recruitment in various government offices. Hundreds of thousands of job-seekers, who came to the city to take these tests, suffered immensely because of the unlawful transport strike. The situation was further exacerbated when rickshaw pullers, CNG-powered autorickshaw drivers and other modes of private light vehicles took this as an opportunity to cash in, making the helpless commuters pay at least five times more than the usual fares.

There were many people who were willing to pay the exorbitant fares, but even then, they couldn't get any transport—so many of them had to walk to their destinations. It was a terrible situation, for which no one was ready.

The crisis continued well into the morning of November 7 (Sunday). It wasn't until the afternoon that the situation somewhat eased as some sort of solution was derived from a meeting between the government and the bus service owners. Even then, there were reports of altercations between passengers and bus conductors over the freewheeling hike in fares imposed by the latter.

In the November 7 meeting, the bus service owners and the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA), the government regulatory body for road transport, agreed to increase bus fares by 28 percent in Dhaka and Chattogram, but the bus services in Dhaka city were found to be charging 50 percent more than



Caught unawares by the transport strike, commuters stand in wait for any mode of public transport that would take them to where they needed to be. The photo was taken in Dhaka on November 5, 2021.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

the previous rates. For example, the fare for travelling from Gulistan to Farmgate was Tk 10 on November 3, but the bus operators charged Tk 15 on the same route on November 7 evening. The fare from Gulistan to Abdullahpur was Tk 35 before the price hike, but after the meeting it became Tk 55.

Almost all the short- and long-range buses in the country now run on diesel. So it is natural that an increase in bus fares will follow the diesel price hike, but there is a due process to do that. The fares have to be increased with the permission of the regulatory body. And just as fares cannot be increased without any formal notice, public transport cannot be taken off the roads at one's will. But that is what has happened.

Leaders of the bus owners' association say they did not call the strike, and the bus owners independently decided to stop operating as

they were not willing to suffer losses due to the fuel price hike. But the road transport sector is an industry. Can an owner whimsically shut down their company? The BRTA officials should have first sought an explanation from the owners over the unlawful strike in the November 7 meeting. There is no way of knowing if they did do that.

But then, what could the BRTA do when the ministry that is responsible for guiding and supervising the regulatory body kept mum over the issue—at least until the meeting? The concerned minister did nothing more than just appeal to the bus owners to keep their buses running, after the public transport was taken off the roads on November 4. He holds an influential post in the ruling party, second only to the prime minister. But is there any reflection of that authority in the management of an important ministry like road transport?

Everyone knows that he is on good terms with the leaders of the associations of bus owners and workers. No doubt, such good terms are useful in running the transport sector. But what is worrying is that the last word, as has been seen on various occasions so far, on any road transport issue, comes not from the government, but the bus owners and transport leaders.

In this connection, one can recall what happened to the road transport law that has been faced with trouble after trouble. After almost a decade's worth of efforts, the law was passed in 2018, although it was announced to be implemented a year later. Representatives of both the government and civil society said then that if the law was implemented, the prevalent unruliness on our roads would come under control to a large extent. But the initiative to enforce the law stumbled in the face of obstacles from transport leaders. It was then said by the ministry high-ups that it would be implemented "soon" after discussions with every stakeholder. That soon has yet to come! The good terms between the road transport minister and the leaders of the bus owners' association could not end the stalemate over the law, which is much coveted by the conscious section of society.

One may be forgiven for asking: If the words of the transport owners and workers are considered final when it comes to making decisions relevant to the road transport sector, then what is the rationale behind having a minister, whose purpose is to protect public interests and to supervise the sector?

The way the diesel price has been increased is also indicative of the fact that the government is not people-friendly. There is no denying that the excessive rise in fuel prices in the international market will have an impact on the local fuel prices. But that does not necessitate an increase of Tk 15 per litre at one go. The government may have thought that if the price of a litre of diesel is increased by Tk 15, it will receive public criticism no less than that triggered by an increase of Tk 5. It may also have assumed that if the fuel price is increased

bit by bit, the criticism may continue much longer than that resulting from a higher increase at one go.

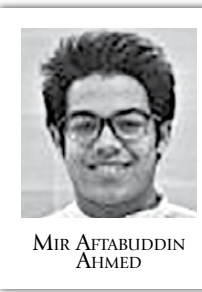
Regardless of what the government may have surmised about the situation, it must be acknowledged that it was not the right time to make the move. The country's economy has just begun to turn around to recover from the devastating effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic, the worst public health crisis in a century, has wreaked havoc, especially on small- and middle-income people who lost either their jobs or businesses. They are now in the process of recovery. Raising fuel prices is bound to make this process difficult. It should be noted that the detrimental effects of raising fuel oil prices are ubiquitous. On the one hand, it raises the prices of all kinds of essential goods, and on the other hand, it increases the cost of living by increasing house rents and travel expenses.

Those who say that the country's per capita income has increased even during the pandemic need to remember that the current system of measuring per capita income is not indicative of an equal increase of income for everyone. The income of a section of people—mostly the better-off ones—has indeed increased, because of which the number of new millionaires in the country has also gone up in recent times. But, at the same time, a large part of the population has lost their income, which is not reflected well in the calculation of the per capita income growth.

Fuel prices have been low in the international market for the last seven years. So, the Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) has made a huge amount of profit during the period—so much so that the government has been able to realise the entire subsidy given to the corporation on earlier occasions. In this situation, the government could easily provide some subsidy to the energy sector for six months or a year more. By that time, the economy might regain its normal speed, while people might also get some relief.

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The life of an international graduate is that of constant learning



MIR AFTABUDDIN AHMED

different programmes to attaining a degree, and everything in between—is fundamental in determining the kind of people we turn out to be later in life. Values are shaped. Socially ingrained ideas do clash. Beliefs are questioned.

For international students, the challenge is undeniably more complicated. We have the opportunity to study at the best institutions in the world, not simply because of our individual merits, but also due to the financial backing of relatively well-off family members—this brings with it a dual sense of responsibility. For one, we must surely be humble in admitting that we are indeed immensely fortunate to have this experience, and do our best in selflessly reinvesting the knowledge we attain, towards the very community that has provided us with this opportunity. We are lucky because a majority of the deserving do not get such opportunities. But simultaneously, we are expected to change the world—in other words, be the change-makers, as is used by many in the media to define the educated youth of today.

I wholeheartedly concur with the dual nature of what is expected from us—we must surely find a way to make the world a better place, both in principle and practice. Privilege brings with it a certain sense of duty, and it is in fulfilling this duty that we find a path to give back to our communities. A study by Harvard

University and the Asian Development Bank, done several years ago, found that 6.7 percent of the total global population has a university or college degree; therefore, our privilege must not be taken for granted. Keeping this in mind, imagine what a small minority the international students are, when compared to the total population of Bangladesh. Importantly though, the reality is that, in fulfilling these duties, we tend to make mistakes. But the imperative aim is to constantly learn from those mistakes.

As I write this, I come back from another day at work. I graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Toronto in 2018, and for the past three years I have been working at a Canadian bank. You see, banking was the last thing on my mind when I graduated. My interests lie in global affairs, public policy and journalism. In reflecting on my four years at university, I now realise that I made key miscalculations in planning, practising and training myself for a post-graduation career in a field of my choosing. In recognising these shortcomings, I now try and find a path to navigate forward.

First and foremost, I failed to focus on my mental health as part of my education. We tend to consider mental health as a subsidiary, rather than an essential component of our education. Added to that are homesickness and a feeling of being distant from the ordinary norms of a foreign land. For university students, this includes building and sustaining relationships—whether it be friendships, professional or, yes, romantic. Being in your early 20s is complicated as it is, but in deepening these social ties, we tend to sometimes forget what makes us happy and healthy. In addition to all this, there is perhaps a societal need to reinvent oneself to adapt to a foreign culture. You can be the most supporting friend in the world to another person, and that can surely improve your mental health. Yet,

in hindsight, I do believe that a large part of university life should be dedicated towards your own mental well-being, while concurrently being there for your friends. This is something that we tend to overlook, and with time, I realise the negative effects of constantly side-lining my mental health. This tendency spills over into one's professional career as well, in areas ranging from productivity to job satisfaction. So, irrespective of what is happening during the elusive exam season or in our relationships



Instead of feeling bogged down by the mistakes made at university, international graduates should learn from them and evolve to become a better version of themselves.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

with friends, it is fundamental for us to focus on ourselves, too. And we can do so by staying true to our personal values.

Secondly, a highly intense environment in classrooms and a competitive atmosphere mean that getting a degree or a high GPA is simply not enough in boosting our chances to be the so-called change-makers. I failed there, too. For reasons unknown to me now, I refrained from developing sustainable relationships with my professors and instructors, and this

surely left a gaping hole in both planning and implementing what I wanted to achieve. Building a cordial and working relationship with instructors is not only crucial in driving student development and academic growth, but vital in our quest to establish long-term connections for personal progress. Furthermore, cultivating these networks allow students to create a comprehensive plan for their future. On most occasions, without the guidance from experienced personnel in fields which we want

to engage ourselves in, it is next to impossible to move up the ladder. Therefore, developing amicable relationships with academics and specialists who are already working in areas which are of interest to us, is undoubtedly important. Finally, attaining co-curricular or work opportunities while studying at university—that, too, in the fields which we want to navigate towards—is another essential component of university life. Of course, sometimes we do not

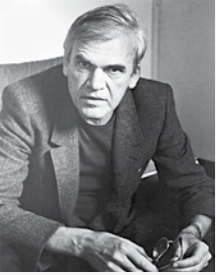
have an option but to work in a job that we do not necessarily like, in order to pay the bills, but that should not deter us from participating in activities that in the long-run can support a career pivot towards what interests us. We owe it to ourselves to follow in the direction that we are passionate about; and by doing so, we can truly acquire a sense of wholesale satisfaction. I regret not taking the time to do the things that I loved when I was a student. But life cannot simply be about regrets, so I have now taken it upon myself to focus on my failings as a student, learn each day by reflecting on these shortcomings, and do so with an unrelenting desire to not simply move, but to march forward.

To students and young graduates of today, I say this: frustrations, depression, anxiety, and a lack of satisfaction can make your days difficult. But what we must develop now is a sustained plan for where we see ourselves in the future, rather than simply regretting past decisions or complaining about the present. I would like to end with a quote which I saw on Instagram a couple of days ago: "Depression isn't always dark rooms and crying endlessly; sometimes, it's getting up, going to work, and smiling and laughing all day and then coming home to sit quietly, doing little to nothing until it's time to go to bed". Perhaps this is what many in our generation currently feel or are going through, and the pandemic has surely exacerbated these circumstances. But with the belief that by reflecting on what we did not do and simultaneously looking towards the future, we can surely learn to be what we truly want to be.

Let's discredit the notion that ours is a generation that wants things handed to them on a platter, and let's truly be constant learners, both in successes and failures. And in the process, let's change the world!

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QUOTABLE
Quote



MILAN KUNDERA
Czech writer
(born April 1, 1929)

The worth of a human being lies in the ability to extend oneself, to go outside oneself, to exist in and for other people.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Indian city
6 Blubbers
11 Spring sign
12 Be of use
13 More reasonable
14 Three-score
15 Euphoric
17 "Far out!"
19 Hosp. sections
20 Pitcher's stat
23 Not worthless
25 Minute
26 Standard baseball game
28 Diplomacy
29 Elvis's birthplace
30 Low digit
31 Steady run
32 Signing need
33 Plane's place
35 Garfield's middle

name

38 Writer Segal
41 Hard stuff
42 High-strung
43 Cryptography

topics

44 Glossy fabric

DOWN

1 German article
2 Pitcher's stat
3 Country bar activity
4 Shoe part
5 Tel Aviv native
6 Diamond corners
7 Eager
8 Crayon makeup
9 Illuminated
10 Cunning
16 Eastern state capital

17 Cost as much as

18 Chinese or Korean

20 Contract conditions

21 Protractor measure

22 Holyfield rival

24 Track act

25 Service reward

27 Denver team

31 Madison or Monroe

33 Visibility reducer

34 Open space

35 Jackson 5 hit

36 Scary shout

37 Cone's counterpart

39 Vegas-set series

40 Egg layer

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23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34

35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44

9-9

SUNDAY'S ANSWERS

A P S E E S P O T S

T E P E E G A R B O

T R O L L E L B O W

A S K S C O S I N E

C I A C A M E R T E D

H A N G O V E R

N E O N T A C K

L A S I V Y N O R

A T O N C E D A T A

M O N E T F I S T S

B L I S S A N T E S

S L A T R E A D Y

BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER

7/13

BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT