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How are students dealing with rising prices in this city?

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Living in a city as volatile in regards to economic fluctuations and living conditions as Dhaka has never been easy, especially when one's a student living on their own.

In a place where it's difficult to live decently even on a conventionally middle-class income, being a student with limited finances is quite the challenge when one factors in the recent price hike.

If you're currently a non-residential student in the city, you've probably encountered a spike in rent already, whether you're living in a shared flat or have a place to yourself. Even as residential students, related expenses have been high for many.

"My hostel rent went from 8000 taka to 9000 taka quite abruptly this month, but the quality of food and other facilities are still below standard," commented Rue Ahmad, an grade 11 student at Rajuk Uttara Model College, currently living at the campus hostel.

However, living expenses are only the tip of the iceberg. For most of us, the main concern is the consistent steep increase in transportation costs and food prices as being quotidian expenditures; these add up to a substantial number when one's

maintaining a strict budget. Although public transportation rates keep rising exponentially, we can do nothing but cope as ride-sharing options on the daily are way too costly, and the utter lack of pedestrian-friendly roads in this city make it almost impossible to walk.

Traffic being worse than ever, CNG drivers and rickshaw pullers now have another excuse to ask for extra money to compensate for their lost time. While their concern is valid, the commute gets more stressful every day. Some days it is better to not go out if we don't have any errands. Again, limiting our movement that is not "necessary".

The current prices of food items have already had hard-hitting effects on us, causing many to change their eating habits. At this point, the price of takeaway food and groceries are almost the same and it is especially hard on those who don't practice or are bad at bargaining. Cutting down on food allocations and switching to eating more frequently at hostel cafeterias, despite its terrible quality of food, are pretty common scenarios now as the absurd prices of vegetables, poultry, and grains make it difficult for many to afford cooking by themselves everyday anymore.

"We had to request our cook to use a lesser amount of oil for cooking as its price has risen tremendously. My flatmates and I have even reduced the number of dishes we consume per meal to save money," mentioned a student of IBA, DU who wished to remain anonymous, when asked about the compromises they're having to make.

Moreover, since even big scale sacrifices are not enough to make life a little easier as a student surviving solo, most of us have now habituated ourselves into letting go of the recreational activities vital for the wellbeing of our mental health, just for the sake of saving a few bucks.

Over the course of the past few months, I have had to cut expenses that are not "essential". For example, I haven't bought any books in the last two months, even though I am a voracious reader. Other little postponed things include, but are not limited to, taking random rickshaw rides, trying out new cafés, and buying flowers for ourselves. These seem too insignificant to even mention in the grand scheme of things, but leaving out all the tenderness and stripping life down to the bare minimum certainly takes a toll on our minds.

Last year, during a conversation with a close friend who lives abroad, the topic of

saving came up. At the time, we were living paycheck to paycheck. It was difficult to explain even then. And now, saving up for something seems like a very distant prospect.

At this point, we have more or less accepted the price hike. On this topic, the story about the boiling frog comes to mind. Once, a frog was sitting in a pot on a stove, and did not realise that the water was boiling until it became so hot that the frog could not jump back out.

Living in Dhaka and dealing with the cost of living is a parallel real-world example of the boiling frog story. Except, it was predictable and preventable. Living in this city, alone, as a student, was quite hectic even before. But now, with the unbearable heat, the traffic and pollution, and the latest hikes in prices, our living conditions and mental health are suffering greatly, if not perishing already.

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The youth's perspective of the National Budget

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The budget of the upcoming fiscal year (FY 2022-23) will be presented at the parliament today by the Finance Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal. At the time of writing the article, the initial size of the budget is set at Tk 677,864 crore.

This is the third budget since the outbreak of the Covid-19 in 2020, and it is believed that it will largely focus on economic recovery from the pandemic and the realities of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. This ambitious undertaking will have several significant implications on the lives of people of Bangladesh, and in this article's context, the youth.

The youth interest in the National Budget has been largely absent in the years before, and it continues to be a subject of disinterest, if not complete apathy. Even in sectors in the economy that dearly affect young people, budgetary discussions have often eluded youth participation.

Yet, the National Budget remains one such area where the youth agenda is often represented, if not properly marketed. Which is why it is extremely important for the younger generation to pay attention to this representation, and understand where their interests are being protected, and where they aren't.

After all, how can today's youth contribute to the national budget if they don't take part in the discussions?

According to the news, the government is set to approve a budget for Annual Development Programme (ADP) for the FY 2022-23, of which the transport and communications sector would receive the highest allocation of Tk 70,695 crore. In common understanding, the ADP will rely on megaprojects such as the Padma Bridge rail link and the metro rail project.

However, young students look at this high allocation in the transport sectors quite differently.

Tahsin Khan Pritha, a student of BUP, elaborates, "I have to commute almost every day to Mirpur 12 from Khilgaon, so I have to use public transport extensively. Most days I have to change buses two or three times to reach my destination. Moreover, I live around Malibagh, where there aren't any immediate projects that are being constructed that will alleviate some of the commuting hassles I have to go through."

"While I know projects such as the metro rail would be extremely beneficial, I cannot exactly rejoice now. So, when I think about more allocation for the transport budget, it's very difficult for me to imagine a reality where my troubles will be lessened in the near future," Tahsin adds.

From Tahsin's opinion, it's understandable that the increase in transportation budget might be an achievement of common good, however, individual realities often get lost within that understanding.

On the other end of the spectrum, NSU student Aidid Ahmed Suprio believes it means very little to develop mega transportation projects when implementation of law remains one of the ways the sector is falling behind.

He explains, "I have to travel almost every day to Bashundhara from Dhanmon-

di. In my commute, I get to see the grim reality of our country's transportation system, that is rife with unfit vehicles and safety violations. What is the point of developing new transport channels when our existing ones are overrun with such breach of law and order?"

Aidid represents a growing frustration among young people regarding this issue. Ultimately, more development of transport channels seems bleak when compared to the existing mayhem that young commuters often face on the road.

However, big budgetary decisions aren't limited to the transportation sector only. Considering the vision for a Digital Bangladesh, accessibility of ICT products both in quantity and price should be a given thing. However, since 2017, Bangladesh has put a duty on imports of tech products to protect

reflect few of the core foundations of the youth interests, imposing VAT on sanitary products and its eventual withdrawal in the 2021-22 budget also reflects the societal impact of the National Budget on the lives of young women.

Put a Period, a youth organisation, commented regarding the historic decision, saying, "We think that taxing menstrual products, in general, can really send a wrong message to society that such products are a matter of luxury, when they're absolute essentials. The tax exemption implies that such products are not being equated with luxury products, which is a welcome first step. It means that this wouldn't bar underprivileged women from accessing menstrual products and worsen the class disparity that already exists regarding periods."



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

local industries – a feat that has affected young people greatly.

According to Zahidur Rahman, a Brac University student, this heavy duty on imports is also facilitated by the fact that there are very few official retailers of these branded ICT products.

He shares, "As we depend on resellers to get our desired products, we also cannot do anything when they increase the price."

Zahid further elaborates why the average electronic product is costing more for young people nowadays, saying, "More importantly, local electronics production is still in its infancy. Because of that, we have to go through all these taxes, tariff, shipping cost when we eventually buy from resellers."

Where the transportation and ICT sector

actually require me to work full-time to pay for a percentage of my tuition. I cannot imagine the pressure it would create, not to mention, make it impossible for me to get out with a decent CGPA."

Thousands of students like Aidid share this view. The implications of potentially putting a tax on their education is much scarier than any budgetary discussions for these students.

However, one of the grimmer sides of the national budget lies within tobacco taxation, and its multifaceted impacts on the younger generation.

With Tk 28,800 crore that came as VAT and supplementary duty (SD) on cigarettes in 2020-21, Bangladesh remains highly dependent on cigarette and tobacco products. However, it is believed that the existing tier-based tax structure has failed to stop the smokers and tobacco users, making it tough for Bangladesh to be tobacco free by 2040. This tax structure has also failed the youth.

"When taxation is increased, it is generally believed that people will quit smoking. However, the level to which prices need to be increased for people to stop smoking just hasn't been done," comments Iftekhar Sadi*, a university student.

"A regular young smoker will have their own budget for smoking, cut from their pocket money. Normally, I'd smoke a premium cigarette that's less harmful for Tk 15, but if the price went up, I'd resort to low-tier brands," Iftekhar elaborates the process to which taxation invites more devastation for young people, instead of curbing the rate of such smokers.

Iftekhar reminds us that, while macro-level impact analysis has been done on population, there are some issues that the youth are more uniquely impacted by. That in itself is the reason the youth, more than any other section of the population, should divert its focus to the National Budget. Most times, such discussions have been put as something out of the younger generation's understanding and comprehension. However, upon closer inspection, it has been clear that these issues also affect young people, probably more so than originally believed.

*Name has been changed for privacy

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Raya dedicates this to all the Economics enthusiasts in her life. Find her at fb.com/raya.mehnaz