

Forests are vanishing acre by acre

Why are the authorities so negligent in protecting forests?

To say Bangladesh has a weak forest policy would be an understatement. The legal and institutional safeguards that are there do have loopholes, which are often exploited, but so much of what's happening today has more to do with how the state approaches the idea of forests. Forests, to it, are valuable until they're not. They should be protected until they cannot be, when more "practical" or parochial interests override that need. This secondary status makes forests vulnerable to exploitation and frequent encroachment attempts, sometimes even from within the government.

The latest case that came to our notice involves a tea company that dug a lake right in the middle of a reserved forest in Fatikchhari, Chattogram. According to a report by this daily, the company, Halda Valley, also felled hundreds of trees in the Ramgarh-Sitakunda forest, despite a court order to maintain status quo on the land. Apparently, the 135 acres of land where the lake was dug are part of a stretch of land that it had leased from the Chattogram district administration, which considers it a khas land. But as per the forest department, it belongs to the reserved forest, and was mistakenly recorded as khas. The department has also filed at least 21 cases accusing Halda employees of encroachment, land grabbing, felling trees and assaulting its officials.

While it is easy to be distracted by the criminal activities of the tea company, and thereby forget about the responsibility of the bickering government parties, the truth is, the latter are no less responsible. Their dispute over the nature of the land has continued for two decades, allowing for the defilement of one of the oldest and richest forests in the country. It's not just a question of legality. It's a question of intent, and whether they have it. Clearly, they don't. The sense of urgency that the transformation of this forestland – from a natural habitat for wildlife into a man-made abomination – warranted was nowhere to be found.

It may be recalled that the cabinet on October 31, 2022 approved the extension of a ban on cutting trees in reserved and natural forests until 2030. The authorities in Chattogram should have known that khas or not, no one can cut trees on land belonging to forests. They should have been able to stop this madness. Unfortunately, over the years, we have frequently seen how responsible government departments either allowed for encroachment of forestland by other government institutions or leased them out to private entities – which, while legal, inevitably made way for illegal activities such as felling of trees and levelling of forestland.

Once you ignore the excuses and circumstances leading to such developments, you begin to see a pattern of institutional neglect when it comes to protecting what little forest coverage we still have left in Bangladesh. This is deeply worrying, not to mention in direct contravention of Bangladesh's deforestation pledge at the COP26 summit. We urge the relevant authorities to shed this laissez-faire approach to forest protection. They need to show strong leadership and better coordination. The forest grabbers must be punished.

IT industry can go a long way

Political will must be backed by sufficient effective measures

We are proud to have held *The Daily Star* ICT Awards to recognise innovators in the IT industry. By awarding these high achievers, we expect others in the sector to follow their level of excellence. In the seventh edition of the Awards, four companies and two individuals were recognised for their outstanding performance.

Late Luna Shamsuddoha was posthumously awarded for her company's role in creating Bangladesh's digital public procurement platform and several e-governance projects. MoynulHaqueSiddiqui was awarded, among other things, for his company's role in developing a nationwide telecommunication transmission network catering to the needs of telcos, cable television and internet service providers. Other awardees included: an online travel aggregator providing essential travel services; a company offering high-end IT solutions such as outsourcing and remote development; another outsourcing company providing customer interaction services, back-office services, skill development training and IT solutions; and a digital agriculture platform providing a one-stop solution for smallholder farmers.

The fundamental notion behind such recognition is that this industry provides the technological support system for all other industries and sectors. It is not just the future of our country – it is also essential for the overall betterment of society.

While there is adequate political will to take this sector forward, there's a slip between the cup and the lip. The initial target of USD 5 billion in exports from the IT sector by 2025 seems quite farfetched when pitted against the reality of USD 1.5 billion in exports. The target of USD 20 billion by 2030 looks even more of a pipe dream. The lack of proper implementation of policy seems to be the biggest stumbling block in realising these goals.

Setting goals without rigorous follow-ups will not achieve the targets. There are still many gaps to be filled – financial incentives for innovators, a proper legal framework, infrastructural capacity, training to develop IT skills needed for the industry, etc.

We, therefore, think the government should chalk out a comprehensive plan that will address the needs of the industry, identify the reasons why we have failed to inject the vigour needed for development of the sector as well as pinpoint effective measures required to untangle the bureaucratic hindrances that are holding us back. Digitisation of all government bodies and departments has to be prioritised and accelerated.

So far, the government has brought us quite a long way but the dramatic turn we need to bring our IT sector to a global level has not yet arrived. To that end, the government has to acknowledge that mere political will without sufficient effective action will be futile. There are many innovators waiting for opportunities to apply their visions to reality. We all must work together to create an environment that will be conducive to further IT development and designing more successful IT business models.

How do we cope with high energy prices?



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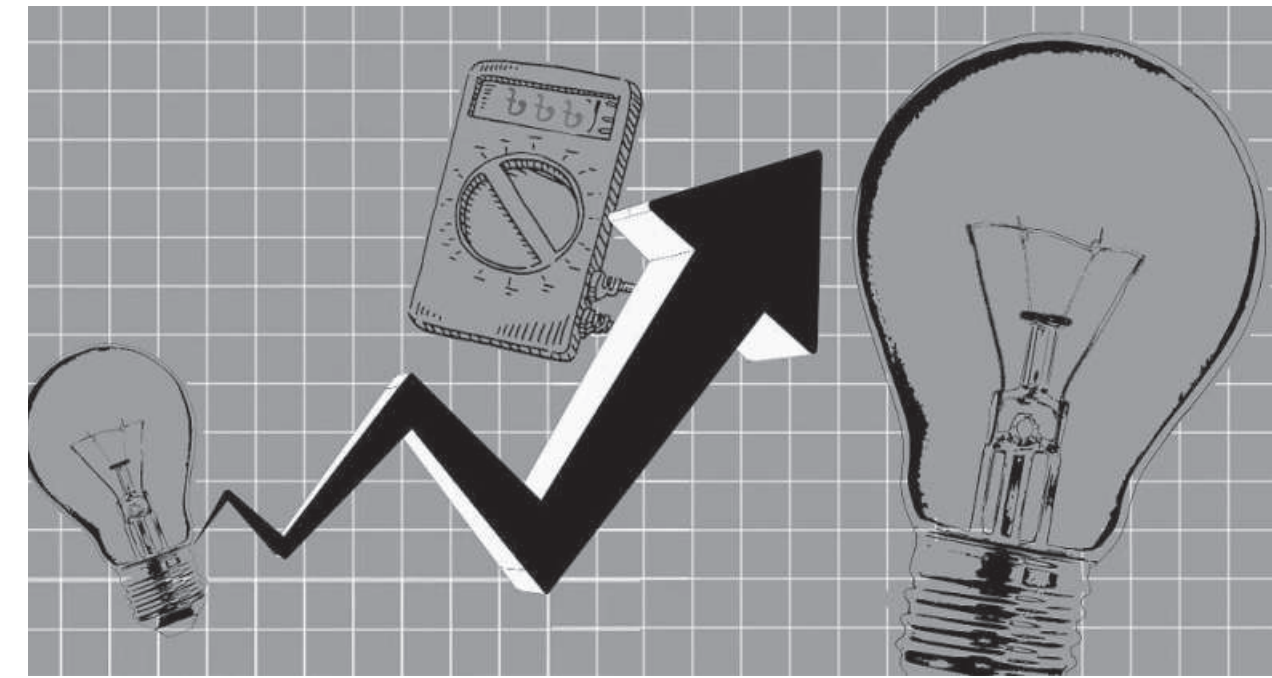
Our financial situation, which is already in trouble due to high inflation, is getting further aggravated by the frequent energy price hikes that have been taking place in Bangladesh in recent times. Last year ended with a bulk electricity tariff hike of 19.92 percent, effective from December. This year started with a couple of similar announcements. In early January, the government announced an increase of electricity price by five percent per unit on average at the consumer level, effective from this month. Then came the announcement of gas price hikes for power, industries, captive power and commercial sectors, at rates ranging from 14 percent to 179 percent, on January 18. These new rates will be effective from February 1.

Earlier in June 2022, the government increased gas prices at the retail level. In August, they raised the prices of various types of fuel when global prices were on a decline. In

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Volatile energy prices in the global market, high prices of imported LNG in the spot market, lack of domestic production, and expensive US dollars have led the government to take drastic measures. Since the Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) is incurring losses and has little resources to import fuel from the global market, the government has no other option but to raise prices and reduce subsidies. Sadly, BPC's



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loss is not new, and global energy prices cannot be entirely blamed for that. The institution has been under the spotlight for resource wastage, system loss, and weak management and governance. Experts have pointed out that BPC's accounting system is not transparent. As a result, even when it made profits during periods of low global energy prices, particularly between FY2014-15 and FY2021-22, the net result was not visible – people did not benefit from those profits.

Consumers in Bangladesh are at the mercy of policymakers. When global energy prices go up, domestic prices are adjusted upwards, but when global prices decline, domestic prices are hardly adjusted downwards. In 2016, energy prices were reduced by a very small amount when global prices declined.

Coincidentally, fuel prices are being adjusted upwards at a time when Bangladesh is seeking a loan of USD 4.5 billion from the IMF in the face of declining foreign exchange reserves. IMF delegates visited Bangladesh twice to discuss the loan. Clearly, the government is under pressure to withdraw subsidies and implement reforms to strengthen the country's banking system and improve the fiscal framework. Energy price hikes are a reflection of this attempt to follow IMF guidelines. It is also easy

valid. Resources that are priced below the market price are depleted faster, and end up encouraging wastage of resources. Therefore, resources such as energy, which are key to economic growth, must be priced appropriately. The pricing mechanism should be transparent, but so far, it has been arbitrary. Energy prices have been generally set by the Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC) through public hearings. However, the cabinet recently approved an amendment to the BERC Act, 2003, which empowers the government to determine fuel tariff under special circumstances without public hearings.

Like many developing countries, the Bangladesh government subsidises some sectors. Subsidies constitute almost two percent of GDP, and a lion's share of them is spent on fuel. But they are enjoyed by both the rich and the poor, which is inefficient. Though global price hikes are being used as a reason to withdraw subsidies, it is actually for the distribution of BPC's loss, incurred mainly due to its inefficiencies, among the citizens. Measures to withdraw subsidies are also being implemented at a time when people are struggling to make ends meet. Instead of a sudden withdrawal, subsidies should be phased out, giving people time to absorb the

increase, hence, the cost of goods and services may increase too, and consumers' purchasing power will be affected. The industrial sector is likely to suffer seriously due to high gas tariffs. There has always been a demand from the business community for uninterrupted gas supply for smooth production and cost management. Now, with higher gas prices, they may lose competitiveness in the global market. For example, many readymade garments' orders that came a few months ago, when the gas price was lower, will see higher production costs, but exporters cannot ask for a higher price from buyers now. Though gas prices have not been raised for households, certain sectors may try to take advantage of this difficult situation and pass the costs onto consumers. This calls for strong management and monitoring of the market.

The government must extend generous support to poor and low-income families through targeted measures to shield them from the negative impact of high inflationary pressure due to high food and fuel prices. Strict implementation of austerity measures, and more importantly, stemming resource wastage and corruption can save a lot of resources, which can then be used to protect people from energy poverty.

Dowry still exists in the guise of ‘gifts’

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Recently, we came across a father from a remote village in Khulna whose daughter was about to get married, and asked him whether he had been asked to pay dowry. He vehemently denied so, but then we learnt that he had gotten a sizeable bank loan against his sole land plot as collateral, to pay for "gifts" for his daughter. He tried to convince us that the groom's family had not demanded such gifts, so they were not dowry.

Simply put, this silent tradition of parents/guardians giving "gifts" at weddings – sometimes at exorbitant costs – is getting ingrained in our society. We now accept dowry in the guise of said "gifts" or "presents."

The value of these so-called gifts is occasionally the same as – or even more than – the assets sold or mortgaged to pay for them. The asset loss due to dowry pushes poor families further into financial insecurity and/or poverty. Added to this are the cases of domestic violence due to dowry that are still being reported. According to a survey conducted in 2018, 15 percent of women are abused for dowry; the actual number of such cases is likely to be much higher as these incidents often go unreported. Interestingly, news reports of dowry-driven violence

cases have been declining since 2015. Does that mean we are heading towards a dowry-free future?

The answer to that question is not pleasant, especially when we dig into the transformation of this practice in rural Bangladesh. To combat the newly-established form of dowry, conventional routes of criticism, awareness-building and law enforcement probably won't work as effectively. This is because in this system, victims are untraced, no complaints are filed, and the so-called gifts are accepted by the groom and willingly supplied by the bride's family.

Empirically, we found that both the bride and groom's families know that dowry is illegal and a punishable offence. Nevertheless, under the guise of gift-giving, the practice still goes on, aiming to keep the groom's family happy to ensure the bride's future security, as observed in the chairs of Sirajganj, Kurigram, Rangpur, Khulna and Satkhira. The key knowledge gap, in this case, is that the gift suppliers are ignorant about Section 3 of the Dowry Prohibition Act, 2018, which states that "...any direct or indirect demand for dowry by either party from the other will be an offence under the law. Such offence shall be punishable with imprisonment (of) maximum five years but not less than one year..."

One of the less-discussed aspects of this form of dowry is the fear of extreme poverty and homelessness caused by climate shocks (cyclones, heavy rainfall, flood and river erosion) in the coastal and northern parts of the country. This threat is driving many families to marry off their young daughters, and dowries are a major

catalyst in these marriages.

Surprisingly, in the current system, the demand for dowry remains silent from the groom's side. They confidentially communicate the demand via the matchmakers, who play a prominent role in driving up dowry, in whatever shape or form. The matchmakers influence the bride's family to showcase their affluence and social standing through luxurious gifts. They manoeuvre the bride's family,

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assuring them that the groom's family has no asset or cash demands. The two sides, thus, avoid embarrassment and potential legal liability, but the bride's family is somehow persuaded to give lucrative gifts – a gift-free marriage causes fear of embarrassment in society.

Social pressure thus plays a critical role in compelling the bride's family to give gifts (dowry) at any cost. Sociologist Shahana Nasrin, in her book *Crime or Custom*, termed hypergamy as one of the key reasons for dowry. The bride's family thinks that marrying off their daughter with a socially esteemed groom would naturally be costly. Therefore, under external pressure – from distant family, neighbours and matchmakers – the bride's family takes up the financial burden.

The commonplace approach to uprooting dowry may not be effective because of its changed form. To obliterate the scourge of such silent dowry, careful investigations are needed. The foremost policy measure can be a nationwide campaign to raise awareness about the law and what it entails. The right definition of dowry, demonstration of such silent dowry practice and its retribution in rural gatherings, its form, and the associated punishment, should be communicated to the masses.

The inclusion of the definition, nature and causes and effects of dowry in textbooks and classroom lectures can slowly alter the attitudes of today's children and youth, who can then bring about an intergenerational shift that will help purge dowry of all shapes and forms from society. Empowering women, albeit a visionary and challenging goal, can boost their decision-making power and economic security, which may help reduce the occurrence of dowry. Targeting changes in attitudes and strong moral standing to get rid of this practice for good is the only way out.