THE latest issue of Journal of Bangladesh Studies is now out. JBS presents quality research articles on issues pertinent to Bangladesh. This is a challenge that is likely to persist, given that a research culture has not flourished in Bangladesh; not many international scholars seem to have found research on Bangladesh as engaging and worthwhile; and because of the growth of a plethora of competing research outlets, some of which seem to demand less from their contributors on substance, relevance, quality, etc.

Some contributors, in their quest to publish or perish, may also opt for less rigorous outlets for their research. JBS, however, publishes the very best research available on Bangladesh.

This quarter's issue begins with an article addressing a crucial sector that has been Bangladesh's export mainstay: the garments industry. Gunseli Berik and Yana van der Meulen Rodgers follow Bangladesh's growth in garment exports in recent years, despite the global economic slowdown.

This has been achieved by focusing on the volume-driven low-price niche in the global market, especially US and EU. Even with China's entry into the market after expiration of the Multi Fibre Arrangement and Agreement on Textiles and Clothing, Bangladesh has carved out a bigger market both in terms of share and value in US and EU.

This is a laudatory achievement. But it has also come at a price; the wage pressure that such a depressed economic environment has generated has affected employment and working conditions in the industry in various ways. These include violation of workers' rights including long working hours (often 60 to 86 working hours per week), forced or excessive overtime, illegal pay deductions, lack of safe and sanitary working conditions, prevention of the formulation of workers' organisations, harassment and abuse, and similar violations that loom large in the industry.

On wage rates, the authors show that Bangladesh's garment industry workers are the lowest paid in the world at around $0.22 per hour -- much less than the next rung which is $0.33 per hour in Cambodia. In China, that has recently increased its market share from 15 to 33 percent in the US and from 15 to 37 percent in the EU, the prevailing wage rates range between $.55 and $1.08 per hour.

That Bangladesh has maintained its competitiveness and gained in share and value of garment exports, despite China's freer access to global markets, misses the point. The deeper question is at what human cost? The violations listed earlier are serious, where the workers seem to have a "disposable" status. While this may be the norm for countries that have a burgeoning population and low employment opportunities, the stark contrast in wages and working conditions compared to other countries needs to be addressed.

This calls for a major overhaul of the garment industry on such parameters as efficiency and dignity of labor. This becomes even more important at a time when, according to the authors, nations such as India, Pakistan, Cambodia, etc have devalued their currency to become more competitive.

As a consequence, further pressures on the workers can lead to labour instability and disruptions on a massive scale if the workers -- the main asset of the garment manufacturers -- are unable to feed themselves or maintain their basic health and sanity.

Mohammad Abdul Malek and Koichi Usami address another vital policy prerogative: improving non-farm employment (NFE) in rural Bangladesh. With rising population, limited land resources, and massive migration to the urban centres, NFE in the rural areas deserves a strategic thrust to bring social, political, and economic stability to the nation.

Using econometric analyses, the authors show that gender and education are important determinants of NFE. Here they highlight women's considerably lower participation in NFE as they continue to be relegated to domestic chores that depress household incomes.

Among the other variables of interest are access to credit, access to organisations, out-of-country remittance, and education. Interestingly, the study finds that of the household income sources, non-farm self-employment has the highest share (28 per cent), followed by non-farm wage employment (20.3 per cent), out-of-country remittance (20.1 per cent) and in-country remittance (6 per cent).

Unfortunately, low-return NFE (68 per cent) opportunities dominate the rural economy, requiring no particular education and little or no start-up capital. This reflects the neglect and inattention given to improving human potential in the country over the years. And this undeveloped human resource base continues to be the bane of the country,