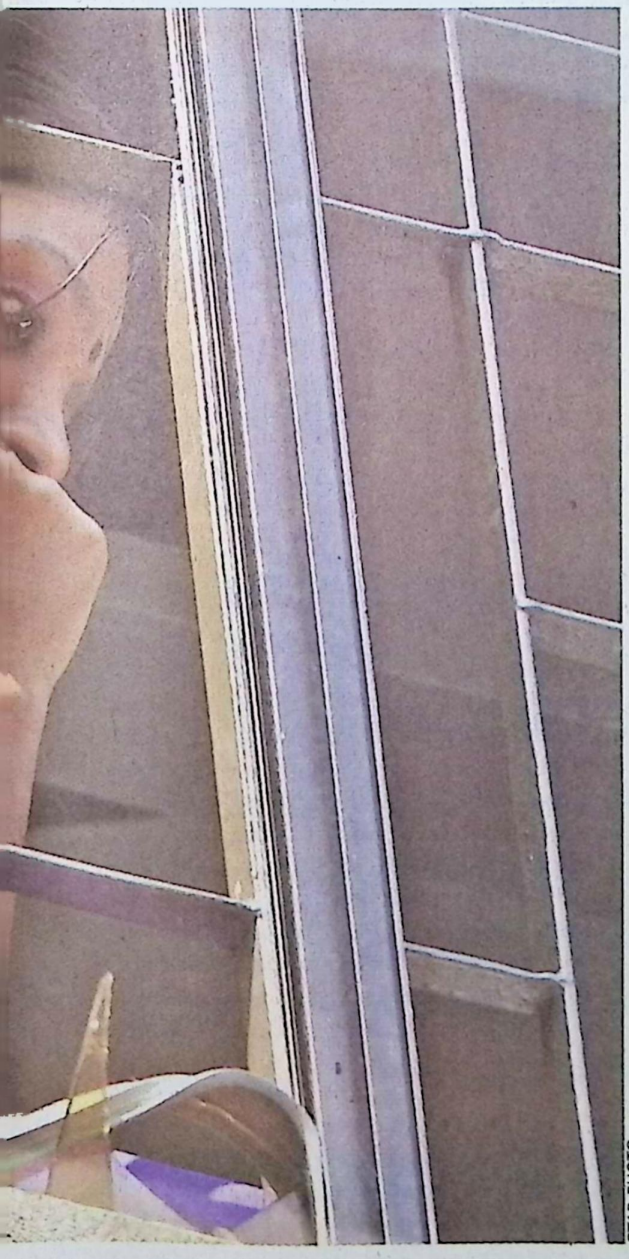
'DON'T come around today, *gondogol*' -- the text-message blipped on my phone. Garments workers were allegedly going on a rampage in Gulshan, protesting the minimum wage award that was announced earlier that week. According to eyewitness accounts, the people attacking the Wal-Mart office -- a major buyer -- didn't look like a spontaneous mob. There were all sorts of speculations: war criminals were behind this; oh no, it was the Indians out to destroy our economy.

And these I heard not just in political *addas* over *cha-nashta* but also in TV talk shows attended by supposedly knowledgeable people. Everyone was giving strong, polarised opinions: "Our garment workers are treated like slaves and nothing short of a 5,000 taka minimum wage will do" versus "a 3,000 taka minimum wage will decimate our global competitive edge". Meanwhile, I heard garment workers in the Ashulia-Savar belt, and their employers too, worry about exactly what the policy entailed and what the future would hold.

Then, within a few days, our "chatterati" culture forgot the whole issue.

But this is not an ordinary issue. Readymade garments account for well over three-quarters of our exports. Millions are dependent on jobs in the sector. Social benefits derived from female participation in the sector rival the best efforts of government and non-government development agencies over the past few decades. This is an issue that deserves far greater attention and deeper analysis than what we have seen.

I ask some questions in this piece that should have been raised in policy dialogues and seminars. It is incredible that our think tanks and policy researchers haven't tackled these questions either.



STAR PHOTO

Is this a living wage?

The package announced on July 29 saw the minimum monthly wage in the sector rise from 1,662.50 taka, set in November 2006, to 3,000 taka. Assuming that the wage set in November 2006 covered the essentials, the first thing we would want to know is whether the wage rise was sufficient to cover rising cost of living.

The consumer price index (CPI) for urban areas had risen by about a third between November 2006 and June 2010. So at first glance, it would seem that the nearly doubling of the minimum wage is quite generous. But is the CPI for all city dwellers a good gauge of garment workers' cost of living?

The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics doesn't provide a basket for garments workers. However, monthly retail prices for some essentials -- the proverbial rice, lentil, oil and salt -- are available until 2009. Throw in a kilogram of coarse rice, 250 grams of red lentil, 40 ml soya bean oil and 10 mg salt and we get a rather bland plate of *khichuri*. In November 2006, with the then monthly minimum wage, one could buy 43 such plates, while 3,000 taka would have fetched 79 plates. Rising prices in 2007 and 2008 eroded the purchasing power of taka, and by December 2009, 3,000 taka could get one