

Industries running below capacity

Strengthening infrastructure imperative

Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) study shows that the industry's inability to fully utilise its capacity is preventing it from contributing to the economy at the desired level. In fact, about one-third of the manufacturing units can utilise between 25 to 50 per cent of their total capacities, while 59 per cent can use 75 per cent of their potential. Given that manufacturing makes the highest contribution to the nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) after the service sector, the issue of underutilized capacity needs to be addressed in earnest. A former president of readymade garment (RMG) sector's apex body BGMEA, which represents more than one third of the total number of industrial units, thinks political instability coupled with power and fuel crisis are to blame for the situation. It's hardly surprising that many of these industries are resorting to job cuts or running the units below their actual capacities.

Some experts, on the other hand, maintain the industry is utilizing two-thirds of its capacity and would rather like to give credit to it for its double-digit contribution to the GDP. And this is despite the fact that the pace of investment in the economy is rather slow.

Differences in expert opinion apart, the fact remains that the manufacturing sector which has seen a phenomenal expansion between 2001 and 2010 has been facing problems. Obviously, the existing infrastructure will have to be bolstered to step up industrial growth.

Workers' safety neglected

Treat it as a priority

CROSS industries in Bangladesh, workers' safety standards are a low-priority issue for management. That workers of the readymade garments have received so much international and national attention over the last year or so is primarily due to two major incidents that killed more than a thousand workers. Yet the same cannot be said about workers in other industries. The news-photo on workers involved in the glass finishing factory in this paper's back page yesterday simply drove home the message. With no protective gear whatsoever, apart from some aprons made of rags, labourers are engaged in a trade that involves miniscule particles of glass flying about the place. We do not see protective goggles being used either. Nor do we see any safety equipment on their persons, especially where there is sharp-edged tools at play that could, at any moment cause serious injury.

In fact, that is more or less the standard scenario for all sorts of hazardous work our workers are involved in various productive sectors – whether it is the tannery industry or the ship breaking sector, workers are engaged in occupations that involve a high degree of personal risk. Authorities promise change only when there is a mishap. What of the lives that are lost? What happens to the families that are left behind? Does a one-off payment of a few thousand Takas suffice to pay for a life lost and the loss of a livelihood upon which perhaps an entire family was dependent?

Now certified journalists

SHAHRIAR FEROZE

LIKE it or not - the time is coming for us to get certified as journalists.

In an attempt to tighten its grip on mass media the government seems to be driven by a blind ego that's even destroying the rationales behind issuing a certificate. The methodology for the person willing to take up journalism involves taking exams. In doing so, he needs to pass the exam and score the marks to fulfil the criteria, but the process for the ones who are already in the trade to get certified is unknown.

Imagine this scene that a journalist working for a newspaper is incompetent whose standard is not up to the mark yet he is a favourite employee of the editor and the editor recommends for his certificate to the Press Council, which he gets. And also who is going to certify the editor since he is a journalist too?

It's reported that under the amended act, anyone could lodge defamatory cases with the council instead of with regular courts. If that happens then the Council is likely to function like a de facto court. If yellow journalism could have been prevented by a certification method then even better methods exist. Funnily, for issuing the certificates the government had to choose the council that since its inception repeatedly failed to live up to its mandate. What I fail to understand is a remark made by the Council's secretary. He said that the certificates will enhance the quality of mass media. If that is so then why wasn't it introduced earlier and why now? If he believes that a signed, sealed and officially approved paper with grades written on it can improve journalistic practices in Bangladesh then there is little to say.

We live in a country where certificate and degrees define who we pretend to be and not what we actually are. The fear is that the certified journalist is going to operate according to the rules of the authority that will certify him. There are likely to be plenty of them controlling our media. And if that's the case then I am afraid I may have to become a journalist like Christopher Hitchens who became a journalist because he didn't believe in everything that the so-called journalists put out.

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The finance minister as a lightning bolt

CROSS TALK



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

dered cash or catch the culprits who made off with the money. In all practicality, he sounded disoriented like Rip Van Winkle after he had woken up from his proverbial sleep.

In reasonable countries, people are held accountable for their mistakes and mischiefs. In those countries, the buck stops somewhere because public money isn't exactly anyone's family fortune. The finance minister once shrugged off Tk. 40 billion as no big deal. Not long ago he obediently accepted the resignation of a bank chairman as if Tk. 45 billion skimmed by the man was pocket change. Much earlier, when stock market manipulators were laughing all the way to the bank, he had accused the small investors of being greedy.

That's why the Thursday therapy came across as confusing. It's not clear why the minister said what he did and what he was expecting out of it. He was surely not taking responsibility for anything. It must have been through him that the political appointments were processed. He should have known it better at that time that square pegs were being fitted into round holes.

The minister's candor on Thursday had the resonance of snatches from the Simon and Garfunkel song "Sound of Silence." The minister was talking without speaking and we were hearing without listening. If the minister was making a serious confession, it should have been backed by some evidence of his repentance if not resignation. If the minister was making accusations, it should have been followed by a plan of action to nab the guilty. If the minister was merely sharing information, it should have been followed by naming the names of those who were involved.

So, why did he want to bare his soul? May be it was the day the minister woke up on the right side of his bed. May be he has got genuine grievances bottled up inside

THE finance minister apparently ate the humble pie two Thursdays ago in a tone that ranged between regret and recrimination. He admitted it was wrong to put political people on the boards, which led to poor performance of the state-owned banks. The minister, however, said nothing with regard to what he has done about it or how he was going to recover the plun-

dered cash or catch the culprits who made off with the money. In all practicality, he sounded disoriented like Rip Van Winkle after he had woken up from his proverbial sleep.

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COMMENTARY

Protector turning the predator?

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1)

MAHFUZ ANAM

Though there are some serious problem areas of this "code" yet we, in the independent media, have voluntarily agreed to abide by it.

The question is what has the Council done to "enforce" this code? The Council will say it has no power. We say, has the Council ever used whatever power it has? Has it ever "warned, admonished and censured" any newspaper for not abiding by this "code"? How many attempts, if ever, the Council made to raise awareness among the journalists as to the existence and usefulness of the "code"? I have the honour of being editor of this paper for the last twenty one years and I can recall no single instance when the Council invited the editors seeking support for the dissemination and enforcement of the "code" and for ways to enhance the quality of journalism. The Council has seldom, if ever, held a seminar or meeting to "counter yellow journalism" in Bangladesh.

It may be of interest to our readers and our Press Council that the Indian Press Council, which was first constituted in July 1966 has exactly the same powers to "warn, admonish or censure" newspapers and has never been known to demand additional power to close down newspapers and to issue intending journalists licences to allow them to enter the profession.

Having done practically nothing to implement its own "mandate" the Council suddenly wants power to cancel a newspaper's "declaration", to cancel tax facilities, impose fines and license journalists.

What makes the whole process ominous is that we know nothing of what triggered it, what were the compelling circumstances that necessitated it, who did the Council talk to, what was the nature of those discussions, and what transparent process was followed. The whole thing occurred behind the scenes-(may be with a select number of people, whose selection process we know nothing about)- and only came to light because of investigative reporting by a few newspapers. Is that how Press Council should work? Even after publication of these reports the Council is yet to come out in public as to what and why they are doing what they are.

The chairman is reported to have had several meetings with the information minister. We have no issue with that. But the Council's primary constituency is the press with whose members and leaders he has had no discussions yet. The Chairman has said that he will soon meet with the Council members, whose members are yet to be selected, and discuss these proposals with them. Why should any self-respecting senior media person or representative go for a discussion when all the proposals have been prepared. The "die is cast" and we will only be called to "endorse it".

The Press Council says that whatever it has done so far was on its own. However, we see a far bigger and sinister picture.

As the saying goes "actions speak louder than words", so judging by actions of the government as compared to its word we are forced to conclude that the government is on a deliberate collision course with the free and independent media, the latter having brought justifiable accolade for our image-challenged country. Like Sri Lanka we are slowly but surely being turned from a freedom nurturing to a freedom suppressing country. At least Sri Lanka has 28 years of a brutal war to 'justify' its aberration with. What is our justification? That our media has grown too independent for the comfort of a government bent on self-indulgence and perpetuation?

We repeat the question we had asked before. What has the media done to necessitate such draconian measures? How extensive is the prevalence of so-called "yellow

journalism" which is being used to justify these restrictive measures? Or is the ruse for actions already decided upon?

Just as the 16th Amendment to the Constitution empowering the parliament to impeach judges is supposed to increase the independence of the judges -- only that the judges don't know it -- so also all the restrictive provisions being incorporated in the new Press Council Act are also supposed to enhance the freedom and dignity of journalists- only that we the journalists don't know it. The spin, dear readers, is Orwellian and we must marvel at the devious cleverness of the instigators of this move.

As we feared, so it has happened or is about to. One after another restrictive laws are being proposed to throttle the freedom of Bangladesh's thriving media industry- TV channels, online media, social media, films and now the print.

After getting the communist-model broadcast policy we fearfully predicted that the next assault would be on the print media, and, like a nightmare it appears to be coming upon us. The most insidious of all the plans are the ones permitting 'cancellation of declaration' and to license journalists.

Under no circumstances can the closure of a media outlet be permitted.

As for licensing journalists it is a communist era proposal which is resurfacing in Bangladesh. In the late seventies the Soviet block countries made such a move within Unesco, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, that also looked at global media issues. This highly discredited move was thrown into the dustbin of history as it deserved to be. How come, after about 40 years, we see it suddenly becoming a part of the Press Council's law in Bangladesh?

Why are we adopting something that has been discarded the world over? On a practical note, does the Council have the infrastructure to issue certificates to journalists from every nook and corner of the country? Will it be able to verify submission of false certificates? Will it be able to withstand pressure from the government- being government nominees themselves- to dish out certificates to people known to support one particular party and withhold them when the opposite case occurs. If the Council has powers to issue certificates, it will automatically have powers to "withdraw" it. How will it resist pressure to "withdraw" a certificate from a journalist whose critical voice the government wants silenced?

We conclude with some suggestions on how to move forward in implementing the original mandate of the Press Council and protect freedom of press and improve quality of our newspapers and prevent "yellow journalism", assuming that the Press Council is genuinely interested in it.

1. The Press Council should abandon all proposals that are contradictory to its own mandate of promoting press freedom and enhancing quality of newspapers and news agencies.

2. The Council should undertake urgent discussions on ways to implement the "code of conduct" for journalists that has been already adopted.

3. To implement that "code" the Council should immediately call a meeting of all stake holders. We the editors will be only too happy to assist the Council in this endeavour.

We repeat that no new law is needed, and urge the Press Council to focus on its own mandate and not do anything that may portray it as an "enemy of free press" and destroy what has been one of the biggest gains of our independence- namely a free and independent media.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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What's left of AL's popularity?

The letters "No head above king" written by A. F. Rahman and "All power to PM" by Md. Mahsin Alam, published in your column recently, caught my attention. The Daily Star's editor, Mahfuz Anam is a very learned person. He writes wise and brilliant commentaries but alas, we do not see any impact of those on anything. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina does not give any importance to the suggestions given by him.

In the second letter the last line was: "The Awami League led government consequently may suffer in the long run and lose people's trust." My question is, after January 5 election, is there any trust left for Awami League?

Nur Jahan
Chittagong

"When Chinese dragon meets the Indian elephant!"

This letter refers to the above titled article by Ashfaqur Rahman published on Sept. 21, 2014. While Chinese Premier was on his visit in India, the troops of both countries were facing each other at the disputed border area of Ladakh. This is a political situation that has remained unresolved for many years. But do these economic giants allow politics to interfere in their economic progress and cooperation? It doesn't appear to be so. The two Asian giants are members of BRICS, an alliance based primarily on economic cooperation and growth. If they geared their policies to be purely based on politics, then China would not have gained the economic status it has achieved today. Even today, one of the biggest markets for Chinese products is the USA.

The Sino-Indian summit was not to settle or hammer on issues of dispute but to consolidate and further expand existing relation of bilateral economic cooperation. Did the two leaders discuss Ladakh? If they did it was not highlighted. What they focused on was how to increase the cooperation on economic matters for their own respective interests. We need to learn how to separate politics and economics from interfering with each other in our national policies. Whosoever is in power should not hamper the economy of the country. The economic policies implemented by one party in power should be allowed to continue to their fruition for the country to achieve double-digit growth.

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Repair roads before Eid

During Eid homebound people's sufferings know no bounds as they have to struggle to collect bus/train/launch tickets, even after paying extra charges over the actual fares. And the miserable



PHOTO: STAR

conditions of roads turn their journey into nightmares. The communications ministry must repair all the dilapidated roads before Eid in order to lessen the sufferings of the homebound people.

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Comments on news report, "Taxpayers get no service," published on September 22, 2014

Sayed Rahman

The service a consultant of the World Bank got shows the plight of the general people of our country.

"United Kingdom remains united" (September 20, 2014)

Genuine Musafeer

Like Bangladesh, many countries got their independence through war -- some of them had been fighting for independence for decades. Though in many countries there are 'pro' and 'anti' independence saga, with a referendum in Scotland, another era started in the history of pro and anti Independence. Let us see how the Scottish remember their anti-independence citizens.

"Sporadic clashes mark hartal" (September 23, 2014)

S. M. Iftekhar Ahmed

Didn't they boast that the protests would be peaceful? Politicians and their lies go hand in hand. Now waiting for the clichéd, shameless statement from one of them, whoever it might be, thanking the people for making the hartal a success.