Behind the scenes of 'Made in Bangladesh'

How much longer will RMG workers shoulder losses, but not share profits?

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PHOTO: **FARIYA RAHMAN BRISHTI**

"Kadhe kandh miliye medha o mononer bunone (Standing shoulder to shoulder, woven with skill and resolution)

Matha unchu kore darai bishwe Bangladesher naamey

(We stand tall in front of the world, in the name of Bangladesh)

Made in Bangladesh, made in Bangladesh."

Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), which represents the top export sector of the second-largest readymade garments (RMG) exporting country, presented the glory of the sector's business development through the above song at the Made in Bangladesh Week 2022, where 550 buyer representatives and experts from 160 countries were present.

Any citizen would love to hear of Bangladesh's identity, growth and independence in such a song. We see a conscious effort to market the sector by praising its possibilities, and branding products by equating them with positive emotions like love and patriotism. Using such lyrics and presentation as a business strategy shows a certain level of maturity on the part of the BGMEA leadership.

But after almost four decades, how are one of the greatest builders of the sector, the garment workers, doing in real life? How is the ongoing inflation affecting their lives? How much has their income risen in line with the increase in export earnings? How many calories of energy do they get to produce for themselves daily? Are they able to maintain a balanced diet, with enough protein? We did not see these issues reflected at the event. At a mega-event for business development, the development of workers' standards of living got swept under the carpet.

When one Sabina graduates from the Asian University for Women and dreams of becoming an entrepreneur, we can definitely be proud. But there are hundreds of thousands of Sabinas who are left without education and have to live without nutrition, leave and rest, and are known as "cheap" labour. Is the life of graduate Sabina the same as the four million other workers? What can they afford with the mere Tk 8,000 salary?

Does the BGMEA leadership have a mega-plan to improve workers' living standards and skills? Can we evaluate the sector's development only through the gains of the owners and buyers, increase of export earnings, development of factory buildings, or their greenery-surrounded walls? If the workers' purchasing power does not increase along with the rise of export earnings, can that be termed true development of the whole sector?

There is no way to overlook the fact that the development of this sector is deeply intertwined with the development of its workers. Any definition, narrative or planning that does not make workers part of the "development" is incomplete.

After the pandemic slowed down, work orders started coming back to Bangladesh, and the media wrote stories of a comeback. But the Russia-Ukraine war, global inflation, the fuel crisis, floods and more put RMG workers in a dire situation yet again. Many times, we have seen this sector's entrepreneurs weather such storms and make a comeback. However, the fair winds of change hardly seem to reach workers. Last year marked 10 years of hundreds of workers dying in the Tazreen factory fire and nine years since the Rana Plaza collapse, but the culprits of either are yet to be punished, and the labour law has still not been properly amended.

Expanding into new markets, crossing the 50-billion-mark to set our sights on becoming a 100-billion-dollar industry, getting recognition as the country with the safest green factories (173 of them), sustainable development (keeping the climate catastrophe in mind) and the 20 goals to work towards it – all of these show the progress of this sector, not its deterioration. According to recent data from the Export Promotion Bureau (EPB), Bangladesh's export earnings in the global market have crossed a record USD 5 billion for the first time ever. From July to November 2022, the value of exports created another record by reaching USD 18.3 billion. The value of exports in 2022-23 has gone up by 15 percent in comparison with the same period in 2022-2021. These are not cock and bull stories.

But is this success only for owners-buyers and the government to benefit from? Because the cruel struggle of the workers throughout the year shows that they have not been party to it.

The owners have failed to set an example of taking responsibility for their workers during any crisis. From the pandemic to periods of inflation, we have continuously seen examples of this. Even in the middle of 2022, when workers in Mirpur, Gazipur or Uttara demanded an increase in their wages, not only were they ignored, but their demonstrations were attacked.

Some honourable ministers made promises of a wage board to try and calm protestors. Some owners have called the protests "conspiracies" or "provocations." Even the head of government has warned, "If factories and exports stop because of such movements, it is the workers who will lose everything. Wages will not increase because they will get no wages instead." Some are saying that workers' movements in the current global environment will force industries to relocate to other countries instead – the same old fear-mongering.

But the Export Promotion Bureau itself has said that, even though the present crisis has hit other export sectors, the RMG sector is somehow progressing.

Products made in Bangladesh are now reaching new markets in Japan, India, South Korea and the Middle East, which is very noteworthy. Market expansion into Chile, Brazil, Mexico, Russia and some African countries has also occurred. In July-August of the present fiscal year, exports to India were valued at USD 190 million, which is 99 percent higher than the last fiscal year. At this rate, the exports will exceed USD 1 billion at the end of FY 2022-23.

According to EPB data, in the first five months of 2022-23 (July-November), exports to non-traditional markets increased from USD 2.47 billion to USD 3.19 billion. Trade with Malaysia, Mexico, India, Brazil and South Korea has gone up significantly, and only exports to Russia have fallen due to the war. In fact, even trade with the European Union, the US, the UK and Canada have gone up, although by not as much as the aforementioned markets.

When there are various crises in the global economy, fears of food insecurity, and a complex political situation at home due to upcoming elections, the strong data and positive reputation we see from the garments industry shows us how stable a sector it is. Yet, despite all this, no wage board has been announced so far, even though it has been four years since the last one was convened. The owners have never come forward to create a fund for workers to use during emergencies, not during the pandemic, nor in times of national and international tumult.

RMG workers are always asked to shoulder any losses incurred, but when owners are inundated with profits, workers do not get their fair share. Profits are personal, but losses are social – this neoliberal economic trend can be seen in the garments sector of Bangladesh, too.

In this economy, simply looking at the prices of goods like rice, lentils, flour, salt, oil and eggs shows the difficult situation faced by workers and the general people of this country. Where everyone is having to make concessions when buying daily essentials, it is not hard to decipher the poor conditions of RMG workers.

In 2018, garment workers' wages were raised from Tk 5,300 to Tk 8,000, which took effect in 2019. According to TCB data, if we compare prices from December 2018 to December 2022, the price of rice has increased by almost 15 percent and price of lentils (thick) has gone up by 97 percent. The prices of flour, soybean oil and sugar have gone up by 120 percent, 86 percent and 114 percent respectively. The price of eggs has gone up in stages, and is now 13 percent higher in comparison to 2018.

In August 2022, the prices of petrol, octane, diesel and other fuels went up by 42 to 51 percent, and since then, the prices of essential commodities have continued to increase in stages. Expenses in all sectors, including transportation, have gone up. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, three-month inflation till August 2022 was 9.10 percent, the highest in 11 years.

And while this was the market situation from 2018 to 2022, the minimum wage of garment workers was stuck at Tk 8,000. Just this is enough to tell us why the increase in costs of essential commodities over the past five years requires us to re-evaluate RMG workers' wages. Yet, whenever one brings up improving workers' living standards in line with the improvement experienced by owners, they have to hear of the fears of "dangers ahead" as more strategies are devised to make workers share losses but not profits.

In the 21st century, we no longer want to see workers just getting by. The cruel joke of advising workers – who are already not getting enough nutrition – to reduce consumption during economic shocks cannot be tolerated under any circumstances. If anyone must practice austerity, then the government has to ensure it is those who consume too much.

The government, as well as owners and buyers, need to take appropriate actions alongside creating policies and structures to tackle the crisis facing workers.

A special emergency fund has to be created. A democratic and accountable environment, free of fear and oppression, has to be created – in factories and everywhere else.

Success cannot simply mean increasing export revenue or owners' income. We must increase our capacity to negotiate better and fairer prices for our products, as well as improve workers' capabilities and purchasing power. Workers must get a living wage so they can retain their productivity and skills. Maternity leave, sexual harassment policies, and other amenities for women have to be ensured as well, so that female workers are not pushed out. If workers' wages go up, their purchasing power will increase and the economy will also receive a boost.

Recently, workers and worker organisations made the legitimate demands of creating a new wage board and setting a Tk 25,000 minimum wage. If the living standards of workers are not improved, if they are left in despair while only export and owners' earnings increase – if there are no laws or trade unions in favour of workers and they are deprived of their right to speak out – there is no scope for us to hold our heads high, at home or abroad.

If we want to take pride in our RMG industry, the owners, buyers and government will all have to take responsibility. Present entrepreneurs will only fully provide evidence of their maturity when they will provide an example of investing in increasing the living standards, wages, and skills of workers. Only then will the behind-the-scenes heroes of the "made in Bangladesh" story finally come out from behind the curtains and take their place on the centre stage.

When there are various crises in the global economy, fears of food insecurity, and a complex political situation at home, the strong data and positive reputation we see from the garments industry shows us how stable a sector it is. Yet, despite all this, no wage board has been announced so far, even though it has been four years since the last one was convened. The owners have never come forward to create a fund for workers to use during emergencies, not during the pandemic, nor in times of national and international tumult.

Does the BGMEA leadership have a mega-plan to improve workers' living standards? Can we evaluate the sector's development only through the gains of the owners and buyers, increase of export earnings, development of factory buildings, or their greenery-surrounded walls? If the workers' purchasing power does not increase, can that be termed true development?

বাংলাদেশ প্রকৌশল বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়, ঢাকা
নিলাম বিজ্ঞপ্তি

নং-প্রাপ্র/নিলাম-০১/২০২২-২৩/ই-৪৩৫(১০০) তারিখঃ ০৮/০১/২০২৩

১	নিলাম কেটেশন আহবানকারী	প্রধান প্রকৌশলী, বুয়েট, ঢাকা।
২	নিলাম কেটেশন ডকুমেন্ট বিক্রির স্থান	প্রধান প্রকৌশলীর কার্যালয়/কম্পট্রোলার অফিস/পি এন্ড ডি অফিস, বাং প্র বিঃ, ঢাকা।
৩	নিলাম বিজ্ঞপ্তি প্রকাশের তারিখ	০৮/০১/২০২৩ইং।
৪	নিলাম কেটেশন ফরম ক্রয়ের অনুমতির শেষ তারিখ	২৯/০১/২০২৩ইং (অফিস চলাকালীন সময়ে)।
৫	নিলাম কেটেশন ফরম বিক্রির শেষ তারিখ	২৯/০১/২০২৩ইং (অফিস চলাকালীন সময়ে)।
৬	নিলাম কেটেশন জমা দেওয়ার স্থান	প্রধান প্রকৌশলীর কার্যালয়/কম্পট্রোলার অফিস/পি এন্ড ডি অফিস, বাং প্র বিঃ, ঢাকা।
৭	নিলাম কেটেশন খোলার স্থান	: প্রধান প্রকৌশলীর কার্যালয়, বাং প্র বিঃ, ঢাকা।
৮	নিলাম কেটেশন দাখিলের শেষ তারিখ ও সময়	: ৩০/০১/২০২৩ অফিস বেলা ১২.৪৫টা।
৯	নিলাম কেটেশন খোলার তারিখ ও সময়	: ৩০/০১/২০২৩ইং তারিখ বেলা ৩.০০ ঘটিকায়।
১০	নিলাম কেটেশন সংক্রান্ত অন্য সমূহ	: প্রধান প্রকৌশলীর কার্যালয়, বাং প্র বিঃ, ঢাকা।
১১	নিলাম কাজের সংক্ষিপ্ত বিবরণ ও সহলাভার যোগ্যতা	:

ক্রঃ নং	মালামালের বিবরণ	পরিমাণ	সহ উদ্ধরির তারিখ	জামানতের নিকার পরিমাণ	নিলাম সিডিউলের মূল্য (অফেরতযোগ্য)	সরবরাহ দেওয়ার সময় (দিন)
১	২	৩	৪	৫	৬	৭
১।	বুয়েট মৌর ভবনের ১২নং কক্ষে রক্ষিত পুরাতন অকেজো কম্পিউটার, বিভিন্ন প্রকার বৈদ্যুতিক ও অন্যান্য মালামালসমূহ অকেজো ঘোষণাকরণ ও নিষ্পত্তি সংক্রান্ত।	সিডিউল মতে	সিডিউল মতে	উদ্ধৃত দরের ২০% (শতকরা বিশ ভাগ)	৫০০/-	১৫ দিন
২।	BUET Centre ভবনের উত্তর পার্শ্বে সংরক্ষিত পুরাতন Concrete Mixture Machine নিলামকরণ।	সিডিউল মতে	সিডিউল মতে	উদ্ধৃত দরের ২০% (শতকরা বিশ ভাগ)	২০০/-	১৫ দিন
৩।	পিএভডি অফিসের বাতিল ও বেওয়ারিশ অন্যান্য মালামালসমূহ নিলামের মাধ্যমে বিক্রয়করণ।	সিডিউল মতে	সিডিউল মতে	উদ্ধৃত দরের ২০% (শতকরা বিশ ভাগ)	৩০০/-	১৫ দিন

শর্তাবলীঃ
ক। মালামাল ক্রয়ের জন্য নিলাম কেটিশের বর্ণিত লটের তফসিল ক্রয়ের জন্য নির্ধারিত পাতে ২৯/০১/২০২৩ইং তারিখের মধ্যে আবেদন করতে হবে।
খ) অনুমতি প্রাপ্তির পর নিলাম কোটেশন সিডিউল এর মূল্য নির্ধারিত ফরমে সোনালী ব্যাংক, বুয়েট শাখায় প্রদানপূর্বক অথবা ঢাকা ট্রেডারিং হাউজের আওতাধীন যেকোন সিডিউল ব্যাংক হইতে কম্পট্রোলার, বুয়েট এর অনুকূলে পে-অর্ডার প্রদানপূর্বক নিলাম কোটেশন সিডিউল পাওয়া যাইবে।
গ) নিলাম কোটেশনের নিরাপত্তা জামানত (৫নং কলামে বর্ণিত) কোন সিডিউল ব্যাংক হতে কম্পট্রোলার, বুয়েট (Comptroller, BUET) ঢাকা এর অনুকূলে পে-অর্ডার/ব্যাংক ড্রাফট আকারে জমা দিতে হইবে।
ঘ) নিলাম কোটেশন সংক্রান্ত যাবতীয় তথ্য অফিস চলাকালীন সময়ে নিম্নস্বাক্ষরকারীর অফিস থেকে জানা যাবে।
ঙ) নিলাম কোটেশন সংক্রান্ত যাবতীয় তথ্য অফিস চলাকালীন সময়ে পিএভডি অফিস থেকে জানা যাবে।
চ) নিলাম কোটেশন খোলার সময় সরবরাহ/তাঁর প্রতিনিধি উপস্থিত থাকতে পারবেন।
ছ) কোন কারণ প্রদর্শন ব্যতিরেকে যে কোন কোটেশন গ্রহণ অথবা অনুমূল কোটেশন বাতিল করার ক্ষমতা বিশ্ববিদ্যালয় কর্তৃপক্ষ সংরক্ষণ করেন।
জ) যাহার নিলাম কোটেশন গ্রহণ করা হবে তাকে উদ্ধৃত মোট মূল্য ও মূল্যের উপর (পাঁচ) ৫% হারে অগ্রিম (কোম্পানী করদাতার জন্য কোড নং-১-১১৪১-০০৮০-০১০১; কোম্পানী ব্যতীত করদাতার জন্য, কোড নং-১-১১৪১-০০৮০-০১১১) এবং (সোয়া সাত) ৭.৫০% হারে ভ্যাট (কোড নং-১-১১৩৩-০০১০-০৩১১) জমা দিতে হবে। নির্ধারিত সময়ের মধ্যে উদ্ধৃত মোট মূল্য বিশ্ববিদ্যালয় তহবিলে এবং অগ্রিম এবং ভ্যাট নির্ধারিত তহবিলে টাকা জমা দিতে হবে, নতুবা জামানত বাজেয়াপ্ত সহ নিলামপত্র বাতিল বলে গণ্য হবে।
ঝ) মালামালের তফসিল ১০/০১/২০২৩ইং তারিখ হতে অফিস সময়ে পাওয়া যাবে।

ড. এ.কে.এম. জাহাঙ্গীর আলম, পিইঞ্জ
প্রধান প্রকৌশলী

জিডি-৪০