

How reliable is the BBS data?



Faiz Ahmad Taiyeb is a Bangladeshi columnist and writer living in the Netherlands. Among other titles, he has authored 'Fourth Industrial Revolution and Bangladesh' and '50 Years of Bangladesh Economy.'

FAIZ AHMAD TAIYEB

According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics' (BBS) Labour Force Survey (LFS) 2022, the size of the country's workforce as of 2022 is 71 million, up from 61 million in 2016-17. Considering this growth, it is fair to ask: can the BBS prove this on the employment contract issue? The answer is no. Can the BBS relate this to the increase in income tax return filings? What about the salary account or payroll increase in the banking sector? What are the positive correlations of this data with other economic indicators?

As per the LFS 2022, agriculture is still the main employment generator despite declining GDP share, now 11.7 percent (FY2022) dropping from 13.6 percent (FY2017), while employment share has increased to 45.33 percent (2022) from 40.6 percent (2016-17). The industry's GDP share increased to 35.3 percent (FY2022) from 32.7 percent (FY2017), but its employment share declined to 17.02 percent from 20.4 percent. What a bizarre correlation of statistical data!

This simply indicates that either the GDP or the LFS data – or both – could have been manipulated. It also means a critical structural shift of

Economic Review 2020, the service sector's contribution to the GDP is 51.29 percent. Per the latest BBS data, the service sector employs 37.65 percent of the workforce, down from 39 percent previously. The BBS has to find positive correlations for this as well, especially with the local, foreign and joint venture investment proposals registered with the Bangladesh Investment Development Authority (BIDA), given that local and foreign investments are currently more inclined towards the service sector.

According to another BBS survey published in 2022, titled the Survey of Manufacturing Industry, nearly 450,000 people joined employment in the manufacturing sector between FY2011 and FY2019. The BBS data shows industrial sector growth of more than 10 percent and manufacturing sector growth of about 12.5 percent in two years, even amid the Covid-19 pandemic. With this tremendous growth, how does manufacturing employment experience a sharp decline in the new BBS report – down from 20.4 percent to 17.02 percent? Which survey is correct, then?



ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

The fact is, owing to Covid-induced unemployment as well as continuous price hikes of energy and commodities due to high inflation, a large number of people have moved to the villages as they are no longer able to afford the living costs in the cities. This migrant labour force has been shown as employed in the BBS survey. This is not acceptable.

employment from industry towards agriculture. Can this shift be backed with any policy reform and sectoral restructuring? A labour force shift towards agriculture is impossible when industrial growth is the fastest. The industrial growth of nine percent caused a loss of 350,000 jobs, while 5.1 percent growth in the service sector created almost three million jobs, according to the survey.

This is not the only anomaly emerging out of the BBS statistics. According to the Bangladesh

The unemployment rate sees a positive trend, dropping to 3.6 percent in 2022 from 4.2 percent in 2016-17 – another absurd statistic. The BBS number of unemployed people in the country is 2.63 million, which was 2.7 million in 2016-17. Many have been laid off from their jobs during the growing economic crisis, so unemployment has risen, especially during the pandemic. Even now, as the Russia-Ukraine war continues, the taka's devaluation of more than 20 percent against the US

dollar, import ban, and the line of credit (LC) crisis, there is a stagnation in employment. Due to the ongoing power and energy crisis, production of major industries has fallen by 25-50 percent, according to a media report. Hence the BBS survey data is highly inconsistent with reality.

The BBS reference to the ILO definition of employment – at least one hour of work in a week – is inappropriate for Bangladesh, because it cannot prove weekly one-hour “wage” registration. In the West, almost every white-collar job is registered, so they count on such wage payment to measure pseudo-unemployment; it's not the basis of counting unemployment rate. In Bangladesh, one is considered employed even if he or she does not get paid for productive work. This does not make any sense, because there is no criteria to measure this production; 89 percent of the informal labour sector does not have wage registration.

The ILO definition considers

the effective value of labour, i.e. on the basis of whether it is possible to cover costs with income from a 40-hour week. Hence, the BBS data on unemployment is seriously questionable as the survey did not include the effective price-based definition. Such data will create confusion and misguide the government's employment policies.

In the 2018 BCS preliminary exam, there were more than 200 applicants per position on average, with over five million young people applying for jobs in just six government sectors. On average, nearly 900 applicants contested for a position in the Department of Narcotics Control, and 1,400 in the Department of Food. In the last few BCS exams, nearly 32,000 educated individuals were “BCS unemployed” even though they passed the exams. According to a 2019 survey by Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), around 27 percent of SSC graduates in the country are unemployed – so are 28 percent of HSC graduates, 36

percent of graduates, and 34 percent of postgraduates; 33.19 percent of the educated population was unemployed.

The fact is, owing to Covid-induced unemployment as well as continuous price hikes of energy and commodities due to high inflation, a large number of people have moved to the villages as they are no longer able to afford the living costs in the cities. This migrant labour force has been shown as employed in the BBS survey. This is not acceptable.

According to Dr Birupaksha Paul, former chief economist of the Bangladesh Bank, “No country has as poor quality data as Bangladesh. It may sound awkward, but the truth is the bureau's data is of the lowest quality.” Be it the per capita income, GDP calculation, inflation measurement, inflation adjustment in GDP and wages, population, reserve counting or employment data – in every indicator, there are traces of data manipulation. The per capita income is calculated by dividing the

country's annual gross income by its population. The BBS has been accused of understating population and inflating the average per capita income.

Childbirth and population growth rates do not correlate with school enrolment. In many cases, BBS data cannot be correlated with other data sets. It is not correlated to the country's domestic and foreign investment flows, inflation, employment, international recessions and booms. It is not related to the rise and fall in fuel prices, agricultural production, and natural disasters. If this continues, national policies will not be effective as they are formulated typically based on BBS data.

There is a criticism that while numerical growth in the data better reflects government development indicators, the BBS data tends to go steadily upwards in a stairwell pattern. And where decreasing numerical values mean improvement, BBS data continues to descend like a staircase. This mystery needs to be unravelled.

A promise that rings hollow

FROM PAGE 1

that the law was being abused in certain cases, and that a six-member team has already been formed to work on addressing some of the discontent centring it.

He said this on December 30, 2021, at an event organised at the Jatiya Press Club by the Overseas Correspondent Association, Bangladesh (OCAB).

The team, he had said, comprises representatives from relevant ministries, including law, information and communication technology, and home, adding that it was formed a year ago, when the minister spoke to the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

Anisul had further said the team is chaired by the secretary of the Legal and Parliamentary Division, and includes officials from the ministries of foreign affairs, home, the ICT Division, and the Law and Justice Division.

He had added that the team has been engaged with a similar one formed by the UN body to find whether enforcement of the DSA had led to any violations of human rights.

The minister had mentioned this committee again in February, while speaking at a seminar organised by International Centre for Not-for-Profit Law and Counterpart International in the capital's Pan Pacific Sonargaon Hotel.

“We have formed a committee, along with the OHCHR, composed of officers from the law ministry, foreign ministry, home ministry and ICT Division. The UN office has given some suggestions and the government is looking into those.”

However, insiders within the UN wing recently told The Daily Star that no such committee has been in touch with them in the two years since the minister has announced its formation.

Irene Khan said the same.

“My office has not been contacted; I have not been communicated with regard to forming any committee. I have been in direct communication with the government and I have had no response.”

On the flipside, bodies and rights chiefs of the United Nations have at least four times called for the law to be abolished or fully overhauled.

The most recent was on March 31, when the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk called for an immediate suspension of the DSA until necessary amendments are made.

He said that his office had “provided detailed technical comments to assist with such a revision”.

Türk had made a similar call a month ago, when he said his office has provided lengthy consultations on the law and now calls for it to be amended.

His predecessor Michelle Bachelet had also said that when she came to visit Bangladesh last year, her office too had given recommendations for repeal and revision of certain provisions of the act.

Last year, Special Rapporteur Irene Khan demanded the immediate repeal of the Digital Security Act in a report submitted to the 50th session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva.

The law minister himself had meetings with the United Nations Human Rights Commission in Geneva at least on three occasions since 2019 and had promised amendments.

The first meeting was as early as December 2019, as per the minister's own statement made during an event by the Bangladesh Secretariat Reporters Forum at its secretariat office in June last year.

The second meeting was with the human rights chief in Geneva last year in November. The minister

exchanged views about the best international practices at both those meetings.

The third meeting was as recent as March 21, where Anisul Huq told Volker Türk that the government is committed to working closely with the OHCHR to amend the DSA.

Law Minister Anisul also said that the government is working with a delegation of the European Union on problematic sections of the law.

That is not all.

In the middle of last month, he also met a delegation of citizens, including Dr Iftekharuzzaman, executive director of Transparency International Bangladesh; Barrister Jyotirmoy Barua; Professor CR Abrar and others, where the team explained for two hours why the law needs to go.

While the law minister presents these meetings as progress, the end is nowhere in sight.

Ministers continuously say they have instructed law enforcers to ensure that journalists are not “unnecessarily” harassed under this law.

The law minister had previously declared that journalists “cannot be arrested immediately” after a case has been filed.

Speaking at the OCAB press conference, he had said, “No journalist can be taken to jail as long as the investigation is not completed, even if there is an allegation under the Digital Security Act. If any case is filed against any journalist under the Digital Security Act, it will go to a cell of the ICT Act, 2006. The case will be accepted if the cell in its investigation finds any merit in the lawsuit.”

That such assurances are all just talk can be seen from the fact that Prothom Alo's Savar correspondent Shamsuzzaman Shams was picked up from his home first, and then charged in a DSA case nearly 20 hours later.

Similarly, Naogaon's land officer Sultana Jasmine, albeit not a journalist, was arrested, injured in custody and was mere hours away from death, when a DSA case was lodged against her.

Even Anisul Huq himself said the law was misused here.

The damage, however, is already done, and Jasmine is dead.

Special Rapporteur Khan said that the ones implementing the law, such as law enforcers, need tight, clear instructions, which this law does not provide, leaving broad scopes for abuse.

For example, while the law does not codify the law minister's assurances that all arrests will be pre-vetted, it does allow the law enforcers to conduct arrests on the basis of “suspicion that a crime will occur” without any check and balance.

“This [the DSA] is an example of using the courts to chill freedom of expression. This is a measure to intimidate journalists into silence by bringing charges against them and then prolonging the case,” said Khan.

This willful procrastination is costing Jagannath University student Khadijatul Kubra the precious days of her student life.

Khadija was hauled off to jail for hosting a Facebook webinar, where a guest speaker made contentious “anti-government” remarks.

She herself, however, had actually not uttered a word of the sentences which the police took issue with, and prosecuted her for.

Sued as an “adult” at the age of 17, Khadija has been in jail for nine months already.

Neither her incarceration, nor the pursuit of her release gets the nation riled the way a journalist under arrest does, and while the government dawdles over amending the law, this university freshman will be the forgotten casualty of the process.

Rift feared because of ‘an outsider’

FROM PAGE 1

central organising secretary Misbah Uddin Siraj and Sylhet city unit Vice-President Asad Uddin Ahmed, General Secretary Zakir Hossain and Joint Secretary ATMA Hasan Jebul.

Besides, Kamran's son and city unit's Organising Secretary Arman Ahmed Shiplu, and Joint Secretary and city councillor Azadur Rahman Azad are also prominent names.

When the local leaders were preparing for the polls, Anwaruzzaman Chowdhury, joint secretary of the AL's United Kingdom unit, returned to Bangladesh on January 22 and claimed to have received a “special message” from the party high-ups regarding the party ticket.

After much speculation and turmoil, 11 AL leaders bought nomination forms earlier this month. The AL Nomination Board last Saturday selected Anwaruzzaman.

Though never involved in the AL politics in the city, Anwaruzzaman was a nomination seeker for the Sylhet-2 constituency in the last two national elections.

Several senior AL leaders said Anwaruzzaman was not nominated for the constituency as former parliamentarian Shafiqur Rahman Chowdhury, also president of Sylhet district unit, was also an aspirant.

Notably, both the Chowdhurys have a business based in the UK and keep close acquaintance with top AL leaders.

Because of their rivalry, the party left the seat to Jatiya Party in both elections.

With Anwaruzzaman's mayoral nomination, the row over Sylhet-2 has ended but it gave rise to the possibility of a new conflict.

Meanwhile on Sunday, after returning to Sylhet after a 14-day London tour, Ariful Haque

Choudhury said his party BNP will not participate in the city election but he will honour citizens' wishes.

According to several BNP leaders, Ariful secured a signal from BNP's acting chairperson Tarique Rahman in London to participate as an independent candidate by resigning from his party post.

Local AL sources say if Ariful opts out, the AL might see a rebel candidate.

Misbah Uddin Siraj, former organising secretary of AL central committee, said, “Every decision draws a reaction. The Awami League is a historic party and when the party decided something, there is nothing to say against it. We vowed to work for the candidate nominated by the party.”

Asked about the discontent within the grassroots, he said, “Awami League is a big political party and that's why there are many aspirants. But they all congratulated me and talked to me positively. I wish to work with everyone.”

While talking to the correspondent, several other aspirants also spoke similarly and said they will work for Boat, the election symbol of AL.

After securing the AL nomination, Anwaruzzaman landed in Sylhet from Dhaka yesterday afternoon.

Asked about the discontent within the grassroots, he said, “Awami League is a big political party and that's why there are many aspirants. But they all congratulated me and talked to me positively. I wish to work with everyone.”