

Workers are right to decry poor wages

Authorities should take sensible steps to restore normalcy

We're deeply troubled by the continuing RMG wage crisis that, in the absence of mitigating measures, has seen both owners and workers pushed to opposite extremes. The workers' protests—which started after factory owners' representatives at the minimum wage board proposed a wage of Tk 10,400 against the demand for Tk 20,393 by workers' representatives—rumbled on through Thursday, too, as agitating workers demonstrated in various places in Gazipur and Ashulia. On their part, many owners responded by closing factories, with the number of such factories reaching 421 by Thursday afternoon, as per an estimate by *Prothom Alo*. In Dhaka's Mirpur area, where there are around 235 factories, a good number of them have been closed, too.

Such closures have a direct bearing on the workers, not to mention the health of the industry itself. Under Section 13(i) of the labour law, which the BGMEA decided to impose on Wednesday, workers do not get paid if they do not work. The provision also allows owners to withhold payment if workers participate in "illegal" strikes. We must say that while we do not condone violence, we do not believe in countering extremes with extremes either. It only begets more resentment, which will further destabilise the industry. Of course, most protesting workers just want their legitimate grievances to be taken seriously, and have nothing to do with violence or vandalism. The solution, therefore, lies in addressing their concerns by fixing a minimum wage in line with the present market reality.

While the minimum wage board still has some time to fix a new wage structure, we suggest they expedite it. At the moment, the minimum pay is Tk 8,000, which was set five years ago. Owners have said that there is room for discussion on their initial offering, and that the workers' side will also be expected to lower their figure. While that may be how bargaining works, owners must keep in mind that their workers, despite being the engine that drives this industry and our economy in general, are suffering disproportionately from the cost-of-living crisis currently facing Bangladesh. So, they must significantly improve their offer.

The onus to make the necessary funding available—and do right by their employees—is on the factory owners. In any case, the authorities must ensure that the ongoing crisis is resolved peacefully and judiciously.

Make good use of our IT sector

More efforts needed to increase and diversify IT exports

Bangladesh has witnessed an impressive growth in the export of IT-related services and products recently. Two years ago, our IT export earnings crossed the half-billion mark. This is proof that this sector has enormous potential which, if utilised properly, can earn us a huge amount of foreign exchange.

However, the pace of this growth seems to have slowed down. According to the latest data from the Export Promotion Bureau, the first month of the current fiscal year (2023-24) saw a 3.37 percent year-on-year growth in IT exports. That means, our July 2023 exports fell short of the strategic growth target of 12.63 percent that the government had set for the month. Sector insiders say this could be the result of a decline in work orders since companies around the world had to downsize their costs on technologies due to the ongoing economic crisis.

This appears to be a continuation of the dip seen in our export earnings last year. According to our report, our IT exports slipped in FY2023 for the first time in five years, the earnings shrinking by 7.42 percent, failing to reach the government's target of \$597 million for the year.

This may be just a blip in the journey of our IT export growth. But we do urge the authorities to look into ways to reverse the growth trajectory right away, especially if they want to meet the government's IT export earning target of \$5 billion by 2025. We know that the government has a number of initiatives underway to facilitate the growth of the sector. Those initiatives may require a re-assessment, and new initiatives may be needed to get us back on track. We urge our policymakers to start working to this end post-haste. We also must expand the range of high-quality services to offer to the world. More importantly, the government must invest into developing a high-skilled IT workforce that can not only provide world-class services to companies overseas, but to businesses at home as well.

30 YEARS OF LEADING THE DAILY STAR

Let's bring more pride to journalism



THE THIRD VIEW

Mahfuz Anam
is the editor and publisher
of The Daily Star.

MAHFUZ ANAM

It is only due to the unstinting support of the readers that my "editorship journey" became possible. Thanks are also due to the patrons and advertisers who helped us reach the crucial financial viability without which no independent newspaper can survive. I pay my highest respects to the enlightened, honest and ethical Board of Directors who had the foresight to see the need for an independent English daily in the country and allow it the editorial independence that it needed in order to gain public credibility.

After 51 years of journalism (I joined *The Bangladesh Observer* perhaps in May 1972) and 30 years of editorship at *The Daily Star*, I have only this to say to my younger colleagues: be proud—not arrogant—about being a journalist, and work hard to bring more pride to our profession. Let our pride work to make the public prouder of our profession.

The reason I am insisting on feeling proud is that our profession is meant for the welfare of society. We serve nobody but the people, and we bow to no power, no wealth, no influence,



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

As I look back, I feel fortunate about how things turned out. But at the same time, I feel deeply disappointed that no government, even and especially after the return of democracy in 1991, could see the merit in having an independent media, though examples stood strewn all over that it is only through a vibrant and critical media that the economic advancement of a country can be sustained.

and no dictates but that of the truth. Just as a soldier joins their profession knowing that the calling includes laying down their life for the country, so too we join our profession fully aware that we may have to undergo all sorts of harassment, insults, assault on reputation, punishment, prison terms, and sometimes even death—an eventuality which is on the rise—to serve our readers. However, a soldier's need for sacrifice comes only when their country is at war or in a serious internal crisis; a journalist facing harassment and punishment is an everyday affair.

With vested quarters in pivotal positions and laws against the free media on the rise, harassment is being wrapped up in a facade of legality and being delivered to journalists daily. Yet, at *The Daily Star*, we commit ourselves to setting the best example of our profession and thereby gain the respect and trust of our readers—regardless of the consequences.

But however bright our past may be, there is an urgent need to further strengthen public confidence in journalism. We need to work harder,

question power more effectively, produce more investigative stories, stand beside the public when their rights are being denied, fight against the hoarders who manipulate the prices of essentials, reveal corruption that pushes up the costs of vital projects, expose those who contribute to the flight of capital, and those who wilfully default on bank loans. In short, we must hold everyone who harms public interest accountable.

Our readers, viewers, advertisers, and patrons must see more examples of credible, fearless and honest journalism so that they can take pride in our work. We must never forget that our only strength is public support. We can face all the onslaught of the government, of the corrupt, of the powerful only with credibility and public goodwill. This can only be achieved through honesty, professionalism, and courageous journalism. We should never be motivated by grudges, arrogance, self-interest, rivalry, and hatred against any institution or individual. As we succeed, we need to watch out for any influx of new "friends," whose sudden appreciation for us may not always be driven by altruism.

On Wednesday, my colleagues honoured me by celebrating 30 years of my stewardship of this paper. Upon the untimely death of our founding editor-publisher, Syed Mohammed Ali-SM Ali for most, and Ali Bhai for us—I was given the chance to lead this paper by the Board of Directors of Mediaworld, the owning company of the paper.

The challenge was enormous, and replacing a man of Ali Bhai's stature was unimaginable. I had neither his knowledge nor his experience, and nothing comparable in terms of leadership qualities, exposure or confidence to replace him. My only strengths were commitment and honesty of purpose. I was determined to give Bangladesh its best English

daily in terms of journalistic and technological excellence, but more so in terms of speaking truth to power. And for that, I was willing to put all my energies and intelligence—mainly common sense—to work. My other advantage was having a very supportive family, especially my wife, who stood by me through the toughest period, when I even had to

I definitely am not—can run a newspaper without a team that is similarly committed to it as himself or herself. It has been my tremendous good fortune to have had some of the most talented, committed, and enthusiastic colleagues one can imagine. They were creative, hungry for stories, and relentless in their pursuit of good ones. It is well-known

borrow money from her to pay my staff.

The element most conducive to the paper's initial growth was the political environment. With the Shahabuddin-led interim government running the show from December 6, 1990 onwards, *The Daily Star*, born within the year, on January 14, 1991, enjoyed the full freedom that the death of an autocratic government usually opens up. An early action of the interim government was to cancel all those provisions of the Special Powers Acts that dealt with controlling the press, including cancelling a newspaper's licence. Thanks to Justice Shahabuddin, no law existed in Bangladesh at that moment that could be used to shut down any newspaper.

As the nation prepared for the first truly free and fair election following the fall of autocracy, the main political parties were all busy preparing their respective manifestos, for which they sought publicity. This gave the media a chance to hold political parties, and politicians themselves, accountable for their actions—a role that must be played by the press in a democracy. Justice Shahabuddin's government gave a great impetus to democracy, and created the right environment for the rebirth of the free media after a decade and a half of military and quasi-military dictatorship. It was in that environment that *The Daily Star* was born.

We started off with great enthusiasm and promise. With Ali Bhai leading us, all eyes were on *The Daily Star*. But our first shock was to discover how slow our growth was. While we budgeted for a break-even period of three years, it took us seven years to get there. What we realised was that newspaper readers were extremely loyal, and it took us proving our superiority in many ways and over many years to convince a reader to switch to our paper, even when the competition was rudderless.

No editor, however gifted—and

that "sources" are the biggest assets for any reporter, and some of mine had a huge treasure of them. One of my biggest sources of pride while leading this paper over the last 30 years is that I have never received a single complaint questioning the integrity of my colleagues, even from those who stood exposed by our reporting. This is all the more creditable, given how the overall atmosphere is corrupt.

However, what bothered me immeasurably, as I ran *The Daily Star*, was the political divide that split our profession—something that is not confined to us alone. How can we expect our readers and viewers to accept our objectivity when we ourselves get carried away by our affiliations? Of course, every citizen can and should have their own political preferences. But to allow that to overtake our professional ethos is quite unacceptable. Unfortunately, this has been allowed to happen.

A similar fate has overtaken our editorial institution. The objectivity and professionalism of every credible media institution lies in the office of the editor. It is the editor who must not only guide his or her team, but also protect them from pressures and threats. In this regard, many of us fail our teams as we shamelessly display our bias in exchange for personal gains from the powers that be. The institution of the editor lies at the heart of the development of a credible newspaper and, at the end of the day, its success determines the paper's own public acceptability.

As I look back, I feel fortunate about how things turned out. But at the same time, I feel deeply disappointed that no government, even and especially after the return of democracy in 1991, could see the merit in having an independent media, though examples stood strewn all over that it is only through a vibrant and critical media that the economic advancement of a country can be sustained.

How sign language can bring about change

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RAIYANA AHAMED

Let's get this straight first: disabilities should not leave a person disadvantaged. Rather, societal practices must be modified to facilitate people with disabilities, whether they be mental or physical.

One specific group of people with disabilities, those whose

hearing is impaired, are frequently excluded from daily activities. Unable to join in conversations, they feel isolated, voiceless, and socially ostracised. All this may result in depression and stress. This is where the importance of sign language comes in.

Sign language is basically a visual and manual communication system used by the deaf. Sign language is not universal, as people from different countries use different gestures to communicate;

there are 300 distinct sign languages. According to the World Federation of the Deaf, there are 72 million hearing-impaired individuals, and among them, 80 percent live in developing countries.

To increase public awareness of the value of sign language to ensure the rights of the hearing-impaired,



READERS' VOICE

the UN General Assembly observes September 23 as the International Day of Sign Languages and the last week of September as International Week of the Deaf. In Bangladesh, February 7 is observed as Bangla Sign Language Day. These occasions offer a special chance to support and preserve the cultural diversity and linguistic uniqueness of all sign language users.

Bangla Sign Language is legally recognised by Persons with Disabilities Rights and Protection Act, 2013. Since 2009, BTV has been using Bangla sign language after official orders. Since then, only two channels have had sign language interpreters.

Clearly, this is not enough, and all this leads to one question: why should we know sign language? The answer is, to empower the deaf community. To reach this goal, the government along with

NGOs can open district-based community clubs where people with hearing impairment and other communities can meet and exchange thoughts. A sign language instructor will be there to teach sign languages. Such an initiative will also facilitate job opportunities for the hearing-impaired community. All this will help them and their families, and people in general, communicate with each other effectively, create awareness and disrupt stereotypes.