

## **Trade Union Movement in Bangladesh:** *Issues, Agenda and Legislation*

**Mesbahuddin Ahmed**

### **Background**

Trade Union Movement in Bangladesh has very long past. The beginning of labour agitation in India was in Bengal. In 1860 in Bengal a noted dramatics and social reform Dinbandhu Mitra along with some of his journalist friends protested the inhuman working condition and hardship of cultivation workers. He wrote a drama title Nil Darpan. A drama about slave like behavior to worker by nil cultivator. drama had created a great impact in the mind of people and social elite. people could realise deplorable and inhuman condition of workers. This was beginning of labour movement. Some years latter, in 1875 Sarobji Shapuri in Bombay made a protest against poor working conditions of workers and brought to the notice of the Secretary of State for India. The first Factory Commission was, thereafter, appointed in 1875 and as a result the Factories Act, 1881 was enacted. But this Act did not reflect the aspiration of workers. There was no provision about child labour and women workers. Another Factory Commission was appointed in 1884. In the same year a conference of the Bombay (presently Mumbai) factory workers organised by N.M. Lokhande had demanded a complete day of rest on Sunday, half an hour recess each working day, working hours between 6.30 a.m. to sunset, the payment of wages not later than 15<sup>th</sup> of the month, and the compensation for injuries. In 1889, in Bombay, workers of Spinning and Weaving Mills demanded Sunday as holiday, regularity in the payment of wages and adequate compensation in case of accident. \*But, a further organise form trade union activities in this region, India sub-continent has started beginning of 18<sup>th</sup> century. The trade union movement was than, generally led by philanthropists and social reformers who organised workers and protected them against inhuman working conditions. One of them was Anusuyaben Sarabhai. She was daughter of a Mill Agent in Ahmedabad. She had visited England and seen for herself the trade union activities there. After return back to India in 1914, she began working among textile workers and poorer sections of the society in Ahmedabad. She established schools and welfare centers and worked for the betterment of the workers and poor people. In 1917, the workers of Ahmedabad Mills resorted to a strike in demand of an increase in wages. Anusuyaben was among the leadership in that strike. Ahmedabad textile workers organised themselves in a trade union under her leadership December 4, 1917. The strike was in success and workers got a wage increase. The first regular Union was formed in Ahmedabad in 1920 for the Throstle Department Workers. This was followed by different trade or craft base Unions. The same year another trade union was formed in Madras in the name of Madras Labour Union. This was formed by B.P. Wadia under the leadership and guidance of Dr. Mrs. Annie Besant. But the growth of trade union movement got momentum at the end of the First World War. The growth of industry and trade had rise following the War. Many trade unions were formed throughout India. There were a number of strikes during 1919 to 1922. Russian Bolshevik Revolution reactant in India, as it did elsewhere. The Bolshevik triumph demonstrated that an organised working-class movement could seize state power. The communist movement

in India organised the workers in trade union with object: first, to secure immediate goals such as higher salaries and better working conditions; and ultimate goal to build a long-range movement that would topple the bourgeois state and free India from British rule. This speeded up the pace of the trade union movement. In 1920 All-India Trade Union Congress was formed. This was initiated by forces of different ideology. The communist and also nationalist forces were there. Later after independence of India the labour leader associated with National Congress Party left AITUC and formed the Indian National Trade Union Congress in 1947.

The colonial ruler finally introduced Indian Trade Union Act, 1926. Before that the Indian workers were denied the fundamental rights of freedom of association. The Indian Trade Union act, 1926 was enacted with a view “ to provide for the registration of Trade Unions and in certain respects to define the law relating to registered trade unions.”

The right to strike and lock-out were ultimately recognised in India indirectly under the provisions of the Indian Trade Dispute Act, 1929. The act provided for *ad hoc* Conciliation Board and Court of Inquiry for the settlement of trade disputes. The Act prohibited strikes and lock-outs in public utility services and general strikes affecting community as a whole.

In Pakistan era there were three main national centers in the then East Pakistan – East Pakistan Federation of Labour, Mazdoor Federation and communist led Purbo Pakistan Sramik Federation. Beside these central federations, Revolutionary Socialist Party (R.S.P.) led Chotkal Sramik Federation had great significant role to organise jute mills workers. The jute mills workers strikes in 1964 and 1967 were launched by this industrial federation.

Ever since the creation of Pakistan, quite a number of Labour Policies were announced by almost each Government – the most democratic one was Air Marshal Noor Khan’s Policy declared in 1969. When Industrial Relations Ordinance 1969 was created after amalgamating Trade Unions Act and Industrial Disputes Act. For the first time Minimum Wages Ordinance 1969 was created fixing minimum wages for unskilled workers. These were in back-drop of mass-upsurge against Pakistani military ruler Gen. Ayub Khan and *Ghearo* movement of workers to realise their demands. The mass upsurge – student, worker and political movement combined force Gen. Ayub to step down and the new military ruler had promised to give democracy, free and fair parliament elections and trade union rights. By these *Ghearo* movement old trade union leadership was up-rooted and a new, more political oriented leadership has emerged. The three new national centers were formed, Jatiyo Sramik League, Trade Union Kendra and Sangjukta Sramik Federation of three political parties respectively Awami League, CPB and Samjbadhi Dal (former RSP). Various political parties attempted to gain strength from workers and their organisation. This became of more unions and fragmentation of trade union movement thus started. At final phase of liberation struggle workers and trade union movement has played a great role. In March 1971, civil disobedience movement against Pakistani Military ruler, trade unions had played an important role, virtually they took over the management and executed the order what they received from Bangobandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

After independence of Bangladesh, government has to take over the industries and establishments those were abandoned when the owners left Bangladesh for Pakistan. After independence the ownership structure in the industrial sector was:

Pakistani Private Ownership:	47%
E.P.I.D.C:	34%
Bangladeshi Owners:	18%
Foreign Owners:	1%

Abandoned industries and E.P.I.D.C. together was 81% and was taken over in March, 1972 of which 77% were kept nationalised and the remaining 4% were offered for sale.

These taken over industries were put under different sector corporation.

Moreover Jute, Textile, Sugar and Financial Institutions and big industries were nationalised. Suddenly trade unions found them they had to play a big role to manage and run the industries and establishments in absence of owner and manager for which they were not prepared for. Eventually, though for time being they become managers of many industries and establishments. Many self-seekers had also join with trade unions to seek personal gain. In 1972, Bangladesh adopted the Industrial Relations Ordinance 1969 with a view to regulating labour relations and disputes in the country. The May Day, 1<sup>st</sup> May was declare as national holiday.

An Industrial Worker's Wage Commission was constituted in 1973 to fix up wage level and other benefits for the industrial workers in public sector. The State-owned Manufacturing Industries Workers(Terms and Conditions of Service) Act was enacted to implement the wage scale and fringe benefits determined by the wage commission.

Restriction and ban on Trade Union Activities:

After liberation of Bangladesh workers have enjoyed a great deal of freedom and trade union rights. The most of the plant level trade unions had joined with the ruling party trade union center Jatiyo Sramik League. Many new plant level trade unions were registered. The trade union was a powerful menace to get authority on factories, mills and establishment abandon by previous owner and subsequently taken over by the government. The political local elite had joined in trade union to control and have benefits of the taken over industries and establishments. Traditionally most of the workers were from outside of locality and from different districts and now local people want to have job there for industrial workers were better paid then informal sector. There were many riots between locals and non-locals in different industrial districts. The worst situation had arise at Chittagong and Tongi industrial districts. The local ruling party leadership to grab the unions there had started agitation against non-local workers for the trade union leadership were from non-locals. To gain control over trade union the local elite gains manifold. The first is they can buy the products in mill rate and sell in market in high rate, second they can supply raw materials to mill in high rate and third by inducting their

own people as workers and employees they can have control over the establishment and in local politics. The cotton yarn, fabric, jute product, butter oil and many other products mill rate and market rate differ very much. One could become millionaire overnight by having a dealership of Kohinoor Chemical Company, a cosmetic and toiletries industries or have an allotment of quota for cotton yarn from Muslin Cotton Mills of Kapasia or quota of allotment of matches from Dhaka Match Factory of Postogola.

### **Agenda and issues of Trade Union Movement**

There was a shift of government in August 1975, which was followed by a shift in economic policy as well. The socialistic policy of the Mujib government was abandoned and privatisation process has started, which were initiated by the succeeding government of Ziaur Rahman. Privatisation started with disinvestment and denationalisation of state owned enterprises (SOE). All the government till now continued the same economic policy.

The present Awami League government in order to make the privatisation process of SOE's faster formed a new institution called The Privatisation Board, which is entrusted with the responsibility of privatising SOE's identified for privatisation. Among disinvested industries a government survey from ministry of industries has found a few of them only running fully, some are partially and a large number are not functioning at all. Work force in those industries has drastically reduced. The leading sectors like jute and textile where traditionally trade union movement was strong got weakened due to loss of job of their members.

To protect job and trade union rights trade unions got united and has formed Sramik Karmachari Oikya Parishad (SKOP) in 1983 and launched a series of action programme to press their demands including job security, higher wages, trade union rights and others. In 1984, government and SKOP came on agreement that a wages commission will be set up to recommend a new wage structure. But it was implemented only in public sector. Other important issue was the job security of disinvested industries and no further disinvestment without consulting workers. This part of agreement was also not respected by government. There was also agreement that the government will form a commission to draft a democratic labour legislation.

### *National Minimum Wage*

At present the main agenda of Trade Union movement is a National Minimum Wage. But there is tremendous opposition from employer side about fixing a national minimum wage. They argue, it should be sector wise. There are many sector employer has no ability to pay such minimum wage. Trade Unions argue that National Minimum Wage argue that Minimum Wage has to be looked upon as the basic right to provide minimum requirement for leading a healthy working and social life. This will have to be uniform for all. They further argue that the labour is not a commodity. It is both, input into production as well as the object of production. Minimum wages are signal to society that this is what is expected and nobody will fall under. It is also very important incentive for business to upgrade for certain wage structure forces competitive high roads by

cutting wages and degrading condition of working. Trade Unions are also demand that there should be regular readjust of wage with the ratio of inflation rate of money.

### *Violation of trade union rights*

From the beginning of 80's a new non-traditional industry, Garments Industries has emerged. And now the growth of employment there nearly 13 lakh and work force mostly are women and not organised in trade union. The employer does not allow worker to form them trade union. Ministry of Labour is suspiciously silent about violation of trade union rules. The government is also forbidden trade union activities in EPZ (Export Processing Zone). Now, government is having pressure from USA and also from ILO to open up trade union activities in EPZ. Industries in the EPZ's are allowed duty-free imports of raw materials and other components, they do not have to pay excise duty on local goods and are eligible for tax holidays. The idea is to create an environment that is conducive to facing competition in the export market. So that investors will attract to invest here and it will increase employment, revenue and technology transfer. All most all EPZ's elsewhere offer similar package to foreign investor. Now questions are these, how much local employment is being generate by these industries in EPZ's and how much transfer of technology has taken place in reality from these industries? How much port and other charges we have received from them, how much profit sharing we could make from them? Till now existing two EPZ employ less then one lakh workers and most of the industries here are textile, shoe and other small scale industries where small number of workers are employed and no high technology is adopted. But we are offering these investors remarkable amount of land, power supply, infrastructure facilities etc. The question is also why should trade union activities prohibited there? The government can not restrict human rights of its citizen for the cost of foreign investment? Moreover, this is not the only issue that investors needs. Peace and non-disturbance in worker relation will certainly attract the foreign investors, but the foreign investors are also need congenial atmosphere, infrastructure like banking, communication support and facilities, those are more important to them than the benefit of no trade union activities.

### **Labour Legislation**

From the period of the British colonial rule, till now Bangladesh has many labour laws, rules and resolutions, legislated and declared by government in different time and period. Often many laws and rules contradict each other.

Example can be site about definition of labour, is not same every law, it differs in employment of labour (standing order) Act 1965, Industrial Resolution Ordinance 1969, Shops and Establishment Act 1965, Factories Act 1965, Wages Act 1936, Workmen's Compensation Act 1923.

IRO, Section 4 (B) provides that President and General Secretary of a registered trade union's workplace cannot be transferred from one place to another but in the Public

Corporation (Management and Coordination) Ordinance 1986 provides a worker of Government Corporation (Autonomous body) can be transferred.

Bangladesh inherit as many 44 labour laws from British and Pakistan period. In 1965 five core labour laws like The Factories Act, The Trade Union Act, Industrial Dispute Act, The Shops and Establishment Act and The Employment of Labour (Standing Orders) Act were repealed and re-enacted. Again in accordance with the Labour Policy of 1969, the Industrial Relations Ordinance 1969 was promulgated repealing the Trade Union Act and Industrial Dispute Act of 1965. There were several amendments in IRO time to time review of the labour laws and regulatory frame work apparently reveals that Bangladesh has quite an impressive series of laws for protection of the workers relating to working environment, working conditions, compensation for accident, disability, death, discharge, dismissal, termination, retrenchment, lay-off, lock-out, and maternity benefits.

A labour law commission was formed in 1992 to draft a unified comprehensive single labour code. The commission submitted the report to the government in June 1994, the commission report is not yet published and not inacted in Law. The trade unionists those were member of the commission had express their disapproval on report and have raise objection on certain clause of the report which will restrict the trade union activities.

Some articles of the proposed laws severely restrict the rights of workers to exercise their rights to associate and to organise. The law will destroys most of the existing trade unions and makes it very difficult to form new unions. Existing trade unions will not be recognised and will need to be registered under the new rule of the draft law. Irony is, it was the demand of trade unions that a Law Commission shall form to make labour law more comprehensive, democratic and protect the rights of workers. Now, Trade Unions have found the proposed law is unfavorable to them and previous laws were better compare to the propose law.

The existing main laws relating to workers are the following:

- The Workman's Compensation Act 1923
- Children (Pledging of labour) Act 1923
- The Payment of Wages Act 1937
- Employer's Liability Act 1938
- The Minimum Wages Ordinance 1961
- The Shops and Establishment Act 1965
- The Employment of Labour (Standing Orders) Act 1968
- The Factories Act 1965
- The Industrial Relations Ordinance 1969

These laws on the whole provide the basis for classification of workers and determine the working conditions applicable to them like leave facilities, payment of wages and other benefits and also ways of termination of employment including procedures for adjudication of grievances.

## **The Structure of Trade Union**

Industrial Relations Ordinance, 1969 (as amended up or date) is intended to regulation trade union activities permits workers to organise themselves into trade unions. The trade union is required to be registered with the Register of Trade Unions. The trade unions in Bangladesh may be divided in structure in to three categories, first is basic trade union – a primary organisation of workers at their working place. The second is the Industrial Federation or trade federation compose of a number of basic trade unions related to the same type of industry, such as Jute Workers Federation, Textile Workers Federation, Garments Workers Federations and third is National Trade Union is federation of basic unions irrespective of job categories. A National Federation may be constituted by two or more basic trade unions irrespectively of the trade. Apart from these there is Craft Union but not have many. This is organised craft wise like Railway Karigar Union, an union of tehncicians of Bangladesh Railway or Biman Cabin Crew union.

Non- employees and non-workers can not be elected to the committees of a basic trade union but can be elected to the committee of Industrial Federation and National Federation but cannot be more than 20% of total number of committee members. Under the rules no unregistered trade union or federation of trade unions can function as trade union. In case there is only one registered trade union in an establishment or a group of establishments, that trade union is deemed to be a collective bargaining agent for that establishment or group, provided it has a minimum membership of one-third of the total member of workers employed in the establishment or group of establishments. In case there are more than one registered trade union, upon receipt of an application from any trade union or management of the establishment, the Register of Trade Unions determine the bargaining agent through secret ballot for a period of two years. But they have to get minimum one-third votes of the total number worker employed in the establishment or group.

There was no restriction before for non-workers to be member of trade union, restriction came when the than military government had amended the Industrial Relations Ordinance on 26<sup>th</sup> July 1980. Tradition and history of trade union of Bangladesh is always being that non-workers took leading role to organise the trade union. It is always by social or political activist who organises the trade union. The neighboring countries of Bangladesh like Sri Lanka, India and others have no restriction on it only proportion of committee members from out side is defined. ILO's conventions also do not have any restriction on outsiders.

Trade union have to submit an annual statement of its income and expenditure, assets and liabilities in the prescribed form to the Register of Trade Unions, the changes of office bearers should also be intimated to the Register of Trade Unions.

A person shall not be entitled to be a member or officer of a trade union formed in any establishment or group of establishments if he is not actually employed or engaged in the establishment or group of establishments.

### *Registration of Trade Union*

For registration of trade union the applicants have to apply to the Joint Director of Labour and Register of Trade Unions with fulfilling certain requirements and procedure. For Industrial and national federation or national unions the Director of Labour and Register of Trade Unions office is responsible for registration. The National Union means those have members throughout the country – such as banks, railway and others.

The trade union executive committee shall be consists of 5 to 30 people depending on its membership. Till 50 members the committee will be consists of 5 persons and 30 persons of committee where are more than 5000 members.

The applicants of union registration have to submit all the application of membership of proposed union in prescribed form and also the register of membership, resolution of the meeting where resolution was taken to form a trade union, list of committee members, list of general members and the constitution of the union along with application. The constitutions should provide the name of the trade union, objects for which the trade union has been established, purpose for which the general fund of a trade union shall be applicable, the maintenance of a list of the members of the trade union, the admission of who shall be person actually or employed in an industry or establishment with which the trade union is connected, the payment of a subscription by members of the trade union, the executive and the other office- bearers of the trade union shall be appointed and removed, the manner in which the rules shall be amended, safe custody of funds and audit, the manner in which the trade union may be dissolved.

The State-owned Manufacturing Industries Workers Ordinance, 1985 restricts collective bargaining in the nationalised sector on certain issues like wages, leave, house rent, conveyance allowance, medical allowance, festival bonus and provident funds. The number of Acts and Ordinances provide that the Industrial Relations Ordinance 1969 shall not apply to the certain establishment.

### **The Employment of Labour (Standing Orders) Act 1965**

The Act covers workers leave and holidays stoppage of work by employers in certain reason, layoff and lockout; procedure for retrenchment, dismissal and settlement of grievances of industrial workers. Beside this Act there are other similar Acts like the Shops and Establishment Act 1965, the Inland Water Transport (Regulation of Employment) Act 1965, the Newspaper Employees (Condition of Service) Act 1974, and the Dock Workers (Regulation Employment) Act 1980. These acts regulate workers and employees of those category of establishments is not obligatory on the part of any shop or commercial or industrial establishment to have its own standing orders under the employment of Labour Act 1965. According to section 3(1) of the Act, any establishment, “may have its own rules regulation employment of workers or any class there of, but no such rules shall be less favorable to any worker other than the provisions of this. So there are flexibility, employers who wish to frame their own rules can do so. They have liberty to add, delete or modify any rules to their needs. But they have to maintain a general standard of uniformity in the terms and conditions of employment of



the workers and conditions of employment in each establishment. The Service Rules or Standing Orders have to be submitting to the Inspector of Factories and Establishment for approval.

The laws discussed above shows a lot of good set of laws in favour of workers. But in practice labour relation is very bad in Bangladesh. One labour leader while commenting on that said it looks like heaven but reality is worse than hell.

Moreover by imposing Essential Service Act the government can ban or suspend all trade union activities, strikes and Bargain.

Under the law all the trade union activities tightly controlled by the Directorate of Labour from the registration of union and to normal union activities like accounts, meetings, strikes etc. thus increased the legal powers of the Ministry of Labour, and simultaneously disempowered the trade unions, since all normal functions and bargaining strength (such as the right to strike etc.) are strictly controlled or even denied. Unions cannot even question management on worker-related issue like worker termination, demotion etc., as all these were considered management's prerogatives Under the Act. This means that management's are given almost absolute control over all labour processes at the workplace. Management prerogatives extended from recruitment, promotion, transfer (except the union executives) and job designation. By thus diminished the possibilities for unions to fight injurious or recrimination of workers by their employers. To seek redress on these grievance, they had to be brought to the chief Factory Inspector or Director of Labour or to the Labour Court.

### **Strength and weakness**

As many 23 central federation till now being registered. No central federation has strength that they can launch nation wide struggle independently. They do not have such organisational or financial resource either. Almost all political party has a trade union. All these except a few trade union, mostly depend on support and financial help from the political party. That is also a reason that the ruling party's trade union center has much more affiliate unions than others. When there is shift of government will be shift in affiliation also. The trade unions here also depends on support from International Trade Union Federation and Foundations. They gets funds from International Trade Union Federation and Foundations for holding seminars, publications and other activities. They get free passage to go abroad to attend seminars and meetings. The foreign visit is so frequent for some trade union leaders that they are almost occupy with arrangements of travel – procure visa, preparing seminar paper and others and left hardly any time to do trade union work.

This become an important aspect of trade union movement here. An example can be sit here, Jatiyo Sramik League, labour wing of Awamy League has recently took affiliation of International Confederation of Trade Union. Formerly it was with former Soviet Union led World Federation of Trade Union. Abolish of Soviet Union and socialist state in eastern Europe WFTU had lost its membership and resource and now not in a position to offer free air ticket for foreign trip and offer hospitality in Hotel

Metropole or Hotel Ukraine in Moscow to its affiliates in developing countries. Though AL chief Sheikh Hasina took personal initiative in the beginning of eighties to get SL affiliated with WFTU, SL did not lost no time to shift to ICFTU.

Though there are mounting pressure for trade union unity from the workers, the trade union movement, initially set up as an extended hand of a political party, continues to function more or less as an extended hand of the political party of its affiliation.

Under the Labour Policy announced by General Ziaur Rahman regime in 1977, the Central Trade Union Federation should registered with the Register and Director Of Labour office. Here is the list of the Central Federation's those were registered from then. The date of registration members are given here, does not mean actual date of foundation of the Federation.

LIST OF TRADE UNION FEDERATIONS REGISTERD AT DIRECTOR OF LABOUR

SL.	Name	Registration No. and Date	Political Affiliation	Int. Affiliation	Remarks
1	Jatiya Sramik Federation	BAJAFE-1 30.08.1977	Bangladesh Samayabadi Dal		
2	Bangladesh Trade Union Kendra	BAJAFE-2 19.10.1977	C P B	WFTU	
3	Bangladesh Sanjukta Sramik Federation	BAJAFE-4 06.07.1978		WCL	Formerly with Sramik-Krishak Samajbadi Dal
4	Bangladesh Tred Union Sangha	BAJAFE-5 27.10.1978			
5	Jatiyo Sramik Jote	BAJAFE-6 04.12.1978		WFTU	Formerly with JSD
6	Bangladesh Jatiyatabadi Sramik Dal	BAJAFE-7 26.04.1979	B N P	ICFTU	
7	Bangladesh Jatiya Sramik League	B-1676 02.10.1973		ICFTU	
8	Bangladesh Sramik Kallayan Federation	BAJAFE-8 15.05.1980	Jamat-E-Islam		
9	Jatio Sramik Federation, Bangleadesh	BAJAFE-9 31.12.1980	Workers Party	WFTU	
10	Bangledesh Trade Union Federation	BAJAFE-12 21.03.1983	Lekhak Shibir		
11	Jatiyo Sramik League	BAJAFE-13 28.04.1983	Awami League	ICFTU	formerly with WFTU
12	Bangledesh Free Trade Union Congress	BAJAFE-16 15.12.1983		1CFTU	
13	Bangladesh Sramik Federation	BAJAFE-17 29.05.1984			
14	Jatiyo Sramik Party	BAJAFE-19 23.03.1980	Jatiyo Party	1CFTU	
15	Bangladesh Jatiya Sramik Forum	BAJAFE-20 23.08.1987			Non-exist
16	Bangladesh Jatiya Sramik Federation	BAJAFE-21 29.09.1987			
17	Samajtantrik Sramik Front	BAJAFE-22 05.12.1988	B S D		
18	Jatiya Sramik Jote, Bangladesh	BAJAFE-23 26.02.1990	J S D		
19	Jatiya Sromik Forum	BAJAFE-24 19.03.1999			Marged with Sramik Party
20	National Trade Union Federation	BAJAFE-25 28.05.1990			
21	National Workers Federation	BAJAFE-26			Marged with

		30.05.1990			BJSD
22	Bangladesh Workers Federation	BAJAFE-27 16.08.1992			

Abbreviation : CPB: Communist Party of Bangladesh

BNP: Bangladesh Nationalist Party

BSD: Bangladesher Samajtantrik Dal

JSD: Jatiyo Samajtantrik Dal

WFTU: World Federation of Trade Unions

ICFTU: International Confederation of Trade Unions

WCL: World Confederation of Labour  
(former World Christian Labour)

## Health Care:

For the workers of Bangladesh do not have separate health care facilities like separate hospital or health insurance for them. The proposed health policy for Bangladesh has recommended to have separate health care system for workers in Bangladesh. Only that the workers and employees in government or private sector gets cash money at the fixed rate of Tk.150 and Tk.200 for medical care with their wages and salary every month. This is so meager it does not help workers when they get sick. Moreover they do not know what to do where to go to get proper medical care. At the primary level of sickness they usually goes to any pharmacy to get some drug. If they are not cured by the drugs given by salesman of drug store they goes to any physician either homeopath or allopathic or kabiraj nearby. In many cases if sickness is serious in nature like cholera, pox, tuberculosis, heart diseases or any mental disorder some patient goes to spiritual healers. When sickness gets more complication then they try to get admission in government hospitals. But the government hospitals are always crammed with over number patient without having connection it is difficult to get admission there. If they are able to get admission in hospital they have to pay for medicine, pathological test and other examination done in private laboratory or clinic. Most cases they have to go at private hospitals, those are expensive. They have to sell their land and other assets if they have any to meet the expenses. Many of them cannot afford such expenses have to die without having proper medical care. Health care are primarily provided by government, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MHFW). Some multisectoral projects in various ministries having health, family planning, nutrition components are also under MHFW. There are also municipalities, municipal corporations, army, police and railway departments which have health programmes. Many NGO'S have also health and family planning programme.

The Directorate of Labour has a wing for family planning and nutrition for workers. There are several workers welfare center runs by Ministry of Labour at different industrial estate to provide emergency medical care, but in reality workers do not get any medical care there. Usually workers also do not visit there for they think it is useless to go there. Doctors and welfare officers are supposed to be there but hardly they can be found, if they are at all available in center but medicine and equipment are not there. There are no need to explain a proper health care not only basic right of a worker but also it helps increase productivity. It will reduce mortality rate and thereby enhance the expectation of life as well as improve the efficiency of labour. It will reduce working days lost for sickness. The workers are also in need of specialised health center where occupational diseases can be cured. A recent study on tannery workers at Hazaribag in Dhaka done by The Society for Environment and Human Development revealed that the average longevity of a worker is below of 50 years. Almost 90 per cent of tannery workers die before they reach the age of 50 due to their unhygienic work environment and lack of proper medical care. About 58.10 per cent of workers suffer from ulcers, 31.28 per cent have high blood pressure and 10.61 per cent suffer with rheumatic fever. Assistant Director of Health Dr. Mohammad Hassan Ali said industrial pollutants, liquid waste and leather dust are the main cause reports publish in Daily Star on 28 February, 2000. Similar case are also with jute and textile workers, suffers from asthma and other breathing related disease from jute and cotton dust. Trade Unions of Bangladesh are always being in demand of separate health care system—clinic, health center and hospitals for workers. If a separate health care system can be developed and it will reduce the pressure on public health services also. Furthermore these will expand the facilities of medical care in the country from generating own resource.

A pilot health insurance project for workers was conceived by German Technical Assistance (GTZ) an autonomous implementing agency of German government for project aid in 1993-94.

While I was catering the idea I found in the beginning the many of us were not very much enthusiastic for this will not provide “cash money to build hospitals or buy ambulances.” The Bangladesh government had also no plan at that stage to have any workers health scheme. It took some time to realise the possibilities and future of this kind of health project. Ministry of Labour and Human Resource had agreed to propose a pilot health insurance project to German Government for their assistance. Even Employers Association’s attitude was positive to the propose project. After long consultation with workers representative and employers, Labour Ministry and GTZ had finally came out with a pilot project scheme The project was intended to start in the second half of 1998 and should cover in its initial phase at least five factories with at least 2,000 workers, predominantly women ad their dependents, approximately 5,000 to 7,000 population. Building on positive experience gained, documented and disseminated and supported by Employer’s Associations including the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association—BGMEA, a substantially wider participation of employers was expected to be achieved still with the first phase of the project.

The project will be jointly implemented by the Ministry of Labour with involvement of related ministries, Employers Association and Trade Union. The idea was tri-partite approach. Provision for health services will be arranged according to their capability, with GOB, private sector or NGO service providers. Technical support will be provided by GTZ, Germany, based on jointly developed annual operational plans and with consideration of local capacity and contribution.

But the project was not materialise due to German government finally did not approve the project. This project could be a good beginning of a workers health scheme. Out of this project a comprehensive larger health scheme could developed, in beginning covering industrial workers and later it could further cover informal sector workers. A example can be sit here news published in a Bengali news paper about a garments industry is being in arrangement with a non-profit health organisation Community Health Service for health service of their workers.

India and Pakistan also have health scheme for workers of industries and in organised sector. My recent visit to Pakistan and India I had experienced with an impressive health care scheme for industrial workers in Punjab province of Pakistan while I was going under study tour on Industrial Relation in Pakistan along with other trade union friend organised by Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies. And this health scheme is funded by employers only. No contribution from the government. Only in initial period of the scheme the government .

provided infrastructure support. The scheme called Employees Social Security Scheme and this was introduce in Pakistan on in 1967 under the provision of Provincial Employee Social Security Ordinance. Under this ordinance the Punjab Employees Social Security Institution came into being. The main objective of PESSI is to provide comprehensive medical cover to the secured workers and work-time injuries. Presently over 4,98,000 workers employed in more than 24000 industrial and commercial establishments and more than 30 lac of their family members are receiving benefits from the scheme. It has 13 local and 14 sub-local office to give service to workers.

The main source of income of PESSI is the Social Security Contribution collected from the notified industries and commercial establishments at a rate of 7% of the wage paid to their workers who are drawing wages up to Rs.3000 per month. The workers once covered under this scheme remains secured even their wages exceed the ceiling of Rs.3000. But in that cases percentage increase in Social Security Contributions against the wage exceeding the ceiling of Rs.3000 is not payable by the employer.

PESSI provides comprehensive medical cover to the workers and their family members including consultation, indoor and outdoor medical treatment, emergency medical care. There are clinic for primary medical care for outdoor patient, small hospitals has bed for 30 to 50 [patient. Large hospitals has more than 100 beds where specialist of medicine, surgery, gynae, TB, pathology,

orthopedic, radiology, cardiology, dentistry etc. Even high-tech medical care like cardiac surgery, dialysis centers are also there. PESSI has 117 ambulances available at different hospitals and primary medical care centres. Every patient admitted to the hospitals are paid diet expenses at the rate of Rs.40 per day. The TB and cancer patients are paid a rate of Rs.50 per day. The scheme is administered by a governing body comprising employers, workers and government

India has also similar health scheme like Pakistan. The workers getting RS.3000 or less are covered by this scheme. It differs state to state about the coverage of scheme. Some states it is covered to all non-seasonal factories using power and employing 10 or more employees and factories not using power but employing 20 or more persons. Seasonal factories, mines and plantations are excluded from the coverage. The scheme provides seven types of coverage, maternity care, benefits for dependence, disablement assistance, funeral expenses and rehabilitation allowance. Except medical care, most of the other benefits are in cash. The ESI scheme is run by the ESI Corporation, comprising representatives of the Central and State governments, the medical profession and the parliament. A Medical Council advises the Corporation on all matters concerning medical care.

Three categories of medical care are provided under the scheme--- restricted medical care, expanded medical care and full medical care. All the insured persons are provided full medical benefits irrespective of whatever the required facilities in Government or other institutions. Family members get restricted or expanded medical care but not full medical care. The non-medical benefits are sickness, disablement and dependence benefit. These are paid in cash as compensation.

The financing of the scheme is mainly through contributions from the employers and employees. The Government of India does not make any contribution but the State governments share the cost of medical benefits to the extent of one-eighth of specified items of expenditure on such benefits. The employer contributes 4 percent of the wages and employees 1.5 to the scheme. The ESIS caters service only in organized industrial sector, it does not provide health security to the large number of workers engaged in informal sector. Furthermore, Indian labour leaders complain that the quality of service offered by the ESIS medical centers is poor.

Mesbahuddin Ahmed  
President  
Jatiyo Sramik Jote  
BANGLADESH