

Role of Employers' Organizations in Industrial Relations in Bangladesh

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Abstract

This paper is a modest attempt to fill a huge gap in knowledge about the role of employers' organizations (EOs) in industrial relations in Bangladesh. It has been prepared basing on both primary and secondary data. Findings of the study indicate that EOs in Bangladesh follow a three-tier structure. In general, they pursue an individualistic tradition. They serve the purpose of their members by acting in different roles like advisory role, representative role, information-provider role, and health-care, labor welfare and community development role. Although inadequate in relation to actual needs, BGMEA, the largest industry level EO in the country has adopted some appreciable labor welfare programs, it might go a long way in serving the interest of the working class if these programs are implemented with real commitment, and EOs in other industrial sectors follow the suit.

Introduction :

Industrial relations is a whole field of relationships that exists because of the necessary collaboration (or otherwise) of men and women in the employment process of an industry (Dale Yoder, 1958, pp. 5-6). The concept of

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industrial relations may be conceived both at micro and macro levels. At the micro level, it refers to the relationship prevailing between employees and management in the day to day working of a particular firm or industry (RAO, 1999, p 490). At the macro level, on the other hand, it is conceived of as the complex of interrelations among (a) workers and their organizations, (b) employers and their organizations, and (c) government (Dunlop, 1958p.viii).

By acting and interacting under unique economic, social, technological and legal contents of any country, the three participants of the industrial relations system develop a peculiar pattern of industrial relations. Depending on the variations in the contextual factors, the nature and form of industrial relations may also vary significantly in the same country from one industry to another, or from one time to another (Khan, 1986, pp, 290-301),

The industrial relations system is largely shaped by the attitudes, value's, and philosophies of the actors participating in the system (Dunlop, 1958, p. 9; Reza, 1963, p. 121). The present paper concentrates on examining the influence and role of employers' organizations in shaping the pattern of industrial relations at macro level in Bangladesh.

Rationale and Objectives of the Study

A review of available literature on industrial relations in the content of Bangladesh reveals that although a lot of research has been done on the topic, almost all of them relate to such issues as industrial conflict (Chowdhury, 1977), dispute resolution (Bhattacharjee, 1982), role of trade unions (Awal, 1986 and Chowdhury, 1999), role of state (Reza. 1963), etc. Until now, not even a single study was undertaken to examine the role of employers' organizations in industrial relations in Bangladesh. Here lies the rationale of the present study.

Specific objectives of the study are:

- To examine whether and to what extent the employers' organizations are organized in Bangladesh.
- To describe the nature and structure of employers' organizations in Bangladesh.
- To identify the general functions performed by the employers' organizations, and the roles played by them in impacting the general condition of industrial relations in Bangladesh.
- To suggest some policy guidelines aiming at better industrial relations in the country, basing on the findings of the study.

Methodology

This study is about the macro-level industrial relations in Bangladesh, and the role of employers' organizations in this context. Because of resource constraints, it was not possible to conduct a comprehensive and systematic investigation on the topic. The study is, therefore, confined to looking at the role of three apex national level employers' organizations and one Dhaka metropolitan city-based employers' organization. The national employers' organizations are Bangladesh Employers' Federation (BEF), Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI), Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) and the metropolitan city-based employers' organization is the Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry (MCCI).

Both primary and secondary data were used for the study. Some data for the study were collected through informal interviews with the office bearers and executives of the sample employers' organizations. Some official publications of the sample employers' organizations, relevant research articles, and project papers done by some MBA level students of some universities were used for other required data.

Structure of Employers' Organizations

In consistence with the Indian structure (Chatterjee, 1978. pp. 420 - 421), it is found that the employers' organization in Bangladesh also have a three-tier structure as given below:

1. Local/chambers of commerce and industry
2. Industrial associations representing the entire industry
3. National federations

1. Local Chambers of Commerce and Industry

Basing on the administrative districts there are 64 local chambers of commerce and industry in the country. All traders, industrialists and businessmen of a particular district belong to the district level chamber of commerce and industry operating in that district.

In addition to the local chambers operating in Dhaka district, a separate chamber has also been established in Dhaka covering its metropolitan areas. This chamber is called the Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry (MCCI), Dhaka. Another chamber is also working in Dhaka under the title Bangladesh Chamber of Industries. Thus, a total of 66 local chambers are now operating in the country (FBCCI. SME, 2002, pp. 64 – 68).

FBCCI has categorized these local chambers into two types – "A" and "B". In reply to a query about the classification criteria, it came out that this was done mainly on the basis of monthly membership fees. "A" class chambers pay more as membership fees than the "B" class members do. 40 percent of the local chambers are "A" class members and the rest 60 percent are "B" class members. The current monthly subscription rates for "A" and "B" class members are Tk. 6,000 and Tk. 4,000 respectively.

2. Industrial Associations

A large number of industrial associations representing all firms in particular industrial sectors have been operating in Bangladesh. For example, all garment manufactures and exporters in Bangladesh have formed an association named Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA). Similarly, separate associations are there for advertising agencies, cargo agents, taxi cab owners, travel agents, construction firms, international recruiting agencies, ready made garments, frozen foods, leather goods, hides and skin, iron and steel merchants, knitwear manufacturers, leasing and finance companies, motor parts and tires merchants, plastic products, poultry firms, publishing and booksellers, textile, jute, timber, ship-owners, courier services, packing industries, real estate and housing, and so on. According to the statistics provided by FBCCI, of which all such association hold membership, there are 191 industrial associations in the country. 97 percent of these associations are "A" class members and only 3 percent are "B" class members according to the criteria set by FBCCI (FBCCI, SME, 2002, pp 64-79).

BGMEA is the topmost industrial association of the country. Since its inception in 1983, BGMEA has been working to promote and protect the interest of RMG sector of Bangladesh. Against its membership strength of only 134 in 1983, the total membership of BGMEA stood at 3,760 in 2002 - 2003 (BGMEA. BATEXPO, 2003, p. 14).

3. National Federations of Employers' Organizations.

Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry :

All the local industrial associations of Bangladesh and local chambers of commerce and industry are affiliated with a national level federation known as the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI), headquartered at Motijheel, Dhaka. It is the apex representative organization safeguarding the interest of the private sector in trade, commerce, and industry in Bangladesh. It was

established in 1973. Its total number of member bodies is 273, of which 73 are chambers of commerce and industry and 191 are trade and industrial associations.

The following table shows the types of members FBCCI has:

Categories	Class	Number
Chambers	'A' Class Chambers	27
	'B' Class Chambers	40
	Joint Chambers	6
Associations	'A' Class Associations	194
	'B' Class Associations	6
Total		273

Source : FBCCI, *SME Fair*, 2002, pp. 64-79.

The "A" class chambers are based mostly on the greater districts of the country. The subscription rate of this category is Tk 6,000 per month. There are 40 members in the "B" category. They are based mostly on the new/smaller districts of the country. The subscription rate for this group is Tk 4,000 per month. Six joint chambers are also working on bilateral basis between Bangladesh and six foreign countries.

Its executive body consists of one President, two Vice-Presidents and 35 Directors. The Federation has 54 different standing committees to work on different sectors. They formulate related policies, evaluate situations and prepare suggestions for future actions of FBCCI in respective sectors. It maintains a secretarial of 54 full time employees including one advisor, one secretary, five deputy secretaries, two senior assistant secretaries, six assistant secretaries, two research officers, five junior officers, and 35 supporting staff (Das and others, 2004, pp. 10-14).

Bangladesh Employers' Federation : Another national level apex organization of employers is Bangladesh Employers' Federation (BEF), It was registered in 1998. Earlier it was known as Bangladesh

Employers' Association (BEA). After its founding in 1998, BEF took over all activities of BEA which had been in operation since 1951. BEF has wider membership representation covering all major industrial associations in the country as well as established individual enterprises.

It is managed by an elected Managing Committee with the active involvement of a permanent secretariat. The Managing Committee consists of 12 elected members who elect the President and the Vice President. The elected committee then co-opts eight other members to ensure representation of other important economic sectors that were not represented by the 12 elected members. Through the process of co-option, the unrepresented associations and smaller member organizations are brought in the mainstream of the decision making process. The Managing Committee, in its activities, is assisted by a large number of sub-committees each of which is headed by a member of the Managing Committee and consists of representatives of the sectors at which the activities of the sub-committee are focused. The Secretariat has the responsibility of implementing the decisions under the supervision of the Managing Committee. The Secretariat is headed by the Secretary General (Salahuddin and others, 3004 p. 12),

According to BEF constitution, two types of membership are allowed—individual and collective. Any standalone company or organization willing to join the federation is allowed to be a member. On the other hand, companies can also be the members of the federation as member of the particular industrial association or any other kind of employers' association. The Federation's membership structure has undergone a lot of changes since the employers organized themselves under the BEA umbrella in 1951. Starting with a few private sector employers, its membership now includes all public sector corporations, and all major national level associations (Salahuddin and others, 2004 p. 13).

Roles Performed

Employers of the subcontinent including those of Bangladesh, are individualistic by tradition (Dwivedi, 2000, p. 67). Yet there are varied reasons for which employers in Bangladesh have organized themselves under some common fronts like employers' associations, local and industrial chambers and national federations. Basing on the information collected for the study, an attempt is made here to explain the role of the sample EOs in the maintenance of ever growing arena of industrial relations in Bangladesh.

Advisory Role

With their established database, expert executives, and wide experience employers organizations in Bangladesh are providing better advice to their members. The subjects of advice generally include issues regarding labor laws and legislation, recognition of trade unions, dealing with strikes and lockouts, rights of employers and employees, desirable management practices, etc.

The secretarial of BEF and its Labor Advisors posted in Dhaka and Chittagong are available to its members for consultation, advice, and information. Advisory services generally concern matters which are directly related to wage negotiations, labor management relations, disciplinary actions, interpretations of labor laws, etc. (Salahuddin and others, 2004, h. 14). The federation renders expert assistance, advice and services for the Government particularly to the Ministry of Labor and Employment, to the formulation of various plans and policies (Salahuddin and others, 2004 h.. 16).

In different centers of Bangladesh, FBCCI assists in the organization of chambers and associations. It organizes training, seminars and workshops on trade, commerce and industry, and conducts research on burning policy issues, and accordingly advises all concerned, including the Government. It also cooperates in the settlement of trade

disputes between and with members through negotiation, conciliation, and arbitration. For safeguarding the interests of the private sector, FBCCI consults and advises the government in formulating the commercial, industrial and fiscal policies of the country (FBCCI, SME, 2002, p, 49). BGMEA regularly advises its member organizations about how to develop the skill and efficiency of their workers and management personnel (BGMEA:BATEXPO,2003,p. 15).

Information Provider

Employers Organizations in Bangladesh generally provide many vital and relevant information to their members. For this purpose, they maintain an exhaustive databank on industries under them. conduct surveys on their members and disseminate the required information in a user friendly way.

BEF keeps its members informed of the up-to-date labor situation through weekly reports and monthly bulletins, It publishes "Labor News" a monthly bulletin and a weekly labor situation report that keeps members apprised of the day to day labor situation. Gists of labor court decisions, and government notifications on labor matters are published in the bulletin. It collects, collates, compiles, and if necessary, circulates various comparative information on pay scales, and other terms of service to member firms with a view to maintaining uniformity of actions. BEF also prepares indices of relevant economic variables to make them available to member firms and appropriate government agencies, as and when required (Salahuddin and others, 2004, p. 13). FBCCI also collects relevant statistical and trade information and disseminates them to their members (FBCCI, SME, 2002, p. 49).

In 2002 BGMEA launched the country's first ever Business-to-Business (B2B) Web Portals in Dhaka and Chittagong opening a unique opportunity for e-commerce between its members and the

buyers world-wide. This unique web portal of BGMEA provides its members with the opportunity of projecting their full profile of production strength and range of products, while the buyers are also able to place on line orders without taking the trouble of physical visits to the factories (BGMEA Profile, 2003, p. 16). It also publishes a monthly News Letter containing important events and current activities of the garment business in Bangladesh. (BGMEA, BATEXPO 2003, p, 13).

Guidance in Collective Bargaining

In theory, employers form employers' organizations for the similar reasons as the workers join trade unions. But in Bangladesh employers organizations and trade unions markedly differ regarding their views and strategies toward collective bargaining. Unlike trade unions, employers organizations in Bangladesh have shown a very dismal performance in guiding the conduct of collective bargaining for their members (Das and others, 2004, p, 12).

BEF represents and safeguards the interests of employers in the Minimum Wage Board, which meets at regular intervals. The Board's awards are crucial for smaller industries, which survive mainly on competitive labor costs. BGMEA keeps regular contacts with labor organizations for harmonious worker management relations (BGMEA, BATEXPO, 2003, p.13). But EOs in Bangladesh do not directly participate in collective bargaining in the large and organized sectors of the country.

Role in Safety, Health, and Community Development

In consistence with the concerns of international organizations, employers' organizations in Bangladesh are showing interest with the issues related to the safety and health of workers and community development. The levels of awareness of both employers and workers

regarding working conditions, occupational hazards, workplace safety, and working environment are gradually rising in the country. Accordingly, the employers' organizations are turning their attention towards ensuring occupational health and safety in their membership bodies by attempting to make them conscious through training programs, seminars, and workshops.

BEF organizes regular seminars, workshops, and symposia on industrial health and safety, and working conditions for managers of member firms with assistance from ILO and other international agencies (Salahuddin and others, 2004, p. 13).

BGMEA is operating a number of projects and programs to ensure better health care, workplace safety, and rights of the garment workers in consonance with the labor laws of the country and ILO guidelines. A summary of the major projects and programs of BGMEA is given below:

(a) Child Labor Elimination : BGMEA has set up a model by eliminating an estimated 10,500 child workers from the Bangladesh garment sector. An ILO report in 2001 said that 100% of the BGMEA member factories were free of child labor (BGMEA Profile, 2003, p, 18).

(b) Non-formal Education Program : After retrenching the workers aged below 14, BGMEA, ILO and UNICEF has been providing them non-formal education. In this context, BGMEA signed two Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) - one in 1995 and another in 2000 with ILO and UNICEF. As per its commitment, it has so far spent over US \$600,000 for the child labor project. Under the project, about 8,600 students were enrolled in 336 schools run by two local NGOs – BRAC and GSS. At present, 34 schools are giving non-formal education to the remaining 300 students of the target group (BGMEA Profile, 2003, p. 18).

(c) Earn and Learn program : BGMEA has given on the job training to 900 MOU students through local NGOs. UNICEF is also providing skill training on tailoring, embroidery, garments machine maintenance, manufacturing, and wool knitting to 576 more MOU students (BGMEA Profit 2003, p. 19)

(d) Support for Loss of Income : A monthly compensation is being provided to the students who were retrenched from the sector as child laborers, and now covered by child labor elimination project. BGMEA provides half of the required fund, and ILO and UNICEF provide the other half (BGMEA Profile, 2003, p. 19).

(e) Healthcare Activities : Starting from 1994 BGMEA has so far established 10 medical centers for garment workers. The centers are located at Malibag, Mohammadpur, Mirpur, Gulshan, Postagola, and Uttara in Dhaka. Two centers were set up in Narayanganj and Gajipur, while two other centers were set up at Agrabad and Nasirabad in Chittagong. The medical centers are providing free primary health care, medicine, and advisory services on reproductive health issues and gender equity to the garment workers (BGMEA Profile, 2003, p.19).

(f) BGMEA-ILO New Partnership on Labor Welfare : Following the tremendous success of the partnership in child labor elimination project, ILO signed a three-year new partnership project on October 1, 2002 for improving labor relations and working conditions in the garment sector of Bangladesh. Under the agreement, the financial involvement of BGMEA is US \$ 600,000 against US \$ 15,00,000 of ILO with assistance from US Department of Labor. Key components of the project are to raise awareness and ensure occupational health and safety, human resource management, labor welfare, and continued monitoring of child labor elimination. (BGMEA Profile, 2003, p. 20).

(g) BGMEA-UNFPA-GOB Project on Family Welfare : With technical assistance from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and under the active guidance of the Government of Bangladesh, BGMEA implemented a five-year project (1995 - 2002) titled "Family

Welfare and Reproductive Health Education Services for Garment Workers in Dhaka. BGMEA's contribution to the project was US \$ 323,000 while UNFPA's share was US \$ 265,000. More than 170,000 workers were so far benefited from the project. Following a successful achievement of the project, the UNFPA, under its sixth country program, has agreed to expand this model program in two more areas in Dhaka and Chittagong. A similar technical assistance deal of US \$ 290,000 has been signed between BGMEA and UNFPA in January 2003 with a view to providing family welfare and reproductive health services to a target of 300,000 RMG workers of 375 factories in Dhaka and Chittagong (BGMEA Profile, 2003, p. 20).

(h) Workers Safety Programs: The BGMEA is implementing a number of programs to ensure workplace safety for workers as well as management personnel of the member organizations. Besides helping the members to comply with the safety rules set by the government, BGMEA organizes training and awareness programs for the workers and management staff. The association regularly monitors and follows up proper implementation of safety compliances by individual member factories (Rahman and others, 2004, p. 23). But the inadequacy of this monitoring process is clearly evident in the frequent occurrences of death claiming accidents in many of its member organizations. Sharing of the benefits with the workers and proper working conditions to them is still a matter of time (Khan and Parvin, 2004, p. 27; Amin and Hossain, 2004).

(i) BGMEA Hospital for Garment Workers: The BGMEA has undertaken the construction of a 150-bed modern hospital on its own land at Mirpur, Dhaka with a view to providing a full package health service to garment workers. The proposed ten-storied building with an estimated cost of two million US dollars will have all important sections including burn unit, emergency and outdoor departments, etc. In case of death or injury at workplace, in addition to the compensation paid by the individual factory owners, BGMEA also pays the cost of treatment and extra compensation to the affected worker or his/her family. The associ-

ation also offers employment to the members of the victim's family to support them financially (BGMEA Profile, 2003. p. 21).

Role as Representative of Bangladeshi Employers

A fundamental purpose of establishing an employers' organization is to protect the interest of its members by representing them in different forums at both national and international levels. The Bangladesh Federation of Employers represent nearly 90% of the established employers in the private sector, and all public sector corporations and autonomous bodies (Salahuddin and others, 2004. p. 16) As the only national level recognized body of both the private and public sector employers, it has been representing on all national bodies/ committees concerning labor management relations. The Federation represents employers in the seven labor courts of the country, through its representatives on panels of labor court members. It not only monitors the cases which come up before the courts, but also carefully ensures that the legitimate interests of employers are duly highlighted in the written opinions of its nominees (Salahuddin and others, 2004, pp. 15-16), BEF represents its members in all national tripartite committees and institutional bodies like Labor Courts, Minimum Wage Boards, and National Tripartite Consultative Committees on Labor Matters, governing and academic bodies of the business faculties and institutions of universities, Bangladesh Institute of Management, Industrial Relations Institute, etc. In various international conferences, and industrial seminars and symposia organized from time to time by ILO and its attached units/agencies, the BEF is called upon to send representatives. The Federation has also representation on the Council of International Organization of Employers through which it maintains close touch with the employers' organizations in other countries and exchanges views and information with them on current issues (Salahuddin and others, 2004, pp.13-17).

FBCCI plays a vital role in all government forums and economic development organizations by sharing views on all important issues

related to the national economy. It represents the private sector in 98 permanent committees of the Government and autonomous bodies. Time to time, FBCCI sends representatives in different committees and task forces constituted by the Government on specific issues.

FBCCI is the member of different international bodies, such as International Chambers of Commerce (ICC), Islamic Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ICCI), Confederation of Asia-Pacific Chambers of Commerce and Industry (CACCI) and the SAARC Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SCCI). To safeguard and protect the interest of the business community in the international arena, FBCCI maintains close communication with these international organizations. FBCCI also interacts with international organization like UNDP, ESCAP, UNESCO, UNIDO, ITC. World Bank, TDB. ADB, GATT. UNCTAD, etc.

FBCCI has joint cooperation agreements with the national trade organizations of 29 countries including Australia, Belgium, Egypt, Finland, Germany, India, Indonesia, Iran, Italy, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Oman, Pakistan, Peru, Philippines, Qatar, Russia, Romania, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, Turkey, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam.

The Federation of Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce and industry has collaboration agreements with the General Union of Chambers of Commerce and Industry and Agriculture of the Arab Countries, Karnataka Chamber of Commerce and Industry and Mizoram Chamber of commerce of India, Kunming Chamber of Commerce & Industry of China, and Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Singapore. The FBCCI has also established a Joint Chamber viz., Bangladesh India Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BICCI) in cooperation with the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry and signed an agreement of understanding with the United States Bangladesh Business Council (USBBC) (FBCCI, SME, 2002, pp.49-50).

Conclusion

From the above analysis of the organization and functions of employers' organizations in Bangladesh a few significant points emerge with regard to their role in industrial relations. Firstly, employers in Bangladesh are generally individualistic. In most cases, a very few of them adopt any collective stand in matters of industrial relations. Secondly, whatever collective stand they take, they are not as direct as those taken by trade unions or their federations. Thirdly, a lot of programs on 'workers' health and education, labor welfare and workplace safety have been undertaken by BGMEA, the apex organization of employers in the largest industrial sector of the country. Although these measures do not appear to be adequate, compared to the needs and requirements of the huge number of workers in the sector, their moves are fairly appreciable (cf Ahmed, 2001, pp. 155 - 163). It is however, argued that the labor welfare measures so far undertaken by BGMEA have been so done more because of international pressure on them than out of their benevolent attitude towards their workers. Whatever might be the reason behind, their moves are appreciable, and it would be to the interest of the workers, if the programs undertaken are implemented with real commitment, and employers' organizations in other industrial sectors follow the suit.

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