

Seafarers Employment Issues: Bangladesh Perspective

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Abstract

The focus of this study is on the employment issues of Bangladeshi seafarers in the prevailing job market for seafarer. The paper gives a summary of the history of seafaring, growth of Maritime institute of education and Training, establishment of national fleet to contribute to the jobs of seafarers and training of cadets. This is a descriptive study. Data collected for this study are from both the primary and secondary sources. Primary data were collected by interviewing people serving in Maritime Education and Training (MET) institutes and the seafarer sailing currently. Secondary sources of data are published books, journal papers, government shipping office website etc. This research conceptualizes the key problems behind the unemployment of Bangladeshi seafarer and effort has been given to explore the inherent root causes. The identified causes are the less number of national flag vessels, reputation of seafarers in the global market, standard of MET. Therefore, this study recommends formation of employment policy for Bangladeshi seafarer, diplomatic effort to regain reputation of Bangladeshi seafarer, enhance the quality of MET institute and increase training facility. This study concludes some proposal for the improvement of work opportunity of Bangladeshi Seafarer.

Keywords: MET, Employment, Seafarer.

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Introduction

Seafaring is one of the old professions. Europeans were the fore bearer of the seafaring profession and it was very prestigious to them to be a seafarer in those days. Nevertheless, with the passage of time and modernization of the world some different areas have come out, which have arisen as great, alternatives before sailors. So they eventually left the seafaring, other seafaring nation such as India, Philippine, Bangladesh etc. had subsequently occupied those opportunity. As a prime supplier of seafarers in the world maritime fleet, Philippine supplies one fourth of the total number of seafarer (Gorecho Dennis R, 2019). Roughly, 30% of the world's maritime labor contributed by Filipino seafarers has made the Philippine one of the world's largest supplier of seafarers (TESDA, Philippine, 2017). Overseas ship owners prefer Filipino seafarers because of their qualities like commitment & discipline, versatility in the industry, loyalty, adaptability, optimistic attitude towards the work and rules etc. It is mentionable that, in 2017 seafarers of Philippines earned \$5.87 billion remittances, which showed about 21.4% growth from 2012 (\$4.84 billion). According to Manila Times Philippine witnessed 28% increase of their seafarer in 2016 compared to 2010 (Manila Times, 2018). India also witnessed remarkable increase of the number of Seafarer. Government of Indian has taken appropriate steps to improve seafarer's standards, which includes on-board training opportunities, certification system update, modernization of the examination system and flexibility of doing business (Ministry of Shipping, India, 2019). Bangladesh, on the other hand, has a long maritime history, started with the British colonial period. More than 50,000 Bangladeshi seafarers have worked on various foreign sea-going ships since the first half of the twentieth century (Kabir, 2014). Bangladeshi seafarers have earned about \$400 million annually in the last decade, which is negligible compared to other big seafaring nations (Halima, 2013). This means that Bangladeshi seafarers face some of the inherent problems, which results in the losing of sea jobs. This paper therefore seeks to explore the condition of Bangladeshi seafarers' current on-board job market and inherent problems behind it.

Global demand supply of seafarer and comparison of Bangladesh

At present about 1.6 million of registered seafarers of more than 150 countries are doing seafaring job on the global merchant fleet. BIMCO/ICS manpower report stated that, the major five officer-supplying countries are China, Philippines, India, Indonesia and Russian Federation. It is also reported that the global supply-demand ratio of seafarer in 2015 was to be estimated 774,000 and 790,500 respectively. As a result world fleet felt a shortage of seafarer which was estimated to be 16,500 in 2015 and which further forecasted upswing to 147,500 by 2025 (Hassan, 2018). A long maritime tradition exists in Bangladesh. Bangladesh's maritime history and culture have been known since the British era. Once approximately 50,000 Bangladeshi seafarers were working onboard national and foreign flag vessels but the number of seafarers declined steadily to 14,054 (GSO, Bangladesh Annual Report, 2018). Although the government has established a Mercantile Marine Academy (named as Bangladesh Marine Academy

since 1972) for training of cadets and seaman Training School (named as National Maritime Institute since 2000) for training of ratings. Subsequently, the 15-private Marine Academies were approved by the Government. In addition, in the year 2013-2016, Bangladesh Marine Academy (BMA) took intakes of 300 plus cadets without analyzing the job market, which results surplus supply of new cadets in the market. At the same time, decline of worldwide freight rate resulted in the collapse of National fleet. This big number of fresh cadets created a mismatch in the job market. In addition, government shipping office figures says that half of the total Continuous Discharge Certificate (CDC) holder remain out of service in the last five years. Following diagram indicates the number of seafarer from 2013-2018 serving in different fleet.

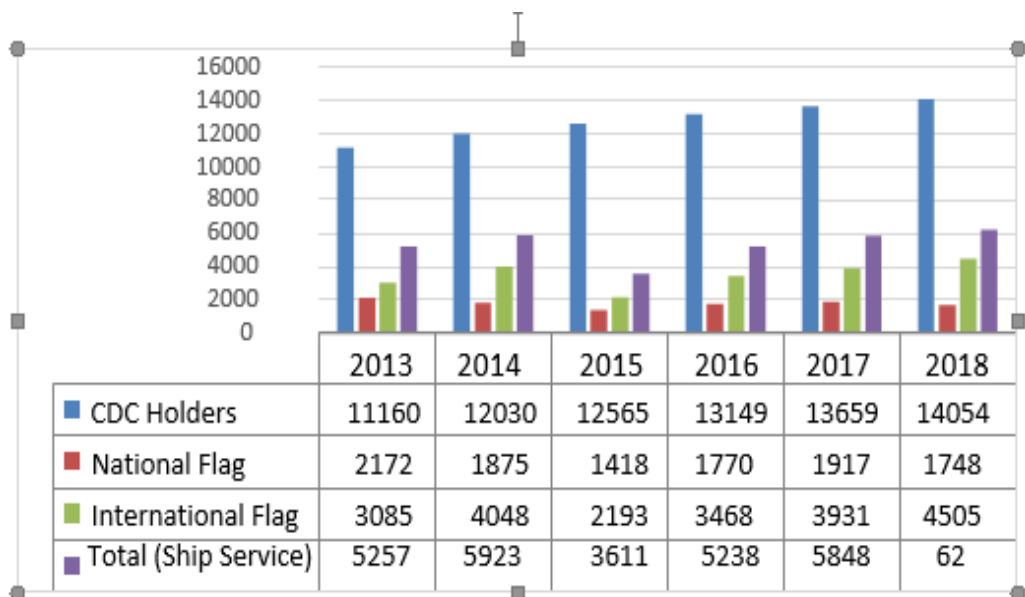


Figure 1: Numbers of seafarers from Bangladesh serving in different fleet.

In addition, most institutes, especially the private MET institutes, could not keep pace with global training standard. Side by side, Bangladeshi seafarer were facing problem during issuance of visa for repatriation and signing off from various major shipping countries like Singapore, UAE, Saudi Arabia, India, Hong Kong etc. in addition, production of fake documents by some people and desertion by some seafarer worsen the situation more problematic though Bangladesh is white listed country identified by IMO.

Methodology

The aim of this study is to find out the actual causes of Bangladeshi seafarer unemployment during the period 2013-2017. This is mainly a descriptive research. Both

primary and secondary data have been used to conduct this study. Primary data were collected by interviewing government and nongovernment officials related to this seafaring field of Bangladesh, people engaged in MET and seafarer sailing a present. Secondary data have been collected from published books, journal articles, thesis paper from World Maritime University available online, Government Shipping Office (GSO) website, Bangladesh Shipping Corporation (BSC) website, Director General (DG) Shipping website, Bangladesh etc. This research has not considered the present scenario of seafaring job market for Corona virus. Simple statistical method was used to present the data.

Issues behind unemployment of Bangladeshi seafarer (during 2013-2017)

The key problems those complicated the employment situation of Bangladeshi seafarer found are decrease of national fleet vessel, reputation of Bangladeshi seafarers' in the global market, standard of Maritime Education and Training (MET). All of these have subsequently been discussed.

Shortage of national flag vessel

After the establishment of the BSC in 1972, the first ship was purchased in 1974. It began to hire its government training institute's cadets from BMA and Seaman Training Institute, which was later changed name as National Maritime Institute (NMI). As per the information of BSC website, it was found BSC procured total 38 ships and all of them were registered under the flag of Bangladesh. The Cadets trained from BMA at that time were placed directly in the BSC fleet for training purpose; also the ratings from the NMI got the opportunity for their employment in BSC. So, the passed out Cadets from the BMA could accomplish their mandatory sea training from the BSC for sitting in the next competency examination. BSC also hired those Cadets after completion of their competency examination. Besides the employment of the ratings' were not also a problem because of processing of remarkable number of vessel in the BSC fleet. But huge amount of operational cost, funding problem and dropping of freight market created a challenging scenario for BSC. Gradually its fleet started to shrink down due to the old age of the vessels and increase in the daily maintenance cost. According to latest data from the BSC website, this government organization possess only 08 ships. This small number of fleet has significantly affected the employment prospects of Bangladeshi seafarers on BSC fleet. The number of ships possessed by BSC from 1990- 2019 is shown in the following chart.

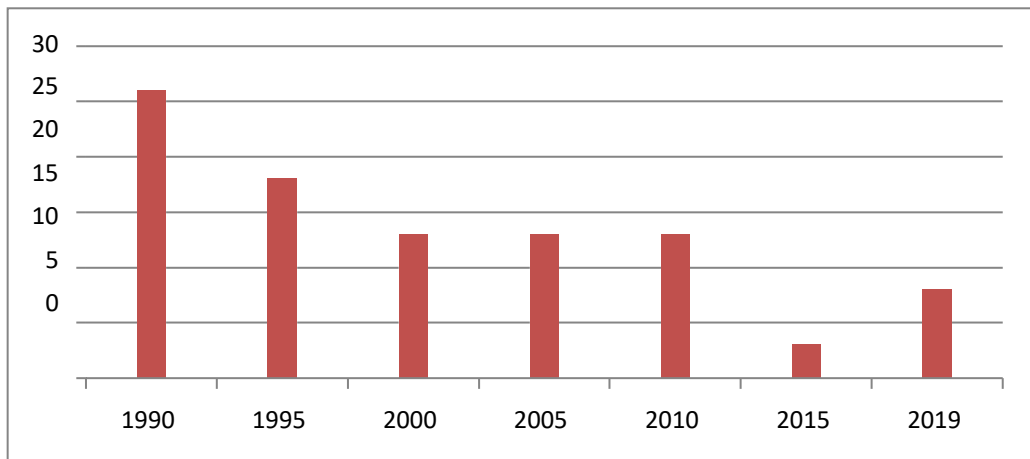


Figure 2: Number of BSC ship from 1990- 2019

Above Chart states that, from 1990- 2015 BSC successively lost her ship. As a consequence, after completing the pre-sea training from BMA and other institutes, the cadets could not be put for further compulsory on-board training. Due to the shipping industry boom in 2009-2011, this gap has somehow covered by the private. As per the information got from the Government Shipping Office (GSO) website, it was shown that the total number of Bangladeshi flagships was 65 due to private sector growth in shipping during 2009-2011, and this showed a remarkable opportunity for the seafarer to be employed in the national flagships vessel. But for the drop of freight rate, high interest rate on shipping loans-private shipping companies also could not sustain in the shipping business and gradually lost their ships too. According to GSO website, privately owned Bangladeshi flag vessel number is 52 (GSO, Bangladesh). It was previously seen that, Bangladeshi seafarer had the opportunity to work in Bangladesh flag vessels and with that experience got better employment opportunity in overseas shipping companies where the payment scale is much better comparing to the Bangladeshi flag vessel. Now less seafarers can be employed in the Bangladeshi flag vessel's shrinking fleet, so transferring to foreign shipping company has become challenging for not having minimum experience.

Reputation in the global market

Another big problem for losing employment in foreign flag vessel has been the reputation of Bangladeshi seafarer to the overseas employer. Following the 9/11 attack, all sectors of the world, including the Maritime industry, have implemented new security improvement laws their respective countries. As a result, in some major ports where seafarers' repatriation/crew changes are processed, Pakistan, Bangladesh and some other countries face a critical situation for the visa approval. Forged documents issue by a group of corrupt persons in the seafaring sector from Bangladesh raised

additional threat to the marine world. Bangladeshi seafarers have lost their jobs, despite having a large number of vacancies in the global shipping fleet. In 2015, the global shortage of seafaring officers was estimated at 16,500, which is expected to escalate further to 147,500 by 2025 (Hassan, 2018). According to an article, 'Overseas job prospect for Bangladeshi seafarers on wane' written by Kabir in daily newspaper "The independent" –the country Hong Kong identified 52 forged documents processed by Bangladeshi seafarers and made an objection to the IMO. The country Iran also found 50 forged documents represented by seafarers from Bangladesh. Since the fake seafarer does not have sufficient expertise to operate the ship, several incident occurred in fake seafarers vessels that penalized the owner of the vessel with huge amount of money. The company's reputation is also hindered in the global market and many of the shipping companies suffered financially too. Bangladesh is still a white listed nation to the IMO for seafaring. But forged documents can be a big reason for blacklisting a country's seafarers. Some causes are also found to be fraudulent by top ranking Officer's certificates and resulted huge fines for many of the overseas shipping companies. The officials of overseas shipping companies said that recent accident of a Canadian flagship in the Japan Sea and subsequent discovery of false documents of ship's Captain and Chief Engineer allegedly issued by the Bangladesh authority made headlines round the maritime world (Bunker Port news Worldwide, 2015). Some countries allows seafarers to get "Ok to Board" visa upon arrival, allowing them to enter the ship passing through that country's airport. However certain countries require the issuance of visas from their respective embassies before traveling to those countries. Some nation like UAE and Saudi Arabia have denied granting VISA for Bangladeshi seafarers for desertion, false document issuance and diplomatic reasons. Forged documents issued by some dishonest Bangladeshi seafarer seemed to be sufficient for the UAE to announce that they would not grant visas to Bangladeshi Seafarers (Bhuiyan, H.K. 2015). In this difficult situation, the employer also faces trouble recruiting Bangladeshi seafarer. As a consequence, despite having many trained and qualified seafarer in Bangladesh, the employer fills this vacancies from other seafaring nation like Myanmar, India, Phillipine, Ukraine, China etc. Moreover, Seafarer Recruitment and Placement Service (SRPS) often finds it difficult to send the seafarer back to their home country Bangladesh at the conclusion of a sea contract as visa issue occurs in most busy ports where the shipping company interchanges the crew members of the ship. Desertion from the ship is another big problem behind losing seafaring jobs. Desertion in developing countries by some greedy seafarers from Bangladesh is observed only for achieving a better life. The noticeable countries for desertion are USA, Canada, and Australia. As a result of this desertion ship owners of overseas countries face difficulties in various ports of the world and consequences are huge penalty. Experts in this sector agree that consecutive steps should be taken to minimize the level of desertion that will encourage improved work opportunities for seafarers in the long run. In a way, it might not be possible to eradicate desertion entirely. According to a writing titled, 'Overseas job prospect for Bangladeshi seafarers on wane' written by Humayun Kabir Bhuiyan in daily newspaper named "The independent" several nations link Saudi Arabia, UAE has stopped employing

Bangladeshi seafarer in their flag ship for the desertion of Bangladeshi seafarer in those countries. The government of UAE, Saudi Arabia and Singapore expressed their doubts about the standard of the seafarer from Bangladesh and UAE denied issuing visa for Bangladeshi seafarer. The visa dilemma has now become a big obstacle to the placement of Bangladeshi seafarers. The seafarer must travel to the port or location where the ship is physically present in order to join the ship. As visa rejection has become a regular scenario, job prospects for Bangladeshi seafarer have sunken.

Maritime Education and Training (MET)

There is a close link between employment and good learning, according to the USEM model for employability (Lorraine and Peter 2007). Consequently, MET quality standards, including the evaluation and certification system, play a vital role on seafarer's employment prospects. Kabir mentioned in his research article that, "Although the administrative thrust has always been to promote the Bangladeshi seafarers in the global market, there are plenty internal issues which affect the employability of Bangladeshi seafarers. Apart from inadequate number of nationally owned vessel, most of the internal issues arise from inadequate MET system of the country" (Kabir, 2014). He also pointed out that the inadequate number of national flag vessels, the implementation of the MET quality standards framework, the evaluation and certification system, the skills and experience of instructors and assessors, and competency-based training and assessment is the prime causes of Bangladeshi seafarers' unemployment. World development report 1998/99 (World Bank, 1998) states: Knowledge is similar to light, weightless and intangible; it can straightforwardly travel around the world, illuminate the lives of humanity universally. So, MET may be a gateway to the world markets for seafarer. In Bangladesh, MET needs to be more open in the realistic training sector by initiating simulation-basis learning. A big problem is the availability of a Training ship, which catches the eye of the every employer. The cadets trained from different maritime institutions need to complete the on job training onboard the ship. They face difficulties in completing the on job training period due to the inadequacy of national flag vessels. As a consequence, it hampers the total progression of becoming a licensed officer. Bangladesh thus lacks behind from contributing to the shipping industry as a provider of maritime manpower. Quality products are the cornerstone of every marketing policies. MET institutions need to improve their products to become eligible for the international shipping market. Under the controlled guidance of trained and qualified trainers and evaluators, MET institutions are considered to have responsible obligations to train the young talents into valuable human resource. In order to acquire best knowledge, skills and comprehensive understanding they should have appropriate institutional infrastructure and ample training facilities. The following concerns arose from the data collected for this research in order to establish an efficient MET system: proper evaluation and certification of the seafarers, frequently review of MET syllabus curriculum, standardization of MET with national curriculum, On-board training of cadets, networking with leading METs, enhanced use of simulators in all MET institutions.

Findings

After the discussion of the above-mentioned issues, this study finds the followings:

- ✓ Reduction of Bangladeshi flagged vessel decreased the employment opportunity of Bangladeshi seafarer.
- ✓ Fake document and desertion hampered the reputation of the Bangladeshi Seafarer, which lead to VISA rejection by different countries all over the world.
- ✓ Lack of proper training facilities and insufficient qualified trainers resulted in the production of substandard human resource.

Recommendation

Bangladeshi people started Seafaring job long time ago. The minimum requirement for serving on board the ship also changed with the transformation of the shipping world & coming of new technology. Some recommendations basing on the research findings have been present here.

Plan for procurement of new ship by BSC

The BSC was founded in 1972 and in 1974 the first ship was added to the fleet and continued to expand steadily and had 38 vessels at one point. But BSC struggled to keep pace with the modern requirements of vessels. After 1990, BSC lost their business due having a fleet of aged ships and a decline in the freight market as well. After that the fleet got smaller to smallest and the employment opportunity of the seafarer on BSC fleet decreased to a minimum. As a result, there is job availability crisis in the market of seafaring, resulting in an enormous number of unemployed seafarers in the market. While interviewing Mr. Bhuiyan, Ex-president of the Bangladesh Merchant Marine Officers Association (BMMOA), he said the government has taken preparation to build up the BSC fleet with the new procurement plan and to bring back its past glory. Over the last few years, after a long period of 26 years BSC has procured 6 ships of various types. Cadets will have the scope to complete their mandatory training period and will be competent officers and the ratings can get scope for gathering experience and search for better employment prospects in the overseas companies.

Thus, the new procurement plan of BSC is a prospect for Bangladesh seafarer by the increase of the national fleet.

Establishment of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Maritime University (BSMRMU)

In 2013, BSMRMU was established for the higher studies and research in the Maritime field. This Maritime University has been established to provide undergraduate and post-

graduate studies in all maritime disciplines including maritime strategy, maritime safety and security, Shipbuilding, Maritime Science, Maritime Legislature and all other related disciplines related with maritime field. BSMRMU can serve as a central entity for all levels of the Bangladesh MET institutes. With the aim of this Bangladesh Marine Academy already been affiliated with this university. For better implementation and monitoring of the appropriate course curriculum for seafarer training, all other MET institutes may be affiliated to BSMRMU. The standard of education in this field will flourish as a result.

Formation of employment policy for seafarer in Bangladeshi flag ship

The Bangladeshi flagships plays a major role in the employment of seafarer and placement of the cadets for the mandatory sea service. In the past, BSC played a significant role in training the cadets and also recruiting other seafarer too. The private shipping companies of Bangladesh contributed a lot as they have remarkable number of ocean going vessels comparing to the BSC fleet. Current scenario of shortage of vessel in BSC fleet has been taken into concern and by now procurement of new ship is in pipeline. The procurement strategy of the government follows complicated steps for ship acquisition. Since shipping is a capital intensive business, a huge investment is required here, but the procurement process can be less complicated by forming a technical committee with experts. Master plans need to be made to buy ships and run them for a long time. Since the private sector already has a number of ships that covers almost the full percentage of the Bangladeshi flagship Dead Weight Tonnage (DWT) size, the government should encourage the private sector to buy more ships. In this situation, there are complication of investment and payment of Tax for ship purchase. For the greater interest of the shipping sector of Bangladesh, the government may relax the tax payment and may engage in compulsory employment policy with the owners of private vessels of Bangladesh for the placement of the cadet on-board for the minimum required sea service for the professional exam. So that they can be trained for the world fleet.

Diplomatic efforts to regain the reputation of Bangladeshi seafarer

In the past, Bangladeshi seafarers had good reputation worldwide. Many seafarers are still sailing with pride in famous overseas shipping companies. But the 9/11 tragedy has strengthened the safety and security as such every single problem is treated with caution. The credibility of Bangladeshi seafarers has been destroyed for false document issuance and VISA rejection. A community of dishonest individuals engaged in the issuance of false documents solely for monetary gain, but they do not know that this form of behavior hampers the image of Bangladeshi seafarers and bring curse for the country. Each document of the seafarer needs to be checked by the government and the technical engagement in this matter will succeed. This matter is carefully dealt with by the Department of Shipping (DoS). It is important to recognize the people behind the scene and penalized them for the fake document issue. Employers also face difficulties in hiring Bangladeshi seafarer in the foreign ports for visa issuance problem.

Consequently, they do not want to employ Bangladeshi seafarers. This Visa issue must be handled with care by the foreign ministry of Bangladesh with the respective country where visa issue is difficult for Bangladeshi seafarers. In this matter, it is possible to make a request to other countries to grant visas explicitly for seafarer. Desertion is not a new subject only for Bangladeshi seafarer. Desertion affects not only shipping business, it also affects a country. There is no particular way to mitigate desertion except to inspire the seafarer. Seafarers desert in the developed countries expecting a better life. Every seafarer needs to be self-motivated, and MET institutions can play a pivotal role in inspiring seafarers in this situation. The seafarers must know the massive effects and consequences of desertion on the seafaring job market.

Enhance the quality of MET institutions

The standard of MET also encourage employers to hire seafarers. In Bangladesh, the majority of MET institutions are found not to have appropriate training facilities. In addition, old teaching methods are followed and insufficiency of professional instructors is witnessed. Only BMA upgrade their course curriculum being affiliated with BSMRMU, but several private academy are providing training for cadets and ratings with old syllabus and insufficient infrastructure. In Dhaka, several number of the private Marine Academy and training institutes are located. As one of the densely populated cities, Dhaka cannot be a place for those institutes, as they need sufficient space to give all the training facilities for MET. It is very much possible to follow the quality of training facility of another country's MET institution. In return for attaining these standards of hiring agency, vessel owner/ Management Company along with associated international and regional compliance like European Maritime Safety Awareness (EMSA), IMO conventions like STCW, Maritime Labor Convention (MLC)-2006 and so on need to be followed by those Marine Academies with limited training facility and infrastructure. All private MET institutions may be affiliated with BSMRMU. In this regard, Razon has made a statement in his paper that "Bangladesh Marine Academy has global acceptance in the World maritime industry as a fore bearer MET center; provision can be made to interchange teachers with the private MET centers (Razon, 2016). As a result the overall level of MET will also increase and will progressively advance towards international standard.

Increase the training facility

Compared to the other MET institutions, the training facility at BMA is appreciable because it has glorious history of training cadets and contributing to the maritime field. But other marine academy lack behind of having proper training facility. As it becomes difficult to get jobs in the foreign fleet for the various reasons stated above, so the seafarers need to be dependent on the national flag vessel until the area of international job market opens for them. Though BMA cadets are being placed in various national and overseas shipping company for their quality but several private academy cadets employment opportunity are narrow. Side by side, the national fleet also have fewer ships comparing to the number of passed out cadets from both the BMA and private

academies. Thus, cadets do not get ships to complete the required practical sea service as an apprentice in the process of becoming a proficient officer. Private maritime academy and institutes around Dhaka city is lacking behind many training facilities where theoretical and practical training are taking place within a small space. Even some institute are confined within the same building, accommodating different department on different floors, whereas MET consists of both the theoretical and practical training, and separate space and demonstration laboratory are required. So Director General (DG) of shipping on behalf of government needs to determine whether they will continue with this training structure to supply substandard maritime labor force in the global fleet.

Conclusion

Bangladesh is a developing country with approximate 38.6 percent unemployed university graduates (Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies-BIDS) and after completing of the studies, they do not get enough employment opportunity as well. Seafaring, on the other hand, is a globalized occupation that can minimize the burden on the national job market. This research paper attempted to describe the job situation of Bangladeshi seafarer. The root causes behind the seafarers' unemployment have been sorted out. Bangladesh had a glorious seafaring past and still many seafarers in all category of ranks are working in various overseas shipping companies with good reputation. But the pace of the advancement is not satisfactory compared to other seafaring nation. National flag vessel number, Reputation of Bangladeshi seafarer, MET quality, proper training facility of Bangladeshi seafarer has been regarded as the major issues for unemployment of Bangladeshi seafarer. The number of seafarer comparing to other overseas jobs, which bring remittance is very less. But in comparison to amount of earning of foreign remittance seafarer brings remarkable amount of foreign currencies and it can contribute to the national development directly. BSC was established after independence to initiate maritime operations in the country, but it is unfortunate that BSC was unable to keep pace with shipping trends. However, government's latest plan to acquire new ships is appreciable. World fleet is growing big day by day. So market will always look for the maritime labor to run this big fleet. So Bangladeshi seafarer will get job opportunity like other seafaring nations as there will remain a scarcity in the market always. Since shipping is a globalized business, it has developed by maintaining the international standard. Usually, employers would not employ sub-standard employee for their vessel operations even though they are in dire need of the seafarer. As a highly interested country on the IMO list for its participation in the maritime activities, Bangladesh is trying to build a maritime nation and the effort behind this are seen through its maritime activities. Bangladesh has numbers of maritime training institutes across the country, mostly are private institutes except BMA. All of those are trying to train the products to their best and sending for the world fleet. But the standard of those seafarers has been challenged by the employer for different issues. Like the Philippines, if seafarers from Bangladesh can be employed on a large scale, the country would be benefited economically.

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