

## An initiative to teach in the mother tongue failing

Teachers need long, intensive training

THE poor outcome of a government initiative to ensure that children from minority ethnic communities are given early childhood education in their mother tongue is symptomatic of how well-intentioned projects are doomed to fail if they are not well thought out. Lack of planning and properly structuring of this initiative seem to be at the bottom of such failure.

The idea was that ethnic minority students would learn exclusively in their mother tongue from pre-school level up to class II and gradually learn Bangla from class III. The government has even published textbooks in various ethnic languages in 2012. In 2017 it was distributing textbooks in several languages. Sounds like great progress except there is a gaping flaw: the teachers assigned to teach the languages can speak the languages but cannot read or write in them. Now how will a teacher teach if he or she herself does not have such basic skills in the language? It is not rocket science to know that to have command over a language requires intensive training. According to a report in this paper, so far only 38.6 percent of the 4,204 ethnic community teachers in three hill districts have attended a 14-day training on their respective languages. How can anyone, no matter how high their IQ, be able to master the script of a new language, enough to be able to teach children in 14 days? To expect such a thing is quite unrealistic.

It is quite hard to understand why such a positive initiative by the government should go to waste because of ill planning and obvious lack of vision regarding how the project can be successful. Even several district education officials have admitted that the existing training is far from adequate mainly because it is just too short in duration. Surprisingly, in Sylhet, where there are several ethnic minority communities, there has been no training at all.

The government must therefore, take immediate steps to increase the training period—to at least three months initially as suggested by a professor of linguistics as this is a multilingual teaching system. In addition, there should be ongoing training for the teachers so that they can keep brushing up their language skills.

The logistics of teaching children from different ethnic communities who are in the same class, also have to be worked out. Unless a proper structure and planning for training these teachers is chalked out and implemented, such a welcome government initiative will just fade away into oblivion.

## A hostel with no boarders

Govt should allocate funds to make it operational

WE are shocked to learn about the fate of a student hostel which was built at Chelachara village in Kawkhali upazila of Rangamati to provide accommodation to the indigenous children of remote areas. According to a report by *The Daily Star* on February 21, the hostel, which was constructed some nine years ago, has been lying useless because of fund crisis. The three-storied building, which has eight rooms for 80 students, a kitchen, a dining room and separate living rooms for staffers, was built at the initiative of the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education at a cost of Tk 3.29 crore in the fiscal year 2010-11. The five people who were appointed as caretaker, nightguard, cook and sweeper in 2013 have also been getting their salaries regularly. But surprisingly, there is no boarder at the hostel. According to our correspondent, there are two other student hostels in Rangamati which have faced the same fate.

Such waste of resources and public money is unacceptable while access to education still remains a big challenge for indigenous children in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Since there are not many schools in the remote areas of the hill district, these hostels should be utilised properly so that students from distant villages can stay there and at least have primary education. Already many parents have contacted the superintendent of the hostel, who is also the head teacher of a nearby primary school, for keeping their children in the hostel.

Thus, the government should immediately allocate necessary funds to make this and other such hostels in the district functional. Such a well-thought-out initiative to provide education to the indigenous children should not go down the drain.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Boosting Bangladesh's export growth

A World Bank report revealed that Bangladesh could significantly boost export growth, maintain its position as a leading garment and textile manufacturer, and create more jobs by improving its transport and logistics systems. It states that if there was no road congestion, transportation cost, the largest direct logistic cost in Bangladesh, would be 35 percent lower. It warned that these two factors combined with inadequate infrastructure and fragmented governance have been hampering manufacturing and freight and are putting the country's robust growth at risk.

Since efficient logistics and transportation system are two of the main drivers for achieving high export growth, the government should give serious attention to improving these sectors. The average cost of carrying a tonne per kilometre in Bangladesh is USD 0.095, which is higher than many developing and developed countries.

The government has already put emphasis on infrastructure development, what it needs to do now is manage the infrastructure effectively.

Shahriar Abid, By e-mail

# When will the global apparel industry truly clean up its act?



MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

NEWS of another apparel factory tragedy on February 8, which claimed seven innocent lives, throws into sharp focus how much is still needed to be done in the global apparel industry to ensure the safety of its workers.

"The easiest way to solve a problem is to deny it exists", said Isaac Asimov, the world renowned science fiction novelist and biochemist and, as the apparel industry reels from the news of the tragic fire at a denim manufacturing plant in Ahmedabad, India, I have to ask, when is the global apparel sector going to wake up and say "enough is enough"?

Although this tragic news seems to have escaped widespread international media attention, it comes just a few weeks after much more publicised reports of a fire at a handbag factory in New Delhi, India, that claimed the lives of some 43 workers, broke.

Regardless of the media coverage, regardless of where the product was being made, the international apparel community needs to stand up and stop tragedies like this from happening.

Simple right? Well, apparently not! As a member of the Bangladesh Ready-Made Garment (RMG) industry, I believed that the wake-up call for all manufacturers, brands and retailers came nearly seven years ago after the tragic Rana Plaza disaster on April 24, 2013.

After an extensive process of multilateral remediation within the Bangladesh apparel trade, wholesale changes have been made, leaving the industry fit for purpose and ready to continue on its path of economic growth.

Things in Bangladesh are not perfect, but are dramatically better than they were prior to the events of 2013. Having been through the necessary procedures I have to applaud the approach adopted by brands, retailers and the industry as a whole to ensure safer, more ethical, compliant trading practices and to establish the basic principal that if you cannot trade in an ethical, sustainable, compliant manner, then you won't be allowed to trade at all.

Sadly, as the recent news emanating from India would indicate, this is not an approach that has been adopted globally and I believe that the apparel industry is in denial, happy to let things carry on until something, tragically, goes wrong.

But this is not about what has been achieved in Bangladesh—this is about the disease that exists throughout the apparel supply chain—from Delhi to Detroit, from Lahore to Leicester, there are examples that show labour rights abuses and sub-standard working conditions are, sadly, everyday occurrences in the garment industry of today. They need to be eradicated and, unfortunately, it would appear that the wider apparel industry is incapable of making the necessary

changes a reality.

Let's not beat around the bush. We are talking about risk to peoples' lives. To my mind, the saving of a few cents here and there on any product does not justify endangering the lives of those that have to make them, largely in lower income sourcing hubs of the globe. Often those involved are the main breadwinners for the family they support. The knock-on effect from calamities of this scale is, put simply, beyond comprehension when it comes to the way it affects ordinary, hard-working humans. This state of affairs is totally unacceptable and things need to change!

The apparel industry is the first to crow about the auditing and sustainable standards that they are maintaining and therein lies the fundamental problem that

fabric maker, proves the point. This was not a fly-by-night operation or sweatshop, it was a respected operation trading with brands in Europe and the United States and yet, as has been reported, an early survey of the factory revealed that the facility wasn't adequately equipped with exit doors, and had "no fire safety measures in place." Yet, Nandan Denim was still allowed to operate. How, given the level of compliance audits that are supposedly in place within the apparel sector, is this possible?

I am afraid that the global apparel industry needs to wake up to the fact that it seems incapable of policing itself and I feel that we need a comprehensive set of universal rules that are applied to all manufacturing hubs and are governed by an independent third party

work and interaction with partners at the highest local and international government levels together with representatives from the side of the manufacturers and retailers and brands. The process needs to be inclusive and all involved have to agree to a systemised standard that is religiously adhered to.

I do not know which body should monitor this process, but it needs to be one with sufficient gravitas to pull together international governments and trade bodies, together with representatives from the apparel community. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) or the United Nation (UN) spring to mind, but an approach by leading apparel bodies would need to be made to secure their participation.



Seven workers lost their life when fire broke out in the unit of Nandan Denim in Ahmedabad, India.

PHOTO: WWW.DESHGUJARAT.COM

allows something like the Indian factory fire to take place. Yes, vast improvements have been made across the globe in terms of worker safety, environmental standards and ethical behaviour but, as they say, "a few rotten apples spoil the barrel" and loopholes obviously exist, as is evident from the events of February 8.

There exists a plethora of auditing standards in the apparel industry regarding factory safety and other aspects of production. Whilst these standards should be applauded as they have helped to improve the industry as a whole, they, sadly do not go far enough and often create confusion amongst manufacturers, brands and retailers as to what standards should be adhered to and which offer the highest levels of worker safety.

Saturday's fire at Nandan Denim, which claims to be India's largest and the world's fourth largest integrated denim

in conjunction with representatives from the apparel industry. As the Bangladesh RMG industry experienced over the last seven years, there is a need for a concise set of standards and rules for everyone to understand, regulated by third party bodies.

For this to be achieved on a global scale, I believe the time is right to establish one, strong, credible auditing standard for the worldwide garment production sector. At the moment auditing is too fragmented, with too many players setting too many diverse standards. The apparel industry needs a common language and not one that is determined by the key players in the industry alone.

What is required is one set of criteria that are applied to any apparel manufacturer wherever in the world they may produce. This is going to require

The global apparel industry can no longer rest in denial. It is no longer acceptable that one set of standards can be applied to one sourcing hub, whilst others flagrantly flaunt their responsibilities and it is no longer acceptable that workers' lives should be put in danger at apparel manufacturing facilities.

The time has come to rid the sector of this behaviour and to re-invent itself in a truly transparent manner—this will only happen with the introduction of stringent legislation and a change in attitude from manufacturers and buyers who now need to be held accountable for the way and with whom they trade. That time is now and there is no more room for excuses.

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# Fresh churnings in Congress after Delhi debacle



PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

NINE months after its meltdown in the national elections, India's main opposition the Congress Party led by Sonia Gandhi, finds itself in fresh in-house churnings over the issue of top leadership. The most immediate trigger for this was the Delhi assembly elections on February 8 as the party failed to win any of the 70 seats. This was a repeat of its performance in the previous poll five years ago.

To make matters worse for the Congress is the unsavoury spectacle of party leaders openly squabbling over the reasons for its Delhi debacle. What has added to the complications for the party is the demand aired publicly for having election to choose its new chief, something unusual for the Congress immersed in the culture of selecting its top leadership.

Soon after the Delhi assembly poll results were out, senior Congress leaders were indulging in mutual recrimination while interpreting the electoral mandate. P Chidambaram projected Aam Aadmi Party's victory in Delhi as a resounding defeat for the Bharatiya Janata Party but was promptly questioned by the Congress' women wing chief Sharmistha Mukherjee, daughter of former president Pranab Mukherjee, who said, "what are we celebrating about?" And instead asked the party men to introspect the Congress' washout in Delhi. Sharmistha was scathing in her response to Chidambaram. Her Twitter response to India's former finance minister read "with due respect, sir, just want to know has

(the Congress) outsourced the task of defeating BJP to state parties?" Similarly, when prominent leader of the party from Mumbai Milind Deora commended on AAP's fiscal management and social welfare programmes for its poll win, it drew a sharp riposte from senior Congress leader Ajay Maken of Delhi who asked Deora to quit the party.

The call for top leadership change in the wake of the Delhi poll rout was aired by senior leader Sandeep Dikshit who was almost immediately supported by Shashi Tharoor. Dikshit was quite blunt in his stand as he said the party did not have the courage to "bell the cat" on the leadership issue. The Congress' chief spokesman Randeep Surjewal pushed back at Sandeep Dikshit saying had Dikshit used as much energy in his own parliamentary constituency, the party would have won the Delhi assembly poll.

Other senior leaders like Manish Tewari, M Veerappa Moily and Jairam Ramesh have gone on record as flaying the Congress' inability to draw lessons from successive electoral setbacks and taking corrective actions relating to issues like the economy, secularism and the perception about the party's failure to think beyond the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty to provide leadership.

The present turmoil in the Congress and the issues being flagged are nothing new. They have been there ever since the Congress was voted out of power in Lok Sabha poll in 2014 with its lowest-ever haul of 44 seats. But no worthwhile effort was made to address the issues. In fact, the opposite has happened every time the party fared well in state-level elections that saw the Congress regaining power in the three heartland states of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh in 2018 and prior to that in Punjab in 2017—the party seemed to lapse into

complacency and slip into the tendency of sweeping thorny in-house issues relating to top leadership and ideology under the carpet.

True, there was a marked improvement in the Congress' performance in the Haryana assembly poll not too long ago. The Congress appeared to rejoice in the break-up of the BJP's alliance with Shiv Sena in Maharashtra triggering a realignment of forces that saw the Sonia Gandhi-led party returning to power. The Congress also savoured the BJP's defeat in Jharkhand assembly elections a few months ago. A section of the party insiders argue that the senior Congress leaders seem to be oblivious to the fact that the party is just a junior partner in the ruling coalition in both Maharashtra and Jharkhand where the regional parties Shiv Sena and Jharkhand Mukti Morcha are leaders. In Karnataka, the Congress had given up its own claim of leading a coalition government some years ago and ceded that position to its junior ally Janata Dal (Secular)—a key regional party—for keeping the BJP at bay after the assembly polls. Is the Congress smug in the belief that the party's sharp decline in two successive national and some state polls in the last five and a half years were merely a cyclical phenomenon? The discussion within the Congress to revive itself organisationally seems to have taken a back seat.

Will the Delhi poll verdict bring the Congress out of its "slumber", as one of its senior leaders put it? Rahul Gandhi stepped down as the party chief in the wake of the 2019 national election setback and it took Congress almost six months to give the reins back to his mother Sonia as interim president in August last year, hoping to put in place a new leadership likely through a credible

internal democratic process.

How does the Congress go about emerging from the leadership limbo? Moily has called for a brainstorming session and it is possible that this would be held in April after the budget session in parliament. Tharoor has suggested that the voting for a new Congress president as well the Congress Working Committee, the party's top decision-making forum, be done through ten thousand delegates drawn from the central and state leadership structures. Senior party leader Prithviraj Chavan opposed the selection culture in the Congress to pick its president. He also blamed the "coterie" around Sonia Gandhi for not allowing organisational elections for years when she was the party chief from 1998 to 2017.

The Congress' decline over the years in several states it once used to dominate has resulted in the rise and flowering of regional parties. The AAP's recent triumph in Delhi is the latest example of that. This, along with the BJP, have ensured the steep erosion of the grand old party's standing as the anchor of a pan-India alliance against the saffron surge.

What should worry the Congress more is that most of these regional parties do not share the Congress' intense antipathy towards the BJP. The reason is that these regional parties are in power in many states and need to work in close collaboration with the BJP-led government in power at the Centre to get funds and other assistance for their development agendas. Most of the regional parties ruling the states have given enough indications that they want cooperative and not confrontationist relationship with the Centre.

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