

The emperor and his Bangladeshi wardrobe

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BANGLADESH, a country best known in the apparel world as a producer of low end quality of garments and having no audacity to offer better products is about to face a peril.

Maybe a substantial number amongst us are heading for closure and a major financial disaster with quota free 2005 marching towards us in lightning speed.

Point is, are we screaming loud enough? Are we being heard at all?

Despite our high hopes of China not being able to upset the global economy with their free flow of exports and flooding the world and killing all our markets , the truth of the phasing out of MFA will happen. Our prayers of capping mechanisms to contain China will probably not happen.

What then is going to be the scenario and how are we to confront it?

Reality is we are still going to have the same size factories and same laborforce , the same technologies and the same goodwill to sell an average product. Therefore finding out what is going to give us the extra mile to cross the hurdle is the most important search of the decade.

Therefore, amidst all the threats and disasters , I want to share with you only a flash of what our lives look like...A7 o'clock wake up call is a common scenario...except that the wake up call comes from within the overcharged brain cells that notoriously remind us of the pending shipments , pending payments, the pending discount ,the airfreight negotiations and even the cancellations.

The best thing about our trade is never having to stall any issue beyond seven days.

Example of such negotiation is as follows: "Hello, is that you, Rubana?" is a common line that haunts me almost every day!

Neither do I have the courage to refuse the call nor do I have the right answers at that time of the day. Yet I take the call and with courage prepare my defence. The conversation is mostly about the document which is pending, a shipment that is reaching them late, a style that is not selling well in the market.

At the end, the other party is convinced that he has given me enough for me to react to and concludes that since he has reached me, his problems will be taken care of.

This is another problem in our trade...there is a serious lack of a conscious mid level management. A couple of years ago, the merchant who diligently works with an account, generally used to get very ambitious and used to leave the company just to float one of his own and would try and sway a few buyers from the company's database.

Now, the scenario is a little changed...as these merchants turned entrepreneurs have found out that life is hard and making a break in today's market is not that

easy and many have them have returned to their home base.

But the pressure is now on the take home packages... It is almost a common practice to double the salary packet of a merchant of a competitor and persuade him/her to sever all his loyalties with his present company and join the new one.

So, this is how we are all fighting against one another and surviving.

In the market of greed, too many of us are fighting against our own interests and few of us have the benefit of a conscience to try otherwise.

A buyer asking us to make a trip to his hometown almost expects us to fly out in a day's notice and reminds us that these trips are potential investments that we need to make in order to cement the relationship. But how many of us can afford to fly out only for a day to Europe and America and have an hour long meeting with the buyers and board the next plane back home.. just in time to attend another meeting in the coun-

try. So, I ask him humbly, what is the customer looking for now ..what are they buying? Oh...they prefer spending their money on vacations, cars and in case if a garment is selling at a dirt cheap price, only then they look towards the clothing shelves.

At this point , I have enough sense to figure out that he is hinting...yes...hinting at the pile of objective sheets that are on the table and is trying to tempt my greedy self to give in to his target prices ... ! Hence begins the endless negotiations and I start lowering my prices just with the hope of winning the programmes.

Then after I have met my targets, the buyer pauses for a second and says that he will only be in a position to confirm the orders after he has finished his Asian tour and has completed his entire research on the price range from my competitors. And should I forget that Hungry Indonesia, Smart Korea, Fashion India , I am to be punished with a

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There is another dimension that has been a comparatively recent addition in our trade: Compliance in all caps.

Technical compliance is a fossilised term now as all the standard factories are more or less technically sound. It is the social aspect that we are talking about now.

Having enough toilets or 60 hours a week are a couple of factors that we do not object to.

But, buying the buyer's representatives checking our workers' teeth is another joke.

Despite the doctor's age certificate, our workers have to go through a mouth checking process which apparently establishes the correct age of the workers. There is only a limit to what we can take and what we can achieve. With compliance prerequisites getting stronger and stronger and with newest demands on structural compliance

Maybe it is time to try that.

We instruct the factory to make the boards and lay even a red carpet for this particular gentleman. Flowers were missing...so we even opt for flowers and arrange a horrendous bouquet from the Kanchipur bridge, where even the sight of fresh flowers is a utopia.

The thought's what counts, says my Chairman.

Of course, I add.

The Hour arrives and the gentleman does too. He steps out of the car and he is totally oblivious to the red carpet that is carefully laid for him to royally tread upon. His second glance towards the board reading: welcome,Mr.X baffles him...he doesn't know what all of this is about.

Finally the bouquet happens to be the last nail in the coffin.

The factory manager overstretches his hands and gives him the pathetic flowers and he takes them, quickly shoves them away and walk straight onto the floor...with no words for me or my Honourable Chairman!

My boss looks at me and says: *Bandor nach holey bhalo hoto, ki bolo?* (a literal translation: maybe a monkey dance would have done the trick?)

So, here we are , fighting for better products, lacking all design direction, having no backward linkage, miserably lagging behind in any value added products, and desperately trying to hold on to the two-digit export figures that we have and all we see is the grey instead of the clear azure...What is going to be left for us at the end of the 31st of December, 2004 ?

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try and not be jetlagged?

However, by the grace of God, we belong to a special species who laugh and despair at a calculated pace and never succumb to physical pressure.

Melatonin is just another medicine and falling asleep onboard a flight is a common sight.

Be it a 2-hour long flight or a 20-hour long one, we all blissfully sleep under compulsion to take a break from our nagging survival mode. Skipping all meals is common, refusing all entertainment is real and being unaware of the turbulence up in the skies is normal.

The rude awakening starts with the landing announcement of the cabin crew and THUD...we land into lands that we do not know well and the anticipation begins.

Checking into hotels that are our homes for two nights , having alien meals are things we really do not look forward to. Yet all of that happens...and while I sulk at this unfamiliar surroundings, my Grameen gets overcrowded with spicy SMS's teasing me about the good times that I am having out there.

God bless friends, fun and flava!

Meetings generally begin with a negative note with complaints of past shipments which were delayed and how the customer has had sales losses and how he/she cannot wait to recover all that money from the naughty vendor. Moreover, the economy has been so bad that the customers have rarely been buying clothes...! At this point I blankly wonder whether coming to this particular meeting has been a

declining quantity that season and my programmes that I carefully performed over the last couple of years are to be awarded to any of them while I pine away for them. And should I ever even think of a seven days delay, I am to lose that customer the following season as apparently they have taken enough of beating from us and they have worthily graduated with full knowledge of our topography and are fully aware of our floods and how good or bad it gets as an excuse.

After all, I did send them photographs of boats plying on the factory premises during the peak period and I did narrate our plights to them with utmost care and lucidity!! Any question on hartial and I hastily jump up with a ready answer of Bangladesh being totally politically stable and how hartial do not touch our lives anymore! So, the next time the buyers are here, they ask, can they have meetings freely and not be whisked off to our office in an ambulance? I pause and carefully answer in the affirmative.

Am I not speaking too soon? Aren't February and March supposed to be turmoil ridden months? The meeting ends in a positive note and I do know that at the end of the buyer's trip, he will give us the orders but I also know that the price compression has begun.

With the threat of 2005 , the buyers have all started to squeeze our margins and in case if we stretch our luck too far, we will lose the business and it will shift elsewhere.

Loyalties do not exist anymore, relationships that we invested in for

in the manufacturing units, we are sinking.

So far, I have taken you through a trip of mine but we are yet to land back home.

As soon as I land, I do not even have the time to go back home as quite conveniently our office is next to the airport. As soon as I step into the office, my mailbox is bursting with mails that have poured in during my plane trip. My personal mailbox is filled with screaming "urgent" notices and the group incoming one is over saturated and is screaming "deletion".

One most important mail refers to a particular trip of a compliance director who is to visit us and take us through the formal process of compliance recheck.

My heart sinks as this particular trip can nullify any effort that we have put into developing a business relationship with this buyer. Nothing can go wrong, words have to be perfectly phrased, machines have to be immaculate, the factory condition must be impeccable, no fuses are to be entertained, no leaks anywhere, bathrooms can't be wet (clients go and check the bathroom facilities before they even engage in a business conversation)...the list could go on.

The auspicious date is only a day away. I speak to my Chairman and update him with all details and His Royal Highness is happy.

But we both have an unsettled heart...what is that thing about the red carpet reception that is so commonly used and what about all the boards saying: welcome in red??

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Just when we have almost perfected the lower end products, instead of giving us a chance to move on to the better ones, suddenly our bathrooms , physical exercises, health care gimmicks have turned out to be more important to most of the clients.

What is going to be left for us at the end of the 31st of December, 2004 ?

An economy in turmoil, thousands of families facing near destitution , and yet so many of us are still unable to steer the conscience of the Emperors who are almost going to go naked with fullest confidence than fill their wardrobe with products from Bangladesh, a country of promise and pain.

This article reflects my personal pain as a manufacturer and I humbly want to add that all that I have written does not in any way belittle my great clients who I cherish and treasure working with. It is the system, the concept that we all need to work with and whatever major corrections are to be done should be actively done at our end, collectively with the support of the conscious politicians and trade reformers.

God bless the RMG sector and God bless us, the God forsaken species of manufacturers!

Rubana Huq is a leading business woman in the RMG sector.

The unique Unicode

MIR LUTFUL KABIR SAADI

THE Unicode character set is a character set projected to represent the writing schemes of all of the world's major languages. Unicode provides a unique number for every character, no matter what the platform, what the programme, or what the language.

The Unicode Standard was created by a team of computer professionals, linguists, and scholars to become a worldwide character standard, one easily used for text encoding everywhere. To that end, the Unicode Standard follows a set of fundamental principles: Universal repertoire, logical order, efficiency, unification, characters not glyphs, dynamic composition, semantics, equivalent sequence, plain text and convertibility.

The Unicode Standard is a character coding system designed to support the worldwide interchange, processing, and display of the written texts of the diverse languages of the modern world. In addition, it supports classical and historical texts of many written languages. Formally, the Unicode Standard is defined by the latest printed version of the book The Unicode Standard, plus online documents and data that update and extend the book's normative specifications and informative content.

The Unicode is developed by the Unicode Consortium. The Unicode Consortium is a non-profit organisation founded to develop, extend and promote use of the Unicode Standard, which specifies the representation of text in modern software products and standards. The membership of the consortium represents a broad spectrum of corporations and organisations in the computer and information processing industry. The consortium is supported financially solely through membership dues. Membership in the Unicode Consortium is open to organisations and individuals anywhere in the world who support the Unicode Standard and wish to assist in its extension and implementation.

The Unicode Standard defines codes for characters used in all the major languages written today. Scripts include the European alphabetic scripts, Middle Eastern right-to-left scripts, and many scripts of Asia. The Unicode Standard further includes punctuation marks, diacritics, mathematical symbols, technical symbols, arrows, dingbats, etc. It provides codes for diacritics, which are modifying character marks such as the tilde (~), that are used in conjunction with base characters to represent accented letters (ñ, for example). In all, the Unicode Standard, Version 3.2 provides codes for 95,221 characters from the world's alphabets, ideograph sets, and symbol collections.

Basically, computers just deal with numbers. They store letters and other characters by conveying a number for each one. Before Unicode was invented, there were hundreds of different encoding systems for assigning these numbers. No single encoding could contain enough characters. For example, the European Union alone requires several different encodings to cover all its languages. Even for a single language like English no single encoding was adequate for all the letters, punctuation and technical symbols in common use.

These encoding systems also conflict with one another. That is, two encodings can use the same number for two different characters, or use different numbers for the same character. Any given computer (especially servers) needs to support many different encodings; yet whenever data is passed between different encodings or platforms, that data always run the risk of corruption.

The Unicode Standard has been adopted by such industry leaders as Apple, HP, IBM, Just System, Microsoft, Oracle, SAP, Sun, Sybase, Unisys and many others. Unicode is required by modern standards such as XML, Java, ECMAScript (JavaScript), LDAP, CORBA 3.0, WML, etc., and is the

official way to implement ISO/IEC 10646. It is supported in many operating systems, all modern browsers, and many other products. The emergence of the Unicode Standard, and the availability of tools supporting it, is among the most significant recent global software technology trends.

Incorporating Unicode into client-server or multi-tiered applications and websites offers significant cost savings over the use of legacy character sets. Unicode enables a single software product or a single website to be targeted across multiple platforms, languages and countries without reengineering. It allows data to be transported through many different systems without corruption.

The primary feature of Unicode 3.2 is the addition of 1016 new encoded characters. These additions consist of several Philippine scripts, a large collection of mathematical symbols, and small sets of other letters and symbols. All of the newly encoded characters in Unicode 3.2 are additions to the Basic Multilingual Plane (BMP). Unicode 3.2 also features amended contributory data files, to bring the data files up to date against the expanded repertoire of characters. All outstanding errata and corrigenda to the Unicode Standard are included in this specification.

The design of Unicode is based on the simplicity and consistency of ASCII, but goes far beyond ASCII's limited ability to encode only the Latin alphabet. The Unicode Standard provides the capacity to encode all of the characters used for the written languages of the world. To keep character coding simple and efficient, the Unicode Standard assigns each character a unique numeric value and name.

The Unicode Standard directly addresses only the encoding and semantics of text. It addresses no other action performed on the text. For example, the word processor may check the typist's input as it is being entered, and display misspellings with a wavy underline. It may insert line breaks when it counts a certain number of characters entered since the last line break. An important principle of the Unicode Standard is that it does not specify how to carry out these processes as long as the character encoding and decoding is performed properly.

The Unicode Standard specifies an algorithm for the presentation of text with bidirectional behaviour; for example, Arabic and English. Characters are stored in logical order. The Unicode Standard includes characters to specify changes in direction when scripts of different directionality are mixed. For all scripts Unicode text is in logical order within the memory representation, corresponding to the order in which text is typed on the keyboard.

You may not find the character in what you think is the obvious spot. While the characters in Unicode are grouped into blocks, this is only a rough grouping because characters can be categorised many different ways. In particular, punctuations and symbols are applicable across a very wide range of usages and scripts (writing systems). Even the notion of a script itself is not well-defined; text in a given language may make use of characters from multiple scripts.

Finally, your character may not yet be encoded in Unicode.

There is a well defined submission process for new characters or scripts. This process verifies that the proposed character is in fact a candidate for encoding. In some cases, this process may not be straightforward: for example, Egyptian hieroglyphs have not yet been encoded because there is not yet general agreement on the exact repertoire of characters.

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The gambit of politics, history and international hegemony

Dominating our state of affairs

AMIRUL ISLAM CHOWDHURY

A comparatively young scholar looks into the governance of a country where legal order is destroyed and a condition is created through weak or no enforcement either because of no intention to enforce, or incapability to enforce, law and justice. Over time various national and international situations ultimately turn such a state into a 'troubled state', 'weak state', 'disabled state', 'quasi state', 'marginal state', 'arbitrary state', and finally appears as a 'Compromised Republic'. In such a situation, the state like Bangladesh fails to fulfil the basic needs of the majority of the population and the citizens lose interest in the state.

The author explains the behaviour of different institutions and actors within and outside the state boundary. He very aptly studies the 'status politics' in Bangladesh and shows how different actors, groups and institutions draw special rights and enforce conditions for legislation to sustain gains of these extra privileges even at the cost of priorities of the Republic. He further tells how extra legislation the gains accrue to these groups in the form of tax evasion, rent seeking and all types of government regulated honours and privileges. Because of this phenomenon, according to the author, the enforcement of legal rights becomes expensive and remains in many cases, unenforced. In this situation the legal order is destroyed, good laws cease to have validity.

A situation is further created where not only the domestic forces