

RMG sector must realise its full potential

Devise ways to make it happen

THE factors behind the rather sluggish trend in our RMG sector have been identified by experts but the real challenge before them is to suggest how we go about redressing them for the sake of utilising the sector's full potential. The US' cap on China's export growth at 7.5 percent till January 2008 is nearing its end with countries like Bangladesh facing the prospect of increased competition from China. But we should be able to weather that storm like we did in the first phase of the post MFA era in 2005 provided we can utilise our strengths and overcome our weaknesses with some special efforts.

We know the things we need to do but what is important is to set an order of priority not only in terms of urgency but also of doability of the agenda. The first order of priority is to cut back on our lead time which is very long. Buyers would like an order to materialise on a short notice but we need 90 to 120 days to deliver on an order. One of the reasons being we are overwhelmingly dependent on import of raw materials for manufacture of readymade garments. There had been track records of delays at the level of customs and port authorities. Port efficiency has since increased but there is room for further improvement. Basically we lack in backward linkages to garment industries to enhance our value addition by way of attaining self reliance in the garment manufacturing sector. In woven garments we don't even have 20 percent backward linkages. Large doses of investment in this area are imperative.

Labour unrest is an area where we can have a turnaround in the situation with special efforts made to improve worker-management relations based on a basis of continuing dialogues and adherence to tripartite agreement by all units.

The majority of our garment factories, some put it at more than 70 percent are compliant yet some outside media are said to be showing the problem factories. Our missions abroad need to counter this propaganda.

The bottom line is, we should have a composite committee with private and government sector representatives to devise a strategy to respond to the current challenges before the garment sector.

Girl Child Day

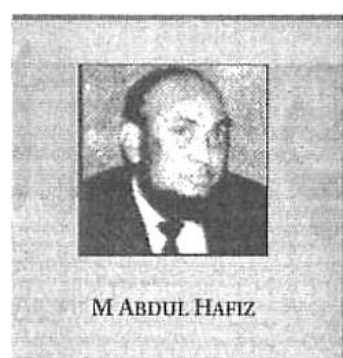
Ensure their fundamental rights

NATIONAL Girl Child Day was observed on Sunday with the slogan to promote and protect the rights of girl children in the country. In a message to mark the occasion, chief adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed hoped that observance of the day would help remove negative attitude towards girl children and help increase awareness in society about them. We believe the issue is important for a number of reasons, the most important one being that a girl of today is a mother tomorrow; hence she needs to be given full attention and care. But when we look around the country the prevailing scenario does not make us too happy. Negative attributes like wide-scale illiteracy, poverty, malnutrition, child abuse, gender discrimination, child labour and child marriage are contributing to the woes of young girls in society. We feel, therefore, a lot has to be done to ensure their fundamental rights to education, health, shelter, security and work.

Research studies show that the situation of young girls in South Asian countries including Bangladesh is not something one can talk about with pride. A little girl is up to three times more likely than boys to suffer from acute malnutrition. In many societies parents prefer a boy child to a girl child. Girls are often kept out of school and put to work from dawn to dusk. Another report says that in many countries a large number of abortions are performed on female fetus every year. She is married without her consent and becomes pregnant long before her body is ready. The leading cause of death for girls of age 15 to 19 is complications from pregnancy.

Policy makers in Bangladesh will have to address the situation on the basis of baseline studies done by various government research organisations, NGOs and UN organisations. By all means, the relevant authorities will have to invest more time and resources to create enabling environment for the healthy growth of girl children.

The crumbling of a monolith



M. ABDUL HAFIZ

ONLY months ago it was inconceivable that a monolith like Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) would be crumbling the way it is now doing. With most of its leaders either incarcerated or on the run, the party -- like a rudderless ship -- has gone adrift. There is nothing to which it could be anchored, as the party was seldom endowed with even a rudiment of idealism.

The seed of its disintegration was indeed contained in the way it came into being. Always and everywhere a political party based on sheer opportunism and expediency is destined to meet a similar fate.

In the wake of the 1975 putsch, General Ziaur Rahman, the eventual founder of the BNP, was its sole beneficiary, and after the countermove that

POLITICS has its stages of development, and it is mandatory to traverse each one. None of them can be skipped over. One is bound to be caught if that short-circuiting occurs. The public contacts, representation, and opinion are indispensable ingredients of political parties. If that chemistry is missing, it flies in the face of the public to whom the prospect, if any, of the party concerned is fore-doomed.

followed he emerged as the "man of the hour" at one of the nation's defining moments. The country's destiny then lay in his hands, which alone could steer its course. The nation, already off-course, awaited a course correction when Zia chose to seize political power to give fresh dimension to an already complex situation.

It was at this juncture that the general was directly in need of a political base for staying in power. He proceeded in a meandering way, hopping from option to option, to finally cobble together an outfit of a disparate lot of politicians and political hopefuls drawn from the extreme left and far right, including the collaborators of 1971, who all were willing to cooperate with politics' new mascot on the basis of some quid pro quo.

In the absence of any binding glue of political ideology,

except some rhetoric of Zia himself, he lured all who paid him fealty with the handsome largesse of political rehabilitation, ministerial berth, plum appointment, business opportunity, big contracts, and so on. The heterogeneous elements from the political wilderness who collected under Zia's umbrella duly obliged him, and helped to prop up the new political formation that suited both sides. Presto! The BNP was born almost without pain.

Although the BNP was imposed from the top, it goes to the credit of Zia and his successors for taking the party to the doorstep of the public. Later in elections -- even if smeared with possible shenanigans -- the BNP came off with flying colours, and had the distinction of ruling the country for most of its existence. But the snag remained as the BNP was looked upon as an officially

patronised party by independent observers.

Moreover, being a party that was incubated in the isolation and safety of the cantonment, it couldn't harden enough for effective political activism; neither could it acquire the required resilience to face adversity or counter hostile situations. It never had to struggle, either for coming into existence or for sailing through the choppy waters of power politics.

So, it is no wonder it couldn't stand in the teeth of the storm. The BNP's colour bearers will no doubt be pained at the unceremonious demise of the party. Ironically, the BNP was on the verge of collapse just when it was at its peak during the party's last tenure of rule.

Emboldened by the party's spectacular success in the 2001 election, in which it secured two-thirds majority, its top



operatives turned arrogant and went about plundering, and resorting to the criminalisation of politics on a scale never witnessed before. Its cup of sin was full to its brim before it started falling apart like a house of cards. That robbed the BNP of its moral authority, dislodging the party from the moral high ground it had held so far. Now, as it is left to lurch, there are few tears.

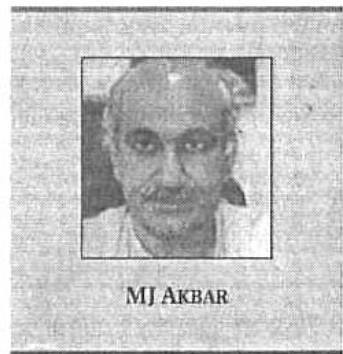
The BNP is now a comatose patient, held together on the life support of a few still sympathising with it while counting its last few breaths. Can it be resuscitated, or a new life breathed into it, is the question being asked. But, given the process of its birth, without the involvement of the public for

whom it is meant, the BNP has since outlived its utility. It will, however, be an interesting experience to contemplate the country's future politics without the BNP in the political scene.

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Twenty20 politics



MJ AKBAR

THOSE who celebrate India's victory over Pakistan in the final of the Twenty 20 tournament celebrate the least of the team's achievements. The game was superb precisely because it was so evenly matched, the teams separated, in the end, by the strength of a single flick of the wrist.

The youngsters led by Mahendra Singh Dhoni deserve applause because they defeated much more than the best cricket sides in the world.

They defeated, for starters, Shoaib Malik. The young Pakistani captain ended a glorious tournament on a silly note when he thanked "all Muslims" for their support to Pakistan. Pakistani players seem obliged to appropriate the Almighty into all proceedings, but that is their privilege. They would be wise, however, not to appropriate all Muslims on their side, for the good reason that all Muslims are not in, or with, Pakistan.

Perhaps Mr. Malik lost the match because he was wearing a blindfold. That is the only explanation for his inability to recognise that there were two Muslims in the Indian side. Irfan Pathan, Man of the Match, did everything possible

to remind Pakistan that Indian Muslims wanted India to win.

It may be news to Pakistan's players that Irfan's father was a muezzin in a small mosque in Gujarat, and his mother wears the hijab in public. The subcontinent apart, does Shoaib Malik believe that a billion Muslims, Indonesians, Malays, Arabs and Turks, were sitting closely glued to their television sets, cheering Pakistan? It would be a miracle if 99% had heard of cricket, a game as foreign to them as the English language.

Perhaps the difference between victory and defeat is the gap between a closed and open mind.

Dhoni's boys did their country great service in a second subliminal region: they defeated the egotism that has bogged Indian cricket for so long. The egos of the big three, Sachin Tendulkar, Sourav Ganguly and Rahul Dravid have become bigger than the team. Three ex-captains in a single eleven must be some sort of a world record.

The team was divided into three individuals in different moods, ranging from sulk to self-interest

to petulance, and eight other players trying to fit into the minimal space these three left for others. Trust me, if the Big Three had any idea that the Twenty20 victory would be as big as it became, they would have been in the team: fitness is not a problem in this form of the game, because Twenty20 is only half as demanding as the full one-dayer.

On the other hand, if the big three had been there, the youngsters might not have won. Alone, they had a different body language, a palpable common commitment, and unity of spirit. This was a victory for new India, which has now marched a step ahead of modern India.

It was a triumph for small-town India, for popular rather than rarefied India, for an inclusive nation, not an exclusive elite. If this is the future, the future is bliss.

It is tempting to see this as the defining culture of contemporary India, the essence of a confident democracy, its populism rid of both elitist genuflection and sectarian tensions.

No definition of popular culture can encompass the whole of India;

but will there be enough such Indians to control the balance in the next general elections?

The thought did occur to me that one section of India had adopted the basic tenets of Twenty20 cricket even before the rest of the country became addicted: television news. Frenzy, drama, nasal diction, and a compulsive need for instant decisions have become its hallmarks. Not all Indian television is there yet, mercifully, but the attitude is pervasive enough to spill over into parts of print.

And so, when the left was playing chess with the government on the nuclear deal, much of the media kept covering it by the rules of Twenty20 cricket. Artificial teams were conjured up to lend excitement to developments. The CPI(M) was split into the pro-Congress Bengal Lions, led by Souradeb Bhattacharya, and the China Kontras, led by Rahul Karat. Journalists were chasing their own version of the story, reporting the collapse of the China Kontras in the twelfth over, or a compromise when the collapse did not take place.

There is a useful rule to remember when covering the left, and they will demand coverage for some time yet. It functions democratically; they take the politburo and the central committee seriously. This means that there is inevitably debate on issues as important as the survival of a coalition that rules the country. But this debate is not conducted in public.

Differences are sorted out behind closed doors, and when they cannot be reconciled a vote determines their fate. The CPI(M) does not conduct its debate through the media, much as it may dishearten the media to discover this. When the party's general secretary takes a position, he does so after taking a sense of his committee. It is not arbitrary imposition. No comrade is impressed by traditional media games like twisting half of a quote to suit an editorial line.

What is surprising is not the media's willingness to see what it wants to see, but that so many seasoned politicians fall into the same constricted mire. Almost everyone in the Dr. Manmohan Singh government had convinced himself that the Marxists would have an epiphany moment at their party conclaves in Kolkata, and return, sheepishly no doubt, to pay homage at the feet of the prime minister. The venerable Jyoti Basu was meant to bring the Marxists into harmony with the American timetable for the nuclear deal.

Clearly, the first thing that happens when you join government in Delhi is amnesia about anything that might be inconve-

nient. Jyoti Basu was on the verge of becoming prime minister of India in 1997 instead of Mr. Inder Gujral, when he was stopped not by his allies but his own party. The politburo voted against the idea because it was not ready to permit the party to share power in Delhi.

Jyoti Basu did not utter a word of protest, although much later, in an interview to this columnist he did call that decision a "historic blunder." Any party that lives by such rigid discipline cannot be split by media whims.

If the Manmohan Singh government does not halt the process by which the nuclear deal travels to the next stage, through the IAEA and the Nuclear Suppliers Group, the left will withdraw support. This is what the left has been saying and this is what the left will do.

Politics is not a Twenty20 game, or even a limited overs match; it is a patient Test series, with long stretches of grafting and boredom, and innumerable breaks for lunch and tea. Excitement is limited to crunch time, and such occasions are rare. One is due in the first week of October, when the next, and perhaps final, round of talks takes place between the government and the left.

The chief negotiator for the Congress is foreign minister Pranab Mukherjee, but he is not the chief decision-maker. He would have happily bought six months of silence so that the government could get on with the rest of life.

But whatever happens, do remember that the game in Delhi is chess, not Twenty20 cricket.

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A business ethic to change the society

KAZI NABIUL HAQUE

CORPORATE social responsibility (CSR) can be defined as social responsibility of the corporate sector in making changes in socio-economic aspects.

CSR is considered as an instrument for making business more committed towards social needs and national development through ethical, legal, social and commercial conduct.

The context of Bangladesh: Historical perspectives

CSR concepts and practices in Bangladesh have a long history of philanthropic activities from time immemorial. These philanthropic activities included donations to different charitable organisations, poor people, and religious institutions.

Till now, most of the businesses in Bangladesh have been family owned and first generation businesses. They are involved in com-

munity development work in the form of charity, without having any definite policy regarding the expenses or any concrete motive regarding financial gains in many instances. Moreover, most of the SMEs fall under the informal sector, and do not have the management structure and resources to address the social and environmental issues.

These limitations drive the top management of local companies to think only about profit maximisation rather than doing business considering the triple bottom line: profit, planet and people (CSR definition of Lotus Holdings). The discussions on CSR practices in Bangladesh are relatively new, but not the concept itself.

Being a part of the global market, it is difficult for businesses to ignore CSR standards, specially in the export sector. In general, it is true that in Bangladesh labour rights practices, environmental management, and transparency

in corporate governance are not satisfactory, largely due to poor enforcement of existing laws and inadequate pressure from civil society and interest groups like consumer forums.

A focus on CSR in Bangladesh would be useful, not only for improving corporate governance, labour rights, work place safety, fair treatment of workers, community development and environmental management, but also for industrialisation and ensuring of global market access.

Nowadays, many CSR dimensions are practiced in Bangladesh. The SMEs largely depend upon export. The US and EU buyers set guidelines to RMG industry to ensure the standards. The 1992 Harkin's Bill, the subsequent consumer and industry boycott of RMG products by US, and the consequent remedial moves by the local RMG sector is one example.

Moreover, some buyers from

EU visited the sites of the recently collapsed garments factories. A temporary ban was also imposed on shrimp export to the EU on health and hygienic grounds, and appropriate remedial action followed in that instance too. But, some of the exporters found difficulty in convincing the US/EU buyers to have positive attitude towards Bangladesh due to inadequate CSR practices.

CSR implications on corporate sector

Speakers from different roundtables identified dearth of expertise and poor accountability as major obstacles in practicing CSR in Bangladesh. The roundtable on CSR, titled "Corporate social responsibility practices and challenges in Bangladesh," was a part of a "Dialogue series on CSR in action."

The private sector enterprises will remain weak unless and until they practice CSR in their ven-

tures, the speakers said.

CSR impact on community development

CSR in Bangladesh can also contribute a lot to community development. The corporate houses can develop the community by creating employment, providing primary education, contribution to infrastructure development like making roads and highways, and addressing environmental concerns.

CSR in health sector

Historically, Bangladesh has been following philanthropic practices for health sector support since the 15th century. Our tradition of running charitable dispensaries, and herbal and homeopathic clinics, was part of social obligation and dignity for the rich people, and many of them were from the business community.

In the 20th century some business and social entities like Ispahani group, Kumudini trusts, and Kundesweri herbal medicines

are notable for their contribution to the health sector. Since its inception, the Ispahani group has been extending its cooperation with the idea of "corporate community coalition" apart from the contemporary notion of CSR, and was an inspiration for emerging businesses to engage in CSR interventions.

The group mainly focused on specific social arenas, like health, education, relief, rehabilitation, where business engagement was an urgent need. An institution like the Islamia Eye Hospital illustrates their commitment to health sector.

Current trend of CSR practices in Bangladesh

According to the business community, there have been significant numbers of CSR practices in the areas of social benefits, response to emergency or immediate needs, crisis management, education, environment, human rights, and health. Particularly in

the health sector, the priority in establishing hospitals and medical colleges, and getting donations for building hospitals and supporting health awareness programs is not high.

Corporate governance and CSR in Bangladesh

Lack of effective good governance in Bangladesh has resulted significantly in lack of business ethics and poor CSR culture. In Bangladesh, the private sector seems to focus on earning profits in the short term, ignoring the issue of responsible behaviour and the desirability of earning the trust of the consumers, which are important for the long-term success of their operations.

Selling of adulterated low quality products at high prices, cheating in weight, and above all, hoarding to reap dishonest profit, all confirm this. In the absence of socially responsible behaviour in the private sector, there is need to enhance capacity building on the part of the state to intervene and

implement sanctions effectively to enforce compliance.

The following recommendations have been made to consolidate the objective of this article:

- Create primary awareness about CSR among academics, managers, stakeholders and students.
- Comply with the standards of CSR, following international firms and organisations.
- Increase understanding and visibility of CSR.
- Develop institutional capacity on CSR, and its management for social causes.
- Develop professionals in resource mobilisation and development.
- Facilitate CSR culture among corporate bodies for good causes of development issues.
- Build NGO-Corporate partnership to exchange resources and expertise for social development.

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