

INCLUDING THE DIFFERENTLY-ABLED

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ELITA KARIM

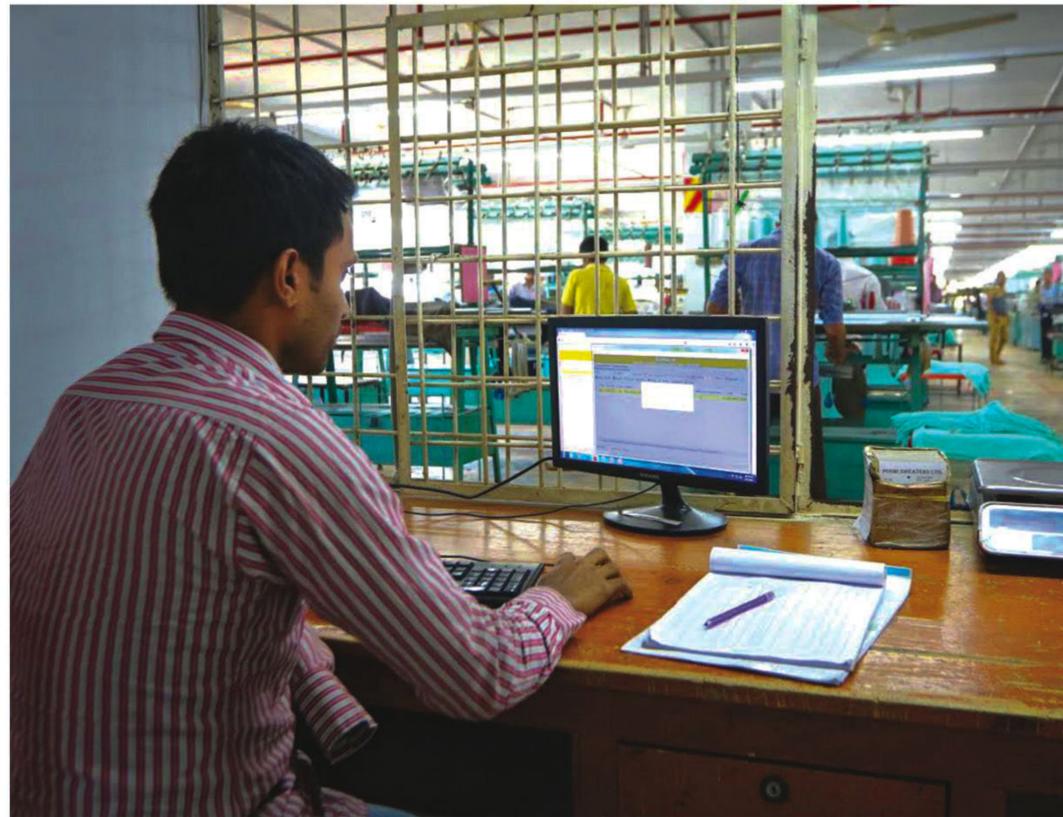


PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

25-year-old Khalil is seen typing away his data entry assignment, at the Distribution Section of Posmi Sweaters, a factory located in Gazipur. Like any other worker at the factory, Khalil is trying to meet his deadline before hitting lunch break, during which he would hang out with his fellow colleagues from the 'Stitching' and 'Pattern' departments, who also happen to be his friends. "I was working with them till last week," he smiles. "I was shifted to the Administration section because I was trained in computers at the Centre for the Rehabilitation of the Paralysed (CRP)." Khalil is missing fingers from his right hand, and his left arm is slightly twisted. Clearly, he has to make an extra effort to type instructions and compose letters and memos. However, he does it with accuracy and speed.

Less than two years ago, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between CRP, Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers, Exporters Association (BGMEA) and Promotion of Social and Environmental Standards in the Industry (PSES), to start an Inclusive Job Centre (IJC)—a platform using which workers with disabilities would be evaluated and placed at several positions of work in factories. Later on, Bangladesh Knit Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA) joined the platform. Around 200 factories are now part of this project. PSES is a joint project of the governments of Bangladesh and Germany. It is being implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, which works on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), in partnership with the Bangladesh government.

Khalil had just finished his BCom exams in Mymensingh, when he injured himself by falling off a tree. "The local *kobiraaj* had given me some medical treatment, which had not worked," he says. "In fact, by the time I reached Mymensingh Medical, my arms were in a bad state. Eventually, my fingers had to be cut off."

Like Khalil, several other individuals with disabilities are now working at Posmi Sweaters. Rupali, in her late teens, is working as an Assistant Admin Officer, at the factory. Her legs are partially paralysed and she sometimes has to use the crutches or the wheelchair to move around faster.

"There are around 2,000 employees working in the factory," says Moshikul Azam Shajal, Managing Director, Posmi Sweaters Ltd. "Many of them have some form of disability or other. I remember last year, there was a woman whose legs were paralysed. But when she came for the induction training, we noticed she was quick with numbers and a very sharp worker. She worked with us for less than a year, after which she got a better job offer and left."

At the induction training, all the new trainees come together for workshops, trainings, counseling and safety trainings as well. "We do a small orientation programme and show them around the factory," he says. "Also, we show them what to do during a fire, earthquake and

give them first-aid training as well."

Posmi is one of the 200 Ready-Made Garments (RMG) factories where PSES is working through its partner organisation CDD for mainstreaming persons with disabilities in the RMG workforce. Posmi Sweaters factory, for instance, has set up barrier-free access to buildings by installing ramps. All in all, more than 300 persons with disabilities have been successfully trained to work in the sewing machine department as operators and supervisors, along with 2400 persons without disabilities. Seventy five percent

of these trained people were placed in suitable positions apart from the 500 people with disabilities who are interested to work in the garment sector and have registered at the job centre, situated at CRP Mirpur, specifically set up for this purpose. Here, they are given advice and training and placed in employment.

According to Sarwat Ahmad, Senior Advisor, PSES, GIZ, the IJC has already organised several sensitisation meetings and workshops to increase employment and career opportunities for persons with disabilities in the RMG sector. "The

centre is operated as a platform which would help in sharing of information, counselling, capacity building and also offer support to find jobs for individuals with special needs."

A tour inside Posmi Sweaters will showcase hard work, honesty and sheer determination amongst the workers to achieve their goals as best as possible. It goes to show how including all identities in the workforce would not only make this country a better economy, but also build a nation based on compassion and humanity. ■

CROSSROAD



Many a comedy is played out "on stage" and "off stage." The longer the number of years one has been with the medium, the greater the number of errors and louder the laughs. A group of theatre friends sitting in an *adda* is bound to chew over the happenings or errors that have happened and laugh out loud at the hint of what's to come. After all, these quips have been so often repeated that everyone knows the ending—somewhat like the retelling of the classics of Shakespeare, Sophocles, Mymensingh Gitika or the folklore of Rupban. But no matter how many times you have seen these renditions on stage or how well you know the story, you never fail to appreciate the magic of enactment, again and again.

The other day, our friends, mostly a few generations younger than us, came over for an *adda*. The laughs came in waves as each one mulled over the incidents of yester years.

Nagorik Natya Sampradaya, a theatre troupe, was to perform *Darpan*, an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in Sylhet. The director of the play, Aly Zaker, who also did the adaptation, is a man of many talents and interests. While the group left for Sylhet in a train, a team of three—Dr. Nawazesh Ahmad, Nima Rahman and Aly Zaker—made their way, in a "firoza" coloured Feroza jeep. The idea was to make a detour through the tea gardens and take some pictures before reaching Sylhet town. It was a case of, as the saying goes in Bangla, "*roth dekha kola betcha*" (killing two birds with one stone).

The plan did not go as intended. The journey was jinxed from the beginning. In those days, there were more ferries to cross while going to Sylhet and invariably, one had to battle a long tailback before reaching the ferry.

While the Feroza jeep passengers were trying to tip the *mastans* (thugs) in charge of loading and unloading the ferry to get on it on a priority basis, the other Nagorik members had already reached Sylhet.

Everybody was in the green room at 5 pm for their makeup, oblivious that Aly Zaker was still haggling with the *mastans* to get an entry onto the ferry. At the ferry, the barometer was rising. The deal was inching at a snail's pace. Even after paying Tk. 1000, the Feroza was nowhere near the ferry. The clock struck 6, and by now, the troupe was worried. This is a tale of a time when cellular phones were not there. Khaled Khan (Juboraj), who was in-charge of the group and also played the role of Darpan (Hamlet), asked Ruma to get ready to play the part of Kulsam (Gertrude), Darpan's mother—a role that was supposed to be played by Nima. So Ruma put on her

COMEDY OF ERRORS NOT BY SHAKESPEARE



CARTOON: E R RONNY

makeup and the attire for the role and rehearsed her part as many times as she could.

It was quarter past seven and the Feroza had not yet arrived. So the show started, albeit 15 minutes late. Ruma was waiting in the wings to go on stage. Kawsar Ahmad, playing the part of Claudius, was already on stage. But just then, the Feroza arrived and Nima rushed to the green room, put on her makeup and exclaimed to Ruma: "*Sharee khol!* (Unwrap your saree) "—What!" cried Ruma, "I'm already in my get-up and have rehearsed the scene a hundred times!"

They did not know where the director was, who, ideally, should have taken the decision. The clock was ticking away. Nima tugged at Ruma's saree and unwrapped it from her body like "*Draupadi's Bastra Haran*." Ruma was crying, holding onto the saree. Nima rushed to the green room, dragging Ruma along with her changed and entered the stage. Kawsar was surprised to hear the unique Usha Uthupp voice. He turned to see Nima sitting next to him. Suddenly Kulsam had a thick, husky voice and a larger stage presence.

Now it was time for everybody on stage to put a lid on their giggles. But

giggles on stage is a dangerous and infectious thing. Once it has been set off, it is difficult to control—much like the soda from a shaken up soda bottle, it bubbles up, spills over and takes a while to settle down. In Sukumar Ray's words, "*Uthchhey hashii bhoshbhoshiye soda r moto pet thekey*" (like fizzing soda, laughter erupts uncontrollably from the gut).

So the noted and much loved Aly Zaker was at the root of the evil. And at the end of the play, he apologised for the error and reprimanded Nima for undressing Ruma and eloping with the role of Kulsam.

There was this other time when Nagorik was invited to enact *The Intellectual Ladies* by Moliere adapted into *Bidogdho Ramanikul* by Aly Zaker. In one scene, the servant, who had been thrown out by the matriarch of the house, was supposed to enter the stage. There was still some time before his entry, so Babu bhai, who was playing the role of the servant, sauntered into the billiard room to watch his friends play. He was in costume and wearing sandals, a half-sleeve shirt and pajamas. The bearers of the Dhaka Club were suspicious of the identity of Babu Bhai. He explained to them that he was playing the role of a servant in the play.

The bearers would not believe him, and escorted him out of the premise by hoisting him up from either side. Meanwhile, on stage, the cast was waiting for the servant's entrance. He had been summoned back by the meek husband. There was to be a comic scene where the servant was made to come in and go out at the alternate order of the Boss Lady and the Meek Husband.

Anyway, when the servant could not be sighted, it was obvious that we would move on to the next scene. The elder daughter Muna (who was an intellectual like her mother) was to be in thick glasses. But she could not find them, and so, in a hurry, she picked up the glasses of Khoka Bhai who was controlling the light at the consul. He was called by his friends "Kana Khoka," as he wore glasses with a power of minus ten. As Muna entered the stage with those glasses, she did not know where she was and which way should she go! Khoka Bhai was an even greater mess, as he couldn't see a thing without the glasses.

I cannot imagine how we managed to finish the play, but finish we did, taking an apologetic bow to the loud applause of the audience.

Sara Zaker is theatre activist, media personality and Group Managing Director, Asiatic 360.