

NEGATIVE PORTRAYAL OF RMG SECTOR

When a picture is worse than a thousand words



It used to be said that “the pen is mightier than the sword,” but in these days of ever-increasing reach and power of the social media, the image has usurped the written headline as the number one medium for grabbing the reader’s attention, with various reports showing that 85 percent of social media users respond to an image as opposed to the written word.

It is this power of image that has led me to become so incensed by a picture published recently by a renowned international apparel magazine, the UK-based Ecotextile News, depicting a totally incorrect image of Bangladesh’s RMG industry. To our utter surprise, the images it used were not even of a Bangladeshi manufacturing unit, and were rather shown to grab the reader’s attention.

Whilst I did not necessarily agree with the opinion expressed in the corresponding article, I must acknowledge that the authors have their right to their own points of view and the right to express them. What sickens me, however, is that one such false image can create an impression in the reader’s mind that undermines all of the universally applauded advances made by our apparel sector in recent years in the fields of ethical and sustainable manufacturing.

The problem here is twofold: as long as there exist in our country unscrupulous business owners operating substandard, non-compliant factories and mills, Western journalists will continue to take advantage of that and use the worst possible images available to support their theory and increase their impact and readership (as some argue that a negative story is news,



Employees work in a factory in Dhaka on January 3, 2014. Bangladesh’s RMG industry has often been the subject of undeserved criticism from the international media.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS/ANDREW BIRAJ

a positive story is just advertorial). I fully appreciate the power that an image can bring to an article, but I also think that what needs to be encouraged and highlighted to the Western media is the positive steps that have been taken, and the improvements that have been made, in terms of attaining socially compliant, environmental business practices throughout the industry.

Having said that, there is no smoke without fire. Despite the conflicting numbers of unregulated factories reported in other recent articles from Quartz and Stern, what is undeniable is that there do exist a small number of manufacturers who are trading improperly, and they are the ones tarnishing the reputation of the industry and Bangladesh as a whole. Unfortunately, in the majority of cases, Western journalists are gaining access to images of these unregulated operations

and are using them to support their opinion on the RMG business in general.

The Stern and Quartz reports claim that there is in excess of 7,000 factories operating in the garment sector, a figure which is adrift of information compiled by both the BGMEA and BKMEA and questioned by a subsequent report by Penn State University on behalf of the Centre for Global Workers’ Rights (CGWR). The Penn State report highlights that a considerable number of the factories included in the Stern and Quartz reports were manufacturing garments solely for the domestic market, not for export.

I am not here to dispute the number of manufacturers operating under the radar. What I wish to highlight is that—as my English colleagues would say—“one rotten apple may spoil the barrel” and that Bangladesh’s RMG

industry needs to adopt a zero-tolerance policy towards these unregulated manufacturers and mills.

These are the types of manufacturers and businesses that the Western media will, sadly, focus on because, quite simply, it will attract higher reader numbers. What needs to be highlighted to these journalists is that what their images represent is not a true reflection of our RMG industry in 2018. They also need to know that the majority of our mills and manufacturers find these images as abhorrent as the Western readership.

That said, whilst this situation exists, we cannot continue to pat ourselves on the back regarding the improvements that have been made in the sector over the last five years. It is time for the government, BGMEA, BKMEA and other partner bodies to establish a system of social compliance and environmental

safety that applies to all manufacturers in the region, regardless of whether their produce is destined for export or for the domestic market.

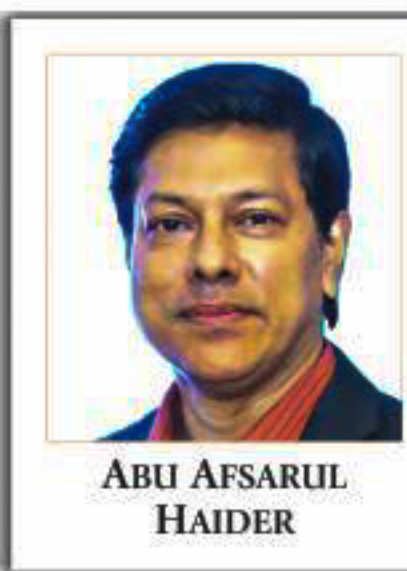
I appreciate that both the BGMEA and BKMEA represent garment exporters from our country; however, as an association, surely they’re duty-bound to protect the best interests of their members? If the image of the export sector is being tarnished by factories that operate without passing the necessary compliance standards, then these associations should be bringing all their force to bear by lobbying the government and local authorities to ensure that these manufacturers cannot trade. Put simply, if any factory, regardless of whether it is producing for the domestic market or the export, is not compliant and has not undergone the necessary rigorous vetting process to manufacture in an ethical and sustainable manner, then these businesses should be closed.

If we want to continue highlighting the compliance and environmental improvements that are being made within the RMG sector, we need to remove this cancer—once and for all—and the best solution is drastic action which needs to be taken by our government, if necessary in partnership with other international partners, governments and agencies.

Only by cleansing the RMG industry of these substandard manufacturers can we truly say that our garment industry is now the safest and most compliant, ethical and sustainable in the world. At the same time, the Western media agencies need to be encouraged to focus on the positive aspects of the changes that have been made in our country and stop the sensationalist propaganda that they are sometimes fond of publishing.

Mostafiz Uddin is the Managing Director of Denim Expert Limited. He is also the Founder and CEO of Bangladesh Denim Expo and Bangladesh Apparel Exchange (BAE). Email: mostafiz@denimexpert.com

Your critics are your best friends



Our good sides and bad sides, and are willing to say the things that most people won’t say. They tell us what we don’t want to hear. They are the best reflection we can have of ourselves because a true friend genuinely cares about us and holds up a mirror for us to see the things we don’t want to see, admit or face. They hold us accountable for our mistakes, and guide us back on our path when we tend to stray. Then, there are friends, or should I say, false/fake friends, or flatterers, who will compliment you, even for the silliest of causes, and never criticise you even if it is needed. Be careful, these are the types of friends you must watch out for because they are only complimentary and affirming when they have something to gain.

Likewise, when you are in power, beware of those people that praise you all the time. People who criticise the policies, decisions and actions of a

government—which go against the constitutional, social and moral foundations of the country—are true friends of that government, not its enemy. Pointing out its mistakes, criticising the flaws and talking about uncomfortable truths of the state do not mean you are being ungrateful or unpatriotic. It means you think critically of certain issues and problems and you make your opinion known so that those are addressed.

Constructive criticism is far better than quietly accepting everything and swallowing your frustration. If you look back in history, you will see that a lot of social changes and revolutions have occurred precisely because people have questioned the actions of their government. Most, if not all, who criticise government actions and decisions do so out of patriotism: they want their country to be better. Criticism comes from a place of hope, not of despair. Criticism is an important pillar of democracy without which democracy itself will be at risk. As former US President John F Kennedy had famously said, “Without debate, without criticism, no administration and no country can succeed, and no republic can survive.”

Unfortunately, lately we as a nation have become a bit too sensitive when it comes to criticism. While

constructive criticism points out our mistakes and shows us where and how improvements can be made, we seem unwilling to accept such feedback graciously. We seem to think that any sort of criticism—whether telling a



cricketer that he has flaws in his batting technique, or warning a friend about a certain relationship, or reminding someone of their manners—comes with an “ulterior motive”. Likewise, whenever people

disagree with the government’s decisions and policies or criticise their leaders for their mistakes, or write an unflattering opinion piece, they are labelled “unpatriotic”, “conspirator” or “anti-state”.

The fact is, we seldom try to recognise the possibility that what we consider right may actually be wrong and vice versa. It is understandable that no one likes to hear “I told you so” or be told to their face that they are wrong, but giving and receiving advice, feedback and even criticism are key to effective leadership and decision making.

In a truly free society, criticism of a government’s decisions is more than a right—it is an act of patriotism. Julian Barnes, the English writer, once said, “The greatest patriotism is to tell your country when it is behaving dishonourably, foolishly, viciously.” Unfortunately, in recent times, we have noticed that partisan politics have created divisions not only among common people but also among our so-called intellectuals and civil society members. Many of them, even when they think something is wrong or bad for the country, don’t utter a word; they tend to see everything around them through a partisan eye. The popular understanding is, the civil society and the intellectuals are

supposed to act as a bridge between the warring political groups by creating space and dialogue to reduce tension and bring the concerns of the citizens to the forefront in a productive manner.

Instead, some of our intellectuals and civil society members have turned sycophantic. They are always seen blindly praising the views and actions of their leaders. Sycophancy is a threat to democracy and democracy cannot thrive in countries where freedoms of thought and discussion are denied.

A democratic society requires the active participation of its citizens and the government must treat all the citizens with respect, because it is there to serve them—not the other way around. Even if the government feels that it is being criticised unfairly, it should not retaliate with an extreme knee-jerk reaction; it must listen to the views of the people, even those with whom it does not necessarily agree. As Winston Churchill once said, “Criticism may not be agreeable, but it is necessary. It fulfils the same function as pain in the human body. It calls attention to an unhealthy state of things.”

Abu Afsarul Haider graduated in economics and business administration from Illinois State University, USA, and is currently involved in international trade in Dhaka. Email: afsarulhaider@gmail.com

ON THIS DAY
IN HISTORY

OCTOBER 1, 1867
'DAS KAPITAL' RELEASED
'Das Kapital: Kritik der politischen Ökonomie' (Capital: Critique of Political Economy)—a consequential book by Karl Marx—was released. Das Kapital is the most cited book in the social sciences published before 1950.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Goat cheese

5 Sound of delight

11 Tilted type: Abbr.

12 Dawn goddess

13 Lockup

14 Grapevine talk

15 Ailing

16 Poll numbers

17 Lead to

19 Cry loudly

22 Pound resident

24 Theater feature

26 Be nomadic

27 Affectation

28 Early Mexican

30 Bars on cars

31 "Sure thing!"

32 Make up lines

34 Teacher to sophs

35 Refiner's stuff

38 Visible

41 Twosome

42 Tidy up

43 Sicilian peak

44 "Halt!" caller

45 Inquires

DOWN

1 Pacific nation

2 List-ending abbr.

3 Some formalwear

4 Maximum amount

5 Long stories

6 Brokers' numbers

7 Bear in the air

8 Dawn goddess

9 "Exodus" hero

10 Pet perch

16 "That's obvious!"

18 High point

19 Yawls, e.g.

20 Storybook monster

21 Harry's wife

22 Recite the rosary

23 Percolate

25 Curbside call

29 Line of work

30 TV alien

33 Soft

34 "Troy" star

36 Skating spot

37 Historic times

38 They hold power

39 Social page word

40 Big truck

41 Stew sphere

Write for us. Send us your opinion pieces to dsopinion@gmail.com.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21

22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37

38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45

9-19

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

HERB HIT CH
ALOUD AMORE
LOOSE LIPPED
OPT FOR HAG
SEESTO MATE
DRIES ETES
DREAD
MORE BREED
ARES ACADIA
HIM BLT INN
LOOSE LIMBED
ELVIS CEBIE
REEDS TENS

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

3-26

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

SCHOOL IS ALMOST OUT. YEP. PRETTY SOON YOU'LL HAVE SCREAMING KIDS FROM DAWN 'TIL DUSK. WELL, I DON'T THINK— AND DUSK COMES MUCH LATER IN THE SUMMER. YOU'RE NOT HELPING.