

Consumers: The missing link in sustainable apparel

Conspiracy everywhere!

Get off your high horse, BCB

INDEED, the media's is not always the first door one should knock for either expressing or seeking redress of one's grievances. And we believe that the striking cricketers should have placed their demands to the right quarters, the BCB, before going public on the matter. By the same token, we feel the BCB boss has overreacted in his response to the cricketers' decision to go on strike. The BCB president's comments was unexpected. One may disagree with the players' action and with their position, but venting one's spleen in public about our cricketers and branding their action conspiratorial is unfortunate. Pray tell us, if there is conspiracy behind the players' action, who are the conspirators? Is it Shakib or Tamim? When does one take such a drastic step like abstaining from work? Evidently, the board as a whole failed to apply its head in the matter and do their homework before talking to the press. If they had, they would have surely got the underlying message in the action of the players. Any organisation that is well administered, and where the head and not the heart guides its actions and reaction, would clearly see in such a step an unequivocal expression of no confidence in it. The demands have not accreted in a month or six months. Over time those have grown in number. And if, as the BCB president says, he agrees with the demands, those being genuine, why were they not addressed sooner before things came to such a pass? We suggest the BCB look into the matter dispassionately and take measures to address them through mutual discussions. That is the only civil way to go about the matter.

How can DGHS ask for another extension?

Investigate why contract was not cancelled

TIME extensions on important public sector projects is nothing new in our country. However, when it comes to this particular project, one that was designed to facilitate manpower training in laboratory medicine at hospital and community levels, it warrants further attention. Strangely enough, the contractor who landed the job from the ministry of health in 2010 was supposed to build the National Institute of Laboratory Medicine and Referral Centre (NILMRC) in Sher-e-Bangla Nagar by 2013. Not only did he fail to deliver, but for reasons beyond anyone's comprehension, the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) sought, and obtained four-time extensions. Now it's asked for a fifth (for another year) at the Ecne meeting on October 22. The project has received extension for a year. During the Ecne meeting however, the prime minister came down heavily on the contractor who is implementing some 15 large construction projects of the government involving around Tk 3,000 crore. Ironically, the owner has recently been arrested by law enforcers on the accusation of tender manipulation amongst other things. We totally agree that government ministries and departments review all contracts with controversial companies and float fresh tenders, or, as in the case of NILMRC, award the job to sub-contractors. It was further suggested that no contractor should be allowed to do more than two public construction jobs at a time.

Our question is, why would the prime minister have to step in to give directives to take corrective measures against a contract-violating company? The time overrun of these extensions are costing the national exchequer an extra Tk 56 crore (that is 41 percent above original cost) and as with all troubled projects, this one too suffers from faulty project design, which should have been scrutinised before awarding of the contract. The benefits of the original project get lost as we get bogged down in endless extensions. Merely unearthing wrongdoing is not enough. These are scams that rip off the public because it is tax payers' money that is being thrown away to fatten the pockets of corrupt officials and contractors. This will only stop if authorities initiate strict reform in the tendering process and introduce serious oversight on project timelines, backed up by hefty fines and legal action against defaulting companies.



MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

WHO should pay to make apparel supply chains more sustainable? This is a question we hear a lot, and it is also one which causes a great many disagreements between factory owners and apparel brands. Factory owners complain that apparel buyers drive a hard bargain on price and that, at the end of negotiations, there is little room left for extra spending on technological upgrading. Brands, on the other hand, claim they have their own pressures and that, actually, this is the way the industry works. People are in business to make money and, in a highly competitive industry, they have little choice but to keep costs to a minimum. If this means placing price pressure on suppliers, so be it.

There is another factor here which perhaps is not given enough consideration: end consumers. For while the apparel industry and its supply chain gets itself in a tangle over the issue of costings and prices, the one clear winner continues to be those purchasing the clothing.

For an economics student, the global apparel industry provides a remarkable case study. Is there any other industry where price deflation has been such a constant theme over such a prolonged period? The US Bureau of Labour Statistics recently produced some data which showed that consumer spending on apparel as a percentage of total consumer expenditure has more than halved to two per cent from five per cent in 1987. This major 12-month study found that apparel was the only major consumer spend category to fall over the same period, with all other categories, including entertainment, dining out, alcohol, and furniture remaining relatively stable.

But here's the thing: the same research showed that people are actually purchasing far more clothing than at any time in history. How can this make sense? How can consumers be buying more clothing than ever yet the percentage of their income which they actually spend on apparel has fallen dramatically? The answer is rather obvious: deflation in the apparel sector which has come about due to the offshoring of apparel production from the West to Asia.

Let's focus on this issue of price deflation and consumer expectations. This word—expectations—is key here.

The problem which apparel brands face is that when you have given something to somebody—in this case, extremely cheap clothing—it is very difficult to take it away. Walk into a fast fashion store in London, New York, Paris or Madrid, and it's possible to buy a T-shirt, a pair of jeans, a pair of shoes and a jacket and still come away with change from 100 Euro. In some stores, you can buy jeans for as little as 10 Euro, T-shirts for less than 5 Euro, jackets for 10-15 Euro. This might be great for consumers, but this is just madness.

around the world before they can be sold in stores. All these steps, all these efforts for a 4 Euro T-shirt! How has it reached this stage and what can we do about it? There are many surveys which suggest that consumers would happily pay more for clothing that is sustainably produced. Really? I don't see this sentiment translating into actual actions. What I do see is a market in which consumers are happy to hand over just a few Euros for their new sweater or trousers,

if hang tags, while providing details on supplier information, also provided information about the product across all steps of the supply chain? Perhaps if consumers realised the complex array of steps required to provide the shirt on their back, they would be happier to pay a fairer price for it. Better hang tags could be supported by marketing from brands. This is something the whole industry could collaborate on, an area in which they could put competitive considerations to one side. It's in the interests of all apparel brands



We hear a lot of talk that the Bangladeshi ready-made garment manufacturers are in a "race to the bottom". They might well be, but so are fast fashion brands.

This brings us back to the negotiations that take place between the apparel factories and brands. As a manufacturer, of course I would like to see an increase in unit prices paid to suppliers. But I can also see with my own eyes that if a brand is retailing a pair of jeans for 10 Euro or a T-shirt for 4 Euro, they have very little room for manoeuvre.

Consider the efforts that go into making a cotton T-shirt. People are paid to pick the cotton, the cotton is sold to factories, the seeds are extracted, the bolls cleaned, and the fibres spun into thread. A trader buys the spools of thread to be sold to mills, the mills produce the dye and the fabric, the fabric is sold to manufacturers, manufacturers create T-shirts and these then have to be shipped

never questioning how or why the retailer managed to provide it so cheap. Ignorance is bliss, as they say.

For the industry to change, for us to move towards a model in which suppliers are paid a fair price for their products—a price that allows them to pay workers a living wage while producing products through sustainable production methods—we need higher end prices for clothing. It really is that simple.

And how can these higher end prices be achieved? There are no easy answers here, but we must not despair. Transparency and openness are key, and as part of this we need to educate consumers, most of whom at present have their heads buried in the sand on this issue.

How about better hang tags for apparel products? If hang tags were required by law to provide better information to consumers, we could start to turn the needle on this issue. For instance, what

to begin to "tell the story" of the clothing. The story of where it was made, how it was made, the steps it went through to reach the store, the skills of those making it. The "story-telling" of a clothing item should be part of its marketing. It should be used to add value.

Clothing, for way too long, has been treated like a commodity. Who'd pay a premium for a commodity of which there is an over-supply?

If we really want sustainable supply chains, we've got to shift away from this commodity model and put the value back into clothing items. Consumers say they want sustainably made clothing so it's up to brands to tell them the story of their clothing and why they need to be paying more for it.

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In which direction is South Asian University headed?



ASIF BIN ALI

THE South Asian University, established in New Delhi in 2010, is a remarkable institution in terms of what it envisaged. SAARC-watchers are generally of the view that the university is perhaps ahead of its times, and is the best functioning SAARC institution despite its many problems. It was the well-known Bangladeshi intellectual and now the International Affairs Adviser to the prime minister of Bangladesh, Dr Gower Rizvi who drafted the concept note for the university, giving Bangladesh a more personal ownership over the university's future.

According to the university's website, its mandate as set out in the Agreement of the SAARC Member States, which made the establishment of the university possible, says that its programmes of study are aimed to: "enhance learning in the South Asian community that promotes an understanding of each others perspectives and strengthen regional consciousness; provide liberal and humane education to the brightest and the most dedicated students of South Asia so that a new class of quality leadership is nurtured; and enhance capacity building of the South Asian Nations in science, technology and other areas of higher learning vital for improving their quality of life such as information technology, bio-technology and management sciences, etc."

As it further notes, "these three elements i.e. building a culture of understanding and regional consciousness; nurturing a new class of liberal, bright and quality leadership and building the capacity of the region in science, technology and other disciplines considered vital for improving the quality of life of the people, therefore, form the core objectives of the South Asian University." Taking this mandate forward in practical terms, the university's Vision Statement notes that South Asian University would offer programmes of study that "have the potential to promote

regional understanding, peace and security which ultimately enhances the well being of the people of the region", "reach newer, common and challenging frontiers in various disciplines, and interdisciplinary outfits, usually not available in individual countries", "can lead to creation and sharing of knowledge that has the potential of creating a South Asian Community of intellectuals, endowed with expanding mutual trust and appreciation of one another's problems."

When seen in this way, it is quite clear that the university takes the idea of regional cooperation and the creation of a South Asian sensibility as seriously as it takes the idea of offering specific subject knowledge through its academic programmes. This is also why the university's rules say that 50 percent of its students should be from the host country while the other 50 percent should be from



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the rest of South Asia, so far diligently worked out through a complex quota system.

While the rules are open about faculty recruitment, it has so far failed to hire qualified teachers or administrators from countries other than India. While all SAARC countries contribute towards the operational funds of the university according to a pre-arranged system of cost-sharing where India pays 50 percent, the construction budget is borne fully by India. In this sense, India's significant financial contribution to the university needs to be seen as an important and generous gesture

towards regional cooperation.

It is also due to the regional interest in the university's mandate that its rules provide for the appointment of its president initially from the host country for obvious logistical and other reasons, and subsequently from other member states on the basis of rotation prioritised by the logic of the English language alphabet. So, since India appointed the first president, the next is supposed to be from Maldives, followed by Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Bhutan.

Even the appointment of its vice presidents are supposed to reflect this regional character; its rules state that VPs should always come from countries other than that of the president. The first president, Prof GK Chadha clearly violated this principle, when he appointed Prof Rajiv Saxena as his VP as both were Indian. The present president, Dr Kavita Sharma whose term ends on November 2, 2019, also has an Indian VP, Prof Santosh Panda, again violating the rules. Also, her own appointment as president is a violation given that India was only supposed to appoint the first president for one term in the first cycle. However, the president had the overall consent of the SAU's governing board, which has representation from all member states. According to university insiders and Bangladeshi diplomats it

was necessary due to the construction phase of the university, which it was about to enter.

The most serious violation of the university's South Asian character is taking place as we write. India's Ministry of External Affairs has now placed a vacancy advertisement on its website for the position of the president. Though nationality is not mentioned in this advertisement and the position seems to be open to any citizen in the world, it is without a doubt an Indian government advertisement. This is clearly seen from two facts: it appears only in the website of India's External Affairs Ministry and cannot be seen on any other websites of SAARC member states; and its preamble is in Hindi, the state language of India and not in the official language of any other member states.

To make the position open or even to hand over the power to India to spearhead the recruitment process by the rest of member states or to offer India yet another turn at the presidency, it is first necessary to have a meeting of the university's governing board and then, such amended rules must be ratified by the SAARC Standing Committee.

None of these have happened so far. What has happened instead is the nudging of Indian diplomats in regional capitals to try and convince their other South Asian colleagues that the presidency this time also should be filled by India. Even so, there is no tangible proof of collective agreement even in these informal phases of bilateral conversations when what is required is a formal multilateral meeting to discuss and agree upon something as crucial as the university's leadership.

The absence of a formal agreement in this direction and the informality of this kind of decision-making is counter-productive for the university's future and the maintenance of its South Asian character as it is creating unhealthy precedence for undermining rules and good practices that are central to the university. One hopes the Bangladesh government would lead its regional neighbours in rectifying this very anti-regional process that is ongoing.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Negative impacts of social media

Over the years, social media has somewhat made our views intolerant. The whole milieu of social media is wired in such a way that we happen to be surrounded by like-minded people and opinions. If we like one page, similar suggestions pop up on our homepage. If we like one type of status or follow a celebrity, similar suggestions follow and we comply by liking them and eventually we get wrapped up in a bubble made up of a homogeneous group. Gradually, we are alienating people and views that we don't like to agree with and in a way losing the ability of accommodating the views that ours differ with. The simple phenomenon of agreeing to disagree, which is an essential part of freedom of speech, is thus becoming extinct. This is the precise reason for the knee-jerk reaction and collective intolerance towards political and social views that we don't agree with. It is high time we straighten up our act and "react" more responsibly.

Mirza Mohammad Asif Adnan

Corrigendum

In yesterday's editorial titled, "Amicable settlement best option" BRTA was mistakenly mentioned as the telecom regulatory authority instead of BTRC. We regret the error.