

We must live up to Bangabandhu's lofty ideals

This is the only way we can honour his legacy

TODAY marks the 47th anniversary of the assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. On this day in 1975, the Father of the Nation, along with most of his family, was assassinated in the most brutal way possible. The manner of his untimely departure – within less than four years of the birth of Bangladesh, and before fulfilling his vision for a nation he liberated from the shackles of subjugation – caused a void in our psyche that is unlikely to ever be filled, a sense of injustice and inadequacy that no court of law can perhaps address.

To talk about Bangabandhu is to talk about his role in uniting us in the pursuit of independence, but also his vision for us post-independence. If the former launched our journey as a nation, the latter offered a destination: a fair, just society in which everyone would be equal in the eyes of the law and enjoy equal rights and opportunities. People's welfare was central to his vision. He fiercely defended their freedom of speech and other fundamental rights, as any modern leader should. He didn't want his monuments to be just bricks and mortar. He wanted them to be built with love in the hearts of his people, something that all leaders should aspire to.

How do we repay someone who gave us so much? By completing his legacy through the fulfilment of his ideals, which, unfortunately, remain unheeded as far as today's society or leaders are concerned. What were his ideals? Although Bangabandhu's notes and books are quite revealing in this respect, those were perhaps best captured in the four foundational principles of state policy laid out in our constitution: nationalism (not in the narrow sense most of us tend to think of it), socialism, democracy, and secularism. In simpler terms, it means that society would be just and everyone would be treated equally, irrespective of caste, creed, gender, religion and language. Citizens would be at the centre of power, and have fair representation. It means greater freedom: the freedom to express grievance, to pursue dreams, to seek and get justice. It means protection for any form of discrimination.

As we mourn the assassination of Bangabandhu, we also mourn the gradual undoing of his legacy and vision through the decades. So on this day, let us strive to repay our debt to our founding father in the only way we can: meeting his lofty ideals. We must be ready for the sacrifice and painful grunt work needed to build a just society.

Why are cybercrimes going unpunished?

Govt must address victims' unwillingness to seek legal recourse

IT is quite alarming that more than 73 percent of cybercrime victims in the country do not seek legal assistance, and that more than half of those who do find the support to be inadequate, as per a recently released report of the Cyber Crime Awareness Foundation. The report also found that a meagre 7 percent of the victims were "satisfied" with the support they had received. That gives a very poor impression about the state of our cybercrime-fighting ability.

As previous reports on cybercrimes have also found out, cybercrimes are rising and evolving at an alarming rate in Bangladesh. As the patterns of crimes have evolved, so have the criminals. And their victims, according to the latest report, fall between different age groups: more than 80 percent were found aged between 18 and 30, 13.57 percent aged below 18, 5.03 percent aged 31-45, and less than one percent over 45. Young people, it seems, are the biggest victims of cybercrimes. However, since most victims are reluctant to pursue legal recourse – due to lack of awareness, lack of faith in law enforcers and the justice system, fear of hassles and social stigma, etc. – and since official data on the matter is barely collected, it is also possible that many elderly people are also falling victim to such crimes, without even realising its gravity.

On the other hand, young people are definitely being victimised more when it comes to online bullying, receiving pornographic material, defamation threats and online intimidation. Meanwhile, getting defrauded when shopping online and having one's account hacked are also occurring frequently. Reportedly, female victims of cybercrimes have been found to be more reluctant to pursue justice through the legal system. And that is another concern that requires the administration's immediate attention. The fact that our justice system is not much gender-friendly was bound to spill over to the cyber space.

Despite having a number of laws in place to fight cybercrimes, the state of our cybercrime-fighting ability has remained quite appalling. Therefore, the authorities – particularly the cybercrime fighting unit of the police – must take steps to address this situation. Since the police have a specific unit to work on the issue, they must have the willingness and required manpower and tools to reach out to all the victims who report to them and provide them prompt and necessary support. Additionally, the government must spread awareness among people that can help prevent them from falling victim to such crimes, and can also help encourage them to seek legal recourse.

Why are the tea workers on strike?

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THERE was agitation in 158 tea gardens in Sylhet and Chattogram divisions during the tea-leaf-plucking season when the tea workers began a two-hour strike from August 9-12. On August 13, they went on a full-day strike. Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union (BCSU), the only trade union of around 100,000 tea garden workers, is organising the strike.

The key message of the tea workers and their union to the owners is that they are fed up with the owners' position regarding their wages. Currently, a tea worker gets a daily wage of Tk 120. BCSU is demanding a daily cash pay of Tk 300, which is impossible given the current trend of pay rise.

The BCSU, the combined bargaining agent (CBA) for the tea workers, and Bangladesh Tea Association (BTA), tea garden owners' representative body, sign an agreement every two years determining the wages and other benefits of the tea workers. In negotiations between these two parties, BTA is always the winner, and BCSU the loser.

An agreement between the BCSU and BTA was last signed on February 25, 2021, fixing the daily cash pay to Tk 120 for "A" class tea gardens, Tk 118 for "B" class gardens and Tk 117 for "C" class tea gardens. These wages were effective from January 1, 2019 to December 30, 2020, which means the agreement was signed post factum.

Generally, the agreements are not signed in time and the workers get their additional pay in arrears. But since the last agreement period expired in December 2020, more than 19 months have passed without an agreement and increase in wages.

In the meantime, the government had set up a Minimum Wage Board (for the third time for the tea workers) in the second half of 2019 to fix tea workers' wages. In the six-member board, Rambhajan Kairi represented the tea workers and demanded a daily cash pay of Tk 300. But to the disappointment of the workers, the wage board sent its recommendation to the labour ministry in June 2021, keeping the daily cash pay unchanged and curtailing some benefits that the tea workers had traditionally been receiving.

The labour ministry thankfully sent the recommendations back to the wage board for reconsideration. A meeting on November 17, 2021 chaired by the state minister of the labour ministry with the members of

the Minimum Wage Board, BTA and BCSU was organised to find a solution to the stalemate. The labour ministry reportedly issued some guidelines to the wage board. But again, to the surprise of the tea workers, the wage board maintained its position in

increase of Tk 14 on top of Tk 120!

This is absurd for understandable reasons. Wages are not this low in the tea industry anywhere in the world. The same Minimum Wage Board has fixed the daily lowest (sixth grade) wage of Tk 620 in the wood sector in

support for the tea garden owners that include state-owned National Tea Company and Bangladesh Tea Board under the commerce ministry that own 17 tea gardens. But this time, the BCSU is adamant not to easily back out. They went for a full day strike on August



Tea workers' protest rally in Sreemangal town last week.

PHOTO: SANJOY KAIRI

keeping the wages of tea workers at Tk 120 per day.

In the meantime, the chairman of the wage board has been replaced. A responsible source in the Minimum Wage Board has confirmed that in the last meeting, held on June 30, 2022, the board finalised its recommendations and sent them to the labour ministry. Rambhajan Kairi neither attended the meeting on June 30, nor did he approve the recommendations. "The recommendations were foretold," says Kairi, "And it is stuck at Tk 120, which is unacceptable to the tea workers."

Now it is to be seen when the labour ministry sends the recommendations to the law ministry, and when the wage structure of the tea workers is announced through gazette notification.

While all these have been going on, the BCSU has also been negotiating with the BTA for the last 19 months without making any headway. It is puzzling why two processes need to run at the same time. While the Minimum Wage Board fixes wages for five years, the BCSU and BTA sign an agreement every two years. The Minimum Wage Board took an unusually long time to develop its recommendations. Leaders of the BCSU allege that the BTA also did the same and pushed them to the edge. What we know from the leaders of BCSU is that the BTA proposed an

the rural areas and Tk 680 in the urban areas – one of the lowest paid sectors outside the tea garden sector fixed by the Minimum Wage Board.

The BCSU, in a letter addressed to the chairman of BTA (dated August 3, 2022), briefly narrated its grievances about their long negotiation resulting in a "shameful" proposal from the owners. According to the letter signed by the president, vice-president and acting general secretary of BCSU, the BTA representative communicated their intention to increase the wages by Tk 14 through a mobile message. Enraged, the BCSU decided to go for a strike in seven working days from August 3.

The BTA remained silent about the warning. What followed is unprecedented in the recent history of tea gardens. BCSU leaders reported that they expected the owners to respond to their demands and communicate a solution with them. But the BTA maintained its silence until August 14.

However, the Department of Labour office in Sreemangal and the director general (DG) of Department of Labour under the labour ministry have reacted. In a letter dated August 12, 2022, the DG sent a warning that "such strikes contravene the labour law."

The BCSU considers such warning from the government authorities as

13, assembling at different points including in the Sreemangal town, in defiance of the law enforcement authorities.

In a meeting on August 13, the central leaders of BCSU announced its next programme. On August 14 (Sunday and weekly holiday in almost all tea gardens) and August 15 (national holiday), they would continue to assemble at different locations throughout the tea growing areas to show their disappointment with the owners. If the BCSU does not get a response from the BTA, it is determined to continue the strike.

Tea workers are among the most marginalised, excluded and poor of Bangladesh. The biggest problem they face is wage deprivation. Needless to say, a worker's family income is far below the poverty level income, causing further deprivation for them. This time they have seen how the owners have hijacked the Minimum Wage Board and kept their future hanging in the balance. All these are happening at a time when tea production has reached its peak and there is no evidence that tea is a losing enterprise.

It is the responsibility of the government to establish rules of fair trade in the tea sector, and ensure justice and protection for tea workers, who are the most important asset for the country's tea industry.

RMG makers can go digital to remain visible

RMG NOTES

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RECESSION looms large on the global economy. Already, as apparel makers, we are seeing some slowdown in orders as consumers in our Western markets are cutting back on spending due to the skyrocketing costs of food and energy.

If the world enters a recession in the next few months, one of the most important aspects for ready-made garment (RMG) makers to consider is marketing. Smart companies boost marketing efforts during a downturn. Their goal is simple: permanent visibility. Even in a stagnating economy, there will be retailers out there who are spending money.

But marketing can be costly and many business owners feel money is better spent on core operational issues in difficult times. This is a trap too many fall into: waiting for orders that never come while forgetting to tell people they actually exist.

The good news is that the advent of digital marketing has changed things and created new opportunities for small and medium business owners. Many digital marketing tactics can be adopted on a shoestring budget. The only real cost is your time and energy.

Here are five ways apparel makers can utilise digital and social media to boost their profile and remain relevant during challenging times.

Number one is brand development. As an apparel maker, does your business have a voice? Does it have a personality? It should. Apparel manufacture is quite unusual in that there are not that many recognised manufacturers, by which I mean garment makers which make global headlines. The only way we as garment makers can change this picture is by building a brand. A good logo, a quality website, regular marketing, and PR activities are all part of that. Social media and digital are key though, as they provide direct connection with end users and can be carried out on a limited budget. I see one or two Bangladeshi apparel makers developing a brand but we need far more than that.

This brings us to point two, which is to become a thought leader and expert in your field. Apparel manufacturers can use an array of social platforms to share articles and opinion columns of interest, thereby establishing a name for credibility and trustworthiness. Views could be shared on topical issues in apparel supply chains. Develop an interesting article and choose a thought-provoking headline. Ask a few colleagues to read it. Then share it as widely as possible with your network.

Other articles could be more product specific or technical, for instance, sharing some of your newer designs

or offering some insight into the latest style trends. Obvious platforms for sharing this kind of information are LinkedIn (an excellent way to meet end customers), Instagram, and Facebook. TikTok is also extremely fast-growing but this may require a little more in terms of video production and storytelling skills.

Point three is networking and

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collaboration. Being visible on social media is a form of soft marketing for businesses, and this includes apparel makers. The benefits of it might not be immediately obvious, but they will become more apparent over time. The longer you are on there and the better content you post, the more visible your brand becomes. From here, increased networking and collaboration opportunities follow. Think of platforms such as LinkedIn as a virtual conference or event which is permanently open. Some days, potential customers might be there, browsing around. If you are visible, you can "connect" and say hello. There's no need for a hard sell. Just make

contact and give a brief introduction of your business. Sometimes this is better done by posting a comment on somebody else's post. It is important to try find some common ground. People don't take kindly to unsolicited attempts to sell to them. This is where the power of content sharing (point two) comes in. If other users see you are sharing valuable information and not just trying to sell to them, they will be much more likely to engage.

Point four is about building a strong, collaborative culture within your business. An active social media platform such as Facebook At Work can be an invaluable way to boost collaboration and information sharing across multiple departments and locations. Internal digital tools can also be used to help foster a strong culture of shared values and ethics. There are many social platforms which are geared up for intra organisational use, and these can serve as powerful weapons for employee engagement, and keeping staff members aligned with company values. Imagine, for instance, if a new employee joins a company and posts something interesting on that company's Facebook At Work platform and then gets an appreciative comment from the CEO. This provides a massive morale boost and makes people feel valued.

Finally, point five is customer retention. Being an active member of the digital community is crucial to keep your brand visible among current customers. At any one time, several of your customers might be looking to switch supplier. How can you prevent this? Well, you don't want to pester them non-stop but you can use digital channels to keep your business in their eyeline and gently let them know you are still there and ready to do business.