

## Ushering Bengali into the digital age

Civic-minded philanthropy and savvy business and technological know-how must combine to bring Bengali up to speed in the digital age, writes **Ashfaq Swapan**, California representative of the International Institute of Bengal Basin. IIBB is a registered non-profit organization based in Berkeley, California. Its broad goal is to explore ways of reducing the impact of toxic chemicals in the Bengal basin as a working model for emerging economies. In January 2003 IIBB will hold its fifth annual symposium in Dhaka in association with the Centre for the Integrated Rural Development of Asia and the Pacific. Nobel Prize-winning physicist Charles Townes will deliver the keynote speech. IIBB has just launched a \$30,000 fundraising programme in the U.S. which will make the Bengali software BornoSoft a free download by February 21.

ONLY about 40 miles south of where I live lies Silicon Valley, the heartland of America's digital revolution. The recent dot-com debacle may have robbed some of the sheen of its glamour, but the fact remains that information technology has most profoundly changed the way we live and work.

Among other things, Silicon Valley is also diverse. People from all parts of the world work here, and fortunately professional success transcends divisions of racial, ethnic and national origin. Bangladeshi engineers also have a decent presence here, I am happy to say, and when you add Bengali Indians, the number of Bengali-speaking high-tech professionals is not inconsiderable.

Yet you know the odd thing about it all? Even in this most tech-savvy of places, you would be hard-pressed to find more than a handful of Bengali speakers who can write in Bengali in the computer. The web sites of the local Bay Area Bangladeshi Association or the Silicon Valley chapter of the American Association of Bangladeshi Engineers and Architects are in English (the West Bengal expat association is only marginally better). Understandable, perhaps, because this is after all an English-speaking country. But not even a word in Bengali?

Now I don't intend to begin a boring tirade on how we neglect our language. I raise this issue to make an important point about the challenge that Bengali faces.

It is not that these Bengalis do not love their language. Most do. Many are avid listeners of *Rabindra sangeet*, some are fans of poetry, there is even a monthly periodical published with much care by Bangladeshis, *Porshi*.

To realize the predicament of Bengali, you have to consider the broader picture. In a world where English reigns supreme, everything is easier and more convenient in English. Whether it is the latest news in current affairs, or academic research, or simply searching information on the Web, we all are lured by the seductive ease of the language which has become the *de facto lingua franca* of the world.

Whether it is a good or bad thing is beyond the scope of this essay: suffice it to say that this is the reality. And it is not just Bengalis who have succumbed to the siren call of English. Other South Asians are equally susceptible, and so Hindi, Gujarati and Urdu speakers in the U.S. also are gradually losing the key vehicle of their culture, their mother language.

In Bangladesh, it's different. With a sigh of relief, we can proudly say that Bengali indeed reigns supreme here. Official correspondence is in Bengali, the nation has a vibrant Bengali language press, the Ekushey book fair is something we all take pride in.

However, take a closer look, and you will realize that there is considerable cause for concern. The revolutionary change in language communication that has swept many languages with the advent of electronic communication has not, I am afraid, touched Bengali as well as one would like. Oh sure, desktop publishing has taken hold fairly well, but that is not what we are talking about here.

You see, language communication has radically changed in the Western world since the computer became a household item. Everybody now types documents, whether it is a research paper, a love letter or an office report. Gone are the days when only secretaries and writers typed and everybody else had to hire a typist.

Bengali appears to be locked in that '60s time warp today. And no one should be surprised, because Bengali presents formidable challenges for the software developer. Not only are there 200 characters, but on top of that the letters are not typed left to right (*E-kar* comes before the consonant, the *ba-fala* is tucked in underneath the consonant, the *ref* is put on top of the *matra*, and so on.) The result has been unwieldy keyboards and minimal dissemination of Bengali word-processing skills.

Currently the most popular Bengali software programmes all require mastering a separate keyboard. This works for professional typists and typesetters, but has few takers otherwise. The result is a paradox: in a nation that celebrates its language and has made the UN recognize Ekushey as the International Mother Language Day, only a tiny fraction of computer users can type in Bengali.

This has grave implications for the future. If there aren't enough Bengali users, software applications will not develop, and Bengali computing will fall further behind. Today there may be a number of Bengali web sites, but not let that fool you. Sites either use the PDF format, or you have to download specific fonts. You cannot do a web search in Bengali.

Yet most information today is archived, transmitted and catalogued digitally. We have to take the initiative to create the conditions in which Bengali will also find its place in the globalized, computerized world.

This is the reason IIBB has undertaken the Digital Bangla Project. The point is not just to make a Bengali

## Peace accord in CHT Problems need immediate attention

ABMS ZAHUR

INSURGENCY in Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) came to an end five years back after a peace treaty was signed between the government of Bangladesh and a rebel group made up of indigenous people called the Shanti Bahini. The treaty provided more autonomy and a regional council was established to develop better relations between migrants to the area and the indigenous population. However, the treaty could not bring peace and the government is concerned by tensions within the indigenous community that are hindering development.

The Khoitin Chibor Dan festival takes place every year in Rangamati. Buddhist from all over the area converge here. The area was the centre of guerrilla war between the Shanti Bahini and the Bangladesh troops. Though five years have passed the agreement is yet to be implemented properly according to Shantu Lama. This has resulted in suffering to the indigenous people particularly. Because of the presence of a military administration in the CHT, it is reported, the common people live in fear due to imposition of restriction on free movement of the common people.

Once the indigenous people formed the overwhelming majority of people in the area. Now Bangladeshi settlers equal them in

numbers. The traditional population welcomed the settlers, but the settlers reportedly often do not treat the hill people well. Thus, government must implement the peace accord for a better life of the indigenous people. They also complain that they have not been properly compensated by the new comers.

The present government pledged to revoke the 1997 agreement. It says that the treaty made too many concessions to indigenous people. There appears to have good reasons to make some revision in the treaty signed by the former government because it was done in a hurry without adequate consultation with concerned people. It indicates that in its anxiety to bring peace in the area the former government ignored some important aspects of this sensitive issue. In its urgency to settle dispute the previous government, as it seems, only considered the representation of the Shanti Bahini, the most militant of the rebels. It left out the question of security of the settlers. This gives a wrong signal that it may have secret desire to drive the settlers (Bangladeshi) from the CHT. If we take lesson from the happenings in the state of Tripura (one of the India's seven North Eastern States) we should refrain from oversimplifying the issue. About three quarters of the present population of Tripura (around three million) is Bengali settlers. Despite such a situation

Indigenous People's Front of Tripura (IPFT) with support from National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) has warned that non-tribal people would be treated as foreigners. Thousands of Bengalis have been expelled from the areas controlled by these groups. However, the Bengali settlers have begun retaliatory attacks. No early settlement of dispute between the Bengali settlers and the tribal people is in sight. Despite this the union government of India is not showing any urgency to settle the issue.

Whatever may be the modality of the union government of India, the government of Bangladesh cannot dilly dally over implementation of an accord concluded five years back. However, the treaty may be examined thoroughly and if necessary discussions may be held between the government, Shantu Lama and the Bengali settlers to bring out a solution acceptable to all parties involved. Last but not the least important is the security (both internal and border) aspect of the issue. The long standing CHT problem should be settled at the earliest not only for the sake of the area's indigenous people or the settlers but also for the rapid economic development of the country.

ABMS Zahur is a retired joint secretary

## Preventing juvenile crime An intervention long overdue

DR. SYED KAMALUDDIN AHMED

IT was not only a heinous act of murder or manslaughter, not only an evidence of deterioration of law and order situation or degradation of moral conscience, it was much, much more. It surpassed the boundary of law and order or morality, and should be more than a matter of concern or crisis. I am talking of a recent incidence of reported murder of a 12 years old child by his playmates due to fight over a game of cricket. It was not the only incident that happened in recent days, more than one similar events happened where foul play by friends and acquaintances were suspected when a teenager was drowned or killed in some other fashion. Recently, a number of sensational murders happened where the accused people were reported to be in their teens or early adulthood. Some of those cases were adjudicated and the victims were convicted and punished. Does it end there? How would we feel to see our children being handcuffed, remanded, found guilty of manslaughter and receive capital punishment or its nearest alternative? Why don't we think for a while and try to find out, at least tentatively, why this is happening, why our children are behaving in this particular way and what can be done to at least minimise its possibility to happen.

The inevitable questions that always haunt us are 'what goes wrong with these children? Why do they resort to a delinquent behaviour of such nature?'. Simple and definitive answers to such complex questions may leave the possibility of short sightedness and virtually there is probably no ready or easy answer nor is there any simple solution to the problem. No singular phenomenon can sufficiently explain the reasons our children are behaving in this particular manner. Genetic makeup, the parent-child relationship, the socio-cultural milieu, the educational and economic endowment, the history and heritage, the peer interaction and many similar factors may have their individual role in influencing and propagating the course of this behavioural outgrowth. May be, multiple factors eventually come together to establish this intricate fashion of behaviour. But in order to unravel the forces that bind the factors together to give the behaviour a particular shape, one may have to look at the dynamics of psychosocial development of a child, which is a little delicate phenomenon. If we fail to recognise the individual and his psychosocial development, and are unable to identify its relationship with environmental factors, our efforts to resolve the issue may appear really futile.

Most of our children can sail through the inevitable pain of growing, growing through quick changes and transformation of childhood, adolescence and early adulthood. Surprisingly, most of the young adults do not have any regret about their early days, rather reminiscence give them full load of pleasure and excitement. It happens because most of them grow up uncashed and mostly accomplished due to injection of norms

and values of healthy living by their previous generation. This has been happening over generations and would probably never come to an end. Children and their parents and caregivers too, often fail to conceive this ever-happening reality. Unfortunately, things are completely different for a few and their families particularly who are identified as "disturbed". Deplorably true, they belong to an age group that has, in most situations, remained mostly unattended.

Each stage of human development is marked by its own vulnerability and stress of oncoming transition, and the youngsters rework psychologically the conflicts of earlier stages and gradually develop a sense of independence, separate out from authority figures and engage in experimentation with different events of life. Ultimately they emerge out as complete human being capable of assuming an adult role personally, socially and economically. Assumption of a perfect adult role becomes problem-

of recommendations to resolve the problem. However, although there are many societal elements in a complex situation like ours that need to be corrected, the truth that cannot be overlooked is that even the healthiest adolescent may have difficulties in identifying, deciding, assimilating and making sense of societal factors around his environment. The "disturbed" children are already victims of a real but immoderate inner chaos and have to confront with a particularly demoralised psychological structure, and therefore they find the environment around them all the more overwhelming and confusing. Some of them may even flounder, lose perspective and proper orientation, and begin to act up. It is true that under these circumstances any of the above stimuli of sufficient intensity may trigger or exacerbate a deviated behaviour and removal or censoring of a particular stimulus may perhaps eliminate certain type of delinquent behaviour and its consequences. It would not proba-

**Implementation of any character restructuring scheme would indeed need a multi-sectoral and multi-component approach. Crime committed by underage cohort of population should not be considered as a legal issue only. Taking into account of individual psychosocial make up and vulnerabilities should also be very high up in the agenda, and then only participation of activists of different sectors from health to children affairs to youth development to law enforcement can be ensured.**

ably alleviate the problem in totality. Therefore, in order to take care of recurrence of a different kind of deviated behaviour on a different occasion, it may need psychological restructuring and socio-economic manipulation in tandem in a broader perspective.

In order to understand the delinquent behaviour, at the outset, one must look for the underlying motivation for a particular behaviour. Clearing up the slums, censoring TV violence, incarcerating for delinquent behaviour or even a capital punishment for proved commissions may bring in a temporary resolve or may assuage our frustration by paving the way for a specific and immediate action. Recently, a new correctional centre for girls has been inaugurated and many good things were told and heard on that occasion. The need for such an initiative cannot be overemphasised and intention of the effort should not go unappreciated. At the same time people may have different ideas about the functioning of the establishments. I had the opportunity of visiting the correctional centre for male offenders at Tongi and similar other public facilities in India and Sri Lanka. Everywhere, to my disappointment, I have noticed an inadequate, if not an absence of, effort for behaviour auditing, psychological grooming and character restructuring. Everything is being done on a daily agenda basis without any need analysis and set objective. Outcome of the endeavour is hardly measured against any mercury column and cost-effectiveness of this public investment is seldom evaluated.

Modification of environmental factors may sound a gigantic job and in most of the situations it cannot be separated from general

socio-economic development of the country, and a comprehensive recommendation on those issues is beyond the scope of this brief communication. I would rather try to limit my propositions on the issues of behaviour analysis and character restructuring as components of any realistic future planning for prevention of juvenile crime. Some of the propositions may appear over-ambitious and time consuming, and therefore a bit more expensive. However, compared to cost of losing a prime age manpower, crimes committed, law enforcement, adjudication process and resulting incarceration taking together, the cost should be only meagre. Most expensive would rather be emergence of a crippled, restricted, deficient and disturbed adult population that the nation could hardly afford to bear with, if the problem remains unattended.

Like many priority development issues, lack of policy guidance may appear as a major hindrance in formulating any prevention plan for

levels of educational curricula development cannot be overemphasised. Similar initiatives should be in place in work place situations where many young adolescents coming from a "disturbed" background are working. Private sectors and business establishments may be encouraged to develop character shaping programmes in and outside the work places through provisions of appropriate incentives from the government and business associations.

Rehabilitation and preference in employment for young adolescents coming out of custodial care or incarceration should be given a priority and a small scale pilot initiative in this regard may give appropriate feedback before such an initiative is undertaken at government or non-government level. NGOs working for street children may consider the idea of integrating such a programme with their existing programmes. Law enforcement authorities may also consider the initiative as a part of the long felt need of community integration of their services and make the law enforcement efforts pro-people and multidimensional. Canadian Mountain Police claimed an encouraging outcome of their school-based programme for crime prevention in one of their publications. Health facilities should have an easy access of this particular population as a part of early psychosocial intervention. In order to pursue all these ventures and for social reintegration of the delinquent population the whole issue of juvenile delinquency needs to be destigmatised, which would however require a long-term motivational campaign. Along with rehabilitation process what is equally needed is healthy recreational facilities. In our situation of shrinking opportunities, we find our children really longing for breaks after all the socio-economic strain they have to undergo during different phases of life.

In brief, we may conclude that implementation of any character restructuring scheme would indeed need a multi-sectoral and multi-component approach. Crime committed by underage cohort of population should not be considered as a legal issue only. Taking into account of individual psychosocial make up and vulnerabilities should also be very high up in the agenda, and then only participation of activists of different sectors from health to children affairs to youth development to law enforcement can be ensured. It would however need decisions at the policy level to allocate required resources and establish coordination between different sectors. Development of an indigenous model with equal option of its application in the community as well as in the institutional care situation may be a worthwhile endeavour when any effective programme is almost nonexistent. Timely evaluation and periodic need-based modification of the model may open up a new door for intervention.

A massive information campaign for healthy lifestyle for children including positive media operations is essentially an important component of any prevention scheme. A well-balanced media and advertisement policy should be made available before any such campaign is set to float. The need for infusion of positive life skill training materials and their proper application in all

Dr. Syed Kamaluddin Ahmed is a mental health professional.

## Public sector paper mills: Can we not revive them?

SYED REZA QUADER

THERE have been four mills centrally managed by Bangladesh Chemical Industries Corporation (BCIC). Out of these, three have already been closed down. Only Karnaphuli Paper Mills, Chandraghona, Rangamati is in operation.

The four paper mills are: 1. Karnaphuli Paper Mills, (KPM), 2. Khulna Newsprint Mills (KNM), Town Khalishpur, Khulna, 3. North Bengal Paper Mills Ltd. (NBPM), Paksey, Pabna and 4. Sylhet Pulp and Paper Mills Ltd. (SPPM), Chhatak, Sunamganj. KNM was closed on 11.01.02. Use of green jute plants (low grade) and BMR could save the mills, it is stressed.

Now first I want to dwell on Karnaphuli Paper Mill. It is an integrated pulp and paper mill situated at Chandraghona some 28 miles upstream of the river Karnaphuli from Chittagong Port. It was established during the period 1949-52 by Daud Group who also set up Adamjee Jute Mills, largest in Asia and the world. The construction was completed on 23<sup>rd</sup> October 1952. Trial and commercial production started on the same day. Total land area is 1232.24 acres - (a) factory 442.32 acres including KRC (Karnaphuli Rayon and Chemicals), (b) housing colony 55.72 acres, (c) others 734.20 acres. The original project cost is 2511.89 lakh taka and the installed capacity 30,000 MT per annum. The main raw materials and source are bamboo, wood, imported pulp, chemicals and pulp of SPPM. Financial aspects are: (a) authorised capital-15,000.00 lakh taka, (b) paidup capital-460.00 lakh taka, (c) equity-2,509.62 lakh taka, loan capital being 1693.81 lakh taka (including debenture).

Value of total fixed assets is 6582.92 lakh taka and total liabilities including current liabilities (Tk. 10947.34 lakh) stands at 14626.61 lakh taka. Products are white paper, other grade papers, connecting products and chemicals. Production and sales range from 99 per cent-

100 per cent and 98 per cent-110 per cent of the targets, marketing system includes distribution through appointed dealers and selling to government agencies. The cost of production and average selling price are Tk. 43.729 per MT and Tk. 42.375 per MT respectively.

MBR was done in 1984-85 at a cost of Taka 2800.00 lakh and the outcome was encouraging. Production came down to 16,000-17,000 MT before BMR and after completion it achieved 105-110 per cent of the installed capacity. KPM manufactures paper through bleached sulphate process. The manpower upto June 2001 as per approved set-up was (a) Worker-2079, (b) Staff-1268, (c) Officer-303, total 3650 against actual- (a) Worker-1441, (b) Staff-1139, Officer-281, total 2361. Total demand for the products in the country is 97,500 MT a year. A huge amount of taxes is contributed to the national exchequer ranging from Tk. 2772.48 to Tk. 3249.87 per annum. The factory switched over to gas in 1985 supplied by Bakhrabad Gas System Ltd. replacing furnace oil as the major energy source.

The mill is bearing the burden of huge loss every year due to illegal use of electricity and water by the unauthorised inhabitants in the protected area of the mill. The minimum amount of such loss stands at Tk 5 crore a year. About 70 thousand people live in the area unlawfully. Miscreants are active in the area under the shelter of political parties and they reportedly steal the valuable parts. About 7/8 crore taka is counted as loss every year due to stealing of parts and other reasons. The mill authority sometimes takes action against unauthorised occupants, but it produces almost no result.

The mill earns profit, but due to losses as stated it remains a loss-incurring factory. The traditional raw materials like bamboo and wood are becoming scarce and for this alternative raw material must be searched out. This is green jute plant. All concerned must ponder over the matter.

We may now have glimpses of North Bengal Paper Mills (NBPM). It stands on the bank of the river Padma flowing through Pabna district southern area. It is also an integrated pulp and paper mill with ancillary chemical plants. The plant-machinery were heavily damaged during the war of liberation. In order to restore the plant to the original installed capacity of 15,000 MT per annum BMR was implemented under the guidance of BCIC at an estimated cost of Tk. 22.11 crore in 1988-89. As a result annual loss came down from Tk. 15.84 to Tk. 6.69 crore next year. Cost of production is Tk 49,000.00 per MT and average selling price is Tk. 44,221.00 per MT. Production ranged from 95 per cent -100 per cent and selling ranged from 68 per cent-100 per cent of the targets over the years. In the same way contribution to the national exchequer varied from 175 lakh taka to 676 lakh taka over the years.

Utility facilities comprise generator-3.26 MW, Sub-station 5.00 MW. Total land area of the plant is 133.54 acres - (a) factory-31.06 acres, (b) housing colony-38.57 acres, (c) others-63.91 acres. Financial data includes authorised capital-Tk 100.00 crore, paid up capital-Tk 500.00 crore and equity-Tk 23.88 crore, loan capital being Tk. 836.04 lakh. The amount of foreign loan and government loan is Tk. 63.85 and Tk. 772.19 lakh respectively.

The construction of the plant started in March 1967 and was completed in 1970. Trial production took place in November 1970 and commercial production started in March 1975. The mill manufactures white writing and printing paper, foil, manifold and duplicating paper, blue match and wrapping paper. As said the mill suffered heavy damage during the war of liberation and it was restored to functional stage after repair work and obviously commercial production got delayed.

The raw materials necessary are bagasse obtained from the sugar mills of northern zone, imported pulp and pulp from SPPM. The

demand for the products is 97,500 MT per annum. The mill failed to achieve annual installed production capacity because of incapability of old paper machine to run for full time, increase in 'down time' for reasons including use of local spares and death of technically capable persons.

The manpower position of the mill up to June-2001 was worker-641, staff-291 and officer-117 total 1049 according to approved set-up against actual worker-596, staff-276, officer-98, total-970. The mills was closed some three months back. The employees are very worried. To free the working personnel from their worries and also for the sake of indigenous industry it is urgent to raise the factory, only one in the northern zone, to functional level by using alternative raw material say green jute plants. Adequate technical persons must be posted and 'down time' be managed to the minimum. The old paper machinery is to be replaced and better functioning must be ensured.

Sylhet Pulp and Paper Mills Ltd. (SPPM) started functioning in July 1977 and trial production occurred in September 1975. The construction work began on 15-07-1973 and was completed in Feb 1975. It was under Bangladesh Forest Industries Corporation (BFIC) and handed over to BCIC in 1977. The mill manufactures pulp from soft wood-nalkhagra-jute cuttings. It has a jute line which was not commissioned in BFIC time because of some inherent fault, it is learnt. The mill with an annual installed capacity of 30,000 MT of chemical pulp is situated on the bank of the river Surma in Chhatak, Sunamganj.

The original project cost is F/C Tk. 8137.40 lakh, L/C Tk. 5038.54 lakh, total-13175.94 lakh taka. The financial side includes-(a) authorised capital Tk. 20,000.00 lakh, (b) paid up capital 1,000.00 lakh taka, equity-3206.50 lakh taka and loan capital of 2004.54 lakh taka. Production varies from 15 per cent to 100 per cent and sale from 21 per cent to 100 per cent of their

targets. The contribution of mill to the national exchequer ranges from 153.95 lakh taka to 783.13 lakh taka per month. The demand for the product in the local market is 20,000 ADMT per annum. The pulp is directly handled by the mill authority through own marketing department. The main buyers are paper mills of BCIC. A little quantity is sold to the private parties. Pricing is settled by BCIC with the approval of government. The cost of production is Tk 46,008.00 per MT and selling price average is Tk. 31,891.00 per MT. The land area is 139.36 acres: factory-60.00 acres, housing colony-64.51 acres, others-14.85 acres. The manpower position, as per approved set-up was worker-450, staff-325, officer-155 total 9309 against actual - worker-343, staff-249, officer-107, total-699, up to June-2001. The loan capital includes government loan AFD-453.00 lakh taka, loan from CUF-500.00 lakh taka, gratuity fund-1051.54 lakh taka. BMR programme was taken up in 1984-86 and completed at a cost of Tk. 28.00 lakh taka. The programme aimed at removal of inherent defects/deficiencies of the plant-machinery in order to achieve full operational success. Because of death of fund jute line functioning could not be raised to the expected level.

The entire public sector paper industry faces acute problems as shown. To save the industry by opening the closed mills (KNM-MBPR-MPPM) and ensuring smooth functioning of all four mills, top priority should have been given to the alternative raw material i.e. green jute plants and modernisation where necessary. But 'pay-off' of the three mills was declared on November 30, 2002 to the utter surprise of all concerned. This is the age of industrialisation. Why should we opt against?

Syed Reza Quader is former head of trng. KPM, and head of administration dept. KNM-NBPM.