

BCS computer show 2003: Questions of a layperson

ABUL MAAL A MUHITH

THIS was the thirteenth fair and the number of participants went up from 18 in 1993 to 115 this time. Incidentally the participants were much more in 1998 (131) and 1999 (292) when the exhibitions were held in what is known as IT Building (actually IDB Bhavan). There is a good explanation for this divergence. In the IT Building every retailer automatically becomes a participant. Now they hold regular sales fair there and they are not considered BCS show. BCS membership is claimed to be 321 now, a tenfold increase from where it started a decade ago. We have, indeed, come a long way. This is not to deny that the industry is fighting against so many odds, made more difficult by domestic policy of state control and mistrust attended with inefficiency and ignorance.

The 2003 show was so far the best arrangement. Not crowded like the last one held entirely inside the Centre. What a pleasant experience in Bangladesh it was of one-stop-service to be able to pay your parking fees and also get your entry ticket to the exhibition while driving into the parking lot. On the last occasion I had to ask a volunteer I knew well to wait me at the entrance to get my entry ticket and guide me in parking the car and in one word make things easy for an elderly person. Because the fair was organised both indoor and outdoor the crowd although definitely larger than last time was easy to handle. I liked the service provided by one of the stalls with which you could easily locate the participant or the booth of your special interest. Also for the first time it appeared to me that there was more than just the sales pitch that marked most of the earlier shows. Surely it brings in young crowds and generates interest but deliberate education programme has been lacking in the past. I was

not in Dhaka when the exhibition opened and I was too late for the seminars. I am not sure if all the planned seminars were actually held. But what I heard was that some of them were good and attracted listeners. Dhaka youth is very inquisitive, indeed. Even for a subject like the space, here you can hold seminars with entry fees. No mean a feat!

Far from being an expert I am not even a very knowledgeable person in this field but I have chosen to comment simply because I have been taking some interest in IT (shall I say ICT) for nearly a decade and a half. I have also chosen to write this column in English, which I do rarely, because the clientele I seek here use a lot of English. My comments are that of a real layperson and I am trying to air them to those who take an interest in this sector. I believe that by 2020 Bangladesh will be known as a country with high computer literacy and 40 percent of its total labour force will be employed in the IT sector. Our population then will be 200 million and the labour force will be 110 million strong. We shall be active both in the industry and in the service sectors of ICT. We shall be manufacturing elements of hardware and, of course, assembling them; we shall produce software; and we shall provide data processing services.

I try to be present in all the BCS events as well as the sales fairs in IT Building and was fortunate to attend the first BCS exhibition in 1993 as also the last two held in the Convention Centre. In 1993 and also in 2001 I had young guides to give me a tour of the show but this time I thought that I could move by myself. I was an early convert to the potential of the computer and long before I was personally exposed to a PC, I tried to promote the IT sector. Perhaps it had something to do with mechanising the foreign aid

accounts in the ERD, with which I was involved and more to the commitment of my friend and colleague Dr AKMG Rabbani, who as head of the Statistics Division and Bureau, installed a Mainframe in the Bureau in the early 1980s. Although computer technology is almost half a century old and can be traced back to ENIAC completed in 1946 in U Penn, its popularity had to wait till the invention of microprocessor in 1979.

I found in the show just held a few days ago that many participants

of many domestic businesses is a limitation on their use of software. But can't this problem be overcome? Surely it can be if the same software meets the requirement of many small businesses. Perhaps if our business houses learnt to cooperate in limited areas they could become customers of software producers. A number of banks or a number of health clinics can combine to secure software that will serve their business interests.

I wanted to know about the opportunities for data processing

on paying rent as you wait for sanction to buy your computers and put them in service and before you have done anything you have a debt to carry. Again, you may be asking for a small loan and it does not interest the Bank official. I know of some who tried for financing and ultimately left the country in utter frustration. I am told that the moment you have a sizeable manpower in an establishment unionism destroys the work ethic even in a high tech sector like informatics.

I wanted to learn about broad-

would be easy for the businesses to cooperate or fill in gaps. But it is almost eight years we have been talking about it and "the project is still under preparation". We made a farce of converting the IDB Bhavan as the IT city. I am convinced that power supply will never be reliable in this country as long as the supplier cannot be sued for punitive damages. But with the all-powerful public sector monopolizing power supply you cannot just do a thing. We permit private parties to set up micro power stations say of 10 MW

country we would be so much luckier. Why should this inefficient institution have a monopoly over our telecommunication system? Why should we not auction it out to the highest bidders, if necessary by unbundling its operations and parceling it out into several units? What right does it have to charge us high rates for overseas calls when VOIP can make it cheap? I shudder at the idea of T&T Board going into internet and mobile telephone businesses. When we should really be trying to wind up the Board we are seeking to expand its business and, of course, its monopoly and corruption. The only way you can do away with monopoly is by abolishing the T&T Board.

We have a serious manpower problem in the IT sector. True that production of computer engineers and scientists have gone up from around 50 a year to 1500 in just about six years. We have a problem with rapid development here. Teachers are neither sufficient nor of high quality and we must attend to rectifying this weakness. For software industry the quality of engineers and scientists must be very high. I gather that we have now some 1500 training institutes for producing skilled computer workers from school graduates. The courses taught in these institutions vary and they are not standardized at all. It is time that national standards are set, affiliation of institutions by a competent body (may be a BCS subsidiary) is made mandatory and there is a system of national certification of qualifications of computer technicians or programmers. For a while 'enclave development' is possible but ultimately if the basic education system is not improved you just cannot have computer literacy of high order. Supply of computers to all secondary school is what we are thinking about when in developed countries children are playing with computers. But let us at least

achieve this target in two years. In education we have not only to improve the textbooks and provide the tools and supplies but the greatest challenge is getting good teachers. I wonder if we should not think of a different compensation level for the education sector. One thing we must do promptly is the switch to English numerals (known as Arabic numerals) in Bangla. This has been done in India and China.

I was surprised to learn that the computer industry like other businesses has the most serious problem with good managers. Somehow our good managers are too much after money and less after excellence. It is certainly the influence of the bad lessons we have given or left behind; but they must try to be better than us. Punctuality, proper use of office equipment, neatness in work and environment, meeting targets, amiable behaviour and above all commitment to excellence cannot be substituted by simple smartness. Talent is a matter largely of cultivation and devotion. Genius after all is 99 percent perspiration. The high turnover of experts and skilled people in the ICT sector is a serious problem. In the 1950s and 1960s our growing jute industry faced the same problem and they found a way to face it reasonably well. The PJMA (Pakistan Jute Mills Association) came up with a range of emoluments for different levels of managers for different mills of varying capacities. All the members voluntarily agreed to abide by these indicative levels of emoluments. The topmost management position, however, was excluded from this standardization. Can't something of similar nature be done by BCS?

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were parading their worth as software manufacturers. The problem there seems to me to be the narrowness of the domestic market. As in consultancy business you cannot depend entirely on external market, then it is better to be a sub-contractor. To establish your own identity you need a domestic market, however small it may be. Unless you receive a push from domestic market it is so difficult to make an entry into the international market. I am sure programmes such as Janashakti for human resource management, or CCPR for generalised accounting, or Zeebika for manpower export are used by many domestic units. Techno Vista boasted of its software capacity and I found that most of its clients are the transnational corporations doing business in Bangladesh. May be because the breadth of operations

and the problems that such service providers are experiencing. I came across very few who actually have any experience in the area as most service providers are still looking for customers abroad. I am told that the problems are too many. First is the problem of power supply. Second, of course, is the problem of communication links. Third, the problem of manpower and its quick turnover is endemic in the IT sector as a whole. Fourth is the problem of credit line from the banking system. Finally, believe it or not, is the problem of labour unionism. I was aware of the credit problem that is essentially an issue of ignorance, graft and promptitude in service. That you need to do something fast in order to keep your customer interested in you because he can be wooed away by somebody else is not appreciated at all. You rent a place and then you go

band service and found that it was not really that advantageous. Very few providers give service to individual customers and it is mainly for corporate and office users. Speed is so difficult to gain in Bangladesh. We are stuck up on the basic problem of fibre optic cable link. Let us hope that at last we shall be linked with the world soon. I also do not understand why the entire country cannot have fibre optic link. There is no reason to underutilize the capacity available with the Railway system.

That power supply is a great spoiler for the IT sector need not be over-emphasized. We thought about an IT village or IT Park, as it is called now, where power supply would not be a problem. Communication links would be plentiful, the investment environment would be conducive for entrepreneurs and it

capacity but we do not allow that power producer to retail his production. What is the hitch? Why can't we have retailers like PBS in cities, towns, industrial areas and so on? Again it is unionism not of the labour force alone but more of the white-collar employees that will resist retailing of power by the private sector.

The biggest obstacle to the development of the IT sector was initially our import policy. Thank heavens that at last in 1997 and then in 1998 our policymakers saw the light. Last year once again we were threatened with darkness. However, the vigilance of the BCS and public outcry helped us to escape this darkness at noon. The next big obstacle has been the T&T Board and I have often thought that if somehow the T&T Board could be thrown out of existence from the

Managing literacy programmes

DR M ASHRAF ALI

ALTHOUGH the rate of literacy has increased considerably in the country according to the census of 1999, the absolute number of illiterates, however, has increased considerably. By now, there would be about 90 million illiterates in the country.

It does not need to be emphasized at great length that such a vast illiterate population is a great burden on the society and stands in the way to the modernisation process. Since Bangladesh is poor in basic natural resources, it can profitably utilise this vast resources of manpower if it can be properly developed by transforming it into a human capital. And by doing this, a burdensome liability can be transformed into a productive wealth.

It is gratifying to note that the government is going to gear up the literacy activities by reintroducing the mass education programme. While no one will deny that it was a retrogressive step to discontinue the programme due to serious pitfalls found in the programme, it is a good realisation on the part of the government to underscore the need of the literacy programme for

a self-propelling development process in the country. However, it may not be too much to expect that the present government would, of necessity, try to avoid the mistakes and wrong approaches that marred the previous programmes.

It should be realised that literacy programme falls within the purview of non-formal education and it is always more difficult to organise and manage any non-formal education programme than any formal education programme. This becomes all the more meaningful when we see that there are very few successful programmes in the non-formal sector which could be accepted as a guide. It is entirely an

uncharted path and therefore is fraught with risks and dangers of wastage and failures. And it is easy to see that when a nationwide

programme fails, the wastage is colossal. In this connection the experiences of other countries who have been successful in endeavours of this kind should be carefully studied before launching programme of our own. Some of the countries who have made remarkable progress within reasonably short period are Cuba, Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand.

Many people in this country propagate the idea of "each one teach one" method in literacy. In my view, nothing can be more wasteful than a non-committal and unplanned approach like this. Literacy does not mean merely learning the alphabet and being

the learner is able to read a newspaper and useful pamphlets and should be able to write an application to the government requesting the things he needs. In this connection the book "New Paths to Learning" written by Phillip Coombs and Manzoor Ahmed should be consulted to obtain necessary guidelines. The authors emphasise in their book essential learning needs for the rural poor. Based on their suggestions it is possible to prepare a realistic and helpful curriculum for the poor illiterates in Bangladesh;

(d) It would be a mistake to think that anyone would be able to teach a literacy class. In order to teach the type of curriculum I have suggested, well-planned thorough training of the literacy teachers is a must. Unless this is done, even a well-planned programme is bound to fail to achieve the desired objectives. The failures of past programmes were mainly because of the use of untrained teachers;

(e) Follow-up activities should be an integral part of the literacy programme. Unless appropriate and adequately prepared reading materials are supplied to such learners, they will be likely to fall back to illiteracy within a very short time. Reading materials, such as, useful books, newspapers and pamphlets should be supplied to a reading center to be established in each village. These should be supplemented by radio and TV programmes designed to raise the level of consciousness of the neo-literates. It is obvious that radio and TV could do a crucial job in this respect and thereby justify the huge investment made in them. Surely in a country like Bangladesh such a costly media like the TV and radio should not be meant purely for entertainment for a negligible minority who actually do not pay for them. It would be advisable to devote more time by these media to educational programmes for the benefit of the rural poor;

(f) And now, the question of finance, which is always scarce for programmes like these, is a vital one. No one is going to deny that in order to initiate nation-wide literacy programmes, huge fund would be necessary. It would be justified to spend the fund considering the priority and need of the programme. The fact that investment in such a programme would bring manifold returns in the future leading to transformation of a nation should also be given due consideration.

Finally, it must be emphasised that we should avoid half-hearted efforts in such a vital programme as this and a total commitment and firm determination would be an essential ingredient for success in a challenging venture like the literacy programme.

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Defining education as an equal right

No mainstream system can discriminate, segregate or exclude any child

ELS HEIJNEN

THE present draft of the Education-NPA is said to be based on the Bangladesh Constitution, the Universal Declaration for Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Its overall goal is that of non-discrimination.

Constitutional provisions relevant to children's rights in Bangladesh are laid down in Articles 27, 28 and 31 in the general articles safeguarding the protection of children from all forms of discrimination.

However, the present education-NPA draft seems to promote the opposite as it proposes segregation and discrimination of poor children (families below the poverty line) and other disadvantaged children such as those with disabilities to be enrolled in non-mainstream Early Child Care Education (ECCE) programmes.

Furthermore, in this education-NPA draft the formal primary education system does not acknowledge, or make provision for, diversity. The system seems to care only for the relatively small group of "standard" children who "fit" and "survive" the inflexible formal system in place. Those who do not "fit" are dumped in parallel, segregated non-formal programmes.

This segregation and marginalization is not based on modern scientific educational criteria. This is exclusive thinking and planning – or in other words: discrimination! Exclusionary pressures in access and teaching-learning practices such as poverty, ethnicity, learning difficulties, social class, disability and gender, are experienced by many children in Bangladesh. Children themselves do in principle not discriminate, but learn this from adult role models such as parents, teachers and others. Segregating disadvantaged children in non-mainstream, non-formal education programmes will not facilitate their integration into mainstream society, nor will it challenge mainstream society to reflect on its prejudices and deeply rooted discriminatory thinking.

What has happened to the overarching strategy of inclusive education, taking responsibility for all children irrespective of their socio-economic background, gender, ability, ethnicity, or other differences, in a compulsory free mainstream primary education system as laid down in the 2nd draft of the Education NPA just a few months ago?

The question may have to be asked, whether Bangladesh will make the same mistake as northern countries by first discriminating and segregating children who do not "fit" the system due to individual educational needs, to conclude that this is not in the best interest of most children, and neither in the best interest of society at large.

Or will Bangladesh look at other low-resource countries in Asia and learn from their successful experiences? In Lao PDR, China and Vietnam for example, governments have shown high commitments and success in creating more inclusive and child-centered mainstream

teaching-learning environments, while at same time improving the formal (pre-)primary education system as a whole.

The Bangladesh education-NPA should be based on an analysis of the many barriers to education in access and practice; in other words factors that make the mainstream education system inaccessible and inflexible for groups of different learners and factors that lead to irregular attendance, high levels of repetition and drop-out rates and poor learning achievements in both formal and non-formal programmes. Schools are not

children with different disabilities. The present rush and payments of large amounts of money for admission forms for those few schools perceived as good schools once again illustrates that even the most basic primary education system is not free!

Provided Bangladesh takes the international commitments to promote Education For All (EFA) seriously, this Education-NPA needs to become more rights-based and inclusive, while recognising that better-trained, professionally supported and adequately paid teachers are the most fundamental ingre-

stream education system.

This article can be finished on a more positive note, because the government (PMED) has agreed to actively participate in the Inclusive Education (IE) core-group together with UNESCO, UNICEF, UCEP, Bangladesh Protibondhi Foundation and Save the Children. This includes [1] an analysis of what is already happening in Bangladesh in terms of increased and improved inclusive access and programming in formal and non-formal education programmes, [2] how these experiences can be linked together for wider learning, replication and impact, [3] organising a National IE Seminar, and [4] translating the UNESCO teacher guide "Understanding and responding to children's needs in inclusive classrooms" into Bangla to be integrated in pre-service and in-service training of teachers.

We have to make a much better effort to implement the right to, in and through education for all children without exceptions and practice what we preach regarding equity and non-discrimination. We have to start addressing social inequalities more pro-actively and include marginalised and excluded children in mainstream education and mainstream development. Only then a more democratic, tolerant and equal society has a chance in Bangladesh!

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All health information to keep you up to date

AIDS : Breaking down immunity

AIDS stands for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. AIDS is not a disease as such but a collection of illnesses (or syndromes) that can occur when a person is infected with HIV. Most of these illnesses are caused by organisms that are quite common and would not normally affect someone with a strong, healthy immune system. However in a person who is HIV positive they can cause serious or fatal illnesses because the body is unable to fight them off effectively. There is no way to predict when or even if each HIV positive person might develop AIDS.

The longer a person has HIV, the more damaged his/her immune system becomes. This leaves the individual more prone to other infections. There are two main types of HIV called HIV-1 and HIV-2. The primary cause of AIDS in Australia is HIV-1. HIV is a virus that cannot live for long outside the human body. Therefore it cannot be spread through everyday activities such as touching people, sharing bathrooms or in swimming pools.

HIV is transmitted from person to person through the exchange of blood or other bodily fluids. For HIV to be transmitted there must be large amounts of the virus present in body fluid (blood, semen, breast milk etc). Other body fluids such as sweat, tears and saliva do not carry enough HIV to infect people, therefore hugging, kissing and shaking hands are all safe.

In many countries the main ways HIV is spread are through:

- & sex without condoms
 - & sharing needles or syringes when injecting drugs
 - & from mother to baby during pregnancy, at birth or through breast feeding (less common)
- There is no known cure or vaccine for HIV or AIDS.

Did you know?

A man died in the Congo (in 1959), is now known as the first proven AIDS death.

Next: Computer: Healthy guidelines for you.