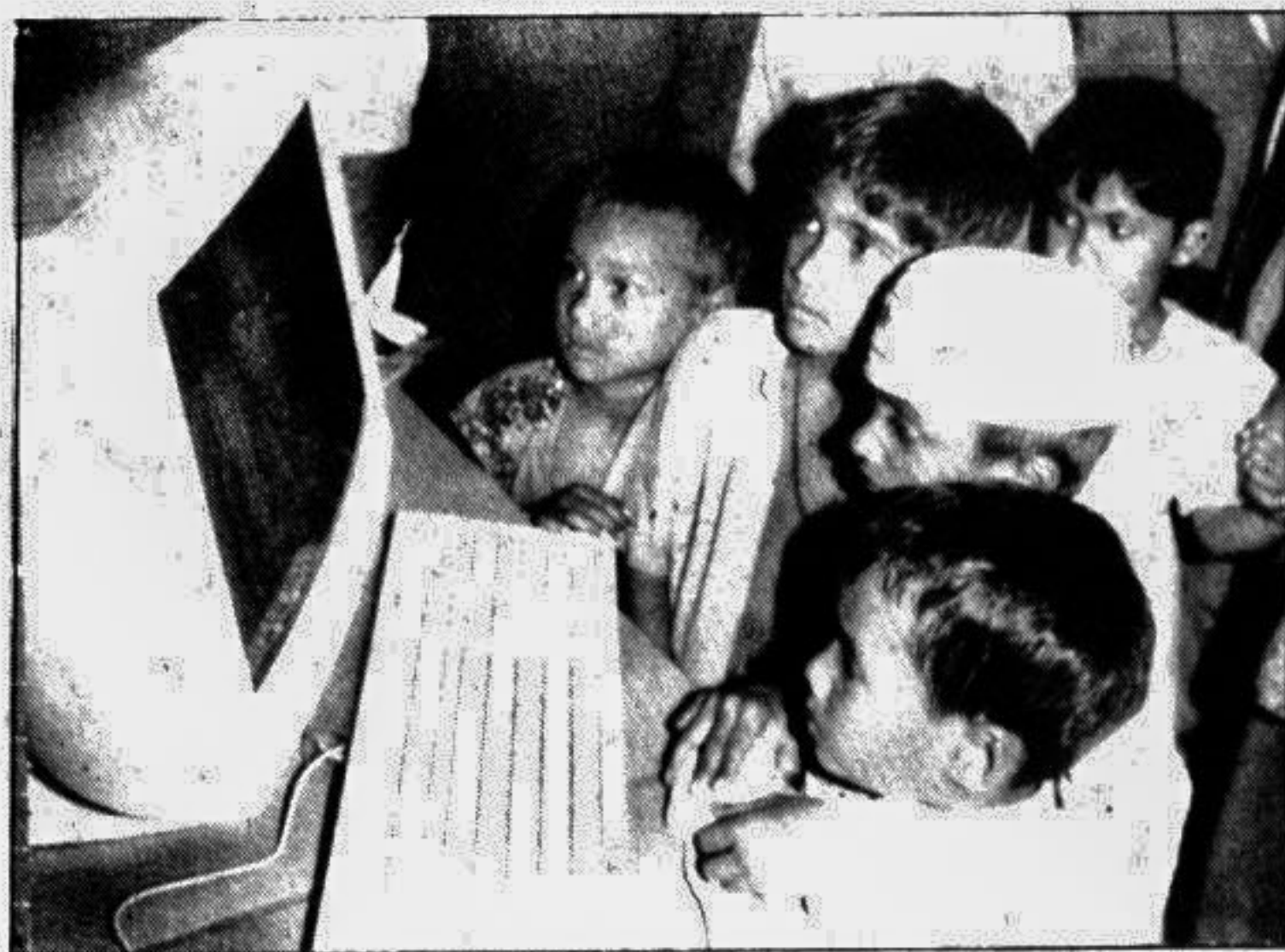


Life in Dhaka

Popular PC Show for the Family

by A Husnain



The BCS is to be commended for coming out of the shell. Now they have to come out with an official quarterly magazine to put the official stamp of approval on the buzzing computer industry in Bangladesh.

I am just back from the BCS International Computer Show 1998, and am recording my first hand impressions after three hours of tiring footwork. I could not finish even half of the stalls, as the crowd started flowing as if coming into a family mela, judging from the number of families present — the age group extending from six to sixty. The happy faces confirmed that this show gave the inking of standard modern exhibition seen anywhere. The 'bugs' would surely be removed at the next Show — bigger, brighter, and more crowded.

What the school-going youngsters were doing there in the world of hi-tech (wall screens were showing movies or TV shows via the computers)? It was the right place to get the feel of the computer world and be mentally ready after a few years, to treat computers as part of the furnishing in a middle class home. The awareness factor has to be driven home early. Exposure to the computer culture is the 'in' thing in this IT age. It is the culture which makes the mind tick.

The government's patronization of the PC and software industry gave a kick start to the PC show — the show of this winter, judging by the large influx of non-professional visitors. About 60,000 attended the show in one day according to news reports. There is no doubt that computer awareness has made a debut with a big bang. Now we need 20,000 programmers a year by 2005, starting with 2000 by 2000 AD.

Take off the garments of the mind, and export programmes and programmes. Do not be surprised if some PC assembly plants start relocating in Bangladesh soon. We have the manpower, — women power, young power, and PC-power, soft or hard. Just waiting to be tapped. But we must remember one joke I heard years ago "The Bengalees are like a bottle of soda water. Open the cap, the gas escapes, and only water remains". Are we really that

harmless and innocent?

No, judging from the infectious enthusiasm. Even some illiterate tokat boys were collecting literature and pamphlets! The 4-floor IDB building site is splendid for exhibitions, a bit away from the madding crowd and the traffic jams. I felt for a moment I was in Singapore or Bangkok. I looked for a place to sit down for a while to rest the tiring body and the feet but there was no 'free' space. The toilet sections have to be expanded to handle the huge show crowds, and include bigger wash rooms. The smokers were furiously seeking spots for a puff, as there were no reserved smoking corners.

The Dhakaites are learning to collect fair literature, and this time the service provided by the stalls were much better than on previous occasions. The crowd was too thick to ask questions and see demos, hence

literature and leaflets have to be studied at leisure at home. It is good PR — reminders in writing for post-show enquiries.

The prices of colour monitors have come down quite a bit, in fact halved. One 14" Korean brand was available for below Tk 6,000. The mighty IBM has reduced the price for entry-level PC, suitable for SOHO (small office, home office) clients. It is competing with original Compaq. One locally assembled MM PC was offered at Tk 28,000 only. This company is also manufacturing AVRs as low as Tk 1500/500W, with transient and surge protection. In Japan during the mid-1990s, thousands supplied parts and components from the cottage industry sector. We have millions of hands for low-tech assembly and fabrication (compare our handicraft, toy and other products).

Multi-media and CDs (compact discs) have caught the imagination of the young owners of computers, as hi-fi music and movies are available, and Internet communication is being cheaper day by day. The speed of the CDs have been going up at a dizzying pace; while the prices are dropping equally fast, specially after the reduction by the government of import duty and other levies. As more and more computer classes open in the secondary schools (starting with the Govt schools), the computer culture will spread to the district towns; and a flourishing second-hand market will encourage penetration of computer hobby to more families.

In Dhaka several computer super stores or department stores have opened. These will pick up business as this computer show has provided good input to thousands of potential customers. One feature at the IDB tower was the presence of a large number of female visitors to the Show; as also a very high percentage of behind-the-counter assistants were young ladies manning the stalls and booths. It was good clean atmosphere, and the spirit was infectious.

The BCS is to be commended for coming out of the shell. Now they have to come out with an official quarterly magazine to put the official stamp of approval on the buzzing computer industry in Bangladesh. Some say our computer software export prospects has the potentiality to beat the annual earning of the garment industry within a decade (India is earning over \$2 billion per annum from software export business). Export of highly skilled manpower (human resources) enhances the image of a country.

The next BCS International Computer Fair would be a gate crasher as more foreign companies would be represented, and lucky prizes would be galore, judging from the crowd response at this Show. Well done, PC Bangladesh!

Prized for Peace: The Nobel Laureates

by A S M Nurunnabi

It's a prize for democracy and a prize in which all the people in Northern Ireland can feel immense pride and credit.



John Hume

David Trimble

NORTHERN Ireland has attained peace after all. In this achievement, some very important figures had their contributions, but John Hume and David Trimble were the solid men of the mainstream who pulled the two biggest political parties in Northern Ireland through the long slog of the peace process. And when they won the Nobel Peace Prize it was a victory for the mainstream values of compromise and consensus. The British Prime Minister Tony Blair said: 'It's a prize for democracy and a prize in which all the people in Northern Ireland can feel immense pride and credit.'

To many Hume seemed to be the obvious choice. He had been a major player in Northern Ireland politics since the civil rights movement of the late 1960s, the leader of the Social Democratic and Labour Party for nearly 20 years and for 10 years a crucial figure en route to this Year's Good Friday Agreement.

Trimble, on the other, has been the leader of his party, the Ulster Unionists for about three years and recently came to be seen as a hard-liner. Hume has been lauded as 'the civil rights movement of Northern Ireland's political leaders in his work for a peaceful solution. 'Trimble has been praised for his 'great political courage.'

But what the Nobel Prize Committee also apparently appreciated was that the quirky chemistry between these two men was crucial to the success and implementation of the Good Friday Agreement. The committee also reportedly seemed to understand Hume's conversion to a metaphor for Northern Ireland's own voyage from three decades of sectarian conflict to something like peace: he had gone from the hard-liner whom people thought they knew to a courageous pragmatist whose accommodation still bothers many of his party members.

Irishman Seamus, who won

the Nobel Prize for Literature three years ago, had as his subject the harmless art of potato digging but his juxtaposition was fitting for a part of the world where the sword — or its modern successor, gun — has proved mightier than the pen for the past 30 years. The imbalance, which has caused 3,500 deaths during Northern Ireland's troubles, was in part redressed when two men who advocated talk rather than arms were jointly awarded this year's Noble Peace Prize. Hume was a Roman Catholic, Trimble a Protestant. Beliefs are usually irrelevant to Nobel Prize. In this context, it may be noted that the Nobel Prize Committee has often given the prize to those who have found an exit from their own belligerency or bloodletting: Yasser Arafat, Shimon Peres, and Yitzhak Rabin shared it in 1994. Nelson Mandela and F W De Klerk in '93. Anwar Sadat and Menachem Begin in '78. Henry Kissinger and Le Due Tho in '73.

For Hume, 61 and Trimble, 54, it was a fantasy back in the bad old days. As young men, they were about as far apart as two politicians in Northern Ireland can be without trying gun each other down. Nearly three decades ago, as fires blazed and water cannons knocked down

The real key to the peace talks in Northern Ireland was their structure — the 'three-strand approach' designed by Hume and sold by him to the participants. Hume was convinced that Northern Ireland had to be viewed in three dimensions: as a political entity that merited the right of self-determination (and therefore a legislature of its own) that was still part of the United Kingdom and that shared an island and a history with the Republic of Ireland.

If it was Hume's vision enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement, it was Trimble who muscled the accord into existence and sold it to Northern Ireland's Unionist majority. The man who accomplished that seemed to have crossed a vast political territory in a short time. His mastery of the hard line was confirmed in 1966. His tough stand in the matter of defying an order of Royal Ulster Constabulary not to march along the traditional route by thousands of angry Orange Order demonstrators earned him the Unionist Party leadership a couple of years ago.

In reviewing the whole process of peace-making in Northern Ireland over a long period, it may be noted that John Hume and David Trimble were not the flashiest kind of peacemakers. They left the spotlight to others, to Bill Clinton, twisting arms over the phone from the White House, to Tony Blair, jetting into Belfast from London to kick recalcitrants into line, to Sinn Fein's Gerry Adams, cloaking his connections to the hard men of the IRA under a mantle of suave charm.

The world will now be watching to see if this latest Nobel Peace Prize will help the powerbrokers in Northern Ireland be clever about and receptive to lasting peace, to discovering that a pen can be 'snug as a gun.' The Nobel Committee's hopes that the award would consolidate the peace process was echoed by other key figures in it.

The Month of Self-purification

by Kazi Aulad Hossain

Not only during the holy month of Ramadan, but also during the period of next eleven months of the year a Muslim is required to learn self-restraint. It is a continuous process and Ramadan is a training too, which enables a Muslim to be an ideal/good citizen of the society.

THE lunar month of Shaban had already given us the glad tidings of the coming of the holy month of Ramadan. Now it has come and we hail it with all our heart. We are really fortunate that benign Allah has graciously been pleased to provide us once again with the opportunity to observe the holy month of Ramadan carefully and meticulously. Not only the Muslims of the world's second most populous country — Bangladesh — Muslims all over the world have also preparing themselves to hail and observe this month in a befitting manner as ordained by Almighty Allah in the Holy Quran.

Ramadan, it may be stated here, is the month of months, rather it is the most important month for it makes a striking difference with all other months of the lunar year. 'Ramd' means heat, so, Ramadan means month of heat. And since Ramadan is a lunar month it formally begins with the appearance of the moon and in that case the time of beginning of Ramadan differs from country to country since Ramadan moon is not sighted everywhere on the same day.

Ramadan means month-long fasting from dawn to dusk and extra night prayer (Terabih) in congregation at community mosques or at homes/private places besides offering compulsory prayers (Salat) five times every day. Ramadan means distribution of Zakat (the poor's due) at a prescribed rate and giving of 'Sadaqa' (charity) by the rich to the poor and needy. Ramadan also means Iftar (breaking the fast) and Sehri (pre-dawn meal) which are important rituals observed each day during the month by the 'Rozadar' (the fasting individual). Now let us see what Lord Creator says in Ayat 183 of Sura Baqara of the Holy Quran vis-a-vis observance of Siam (fasting) during the month of holy Ramadan. He declares:

'O ye who believe, Fasting is prescribed to you As it was prescribed To those before you, That you may learn self-restraint'

Ramadan, it may be further mentioned here, is the month in which benign Allah has sent down the Holy Quran as a guide to mankind and also "Clear

(signs) for guidance and judgement between right and wrong" (Ayat 185 Sura Baqara).

Now the question is why this month-long fasting from day-break to dusk? It may be said in this connection that a Muslim's abstinence from food and drink is not simply self-denial or self-torture. It is something else, it is something noble, something meaningful.

In this context we may now see what Almighty Allah says in the last line of the Ayat referred to above. As ordained in this Ayat Muslims are required to learn self-restraint. The last line of the Ayat is highly significant and meaningful. According to this Quranic injunction, Muslims are required to restrain themselves not only from taking food and drink, they are also required to restrain simultaneously from all kinds of evil deeds including lying, theft, dacoity, murder, arson, loot, terrorism, back biting etc.

'Siam' (fasting) is one of the five pillars of the grand edifice of Islam and to observe it (fasting) is incumbent (Fara) on the part of every able-bodied Muslim, according to the dictates of the Holy Quran. So

when a tycoon or a millionaire fasts he can easily realise the suffering and hardship of a poor man when he feels the sharp pinch of hunger. And as such he (the millionaire) is required to discharge his bounden duty to help rehabilitate the poor hungry people of the society. Islam teaches the have to be conscious of their duties toward the have-nots through the great institution of Siam.

Not only during the holy month of Ramadan, but also during the period of next eleven months of the year a Muslim is required to learn self-restraint. It is a continuous process and Ramadan is a training too, which enables a Muslim to be an ideal/good citizen of the society. For a Muslim such a thorough and intensive month-long training programme is imperative for moulding his mind and for self-purification. And after successful completion of training by His such faithful and obedient 'bandas' (servants), Lord Creator says: 'Siam or Roza is for Me and I will reward the Rozadar. Myself.' So, let us endeavour to achieve self-purification in the holy month of Ramadan.

Ancient Building Science Makes a Comeback

Anjana Motihar Chandra writes from New Delhi

ILABEN Shah spent a hefty Rs. 330,000 (\$8,000) to re-design her bedroom and bathroom in her 20-year-old Peddar Road apartment in Mumbai simply because a 'Vastu' consultant predicted that if she did not, someone in her family would die of leukaemia. Neurologist Amitabh Verma underwent much inconvenience to relocate his kitchen to the front of his two-storey home where his daughter's bedroom originally was. The move, to the southeast, was carried out according to the principles of 'Vastu', the ancient Indian science of architecture and design.

Film star Sanjay Dutt, who spent two difficult years in jail, reportedly effected structural changes in his home just before his release from prison in October 1995 to improve his fortunes. More and more people, be it professionals, industrialists, film stars, businessmen or politicians have become firm

believers in this ancient building science which has witnessed a remarkable resurgence in urban India in recent years.

'Vastu' means the dwelling of humans and gods and 'Vastu Shastra', or the science of Vastu, is essentially the art of correct setting so that one can harness the five elements of space, air, fire, water and earth for harmonious living. According to Vastu science, proper use of these elements, creates a perfectly balanced environment which ensures good health, wealth, prosperity and peace. The traditional practitioners of Vastu believed that an invisible energy force from the earth's centre was responsible for the way certain locations thrived more than others and were thus more habitable.

Thus ill-health, acrimony at home, marital discord, misfortune in business are now being blamed on the improper

'Vastu' of the house. The resurgence of the science has given rise to modern-day Vastu experts, some of whom are established architects.

According to architect D. Muralidhar Rao, author of 'Hidden Treasure of Vastu Shilpa Shastra', 'Vastu' has retained its traditions for thousands of years and is as relevant today as it was when it was first propounded. 'Vastu is full of truths which seem idiosyncratic until you understand the basics,' explains Jugal Kishore in his weekly column 'Vastu' in the Times of India newspaper. 'The north-east, for instance, is considered the best direction. From here, nature gives us both peace and prosperity.'

But, he is quick to add, 'a bedroom shouldn't be in a home's northeast. Otherwise you end up like the people in the first row of a movie hall.' By

following the principles of Vastu, an architect can design a structure that will not only cater to the gross requirements of the resident but also to his subtle needs of mental peace and happiness, says Pandit Prakash Bhargava, founder chairman of the Mumbai-based Worldwide Astrological Research Centre. However, not everyone is convinced of Vastu's scientific fundamentals and its relevance in modern times. Vastu defies logic, argues architect Ponnappa while Sushil Sharma, who has designed buildings for leading Delhi builders Ansal Properties, feels there is lack of scientific proof for or against Vastu. Architect Jayshree Gala simply dismisses it as another trend like Reiki (alternative system of healing through touch), Ayurveda (herbal medicine) and organic food.

— India Abroad News Service

A Rice by Another Name

by Sumita Dasgupta

THAILAND is all set to drag the US government to the dispute settlement panel of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) for lettering Rice Tec, the Texas-based seed company, use the name 'jasminti' as a trademark for selling a variety of rice. The US company perhaps wants to mislead consumers into believing that the product is similar to Thailand's famous jasmine rice.

Jasmine rice is Thailand's prime export commodity. More than five million farmers earn their bread by cultivating it. Rice Tec has no business encroaching on their territories, say the authorities in Bangkok. They want to settle the issue at the WTO to gain long term relief. And they are hoping to woo India and Pakistan to join ranks with them to build up a strong front against the marauding seed sharks.

Both India and Pakistan are already struggling separately to build up cases against Rice Tec

ever since the company was granted patent on 'new lines and grains' of basmati by the US patent office. Exporters in both the countries were equally apprehensive about Rice Tec pushing itself into a market which, they felt, should belong exclusively to traders from the subcontinent.

Early this year there was talk of India and Pakistan jointly applying for revocation of the basmati patent at the US patent office. But then bureaucrats in Delhi and Islamabad found it impossible to work together, even on a trade issue. The Pakistanis were heard grumbling about the Indians being 'reluctant' to cooperate with them for diplomatic reasons.

The Indian officials excused themselves by saying that they would begin discussions with the Pakistanis only after they

accounts for the difference between conventional and hybrid rice production. Thus, hybrid rice requires specialised two-stage seed production: multiplication of male sterile seeds and production of hybrid seeds. Accordingly, hybrid rice seed production requires more land than the conventional seed production does.

The hybrid seed fields are isolated from the other pollen sources in flowering rice fields to ensure cross-pollination with the desired male parent. This can be attained by the adjustment of plantation time. In this method rice in hybrid seed fields flowers when the rice in adjacent fields is not flowering. Some hybrid seed producers in China also practise physical isolation method. In this method, male-sterile seeds are produced in a field 50 metres apart from other rice fields. The farmers plant the male parent around the seed fields. Some producers erect 3-4 metre high wall around the seed fields. Sometimes the seed are produced on the fields that are 50-60 m higher than the nearest rice fields. Some producers also rely on natural isolation by hills or river around the fields.

In Japan, Sumitomo Company has developed a chemical sprayed over rice fields to destroy the stamen. It makes male flower sterile and quickens the cross-pollination. The time and volume of spraying are the major limitations in the application of sterility chemical.

**Labour Requirement**  
Labour requirement in hybrid rice production is much higher than in conventional rice production. IIRI (International Rice Research Institute) study in China suggests that per hectare labour requirement for male-sterile seed production ranges from 300 to 425. It is 240 to 370 for hybrid seed production. The labour requirement for hybrid rice production is more than 250 per hectare from 1.4 to 2.0 t/ha. The IIRI study also suggests that seed producers can receive more than 50 per cent profit from male-sterile seed production. The profit is also the same for hybrid seed production. This indicates that hybrid rice production in Bangladesh can provide opportunity for large number of labour employment with the increase in food production. However, the hybrid rice production will require consideration of (1) male-sterile and hybrid seed production by BRRI, (2) breeding for hybrids suited to the local environment, (3) extension programme on hybrid rice cultivation technique to ensure technical and economic efficiency of hybrid rice production.

The writer is an agronomist.

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