

Information Technology Our Prospect and Potential

by Ziaur Rahman

THE computer revolution is finally knocking at the doors of our country's bright and bold entrepreneurs. The recently ended computer show was emblematic of the giant prospects for the IT (information technology) revolution in Bangladesh. Until very recently, computers were instruments of awe; the prices were out of reach of our middle class. Thanks to the culture of the computer industry, the prices of computers continue to tumble. A good computer system nowadays costs in the range of 30 to 40 thousand Taka. This drop in prices has resulted in a keen buying spree amongst the middle class — the stalwarts of the economic power base in Bangladesh. Additionally, the public perception about computers is slowly changing; we are gradually understanding that computers will become an integral part of our lives sooner or later. Computers are no longer viewed as 'job-displacing instruments' of evil design. On the contrary, computers have alleviated their status because the Bangladeshis now view computers as indispensable machines that add value, accuracy and efficiency to enterprises.

Development in various IT related sectors have been lacking in Bangladesh in spite of IT's tremendous potential with its pool of talented and moderately expensive labour force. With the proliferation of computers, television and telecommunication, the global market place is experiencing amazing growth in various computer, video and telecommunications driven business. Different organizations have estimated that on average this IT industry has been growing at the rate of 25-30% annually with no slowing down in growth. Globally, the IT revolution has happily invaded everyone's privacy in his or her daily life. From the industrial West to the Pacific Rim and to the rest of the world, computers, telecommunications and motion graphics have become an intricate part in the educational system even at the primary levels. Without such technological advancement, the world cannot move at its current pace.

quality speed and an effective medium has become the sole competitive advantage in the proper functioning of any enterprise. Without embracing an IT-centric outlook, all enterprises of the future cannot and will not stand the tide of companies and organizations with superior IT infrastructure. The driving force of businesses in the 21st century is information driven and that information has to be received, analyzed and directives disseminated at unprecedented speed that this century has not seen so far. However, some countries in the industrial West and the Pacific Rim are rallying for such wired enterprises where all employees within the organizations are connected 24-hours enabling seamless transfer of information. Gone are the days of cabinet filing and inter-departmental file transfers. In the new wired enterprises, paperless environments are being nurtured and cultures developed for digital data transfer, encryption, electronic commerce, global computer platforms for information dissemination, video conferencing, etc. Now one can access, query and transfer funds from one's bank account remotely; send and receive email instantaneously and search websites located at far corners of the world for information and research. The wave of such uniquely efficient systems of operation have been rather slow in penetrating Bangladesh as of yet. Bangladesh has seen some changes, but the majority of advancement has been the played amongst the Asian tigers and the industrial world.

However, with time, commitment and change of vision Bangladesh should also make strides in the global IT arena. Our closest neighbor, India, through its comprehensive national plan has achieved sensational success. India within a few short years has become the hub of different IT-centric industries. India is now proud to produce over \$3B in foreign revenue, simply by exporting software, not to mention the million of Indians working in good capacity in the Western world by dint of their IT focused human resource development. Companies such as Microsoft, Oracle and Computer Assoc-

ates have tapped into India's IT labour force. They have established strong positions on an Indian soil. Microsoft, the world's largest and most fearsome computer company, has cleverly created strategic alliances with many of the Indian companies and, has also established its own 400-plus software programmer base in India. One might ask, 'How was it possible for Indians to have such a dominant role in the computer and software industry?'

The answer is a focused strategic human resource investment over the years by the Indian Government and the private enterprises of India. The Government of India played an active and progressive role in the macro design of the human resource development in India. While we, the people of Bangladesh, were tinkering with basic 'Algebra' and 'Trigonometry', the Indians were mulling over a strategy for advancement in the emerging technologies of the present and future. I am not trying to undermine the knowledge acquired through orientation with the basic sciences; however, I insist that we, the Bangladeshis, must be abreast of technological changes, quickly adapt to the newness around us, and seek positive economic advantages from it. Our national inertia to maintain a 'status quo' must be shrugged off from our 'national psyche' and a mentality to embrace change for the betterment of our own afflicted lot be instilled in the minds of every nationalistic Bangladeshi. The Government more specifically, those individuals at the helm of our government must undertake progressive measures to nurture the minds of million of Bangladeshis, who can make a positive impact in the development of our country. So, let us partner with our government and create a better, technologically savvy and able labor force.

With a vision to develop our country's IT labor force, I feel that investment must be allocated in the respective areas.

1. Hardware procurement and establishment of computer stations at all levels of educational institutions.
2. Establishment of Government sponsored training

institutes for selective training on various computer applications (it should be noted that only those software training be available where there is market demand).

3. The Government and private universities and institutes must allocate more seats for computer-related studies. More diplomas and certificate courses may be initiated in the fields of:
 - Computer Networking
 - Multimedia Development
 - Computer Based Video Editing and Compositing
 - Computer Based Cartoon and 3D Animation
 - Systems Analysis
 - Database Administration
 - Web Development
 - Electronic Commerce

4. The Government should increase the number of foreign scholarships in the IT area.

5. Develop a tax free zone, which can function as a miniature Silicon Valley of the US.

6. Adult computer literacy courses can be started at the Thana level.

7. The government may allocate more investment funds for people interested in setting up computer related companies.

8. The Government may act as a guarantor for funds procured from private and foreign banks for IT specific investments.

9. The Government should take step-by-step plants computerize its various departments.

10. The loan procurement process may be made less rigid for entrepreneurs in the IT area. However, loan disbursement should be closely monitored to stop funds from being misappropriated.

11. Trade consulates at the Bangladesh embassies in various countries may be furnished with better qualified IT officers, who may contact foreign companies and showcase different possibilities within Bangladesh's IT area.

12. The Government should sponsor syndicates of Bangladeshi IT companies to travel overseas and participate in various international trade shows.

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Life in Dhaka Amar Economics by Sen

by a Husnain

The social trend is changing. The recent Book Fair in Dhaka, which almost coincided with the BCS International Computer Show, failed to divert the curious and enthusiastic crowds from computers to books.

THE Sen Factor (SF) has hit Bangladesh (after the recent flooding!) Genial and disarming Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen came, saw, and conquered the Bengalee hearts (how he conquers the Planning Commission and the Bureaucrats remain to be seen). We do not mind such recapitulation (to rejoicing), as, on recapitulation, it turned out that it had happened only twice in history.

Au revoir, Sen-da, and many happy returns of the day! So, socially, we take leave of the host/s by purring "Aashel", which means coming (taking leave, not going), instead of saying 'jai' (leaving). Sen-da, you are coming back, because that's what you promised. You have left us charged into a state of higher consciousness. It is for us to bring ourselves down to earth; although there is many a slip between the cup and the lip.

What was remarkable in our family drawing room that evening was that the whole family hugely enjoyed the television interview of Amartya Sen broadcast by BTV. It was an informal chat show dealing with high and new theories of economics at the very frontier of formal knowledge; but all seemed to enjoy it, inside and outside the studio. The secret

was that the tone of the talk was not high flown technical jargon. Simply put, development is awareness. The rest of the exercise is nuts and bolts.

I felt jealous that amongst the viewers in our drawing room, there was no evidence of female and age factors, as wife and sister-in-law hugely enjoyed the conversation on high economics; and my 5-year-old niece also listened without disturbing us, as Sen-da spoke in fluent Bangla, hardly using English words and expressions, and avoided technical jargon. The performance revealed a remarkable command of the subject and the language. When I talk hi-tech, my family audience desert me.

The month of December in 1998 added two more development factors (DF) in the psyche of the nation: the computer show held the preceding week drew huge crowds of families (two lakh people attended the show) making it a sort of social movement on computer awareness. The second was what we can affectionately term as the 'prodigal's return': Amartya Sen brought down the economics of the poor to the middle-class level, as far as awareness is concerned. The proof of the *daat-bhaat* lies in the eating.

Economics theories are a dry

subject (unlike a PC demo of a game) which take generations to prove (there are too many variable and human factors), followed by eclipses of doubts and ambiguity, as this decade is observing, which perhaps resulted in the award of this Nobel prize. The civilisation said good-bye to the Soviet type of socialism after 70 years of application, now the economics of the poor is under the microscope, compared to the current application of the economics of the rich and affluent, which calls for a slimming course on the part of corpulent 'Miss West'. The reported successes in the field applications of Grameen Bank type of micro-credit schemes are hugging the headlines. Now at least Bangladesh is not deprived of ideas.

It might be mere coincidence, but what is common between Sen's articulations and GB experiments have to be evaluated by the experts, remembering that two Bengali minds used Bangladesh as the field models in many areas of their theoretical studies and field applications.

Amartya Sen's findings may provide a fillip to make Economics a popular subject in the third world campuses, as the TV interview indicated that this

obscure discipline, toying with the fate of billions of lives at the marginal levels could be brought down to the popular level of awareness.

The social trend is changing. The recent Book Fair in Dhaka, which almost coincided with the BCS International Computer Show, failed to divert the curious and enthusiastic crowds from computers to books. Computers have two added advantages, the AV factor, that is the presence of audio and video, compared to the books, which is confined to the print medium only. There is another advantage, the same computer could be used by all the family members, regardless of age and academic level; that is, the field is bigger and more varied.

Globally, the impact of economic theories will never be the same again, as the human factor (HF) has been brought in. This HF factor is considered a nuisance in the labs and in R&D. Mathematics is a popular tool, because the mathematical terms and treatment are pure and precise; but might falter in the field, as the HF becomes the bug. Bangladesh can take off sweetly once this HF bug could be contained. The challenge is there, but it has been identified.

Upholding Education: Let's Rise over Differences

by Md Abdus Salam

The nation must evolve a consensus to make education sector free from politics, foul politics, foul games, conspiracies and party-tailism without losing any further time. The place of cultivation of culture, intellect and scholarship should be kept beyond and above any out side unholy touch and contamination.

THE nation is deeply concerned over the deteriorating state of education. The sliding down of educational standard inks at ruin of the academics, intellectuals, leaders, teachers and guardians — all are worried about the grim situation. It precludes that dark and gloomy days are gradually encompassing the nation squeezing it gradually into a crippled one.

Congestional atmosphere is absent in institutions and campuses. Nasty politicisation of the student community is having its telling effect. Parochial interest and power-mongering are leading a promising nation to a valley of destruction.

These are the scenarios of our holy academic arenas which depicts how far vested interests groups can be heinous and selfish for their mundane gain at the cost of the cream of Society.

During the preceding decades the usurpation of power by some undemocratic forces engineered situations for penetration of decadence in our education. Young students were tempted with pelf and power and were replete with arms and money just to serve the 'masters' and they were calculatively derailed from the path of intellectual attainment to a path of terrestrial affluence. Giants got over the serene world. These day by day corrosion and decomposition shattered down the sacred realm with threats of

perpetual crush of values and thinkings.

As education is the backbone of a nation, its strength and power are highly indispensable for building up of a nation strong at head and heart. Without sound education a nation is bound to become spineless, weak and inefficient. Our educational domain has been polluted and dwindled by some irresponsible and unscrupulous political leaders who appeared as occupants in the name of democrats and acted as dictators in the plea of patriots. Their deeds made the nation confused. They very shrewdly sneaked into the academic arena conquering intellectual world for using (misusing) it at their will. The vanquished residents of this world are now ailing and need desperate treatment for cure.

The backdrops of this situation speaks of nasty vitiation and sinister approach. The holy citadels were grabbed and envionomized. The luckless inmates became victims of inroads of violence, terrorism and anarchy. Chaos and confusion were bred and nurtured. The wistful learners and the scholar teachers became 'prey' to this grave situation. Now it seems we are almost undone.

Over the period reckless indiscipline and corruption thrived rampantly. Management guardians and teachers became involved in those unwarranted activities even guardians and teachers sup-

plied books and papers for copying in the examination halls. The situation became so much pervasive that almost all sailed in the same boat for making money and getting their wards passed easily. The local muselmanism based and in connivance with political power took up the rein. The inexorable result of such vandalism was a bigger destruction in morale of the nation and in the standard of education. The board/varsity personnel were also entangled in the foul game.

Prevalent government rules and regulations were hardly followed. Whims and caprices worked where reasons and arguments had to yield. There were few to ask 'whys' and give 'replies'. Teachers got benefits and salaries from government exchequer but they were not found as dutiful, and careful about their responsibilities. They were more prone to private tuition causing negligence to classrooms. There were few to care for development of merit. Even through most students got placed in board examinations, still the board exposed to be responsible teachers and the management were not questioned and brought to book. Because of politicisation of vast magnitude for the sake of staying on in power, those horrible and punishable matters were not taken into account in the proceedings of the government.

However, immediately after taking over the present education minister apparently hit

the places of corruptions, rocked the rendezvous of irregularities and carelessness. Through high-powered investigation teams, he was found to unearthed dens and devils of indiscipline. Some varsity/board college executives were found manipulators, organisers and abettors of many corruptions and negligences. He suspended salaries to the institutions producing no success in public exams. The vast majority of teachers were taken aback with fear. Though they tried to foil his mission with united strength, but at last compromised on terms of guarantee to specified level of success and marks in every subject. Staff/board naturally, earned laurels from all quarters. But it is yet to yield envisaged results.

The nation must evolve a consensus to make education sector free from politics, foul politics, foul games, conspiracies and party-tailism without losing any further time. The place of cultivation of culture, intellect and scholarship should be kept beyond and above any out side unholy touch and contamination. Because where brains are created and reared up, there it should be always an atmosphere of peace and tranquility. If this nerve-centre of the nation's thinking, creativity and human resource building is spoiled, everything will be lost. Let's rise over differences with patriotic spirit.

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The Indian State and Gender Justice

Priya Prakash writes from New Delhi

The four women-specific directives are: 1) that men and women equally have the right to an adequate means of livelihood; 2) that there is equal pay for equal work for both men and women; 3) that the health and strength of workers and the tender age of children are not abused and that necessity to enter avocation unsuited to their age or strength, citizen are not forced by economic necessity; 4) provision of just and humane public assistance in case of unemployment, old age, sickness and disablement and in the case of under served want.

THE preamble to our constitution enunciates the objectives and the socio-economic goals for which the constitution was framed. The solemn resolve of the founding fathers contains two specific objectives which have a direct bearing on the status of women.

a) Justice — social, economic and political for all.

b) Equality — of status and opportunity for all.

The latter objective makes all discrimination between citizen and citizen, inter alia on the ground of sex, illegal and unconstitutional.

The Fundamental Rights and the Directive Principles of State Policy are considered the backbone of our constitution. They spell out in detail what equality means and how justice in all spheres — social, political, and economic may be achieved. An exception to the principle of equality and non-discrimination, however is the right given to the state to make special provision for women and children; that reflects the realism of the founding father who recognised that age old social practices which institutionalised the women's inequalities could not be eliminated without positive and direct interventions by the state. It is also linked to another concept spelt out in the Preamble — dignity of the individual which provides the underpinnings for the entire political system.

For the Executive arm of the state the most important constitutional mandates are the Directive Principles of state policy. The four women-specific directives are: 1) that men and women equally have the right to an adequate means of livelihood; 2) that there is equal pay for equal work for both men and women; 3) that the health and strength of workers and the tender age of children are not abused and that necessity to enter avocation unsuited to their age or strength, citizen are not forced by economic necessity; 4) provision of just and humane public assistance in case of unemployment, old age, sickness and disablement and

in the case of under served want.

The 80s were considered the Decade of Women, thus the golden period for Indian women. The Report on Status of Women (1975-79) inspired several legislations, setting up of the Department of Women and Child Development, and at international level UNIFEM was set up to spur affirmative action in order to mainstream women's development programmes.

One important recommendation was to assure at least 33 per cent positions for women in most of the policy-making bodies legislatures and management/executive positions for women, and prepare them for such role by suitable training etc.

The Supreme Court has made it clear that the government policies and legislations cannot go against the Directive Principles of state policy, and emphasis that it is the duty of the state to implement as many directives as possible. The Equal Remuneration Act and its recent amendment indicates that state policies are moving in this direction. The Article 51 A of the constitution lays down that it is imperative for all citizens to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women. The 42nd Amendment (1976); the indecent representation of women (Amendment 1984 and 1986) are some of the affirmative actions. The people representation Act of 1998, while lowered the age of voters to 18 years from earlier age of voters as 21 years; it also contained the provision of disqualification namely a candidate would be disqualified, in case there is conviction on account of cruelty to women, as defined there in, e.g. offences under sat, dowry, harassment to women etc. offences punishable by imprisonment and fine etc. The amendment Act 1988 represents an ideological extension of the state's attitude to cruelty to women by recognising that such offences should not be treated as social and criminal only but be regarded as political misconduct which

would deprive a person of his/her political rights as well. India is perhaps the only country where such plethora of constitutional provisions and legislation in favour of women has taken place during the Decade of Women but the impact on the welfare and egalitarian environment has not been achieved in the same proportion.

The evidence of growing inequalities and vulnerabilities of women in all sectors, economic, social, demographic, health, nutrition etc. is provided by social and economic indicators. The process of development instead of reducing the inequalities based on caste, class, gender, religion and ethnicity have at times strengthened some of these that appear to be based on old, obscurantist traditions, which are trying to reassert detestable practices like widow burning, female infanticide, etc. Some of the recommendations that list of women's rights some statistics are given below to indicate the state of affairs.

1. Declining Sex Ratios — in India sex ratio of women in the 1981 census has declined — 935 women per 1000 men at the national level.
2. High illiteracy rate and increasing gender gap in literacy rates — in 1981 the female literacy rate was 24.6 as against 49.9 for male. The female literacy rate in 196 districts out of 416 were below the national average of 24.8.
3. The economic indicators — The sectoral distribution of workers indicate that overwhelming number of women 83 per cent are engaged in primary sector only 8.9 per cent in the tertiary sector and 7.5 in the secondary sector as against 13 and 20 per cent male the last two sectors respectively.
4. Political empowerment — The constitutional amendment 1973-74 have made the provision for 33/1/3 per cent seats in the panchayat and local bodies to be reserved for women. Empowering women in the primary sector of the government. However, this process was to

continue through 81st amendment for reservation of seats in state legislatures and parliament suffered a setback and inordinate, due to opposition from all across the party line.

5. The personal laws — The historical legacy of the British Raj has left these linked with the religious affiliation of men and women. These personal laws mainly govern the allocation of family property status of women in marriage, viz. as married, or single divorced, and widows. Similarly, laws relating to adoption etc., most of these affect the women adversely and with undue discrimination.

Modern women are educated; and a number of them professional and employed at workplaces as men. Often they experience and other kind of discrimination i.e. sexual harassment and the Supreme Court in a recent judgement described this as a violation of three fundamental rights viz. right to employment, right to protection of life, and right to life with dignity and right to liberty and justice. Therefore Supreme laid down the guide lines for the employers.

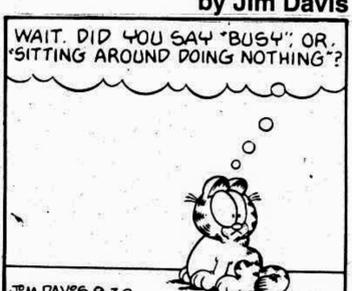
The other significant provision to be noticed is the amendment in the peoples representation Act as mentioned earlier, debarring a candidate to fight in an election to legislative bodies who has been convicted for any of the offences punishable for crimes against women. Women have to be alert to these rights and help the victims that justice is done to them even in those cases due to apathy of investing agency or leniency of judicial procedures culprits go scot free.

The most important mandate for the non-government social activist has to be to create an awareness about the basic rights and respect for women's access to a life of dignity and specially imbibe these in the younger generation.

— Mandira

The author is a former Secretary to Govt. of India.

Garfield



James Bond

