

FOCUS

Cut Out the Cyber-Hype : Limits of the IT "Revolution"

Praful Bidwai writes from Hyderabad

What we need is less an obsession with "superpower" status, and more imaginative schemes to harness IT to our basic social priorities — not for their dazzle effect, but for empowering our underprivileged.

If you saw the hype and hoopla at Hyderabad on January 20, with the road to "Hitec City" decorated with bunting, you would imagine there was some historic celebration on, involving the heads of major states, if not the bulk of the United Nations. Alas, there was only prime minister Goh Chok Tong of Singapore (pop. 3 million) making a brief tour as part of his six-day visit to India, where he was repeatedly asked for his advice on acquiring instant Tigerhood through Information Technology (IT).

In reality, "Hitec City" is just one single building, which may have been considered "futuristic" just about the time Apple first began selling personal computers (1977). The potholed road that leads to it is Ambassador-class. So much for "Cyberabad"! The city's software exports run at under \$30 million a year, compared to the \$300 million from Chennai, which makes no such claim.

True, Hyderabad hosts small operations of Microsoft, Bell, Alstom and Matsushita. It is growing. Mr Chandrababu Naidu, with his impressive notebook computers, is India's most IT-savvy political CEO. But that is a far cry from Andhra's transformation into "dotcom territory". No IT "revolution" is taking place in Andhra, with its public finances in a mess, its infrastructure crumbling, and its growth stagnating.

Hype about Andhra's "revolution" is similar to the extravagant but fashionable hope that

India will become the world's "IT superpower". The reality, despite IT's dizzying growth, is different.

Nothing qualifies India as "IT superpower" — no more than winning a few tacky "Miss World" crowns warrants the title "beauty superpower", with our Sub-Saharan female health indices. India will remain a modest global IT player, and informatics is unlikely to transform it — unless attention is paid to core issues like literacy, education and health.

On the positive side, India's IT business has grown five times faster than industry as a whole. The software market has zoomed from \$150 million in 1990 to \$3.9 billion. The hardware market has crossed the one million units-a-year mark — five times bigger than in 1995. Computers are growing in smaller cities at rates exceeding 50 per cent. The number of Internet connections has rocketed from under a lakh in 1996 to eight lakhs.

There is some real entrepreneurship in the IT field too. E-commerce is likely to clock over Rs. 300 crores. Most important, computer-based services have tended to bypass

some social inequalities, providing mobility to young people from underprivileged vernacular backgrounds.

However, the Indian software business is less than 1.5 per cent of the world market. India's share is growing relatively slowly. The penetration of India's households by PCs is under one-fifth the world average — less than five machines per 1,000 people.

In Internet access, India remains a backwater — 0.1 per cent penetration, or the same as sub-Saharan Africa's, as compared to Taiwan's 14 per cent, or the US's 35. A computer costs the equivalent of our average income for three years, but only a month's American salary. More than 90 per cent of Indian IT transactions are in English, which is spoken by five percent of the population.

Our IT penetration is uneven, more than two-thirds of it in the West and the South, with the Hindi belt hugely lagging behind. The number of Internet users is likely to quadrupl in the coming three years. But the upper limit is telephone lines — under 30 million today, a mere drop in the ocean. Even if everyone who has a phone gets a

computer, India will lag behind most Third World countries.

Our software exports are primarily in the low-end segment. "Body shopping", or low-paid professionals physically working from the US, accounts for about half such exports. What is growing rapidly now is data entry, medical transcription, answering services, etc.

This segment lacks strong technology links with the upper end of the market. Such a global division of labour means low-paid work in the periphery, and value-added work at the centre. The dominance of marketing in IT — on which predatory companies like Microsoft have thrived — is one reason for India's low status. Another is that India is losing some of its advantage in advanced R&D.

Leading IT researchers, who met at an international conference on "high-performance computing" in Calcutta in December felt that Indian computer R&D has "no real impact" in any domain any longer. One reason for this may be the absorption of too many researchers into industry for low-end tasks. For instance, Prof Pankaj Jalote of IIT, Kanpur, says: "Even before a PhD stu-

dent finishes, he gets a job." Another problem is defects in and low reliability of our software products.

None of these problems will be redressed by the new Rs. 100 crore IT venture capital fund, or by the government's reiteration of its resolve to "take all measures to replicate a Silicon Valley here". These problems will persist even if all duties on IT are abolished.

What we need to do is develop low-cost IT access (by replacing costly PCs with cheap "network computers"), and promote Indian-language interfaces and low-cost IT educational material that ordinary schools can afford. This means the focus must return from "Hitec City" to village schools (many without blackboards) — i.e. to promoting literacy and other modest goals.

Regrettably, the runaway market success of IT companies diverts attention from these priorities. Today's IT bubble has more to do with stockmarket speculation than real understanding of India's growth potential. This export-oriented IT sector could thrive without affecting the rest of the economy, without changing the information content of Indian industry.

That would be yet another "enclave development". What we need is less an obsession with "superpower" status, and more imaginative schemes to harness IT to our basic social priorities — not for their dazzle effect, but for empowering our underprivileged.

Where Even the Opposition Candidate Doesn't Vote for Himself

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Western leaders had high hopes of fostering market-oriented democracies in the newly independent Central Asian republics. However, recent developments, including economic setbacks, have thwarted these ambitions.

Dilip Hiro writes from London

1998 economic crisis in Russia have dealt a severe blow to moves in this direction.

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National leaders have paid scant attention to electoral criticism for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), which admitted the five republics as members soon after the Soviet collapse in 1991. The governments have repeatedly failed to implement the recommendations made by the OSCE election observation mission regarding voting systems and practices to ensure free and fair contests between multiple candidates.

They protested, complaining that the Electoral Commission had not supplied them with official forms for signatures on time, thus ensuring that they would be unable to meet the requirement.

A fortnight before the poll, a Supreme Court judge ruled that Usman had managed to collect the required number of signatures and that he should be registered as a candidate.

Sections of the opposition saw the ruling as a ploy to divide opponents of Rakhmonov by excluding the other two candidates. The United Tajik Opposition stuck to its line that insufficient signatures had been collected because of electoral commission failings, and urged its supporters to boycott the poll.

Despite this, the commission went ahead and printed Usman's name on ballot papers, turning the election into a two-horse race and thus legitimising it.

Disputing official figures showing a 98 per cent turnout — with nearly all votes going to the President — Osman estimated that only 20 to 30 per cent of the electorate had cast ballots. He rejected the result, and called on the commission to invalidate it, but in vain.

His only solace was that the OSCE refused to send election monitors.

If none of the opposition candidates was able to collect the required number of signatures, it was due to the difficulties they faced when trying to gather them," said Martin Buhoara, head of the OSCE mission in the Tajik capital, Dushanbe.

From the start of independence, Central Asian leaders stressed nation-building and stability and downplayed multi-party democracy, perceiving the latter as a luxury which could be enjoyed only after a stable, prosperous polity had been established.

Progress was made, however, in political reform in the 1990s, along with economic liberalisation, but these suffered with the collapse in 1998 of commodity prices and the Russian rouble, to which Central Asian currencies are officially tied. The fallout deepened poverty and stoked discontent across the region of 55 million people.

— Gemini News

Female UP Councilors: Problems and Prospects

by Dr Nibedita Dasguptakayastha

MP councilors in a Pabna constituency

THE Union Parishad or Council, the lowest rural administrative tier of the Local Government of Bangladesh and the first entry point of direct communication with the local people, has been given the responsibilities for the development of the Union including judicial function. The Union Parishad is established in accordance with the laws and ordinances passed by the Government of Bangladesh. It was first introduced by the British rulers in 1870 under the Bengal Village Panchayat Act. Since its inception its name, location, functions and financial power had been changed from time to time. But functions of the Local Government were always in the hands of male representatives. Women were not eligible to cast their votes in the elections to the local bodies till 1956, when for the first time election was held on the basis of universal adult franchise.

Objectives: The study aims at gaining the following objectives. 1. To go deep into the formal structures and functions of the union council in Bangladesh; 2. To know the socio-economic and political background of the elected women councilors of union councils and their perceptions; 3. To find out whether the female councilors are overburdened with their offices and household chores; 4. To find out the degree of involvement of the NGOs in bringing out women from houses to union councils.

Methodology

Area coverage: The study was conducted in 109 unions of 10 selected thanas (upazila) under the six divisions of Bangladesh. Respondents were selected from the working areas of the women network partners of the PRIP TRUST. Finally, unions were chosen on the basis of their representative characteristics and geographical coverage.

The sampling procedure: Out of 325 selected union councilors of 109 unions of 10 thanas, 175 were interviewed. Besides, 20 female councilors were separately selected for in-depth study.

Respondents were classified according to their age, marital status and educational qualifications. The age group was divided into four categories: young (25-30), middle age (31-40), elderly (41-50), and old age (50+).

In regard to marital status, the group was divided into five categories as married (who were living with their husbands), unmarried, divorced (who were formally separated from their husbands by law), separated (who were not living with their husbands and formal divorces were not made) and widow.

Their educational level was divided into five categories as illiterate (who couldn't read and write), below secondary (studied up to class XI), secondary (who had passed SSC Examination), HSC (who had passed higher secondary examination), and graduate (who had obtained their bachelors degree).

Major Findings

1. The majority of female councilors (58.86 per cent) were housewives and the highest percentage of them belonged to the young group. There was a significant inclusion of young persons. More young women were found to be acquiring leadership in union councils compared to the old groups.

2. The overwhelming major-

tutes. The minimum budget for an election expenditure was from Tk 500-Tk 10,000, and maximum Tk 15,000.

9. It was interesting to note that a female candidate became elected as a union councilor by the support of Awami League because that time she got married to an Awami League supporter.

10. It was apparent from the FGD and the Activity Profile of the respondents, their spouses, fathers and other relatives that gender relations are improving in regard to sharing of responsibilities at their family level.

3. The representation from lower middle (60.57 per cent) and low-income (30.29 per cent) strata was larger in the union councils than that from the middle (7.43 per cent) and high-income strata (1.71 per cent).

4. The majority of the respondents (52.58 per cent) have small families and the minority (5.71 per cent) have large families which implied the increasing trends of awareness, better understanding between couples, growth of individualism, improvement of economic condition and interest in development activities undertaken by the NGOs.

5. NGOs had strong linkage with 40.58 per cent of respondents and these respondents had received assistance from the NGOs in the form of credit, training and voter education.

6. NGO workers had ensured their group members' attendance in the polling centers. It is revealed that in some cases the NGOs had reasonably borne election expenditures of the group members.

7. 70.86 per cent of the respondents affirmed their affiliation with the Awami League, 22.85 per cent with the BNP, 4 per cent with the Jamaat-e-Islami and the rest were with the Jatiya Party.

8. Election expenditures of candidates in many cases were incompatible with their family incomes. Candidates had to depend on other sources like credit, land selling and mortgaging money, donation of some sort. It is observed that NGOs had played a pivotal role in the elections. The programme for creating

by Jim Davis

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Dated: 24-01-2000

Invitation of International Tender Notice

Sealed tenders are hereby re-invited from the reputed local suppliers/traders for supply of Computer, Printer, Modem, Thermal Printer & Laminating Machine, etc. to Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission, Dhaka. Tender schedule may be purchased from the Accounts Officer (Cash), Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission, Dhaka and Atomic Energy Research & Establishment, CAD Building, Ganakbari, Savar, as well during office hours up to 15-02-2000 on cash payment of Tk. 450.00 (Taka four hundred fifty) only written application and permission from the Sr. Administrative Officer (Procurement), Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission, Dhaka & Administrative Officer (Procurement), AERE, Savar, supported with attested photocopy of (1) Current Year Trade Licence, (2) Up-to-date Income Tax Clearance Certificate, (3) Bank Solvency Certificate, (4) VAT Registration Certificate and (5) Agent's/Dealership Certificate. No tender documents will be sold on the day of opening of tender. Tenders with 2% (Two per cent) earnest money of the quoted amount in the form of Bank Draft/Pay Order from any scheduled bank in favour of "Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission, Dhaka" shall have to be dropped in the tender box kept in the following office up to 12-30 hours on 16-02-2000 and will be opened at 11-00 hours on 17-02-2000 in presence of tenderers, who may wish to be present.

1. Sr. Administrative Officer (Procurement) Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission 4, Kazi Nazrul Islam Avenue, Ramna, Dhaka.
2. Administrative Officer (Procurement), Atomic Energy Research & Establishment Ganakbari, Savar.
If there occurs total transport disruption or govt. holiday on the opening date of tender, the next normal working day will be treated as valid opening date of tender keeping time, place and other terms intact. Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission reserves the right to accept or reject any or all tenders or a part thereof without assigning any reason whatsoever.

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(Procurement)