

Rays of hope

Cyber beacon shining

by Sharier Khan

AT A TIME when the deteriorating education environment makes us despair of the future; perhaps, the disbelief in a brighter future, perhaps the booming urban-based cyber culture has us see the light of hope.

It may sound odd, but the cyber culture has now become an integral part of a great segment of the urban people - especially in Dhaka. Whereas once the general people feared a personal computer as an obscure and expensive device, the same has become their ultimate business, communication and entertainment tool. And above all, it has been socially accepted as great educational equipment.

Personal computers first arrived in the country in the early eighties. But back then, few people could afford it or make proper use of it. Other than the printing or banking sectors, it also did not have much appeal - both technologically and financially.

But from the mid-nineties, when cheaper Pentium processor-based computers swept across the world, its waves reached Bangladesh and gave birth to a new cultural wave. By that time, software developers had also made the PC an all-arounder ultimate machine.

The business community, which used expensive telex-fax facilities for their interna-

tional correspondence, now largely depends on e-mails and Internet-based fax facilities. Besides, businessmen no longer have to run from door to door to find a middleman who has international business information. Instead, they now surf the Internet to collect information on where a certain product is available at a certain price. A cheap single Internet line has cut down telex-fax and other international correspondence bills by thousands of taka. And moreover, information is now virtually instant.

A new breed of businessmen led by a younger generation was also created out of this cyber boom. Back in the eighties or even in the early-nineties, most of the computer dealers or vendors were senior businessmen who perceived computers as office tools. But from mid-nineties, huge numbers of students or graduates started entering the cyber business.

In the past, no single business area had attracted so many young people like the computer business did. Now, more than 90 per cent of the computer business are run by people who are aged around thirty or below.

Also from the mid-nineties, the Internet Service Providers (ISPs) started coming up in large scales. In this area, too, the young generation domi-

nated the activities.

Computers have also become part of the family entertainment. Many people in the city are nowadays buying a PC for its pure entertainment value. Like a TV or a VCR or a cassette player, computers have found their place in the families for its entertainment value as the PC plays both video and audio CDs with a very little extra cost. Besides, considering the cost of an independent CD player and a VCD player, a TV and a video game console, the appeal of multi-media PC remains unchanged. It has become such a popular entertainer that most video cassette rental shops in Dhaka have turned into VCD rental shops in recent years.

Among young people, the enthusiasm for learning computer languages is noteworthy. For some youths, it has become an addiction and for the majority others, it's a growing awareness that in the future, nobody would qualify for a job if she/he were not computer literate.

To meet this growing need of computer education, there is now a boom of computer schools across the country. Most of these schools provide computer basic education. But some of them, affiliated with international education centres, provide in-depth education and training. The number of

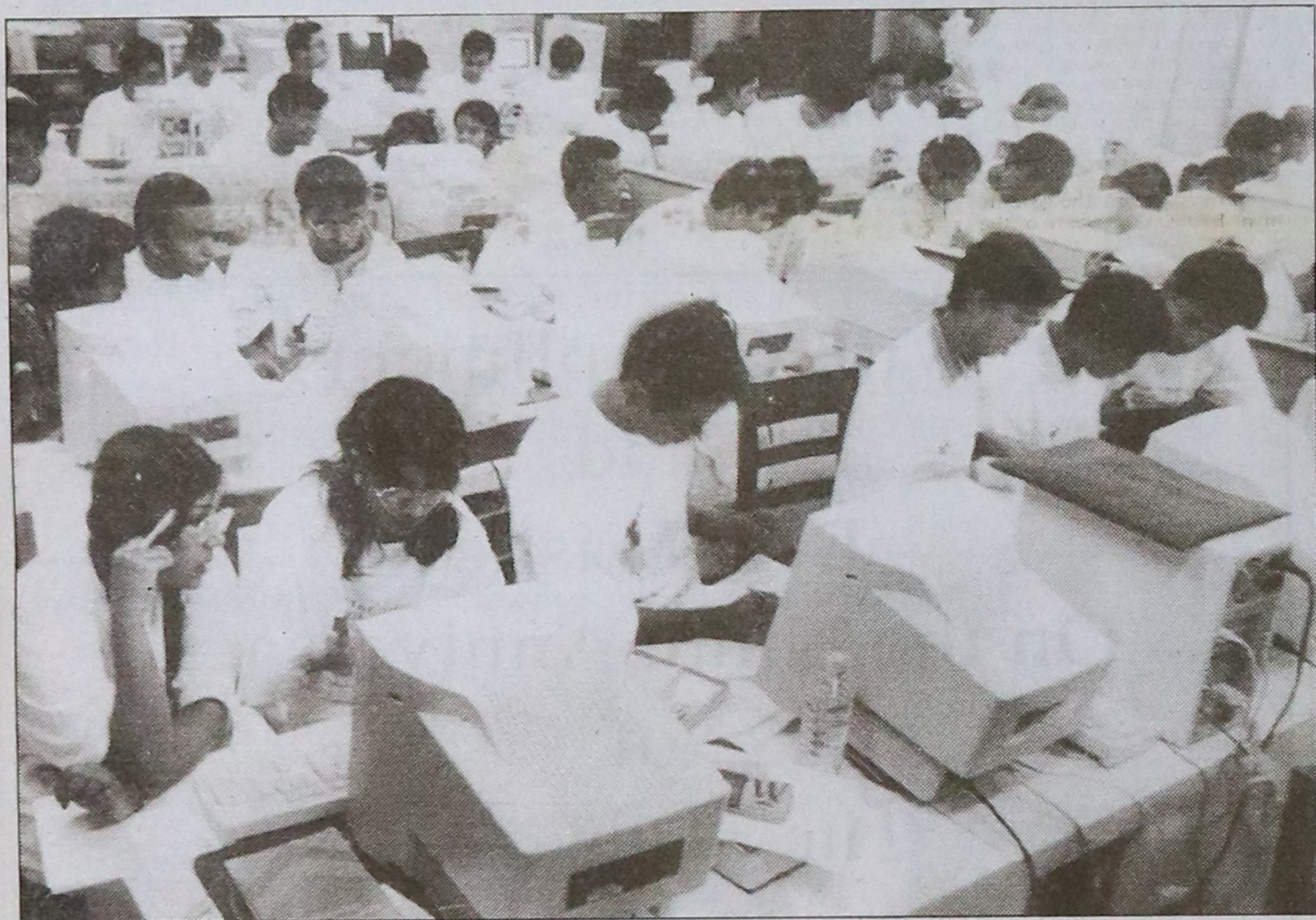
such schools are still a few - but it can be easily said that soon there would be enough schools to educate a generation of computer geeks who would become a financial force for the country.

Though inadequate and costly telecom infrastructure had been a major obstacle for the growth of ISPs, the Internet facilities had been a "big cultural hit" in the urban part of Bangladesh. Now that Internet has become a part of the urban culture, it can be easily predicted that the future of ISP is bright.

With the expansion and modernisation of telecom across the country, there will be more ISPs. In return, such growth may lead to development of electronic commerce or e-commerce in Bangladesh, increased computer literacy, Internet-based job market and finally a new way of urban living across the country dominated by the computer culture.

Bangladesh's neighbour India, which had emphasised on computer education decades ago, is already enjoying the fruit of their right policy by earning billions of dollars a year from software exports. In Bangladesh, the cultural context is now set. It's only a matter of time that we too would be able to earn billions of dollars in the same way.

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Towards tele-technology

by Mustak Hossain

NOW Kishore is always in touch with his mother through mobile. Mrs. Islam, Kishore's mother, is also very happy that her son has started spending less time on campus for gossiping and more in front of his personal computer (PC) for web surfing.

All these were possible due to advancement of tele-technology and massive growth of mobile cell phone and wide use of Internet.

In 1872 when Alexander Graham Bell invented telephone, he and his friend Watson had to be at two ends of a circuit. But now an executive travelling on board can call up from any location. All this was possible for a boom in telecommunication.

Massive growth of mobile cell phone and Internet brought about a revolution for the country's telecommunication sector.

Bangladesh is making headway for grabbing big stake for the information technology (IT) business and as part of that, the country is going to set up submarine cable network (SCN) in the Bay of Bengal by the year 2001 to promote Bangladesh's access to the information super highway.

The country is going to provide 200,000 more telephone lines within the year 2001.

Bangladesh introduced mobile cellular phone in early nineties through four operators and the fifth one will launch its operation by mid-2000.

Bangladesh has a vision towards bringing all of its district headquarters under digital telephone network by the year 2001 and there will be no analogue telephone in the country.

Japanese Nipon Telegraph and Telephone got a deal to install and operate 200,000 mobile phones with the name of Personal HandypHONE Systems (PHS) in the capital.

The number of mobile users has increased steadily. The four mobile operators collectively boast 116,200 customers in October 1999.

The private cellular mobile acquired 23 per cent telecom market share in Bangladesh.

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Bangladesh has 500,000 fixed telephones of state-run Bangladesh Telegraph and Telephone Board (BTB).

"Hostile regulatory environment, inadequate infrastructure of BTB and impractical import duty on the handsets have been consistently hindering the cellular mobile growth in Bangladesh," said Abu Sayeed Khan, a telecom analyst.

Pacific Bangladesh Telecom Ltd launched City Cell in early 1993. It was also the first cellular mobile in the region.

World-wide, the cellular mo-

bile was an up-market product at that time and it was the same in Bangladesh but higher price of mobile handset put a negative tag on their business. However, it is less than the prevailing rate in the region.

Bangladesh also awarded a temporary license to Iridium, the first satellite phone in the region.

But it is yet to start operation in the country as it is yet to get approval from the ministry of defence and National Security Intelligence (NSI). Both are concerned about national security.

There are 29 Internet Service Providers (ISPs). The number of Internet users is several thousands. Many of the local busi-

ness entrepreneurs have their own web sites to promote their business and service.

The government has introduced a national telecommunication policy to give an outlook on the country's progress in telecommunication.

Introduction of facsimile, popularly known as Fax was a groundbreaking invention in telecommunication. The technology brought tremendous change in document transfer within a fraction of second, earlier a document from a neighbouring country took several days to reach its destination.

Now internet user can post their mails through internet in a less time and money consuming way.

Just a start on info-way

by M Shamsur Rahman

IN A BID to share world-wide trend of IT explosion and realise the bright prospect for development and export of software, Bangladesh in 1997 included the IT in the list of its thrust sectors.

With a view to achieving its ambition and engaging unemployed youths in a gainful pursuit, the government withdrew taxes on import of computers with the result that has been witnessing an increased sales of personal computers at around 32.88 per cent annually.

But the IT activity of the country is not uniformly dispersed over the country as the Dhaka Division alone has the highest concentration at 72.76 per cent, followed by Chittagong at 11.14 per cent, Rajshahi 7.93 per cent, Khulna four per cent, Sylhet 2.8 per cent and Barisal



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Human resource development on IT, especially on acquiring higher level IT skills, must be given foremost importance to utilise the huge unemployed youth force of the country and to enhance the nation's potentiality for software export, the survey observed.

1.30 per cent.

In the absence of any reliable database on the IT for guideline purposes, the sector has been growing in an unplanned manner.

Realising this, the government with the help of Bangladesh Computer Council (BCC), the Ministry of Science and Technology and Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics Division and the Ministry of Planning jointly conducted a countrywide survey and submitted its report in April last year.

A total of 1836 IT organisations were surveyed and it was found that 55.82 per cent of the organisations were involved in human resource development activities. The infrastructure of most of these training institutes was found to be inadequate for producing IT manpower suitable for the present job market.

About 23 per cent of the surveyed organisations have been

in hardware, software development and data processing business.

The survey also revealed that there were about 19,000 IT professionals and people out of which 50 per cent were word processing and data entry operators. There were 1,221 programmers, 870 database and 432 network experts.

The computer density was found to be 1710 persons per computer.

The survey concluded by suggesting acceleration of the growth of use and applications of IT from its present state, a policy of liberalisation and incentives to encourage procurement of IT products for government and private sectors.

It also called for a national IT policy with a master plan formulated to put adequate emphasis on software copyright law.

Human resource development on IT, especially on ac-

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