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POINT 拳COUNTERPOINT

ICT in Bangladesh: Waiting for a take-off?

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HOUSANDS of years ago at the dawn of human civilization, agricultural society evolved from the plough. In the second half of the eighteenth century, with the advent of the steam engine the industrial revolution took place in Europe. Now at the dawn of the new millennium another revolution of entirely different kind is taking place across the globe -- a silent revolution, much more powerful and all pervasive -- it is information technology revolution. No wonder that the present age is being called the information age.

The term information technology or IT has been replaced by information and communication technology or ICT which involves collection, storage, processing and distribution of information. Computers, internet and electronic communication are integral parts of ICT. Texts, numbers, audios and videos are being exchanged throughout the world without space and time barrier. ICT has accelerated the pace of globalisation. At the heart of the startling development in some of the developing countries there lies ICT. Countries having access to and control over information will dominate the world economically and politically

While the huge march of the ICT revolution is going ahead in many countries, will Bangladesh remain merely a spectator? The problems in Bangladesh surrounding ICT are manifold: very low telephone density, high charge of internet service providers, access of insignificant number of people to internet, the present low speed and efficiency of the communication system in the country, low pace of computerisation in various offices and sectors, absence of cyber laws and many things more. In the backdrop of all these, a big event is going to take place at the end of this year. We are going to be connected to the information super highway as fibre optic backbone within the country and the fibre optic submarine cable connection is going to be complete. Suddenly we will be amidst a digital communication system many thousand times more efficient, speedy and powerful. Are we as a nation getting ready for this big arrival?

In Bangladesh, in the ICT sector a large work force with different levels and various expertise is growing. Computer literacy is imparted, computer applications are taught, training given, diploma, bachelor's and master's degrees awarded. Training centres, colleges, computer institutes, private universities and public universities are all contributing in different ways. The related departments are IT, ICT, Computer Applications, Computer Science, Computer Engineering and

Telecommunication Engineering.

Through intranet (unlike internet Steps for quality control of computer it does not go to satellite, nor does it education of all kinds should be leave the country in some other taken. Very soon the need and way) the Prime Minister's office may supply of the ICT work force of be connected with all the ministries different level is to be assessed. and the ministries may be We cannot reap the benefits of connected within themselves. The ICT if it is confined in selected ministries and directorates can have households in one or two big cities connection with their departments and if we fail to take it to the throughout the country. Establishdoorsteps of general people ment ministry can have connection throughout the country. It is possible with DC offices which in turn can have connection with TNO offices. to open a huge number of cyber centres in the small towns and Through intranet Home Ministry can be connected with BDR. Coast villages in the country. The cyber centers can be a place where Guard and Ansar Head Quarters people will get opportunity to send and SP offices which in turn can be and receive e-mail and can have connected with all thanas. Thanas telephonic talk over the internet can have information of all recorded These are the places where people crimes and investigation reports. will have access to internet for Electronic databases may be used information on agriculture and to store details of crimes committed. list of criminals along with their business, health service and can

inaccurate bills or other complaints.

There can be transparency and safety in land registration if the whole process of registration is computerised. Through Geographic Information System or GIS, with the click of a point on the map information about land, terrain, climate, agriculture, oil, gas, coal, transport, development and demography can be obtained. GIS can be utilized effectively by various ministries.

Bangladesh has great potentialities for earning crores of dollars in foreign currency by providing ICTenabled services to the foreign buyers. Bangladesh has a time difference of twelve hours with North America and other main markets which makes possible easy delivery of ICT enabled services. Availability of large number of In Bangladesh education and research can get a strong boost by exploiting all these opportunities.

facility and uninterrupted electric Telemedicine or e-health care supply will attract companies has a great future in Bangladesh. involved in software and IT enabled Patients in the remote places can services to start their business from consult the doctors over the internet. In the future distant analysis/transmission may be possible. Using telemedicine, doctors and other caregivers can consult with specialists thousands of miles away, provide diagnosis and treatment, continually upgrade R&D in Bangladesh. their education and skills: and share medical records and X-rays. Telemedicine or e-health care can be of great help for the health of the

inside and outside the country. Rural economy and health care can be substantially improved with

rural people. A village can be linked

to the health services available

To create a smooth environment for e-commerce, to safeguard the dealings over the net and to check the threat to computer communication ICT law should be passed in the parliament. The law needs to have a legal framework that recognises digital signatures and other electronic documents and have enough provisions to check cyber crimes, which are not covered by existing law of the land. In order to let the IT sector take off, government should pass a comprehensive cyber law without any further delay.

have education. entertainment and so on through internet. All post offices can work as cyber centers, in addition to their normal present duties. These cyber centres can be economically profitable for the entrepreneurs. One may raise the question how the illiterate and illeducated village people can understand English. It may sound like a fiction, but in near future we will find texts in English converted to texts in Bangla, more surprisingly to voice in Bangla! Extensive researches are going on in India to convert text in English to voice in different Indian languages including Bangla. The success is round the corner.

Electronic governance or egovernance is much talked about in this information age. In Bangladesh it can make the government more efficient, transparent and effective. Besides, it can generate an experienced IT workforce which cannot only earn money within the country but fetch huge amount of money from abroad. Although the ultimate hope of IT revolution depends on private enterprise, it is the introduction of e-governance that can trigger the IT revolution in the country as it covers all sectors and the whole country. In egovernance, government can give information to public and public can have access to important informa-

tion and documents of the government. Public opinion may be sought on various issues as interaction between public and government can be built through internets and websites. People can vent their grievances and lodge their

complaints.

promising?

biometric signatures in the form of photographs and fingerprints. Reliable biometric devices and related software are already available in the market.

Videoconferencing to accelerate decision making reducing the cost of travel and accommodation will result in huge cut in the cost of governance. Progress of different projects in distant places can be monitored from the capital city and divisional headquarters. Tender advertisement and tender bidding for government purchases can be done using the internet. Status of various projects of public interest could be displayed through a web site. All information about different stages, starting from the initial

conception of a project, to approval of the project. floating of tender documents and ending up with the awarding of the contract to the bidder could be made available to the general public for the sake of transparency. Advertisement for various posts in the government sector may be put up on the websites of the ministry concerned and candidates may apply through internet.

Government should immediately take steps to create a Central Data Bank for the entire population. Electronic ID cards should be made for each individual. That ID card can be used for voting, opening a bank account, having a license or passport, giving tax or income tax, for obtaining job and so on. Various utility bills like power supply, water supply, gas supply and telecommunications can be paid by consumers through internet. They can interact with these utility agencies regarding computer-trained young people with the application of ICT. Farmers can English base on the one hand and have continued specific advice cheap wage of the trained regarding fertilisers, choice of crops manpower on the other puts and timing of sowing for their Bangladesh in an advantageous individual plots. They can learn position. Political will of the relevant technology. Growers can government manifested in the know the current prices of declaration of ICT as a 'Thrust vegetables, fruits etc. throughout Sector' and its desire to turn the country and can make their Bangladesh into an ICT driven strategy for timing and place for sale country will definitely help. The of their products. Taking the advantage of prospective ICT enabled services are call centres, medical transcripnationwide infrastructure in tion, data entry, back office telecommunication. IT enabled services could be set up in rural processing, insurance claim

processing, salary processing, areas. Businesses will take the engineering design, translation, advantage of low cost of office space and lower wages. Standard animation and many things more. Some firms in Bangladesh are of living in rural areas will grow. producing quality software which Educated rural youths will get have great demand both at home employment. This will help lower the and abroad. They, however, face rate of migration to big cities. severe competition from the foreign Electronic commerce or e-

firms as many Bangladeshi buyers commerce covers many forms of have a tendency to buy 'foreign' trade of goods and services, all of products. Additional taxes may be which rely on the internet to market, imposed on foreign software to identify, select, pay for and deliver boost the local firms. Government these goods and services. Although will need a large number of software it originated in developed countries, for e-governance and this may give e-commerce has changed the the local talented software perspectives of entrepreneurs the developers an opportunity to world over, including the remote improve their expertise and gain areas of developing countries. Ecommerce and e-banking or online experience. This will ultimately improve their prospect of getting banking is in its nascent state in Bangladesh. We should develop e-Through internet there has been commerce culture to create such an explosion of information. buvers who would expect quick creation of transparency and a service and supply. Bangladesh can tremendous opportunity for specialize in e-service, any service acquiring knowledge and doing that can be provided through research in all disciplines. People internet. More and more services have access to libraries, books and will emerge which will be just journals through internet. Distance appropriate for providing through

The recently established

internet.

HABIGANJ CARNAGE A traumatic blow to democracy

ABMS ZAHUR

Incubation Centre at Kawranbazar

Dhaka with data transmission

stored.

the centre. The nation is now S a least developed country eagerly waiting for the establishwith poor resource base and ment of the High Tech Park with all burden of over population modern infrastructural facilities the capability of Bangladesh is planned at Kaliakair near Dhaka, extremely limited for development. which will be a milestone in IT The future of Bangladesh depends industry, high tech industry and on its ability to convert its vast population into valuable resource. The present aovernment Its people are freedom loving. They approved the National ICT policy in fought valiantly for freedom against October 2002 with the aim of the Mughals, against the British building an ICT-driven nation against the Pakistani military. Unforcomprising a knowledge-based tunately, after attaining the freedom society. ICT Task Force with Prime in 1971 its leaders could not survive Minister Begum Khaleda Zia as the long. Thus the cherished dream of chairperson has been created for its people to live peacefully with making policy decisions regarding honour and dignity in a free country various ICT related activities. A has repeatedly been shattered. project "Support to ICT Task Force" Ever since the assassination of primarily for introducing e-Sheikh Mujibur Rahman we do not governance is being implemented. see much hope for establishing It is much felt that there should be a democratic rule even after rather Centre for E-governance Initiative peaceful transfer of power from the which will oversee the total ICT military rule of Ershad to democratic implementation in the country thus rule. In 1991 formation of governcoordinating all ICT activities. An ment by BNP was unexpected. important and essential unit of this Awami League wrongly calculated centre should be a National Data that BNP cannot be a match for Resource Centre where all the Awami League's experience. Right information and data can be from the first term of Khaleda Zia AL could not accept the people's judge-To help the ICT sector flourish in the country, there is a great need for an effective legal framework. Suitable legal reforms

ment in the election of 1991. It placed stumbling blocks one after another for an inexperienced government of BNP so that it failed to can create an ICT friendly legal rule. It forced the then BNP aovernenvironment which will help this ment to amend the constitution to sector grow by attracting make provision for 'caretaker govinvestment. A recent amendment of the Copyright Act 2004 ernment' to ensure free and fair election. When AL's chance to rule incorporating issues related to the country came BNP behaved ICT will reduce the piracy of copyright of an individual or a almost in similar fashion. Thus company. Software, animation parliamentary rule could not operate and web page can have copyright fully right from the restoration.

using this act. Our much desired It is not clearly understood as to paperless environment and filing why AL cannot accept the fact that system in our offices needs the situation of 1971 no longer exists. In 1971 AL emerged as the certain legal protection. To create a smooth environment for emost powerful party because of a commerce, to safeguard the ten-year dictatorial rule of Ayub dealings over the net and to check Khan (1958-68) and the dynamic the threat to computer communileadership of Sheikh Mujibur cation ICT law should be passed Rahman.

On winning the 1996 election AL in the parliament. The law needs miscalculated that by trying hard to to have a legal framework that recognises digital signatures and revive the memories of 1971 the other electronic documents and people of Bangladesh would redihave enough provisions to check rect their attention toward AL and cyber crimes, which are not consider them as the sole liberators of Bangladesh. Thus they lost the covered by existing law of the land. In order to let the IT sector election of 2001

take off, government should pass The present BNP, though ideologically the same as the BNP of a comprehensive cyber law without any further delay. Ziaur Rahman, is relatively more Bangladesh is passing through a democratic than Zia's BNP. Through juncture where the present tireless effort with a strong determigovernment has the opportunity nation Khaleda Zia seems to have to take the nation successfully has made the BNP the biggest party into the digital world and can thus in Bangladesh. However, it has yet play a historic role at the dawn of to do a lot to make it capable of facing crises by bringing more balance of power between the junior and senior members and between the hardliners and the moderates

of the country the alliance government has not been able to achieve it. Killing some terrorists cannot bring real benefit to the people. It is indeed unfortunate that the government has not vet been able to find out the real culprits of grenade attacks which so far targeted only the AL leaders and supporters. This gives an impression that either the BNP or members of other parties of the alliance do not like to punish the terrorists. The government cannot absolve itself of its responsibility by stating that police or civil administration is inefficient or the opposition themselves are perpetrating these incidents. The failure of the government to stop these attacks will be detrimental to the long term interest of the BNP. As the leader of alliance it will have to take the full blame. The other members of the alliance will not share this. The repressive measures taken by the government in the name of controlling the destructive activities of the opposition activists will be counterproductive for the ruling parties.

In regard to Kibria it may be stated that he was a moderate politician with intellectual bent of mind. His criticism of the BNP may be sharp and cutting but this is expected of a highly intelligent politician with glowing diplomatic past. No doubt he was one of the very few leading politicians who had the capability to lead the democratic movement correctly and courageously. Democracy may mean government by the uneducated yet it cannot be run properly without really educated leadership in one form or the other. No doubt Bangladesh is suffering badly because of serious shortage of properly enlightened leaders.

Bangladesh may have a literacy rate of around 45 percent, but she does not have too many Kibrias. Man like Kibria is much sought after even in the most advanced country. He was not only a brilliant student, he was also a top grade diplomat and policy planner. He is certainly not replaceable in near future. Whosoever have done this heinous crime do not appear to be aware of the value of a politician of Kibria's stature at this nascent stage of democracy in Bangladesh. By finding out the criminals of this aruesome act the government will not only help building their image nationally and internationally, but they will render immense service to the limping democracy of Bangladesh. Let us remind the BNP leadership about their movement to oust the dictatorial regime of Ershad to establish democracy. Let them be aware of the danger from emerging anti-democratic forces in the country. These must be crushed by them in their own interest.

Despite election commitment to improve the law and order situation ABMS Zahur is a retired joint-secretary

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Whither Shonar Bangla?

RUBANA HUQ

IMES are stranger than volumes expected. The entire nation

has turned towards "dangabaji". Enraged protestors chasing innocent people, aggressive police force coming down on people with uncalled for attacks, endless front page news and vivid photographs of blood stricken bodies and a riotous scenario...

With all of that added to the anticipations and fears of the garment exporters, and with the trade body elections coming up, we are all treading on uncertain arounds.

Everv statement is wearing the garb of a political affiliation.

I am wondering whether the basic need to survive has been subdued by our need to rule. Let's go hungry, nation...but

let's wear the crown!

Let's go hungry, nation....but let's fight back on every possible opportunity and prove our opposing strength.

I wake up every morning with the South China Morning Post. I surf the net and look for this particular daily at ungodly hours in the morning as well. All this is done ..just to be ahead of the race. The first challenge is to counter my partner and have answers ready for him when he springs up with: 'Where are the margins? At this pace, we won't see any meaningful business anymore.' But, China is slowing down on purpose and with Big Mac, Kentucky, Walmart culture, that nation is truly focusing on dominating the globe and the Chinese era will not only give rise to Chinese Ego, but hopefully the Chinese will not slave away at garment manufacturing and will move on to higher plains !

And in the process, we will be saved

The next challenge is the office...where 60 colleagues wait for me to walk in with a winning

smile every morning and believe sleep at night

me that smile is supposed to speak So, over this anxiety, for the next couple of weeks, my rest at night evaporates into the thin air and till I To them , it means their livelihood, the survival of the 7000 find the perfect partner to fill my people at the factories that we open capacities in, I lose my lovely have with us. Every day is 6 hours and settle down for a supposed to be a sunny Sunday measly 3.

Anyway, back to the office. where I have, by miracle closed deals to our benefit. But have I Office has other appointments done so? Has this season been going for me. ..a couple of buyers visiting our facility and evaluating My mailbox is jammed with our technical and HR compliance.

that garment has it.

these garments would not be uniformly manufactured.

orders for software from abroad.

education and virtual teachers are

made possible widely by using ICT.

But of course, India gets away with it. They coolly put up a tag which is in the form of a disclaimer and which would simply tell the customer not to expect excellent care instructions out of that garment and that it would fade after 2/3 washes and that its tearing strength would be compromised if the consumer did not carefully local fair that hardly attracts any clients and it is the same fair which

has problems naming the spot sales figures to the press after the fair has ended !) Then I wanted to know what, in her eves, would be a good product to export(mind you. I had lowered my level of guery) and she confidently answered: Silk!

Totally baffled by her answers, I ran to my next room, to my wash the garment. But then, why Chairman (he is in the board of

Efficiency at all levels including communication, production, house keeping, transparency, automation ...this much can definitely be ensured by private sector. But what about the policy support from the government with regard to the central bonded warehouse, the relaxations of rule of origin, the support to the sick industries? How can we, the struggling specie even dream of moving forward with our production plants and even dare to make our ends meet without any meaningful help from the establishment?

queries from all over the world and On this meeting depends our next couple of seasons and therefore, I I am wondering why on earth has Iceland missed us out ..? After all, am totally focused and begin the the terrific jackets and the winter meeting. But, right at the beginwear that we produce are The ning, I gape at the most complicated garment that I have ever Best.

In fact, I am wondering whether we should be brave enough and start selling a national brand: The Best to all our friends in the EU and the U.S

But, suddenly another realisation dawns on me...Haven't I received almost over a hundred queries from a single retailer this season and haven't I simply been given a pathetic 6000 pieces as a trial order and have been assured that the next season the orders will come down on us like avalanches and we should be planning capacities accordingly?

Oh, yes...that is the sole reason why I decided on increasing sewing lines and at this point, I have more than 100000 pcs of open capacity effective April '05. "There goes my only posses-

sion, there does my everything!" certainly not our cup of tea. There was a time when this was a Besides, even if we venture out favourite from Engelbert and truly, with this order, we would end up today, my possession is a sound with lots of quality problems as

do I complain? The Indians, probably, deserve this lead and this advantage. After all, they have hundreds of designers coming out of NIFT and after all, these designers know, at least how to seen in my life ... you name any surf the Net and follow the trends. component or embellishment and So, they give the best and get some back. But, of course!

Truly it is the most wonderful At this point, I must mention my and the most challenging garment frustrations with our designers (not that I could ever dream of handling haute couture, but simple and if I took this order in and closed commercial and industrial the deal, either my General designing). The other day, while I Manager, productions or my was interviewing a head designermerchant who has to arrange and cum-a lecturer out of BIFT link all the missing pieces, would (Bangladesh Institute of Fashion throttle me to death. So, India Technology), I wasn't only hoping beats us here. With the ability to to see some light, but I was actually manufacture even 200 pieces per hoping to hire her..simply because style with the most complex design I have had a space empty as a and optic, they have beaten us design space crying out to me hollow and have sucked up the e v e r y d a y margins that the niche market and simply because I feel the could ever offer. Therefore, the fast necessity to at least try and give turn around product that changes some design inputs to our with every season, which makes a customers. I only asked two higher fashion statement, is , most questions and I was given two, verv embarrassing answers. I asked her if she could name a

couple of fashion fairs in the world.

She named one: BATEXPO(the

BGMEA) and asked him what did they think they were doing with that institute? Needless to say, I was promptly dismissed as there are things which are better discussed at better times.

My question is, when are we ever going to have the time to think about this industry?

Seminars may raise alarms, statistics may frighten some of us into putting up world class infrastructures, random world travel may win our buyers' trust and we may win some and lose some, but what are we doing to clean the track? This is a track which Indonesia, Korea are not even bothered to attempt, this is a track that is far removed from the Sri Lankan niche concept, this is a track which the Indians cannot even be bothered to consider as their backward linkage, their fashion concepts, their RAJ styled hotels (talking of which I am wondering when the Radisson is going to be completed!) are far beyond our mundane reach, this is a track that China does not even see (we are mere dots in the

Then what does this track comprise of? Efficiency at all levels including communication, production, house keeping. transparency, automation (mind you, the Blackberry must work!)...this much can definitely be ensured by private sector. But what about the

this new millennium.

National University

offers)

Dr. M. Aminul Islam is the Pro-Vice-Chancellor

beyond .. what about the policy support from the government with regard to the central bonded warehouse, the relaxations of rule of origin, the support to the sick industries...what about them?

How can we, the struggling specie even dream of moving forward with our production plants and even dare to make our ends meet without any meaningful help from the establishment?

How can anyone not pay any attention to the fact there are actually lesser and late placements this season and any factory that is booked till May'05 should be eternally grateful to God and should thank Him for His infinite mercy?

When are all going to realise that this is the Final Call and if we go unheard, it will be the Final Cut (Pink Floyd, remember?) for the 2 million workforce?

And judging by the last couple of days, the only direction seems to be suicidal.

Let sanity prevail and let self interest be laid to eternal rest.

While I finish my piece, I am staring at the MSN user name of my daughter who's 19 and who aspires to be a politician one day .her name reads: "no heroes in our skies" and I end up writing to my son, who's in a business school 10,000 miles away from me..Amader moto manush hoyo na, manusher moto manush hoyo. God bless our trade and God bless our shonar bangla.

Rubana Hug is a freelance writer horizon in terms of their capacity