

# ICT in Bangladesh: Waiting for a take-off?

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**T**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The term information technology or IT has been replaced by information and communication technology or ICT which involves collection, storage, processing and distribution of information.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. Steps for quality control of computer education of all kinds should be taken. Very soon the need and supply of the ICT work force of different level is to be assessed.

We cannot reap the benefits of ICT if it is confined in selected households in one or two big cities and if we fail to take it to the doorsteps of general people throughout the country. It is possible to open a huge number of cyber centres in the small towns and villages in the country. The cyber centers can be a place where people will get opportunity to send and receive e-mail and can have telephonic talk over the internet. These are the places where people will have access to internet for information on agriculture and business, health service and can

Through intranet (unlike internet it does not go to satellite, nor does it leave the country in some other way) the Prime Minister's office may be connected with all the ministries and the ministries may be connected within themselves. The ministries and directorates can have connection with their departments throughout the country. Establishment ministry can have connection with DC offices which in turn can have connection with TNO offices. Through intranet Home Ministry can be connected with BDR, Coast Guard and Ansar Head Quarters and SP offices which in turn can be connected with all thanas. Thanas can have information of all recorded crimes and investigation reports. Electronic databases may be used to store details of crimes committed, list of criminals along with their

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 ICT-enabled 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.

Telemedicine or e-health care has a great future in Bangladesh. Patients in the remote places can 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 their education and skills; and share medical records and X-rays. Telemedicine or e-health care has a great help for the health of the rural people. A village can be linked to the health services available inside and outside the country.

Rural economy and health care can be substantially improved with

Incubation Centre at Kawranbazar, Dhaka with data transmission facility and uninterrupted electric supply will attract companies involved in software and IT enabled services to start their business from the centre. The nation is now eagerly waiting for the establishment of the High Tech Park with all modern infrastructural facilities planned at Kaliakair near Dhaka, which will be a milestone in IT industry, high tech industry and R&D in Bangladesh.

The present government approved the National ICT policy in October 2002 with the aim of building an ICT-driven nation comprising a knowledge-based society. ICT Task Force with Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia as the chairperson has been created for making policy decisions regarding various ICT related activities. A project "Support to ICT Task Force" primarily for introducing e-governance is being implemented. It is much felt that there should be a Centre for E-governance Initiative which will oversee the total ICT implementation in the country thus coordinating all ICT activities. An important and essential unit of this centre should be a National Data Resource Centre where all the information and data can be stored.

To help the ICT sector flourish in the country, there is a great need for an effective legal framework. Suitable legal reforms can create an ICT friendly legal environment which will help this sector grow by attracting investment. A recent amendment of the Copyright Act 2004 incorporating issues related to ICT will reduce the piracy of copyright of an individual or a company. Software, animation and web page can have copyright using this act. Our much desired paperless environment and filing system in our offices needs certain legal protection. 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.

Bangladesh is passing through a juncture where the present government has the opportunity to take the nation successfully into the digital world and can thus play a historic role at the dawn of this new millennium.

The recently established

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## HABIGANJ CARNAGE

# A traumatic blow to democracy

ABMS ZAHUR

**A**S a least developed country with poor resource base and burden of over population the capability of Bangladesh is extremely limited for development. The future of Bangladesh depends on its ability to convert its vast population into valuable resource. Its people are freedom loving. They fought valiantly for freedom against the Mughals, against the British against the Pakistani military. Unfortunately, after attaining the freedom in 1971 its leaders could not survive long. Thus the cherished dream of its people to live peacefully with honour and dignity in a free country has repeatedly been shattered. Ever since the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman we do not see much hope for establishing democratic rule even after rather peaceful transfer of power from the military rule of Ershad to democratic rule. In 1991 formation of government by BNP was unexpected. Awami League wrongly calculated that BNP cannot be a match for Awami League's experience. Right from the first term of Khaleda Zia AL could not accept the people's judgement in the election of 1991. It placed stumbling blocks one after another for an inexperienced government of BNP so that it failed to rule. It forced the then BNP government to amend the constitution to make provision for 'caretaker government' to ensure free and fair election. When AL's chance to rule the country came BNP behaved almost in similar fashion. Thus parliamentary rule could not operate fully right from the restoration.

It is not clearly understood as to why AL cannot accept the fact that the situation of 1971 no longer exists. In 1971 AL emerged as the most powerful party because of a ten-year dictatorial rule of Ayub Khan (1958-68) and the dynamic leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

On winning the 1996 election AL miscalculated that by trying hard to revive the memories of 1971 the people of Bangladesh would redirect their attention toward AL and consider them as the sole liberators of Bangladesh. Thus they lost the election of 2001.

The present BNP, though ideologically the same as the BNP of Ziaur Rahman, is relatively more democratic than Zia's BNP. Through tireless effort with a strong determination Khaleda Zia seems to have made the BNP the biggest party in Bangladesh. However, it has yet 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.

Despite election commitment to improve the law and order situation

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 yet 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 gruesome 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.

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# Whither Shonar Bangla?

RUBANA HUQ

**T**IMES are stranger than 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 grounds.

Every 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 me that smile is supposed to speak volumes.

To them, it means their livelihood, the survival of the 7000 people at the factories that we have with us. Every day is supposed to be a sunny Sunday where I have, by miracle closed deals to our benefit. But have I done so? Has this season been promising?

My mailbox is jammed with

sleep at night.

So, over this anxiety, for the next couple of weeks, my rest at night evaporates into the thin air and till I find the perfect partner to fill my open capacities in, I lose my lovely 6 hours and settle down for a measly 3.

Anyway, back to the office.

Office has other appointments going for me...a couple of buyers visiting our facility and evaluating our technical and HR compliance.

these garments would not be uniformly manufactured.

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 wash the garment. But then, why

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 eyes, would be a good product to export (mind you, I had lowered my level of query) and she confidently answered: Silk!

Totally baffled by her answers, I ran to my next room, to my 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 I am wondering why on earth has Iceland missed us out.? After all, the terrific jackets and the winter wear that we produce are The 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 possession, there goes my everything!" There was a time when this was a favourite from Engelbert and truly, today, my possession is a sound

On this meeting depends our next couple of seasons and therefore, I am totally focused and begin the meeting. But, right at the beginning, I gape at the most complicated garment that I have ever seen in my life...you name any component or embellishment and that garment has it.

Truly it is the most wonderful and the most challenging garment that I could ever dream of handling and if I took this order in and closed the deal, either my General Manager, productions or my merchant who has to arrange and link all the missing pieces, would throttle me to death. So, India beats us here. With the ability to manufacture even 200 pieces per style with the most complex design and optic, they have beaten us hollow and have sucked up the margins that the niche market could ever offer. Therefore, the fast turn around product that changes with every season, which makes a higher fashion statement, is, most certainly not our cup of tea. Besides, even if we venture out with this order, we would end up 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 surf the Net and follow the trends. So, they give the best and get some back. But, of course!

At this point, I must mention my frustrations with our designers (not haute couture, but simple commercial and industrial designing). The other day, while I was interviewing a head designer-cum-a lecturer out of BIFT (Bangladesh Institute of Fashion Technology), I wasn't only hoping to see some light, but I was actually hoping to hire her. simply because I have had a space empty as a design space crying out to me e v e r y d a y ...and simply because I feel the necessity to at least try and give some design inputs to our customers. I only asked two questions and I was given two, very 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 horizon in terms of their capacity

offers).

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 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.

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