

The world is calling

As a region, Asia is starting to pose a real threat to the Indian offshore market. With the middle management shortage and 40% employee turnover in India, many in the industry are looking to alternatives. For cost, India is still best for now. However, the real focus should be on value for money. With unique culture, motivated and educated workforce, and low staff turnover, coupled with a stable economy, Bangladesh is a strong contender for offshore.

AHMADUL HOQ

WHEN asked: "Where are the Asian offshore centers of the future?" few would include Bangladesh among the leading pack. Bangladesh is renowned more as a disaster prone location than for high-tech outsourcing facilities.

Other Asian countries, such as the Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand and India have a long history of interaction with the West, whereas Bangladesh, as an independent nation, has remained uninteresting, an image not synonymous with call centres.

Nevertheless, Bangladesh industry is growing rapidly, achieving the level necessary to take international calls, and possibly a share of the substantial offshore market. The big question of whether Bangladesh can take a portion of the multi-

billion global offshore and outsourced services industry is assessed here.

Offshore

The booming offshore industry is now an integral part of the contact centre profession. Forrester Research predicts 750,000 British jobs will move offshore by 2015. Overseas governments now realise that tapping some of the "golden flow" is a national priority.

Bangladesh

Bangladesh can become a serious contender in the offshore market, with multi-media call and contact centres, dramatically cutting call costs.

It has very motivated, young, educated people who are waiting for opportunities such as contact centres to take them out of the unemployment and underemploy-

ment situation. Most importantly, it has over 20,000 graduates with Fazil and Kamil degrees, which is an excellent lower cost resource for the Middle East region's IT services and business process outsourcing/offshoring companies.

The opportunity to service nationally, regionally and globally is immediate. The only foreseeable limitation that may be observed at this point is the English language; however that can be overcome with targeted and on-going training.

The competition

In the offshore services perspective, India remains the heavyweight when it comes to offshore, with skilled, English-proficient workers and a long-term knowledge of the contact centre industry. These factors have led McKinsey Consulting to expect India to account for \$4 billion in

offshore call centre services by 2008, growing at an annual rate of 50%. Stopping, or even denting, this trend will be a difficult task. However, Asia-Pacific is now tackling the Indian industry head-on, and market researcher Frost & Sullivan expects revenue from call centres in Asia to increase to \$1.5 billion by 2008.

Although Asia-Pacific is rivalling India, there are huge differences between offshore successes in constituent countries. Where countries such as Singapore have experienced minimal growth, there is expected to be a 100% increase in offshore agents in the Philippines yearly in the foreseeable future. The Filipino BPO and IT enabled services market, meanwhile, was valued at \$3.5 billion last year and is expected to more than triple to \$12.2 billion by 2010, according to the projections of BPAP -- an industry body.

Robert O'Mally of Outsourcing Warehouse sees the Philippines as the strongest offshore contender in Asia. He says: "The Philippines have more call-centre agents per head of population than any country in Asia (including India)." Indeed, 72% of the population are fluent in English and do not have the same accent limitations as those in India. Martin

Conboy of callcentres.net comments that: "The Philippines is still the fastest growing contact centre industry in the world since man invented the bottled beer."

Another prominent contender in the region is Malaysia. However, after carrying our research into the country, O'Mally concludes that it "is not really serving the US/UK market. It is a hub for pan-Asian work because of the high number of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean speakers." This "3rd way" of offshore locations provides both regional and international centres, and is likely to be Bangladesh's best hope of success. CIO reports that "over the next few years, the Asia Pacific will represent something in the region of 33% of global GDP, making it the fastest growing emerging market in the world." As such, pan-Asian work is almost as significant as international.

Clearly, there are large differences between Asia-Pacific countries in terms of their offshore industries. The Philippines is racing ahead of all other countries in the region, and it is here that Bangladesh will have to compete most intensely.

Profitability and prospect
Incubation period and break-even

point are at acceptable level, and the growth potentials are enormous, provided achievable plans and right resources are in place.

It is important to note that more than 60% of the total revenue of a service provider is spent on salary. This industry is poised to become the leading creator of jobs for the young educated masses. One estimate is that, with the right policy and support from the government and the business community, approximately 500,000 jobs will be created in Bangladesh by the year 2015.

Getting offshore business will be the mid-term goal. The short-term goal will be to cater to the national demands, including that of other call centre entrepreneurs.

The national demand for the services will come primarily from financial, telecommunication, manufacturing, retail, and health sectors, to name a few. Also, the infrastructure will allow small to medium companies to embrace the e-commerce.

The long-term goal has to be overseas markets, but to achieve that the local team needs to experience success and what a world class service looks and feels like.

Final word
As a region, Asia is starting to pose a



Can we help you?

real threat to the Indian offshore market. With the middle management shortage and 40% employee turnover in India, many in the industry are looking to alternatives.

For cost, India is still best for now. However, the real focus should be on value for money. With unique culture, motivated and educated workforce, and low staff turnover, coupled with a stable economy, Bangladesh is a strong contender for offshore.

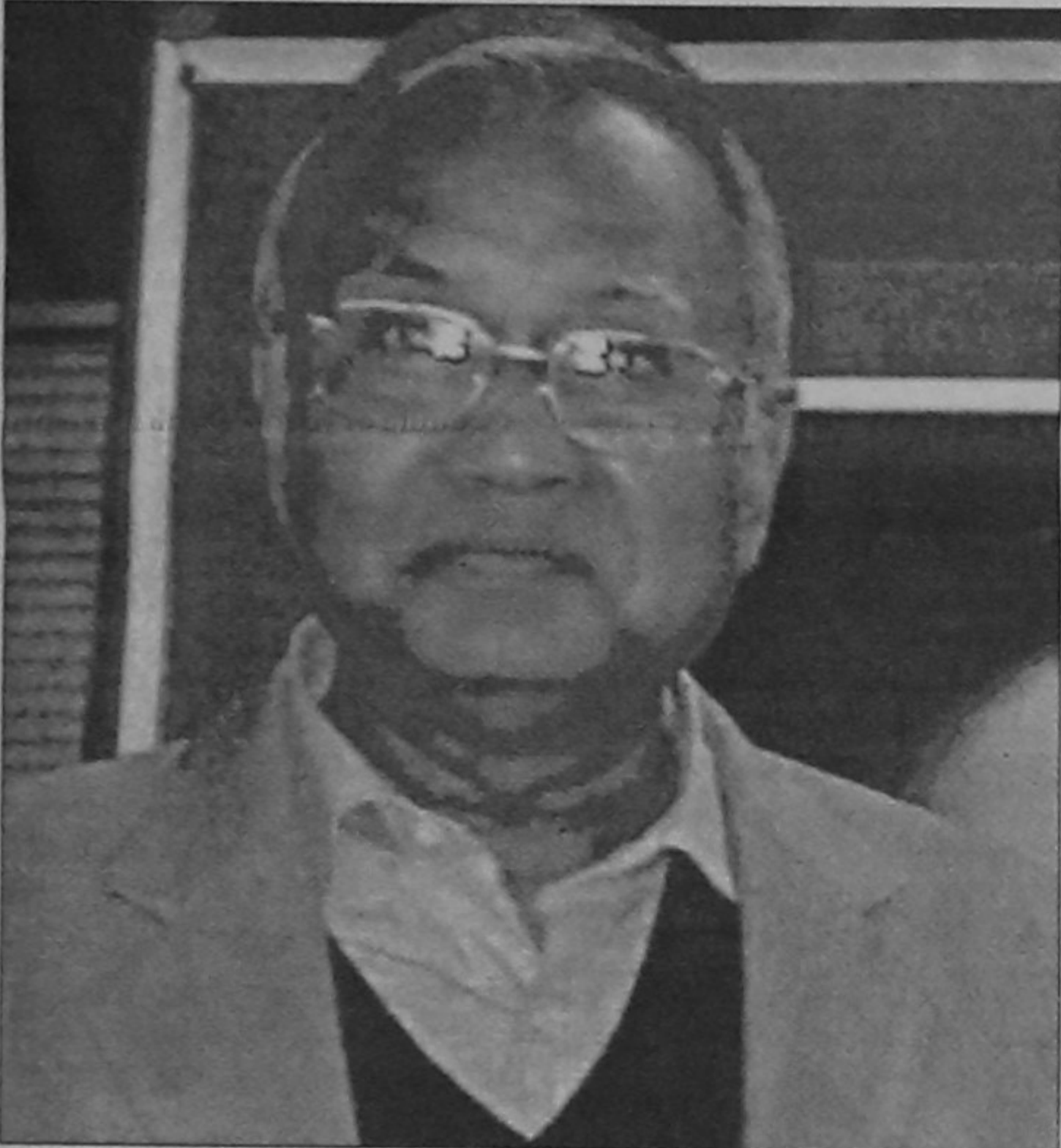
As such, Bangladesh is not such a far shore as otherwise thought.

My own experience of the Bangladesh industry is one of enthusiasm, determination, and an overwhelming belief in success. However, with a track record in offshore and large numbers of skilled English speaking staff, the Philippines are likely to take the first wave of outsourcers looking for an alternative to India. But, Bangladesh should prepare to take up the challenge.

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Time to say good-bye

As a young man he started his profession as a journalist in the daily Sangbad in 1961. Bazlur Rahman was a product of the "Sangbad School" and till the last day of his life he was with Sangbad and served it as its editor. He was a role model for young learners.



ABDUL MANNAN

THEY came from all walks of life. Journalists, teachers, artists, writers, politicians or people without any identity. All of them came to the Central Shahid Minar in the fading afternoon of last Wednesday, for paying their last respect to the deceased journalist and a perfect gentleman, Bazlur Rahman. He was Bazlur Bhai to all. Old and young. Bazlur Bhai expired at 11.45 the night before. The breaking news telecast immediately over all

electronic media was stunning. Bazlur Bhai was a person whom everyone loved, respected and adored.

Presenters and participants of all talk shows of the electronic media that night just fumbled and stumbled as they remembered the memories of Bazlur Bhai. He was a frequent participant in their talk shows.

Born on August 3, 1941 late Bazlur Rahman was a graduate in Economics from Dhaka University. Most bright students in the days of Bazlur Bhai would be attracted to Marxism. He was no exception. As a

young man he started his profession as a journalist in the daily Sangbad in 1961. Sangbad is a newspaper of very high quality and amidst the journalist community it was considered a school where one got to learn the finer art and skill of journalism. One would see icons in the world of journalism like Ahmedul Kabir, Shahidullah Kaisar, Jahur Hossain, Syed Nuruddin, Santosh Gupta or K. G. Mustafa work to the finest detail of their profession in Sangbad and learn from them. Bazlur Rahman was a product of the "Sangbad School" and till the last day of his life he was with Sangbad and served it as its editor. He was a role model for young learners.

Bazlur Bhai was a very soft spoken person and would never show his anger or agitation in public even though there were reasons for such reaction. In one of the TV talk shows, telecast in the month of April 2007 an editor of a daily newspaper, very close to the Four Party Alliance, while discussing the formation of the Mujibnagar government and their oath taking commented that "some people" did something like that without valid authority. For any person believing in the history of our Liberation War such a comment would be enough to start a heated argument.

Bazlur Bhai was very calm and composed and explained to the gentleman these people who formed the government, and took oath of office were heroes of history and not just "some people." They were all elected members of Parliament, senior Awami League leaders and his leader (Major Zia) served as a sector

commander under this Mujibnagar government lead by "these people." They were the people who had the rightful authority to form a government in exile during that hour of crisis. All foreign governments who wanted to help our War of Liberation dealt with them and "these people" were assassinated by the enemies of the state. Not for a moment was any annoyance, anger or disgust visible in the face of Bazlur Bhai. This was Bazlur Rahman the pacifist. Any viewer who watched the program that night felt proud of Bazlur Rahman.

Bazlur Rahman, and Motia Chowdhury (Presidium member of Awami League) made a very happy couple. Last Valentine's Day both appeared on a TV show anchored by Munni Shah and shared with the viewers the happy moments of their long married life. Like any other normal happy couple they agreed to disagree on many issues in smiling face and while having their evening meal talk about the ever rising cost of living in Bangladesh and how difficult it is to make both ends meet with one's limited income.

Bazlur Bhai came to Chittagong on September 9, 2006 to be a discussant in the launching ceremony of my book "Janatar Joy" (People's Victory) compiled to document the Chittagong City Corporation election of 2005. He was staying at the City Corporation Guest House and the city was without power on that day. When I went to meet him and apologise for the unbearable condition because of the power outage, he just smiled and said I do not have to be apologetic. It is a price one has to pay for choosing the wrong people to rule the country. May the departed soul of Bazlur Bhai rest in peace.

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The colour of money

Does the Bangladesh Bank need to hold a massive dollar reserve, as less of it is more likely to reduce the price of imported consumer goods? And why people must surrender their foreign currencies earned through trade or received in remittances to the central bank? Money, its supply, and management can no longer be a matter of ivory tower experts, but of the people on the ground.



NIZAM AHMAD

ELECTED governments, to uphold their narrow political interests, remained indifferent to many economic aspects that this government can embark on. Bangladesh's geographical position is a unique economic advantage, but elected governments, to preserve their politics, never considered it.

Governments should not block international trade to protect inefficient industries or for foolish nationalistic sentiments. Trade, whether unilateral, bilat-

eral, or multilateral, benefits people. International or regional trade is between people of different nations, not governments, but only governments can facilitate it.

Re-opening the pre-1965 land, water, and air route not only to India but also, unilaterally, to all surrounding countries is an important economic issue that this government can address.

Vital issues are IMF and World Bank roles in our monetary affairs. Since Bretton Woods, the world's monetary order has transformed but the government authority in monetary matters

has not. US dollar, the currency that was the reserve currency of the world is fast eroding as one.

Robert Morley in his article "Why the US Dollar Constantly Loses Value" [the Trumpet.com] writes that Alan Greenspan, former Fed chief, warns of a "global dollar dumping" by other currencies.

Bangladesh's monetary authority does not appear to be concerned about this side of a declining dollar. Moreover, does the Bangladesh Bank need to hold a massive dollar reserve, as less of it is more likely to reduce the price of imported consumer goods? And why people must surrender their foreign currencies earned through trade or received in remittances to the central bank? Money, its supply, and management can no longer be a matter of ivory tower experts, but of the people on the ground.

Historically, money evolved as a medium of exchange from barter when the economy was tiny, to metal-backed currency when economies grew, and to depreciating fiat currency, as now, when governments began to expand and restricted people's economic freedom by their sheer size and regulatory authority. As music, or language, no governments or monarchs invented money but they monopolised

money as a mark of sovereignty. Modern elected governments imposed their currencies as the sole legal tender banishing all other preferable mediums of exchange. To finance wars, to develop the economy imperially, and to extend their authority they taxed, borrowed, printed, and created money at will. They, therefore, abandoned the need of tangible assets that traditionally backed money to preserve monetary value.

The value of money today dissipates rapidly unlike times, when money, backed by gold, remained firm for generations. Globally, prices of gold are skyrocketing, as people prefer this metal as their reserve, and movable asset, not the paper currency of governments.

The 1974 Nobel Prize winner Dr. F. A. Hayek in his book "Denationalisation of Money" advocates abolishing government monopoly of money. Hayek favours "a competition in currency" to maintain its value.

People must urge the government to modify its monetary authority to suit the needs of a globalising economy where economic sovereignty of the individual, not the power of government, is imperative to overall economic growth.

Flawed monetary mantras, apart from supply and demand factors, cause furious price hikes. There are no syndicates, but erroneous monetary policies. Monetary reforms are urgent before Bangladesh becomes another Zimbabwe where prices rise on an hourly basis.

The chief adviser's education promises

A little over two percent of GDP is being devoted at present to education as public resources. This ratio needs to double within the next decade and the share of government spending for education needs to increase proportionately from the present level of under 15 percent. This investment is necessary to fulfill the aspirations in education. But good governance must ensure that the increased resources are used effectively and efficiently.

MANZOOR AHMED

DR. FAKHRUDDIN Ahmed, the chief adviser, addressed the inaugural session of the conference on Governance in Education on Sunday, March 2, at the Shapla Hall of the International Conference Centre at the Chief Adviser's Office. He provided important guidelines for educational priorities, especially at the pre-tertiary level.

This is the first time that the head of the current government has spoken on key education issues. His comments and ideas have major implications for national education policy and strategy. The finance adviser, Dr. A.B. Mirza Azizul Islam reaffirmed the need for reforms at the concluding session of the conference on March 4.

the government, especially the two ministries of education, are going to do about what the chief adviser said. The main points in his speech, posted on the website www.caobd.gov, are the following:

- Great differences have emerged in the quality of education in urban and rural areas and for children of the rich and the poor. Segmentation and division in the education system have created a divided society.
- We have to ensure that a set of core knowledge and competencies are acquired by all students, along with choices for additional/complementary learning options. This calls for a core curricular content and objectives irrespective of the type of institution and provider of service.
- National commitment to "offer free and compulsory education to

all boys and girls" as stated in Article 17 of the Constitution, and the MDG and EFA goals for 2015 will remain unrealized at the present rate of progress.

- Well-known NGOs in Bangladesh, which have pioneered internationally acclaimed innovations in preschool, primary, and secondary education, constitute a major "social capital" for our national development, which must be used to achieve national education goals.
- All service providers in a geographical unit, such as the upazila -- be they government education authorities, NGOs, or community organisations -- should work together through a mechanism of local coordination to ensure that every child can participate in an institution which meets minimum agreed standards of quality



How long must our children stand in line?

- instruction, whoever provides the service.
- Non-governmental and community organisations can serve as the intermediary between the public education services and the community and parents to bring all stakeholders together. Educational institutions then can become truly responsive and answerable to the community and the parents. The local government institutions, as they become stronger, can play a more direct

- role than at present in this process.
- Community, voluntary and non-governmental organizations and the private sector need to be encouraged and supported to create and manage community learning centres, ICT centres and education programs for youth and adults as the building blocks of a "learning society."
- Vocational and technical education opportunities at the post-primary level should be increased substantially. Participation in skill

development of youth who do not continue in formal education has to be raised manifold to prepare young people for the world of work. New models of effective and high quality vocational and technical education need to be designed which are responsive and adaptable to changing market demands.

- Successful experience elsewhere shows that the government should focus on policy-making, regulatory framework for standards, and overall planning to promote public-private collaboration in provisions for market-responsive vocational and technical education.
- Critical educational policy decisions and choice of priorities should be made transparently with ample public dialogue and the opportunity for review by stakeholders. An institutional consultative mechanism mandated to review and provide policy directions on a regular basis can be an effective vehicle for public scrutiny and continuity of policy.
- An important step in utilising ICT resources for education would be to make a BTv channel available for educational use, for which the infrastructure largely exists. This

channel can be used optimally and effectively for high priority purposes, such as, teacher training and support, literacy and continuing education, supplementing formal primary and secondary classroom instruction, Open University courses, English language instruction, and so on.

- The content and the delivery of the different programs can be the responsibility of concerned education service providers, including non-government ones. The Ministry of Information and the two ministries in education should move expeditiously to create the new facility.
- A little over two percent of GDP is being devoted at present to education as public resources. This ratio needs to double within the next decade and the share of government spending for education needs to increase proportionately from the present level of under 15 percent. This investment is necessary to fulfill the aspirations in education. But good governance must ensure that the increased resources are used effectively and efficiently.

Unesco in co-operation with the ministries of education and primary and mass education, with substantive input from the Institute of Educational Development, Brac University and the Access to Information Program at the Chief Adviser's Office.

They welcomed and endorsed the statement as an important guideline. They recognised that several ministries and agencies besides the two education ministries need to work together to initiate and facilitate follow-up of the guidelines contained in the statement. They adopted a "framework of action" which urged that a task-force with the lead taken at the Chief Adviser's Office be formed for this purpose.

The two advisers, respectively for primary and mass education and secondary and higher education, Ms. Rasheda K. Chowdhury and Dr. Hussain Zillur Rahman, arguably have the best possible credentials for their positions. The expectations from them and the teams they lead in the two ministries are, therefore, high.

Some 80 participants attended the three-day conference, organized by

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