

Web 2.0 and Digital Bangladesh

If the state of technology had been then what it is now, blogs, Facebook, Twitter and other social media would have brought the news of Sheikh Mujib's assassination and the events that followed, to doorsteps of not just Bangladeshis but also the rest of the world's. This, unfortunately, did not happen.

TANYA GUPTA

AROUND March 4, someone posted on YouTube a thirty to forty minute clip from a meeting between Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and army officials. It showed the confrontation between angry army officials and the PM on her decision to negotiate with the mutineers rather than take military action.

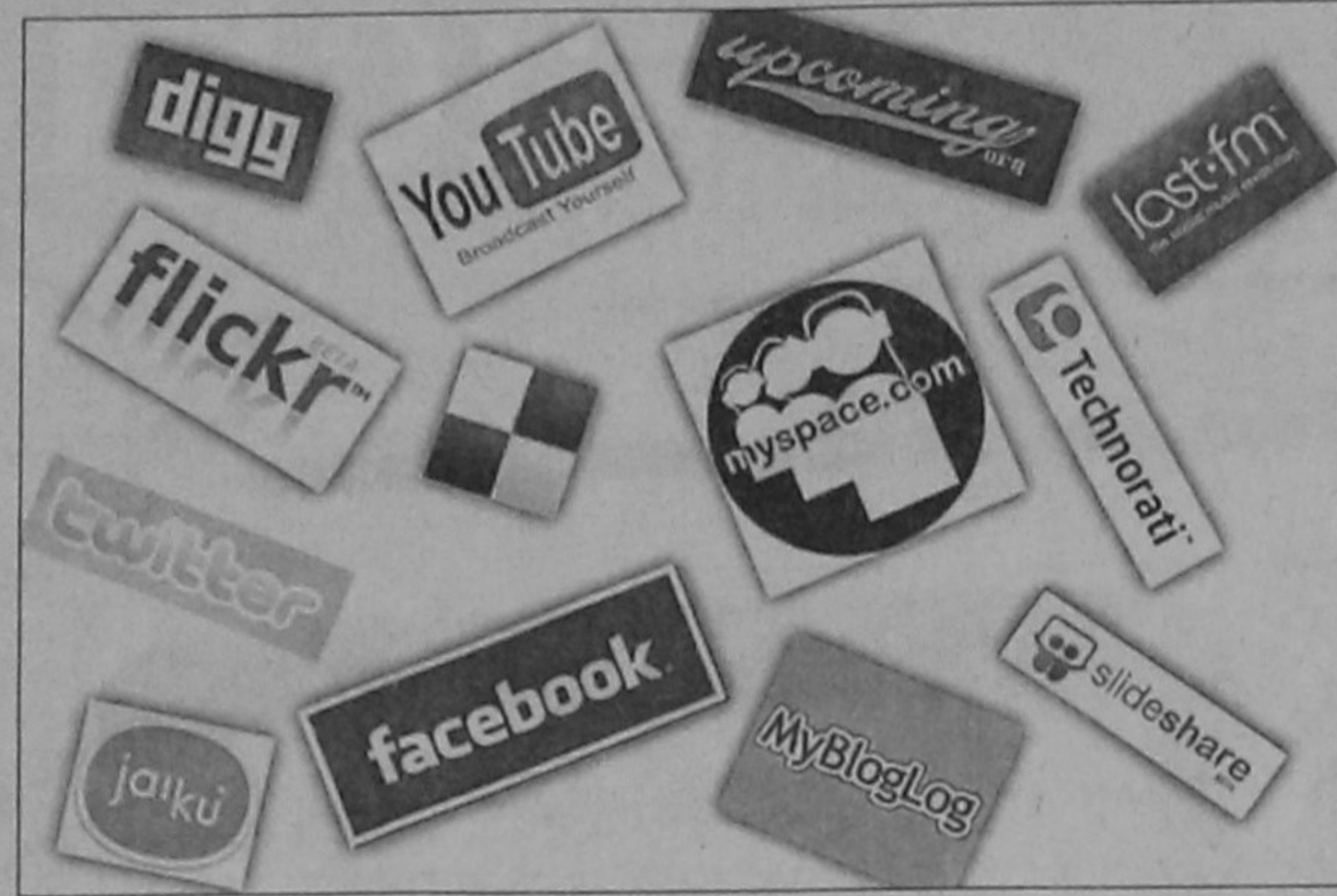
Within hours, the clip had spread to the four corners of the world. Facebook users put the YouTube link in their status, bloggers wrote about the video, related articles were dug up, and TV stations around the world discussed the meeting and its implications on the newly elected PM and the army. (All of these applications are considered a part of Web 2.0, where Web 2.0 refers to a perceived second generation of web development and design, that facilitates communication, secure information sharing,

interoperability, and collaboration on the WorldWideWeb).

Taken by surprise by the intense media attention, the government blocked YouTube altogether on March 6, hoping that it would blow over.

This created an even bigger sensation, and the government was soon impelled to take down the block. The end result? For one, the government, the army and the rest of the administration were forced to acknowledge the power of social media as a force for increased transparency. A combination of a watchful citizenry and technology brought about increased transparency. Secondly, many realised the irony of talking about a "Digital Bangladesh" in the same breath as YouTube blocks.

Flashback to 1975. On August 15, 1975, a group of junior army officers invaded the president's residence and assassinated Sheikh Mujib and most of his family. As the events unfolded, citi-



Road to Digital Bangladesh.

zens were left uninformed, and Dhaka became a city of rumours. Coups and counter-coups took place, and stability was established only in 1977.

If the state of technology had been then what it is now, blogs, Facebook, Twitter and other social media would have brought the news of Sheikh Mujib's assassination and the events that followed, to doorsteps of not just Bangladeshis but also the rest of the world's. This, unfortunately, did not happen. 1975 remained,

for the most part, local and not global, which meant that it probably continued longer than it might have under Web 2.0.

There are two lessons we can take away from the 1975 and 2009 comparison. One is that information and communication technologies (ICT), especially Web 2.0, can be relevant even in a developing country by contributing to improved governance. It does so through increased transparency, accountability and collaboration. The other is that Digital Bangladesh is already

happening, and those interested in the development of Bangladesh need to align Digital Bangladesh strategies with what is already happening in the country.

Bangladesh provides a good counterpoint to governments, international development agencies and others who argue that information technology projects are not relevant for developing countries, as there are more basic needs that should be fulfilled first. They argue that one is better off investing valuable resources on areas such as food, nutrition and education, rather than on information technology.

This point of view is pretty much de facto among the development community. This argument is based on the assumption that technology is an independent sector, and resources can be diverted to one sector or the other. This is a flawed assumption and reveals a fundamental lack of understanding of technology. Technology is not just a sector of its own, but also an important driver of other sectors, and an enabler of development goals.

To ignore investment in information technology puts a developing country at risk of falling even further behind in the race for development. Every country, regardless of the level of economic growth, can benefit from thoughtful applications of ICT. In Bangladesh, which is a developing country, the two mutinies of 1975 and 2009 proved that ICTs,

through increased transparency, can create pressure for improved governance, and thus contribute to development.

It was technology that really made the difference in 2009. Facebook, Twitter, Youtube etc., all of which played a key role in 2009, are Web 2.0 tools (also "social media"). Web 2.0 forced the government of Sheikh Hasina and the entire political apparatus to accept the fact that, from now on, transparency would be de facto. All government actions will have to be taken with the explicit understanding that their actions could be broadcast to the whole world within minutes.

Digital Bangladesh is already happening, whether the powers that be like it or not. The best way to promote it is to support the direction that it is already taking, and not counter it through ineffectual means like banning Youtube. It is also proof that ICTs, when thoughtfully used to promote governance and economic development, can be of great benefit to all countries, especially developing countries. It is enormously shortsighted to take technology investment off the table of options, when considering ways of bringing about economic development.

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Let's not waste waste

Let us create awareness about how not to litter our streets, and to throw waste in designated areas. Let us not burden our country with waste, but learn in a nation-wide campaign to put it to good use.

ZEBI I. SERAJ

CALL me naïve, but I am a strong believer that the fate of our country lies in the hands of each one of us. The citizen need not be highly educated; however, the highly educated and well-to-do definitely have more responsibility towards the country. The latter need a change in mind-set and should start thinking of "not what the country can give her/him but what he/she can give to the country."

I also think that this mind-set cannot

come naturally -- it has to be taught, ingrained and repeatedly pushed down every citizen's throat until "country comes first" becomes a part of our nature. And this process has to start right from kindergarten. We should also be taught to think positively, to learn not to think of what problems we have but to think of finding solutions to those.

And those of us who are fortunate enough to have an education should in turn influence those not so fortunate to build a positive image of their surroundings and play their part in making their

own area clean. Being naïve, I also believe that a clean Bangladesh will automatically produce a prosperous Bangladesh.

Banning polythene bags is not enough; people need to be made aware of the consequences of substances resistant to biodegradation, and also of the positive aspects of biodegradable material and their recycling capacity. I wonder if anyone has noticed that the farther away from Dhaka one goes the less one observes litter on the roadside, and heaped garbage near water-bodies? In other words, village folks create less non-biodegradable waste and are more adept at re-cycling.

As most of us are aware, urban garbage is a huge problem in Dhaka city. The garbage dumps at Syedabad are not only hazardous, the residents living around that area must also be in an olfactory hell. Most residential areas, including Dhanmondi, Gulshan and Baridhara, have their share of stench-emitting dumps -- which frequently totally overpowers our sense of smell.

Most of the waste we produce is not only biodegradable, it can also be used to produce energy. Just think, if we could have a system of collecting the biodegradable kitchen waste separately and this was supplied to a biogas generating plant, we would all be winners!

In Japan and the Philippines, households have to collect and dispose of their waste in 3 categories; (a) biodegradable stuff like paper, vegetable waste or other biological material, (b) glass and (c) metallic waste. There is re-cycling of the glass and metallic products, while the biodegradable stuff is collected for further treatment to generate fertilizer or biogas. In collaboration with the

municipal bodies, we the citizens in every residential community need to start a similar system as soon as possible.

I felt so proud the day I read in the papers that a biogas generating plant had been set up with German help and an agreement signed with Kawran Bazaar for collection and provision of the daily raw vegetable waste to the biogas plant in Narayanganj. We have heard of various business bodies talking about funds to generate power, but biogas is a suitable alternative and more plants similar to the one set up by the Germans can be easily established.

I was heartened when I saw a program on Channel 1, where the excretory products of chicken in a poultry farm were being used to generate biogas, which in turn was used to drive a generator. The power generated was enough to run the poultry farm.

All it required was the innovative skill of an engineer, who converted local generators in such a way that these could directly operate by using biogas. More programs such as these should be broadcast, awareness created, and arrangements made to produce such systems on a wider scale.

I often wonder what it would take for the factory management to stop spewing waste into our water-bodies, polluting our beautiful rivers, and turning our surroundings into toxic dumps. The Daily Star published a series of photos of the appalling condition of some of the rivers and water bodies in the city's outskirts, where unsuspecting children were even seen bathing.

I am reminded of the famous quote of Martin Niemöller's: "In Germany, they came first for the communists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a com-

munist. And then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. And then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. And then... they came for me... and by that time there was no one left to speak up."

We in Dhaka are so busy making a living and making ends meet that we shut our eyes to this blatant and deliberate pollution, thinking that it will never affect us. It is, however, actually affecting us because one day a fish growing in one of the lesser polluted areas may end up on our dinner table!

The situation is truly dangerous and alarm bells should be ringing, because this toxic waste is now getting into the ground water system -- our beloved Dhaka city is truly on fire! The government, environmentalists, microbiologists, biotechnologists and factory management, a multidisciplinary team, should put their heads together and quickly put up economically viable schemes for pollutant degradation, and save themselves and their city from a certain slow and painful death.

Schemes for water conservation are also the need of the day. Small local projects can be thought of, as well as bigger projects in village communities, for rainwater-harvesting. Creation of proper awareness is a key factor here, where each and every citizen can do his part.

The government should also declare water conservation a high priority task and develop strategic plans for implementation. Just the other day I was reading about how unscrupulous digging up of soil for selling was destroying native homesteads in villages.

If this practice could be done strategi-

cally, where water would naturally collect during the monsoon in areas where the soil was removed, a win-win situation would be produced.

Children in every household should also be taught not to waste water by turning on taps at full speed and leaving them on for long periods. Tap leaks should be dealt with urgently, and systems which use water sparingly for flushing waste should not only be developed but also installed in all households.

Another day when my heart was filled with pride was when the Cox's Bazaar cleaning campaign started, and adults and children alike picked up litter from the beaches in order to popularise opinion for voting for Cox's Bazaar as one of the 7 wonders of the world. Let us do this in every city and every community. I believe we can turn Bangladesh into a wonderful country.

I started out with creation of waste by urbanites. Has any of you ever gone to visit our national symbol and pride, the Shaheed Minar, on February 22? I cringed with shame at the litter strewn in every corner in the whole area.

Let us create awareness about how not to litter our streets, and to throw waste in designated areas. Let us not burden our country with waste, but learn in a nation-wide campaign to put it to good use. I urge all our dramatists, literary giants and eminent personalities to create awareness about cleanliness, biodegradation and recycling with utmost urgency. Journalists and eminent personalities should also put pressure on the government to tackle all kinds of pollution problems on a priority basis.

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Not to be wasted!

What lies ahead?

Asia thus needs to rebalance growth toward domestic demand, for example by reforming tax and financial systems, and building stronger social protection systems that will reduce the need for precautionary savings to meet health, education, and retirement expenses.

KALPANA KOCHHAR

WHAT a difference a year makes. Last May, Asia seemed to be in an enviable position, with its economies continuing to boom, even as the United States was becoming mired in recession. At that time, many analysts argued that this situation would continue, since Asia would "decouple" from the West. Things turned out quite differently. Instead of decoupling, some of Asia's key economies, including Japan, are experiencing recessions more severe than those at the epicenter of the crisis. How did this happen? And what does this experience imply for Asia's future?

At the time, the arguments for decoupling seemed plausible to many. After all, Asia was far from the center of the crisis, not just geographically but also in the sense that it had not engaged in the financial practices that led to such problems elsewhere. Its corporate and financial institutions were in robust financial health, and it had

accumulated fiscal surpluses and high buffers of international reserves. So, if any region of the world seemed in a position to decouple from the United States, Asia was that region.

Or was it? In reality, as the IMF pointed out a year ago in its Asia-Pacific Regional Economic Outlook (REO), decoupling from the rest of the world was always an unlikely scenario. That's because Asia has long depended on exports as its engine of growth. As the new May 2009 REO shows, whenever exports have slumped, Asia has typically gone into recession. And Asia has not recovered until exports have started to revive. (See www.imf.org)

What was truly surprising, then, was not that Asia followed the West into a downturn. It was the degree to which Asia had suffered. The region suffered from an "accelerator" effect because its exports are concentrated on technologically sophisticated goods, such as IT products, for which worldwide demand has collapsed. As a result, GDP in emerging Asia, excluding China and

India, fell at an astonishing 15% annual rate (seasonally adjusted) in the fourth quarter of 2008, and a further decline most likely took place in the first quarter as well.

What's next? In a new variant of the decoupling argument, some analysts are claiming that Asia has already turned a corner, and is poised for recovery. They make two main arguments. First, they claim that China will be able to act as a locomotive for the region, as its economy has begun to rebound. But this argument ignores the fact that the fiscal stimulus propelling China's growth has shifted the pattern of production towards infrastructure, which has relatively little import content. So, the benefits to the region are likely to remain small.

The second argument is that Asia's domestic demand is likely to revive because of the large stimulus that governments are providing. Governments are indeed making exceptional efforts, which in some cases may succeed in returning growth to positive territory this year. But by themselves they will not be able to regenerate sustained growth. As long as exports remain depressed, private investment will remain low. Meanwhile, consumption will be hampered by growing unemployment as firms retrench in order to restore profitability.

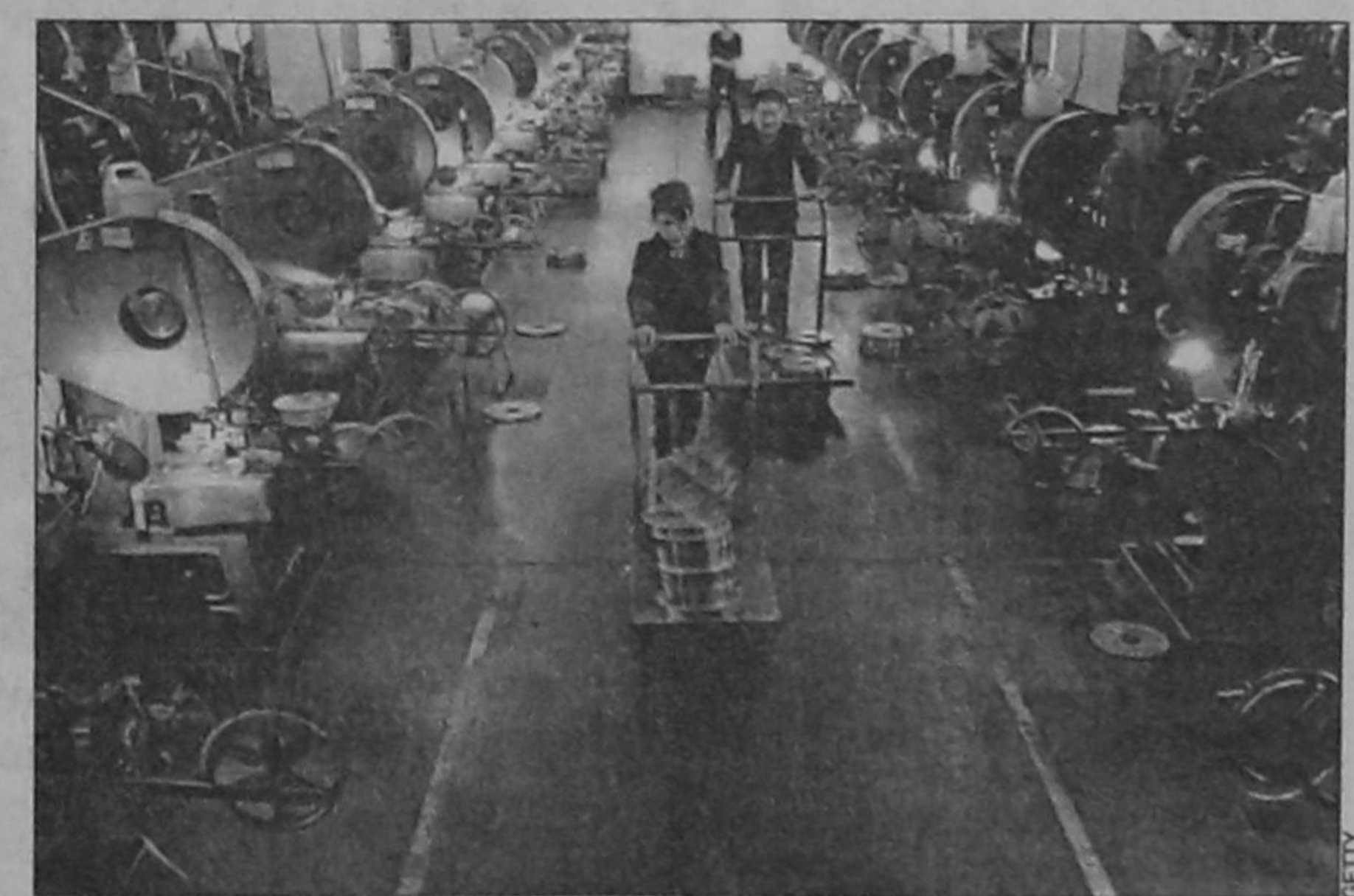
So a sustained recovery will once

again need to await an improvement in the global economy. This will take some time. It will take more than a year for financial conditions in the U.S. and Europe to return to normal, and even then consumption will remain depressed since American households need to save more, rather than spend.

Consequently, the IMF does not expect these economies to recover until the middle of 2010. Accordingly, growth in Asia (from India in the west to Japan in the east, and including Australia and New Zealand) is forecast to decelerate to just 1.3% this year, before rebounding to 4.2% in 2010, still well below the region's potential and the 5.1% rate recorded in 2008.

What can Asian policymakers do to support economies in these difficult circumstances? They can continue to apply forceful counter-cyclical policies. In many cases, there is scope for reducing interest rates further, and for adopting unconventional policies -- such as flooding banking sectors with liquidity or intervening to support credit flows -- as done in advanced countries.

In addition, the fiscal stimulus provided in 2009 will need to be sustained into next year, while being placed in a medium-term framework that ensures a gradual return to fiscal rigour. Finally, authorities will need to maintain foreign exchange liquidity, drawing where necessary on bilateral swap lines or the IMF's new Flexible Credit Line, which provides qualifying countries with large upfront



Is Asia feeling the pinch?

assistance with no policy conditions.

Policy makers also face a more structural issue; the need to reduce Asia's dependence on an export-driven model of growth. The past year has provided ample demonstration of the dangers of relying solely on one growth engine. Moreover, the export model may not pay the same dividends as in the past, for the era of "easy credit" in the West to finance purchases of consumer durables could well be over.

Asia thus needs to rebalance growth toward domestic demand, for example

by reforming tax and financial systems, and building stronger social protection systems that will reduce the need for precautionary savings to meet health, education, and retirement expenses.

In short, Asia has not decoupled -- and should not decouple -- from the rest of the world. But neither can it continue to rely exclusively on exports for growth; it needs to develop its own autonomous sources of demand. A return to sustained rapid growth may depend on it.

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