Where will the canal water go?

Where will the canal water go? The answer to this question is that canal water has to reach the rivers, and for that the city has to open up to the rivers, for both rainwater to drain and for river water to come in and perform its annual cleansing, recharging, and other vital roles.

NAZRUL ISLAM

THE water-logging caused by the rainfall on July 27-28 led many to search for Dhaka city's lost canals. According to historical sources, there were more than forty canals criss-crossing the area that is now Dhaka city, connecting the land with the rivers and even rivers on the east with rivers on the west. In addition, there were hundreds of ponds, lakes, jheels, and other water retention bodies. Thus rainwater could quickly drain off to the rivers and the river water could spread over wider areas so that depth of flooding would remain low. In addition, all inland water bodies would get recharged by fresh water (not polluted yet!) every year, instead of turning into pools of stagnant, filthy water.

That was, however, then. Now we have constructed a city by filling up most of the water bodies, including the canals (khals). There have been some attempts in recent years to recover some of the khals that still exist, though severely encroached upon. However, many more khals have been simply built over. According to press reports, the prime minister herself has instructed relevant authorities to restore the lost khals. There is no doubt that khals are vital for Dhaka to survive in the long run, particularly because of climate change.

However, recognition of the necessity of the canals is only half the solution of the problem, because it does not answer the question: Where will the canal water go? In the natural order of things, khals would meet the rivers. Unfortunately, ever since the Krug Commission in 1955, the country has been following the erroneous Cordon Approach, according to which floodplains are to be sealed off from the neighbouring rivers through cordon-like unbroken, solid, embankments.

The Dhaka-Narayanganj-Demra (DND) project is the classic example of this approach, whereby the project area has been sealed off from the Buriganga and Sitalakyha rivers. Similarly, following the 1988 flood, the Greater Dhaka Western Embankment was constructed, sealing off the city from the Buriganga and Turag rivers on the west. There is the plan to construct an eastern bypass in the form of a cordon to similarly seal off Dhaka from the Balu and Sitalakyha rivers on the east.

Apparently, these cordon-like embankments are necessary to protect Dhaka from flooding caused by river water. Unfortunately, what the cordon promoters forget is that rainfall occurs inside the city too, and this rainwater needs to pass on to the rivers. In other words, water flows both ways. If we put up cordons to obstruct river water reaching the city, we also obstruct rainwater of the city from reaching the river! And while serious flooding caused by river water is an infrequent event, occurring every, say, 10 or 20 years, rainfall within the city is a perennial phenomenon.

A die-hard cordon advocate may say that pumping out rainwater from inside the cordon into the rivers outside is the solution. Unfortunately, even the mighty US found it difficult to pump out the Katerina water from inside the New Orleans levees into Lake Pontchartrain. Bangladesh has a hard time every year pumping water out of the DND project area. Pumping, therefore, is not a viable proposition for Bangladesh, on both technical and economic grounds.

Moreover, cordon-plus-pumping would deprive the city from numerous benefits that preservation of links with the rivers can render, such as recharge of surface water bodies, use of canals as alternative means of transportation, moderation of temperature due to presence of water bodies, improved air quality due to presence of moisture in the air, fishing, not to speak of the recreational and aesthetic value of healthy water bodies inside the city.

Hence, the only solution to the conundrum lies in the abandonment of the Cordon Approach and adoption of the Open Approach to rivers. The process of sealing off the city from her rivers has to be reversed. The canals have to be allowed to meet the rivers. The already constructed western embankment has to be transformed from a cordon into an embankment with sluice gates for canal water to pass and also for river water to enter up to the acceptable limit.

Similarly, the eastern bypass should not be constructed as a cordon. Instead, it should be constructed with adequate passages left for water to pass between the city and the river. Embankments with adequate sluice gates can provide a way of retaining monsoon water in the city's canals for the dry months. The possibility of the eastern bypass being constructed in the form of an elevated road may also be explored. Comprehensive cost-benefit analysis may actually show the latter to be the better option.

There are some people who think that cordons are needed for urbanisation and that the Open Approach will obstruct it. In fact, cordons lead to a wrong kind of urbanisation by encouraging below-flood-level settlement that ultimately makes people more vulnerable to inundation from either rainfall inside or from any accidental breach in the cordons or overflow of river water from outside.

The experience of DND makes these effects clear. The cordons of this project have led to below-flood-level settlement, and during each rainy season the army needs to be called up to protect the cordons from breaching so as to save the houses inside the project from getting submerged! The cordon approach will lead to a replication of the same perilous situation in Dhaka city, only on a grander scale. By contrast, the Open Approach will lead to safer and sustainable urbanisation, because people will be aware of the flood level and thereby be forced to follow the time tested "dig-elevate-dwell" rule of settlement in floodplains of a delta.

Thus, it is good that the July 28 deluge has sensitised policymakers and the people about the role of canals in draining off rainwater. However, it is necessary to ask the next question: Where will the canal water go? The answer to this question is that canal water has to reach the rivers, and for that the city has to open up to the rivers, for both rainwater to drain and for river water to come in and perform its annual cleansing,

Trapped within man-made borders.

recharging, and other vital roles.

Those who have visited Amsterdam have seen how this great city has preserved and fruitfully used its links with the Rhine river, so that canals are an important alternative mode of transportation of this city. Dhaka, being the capital of a deltaic country, can also set an example of harmonious relationship with her rivers. Instead of treating rivers as enemies from which the city has to be fortressed through cordons, the city needs to embrace the rivers, which gave birth to it.

The Cordon Approach has harmed not only Dhaka city but also the whole country. It is now time to rectify this. According to press reports, the government plans to undertake a Tk.30,000 crore project to rejuvenate the rivers, using the money that it hopes to receive as climate change-related assistance from developed countries. It is a good idea. However, this project needs to be formulated on the basis of the Open Approach and not the counter-productive Cordon Approach.

The current government came to power with the promise of "Change." A change from the Cordon Approach to the Open Approach would be a befitting example of implementation of that promise.

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Bangladesh: A home of IT outsourcing

Many of the companies involved in outsourcing are basing their businesses on freelancing. While availing opportunities available on these sites are great, we cannot build a sustainable and significant industry just off of these sites.

SYED RAYHAN

THE IT sector has been identified as a thrust sector for quite some-time now, yet we are still struggling to find our place in the IT outsourcing market. Bangladesh did not make the list in a recent report from A.T. Kearney's Global Services Location Index (GSLI), a ranking of the most attractive off-shoring destinations.

The proposal is based on insights that I gained over last 3 years in building an IT outsourcing business (Code71).

Based on what I can gather, Bangladeshi companies exported IT services worth $27 million last year. I would venture to say that a significant part of this revenue came from freelancing sites like RentACoder and Elance. Many of the companies involved in outsourcing are basing their businesses on freelancing. While availing opportunities available on these sites are great, we cannot build a sustainable and significant industry just off of these sites.

Many people cite infrastructure issues like unreliable power and internet connection, and high cost of suitable commercial office space as reasons behind our lack of success. While I agree with them, there are other challenges that we do not hear about but are actually holding us back from achieving success. The nature of these issues is complex and cultural.

The issues are:

Company size: Average size of an IT company in Bangladesh is about 8-10 people, only a few companies have 50+ software engineers. A small Indian company has a few hundred developers with an average annual revenue of $10 million (source: http://www.nasscom.in/upload/Annual_Report07-08.pdf). 74% of the Indian companies fall in this category.

Lack of onshore presence: Most companies in Bangladesh do not have offices in the buyer's country. IT services is a relationship-based business. Without regular personal interaction, it is very difficult to build a sustainable business. The greatest challenge is the time zone differences and distance. Although it is expensive to setup and run an office in US or Europe, it is imperative to have a bridge team onshore to address this very issue.

Lack of IT savvy investors and leaders: Our business culture is based on trading and manufacturing. We do not have much experience in knowledge-based high-tech industry. Successful business people from other industries invest in the IT industry as a way to diversify their portfolio. However, many of them struggle to manage IT business because they try to run it like a manufacturing business.

We also see many young IT professionals turning entrepreneurs themselves. This is good if they are working on some new product ideas, however, it does not work so well with IT services (that is building software for clients). One needs experience and enough credentials before starting an IT services business.

Transient nature of the industry: Most IT companies run their businesses based on availability of projects. The mantra is hire when there is a project, and fire when there is none. They do not want to invest in people development, and the programers do not want to bet their careers on the companies that do not offer a career job. As a result, we have an industry riding on programers with an average experience of 1-2 years.

Role of Basis, EPB, and BCS: BCS, Basis, and now EPB, seem to have overlapping goals. Responsibilities must be delineated among these three organisations so that we can be consistent.

Let's look at the market opportunity available to us. Worldwide IT services spending was $967 billion and global sourcing was $76 billion with a growth of 30% in 2008 (source: NASSCOM). While India had the lion's share of that ($40 billion), Vietnam (it has seen 35%-45% yearly growth in last few years with export reaching $300 million) provides a good picture of what Bangladesh can achieve.

So, what can we do to address the issues mentioned above and capture the opportunity before it passes us by?

Here are some of the things that we should implement sooner than later.

Practice merger and acquisition: We all need to be open to forming larger companies through merger and acquisition. In order for us to compete with companies from Vietnam (our real competition), we need to have a larger pres-
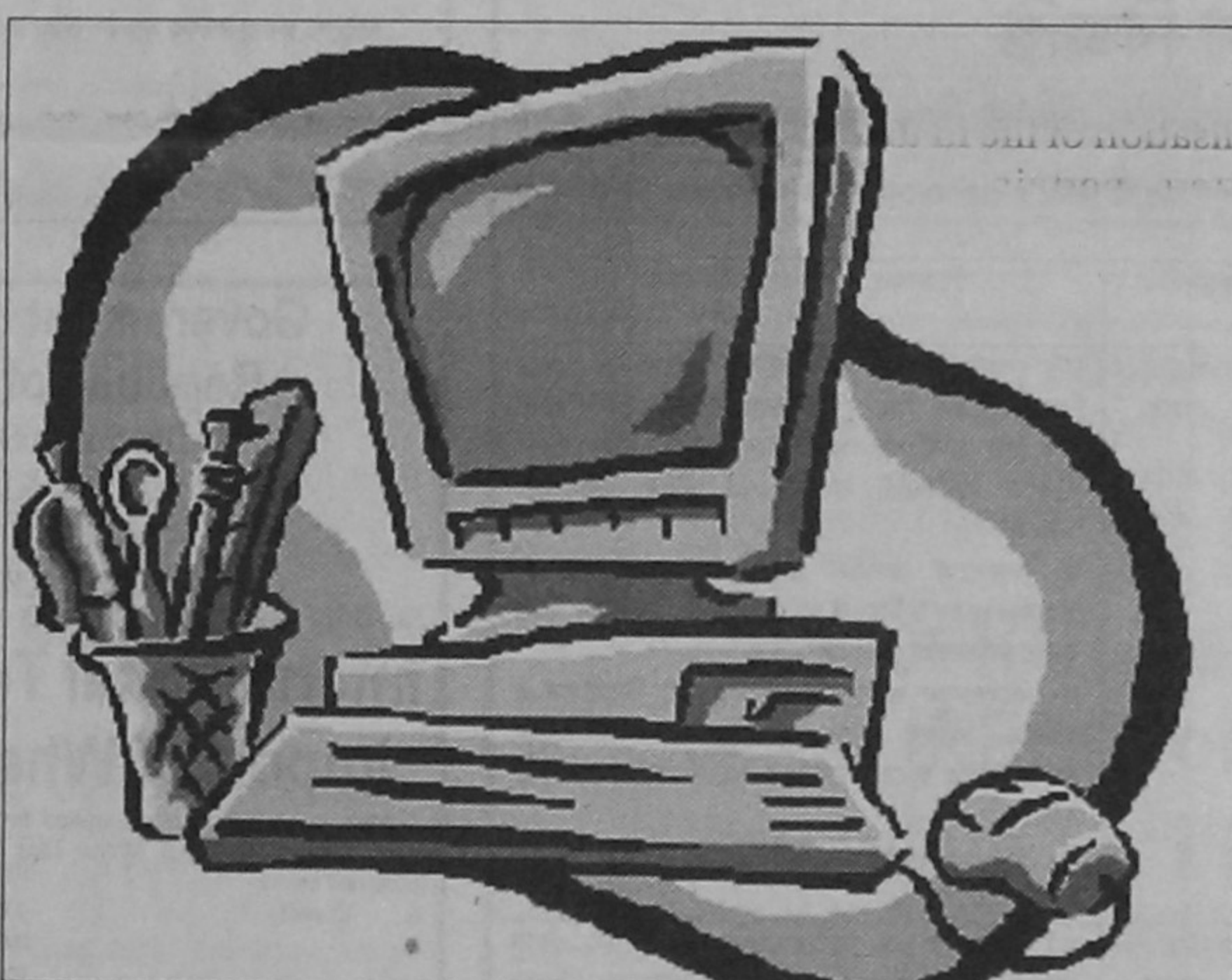
A tool for gaining the recognition of the world.

ence. This may be difficult, not because of the mechanics involved but because of our traditional business culture. Through merger we could also solve the lack of onshore presence, one of the critical issues that prevent Bangladeshi companies form having long-term success.

Establish an IT park: Most IT companies in Bangladesh operate from a limited space because of the high cost of commercial spaces. Although the first IT incubator in BSRS Bhaban has proved to be successful in helping companies get started, it was not built with IT outsourcing companies in mind and hence lacks some of the much needed features. Now is the time to build a more comprehensive IT park with all modern facilities (security, power, internet, SAS 70 data centre, library, training facility, seminar facility, supporting services etc.) to provide excellent environment for programers. This will also help eliminate infrastructure concerns that many clients/buyers have about Bangladesh.

Restructure Basis: NASSCOM is the poster child for what such an organisation can do. We need to have a dedicated team of highly experienced professionals in marketing, business, strategy, and brand development in addition to IT experts. The team needs to be recruited from the industry for a competitive compensation to attract the right talents. It will report to a board of directors formed by the volunteers elected from the member companies. A part of the EEF fund could be utilised to fund this operation. Develop local market for software service: A viable IT industry requires a healthy local demand. India's local market demand was $12 billion in 2008. It is important to make sure that private companies and government agencies award projects to local service providers at a price they would usually award to Indian companies. It would allow Bangladeshi companies involved in IT outsourcing to also offer the same service to the local market.

Niche market focus: It is difficult to have success with just service offerings (everything for everybody) as the global IT outsourcing industry is very matured now. We need to distinguish ourselves by building expertise in niche areas (emerging trends) rather than blending in. We need to have a very clear message to the buyers as to why they should consider Bangladesh over other established IT outsourcing destinations. Low price cannot be the strategy. There is nothing stopping Indian or Vietnamese or Chinese companies from matching our price. In fact, they are already doing so. The niche areas can be technology, industry, and market segments. We also need a brand for Bangladesh as an overall destination for IT outsourcing. I would like to propose that the Bangladesh brand be "A home of agile IT outsourcing."

I believe we can become a known destination for IT outsourcing. We have the intention, and talent, all we need is to have a focus and to take the right initiatives.

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Folks who get honourary degrees

Vittachi

ONLY IN ASIA
by Nury Vittachi

EEK! Exam results are arriving in letter boxes. At schools, universities and polytechnics all over the world, students are receiving certificates, baccalaureates, doctorates, polycarbonates, barbiturates and so on.

Many are celebrating in time-honoured fashion by losing their caps on rooftops, balconies and awnings.

But some get bad news. They're notified that they have failed, despite having spent long days and nights toiling over good food, er, computer, in their halls of learning.

Yet despite the high rate of competition in the education sector, there's surprisingly little envy. Students laugh or cry with each other, except for the occasional jealous murder, which can be attributed to youthful high spirits.

One reader sadly failed to get his degree for the second time, despite having set aside four years of his life and a small fortune.

He asked for advice.

I informed him that actually, there is a cost-free, study-free way to get a top degree from a top university: simply get an Honourary Degree.

Noddy Holder, singer of a British group called Slade, got one from a British university for his "services to art and literature," which consisted of co-writing musical masterworks such as Coz I Luv You, Mama Weer All Crazee Now and You Boyz Make Noize.

Is your spelling worse than his? No problem.

Rapist Mike Tyson got a Doctorate in Humane Letters for his wide range of skills, which include assaulting women in hotel rooms and biting the ears off opponents.

Too nice to molest women or bite bits off men? You can get a degree simply for being a hunk. Arnold Schwarzenegger got one for this reason, and Tom Selleck got one for services to the cause of mustache-wearing.

Pierce Brosnan got one for repeatedly saving the world from evil geniuses, but I suspect they mistook Mr. Brosnan for the role he played (James Bond).

What if you are small, unattractive and completely talent-free, such as the present-looking Robert Mugabe has two honourary degrees, and his only skill is being monstrously evil.

If you have no skills at all, not even negative ones, you can still get an honourary degree the Asian way: simply be born rich.

One Hong Kong guy recently received a doctorate for being the son of one of the world's richest men.

His three main achievements:
He was born fabulously wealthy.
His dad gave him a top job and a massive salary.
Er. That's it.

Honourary degrees were invented by Oxford University in the late 1470s. Administrators wanted rich, powerful friends, so they gave an un-earned degree to the king's brother-in-law. Other universities followed suit.

These days, you don't even have to be human. Long Island University in the US awarded one to Kermit the Frog, a hand puppet made of green felt.

This news made me shake my head at the folly of the world, which can be summed up in the words of Noddy Holder, PhD:

Mama, weer all crazee now.

For more on how to achieve Honorary Degree, visit our columnist at www.vittachi.com