Beyond the traditional view of literacy

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S.M. ZAKIR HOSSAIN SARKER

TODAY, when we as well as the international community are observing International Literacy Day 2009, some 776 million adults lack minimum literacy skills. Every year Unesco observes this day and reminds to review the status of literacy and adult learning. The education ministry, in cooperation with other stakeholders, organises rallies, workshops and meetings. NGOs and civil society organisations also organise events on this occasion.

International Literacy Day is observed every year, but the achievements are questionable when we see the worldwide illiteracy rate. The events are organised by literate people, but the illiterate people are not involved in them -- which certainly disempowers them.

Literacy and Empowerment is the theme for 2009-2010 declared by Unesco. The government, in cooperation with Unesco, has published a poster on this theme and will hold a national level meeting on this issue today. Do we think that this is sufficient for empowering the illiterate people? Do they have the investment and programs to educate the adults? If not, how will Bangladesh achieve the Education for All (EFA) target by 2015?

EFA Global Monitoring Report 2008 noted that illiteracy is receiving minimal political attention and remains a global disgrace, keeping one in five adults (1 of 4 women) on the margins of society. In 2008, the adult literacy rate was 48.8% while it was 64% in 2000. The government as well as the other organisations focus more on the children and youth non-formal education and put less emphasis on the issue of adult education. However, a few organisations provide support for adult literacy and use different approaches/models to implement their adult literacy programs.

Reflect is an approach, which won UN literacy award in 2003, 2005, 2007 and 2008, and is used by over 500 organisations in over 70 countries worldwide. In Bangladesh, it is used under different names by more than 100 organisations -- e.g. ActionAid, Bangladesh, Care, Bangladesh etc.

Reflect is a participatory approach to adult learning that fuses the philosophy of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire with the methodology of Participatory Rural
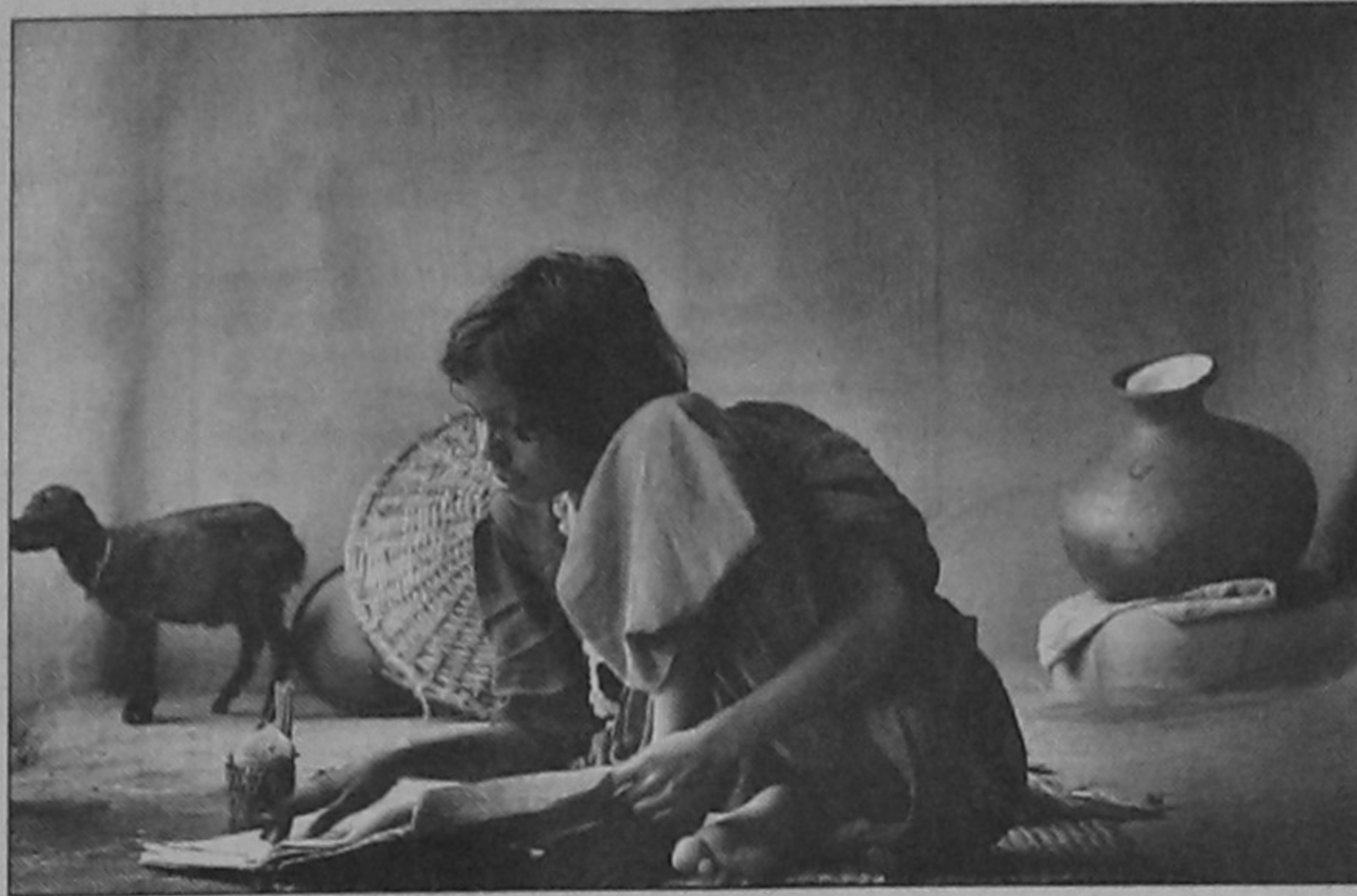
Solving the problem by herself.

Appraisal (PRA). When ActionAid first developed it in the early 1990s in Bangladesh, Uganda and El Salvador, Reflect focused on linking adult literacy to empowerment.

Groups of adult learners convened to learn literacy, and constructed maps, graphics, calendars and matrices to analyse different aspects of their own lives. These would be done on the ground and then transfered to paper, using simple pictures drawn by the non-literate participants (who thereby practiced the manual skill of holding a pen). Words would then be added to the visual images as labels and these would serve as the basis for literacy practice.

The facilitator would write up key conclusions from discussions and these would become texts for further study. Participants would identify action points to resolve issues and literacy would then be put to practical use in taking forward such actions (groups would write letters to government officials or NGOs etc). Each participant would end up writing his/her own book based on the language and issues discussed.

Over a year or so the group would end up producing its own collective local development plan. This was an inversion of traditional power dynamics in development -- giving the poorest and most excluded time to do their own analysis and come up with their own solutions.

Reflect is a way for people to discover that they can affect what happens to themselves and their families by influencing what happens in their groups, their wider communities and further afield. By focusing on what people know as opposed to what they don't know, Reflect works with groups which have often learned to see themselves as uneducated (because they are told they can't read and write) and hopeless, so that they rapidly become expert in describing, discussing and analysing their environment, and shaping it to better meet their needs. This is a very empowering experience, which has the potential to create a widening spiral of change.

A significant aspect of the empowerment process is developing the literacy needed to act confidently within a given environment, and to access basic human rights such as health, clean water, education and food security. This includes not only using existing services but also actively influencing their design, quality and provision to ensure that they meet the needs of those concerned.

Thus many facilitators and participants from Reflect circles go on to become members of school management committees, women's leaders or member of the local governments, taking on leadership roles through democratic processes. Others develop business skills, and increased income brings status, influence and new opportunities for their families.

Reflect circles play an important role in identifying the needs and developing the materials, with Reflect participants simultaneously being empowered through these activities and showing the way for others. (Source: Counting seeds for change, compiled by Kas Sempere for South Africa Reflect Network, ActionAid, DVV international, Open Society Institute, 2009.)

Education is a human right, and it also includes the adult. Denying this is not only the violation of an individual right but also the violation of collective rights since it is a prerequisite for human development. Bangladesh is a medium level (147) developing country in the world as per the Human Development Index (HDI). HDI combines three basic dimensions where one is kknowledge and education, which is measured by the adult literacy rate (with two-thirds weighting).

It is our dream and a right as well to see Bangladesh in the list of developed countries, for which it is a must meet MDGs and increase HDI ranking. So, more investment is needed for adult literacy programmes and an appropriate participatory approach/model is required for proper utilisation of the investment.

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Getting the fundamentals right

> As a finance minister, M. Saifur Rahman had one specialty -- he had always been an advocate of market driven economic management -- and formulated policies accordingly. Hence, we see that many economic reforms were undertaken during his era.

MAMUN RASHID

AS a nation, we are yet to learn how to make constructive criticism. I have always noticed the unnecessary exaggeration whenever we make remarks on something or about someone, be it positive or negative. Moreover, in most cases, we do not recognise the good deeds of a person during his life and fail to show respect. We either see exaggerated admiration or ruthless disparagement. We pay tribute only after someone's death.

I wrote a small piece, "M. Saifur Rahman," in 2006 on our former finance minister, who died recently in a tragic road accident. I wrote about him not because he was the longest serving finance minister in our country; but because I wanted to portray how a finance minister of a developing nation encounters multidimensional challenges and how it is possible to work relentlessly for the betterment of the nation against all odds.

M. Saifur Rahman is possibly the only one in Bangladesh who has left his footprints in each economic policy of this country, which are not only visionary but also provide us direction for development. He was acclaimed for his inventiveness in policy making; nevertheless, he was also criticised. In my childhood, one of my teachers taught me that "the man who does not make any mistake in life has actually not tried to do anything meaningful." With this reminiscence, I just want to state that M. Saifur Rahman never retreated from his objectives for fear of making mistakes.

As a finance minister, M. Saifur Rahman had one specialty -- he had always been an advocate of market driven economic management -- and formulated policies accordingly. Hence, we see that many economic reforms were undertaken during his era. Convertibility of Bangladeshi taka, floating exchange rate regime, food for education program and privatisation of the SoEs are the exemplary reforms in the financial sector.

All these reforms not only uphold his long-term vision and courage as a policy maker, but also establish him as a successful political leader who could bargain and negotiate with various stakeholders and self-interest groups and make them understand the long-term benefits of such policy measures. He also successfully implemented "Value Added Taxes" (VAT) and thus broadened and increased the country's revenue base. Not all of the initiatives were gladly accepted, however, but he executed whatever he believed in.

Saifur Rahman could face the crises and challenges in formulating long-term economic policy for a developing nation and all the stakeholders, including the political parties, key economists of the country, civil society and most importantly the common people. Prior to announcement of the budget, the finance minister receives requests from various business segments to lessen taxes/levies. In response to that, M. Saifur Rahman asked how government revenue receipts would increase if tax rates were reduced in every industrial segment and how the shortfall in annual development programs (ADP) would be covered. He emphasised the need for domestic resource mobilisation and reduction of the dependency on foreign grants and aids, and for privatisation.

Every year, state owned enterprises incur huge losses, which the government has to make up with significant amount of subsidies. These subsidies are entirely funded by the revenue receipts, whereas the revenue receipts are meant to finance the development budget. The prime challenge of a finance minister is to ensure proper allocation of resources, which is scarce in a developing nation like ours. Saifur Rahman could reach all the stakeholders and was able to build a

M. Saifur Rahman

broad consensus around economic priorities. As a result, the closure of Adamjee jute mills was possible without any major debacle. All these achievements had increased Saifur Rahman's credibility to the development partners and increased our bargaining power as a nation.

As a finance minister, M. Saifur Rahman never hesitated to raise unwelcome issues, rather he always spoke his mind. He was vocal about the ground realities of executing reforms as well as concerned about lack of corporate governance, skills and transparency in the private sector. His words against such issues created a lot of debate and many quarters, including the media, criticised him. However, people who were in disagreement with his views had to support him in the end, because all of them knew that such discussions were necessary for long-term development. To find solutions for every critical issue is difficult, but he pursued a way out relentlessly. Many a time, such efforts could not materialise because of political realities, but he kept on looking beyond the box.

The success and failure of M. Saifur Rahman as a finance minister, therefore, represents our collective efforts as a nation. We should appreciate his role as finance minister on the basis of his firm determination to work for the betterment of this nation and continuously push for solutions. We can learn about our flaws from his failures, we can shine in glory from his achievements. The very name, M. Saifur Rahman, signifies persistence and prosperity -- an adamant endeavour to place Bangladesh on the global map. We will remember him, for getting the fundamentals right for Bangladesh.

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Dynamics of digital management

> The unaided brain could not cope with the machines, and inventory, population growth and environmental control became unmanageable. Came the digital machine (computer) and relieved the brain -- and the IT or digital era, or information revolution, started.

M. AZIZUR REHMAN

"Nature knows no pause in progress ad development, and attaches her curse on all inaction." -- Goethe

"Changing, adapting and conforming to situational requirements on this earth has been as old as man himself since nature provides on this earth, a suitable environment for man, but seldom are the detailed natural forms of this environment exactly suitable for his needs." -- T.Y. Lin

BANGLADESH is yet to adopt digital or modern management fully, and most of the ills it faces can be attributed directly or indirectly to this. The aim of this paper is to prescribe suggestions so that Bangladesh can adopt modern management and catch up with globalisation.

The four basic urges -- hunger, sexual-urge, fear and management -- have not changed with time, but the standards and forms are changing continually. They are linked to four basic "objects" of gratification (goods and services or products); management with thinking /planning /producing, hunger with food, sex with sexual gratification and offspring, fear with security/protection.

The "want" for these needs produce tension and their gratification produces the "primary happiness" needed for survival. But because humans want better standards and forms -- "secondary satisfaction" -- the competitive urge comes into play. Thinking is linked with planning and management. So "quality of life" or happiness is directly correlated to management efficiency.

Management has to plan, search, produce, distribute and make things available in time. Shortage of products, or errors in time and space management, creates social chaos, including wars, among societies.

Primary happiness creates relative "stalemate" in life. For "secondary" and "continual" happiness man has to be competitive to produce goods of higher st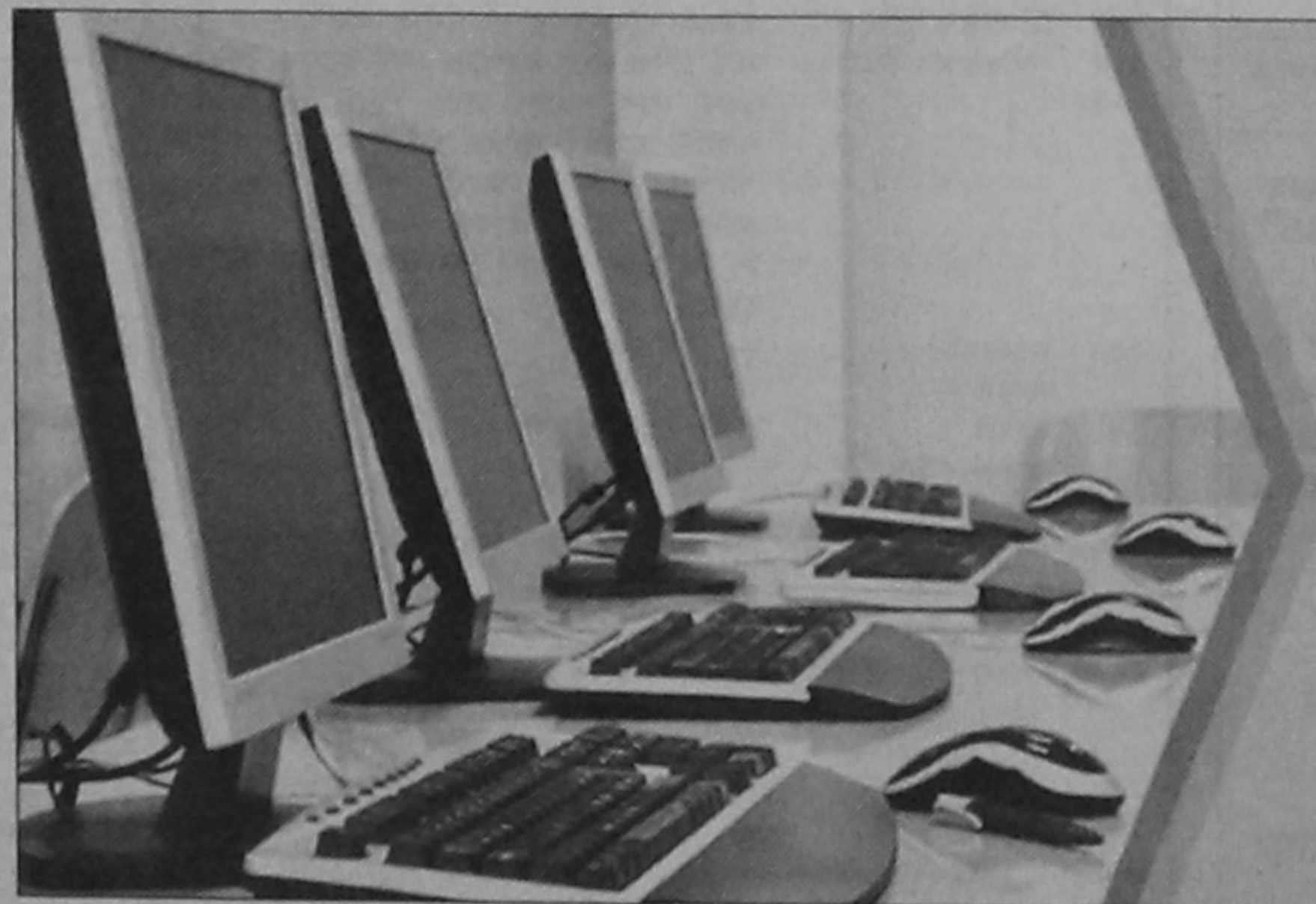andards. Standards and forms of products should conform to the demands of a society to produce secondary and dynamic happiness. Competitive wars among societies go on for attaining higher standards.

Most of us are likely to agree with the philosophy of slow incremental changes -- but not with drastic (like digital revolution) or revolutionary changes, which are at times required to perpetuate the species and states.

According to Alvin Tofflers, there have been three revolutions -- agricultural, industrial and digital. These revolutions transformed the human organisations and institutions created by the earlier ones. For example, nation-states created by the industrial revolution are already under threat by a de jure global state. The most important point is the rate of change of these revolutions -- that of agriculture was slow, industrial was faster and digital is the fastest.

The duty of management is to produce goods and services for happier and longer lives most efficiently.

The agricultural era provided the leisure to bring about the industrial revolution. The unaided brain could not cope with the machines, and inventory, population growth and environmental control became unmanageable. Came the digital machine (computer) and relieved the brain -- and the IT or digital era, or information revolution, started.

The world has been undergoing slow-speed incremental and high-speed revolutionary changes. A revolution brings about both "constructive" and "destructive" changes. A society that can predict and adopt changes can gain from constructive changes. Low project implementation efficiency of our ADP shows our lower management efficiency.

On a strategic level, the impact of IT on management is stupendous. How? There are four attributes of computers that are impacting management with concomitant revolutionary socio-political changes. They are:

• Colossal computing power, which takes management to very high levels. This provides high speed to management activities, which affects national competitive (exporting) powers.

• Accuracy, which provides fail-safe management activities.

• Data /info sharing/ networking, which negates distance and revolutionises social /business /military activities.

• Virtual reality and simulation, which mimics costly "hard reality." Virtual professors can provide e-lecture for e-learning to reduce the cost of real education.

When the rules and principles of industrial management are reinforced by the above four digital attributes, management becomes digital and modern.

Bangladesh has no integrated management infrastructure at government level. Public-private sector cooperation is required. Policy-making should be undertaken by the government, however, the private sector and the public should be consulted. The BCC Act 90 is the only legal framework for handling digitalisation in the country, but it has been buried alive. The BCC Act should either be executed properly or scraped and replaced by an alternative legal framework.

The aim of this paper is to advise the national policy makers to adopt IT-based management immediately. Planners want to adopt IT only as tool, without proper management. The result is dismal. The recent talk of state failure was directly connected to non-integration of management with IT. Mahathir adopted management and IT together. The government's policy-making unit was placed under the PMO and named "Modernisation of Administrative and Management Planning Unit (MAMPU)" in Malaysia -- no mention of IT.

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Magical tool for management.