Degree of growth

STAR FILE PHOTO

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SYED ALMAS KABIR

OUR ICT industry is currently at a stage where the right vision and the correct roadmap can take it miles ahead. We need to take a few proper steps, make some detours, and march ahead with determination. The government decision to give a thrust to the ICT sector is a golden opportunity to expand our industry.

At the same time, outsourcing's favourite playgrounds -- India, China, Philippines, etc. -- have started losing their edge with regards to cost. This double-scoop of opportunity, both nationally and internationally, has the potential to catapult our ICT industry to a high echelon. To unleash this potential, we need to prepare ourselves with a crash course.

One of the biggest hurdles to our growth is the lack of expert human resources. The number of students who graduate every year with degrees in Computer Science/Engineering and related fields is much less than our emergent industry requires.

Many in this group pursue a different field of study in the tertiary level without going into their work-field. Many, mostly those with good results, go abroad for further studies and never come back; and others join the booming telecom industry where little development and more maintenance is required. The remainder gets absorbed by local ICT companies, but for less pay.

Interestingly but unfortunately, the pay scale of a computer science graduate and a business graduate differ, with the latter being about 50 percent to 70 percent higher. Also, many computer science graduates remain unemployed, mostly because of a lack of required workplace skills.

ICT companies, on the other hand, are sometimes frustrated when they cannot get the right people with the right skills. As a result, their growth remains restricted, so they cannot become financially successful. If an industry does not grow, it cannot accommodate more people.

This vicious cycle has been toughened by another trend. This discouraging scenario has affected the minds of young students, who are losing interest in studying Computer Science/Engineering. Enrollment in these departments has nose-dived across the country's public ands private universities in recent years.

Business Administration, Media & Arts, Economics, Sociology, Environmental Science, Population Studies, and Telecommunication departments are full to the brim. This low enrollment in Computer Science will further shackle this industry's growth.

To break the cycle, our education system needs to be redressed. The haven of ICT outsourcing, India, faced a similar quandary around two decades back. But they quickly took a few corrective measures; an important one was introduction of ICT training institutes, viz., NIIT, Aptech, etc.

These institutes offered training on the current technological tools needed to support India's booming ICT industry. Diplomas from these institutes were much sought after by employers and, therefore, by the young generation. The industry leveraged on the ready availability of skilled ICT personnel and, as a result, prospered.

Later, in the last decade, to pacify the subcontinental intellectual snobbery for degrees against diplomas, a few leading universities introduced a new degree: Master of Computer Applications (MCA). The industry embraced it with open arms, and students were encouraged to study computers and earn a degree (not a diploma) that was socially acceptable too.

The MCA program's increasing success made mainstream universities introduce the Bachelor of Computer Applications (BCA). Both MCA and BCA offer hands-on courses that are directly related to the work-field. They spend more hours teaching the application rather than the science behind it, which is not always required in the workplace if you are not involved in research.

Where Computer Science degree programs teach Relational Database Management System and the science behind it, MCA & BCA touch upon the theory and then train the students in Oracle in the labs. Similarly, instead of teaching theories on computer networks and protocols, these programs give a student hands-on exposure in configuring a Cisco router's operating system.

While a Computer Science student will know how and why an Operating System (OS) works and also may be able to design one, an MCA/BCA will know how to run and administer various popular OS's, such as Windows, Linux, Ubuntu, BSD, etc. The programs also include courses on Business Process Outsourcing (BPO), project-management and even on how to behave in an ICT work-environment.

The graduates of these programs come to the job market ready to be productive from day one, whereas our Computer Science graduates take at least 3-6 months time to train before they start producing results.

The arguments above don't deny the requirement of Computer Science graduates. They are needed wherever there is any R&D-related job. And, R&D is essential for any industry to break new ground and take leadership. But everyone is not required to study the science.

The nature of work done in our industry now (and in the immediate future) is not related to R&D, therefore we need more skilled personnel than knowledgeable people at this moment. This way, the industry will thrive on greater revenue, give an ICT-savvy image to the country, and accrue goodwill.

Industry members will eventually evolve from being data processors and implementers into designers and developers. Rome was not built in a day, and we, too, shall need some time to emerge as the R&D hub of the ICT world.

ICT-related associations, such as BASIS, BCS, ISPAB, etc., should sit with universities and help design programs like MCA and BCA. The academia should seriously consider this, as it will be beneficial to the academic institutions as well, and attract more students than they have now. The industry will get trained graduates ready-made who will become productive right away.

There are a few more steps required to complete the roadmap for a flourishing ICT industry in Bangladesh. Fine-tuning the education sector is one big step towards that golden future.

Syed Almas Kabir is an ICT professional and academician.

The veil: A threat or a right?

AP

Human rights cannot be trumped easily by security concerns. At stake here are the fundamental rights to freedom of expression and religion. Under international law, these rights can only be restricted if public security, order or morals, or the rights of others are seriously threatened.

IRENE KHAN

A new law was adopted in Belgium last month, which effectively criminalises the wearing of the full veil -- niqab or burka -- in public places.

The Belgian law is not a one-off phenomenon but part of a growing trend throughout Western Europe to clamp down on veils and headscarves. Nudity on the beach is acceptable; covering your face on the bus is not.

In 2004 the French government banned the wearing of headscarves in schools. A French parliamentary commission is now proposing a law to prohibit the veil in all public facilities including hospitals, post offices, buses and welfare offices.

In the Netherlands, several draft laws banning the veil are before the parliament, including a measure that would stop teachers and civil servants from wearing it.

In Denmark, the government is discussing limiting the wearing of the veil in public places, including schools and courts.

In Britain, a government directive allows the school authorities to prohibit the niqab in classrooms.

Opinion polls show that the majority of the public is in support of these measures. But this obsession with the veil is quite out of proportion with the size of the problem. Only 1,900 women out of a total population of 5 million Muslims in France wear the full veil. In Belgium, the number is around a few dozen.

Many Muslims find it hard to understand why a Europe that tolerates crucifixes, skull caps and turbans is drawing the line on the veil. To them, it is yet another sign of Islamophobia, or intolerance of Islam, in the wake of the War on Terror.

To others it is a clash of civilisations -- the values of a secular, modern Europe colliding with the religious dogmas of medieval Islam. They fear for Europe's cultural integrity in the face of rising Muslim immigration. For some, the veil is a security threat.

What kind of a security risk does the veil create? Neither suicide bombers nor burglars have taken to wearing the burka, nor are people on the streets of European cities being mugged by niqab-wearers. True, terrorists or criminals might try to escape identification by putting on a burka or niqab, but by that same logic governments should ban motorcycle helmets, balaclava caps, hooded jackets and outsized sunglasses.

Human rights cannot be trumped easily by security concerns. At stake here are the fundamental rights to freedom of expression and religion. Under international law, these rights can only be restricted if public security, order or morals, or the rights of others are seriously threatened. Moreover, the restrictive measure must be proportional to the risk and narrowly focused so that it cannot be abused. A blanket ban on veils, as in Belgium, fails the test on all counts.

It is wrong for Belgium or Turkey to force a woman not to wear the veil. But that does not mean it is right for Saudi Arabia or Iran to force a woman to cover her head. The right to express one's identity or belief means the right of a woman to take off the veil or to put it on. The state should not dictate what a woman must wear nor regulate a woman's peaceful expression of her religious beliefs. The choice is that of the woman.

Feminists say the veil degrades the dignity of women. They see it as a symbol of women's oppression, and want it banned as a matter of public policy. In other words, they say it is not matter of a woman's choice. This smacks of paternalism, and ignores the many educated, articulate, independent-minded women who want to wear the veil or head scarf as an explicit expression of their faith and identity. I may not agree with their values but I have no right to impose my interpretation of dignity on them -- and neither does any government.

The real question is whether women are able to make their choice freely. In Europe -- as in Muslim countries -- many women are coerced by family and custom to don the veil. Sometimes they wear the veil out of fear of harassment and violence by strangers or others in their community if they do not cover their bodies fully.

Governments must devote more attention and resources to ending all forms of gender violence -- from harassment in the work place and domestic violence to rape and honour killings. Eradicating gender violence and empowering women and girls through education and employment will give them voice and choice -- and will be a better weapon against conservative cultural and religious forces than laws banning veils.

As for those who argue that the veil is a barrier to the integration of Muslim immigrants in Europe, they are fooling themselves. The real obstacle to integration is not a piece of cloth around a woman's face, but poverty, social exclusion, youth unemployment, discrimination and racism. Laws against the veil only alienate and anger Muslims, and fan the flames of xenophobia and extremism.

Cultural norms do not shift overnight through law but evolve through education and interaction over time. European governments must invest more in social development as well as education, awareness-building and dialogue across communities, Muslim and non-Muslim. In particular, they must create space for the women themselves to participate.

And what, if after all that, women still choose to wear the veil? Like secularism, tolerance is also a European value -- Europe should not forsake it.

Abandoning the attack on the veil and focusing instead on creating a safe, empowering environment for women will be a more effective policy response by European governments. It will also send a powerful message to Muslim countries -- where equality still evades women and where many of them are compelled by custom, culture or coercion to wear the veil -- that the state's role is not to police a woman's morals or clothes, but to protect her from violence and discrimination.

Irene Khan is a former Secretary General of Amnesty International.

Microcredit? To him, it's only a start

Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus, the renowned pioneer of microfinance, has for the past several years been involved in promoting the importance of social entrepreneurship. In his latest book *Building Social Business*, he discusses the collective value of social businesses which benefit the impoverished. *The New York Times* recently published a review of his book and *The Daily Star* here reprints this review in recognition of Dr. Yunus's powerful ideas.

DEVIN LEONARD

IN 2006, the Nobel committee made the surprising decision to award its peace prize not to a philanthropist or a human rights activist, but to Muhammad Yunus, the founder of the Grameen Bank of Bangladesh. What did this financier from a small, impoverished country do to deserve the world's most prestigious award? He invented microcredit, the practice of lending tiny amounts of money to the poor.

It was a revolutionary idea. Until then, bankers figured that such borrowers were worthy of neither credit nor trust. Along came Dr. Yunus, who demonstrated that lending to the needy could be a profitable business and transform their lives. Indeed, many of Grameen's clients used these small sums to start small businesses and to escape the clutches of poverty.

But you probably know this already. Over the years, Dr. Yunus has been embraced by rock stars like Bono and Peter Gabriel, and last year was recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Obama.

He has also been honoured by major corporatiothes eager to have their brands associated with the anti-poverty work of Grameen, which shared the Nobel with its charismatic founder.

What is Dr. Yunus doing with all the good will he has accrued? He has another initiative, one that is even more ambitious than microcredit. In "Building Social Business: The New Kind of Capitalism that Serves Humanity's Most Pressing Needs" (Public Affairs, $25.95), he calls for creation of an alternative economy of businesses devoted to helping the underprivileged.

The way he envisions it, these companies would be run as efficiently as the for-profit variety. Unlike charities, they would make enough money to be self-sustaining. However, they would invest leftover money in expanding their humanitarian efforts rather than paying dividends to shareholders.

People "will be delighted to create businesses for selfless purposes," Dr. Yunus predicts. "The only thing we'll have to do is to free them from the mind-set that puts profit-making at the heart of every business, an idea that we imposed on them through our flawed economic theory."

He even foresees the day when social businesses will be public companies whose shares are traded on their own stock market. This, he believes, will help pave the way for the elimination of poverty in our lifetimes.

In many ways, "Building Social Business" is best appreciated as a sequel to Dr. Yunus's 2007 book, "Creating a World Without Poverty: Social Business and the Future of Capitalism," in which he first presented his theory of a new economy. The difference is that the author now declares that social business is no longer a dream. Three years later, Grameen has created social business ventures with corporations including Intel, Adidas, BASF and Danone, maker of Dannon yogurt.

"In just a few short years, social business has developed from a mere idea to a living, rapidly growing, reality," Dr. Yunus says. "It is already bringing improvements into the lives of many people and is now on the verge of exploding into one of the world's most important social and economic trends."

Well, maybe. The trouble is that many of Grameen's partnerships are still in their infancy. And the two more mature projects that he showcases have yet to break even, including Grameen Danone, an effort to provide poor Bangladeshi with low-cost, nutritional yogurt. I mention it because he included it in his last book as one to watch.

To be fair, Dr. Yunus expects the yogurt business to break even this year. But he's not making any promises. No wonder the chapter on Grameen Danone is entitled "Growing Pains."

None of this has dampened this global celebrity's enthusiasm for his cause. He urges readers to join his crusade. "You don't need to know 'how to do business,'" he writes a bit too facilely. "Much more important is your desire to solve a social problem. To be sure, practical knowledge about doing business will be useful. If you do not have experience, you can learn as you go along -- hopefully with a mentor, an investor, or a partner to challenge and support you."

Yes, but won't this be expensive? "Obtaining financing is probably one of the biggest hurdles you will have to face on the road to launching and running a successful social business," Dr. Yunus says. "But with some creativity, resourcefulness, and a lot of patience, you should be able to achieve your goals."

That's easy for a noble laureate to say. He has so many big corporations calling him about creating social businesses that he can name the terms. It's hard to imagine any neophyte social entrepreneur being so lucky.

It's hard to fault Dr. Yunus' intentions and his optimism. Those things have already taken him awfully far. But it's a bit premature for him to assert that his social business movement is on the verge of reshaping the world economy.

He has a lot more work to do first. Then again, he probably encountered a bit of skepticism when he first floated the idea for microcredit, too.

Devin Leonard is a business writer for The New York Times.

AUTHOR OF THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER *BANKER TO THE POOR*

MUHAMMAD YUNUS

BUILDING SOCIAL BUSINESS

The New Kind of Capitalism that Serves Humanity's Most Pressing Needs