AWAKEN THE SLEEPING GIANT

Shameem Ahsan is the President of Bangladesh Association of Software and Information Services (BASIS), the national trade body for Software and IT Enabled Service industry of Bangladesh. A member of the Prime Minister's Digital Bangladesh Task Force, he shares his views about how to develop the ICT sector.

There are four things we want to achieve in the next five years: ICT export to reach USD 1 billion, provide training to 1 million people, bring internet services to 10 million people, and make sure at least 1 percent of the GDP comes from the software and business process outsourcing (BPO) industry. It is a 400 million dollar industry. There are at least forty thousand people who make more than a thousand dollars per month from outsourcing jobs. And there are those who even make 4 to 5 thousand dollars. The number of students in schools, colleges and universities is about 3 million now. This number will grow to be around 6-7 million in the next 5 years. If we can train at least half of these students on skills like data entry, web site development, programming and mobile apps development, they will be able to find outsourcing jobs and earn money. If we can do this and present a positive image of Bangladesh to the world, we can become a high income country in the next 15years. This is the only way for our country to move forward fast. ICT can flourish even in the midst of poor infrastructure and political unrest. All one needs is a computer and an internet connection. It is also the most environment-friendly sector. Our education system needs an overhaul. Rote learning is encouraged which impedes analytical thinking. Curriculum needs to be upgraded. Samsung wanted to hire 2000 skilled workers locally. But after hiring 500 workers they were unable to find workers who meet the requirements. We need to develop a country brand name. You cannot build a 1 billion dollar industry with a budget of USD 150,000 which is roughly the annual budget of our Export Promotion Bureau. Financial institutions must learn to appreciate intellectual property.



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In the US there are programmes through which Mexicans go to the US on a temporary work visa, work in the agriculture sector and at the end of the contract, return to their native Mexico. Some Bangladeshi farmers have achieved remarkable success in agricultural farming in Qatar, Oman and Saudi Arabia. Can our government negotiate similar contracts with foreign governments?

"If the government is interested to pursue non-traditional markets, agriculture is one area where it needs to do research in the context of Middle East as well as South East Asian countries," suggests Professor Siddiqui. "The Bangladesh government hardly invests in their media in highlighting positive contribution of Bangladeshi migrants in this respect."

One thing often gets ignored is that even "illegal" immigrants have rights. Irene Khan, an international human rights advocate writes in the article titled *Invisible people, irregular migrants* (June 7, 2010, The Daily Star), ""Fundamental international labour and human rights norms apply to all migrants, whether or not they have legal status. The UN Convention on Migrant Workers explicitly addresses undocumented as well as documented workers, but is the least ratified of the major human rights treaties."

[Dr Tasneem Siddiqui is one of the key members of committees which drafted the National Overseas Employment Policy of Bangladesh and the Emigration and Overseas Employment Law.]