

A change-maker in the knowledge industry

The knowledge industry is still in its infancy in Bangladesh. Firms like the McKinsey & Company or Brookings Institute are now important to businesses worldwide, and think tanks and consulting firms play a vital role in the global economy and governance.

In Bangladesh, we have only a handful of such firms. But, in the last few years, the seeds for change have been taking root. The importance of think tanks and consulting agencies are being understood more clearly. A little-known think tank from Bangladesh, The Institute for Policy, Advocacy, and Governance (IPAG), is now making policy recommendations on an international level, and is competing with the best in the industry worldwide. IPAG is a not-for-profit, independent international think tank and has worked on a multifaceted range of fields that include economic development, regional cooperation, international relations, interfaith harmony, etc.

It also promotes dialogue among various actors and stakeholders that facilitates synergy of cooperation for development.

Prof. Syed Munir Khasru, its founder and a teacher at the Institute of Business Administration (IBA), University of Dhaka, who also is an MBA from the Wharton School of Business, University of Pennsylvania, in an interview with The Daily Star shared some insights about IPAG, its experience, and its role as a change-maker in the knowledge industry in Bangladesh.

The Daily Star: Why did you think of creating a think tank in Bangladesh?

Syed Munir Khasru (SMK): When I came back from the US, I saw that the best and the brightest from IBA and the other leading schools were going into traditional industries like FMCGs, telcos, banks and MNCs because they pay well and for the corporate culture. Education at well respected public institutes of learning like IBA is highly subsidised by the government, but unfortunately the taxpayers of the country are not benefitted much from these students. About seven or eight years back I was not sure whether these graduates would ever come to work for entities like IPAG or e.Gen. When I started e.Gen Consultants, at the beginning only a few students from IBA started joining.

Due to rampant corruption and poor governance, it was difficult to participate in the consulting industry in Bangladesh where brown envelopes speak louder than either talent or abilities. We needed to push the boundaries. No one thought that a group of people in their twenties would be able to achieve much in an industry dominated by seasoned and senior experts with years of experience and expertise. But then we started competing globally against some of the top notch consulting firms and think tanks of the world and started winning projects from the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the World Bank and started spanning our presence across Asia, Europe, and Africa.

We were doing well in the international consulting industry. While we were outperforming the big names from US, Europe, Australia, and India, we could not work in Bangladesh due to governance and transparency issues. So we started IPAG, a think tank whose one of prime areas of work would be promoting good governance. We started getting bright young people from other leading institutes like BRAC, IUB and NSU. For the business school graduates as well as the bright minds from other



PROF. SYED MUNIR KHASRU

disciplines, it seemed like making lot of money (like corporate jobs or business) and having an impact (government jobs, knowledge industry) are two mutually exclusive propositions. IPAG and e.Gen have shown that while making a decent and competitive income you also can have opportunities to positively influence both people's lives and things happening in the world.

We have shown that the talented youth of this country can produce world-class intellectual products and services and given the right platform and positive empowerment, the youngsters of Bangladesh can match anybody anywhere in the world. What also makes us different is that IPAG and e.Gen are cent percent professional entities where anybody can rise to any level of the organisation on his/her talent and

competency as opposed to typical family owned entities where no matter how capable a young professional is, at the end of the day it is family lineage that matters most and the seats at the top are reserved for the family only. I would be quite pleased when the day comes when our youngsters can run these organisations completely on their own. Sadly, this professional culture is missing in our private sector and other bodies which demotivates the brightest and ambitious who wants and can make it to the top. It already is happening here and I am quite happy about it.

TDS: So what role does a think tank like IPAG play?

SMK: Think tanks in general do research and analysis on particular sectors on issues that are important and relevant for the country or

internationally. Then they make a set of recommendations available to those who make the decisions.

Take one example: when the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) was signed, we were asked to analyse the effect it would have on Bangladesh. We made a presentation to the government on what the impact of TPP might be on the RMG sector and made available set of policy recommendations for the government to consider.

TDS: What are some projects that IPAG has worked on, or are currently involved in?

SMK: The 2016 G20 Summit will be held in Hangzhou China in the first week of September. Again, Bangladesh is not a member of the G20, but because of our previous work, IPAG was invited to the think tank level T20 Summit. We proposed the creation of a Center for Ideas, Innovation, Initiative (CI3) to foster innovation in the G20+ countries. Our idea was much appreciated and is likely to go up to the Chinese leadership for discussion by the G20 leaders.

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For the South South Cooperation we proposed a COLD (Connect, Organize, Learn and Develop) model during the New Delhi meeting last March to strengthen the SSC, which received wide appreciation and special mention was made in the valedictory session.

TDS: What sets apart IPAG from other think tanks?

SMK: The culture of IPAG is driven by bright young people. Within a short span of five years, we have been making our footprints as an international think tank whose presence has been expanding across the Asia Pacific. Both in terms of our operations and recruitment, we have not hesitated to go beyond Bangladesh and are on the constant lookout for the best, brightest, and youngest, wherever they are.

For example, what started as the Arab Spring in 2010 has ultimately ended up in the Migration Crisis that has captured the attention of the world. IPAG in collaboration with some of the leading think tanks from Germany, US, Turkey and France are in talks to do a multi-stakeholder conference which will be the first of its kind.

We also have a respectable presence in some of the leading media outlets of Asia which regularly carries our commentaries and analyses with due importance. When 25 Bangladeshis were deported from Singapore in January this year, the Straits Times sought our opinion and it was carried the very next day, which did some damage control by helping people understand that the true face of Bangladesh is moderate and progressive and not based on either extremism or radicalisation.

Finally, our goal has always been to excel based on international standards and we do not want to be any second rate player. Our ambition is to become a world class think tank and we still have a long way to go.

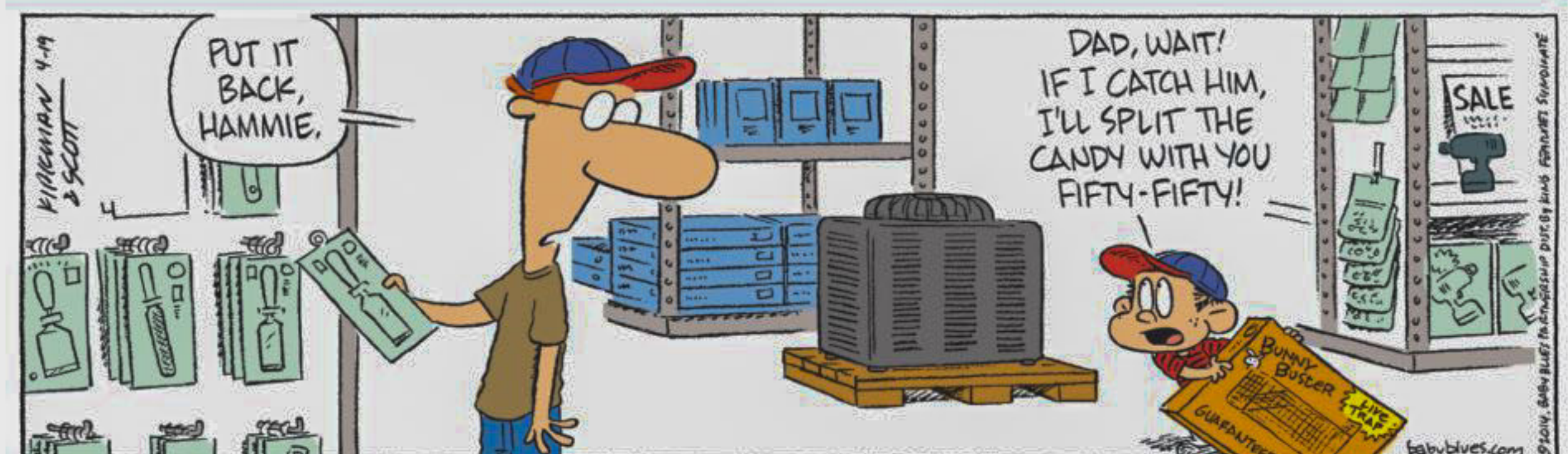
BEETLE BAILEY

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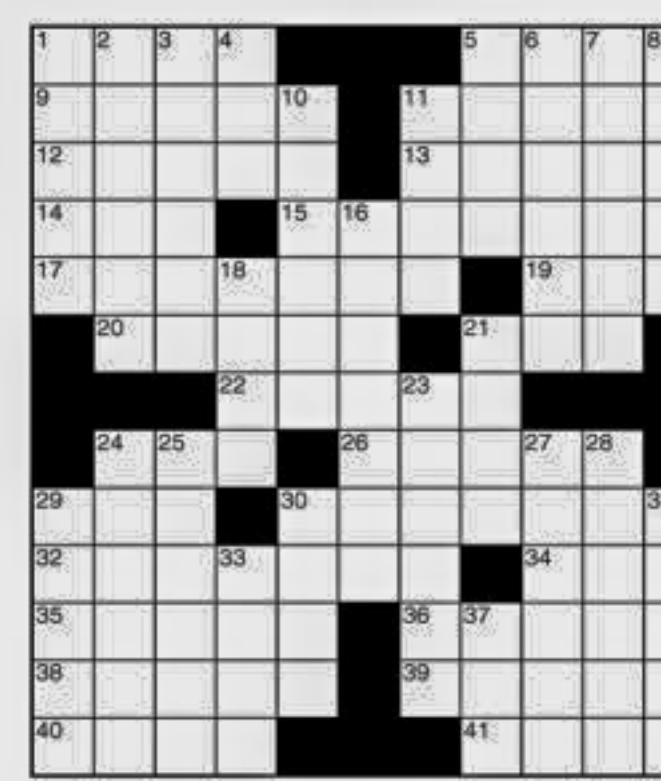


QUOTABLE Quote



Jean-Paul Sartre

Man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does.



CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Reached base, in a way
- 5 Church group
- 9 Touch base
- 11 Ping producer
- 12 Dwelling
- 13 Golf feat
- 14 Nonsense
- 15 African capital
- 17 African capital
- 19 Spare tire
- 20 Sword material
- 21 Fall mo.
- 22 So far
- 24 Spoil
- 26 Precise
- 29 Naughty act
- 30 African capital
- 32 African capital
- 34 Heir, at times
- 35 Geography class aid
- 36 Binding need
- 38 Broadcast
- 39 More reasonable
- 40 Pants part

DOWN

- 1 Kick off
- 2 Dozen for Hercules
- 3 Catching call
- 4 Failure
- 5 Shower need
- 6 Hire
- 7 Evoke
- 8 Pay for everyone
- 10 Some teas
- 11 Convoy truck
- 16 Not seasonal
- 18 Still life fruit
- 21 Sirius, e.g.
- 23 Is real
- 24 Bush family dog
- 25 Sweater yarn
- 27 Secant's reciprocal
- 28 Some steaks
- 29 Long stories
- 30 Demand
- 31 Like neon
- 33 "Yeah, right!"
- 37 Simple card game

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