INTERNATIONAL DAY OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITY

A CITY FOR ALL

AMITAVA KAR

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

IMAGINE you are a on a wheelchair. Or you cannot see. What can you do with your life if you live in Dhaka or any Bangladeshi city for that matter? The short answer is: nothing. You seldom go outdoors—when you do, you are at the mercy of others. None of the public spaces in our cities has been designed with your needs in mind. Be it bus stops, railway stations, shopping complexes, public buildings or toilets, you feel short-changed by the poorly planned infrastructure and public spaces. Mosques, temples, churches and pagodas that are, by principle, supposed to welcome all are not accessible to you. Barriers to free movement include uneven access to buildings, poor signage, narrow doorways, inadequate bathroom facilities, narrow and poorly maintained pavements and lack of traffic control, among others. Such built environments are full of uncertainties, anxieties and dangers for you. Dr Roxana Hafiz, professor, Department of Urban and Regional Planning at BUET, says, "Due to lack of facilities and accessibilities, a lot of disabled people cannot get out and have to remain at home; they are condemned for life."

Historically, people with disabilities in this country have been provided for through solutions that segregate them, such as residential institutions and special schools. Developed countries have taken a more interactive approach recognising that people are often disabled by environmental factors as well as their bodies. Cittaranjan Das, Additional Chief Engineer of Public Works Department says, "We have to widen doors in buildings and install ramps and disability-friendly toilets. In some disabled rehabilitation centres, we are already doing it."

Most modern cities are creating Barrier Free environments or Universal Design in order to meet the needs of people of all ages, sizes and abilities. Universal Design is the design of products and environments to be usable by all people to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialised design. Dr Hafiz says, "As life expectancy rises and modern medical science increases survival rate of people with disabilities (arising out of illness, significant injuries, birth defects, ages and/or status in life) – universal design offers improved living conditions and better quality of life to these people as well as others."

If you are at a Mass Rapid Transit station in Singapore, chances are you will see someone on an electric wheelchair coming down a ramp and before you know it, he has zoomed past you into the nearby supermarket. You will be impressed by the way people with restricted physical conditions can move about with incredible speed in their powered wheelchairs. The ticketing machines have buttons low enough for wheelchair passengers to reach. Entrance lanes for them are wider and clearly marked with a wheelchair logo. The touch-screen system is a great help as users do not have to fumble about to get a slim card into a slot. Built into the highly polished floor inside the building, there are stainless steel guiding blocks that lead all the way to an elevator, clearly marked for the disabled.

Sara Wallbeck, an architect from Wisconsin, USA worked for a multinational company in Singapore for six years. Her husband Jodie has a broken hip and has to use a wheelchair to get around. Here are Sara's observations about some disabled-friendly features of Singapore:

There are low glass protective barriers along the entire length of the arrival platform of trains to prevent wheelchairs from accidentally falling onto tracks. The barriers are synchronised with the trains' doors and open together.

The gap between the train and the platform is hardly noticeable, providing smooth access for wheelchairs to get into the train. Inside, there are clear signs of all the train stops in green lighted circles, while the current stop is in red. Deaf passengers have LED displays with rolling messages that constantly keep them informed of audio announcements. Which door will open when the train arrives at each destination is clearly indicated with blinking lights. Blind passengers are guided by clear announcements.

Seat rows are designed to accommodate wheelchairs.

Toilets many shopping complexes have sliding doors with soft-touch electronic buttons at low height.

At the Singapore Zoo and Kota Damansara forest reserve, a person who cannot walk can hire a battery-driven vehicle.

Sara says living in Singapore made her realise how important it is for everyone to start including disabled-friendly features in the planning stage rather than later when it can be costly.

"If we ignore the issue of accessibility today, we will reap the fruits of our apathy when we get locked out of society in our old age," Sara concludes.

The front door at Access Living's old headquarters on Roosevelt Road closed way too fast for Nita Patel. She would hit the button to automatically open the door, but then it would close on her and her wheelchair halfway through.

No longer.

The new building in River North has automatic sliding doors that whoosh open -- and stay open – as Patel, a housing counselor, approaches in her chair.

At first glance, the 50,000-square-foot Access Living headquarters at 115 W. Chicago Avenue looks like a modern, light-filled office building. But a closer look reveals many subtle, important differences. At the entrance, there's a wheelchair ramp cut into the curb in front of the building. A thick, dark, grooved line leads from a drop-off spot on the sidewalk through automatic double doors to the reception desk to help people with visual impairments and developmental disabilities find their way easily.

Throughout the building are scores of other features chosen for their universal user-friendliness. The refrigerator in the kitchen is a side-by-side design, which is easier for people in wheelchairs to use. The hallways are wide enough to accommodate two people in wheelchairs and a person walking by. The sinks in the restrooms are shallow, leaving more legroom underneath for people in wheelchairs. The restrooms have no entry doors (the stalls do, of course), making entering and exiting easier.

Affordable universal design concepts are needed for a low-income country like Bangladesh. Universities should take initiatives to conduct research to develop and test for effective solutions that are inexpensive and appropriate in the local context. "If a little care is taken while designing a building, the accessibility can be increased. It is not expensive," says Dr Hafiz. "If there is a ramp in every building, accessibility will increase. Our doors are usually 40 inches wide. If we make it just 2 inches wider, a wheel chair can enter. Instead of tiles or granite floors, tactile floors can be used as they are less slippery. The building code and the Disability Act have provision for these facilities. But it is not implemented."

While compliance with the laws is essential, the society ought to treat people with disability with more respect. "In many countries, when a blind person boards a bus, the driver gets out to assist the person. We must remember that a lot of us will get disabled when we are old," says Professor Hafiz.

The writer is a member of the Editorial Team, *The Daily Star*.
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Bangladesh's IT Industry

The Next Frontier?

MUHAMMAD HELAL & MAHJABEEN RAHMAN

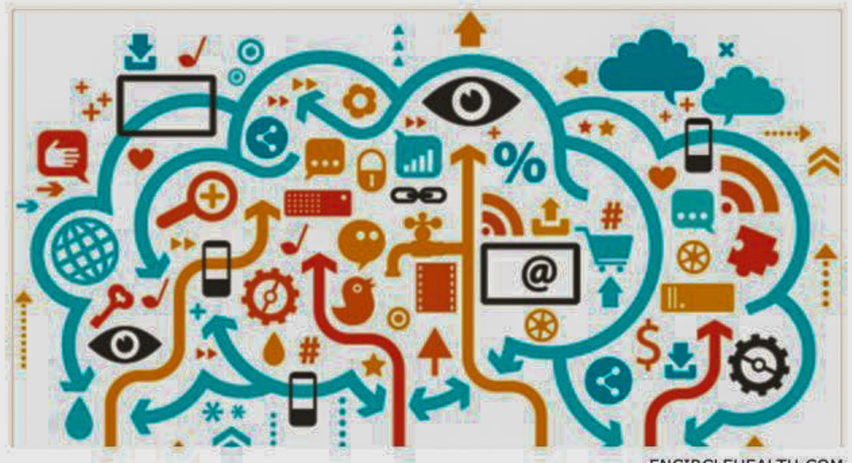
INFORMATION Technology (IT) gives fast, easy access to information which is essential for the development of a nation. Large IT companies are opening around the world, and nations are building up IT platforms, developing and promoting their IT industries. Asian countries are also becoming stakeholders in this boom by creating conducive environments, drawing global IT companies to invest there. Existing giants like Microsoft, Apple, Samsung, etc. are making massive investments in Asian countries to utilise the cost advantage. Bangladesh, with its huge under-utilised manpower (cheaper than India, Malaysia and China), can also benefit from these initiatives, provided an established foreign investment platform with a nation-wide IT infrastructure and skilled labour force is created.

Considerable achievements in the IT sector have already been made over several years towards building a 'Digital Bangladesh' and more initiatives are coming. However, to fully capitalise on the opportunities offered by the worldwide IT expansion, Bangladesh should thrust heavily towards further developing the IT sector to draw the attention of foreign investors competing with other technologically advanced/well-invested Asian countries. At the same time, we should encourage our entrepreneurs to launch IT companies here. Both these efforts would create hundreds of thousands of IT jobs and, consequently, help Bangladesh become a middle-income country by 2021.

The idea is to repeat the success of the RMG sector (which has created millions of jobs, though mainly lower-skill/lower-wage, and billions in foreign exchange), and significantly increase higher skill IT jobs to attract the youth, along with billions in foreign exchange, thus accelerating the growth of Bangladesh.

Emerging Asian countries like India, China, Malaysia, etc. have opted for digitisation to exploit opportunities offered by the Digital Age and catch up with technologically advanced countries. These countries have heavily invested in IT sectors, reaping considerable benefits in higher employment/income, and accelerating growth. For example, continuous growth of the IT sector in Malaysia, fully supported by the government, has created 800 new IT companies with over 98,000 new jobs, while 200 foreign companies have set up regional centres in Malaysia, bringing billions of dollars in investment and creating significant new jobs. Indian IT industry growth was spurred by huge foreign investment, contributing significantly to India's GDP growth. It is estimated that the outsourcing sector has a worldwide market of USD 500 billion; India's share is USD 140 billion compared to Bangladesh's USD 700 million.

Bangladesh can draw on experiences of these countries to design and implement a rapid IT promotion strategy tailored to her own resources/objectives. The government can consider the following strategy to compliment the ongoing 'Digital Bangladesh', which will accelerate the IT industry and utilise this sector as a platform for sustainable growth. Through injecting a major investment of USD 1.0 billion over five years



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(USD 200 million per year), the government can accelerate progress in this sector. This strategy can intensify efforts in specific areas: (a) Speeding up IT training/skills; (b) Actively attracting international IT companies/investors (Google, Intel, etc.) to establish IT centres (R&D, Service); and (c) Helping Bangladeshi entrepreneurs to start IT companies by providing funds/incubation, sales/business development/marketing support.

The proposed strategy can generate the two main positive outcomes that will set Bangladesh towards the goal of sustainable growth: one is the creation of high paid IT jobs, further leading to the expansion of small Bangladeshi IT companies, while the second is to generate massive inflow of foreign exchange through Foreign Direct Investment.

Moreover, this could also lead to the creation of high income jobs that would encourage foreign trained Bangladeshis to return (thereby reversing the brain-Drain), who can contribute to R&D, and help attract foreign companies to come. The IT industry also uses higher skill, pay better, can be more stable with greater potential for growth than the RMG sector, which is more vulnerable to lower cost regions in Asia and Africa. Development of a more professional sector will encourage youth to seek better education/IT training, generating higher income. Bangladesh can also receive huge remittances from exporting IT labour.

As the mobile phone sector in Bangladesh is well-developed, ICT-related service trade will progress, particularly in business process outsourcing (BPO). Development of other businesses and industries through computerisation of the business process can lower costs significantly, increasing productivity and profitability.

The government can accelerate investments in English and IT education starting at primary schools to scale up this industry. Enabling conditions such as, improving transportation, communication, physical infrastructure of major IT hubs, installing work ethics, transparency, accountability laws, strengthening regulatory roles, and ensuring homeland security can turn Bangladesh into a popular investment destination.

A government promoted private-public partnership foundation can be established to promote investment in IT and aid entrepreneurs. Institutions already working towards developing the IT sector (for example, BASIS) can become partners in this effort and senior representatives from key government agencies (for example, the Computer Council) should be included to advice investors on policies and procedures. Together, they can attract foreign investment in Bangladesh's IT industry. A global network of small overseas IT trade offices can also be established to attract and assist investors in setting up IT companies and service centres in Bangladesh.

Efforts to sub-contract from IT advanced Asian countries can be fruitful. Small scale companies not considered by India and China can be attracted to Bangladesh. India and China can also see the benefits in helping Bangladesh expand its IT sector. Moreover, the public and private sector can advertise IT careers to the youth and encourage entrepreneurship by providing start-up capital or easy bank loans to start IT companies.

The Bangladesh government has been playing a key role in framing policies to foster infrastructure developments in ICT. With Digital Bangladesh in mind, people are also in the correct mental space to move forward with government agendas of economic growth through developing the IT sector. However, it is important that ICT initiatives and implementation under both existing and new schemes be closely linked to the overall economic development and poverty reduction strategy to turn Bangladesh into a middle-income country by 2021.

The writers are a veteran of the high-tech industry who lives in Silicon Valley, USA, and a freelance economist who has lived for several years in Canada, and has published writings on Labour & Development Economics, including poverty and women's empowerment.

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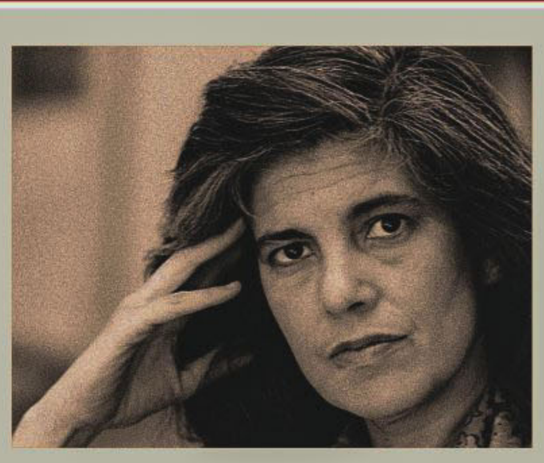


SUSAN SONTAG

Intelligence is really a kind of taste: taste in ideas.

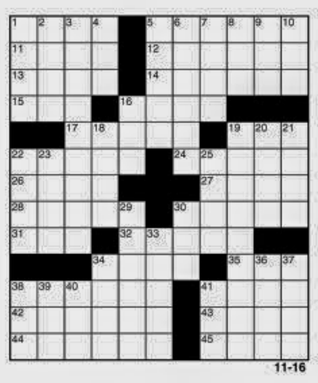
CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Clip
5 Jordan neighbor
11 Last Stuart ruler
12 Cube face
13 Letter after epsilon
14 Bit of beach-wear
15 She sheep
16 Diamonds or clubs
17 Lawn tools
19 Follower's suffix
22 Stereotypically upper-crust
24 Vietnam's capital
26 Chopping tools
27 Leave speechless
28 Bad habits
30 Impassioned
31 Id –
32 Plain to see
34 "Pygmalion" writer
35 Airport sight
38 Deep cuts
41 Castor's mother
42 Not out
43 Like cupcakes
44 Paging device
45 Sicily volcano

DOWN

1 Intent look
2 Over again
3 Cross
4 Brewed beverage
5 Debate topic
6 Grape-crushing sound
7 Litter's littlest
8 Contented sound
9 Important age
10 Rent out
16 Blue hue
18 Church area
19 Throw in
20 Tart
21 Minute
22 Surfer's ride
23 Line of symmetry
25 Largest continent
29 Plot
30 Small number of
33 Holography need
34 Mall unit
36 Adam's place
37 Unveiling cry
38 Talker's gift
39 Feasted
40 That woman
41 Tell tales



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YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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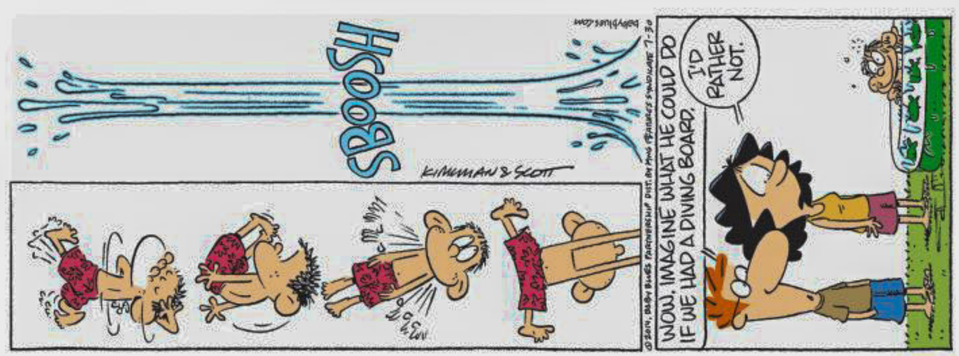
BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott