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FORUM

A monthly publication of The Daily Star

Volume 3 Issue 9 | September 2009

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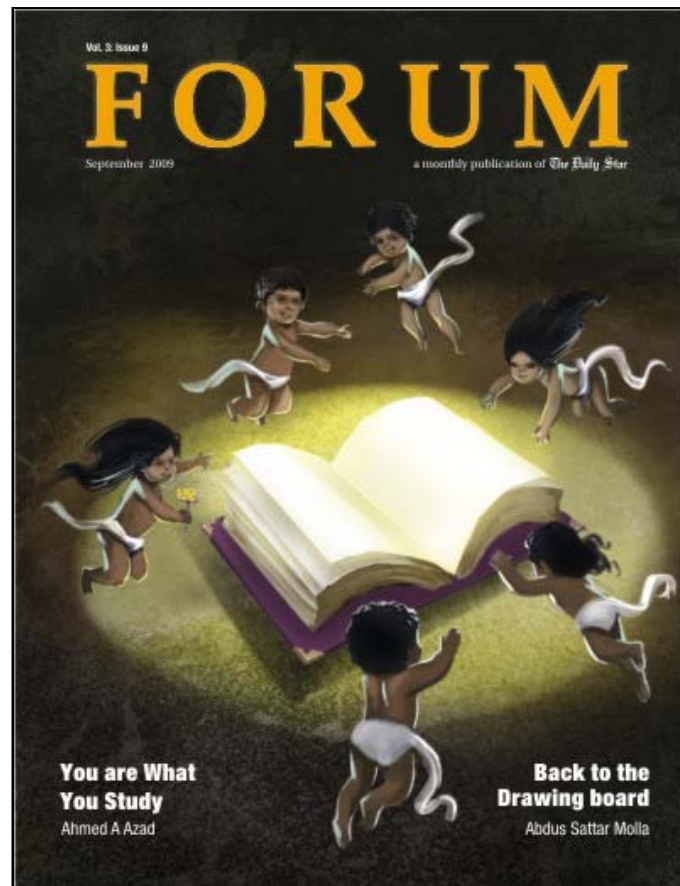
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Going Digital

Swapan Kumar Gayen foresees a hi-tech Bangladesh.

Digital Bangladesh

"Digital Bangladesh" and "Vision 2021" are catch phrases in Bangladesh these days. The buzzwords are no longer confined to the lexicon of information and communication technology (ICT) enthusiasts, but have entered the vocabulary of the educated section of the population. In its election manifesto leading up to the Ninth Parliamentary Elections in 2008, the Awami League (AL) coalition envisioned a Digital Bangladesh by 2021. The alliance led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) countered with a promise of an even earlier delivery. ICT activists in the country may find this competition to own the issue heartening, as it may be a realization among the politicians that digitisation is synonymous with being modern and forward-looking, and that investment in ICT is important for national development.

The creation, dissemination, exchange and application of knowledge play an increasingly important role in the economic development of the "knowledge-based society" that the world is embarking upon. It is imperative that Bangladesh positions herself well to avail that rising tide to become a member of the group known as the "emerging economies." The pursuit of a digital Bangladesh by 2021, the golden anniversary of the nation's independence, will be a coveted endeavor.

Questions need to be asked though: What is the scope of Digital Bangladesh? What are its mission and goals? Is there a roadmap to achieve the desired end? Activists and enthusiasts who like to go beyond rhetoric and look for concrete plans of action are raising these questions from different pulpits and platforms. Answers to these questions are yet to be articulated, and as one waits for those to take shape, expectations build, demands grow, and interest groups come up with their own interpretations and agendas. While the scope of Digital Bangladesh is likely to evolve, being shaped by the economic, political, social and cultural realities, there will be some common threads that reasonable people can agree upon. Digital Bangladesh will entail applications of ICT to enhance efficiency of operation, administration, management, and governance. In a Digital Bangladesh:

-Educational institutions will be connected to the world wide web of knowledge and communication networks enabling open exchange of ideas and information.

-Health-care institutions (medical colleges and hospitals in big and small cities, diagnostic laboratories, hospitals and clinics in rural areas) and health-care providers (doctors, nurses, medical technicians, paramedics) will be connected to one another and to patients everywhere including remote locations; information on hygiene, safe health practices, disease prevention, spread of diseases, and health alerts will be easily available.

-Governance will be made efficient and transparent through the use of ICT, the government officials will be able to communicate with and provide services to citizens promptly and effectively.

-Industrial concerns will use ICT for promoting and marketing their products, managing



Amirul Rajiv

communications between management and workforce, and democratizing the decision making process.

-Agriculture sector will be brought under digital management so that seeds, fertilizers and other enabling commodities are readily accessible to farmers, and relevant alerts, information, and know-how can be promptly communicated.

-Overall land administration that includes land survey, land records, and land management will be integrated and pertinent records and information digitized.

-A robust industry to develop cutting-edge software and hardware products will flourish and ICT trained manpower will be a national resource; and

-An information and communication highway system will make the benefits and services of ICT sector available everywhere in the country.

Realization of Digital Bangladesh is a formidable challenge that will require a concerted effort by Government, private sector, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), along with mobilization of resources and expertise on a national scale. Non-resident Bangladeshis (NRBs) can play a supportive role. Many of them are employed in the ICT field and can share their valuable technical expertise, and contribute funds to help implementation of relevant projects.

It is encouraging that the allocation for the ICT and telecommunication sector almost doubled to \$82M in the proposed budget for the 2009-2010 fiscal year compared to that for the previous year. It includes targeted allocations of \$15M for ICT development, \$30M for the Equity and Entrepreneurship fund for ICT promotion, and \$20M for an annual development program for the Science and ICT ministry. While unveiling a nationwide ICT strategy, the finance minister announced that digital management will be introduced in the sectors of education, health, and land administration. The minister further mentioned 2012 and 2014 as target time frames for the introduction of e-commerce and e-governance.

The process of transforming Bangladesh to a "digital" country will be complex. Many administrative, strategic, management-related, and even socio-economic issues have to be addressed and resolved along the way. Two core issues are manpower development and democratisation. A competent workforce with the requisite technical expertise, as well as communication and managerial skills, will be necessary, not only in the big cities but throughout the country including rural areas. This in turn will require supreme emphasis on education in general, and strengthening of the science, technology, engineering, mathematics, communication and management education, in particular. In order for a "Digital Bangladesh" to be meaningful for all her citizens, the benefits of digitisation should reach the disadvantaged everywhere in the country, and not be limited to an elite few. Anything less will have the undesirable effect of widening the "digital divide" and accentuating the disparities between the privileged and the underprivileged.

Visiting a rural Computer Literacy Center

Flash back to a trip we took to visit a computer literacy center (CLC) on a hot and humid day in July 2008. Our trip started in Dhaka early in the morning. Our destination was Kadambari High School in Kadambari, a village in the low lands of Rajair upazila in the district of Madaripur. Nearby significant business and governmental activity centers are Gopalganj and Tekerhat. In the not-too-distant past one had to access Kadambari by boat during the rainy season and on foot during the rest of the year. Thanks to recent developments in roads and highways, our van could be parked by the roadside near the school in the early afternoon.

The school structure consists of a small brick building in need of substantial repair work, a sharp contrast with some of the high school buildings that I saw in Dhaka and Gopalganj. The classes were not in session as the students prepared for an upcoming examination. The headmaster, members of the teaching and support staff, and some members of the school board greeted us, along with one of the computer teachers. Trained by the Computer Literacy Program (CLP), he had made special arrangements to take time off from a training session to meet with us. We spent some time talking about students, concerns that are specific to the school, and issues that the secondary schools face in rural Bangladesh. What I found most striking was that even though rural high schools in Bangladesh had a paucity of qualified teachers to teach advanced mathematics, Kadambari High School had two good mathematics and science teachers. I had also begun to notice a paradigm shift where commerce was attracting brighter students who would have earlier gone into science and humanities



Munir Uz Zaman/Driknews

We then took a tour of the computer lab, a room with four working computers, a printer, relevant accessories, desk space and seats for students. The entrance to the room had the plaque identifying the CLC prominently displayed. Even though the classes were not in session, some students were working on those computers. The computer teacher told us that the students eagerly wait for their turn, as each batch can only accommodate eight students. Since the establishment of the CLC there, the school has even started to attract more students compared to neighboring schools. We found the students to be confident in what they were doing. They demonstrated their familiarity with the physical parts of the computer and skills in using Microsoft Word, Excel, and Paint programs. The teachers pointed out that some students are enthusiasts and tend to go beyond what is in the training program. I remembered that the students from this CLC did very well in a quiz competition set up by D.Net (www.dnet.org.bd). One student even dedicated a poem to the computer, which was published in the newsletter that D. Net started for CLC students.

We took a tour of the science lab, a small room that the school could afford for students to carry out physics, chemistry, and biology experiments. The fact that the school allocated a room for the computer lab when the infrastructure was inadequate was testimony to their interest in computer literacy. The headmaster mentioned that the school received a gift of five computers in addition to the 4 provided by the CLP, but needed space and resources to set those up.. I found it heartening how much students and educators could do even with such a small base of resources. More Computer Literacy

Centers

The computer literacy center at Kadambari High School is one of the early CLCs established under the auspices of the Computer Literacy Program. A group of expatriate Bangladeshis living in New Jersey initiated the program in 2004, organized as the New Jersey chapter of the Volunteers Association for Bangladesh (VAB-NJ, www.vab-online.org/vabnj) and enlisted the help of D. Net to implement the goals of the program in Bangladesh. The mission of CLP is to empower the underprivileged youths in Bangladesh by making them computer and Internet literate. . The Volunteers Association for Bangladesh (VAB, www.vab-online.org) is devoted to helping the underprivileged youth with quality education and training through scholarships, science laboratories, library books and teachers training. D.Net is a pioneering non-government organization devoted to the spreading of information technology in Bangladesh, particularly in the rural areas.

The principal objective of the program is to establish CLCs in selected educational or social institutions in rural Bangladesh. Every CLC has a computer lab equipped with a minimum of four computers, one printer, other accessories and requisite furniture. Two teachers from each CLC receive two weeks of intensive computer and Internet training from D.Net professionals in Dhaka. The teachers are also provided with a complete "Teacher's Manual" so that upon their return they can teach the students. At each CLC, students in batches of 8 to 10 receive hands-on training free of charge for two hours a day, twice a week for eight weeks. The content includes knowledge of the physical parts of the computer, fundamental usage, Microsoft Word, Excel spreadsheet, and Paint programs. Each student is provided with a copy of the specially developed student's manual, "Esho Computer Shikhi" at a nominal

cost. Since the teachers provide the computer instructions in addition to their regular duties, each teacher and a teacher's assistant (commonly a student who successfully completed the training) receive honorariums of Tk 1000 and Tk 200, respectively, after training a batch of students.

The joint efforts of VAB-NJ, D.Net, and local school management run the program. VAB-NJ provides the conceptual framework, the implementation directives, computers, teachers' honorarium, and funds for project implementation. D.Net assists in selecting the host institution, the production of the manuals and curriculum, teacher training, physical establishment of the computer lab, technical oversight to keep the computers operational, monitoring the progress of each CLC and overall management of the program. The school management and local residents provide the room, furniture, electricity as well as encouragement to the teachers and students.



Iqbal Ahmed/Driknews

The CLP efforts, though modest in the context of the overall needs, have made important contributions over the past five years as the following achievements will indicate:

- As of June 2009, the CLP has established 107 CLCs primarily in selected rural educational institutions in 39 districts of Bangladesh. Internet connection has been provided to 50 of these institutions.

- Out of a total of 18,913 enrolled students 18,404 successfully completed the program as of April, 2009. Almost 50% of these are female students.

- To date 252 teachers have been trained, 41 of them are female.

- The success of CLP has attracted support from organizations and individuals within Bangladesh and abroad raising the real prospect that the program will flourish and be sustainable.

- Several thousand copies of the attractive student's manual, "Esho Computer Shikhi" have been distributed among students at a nominal cost. A revised and improved version of the manual is under preparation.

- CLP has inspired and helped launch other educational and ICT-related programs, such as, Computer Teaches Everyday English (CTEE) and Community for Learning, Information Communication and Knowledge (CLICK) that are relevant to the vision for a Digital Bangladesh.

Making connections

The CLP experience and achievements should help quell any skepticism about the feasibility of realizing a Digital Bangladesh by 2021. If the efforts of a few NRBs could accomplish what has been achieved, the power and resources of the Government together with participation of the private sector, NGOs, and interest groups should be able to fulfill the dream for digitisation, provided proper strategies are formulated and implemented. The experience of CLP can be looked upon as the ready-made results of a successful pilot study to spread the ICT education and training to rural Bangladesh, which would be an integral part of the education component of the strategy for a Digital Bangladesh.

The computer and Internet will be leveraged for digital management and delivery of educational materials. CLP has already taken important steps in the implementation of this idea. In addition to making use of available materials on the Internet, it will also be necessary to present materials in a way that relate to the experience of students. With this end in mind the CTEE project was initiated. CTEE aims at helping students learn aspects of English language that students don't encounter in their everyday English classes, such as proper pronunciation comprehension, and carrying out a regular conversation. An English teaching CD-ROM that draws from the daily experiences of students in Bangladesh has been developed, and is being used in a pilot program in five schools with CLCs. The project will help students learn English and develop computer and communication skills, which ought to be a coveted goal for the education sector for the digitisation of Bangladesh.



Shakirov

The CLICK project is designed to provide advanced ICT training to unemployed educated young people in rural Bangladesh so that they can find employment in ICT related fields. It combines aspects of CLP and Pallitathya, an information system for the poor and underprivileged through telecenters initiated by D.Net. Funded by Microsoft, the project operates 13 Pallitathya Kendras (Rural Information Centers) in 11 districts in Bangladesh. Every Pallitathya Kendra (PTK) is equipped with 7 computers Microsoft Unlimited Potential (MSUP) curriculum, Internet connection, mobile phone, information and knowledge base, and pertinent logistics. In addition to vocational ICT training (such as, desktop publishing, web development, and database), the PTKs provide livelihood information on health, agriculture, education and other areas, and ancillary services (such as, soil test, pond water pH test, photography, composition and printing, commercial mobile phone etc.). These again are services that a Digital Bangladesh will be expected to provide to its citizens in rural areas.

The Computer Literacy Program is indeed a step towards a Digital Bangladesh, as it has explored some of the territories that have to be charted to realize that lofty vision.

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