Premature evolution of IT in Pakistan

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Equipping the country with modern technology is a top priority of Musharraf's government. Multi-million dollar projects are being launched to boost up Information Technology. Mass IT-based educational programmes are being inducted. The government infrastructure is being equipped with high tech tools and techniques. Cyber technology, e-business and other high tech concepts are being introduced in various fields of life. Dr. Atta-ur-Rehman, the minister for science and technology is dedicated to match the IT industry of Pakistan with the rest of the world. He wants to bring the country's IT resources in the international market.

Dr. Atta-ur-Rehman and the other heads of various projects possess outstanding success in their profession. These high profile professionals have the ability to successfully implement any mass IT project provided all the environmental prerequisites are also matched. Talking about the environmental prerequisites -- other than the hardware and man-made related requirements -- there are certain vital factors that must be considered for successful implementation and to achieve the post-implementation desired results of any small to massive project.

It is often observed in the IT industry in underdeveloped countries that the major focus is on the need and the resources but the least weight is given to the environmental issues. In order to match the technological level with the developed countries and to be considered as a progressing nation, modern concepts, techniques and high tech tools are launched without the consideration of the crucial parameters link with the social civilization, economic status and the environmental situation. As a result, multi-million dollar projects, schemes, plans and other undertakings have failed to provide the desired output and productivity. Among these major aspects of society there are two crucial factors for the success of any mass technological development. One is the civilization standard and the other is the technical know-how of the appropriate use of modern technology. These factors could directly affect the expected results. Low level of technological literacy of the users produces a negative impact on the beneficiaries. For example, current study shows that in most underdeveloped countries, a high portion of Internet access is used for chatting, etc., rather than obtaining useful information. There are specific experiences which reflect that an inappropriate use of modern inventions impacts adversely.

In Pakistan, government institutes are maintaining websites to provide important and up-to-date information to global users. It has been observed that these websites are not updated on time and users get misleading information. The official site of the Government of Pakistan contains information about Pakistan and government institutions. The site also contains the e-mail addresses of the cabinet ministers and chief executive - which should be displayed as "President" now -- for the public to use for correspondence, if anyone wishes to do so. It has been commonly experienced by many including the writer that no reply or even acknowledgment is delivered to the senders.

This shows that even at the government level the people are not literate enough yet to use modern technology according to its demands.

Global economic and job crises have inspired people to enter the IT field, having considered the IT industry as relatively having more demand capacity. The continuous flow towards IT has created saturation conditions internationally in the human resources sector, especially in the past three years or so. The post-Y2K big boom brought a sudden decline in the IT job market. Several hundred Indian IT professionals have been retrenched in the USA and Europe in the past three years. The job opportunities are not the same as they used to be five years ago.

On the other hand, the ministry of science and technology of Pakistan is launching programmes to produce several hundred IT professionals every year with the intention of marketing them internationally. One can imagine what would be the situation when these youth will be on the roads having degrees in their hands and yearningly looking for appropriate jobs. This un-researched scheme will create a saturated situation in Pakistan in the next three to five years. The situation will not be different as of today when IT degree holders will also be looking for any non-professional ordinary job.

Recently, the ministry of science and technology of Pakistan has launched the Virtual University. The concept of a virtual university is not much different to the (old) concept of 'distance education' and 'open university' through correspondence or teaching through electronic media like television and radio. These methods have already been running for many decades in Pakistan, such as the 'Allama Iqbal Open University'. How many people of the total population of Pakistan are benefiting from these existing programmes? One can boldly say that these programmes never achieved the desired targets.

The Virtual University-like concepts have already been tried in other underdeveloped countries but could not get success due to the unmatched environmental issues. One hopes that Dr. Atta-ur-Rehman and his team have thoroughly researched this multi-million dollar project prior to its launching. Otherwise, as a matter of fact, this concept has already been unsuccessful in many other countries. As described earlier, the environmental factor plays a vital role in the success of any project. The virtual university is a study programme through the Internet. How many people can afford to have access to the Internet in Pakistan? How many people have computers or how many can even afford to have computers in Pakistan? And at the top of all these questions, how many people have the facility to have 24 hours electricity available even if they can afford to have computer and Internet access?

Who would not like to see Pakistan progress and be equipped with modern technology? The writer himself is a senior IT consultant who has worked in the USA, UK and Australia for the world's top multinational companies for the last 22 years. Therefore, he totally understands today's need of modern technology and at the same time its feasibility in different environments.

One must understand that industrial and technological developments are related to financial and economic stability and growth. Economic stability depends on social and political environments. Social and political steadiness in any society depends on the degree of literacy and knowledge. These are all sequentially inter-related and interdependent factors. Hence, the bottom line is, you cannot succeed in any sector without achieving the prerequisites and without setting your priorities for the rest of the sectors. You cannot construct a ten-story building starting from the tenth floor and then working your way down to the ground level.

Science and technology, no doubt, is a great need of this time but how can you successfully run thousands of industries, millions of computers and millions of offices with modern equipment when you cannot provide 24 hours electricity to the people? How can researchers and professionals do their job when they are subjected to the unbearable suffering of almost daily load-shedding?

If the West has achieved, today, the most modern technological advancement then it did not come just by buying or hiring and implementing the technology. These nations have gone through systematic phases of industrial development from manual to automation, computerisation or high tech revolution.

Most heads of IT projects and other high official technocrats in Pakistan either have studied or worked in the developed countries. They must be fully aware of these issues. However, the dilemma in Pakistan is that despite knowing the possible pessimistic endings, they compromise with the non-technical bureaucrats and policy makers for their own survival.