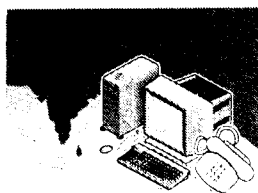


Indo-Lanka IT cooperation - new vistas

By Subimal Bhattacharjee

Indian Information Technology (IT) industry and its large success story is a common mention in Sri Lanka. Whenever I am in Colombo, I am reminded of this fact by people across the spectrum. A common understanding among the business community in the IT arena is that there should be more cooperation between the two countries and India should help Sri Lankan IT industry to develop and build up its own capacity to ensure that it gets a pie of the global IT opportunities. Particularly in the areas of offshore software development and the emerging BPO industry, these contentions are more prominent. Also applications of e-governance right upto the grass-roots level finds mention in some of the deliberations.



As part of my assignment for Commonwealth Service Abroad Programme of The Commonwealth Secretariat, I felt that there could be a clear and better understanding of the Indian success stories and possibilities of repeating those stories in Sri Lanka if there could be a first hand exposure in India for some of the key players from the island nation. A trip was thus arranged in mid July for a cohesive team of four key players under the Acting Chairman of Council for IT (CINTEC), Sri Lanka who visited New Delhi, Hyderabad and Bangalore. The composition of the delegation was government, industry, bureaucracy and academic. Three members of the team were sponsored by The Commonwealth and the academic gentleman from Moratuwa University by the India-Sri Lanka Foundation.

The members almost covered the whole story for the last 20 years in a week by meeting industry stalwarts, government honchos and academia. They interacted with National Association of Software and Services Companies (NASSCOM) President and his team and looked at specifically putting two points on the immediate agenda so that work could start and then progress.

The idea of India and Sri Lanka jointly cooperating in marketing themselves in a couple of third countries was actively appreciated by both the sides and the next steps have been planned. At Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India (ASSOCHAM), there was a consensus on distance education as an area where Indian companies would actively consider for embarking in Sri Lanka. The meeting with Software Technology Parks of India (STPI) in Hyderabad was also very encouraging and there were areas where the idea of having software parks in Sri Lanka with its help was discussed. The Federation of Andhra Pradesh Chamber of Commerce and Industry (FAPCCI) hosted the delegation to a major round-table where small and medium software participated to tell their inspiring stories. Hyderabad Software Exporters Association (HYSEA) also met the delegation. The visits to the sprawling campuses of Infosys and Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) in Bangalore were mind-boggling - they were thrilled at the sheer size of the campuses, their grandeur and intellectual discipline. The dinner meet organised by the Greater Mysore Chamber of Industry (GMCI) in Bangalore was also very fruitful as many companies came out with proposals to go and participate in the IT development of Sri Lanka. Some of them were already aware of the status of the Industry there and the new directions under the e-Sri Lank programme and the delegation members had a good time in highlighting many unknown points which I also could not gather in my trips to Colombo and elsewhere. Similarly the visit to the Hitech City in Hyderabad and the facility of EDS in Gurgaon on the outskirts of Delhi were some educative exercises. That so much has been attained and that is possible to do so was inspiring for the whole team. The team also interacted with the two top leaders who have facilitated IT in their own states. Mr Chandrababu Naidu, Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh was very pleased with the delegation and promised full support for helping Sri Lanka come up with e-governance initiatives. He also mentioned to the delegation about how he was going to connect all the rural areas with IT citizen delivery points where 154 services could be provided. He was eager to visit Colombo and would do so at the earliest available time. The visit to the e-seva centre in Hyderabad was also quite exciting. The team saw how in no time people were able to make payments for various utility and other services. The Karnataka IT Minister, Mr DB Inamdar was also very encouraging and promised to play a role on making Sri Lanka advanced in IT. Over a dinner, he emphasized the points that he would visit the country and gain a first hand view of how his government could participate.

This exposure visit was a real educative exercise as was mentioned by the team members. It has given the delegation to see for themselves how India was keen to see a prosperous IT industry in Sri Lanka. While many such visits have taken place at political and business levels, there has been little achieved so far and so it is very imperative to see that something comes out of the trip. The strategy and sincerity of the delegation chief was clear - to concentrate on just 2 or 3 projects, get them rolling, nurture their sustenance and then fructify other programmes. Their confabulations with industry and government captains have given them the right thrust to espouse the cause of IT when they go back. While there is a MOU between the two nations on the cooperation in IT between the two nations, nothing has really progressed and there are the blanks to be filled up in terms of an action plan and programme. The delegation took the opportunity to ascertain how to take the initiative forward in terms of what to ask from India and how to conduct the cooperation. Some of the possible areas where immediately work could start were training in software engineering, implementing e-governance programmes, setting up of disaster recovery centres of Indian companies in Sri Lanka and having some software development facilities. Now these could be brain-stormed and then the exact modalities can be worked out. There is also an Line of credit by the Indian government to Sri Lanka and the areas in IT where such a programmes could be implemented needs to be positioned and the delegation was seized of the matter.

The purpose of the visit was not only exposure but also enterprise. The four minds have already started thinking on how best to capitalise the trip and place milestones before the government functionaries to foster a deep Indo-Lanka IT cooperation. As many conferences and exhibitions are happening on this count, it remains important to see that something concrete happens. The Indian IT industry was not built overnight - it went through periods of trials yet has sustained itself. Even today there are many pressures and these could be object lesson for the Sri Lankans. A new beginning has been done, let it be capitalised.