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Book Review

My Brac Life: The Becoming of a Development Activist

Ahmed Mushtaque Raza Chowdhury

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It is not very frequently that one comes across a book and the first thing that crosses the reader's mind is "If only I had an opportunity to read this book earlier! Perhaps it would have steered me to think differently, and act differently. Perhaps it would have led to something more fulfilling and more meaningful in my life. Something different". Dr. Ahmed Mushtaque Raza Chowdhury's book *My Brac Life: The Becoming of a Development Activist* is one such inspiring read. While the book will be of interest to the wider audience, I would venture to particularly stress its importance to the younger generation, who dream of a better world and who are keen to pursue their vision and translate their ideas into actions towards such an aspiration.

The author's narrative spans the greater part of his life and work and encompasses a period which coincides with Bangladesh's post-independence journey. The non-state organizations and actors of Bangladesh have played a crucially important role in this trajectory, making significant contributions to the many impressive achievements in the socio-economic arena of which the country can be genuinely proud of. Brac, the world's largest non-government organization (NGO), and its founder Sir Fazle Hasan Abed, have especially played a key part in this impressive journey. This book is an insightful look at this and is narrated by someone whose life was closely entwined with both the institution and the man behind the institution, first as a foot soldier, and subsequently as one of the closest associates of Sir Abed at the helm of Brac's leadership. As Vice-Chairperson and Advisor to the Chairperson of Brac, Dr. Mushtaque worked closely with Sir Abed, and had a unique opportunity to witness the evolution of Brac into what it is today and contribute to its emergence as the globally renowned institution it has become.

Dr. Mushtaque writes about the early 1970s, when, as a freshly minted graduate of the Department of Statistics of Dhaka University, he met Sir Abed, who had returned to Bangladesh leaving his promising career as an accounting professional in London. It was a time when the newly independent country was struggling to deal with devastation, poverty, hunger, and destitution. The Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had called on all to demonstrate patriotism and commitment and lend their hand to rebuilding the newly independent country from the ashes left from the liberation war of 1971. Indeed, this was a time when Just Faaland and Jack Parkinson were writing one of the very first books on the newly independent country. In the preface, these authors justified the naming of the book by arguing that they first thought of titling their book as "Bangladesh: A Test Case for Development" but then changed it to "Bangladesh: The Test Case for Development" since they thought that if development was possible in this country, it would be possible in any country and hence the justification for "*The Test Case for Development*".

Sir Abed dedicated his life to realizing the dream that was Bangladesh, and he inspired the young graduate to come and join him in his quest for that dream. The test of the young man's commitment came rather quickly – the choice between going to Harvard University to do a PhD that would have taken four to five years, or to the University of London, which required shorter time span. Young Mushtaque chose the University of London and completed his PhD in a record period of two years and three months. The subject of his thesis work was Brac's oral rehydration therapy program.

When he returned to Bangladesh, his choice was to join Brac or to go for a job in a multinational company at a salary that was several times higher. The question the young Dr. Mushtaque asked himself, and, which helped him resolve the dilemma was: "it is possible to earn a lot of money in life, but should this be the metric of life's fulfilment?" In receiving the Ramon Magsaysay award for community service in 1980, Sir Abed had observed, "A community of greed has taken over the community of need." These words had inspired him to remain committed to

the life he had led for the next four decades. Dr. Mushtaque reflected on his options and decided to anchor his lifetime's work at Brac and with Sir Abed, though at different points in life, his talent and scholarship did take him to other jobs and accomplishments. Dr. Mushtaque had the distinction of being the first tenured Bangladeshi Professor in an Ivy League university in the US when he was teaching Public Health at Columbia University. He was offered the prestigious position of Senior Advisor at the Rockefeller Foundation and, as part of its formidable global engagements, Dr. Mushtaque made important contributions to improving the health and well-being of people in many countries. This included the establishment of the Department of Public Health and Informatics at Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University in Bangladesh. However, when Sir Abed requested him to return to Bangladesh, he did not hesitate to leave his job and comfortable life to come back and rejoin Brac.

Dr. Mushtaque's book, however, is not about himself, but about how "BRAC" graduated from an acronym to a word with a distinct identity, the learnings and unlearnings that informed its pathway, the mistakes and the successes, and how from small beginnings Brac became what Brac is today. For both academics and development professionals, his experiences, presented in a most lucid manner, are highly instructive. What emerges from the author's narrative, analysis, and interpretations is that institutions matter, people matter, and public-private partnerships matter. Brac initiatives have been successful because Brac had the institutional capacity to experiment, go through trial and error, correct any mistakes, and then move on; because Brac was able to assemble a team of dedicated individuals who believed in Sir Abed's vision and were ready to commit themselves for the long haul. In addition, and this is often not appreciated enough, it was able to function within a conducive policy ecosystem that saw the non-state sector and its actors as complementary forces and partners for development rather than competitors or rivals. This also has relevance for contemporary Bangladesh.

Being the scholar he is, Dr. Mushtaque dedicates a significant amount of his book to emphasize the importance of research in Brac's manifold activities, and as a key driver of its successful programs. The author writes about the role of field level investigation and research in assessing what works and what does not work in the developmental praxis. He also writes about how research has contributed to the success of Brac's many initiatives, experiments, and innovations. He writes about how field level experience has helped him hone his research skills and develop as a scholar, teacher, and a public intellectual grounded in realities. He writes, "My being engaged in research was no accident; my childhood dream was to do something good for the downtrodden people. I considered research as a tool in realising this dream. I took my preparations in a conscious way. Perseverance and dedication have played an important part in all my endeavours."

We learn from his book how low cost-solutions introduced by Brac became widely disseminated and accepted in rural households and by mothers in rural villages in Bangladesh. We learn how programs such as oral rehydration therapy, using common salt and unrefined brown sugar, brought about revolutionary changes in the well-being of children in Bangladesh. At the same time, we also learn that none of this was easy, and that behind every success story there was experimentation and error, a lot of convincing was needed to trigger behavioral changes, and that culturally appropriate messaging was as important as the efficacy of the interventions. We learn that cost-effectiveness of interventions mattered, and that research was important in identifying cost-effective and low-cost solutions. The author recalls the dedication of Brac's field level workers who made it all possible. We learn how Dr. Mushtaque and his team had set up Brac's flagship Research and Evaluation Division, and how it worked by blending qualitative and quantitative tools of analysis to test out the efficacy of Brac's interventions and proposing improvements.

Brac's engagements are wide in scope and highly diversified, ranging from women's empowerment programs to allowing people to read and learn by making reading glasses widely accessible; from specific and targeted rural development programs such as the introduction of improved seed and fish varieties and poultry revolution to programs that blended health, nutrition, microfinance, and non-formal education. Dr. Mushtaque's writing allows the reader to benefit from an insider's view as to how some of these programs were translated from ideas to action models, and then to visible outcomes that could be scaled up and replicated widely. One also learns why research at all stages – upstream, mid-course and downstream – is so critically important for the success of any intervention. Readers also gain insight into how many of Brac's programs were replicated in several developing countries – saving lives, providing livelihoods, empowering women, and educating children. The author's observations about the importance of attention to context and details, local specificities, community involvement, and stakeholder participation will be of benefit to development practitioners who are keen to learn what makes the difference between failure and success at the field and operational levels.

Dr. Mushtaque writes about his experience as the founding Dean of James P. Grant School of Public Health, and how it has evolved into a globally leading center of excellence. Indeed, by selling the only plot of land the family

owned, they have set up a foundation to give scholarships to needy students at the school who come from socio-economically backward communities.

Dr. Mushtaque took the scholarship generated by Brac's experience in health areas to wider audience and newer heights through publications in the world's leading medical journal, *The Lancet*, and by organizing the *Lancet Lecture Series* in Bangladesh. At the same time, through his pioneering work with Health Watch and Education Watch, he continues to play an important role in blending knowledge and research with policymaking and public awareness to trigger demand-driven actions and changes.

Reading about all these multifaceted initiatives and actions with which Dr. Mushtaque has been involved, one comes across a person who is ever ready and keen to give all the credits to his colleagues and collaborators, keeping himself in the background and downplaying his own role in many initiatives which Sir Abed entrusted him with during his long association with Brac.

Dr. Mushtaque writes that he is worried about the state of education in the country, a view which will no doubt be shared by many in Bangladesh. His worrying observation about the declining quality of education in Bangladesh ought to be taken in all seriousness. "This is a wake up alarm, not a wake up call", he cautions. But he is not someone who would surrender to pessimism. Dr. Mushtaque continues to work on improving the quality of education and health in Bangladesh, as a distinguished member of the Board of Trustees of Brac University, of Education Watch and Health Watch, and through his association as member of the Core Group of Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh. In the limited time that life gives us, the true value of life lies in doing something for fellow human beings, he writes. This life lesson he learned from Sir Abed which he repeatedly recalls in many pages of this book.

It is not surprising that in one year since its publication, the book has gone through five reprints and a new edition, testifying to the interest it has generated among the wider readership in Bangladesh. One hopes that many more will read the book and draw inspiration from the life of an exceptional man whose journey was inextricably entwined with a truly visionary man and an iconic institution.