## Special Feature

E had been meeting Fazle Hasan Abed socially for some years, watching his activities, rather of BRAC, from a distance, with admiration. Some of our staff members visited his projects and returned with reports which provided with a some what partial view of what was going on in what is undoubtedly the largest NGO in the country. in terms of its size, dimension, social commitments and future plans. But we kept putting off a long detailed conversation between Abed and a team from the Star.

When we finally met a few weeks ago, we were fully rewarded for our long wait. As in all our previous conversations with such noted personalities as . Poet Shamsur Rahman, Prof. Mohammad Yunus, Prof Rehman Sobhan and Jim Grant, our discussion was totally unstructured, with no written questions to follow. Of course, there were tape recorders and we had to work hard- in putting it to the shape we have given it today in this two-page spread.

The arrangement suited Abed. At social meetings, he was always an easy man to talk to. During the conversation, he was more than just articulate. His in-depth responses to our questions reflected his confidence, modesty, a remarkable attention to details of his projects and a vision for the future, not just of BRAC but of Bangladesh. Maybe, soon after our conversation got off the ground, the barrier that so often separates a section of the national media from people who often treat the press with some unease disappeared and, to put it simply, we stood on the same side, with shared commitments, obligations and challenges.

Now, we are pleased extensive extracts from the conversation between Fazle Hasan Abed and a team of The Daily Star.

Daily Star (DS): How do you trace the history of BRAC. How did it start?

Fazie Hasan Abed (FHA) Well, I think I have to go back to November 11, 1970 when we had a cyclone which killed some three million people. At that time, I worked for the Shell Company in Chittagong. Immediately after the cyclone, I organised a team to visit the islands to assess the situation. The first island the team went to was Sandwip. After Sandwip it went to another island which is even more remote. It found the area ravaged; thousands of corpses were lying about. That is the first time I came in contact with disaster of this magnitude, human suffering, death and destruction. This prompted me to set up an organization called HELP. Within 15-20 days of the disaster various donor agencies started flocking into Dhaka and Chittagong. I offered them prompt assistance. HELP drew up a plan - Rehabilitation and Development programme for Monpura island.

DS: Were you still with Shell? FHA: I was still with Shell but then this was outside the work of the company. The Monpura island had 49,000 people of which only 12,600 people were alive. I decided that HELP would try to rehabilitate them. That's how I became involved in disaster relief work and also started thinking in terms of organising people, housing, reconstruction and things like that.

DS: How many people were working with you at that time in the organisation?

PHA: About 30, all volunteers. Father Timm who was then the Principal of Notre Dame College also came with 12 of his boys to help. Later when he got the Magsaysay award five years ago, he said, "Abed brought me into development

What happened after the initial months of relief work was that the Germans committed 3 million Deutsche Mark for the HELP-Monpura project and the project was approved by the government. We wanted to hire people for the project when the money was available. The whole organization needed to be set up. So we looked for someone who could run the organization - the first NGO. We hired

Conversation.

## Fazle Hasan Abed Outlines the Battle against Poverty

If one should draw up a list of the world's most successful non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee — better known as BRAC — would be very much near the top, perhaps as some would say, right at the top. The distinction earned by this 22-year old organisation, better known internationally than nationally, rests not so much on many awards it has won over the years, including the prestigious Magsaysay Award for Community leadership in 1980 and the Maurrice Pate Award of UNICEF in 1992, as on the long hard sustained battle it has fought against all that afflicts the impoverished millions in Bangladesh, from malnutrition to illiteracy, from rising unemployment to population explosion. Herein lies that real success of BRAC, the success that endures and serves as a model for other developing countries. Right from the time, it got off the ground during the war of liberation, BRAC identified the linkages among the problems facing the country and looked for their solutions, sometimes separately and sometimes in a package. If the start was a modest one, involving only a handful of people, it was also innovative with a much stronger grass-root appeal than many other NGOs. Not surprisingly, during the past two decades, it grew into a massive organisation, in manpower and activities, drawing moral and financial support from all parts of the world.

One cannot talk about BRAC without speaking about Fazle Hasan Abed, the 57-year old, a former oil executive-turned-social reformer who serves BRAC as its Founder and Executive Director. But many would say, Abed is BRAC, a plaudit that he denies firmly, with a self-effacing smile. There is little doubt that Abed has served as the motivating spirit, the heart and soul, of this unique organisation.

To know more about BRAC and indeed about its future plans — this is perhaps the most exciting part of it — The Daily Star joined Abed in a four-hour long conversation at the modest but tastefully furnished BRAC office at Dhaka's Mahakhali Commercial Area. The conversation was conducted by The Daily Star Editor S. M. ALI who was assisted by the paper's Executive Editor MAHFUZ ANAM Chief Reporter ANWARUL HUQ and Staff Photographer ENAM. Abed was assisted by Faruq Ahmad Choudhury, a former diplomat and now an Adviser to BRAC, and by the organisation's Director of Programmes, Dr Salehuddin Ahmed.

Akbar Kabir (who later became adviser to President Ziaur Rahman) as the coordinator of the project. He had just retired. Then I brought Kaiser Zaman from Shell. A board of directors was formed and that is how HELP was set up.

DS: When did you start

FHA: During the liberation war, I went to London and started an organization called Action Bangladesh together with some of my friends to build public opinion for Bangladesh. It became a large organization with a lot of supporters. In May or June, 1971 we gave a front page advertisement in the Times saying that 'a genocide is going on in Bangladesh' and so

In September, my friend Vikar Chowdhury and I arrived in Calcutta with a number of things to do. One was to set up food godowns around Bangladesh border — the liberated areas. Vikar stayed back and set up an office in Calcutta. I sent out as much money as I could raise. After the liberation of Bangladesh, there was some money, about two lakh rupees, left from our various operations in the Calcutta account. With that and my own money I decided to set up an organization. The total amount came to three

DS: So one could say BRAC was launched with a modest capital of three lakh rupees? How did you get BRAC started?

FHA: No. BRAC came later. Vikar and I met with some one you all know, Suranfit Sengupta. Vikar went with him to the Sulla area of Sunamgant which was a Hindu majority area. Pakistan army with local forces had burnt down everything there. It was a scene of complete destruction - no houses, no cattle etc. Vikar came back and suggested we might be able to do some relief work there.

DS: You were no longer with

FHA: No. When I left for London, I left Shell.

DS: Could one say that BRAC started with relief and rehabilitation work in the post-liberation

FHA: Yes, that's how BRAC started. I thought I would give two years of my life to this. I set up the organization and hired young people for the rehabilitation in Sulla. It is a remote area. It takes two days to go there. I decided to work there because, I thought, nobody would take the trouble of going

DS: Let me have the time-

FHA: February, 1972. DS: Could one say BRAC was

FHA: Yes. DS: Tell me about something that has puzzled me for the last few months. What is it that made you think of BRAC? BRAC

stablished in February, 1972?



At the roundtable conversation, from left to right, Anwarul Hug, Mahfuz Anam, Dr Salehuddin Ahmed, Faruq Ahmad Choudhury, S M Ali and Fazle Hasan Abed. - Star photo

stands for Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee - why did you think of a committee?

FHA: At that time we were not planning a permanent organization. We were thinking in terms of a committee doing some relief and rehabilitation work for a short period and then disband it. Initially it was called Bangladesh Rehabilita tion Assistance Committee. I said to myself that I would give two years to do this and then go back to my profession.

DS: Can you say something about the early days of BRAC?

FHA: Sulla became our focal point. All help was concentrated there. Sometimes I rang up my friends in the Dhaka University and said: You send me young boys who have got their Masters Degree and have been involved in the liberation war.' They sent me some and I hired them. It was exciting for them. They had fought for their country, and now they were building it. I myself with three secretaries one was Faruk's sister, one was Khushi Kabir who now heads Nijera Kori, and another was a diplomat's wife — went to work at Sulla. The secretaries used to write reports and project proposals. I wrote the first project proposal for the rehabilitation programme for Sulla Thana to submit to any donor who might

DS: Who funded your first FHA: It was Oxfam. The di-

rector of Oxfam came to my Motifheel office (I was using Vikar's law chamber as the BRAC office) and said 'I hear you have a project in mind. That was in the first quarter of 1972. He saw the project proposal and within 15 days of his going back to London, Oxfam made a commftment of 189,000 pounds. That was the first grant provided by Oxfam UK.

DS: How did you feel? FHA: It was exciting in the sense that we had so much to do. As part of the project 10,000 houses were to be built. Boats and fishing nets were to be provided to the fishermen. Even masons did not have their tools; carpenters didn't have anything to work with. It was primarily a housing programme

though. DS: Did you take up any work other than building

FHA: We also took up relief work. We collected milk from UNICEF, opened feeding centres and gave milk to the children. We hired doctors to provide medical assistance.

DS: Did you take up any cultivation programme as part of your project?

FHA: As we were progressing with our rehabilitation work it was already February. In Sulla area, we have only one crop — Boro — no Aman. thought, unless we planted something in March there would be no crop for that year

and everybody would be starving. There were no cows for ploughing. In those days it was hard to get a power tiller. My maternal uncle took his two power tillers along with his men and tilled about 300 acres of land. I did not bother about whose land was being tilled and who was getting benefited. At that point tilling was more important. So we did it.

During that period I went to Assam and met the Chief Minister there. I asked for his permission to take 21 lakh bamboos which float through the Kushiara river. The permission was given and bamboos came floating to our territory.

DS: Was your first grant primartly for housing projects? FHA: Housing, relief and re-

habilitation. Farming, fishing, and all were part of the rehabilitation programme. I had to import nylon twines for fishing nets from Japan. Timber for boats were brought in from

DS: More or less you had the operational headquarters in

FHA: All the work was going on in Sulla. I was staying in Dhaka. I had a logistic office in Dhaka. I had to keep liaison with the government officials and donor agencies. I also had to look over the banking. needed a big logistic department but I had only three or four people to do this.

DS: What did you do with the volunteers?

FHA: They were not really volunteers in the true sense. They were paid salaries: 300 taka for an MA, 200 taka for a BA - and if below the grade of BA, 150 taka per month.

DS: Did you have any programme during the famine of 1974?

FHA: There was a famine in North Bengal in 1974. People were dying like flies. Cole Dodge, who was in Oxfam Bangladesh at that time, said Oxfam will provide the fund and BRAC will implement the programme of feeding in Rangpur.

When I arrived in the area in January 1975, there were hardly any men around. They had all fled. This is what happens during famines in our society. Men go away once they have sold their cows, goats and utensils. They leave for towns and cities in search of work and money. But they seldom send their remittance to their families, Because they can hardly survive themselves. What they leave behind are women and children who face sure death.

DS: How did BRAC start its expansion programme? FHA: BRAC's first expansion started in Manikgoni and Jamalpur after the famine. These were also experimental

Dodge. He took an emactated

child full of scables on his lap

like Mother Teresa does. He

could do that. Despite all my

empathy for the poor and the

suppressed I still had the hest-

tation to do what he did.

projects but we were learning as we were expanding. We learned that we have to be both effective and efficient. There is no point expanding otherwise. You will be wasting a lot of resources. This formulation was in my mind and I have also talked about it with many theoreti-

David Korten, an organisational theorist, said BRAC is the prototype of a 'learning organization. According to him, a learning organization is a group of people continually enhancing their capacity to create what they want to create. But another theorist, Peter Senge, described the factors of a learning organization in a different way. He talked of five characteristics:

-Building a shared vision: That means binding people together around a common identity, essence of destiny, the practice of unearthing shared pictures of the future that cost a genuine commitment.

-Personal mastering: The skill of continually clarifying, and deepening the personal vision of an organizational partic-—Examining mental model:

The ability to unearth the internal pictures of the world. To scrutinize them and to make

them open to the influence of others, changing as necessary the deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations and even pictures or images that influence how organizations, leaders and staff understand the world and how they act.

-Team: Learning the capacity of the members of a team to suspend assumptions and enter into a genuine 'thinking together' by mastering the practice of dialogue in discussion;

-Systems thinking: The discipline that integrates others and makes full patterns clearer and help organizational leaders to see how to change existing patterns effectively, and to understand complex policy and strategy issues.

These theoreticians started looking at BRAC as a prototype of a learning organization. So in the first big expansion plan, we started thinking at a national level.

DS: How did you go national? FHA: 1979 was the "International Year of the Child." I thought of taking up a nationwide programme. Diarrhoeal mortality level was the highest in Bangladesh. I had a friend, Peter Cash, who was working in ICDDR, B and is now in Harvard. Peter and John Rhode who is now in UNICEF. Delht, discovered the oral rehydration saline. I wanted to teach one woman in every household how to prepare it at home (See box: ORS). That is how we started expanding.

DS: How long did you continue the rehabilitation work?

FHA: The programme went on well and it was a 10-month programme. By the end of the year the relief and rehabilitation stage was over. We understood that poverty in Bangladesh could not be alleviated by the rehabilitation programme alone. Poverty is a much more endemic thing. It needs a longterm commitment and understanding of how poverty can be removed by getting the poor involved in their own development. DS: When did you start the

rural development programme? FHA: I decided to go into the field of development and asked my friends if we should do it in Sulla. It is so remote, so diffi cult to reach, but all our staff agreed to do it there. They rather forced me to stay on in Sulla, and start the second phase of the programme, which we called the multisectoral rural development programme. The concept was to set up a programme for Bangladesh's poverty alleviation or a rural development programme.

DS: So your first grant of 189,000 pounds came from Oxfam and you moved it on to projects like rehabilitation. Now to continue with the growth of BRAC would have involved two things: one was an agenda for your future activity and you were looking at the problem of moving away from rehabilitation to poverty alleviation.

FHA: Right. At that time various ideas of rural development Continued on page 9

## Oral Rehydration Saline

"Half a seer of water, a pinch of salt and a fistful of molasses" - the simple composition of ORS has helped millions in Bangladesh combat the killer disease, diarrhoea.

I took my team of four or five

people from Sulla, and hired

some local people. Within a

week 30 feeding centres were

opened and milk, biscuits and

During that time an incident

made me come closer to Cole

wheat started pouring in.

BRAC took up the campaign to create public awareness and educate the people about Oral Rehydration Saline (ORS) 14 years ago. In 1979, while observing the

International Year of the Children BRAC thought of two options to serve the children immunizing women of the reproductive age group to cut down neo-natal mortality rate and familiarizing ORS to reduce the diarrhoeal mortality rate, which was the highest among children. It decided on the lat-

"Immunization was not a feasible choice as lack of electricity in rural areas prevented the storage of vaccines at the required level of temperature," says F H Abed. On the other hand, mortality due to diarrhoea was the highest in Bangladesh.

The country needed 20-30 million packets of ORS while only half a million packets were being produced by private pharmaceuticals and the government together. So BRAC thought of teaching the women of every household how to produce ORS at home in a simple but effective manner.

But there were 14 million households in the country. That meant 14 million households were to be visited physically.

There were many other factors to consider like employment of workers for house-tohouse teaching. Each lesson would take at least 45 minutes. The lesson would have to be thorough as the slightest error in the composition would either make the solution dangerous or ineffective.

None of the workers would be paid a salary based on their work; They would be paid on the basis of retention of knowledge by the women they taught. It was somewhat like paying teachers on the basis of how the students perform. BRAC launched the pro-

gramme in five big districts between 1980 and 1983. Seven more districts were brought under the programme by 1986. The rest of the country was covered by 1990.

"Covering the entire country meant covering 12 million households" according to Abed. BRAC is the only NGO in the world which has worked in every village of its own country."

Initially, the problems were numerous. How to define measurements for a standard quantity. Not all households in remote villages possessed a glass. A utensil measuring half a litre had to be marked. But the results were rewarding.

A month after the women were taught, a random survey was carried out to check how accurately they had learnt the lesson. Five per cent of the women were tested to see if they could remember all seven points involved in the preparation of ORS.

The women prepared the solution which was then tested in the laboratory. If the entire test went well, the worker who taught the women got six Taka. If the woman could remember six points, then the worker received three Taka and if she remembered less than five points, only one Taka was paid.

And if laboratory tests showed that the solution was not within the tolerance range, no money was paid at all. So the worker had to make an effort. In order to make the cam paign effective, emphasis was laid on quality rather than quantity.

the workers were told to teach less households but to teach effectively. They were not to teach more than 12 households a day. If any worker earned less than 700 taka per month, this meant she was not performing well and her services would be terminated.

BRAC's programme in this field was highly appreciated by Nigerian Health Minister Nelson

Kutti, who visited some of the programme areas. A member of India's Planning Commission also marvelled at the oral rehydration programme.

The ORS programme brought BRAC to the attention of the world.It became a big name in development circles.

Meanwhile, regular monitoring of the programme revealed that though every household was visited, this did not necessarily mean that every family was taught the lesson. Sometimes women of a household would be out on a visit thus missing the lesson. But if the neighbours learnt the lesson, this would more or less be

considered sufficient. However, of all the samples prepared by the village women only two per cent proved to be outside the tolerance test.

But there were some more considerations to be taken into account, for example, in certain regions, like in Khulna where the salinity was high, the pinch of salt in making the solution would have to be smaller. Such things needed constant finetuning.

Further research revealed that of the first 30,000 women taught how to prepare oral rehydration saline, only six per cent actually put it to use. Field workers found that it was the husbands who were discouraging their wives from adopting such methods, saying that a visit to the doctor was enough to treat the child.

So it was obvious that the husbands too, had to be educated on the need for using ORS. Discussions were organised in the village markets and mosques. Campaigns went on, over radio and television.

The campaign proved to be successful with BRAC spending about 70 lakh taka in the last ten years in media campaigning for oral rehydration saline. "Half a litre of water, a pinch of salt and a fistful of sugar or molasses" has now become a household phrase.



BRAC projects help the poor both at the households and in the

Photo: Shezad Noorani