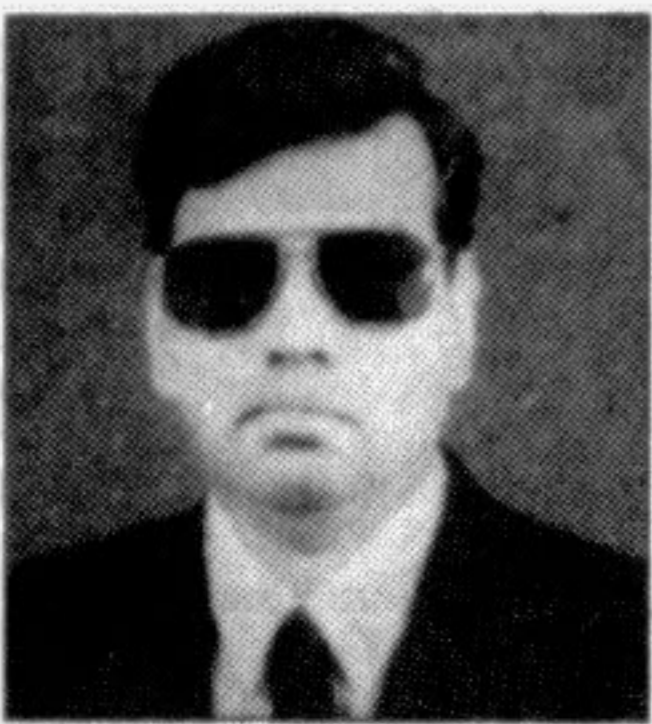


Using an Inner Vision



Mansur Ahmed Chowdhury years being a social worker for the rehabilitation of the disabled. With various forms of training from abroad, Chowdhury has worked for a number of organisations including Assistance for Blind Children (ABC) Bangladesh Sangsad Incorporated in New York, and Helen Keller International in Dhaka. He has also been associated on a voluntary basis with several local and international organisations.

awareness programmes, curative treatment including surgery in the field of eye, ENT and orthopedics, by travelling through the rivers' says Chowdhury.

As for his achievements, which are many, he gives most importance to the love and confidence he has acquired from his family from his friends both at home and abroad.

But Chowdhury has also had to face the pain of apathy, limitation of opportunities and the humiliation of uncalled for pity. Chowdhury agrees that there are many things in society that need to be changed to allow disabled people to lead lives on equal terms and with dignity. "Social awareness, political will and commitment are essential. There should be effective legislation to ensure that the disabled get equal opportunities to education and employment. We must not forget that 10 per cent of our population are disabled in some form."

Yet inspite of all the odds, Chowdhury has managed to lead a close to normal and rewarding life. With various skills such as reading and writing in Braille, orientation and mobility not to mention a highly developed intuition, Chowdhury is an independent person who travels abroad, has a social life and is completely committed to his work and family.

It was one hit from a tennis ball and a surgery gone wrong that left seven year old Mansur Ahmed Chowdhury blinded for life. The right uninjured eye also lost sight due to sympathetic ophthalmia leaving Mansur in a world of complete darkness.

"You can imagine how shattered I was", says Chowdhury now in his 40s, "being sighted before. I lost hope in life". It was Chowdhury's father, a civil servant, who stood by his son giving him support and love to help him get over the shock. Chowdhury's extreme perseverance and support of his family has helped him to reach a position in life that would have seemed impossible for a man who has had so many odds against him.

Now the director of Impact Foundation an international body devoted to prevention of disability, Chowdhury has found strength in working for others who have become disabled and so shortchanged in life.

But reaching this point has not been easy. Inspite of getting a First class First in his Masters examination in Public Administration, Chowdhury was refused for a lectureship at the Dhaka University. Perhaps this was a blessing in disguise for this obstacle only made Chowdhury more determined and he devoted the next eighteen

Taking on the Challenge with Optimism and Courage

KHONDOKAR Jahurul Alam has come a long way from being the little boy a victim of polio, who was called 'Khora' (Crippled) by cruel children of the neighbourhood. He is now the President of NFOWD (National Forum of the Organisations Working with the Disabled) and the Director of Gram Kendra, a multi-sectoral developmental organisation which focuses mainly on the disabled.

Besides this, he is also involved with many voluntary organisations including Bangladesh Protibondhi Kalyan Samity (BPKS) and National Coordination Committee for Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) of Bangladesh. On an international level, Alam is the Chairman of Disabled Peoples, International, South Asia and an Honorary Country Representative of Action on Disability and Development (ADD), a donor agency of UK.

But how has he reached this stage of life earning respect and admiration both at home and abroad? "I believe", says Alam philosophically, "life is not a bed of roses especially for a PWD (Person With Disability) it is full of thorns. To reach this stage I have had to face many challenges but luckily I had the support of my family." He has had to undergo nine operations in his legs.

Alam believes that it has been his hardwork, sincere efforts and honesty that have helped him reach this stage in life. "My biggest achievement in life is that I have the chance to work for other PWDs in my country and also the fact that I am able to support my family and am self reliant."

Alam has an interesting way of describing how disability has affected his life, a reminder of his general optimism. "With my disability I have completed my education, secured a top post in

my organisation, I am married and am able to work for other PWDs. Moreover, I now have the opportunity to represent disability issues and meet interesting, important people at home and abroad.

On the other hand, says Alam, "If I had no disability, I could be a good football player or a doctor, a civil servant." "I could be an army general or even a mountain climber", he adds wistfully.



Khondokar Alam

But more than his inability to walk it has been the negative attitude of people that has hurt Alam. "Most people treated me as a cripple and not as a person". As a young boy Alam had to wait till his younger brother was old enough to take him to school. Since transport was a problem he could not attend the better schools. The BCS examination, which he wanted to take, was also out for him. "Sometimes, I feel I am treated as a second class citizen in my own country", says Alam. Due to his disability he cannot use public transport and hence travelling is very costly.

To make our society more

sensitive towards disabled people, Alam has a few suggestions. Alam mentions that ESCAP (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific) has declared the Second Decade for Persons with Disabilities, the main objective of which is ensure equal rights and opportunities for the PWDs. The declaration signed by the Prime Minister if ensured, can enable PWDs to lead a life of

bilitation for the Physically Vulnerable) an organisation that focuses on raising awareness, research, and advocacy. It also implements practical work for the disabled thus highlighting not the disability but the ability. With a BSS (honors) and MSS in Public Administration from Dhaka University, Haque was determined not to let his physical limitation and hostile attitudes of the society around him come in the way of reaching his goal. Haque feels that disability is no longer a welfare oriented concern but a developmental issue. Both the government and NGO sector, says Haque, have recognized this and are trying to integrate the disability issue into their developmental activities.

Haque's relentless efforts and unique vision has won him an Ashoka Fellowship award which recognizes social entrepreneurs and change makers.

The road to this kind of success, however, has been full of obstacles and disappointments. Physical infrastructures in this country says Haque, which have no provision for the physically handicapped, are mostly inaccessible to him. These include office buildings, national monuments, recreational or education centres and even basic conveniences such as footpaths are not made to facilitate such persons. Moving from place to place especially, has been very difficult and expensive for Haque since he cannot use public transport.

"I have also had great dif-

On the occasion of the International Day of disabled persons as proclaimed by the UN, The Daily Star brings out this special page containing profiles of a few disabled people who through their own efforts and hardwork have achieved success in their work and are active citizens contributing to our national development. Let these stories inspire us to recognize the hidden talents of the disabled people in our country who must be allowed to live on equal terms and with dignity.

Aasha Mehreen Amin interviews Mansur Ahmed Chowdhury, Khondokar Jahurul Alam, Abdus Sattar Dulal, Muhammad Abdus Salaam and Shahidul Haque

Highlight not the Disability but the Ability

A man with crutches in our insensitive society either evokes excessive pity or deliberate avoidance, both of which can be extremely humiliating to him. Very rarely do people see beyond the crippled limbs, forgetting the man's soul and mind. Shahidul Haque, who has a walking disability caused by childhood poliomyelitis, wishes to change this attitude. He wants to make society realize that disabled people have a hidden potential which can have positive developmental consequences.

He himself is the Executive Director of SARPV (Social Assistance and Reha-

faculty in getting a job inspite of my qualifications," say Haque "and it took a long time for my family and society to accept me for what I am".

Haque suggests several ways to make the relationship between disabled persons and the rest of the society, a mutually acceptable one. Negative social attitudes such as apathy, hostility or mockery can be changed by mass awareness through the media. The physical environment should be reformed to enable handicapped people to be more mobile. For example, buses and other forms of transport can have special seats for the handi-



Shahidul Haque

capped, close to the doors of the vehicle. But most of all, says Haque, disabled persons should be given enough job opportunities so that instead of remaining unproductive, they can play a productive role in the nation.

Inspite of the trauma and unexpected barriers he has had to face Haque has been able to lead a full life both professionally and personally. He has two children and enjoys reading, writing and travelling, especially within the country.

He is one of those rare people who channel their weak points into positive directions. In Haque's case it has been his disability and overcoming it to help others that has given him a direction in life. In that he has given much more to society than what it has given him.

Working for Development

ABDUS Sattar Dulal was only 15 years old when he fell from the tree he had climbed up in his family's garden. After remaining unconscious for a few days, Dulal regained consciousness but had lost the ability to walk. A long drawn out treatment lasting seven years has allowed him the power to walk a little but hardly the way a 'normal' person would do.



Abdus Sattar Dulal

It is hard to imagine the struggle and pain Dulal has gone through to come to this stage in his life where he is the Executive Director of Bangladesh Protibondhi Kalyan Samity (BPKS). "I had no one to encourage me to realise my dream to pursue higher education; I was the eldest son but was not able to take any important responsibility. Instead I was dependent on my parents who had to sell all their property to pay for my treatment. Frustrated and helpless, Dulal spent a life of hardship and distress.

In 1985, Dulal got his first real break when he got admitted into the Employment and Rehabilitation Centre for the Physically Handicapped (ERPH) in Tongi where he was able to acquire some developmental skills. After completing several training

courses Dulal got a job in a project of the centre. Then one day Dulal realized that he wanted to play a more active role helping others with disabilities. "I thought that the PWDs should be given the opportunity to utilize their skills and talents in national development.

With this view Dulal set a goal for himself to establish an organization for people with all kinds of disability. On October 25 1985 Dulal with a group of other PWDs, founded BPKS. As the chief executive and member secretary he is responsible for running the activities of the organization and implementing the programmes. Dulal is also responsible for representing PWDs at home and

abroad at various seminars and conventions. Dulal has also taken part in the Fourth International Abilympics in Perth Australia in 1995 where he won a bronze medal in Chess.

Like other PWDs Dulal has had to face the negative attitudes of the society at large and environmental barriers (transport, accessibility to buildings etc) that have limited his mobility.

In order to enable PWDs to lead lives on equal terms and with dignity Dulal feels most of all, equal participation should be ensured at all levels — decision making, educational, policy and legislation, processing, implementation etc. PWDs should have access to educational, cultural and recreational centres, public transport, bazaar, etc. Employment, both self employment and wage-employment should be ensured. Legislation should be amended.

In his free time Dulal likes to play chess for which he has a special talent and listening to music. He expects to get married this December. His greatest achievement in life has been to be able to work for the development of PWDs in Bangladesh and to have the opportunity to be a part of the national policy development of PWDs.

Winning the Challenge of Speaking

THERE was an irritating cross connection while I tried to speak to Muhammad Abdus Salaam, the Principal of Hi Care, a school for the hearing impaired. It was only after I had hung up that I realized with shock that I had been having a perfectly normal conversation with someone who was deaf. Speaking was something that had been learnt through extreme effort and perseverance. For Salaam, therefore, acquiring normal speech and language, has been the greatest achievement of all.

Salaam was only six months old when he got typhoid fever resulting in almost total loss of hearing. "My main difficulty was learning to speak since I could not hear people speaking to me" says Salaam. "Fortunately", he adds, "my uncle had some knowledge about deaf children. He dedicated his whole life to teaching me language and speech." Yet even with speaking ability, Salaam as a child, found it very difficult to get any school to accept him. With the help of his family, however, he was able to get a regular education going on to complete a Bachelor's degree from Dhaka University.

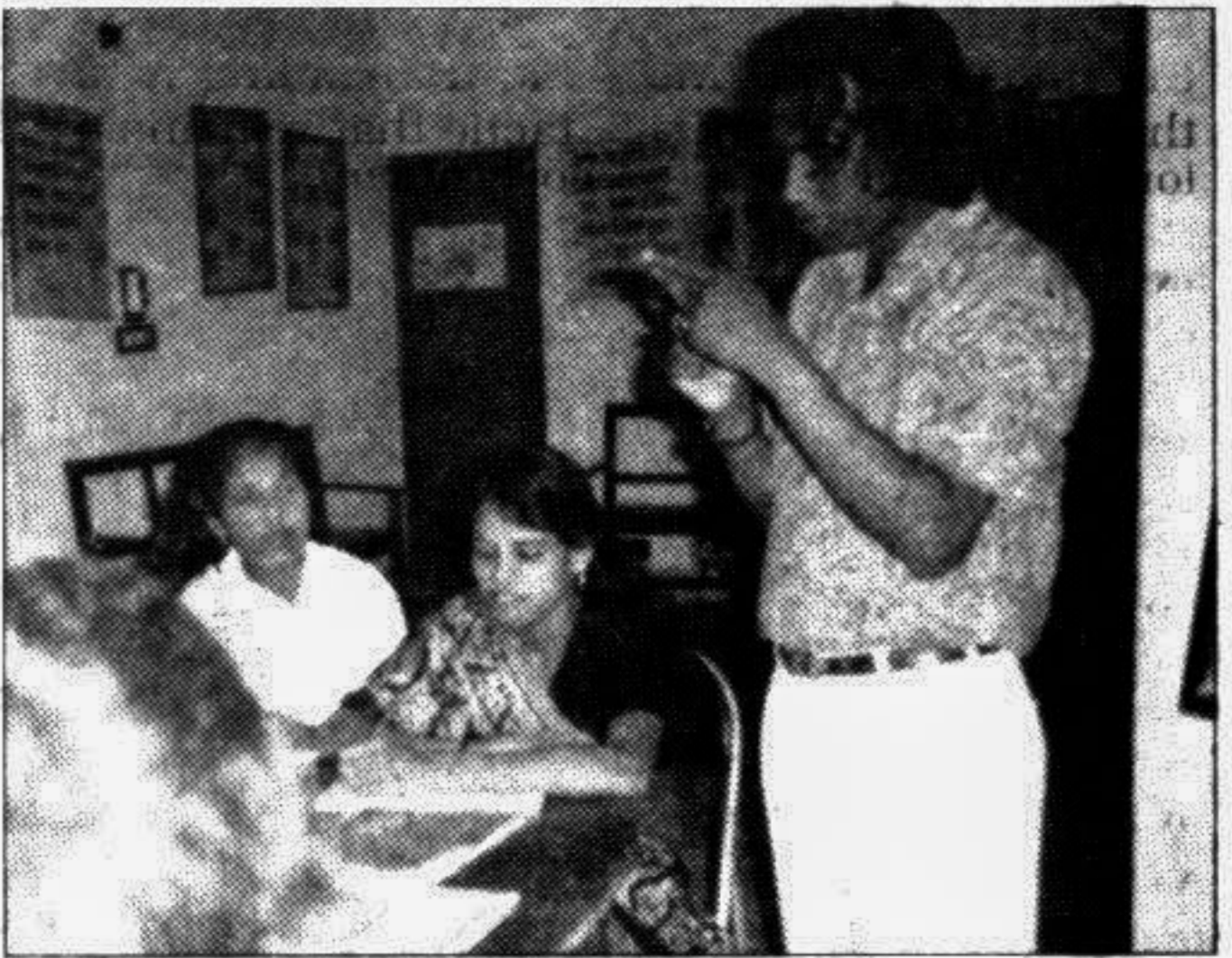
Salaam is also fluent in Bangla, and English. Now, as an adult, he says, "I face very few difficulties and am able to lead a perfectly normal life."

a school for hearing impaired children is demanding enough. For Salaam it must be doubly so. Yet with ease and determination he teaches other deaf children who have greatly benefitted from his organisation. At present there are about hundred students in his school from ages two and a half and above. These children are all learning speech and language much in the same way as Salaam, who uses a hearing aid that helps him to hear.

But how does the world outside this safe cocoon, treat people like Salaam? "We need to educate our society", he says, "to accept every person as an equal human being

whatever their handicap or social background". As the Vice President of NFOWD (National Forum of Organisations working with the Disabled), Salaam is active in raising awareness to eliminate the biases against handicapped people so that they are treated equally.

Teaching the children and spending time with his family leaves very little time for anything else, says Salaam, although he admits he enjoys reading magazines and watching TV. Infact, his disability has not interfered in any way with his personal life. "I am happily married and I have four beautiful children", says Salaam proudly.



Abdus Salaam — Principal of HI CARE, giving a lecture to new teachers of various schools for the deaf.

Waiting for the Light of Opportunity

WE are all, in some sort or manner, indebted to our society. After all whatever we learn — the ways of surviving, techniques of earning a living even educating ourselves is all because of the reason that makes us social beings. In return we give the society, a thing or two back, for instance — we work and in the process utilize the things society has taught us.

But sitting unemployed, not being able to put in use the education, not being able to help others in the society is undoubtedly a misfortune. At least it is for Manju Biswas, a Master Degree holder in Political Science. For Manju being out of work and being utterly depressed because of it, is not the only tragedy.

In the year 1982, when she was preparing for her school finals, a wrong treatment for an eye-nerve infection left her totally blind. When things were already too late, she went to Calcutta and toured some parts of India, namely Madras and Chandigarh, for a year and half, just to get back her sight. But unfortunately her efforts were in vain.

There I saw people like me study and avail degrees and as my father is a teacher, he encouraged me to complete my SSC with the help of Braille. Biswas reveals her story. After her SSC in 1984, she completed her Intermediate in '86 with help from a house tutor Nur Mohammad and also a blind-based NGO in Mymensingh ABC (Assistance for the Blind Children). This NGO created such an environment where normal and blind children could work together. However from there she got admission to Dhaka University and availed

Raffat Binte Rashid talks to Manju Biswas

her Honours and MA in Political Science. A resident student of Shamsunnahar Hall, Biswas lead her university life like any other student, living through violence, competition, and failure. She was dependent on class teachers, hall or class mates in the way every body was, no preferential treatment. Inspite of all her drawbacks she secured 56 per cent in her MA and 58 per cent in Hons. "If you place me in a new room I'll be lost, that's my draw back but if you help me in the room for two to three days I'll be as efficient as any one in the room," she talks about

her dependency. This extremely brave young lady feels that she is left out and the society is running on its own pace leaving her behind. Her spirit is dampened because she feels cheated not because fate played a cruel trick on her eye sight, but because she is out of work for the last two years. Like any other fresh university graduates Biswas was sure she would get a job and her desires were more strong because she was awarded an honorary award, a cheque of Tk 50,000 and a promise to get a job the moment she completes her MA final by none

other than the Prime Minister herself.

Obviously such promises left her more confident and a bit dreamy. When she actually stepped into the real world she realized that, people don't even know that blind children or adults are educating themselves. "What we need is a bit of introduction and someone to show confidence in us," Biswas realizes. Adding further that she tried a number of times to meet the PM again but was always tangled up in the bureaucratic process. "Even our VC tried to reach her but people in her office always assured us that there is no job," she says.

"I was good to all, and showed others sharing my tragic fate, the way to education. We are girls and that too handicapped girls, education is our only weapon to fight back and be accepted," she confides and says that she was not properly evaluated. This is the first time she lost her battle in any competition and not because of her drawbacks but she has no-one to show confidence in her.

"This is very depressing, I am sitting home idle, I must do something and not waste time." A realization how many of us (even normal beings) understand or come face to face with.

Manju Biswas wants to be a government resource teacher, do social work. This aspiring young mind irrespective of her misfortune, wants to lead a normal life — be a part and return a few favours to the society which gave her so much. When will this society of hers evaluate her noble intentions and make her feel happy and normal again? After all, her being a handicap now is someone else's fault.



Manju Biswas Aspiring to help others



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by Jim Davis

