

'We have some very impressive Bangladeshis at all levels'

Vice President and Controller of the World Bank **Fayez Choudhury** tells **Navine Murshid**

FAYEZ Choudhury's is a success story that can inspire many and give people hope. The story of the Vice President and Controller of the World Bank is also of hard work, determination and, above all, respect for himself and for the people around him.

He did honours in Engineering Science and Economics from Oxford University in 1974. He articled with Price Waterhouse in London in their public accounting practice where he obtained membership of the Institute of Chartered Accountants in 1977. Next year, he was transferred to Price Waterhouse Management Consultants in 1978 with specialist interest in financial institutions, including a three-year assignment to develop consulting practices in Nigeria. Seven years later, he left Price Waterhouse to join the World Bank in 1985 as a management consultant in the Organisational Planning Department, the Bank's internal management consulting unit at the time. Two years later, he moved to the International Finance Corporation, the private sector affiliate of the World Bank Group as Chief of Accounting. In 1990, it was back to the World Bank, this time as the Chief of Loan Accounting and Borrower Services. Three years later he became the Chief of Asset and Budget Accounting and then Director of the Accounting Department in 1995 before assuming the current position as Vice President and Controller last month.

Following are excerpts of

the conversation he had with Navine Murshid:

Q: Why do you think it took such a long time for a Bangladeshi to become a Vice President whereas people from India and Pakistan were made VPs quite some time ago?

A: Basically, I would say that it is because we do not have as long a history of employment in the Bank as do our colleagues from other parts of the subcontinent. At the time of independence we were not, I would suspect, particularly well represented in international organisations, and it probably took some time for our qualified people to get hooked into the international organisations network. When I joined the Bank some fifteen years ago there were very few Bangladeshis in the Bank. Happily, since then the numbers at Headquarters have grown. I believe we now have some 27 in regular internationally recruited appointments and I certainly hope the numbers will continue to grow.

Q: Have you ever felt that the World Bank was partisan or unfair in recruiting and/or promoting staff?

A: No, not really. Entry into, and promotion within, the Bank is obviously quite competitive. With the creation of formal professional networks some years ago, the emphasis on attracting, maintaining, developing and retaining the needed professional skills has been heightened. There is a fairly substantial set of checks and balances that the networks and our Human Resources

function exercise to ensure fairness and transparency in recruitment and promotion, and a very real management commitment to it, but any recruitment or promotion decision inevitably involves a measure of subjective judgement.

Q: How are Bangladeshis faring in the World Bank? What are the chances of other Bangladeshis to become VPs?

A: Overall, I would say very well. We have some very impressive Bangladeshis at all levels, and about 30 per cent of our nationals are at managerial levels. A fairly high proportion of our compatriots are relatively young, and so hopefully it is just a question of time before they move through the pipeline and present themselves as very competitive candidates for senior positions.

Q: As a Vice President, what would be your mandate? What sectors will you be looking after? What are the challenges you see in carrying out your responsibilities?

A: The Controller's primary responsibilities are to maintain a strong and transparent reporting and control environment, provide intellectual and strategic leadership on accounting, auditing and borrower financial management and accountability issues, support institutional information needs, play an active role in the risk management of IBRD and IDA as well as participate as a member of the senior management group in matters of corporate strategy, planning and governance.



The challenges are numerous. Like any organisation the Bank must constantly scan its environment and make sure its focus remains relevant to accomplishing its objectives, and likewise the functions within it. The Controllership function is

rapidly evolving in most large organisations and we too need to continue the process of change, which has already been started. We need to continue the shift to a greater focus on the effectiveness of an institutional control framework which is

aligned with a process of institutional risk assessments, to measurement and disclosure of performance and results against internal and external benchmarks, to greater utilisation of technology as an enabler for devoting fewer resources to

transactional activities, and generally to move as rapidly as possible to higher value-added activities.

Q: How do you hope to make a difference, e.g. to the Bank and to member countries like Bangladesh?

A: In essence by contributing to the effectiveness of the Bank in its mission of alleviating poverty. The work of development is extremely complex -- not only in conceptualising interventions to alleviate poverty, but also in having the organisational responsiveness and implementation capability to ensure that we extract the maximum leverage from our limited resources in the work that we do. To be effective, we need a flexible and well functioning organisation which requires all line managers, be they in operational, finance or support units, to be fully engaged in a collaborative fashion towards the delivery of our services and the achievement of our shared objectives. More specifically from the perspective of the Controllership function, maintaining our high standards of internal control and financial reporting are key components in maintaining our AAA bond rating, which in turn is key to our being able to lend funds to our borrowers at very fine rates. And in the area of developing new and effective means of giving us assurance that the money we lend to borrowing entities is used for the purposes intended, we get into the whole area of financial accountability, a cornerstone for effective development.

Q: From what you have seen and experienced, what would you say is required for a Bangladeshi to be successful in multilateral organisations?

A: I am not sure that there is any ingredient that is particular to Bangladeshis. International organisations are by definition multicultural in terms of their staff composition. So, the host of issues that arise from being a minority in an environment where there is an overwhelmingly dominant majority culture, such as would be experienced, say, in a private sector organisation in the United States or Europe, largely do not arise. Having said that, the ingredients for success are varied and numerous: technical competence; good judgement; being able to clearly and persuasively articulate one's views; working collaboratively with internal and external partners; drive, initiative and the ability to deliver results etc. And, of course, luck plays a big part: being in the right place at the right time to capitalise on opportunities. But leaving this latter point aside, in terms of individual attributes, I think Bangladeshis are eminently suited to be effective in international organisations so long as we have self-confidence grounded in self-awareness which lets us demonstrate on a day-to-day basis the full scope of our abilities and potential.

Q: Thank you for your time.

The interviewer is an Economics student at Lawrence University, Wisconsin, US.

'Life is my hobby'

France Lasnier tells **Fayza Haq** before leaving Dhaka on completion of her tenure as the director of *Alliance Francaise de Dhaka*

France Lasnier, with her incomparable charm and wit, contributed to the cultural and social life of Bangladesh for four years while she was here as the director of *Alliance Francaise de Dhaka*. She left for Paris late last month.

Fayza Haq (FH): What are the things you will miss in Bangladesh once you leave it to go back to your country?

France Lasnier (FL): I will first miss our team in *Alliance Francaise de Dhaka*, which is exceptional on the professional and human point of view and all the Bangladeshi persons I have been interacting with for the past four years. In fact, the interaction between my private life and my professional life has been very intense during these four years spent in Bangladesh. I will indeed miss people who are active every day in the environment of the daily life, when I take the car to go to the office and who give me courage to perform my duty with love and dedication. For me, of course, results are important, but more important maybe is the way you achieve these results. And all my best rememberings are linked to the implementation of all the projects we have done as a team. I would say as a family in *Alliance Francaise de Dhaka*.

FH: Was Bangladesh what you had expected it to be before you came here?

FL: Yes, Bangladesh was the country I expected. Having worked for seven years as an Associate Professor in the Asian Institute of Technology in Bangkok, I had many Bangladeshi students and colleagues who luckily projected within me a certain idea of Bangladesh -- not restricted to cyclones and calamities -- and of the character of the Bangladeshi people. I remember my personal assistant, M Howlader. He was the person we all admired. He was skinny but a very hard working person never departing of his self-control and his dignity even in situations of hard stress. He was an example for us and I remember him until today. I have not been deceived by what I discovered here in Bangladesh in any way. I should say that it is even the contrary. Do not forget that I chose to come and

work in Bangladesh.

FL: Who are the notable friends that you made in Dhaka during your tenure? Say something about your connections with them.

FL: *Praner Bondhurey!* Friends are those who share the same dream and help in implementing it. Fayza, of course, is one of them! The dream was to deepen the friendship between France and Bangladesh and understand through life experience as much as we could from our respective cultures. Through my professional activity which has been the heart of my life in Bangladesh, I experienced often this feeling of friendship. Every friend is notable and dear to me in one way or another and my only wish is that we keep in touch with time.

FL: Did the Bangladeshi countryside attract you? Which are the places that you went to and that has left and indelible mark on your

mind?

FL: Yes, I have been travelling extensively in Bangladesh and I also came back in some places which for any reason become dear to me. Such places are Bandarban area, the region of Dinajpur, the region of Haluaghat and also Tangail district, Mymensingh. Also the river of Dhaka. Ruplal House is my dream, it should become one day Dhaka's nicest hotel like the 'Oriental Hotel' in Bangkok! Gandaria, Old Dhaka, Shakhari Bazar. In this biggest delta of the world, light is very peculiar. I wished I had more time to visit Bangladesh by boat.

FL: What are the different facets of the culture of Bangladesh that you learnt during your stay?

FL: What I learned is that the culture of Bangladesh is very sophisticated and subtle. People are emotional and need to be approached with a certain tenderness and sincerity if we want to

win their heart. The foreigner has to find a magic key for the country to open to him/her. The foreigner should adopt an attitude similar to the gardener in front of a rose to see it blossoming because of his/her care. The only way to achieve something is by winning the heart of the people. These people have a great sense of freedom and dignity and they accept us as we are with what we are. We can hurt them without them showing anything externally and I must apologise for having certainly done it unconsciously. Also as it is a culture of subtlety, one has to listen to people a lot, if not to understand but to perceive their internal atmosphere and the message they want to convey. If we miss the point they just vanish. People of Bangladesh are sound and sober, but they can melt like snow when they feel we are interested in their culture and in their country. I am sincerely

interested in their culture. If we gain their confidence, people can speak forever about their culture and the love of their country. They also have a great memory.

FL: What is your impression of Bangladesh? Did you like its music, food, literature and other integral parts of its culture?

FL: I would use a cliché about my impression about Bangladesh. For me this country is really at the junction between the South-East Asian culture and the Indian sub-continent one. This country can be very extrovert in terms of artistic expression but at the same time extremely introvert as far as what is aimed to be expressed. It is difficult for a foreigner to understand. I would need so much time. People are extremely generous and I have the impression they gave me much more than I have been able to give to them. May be that is the best lesson I learn from this country: generosity.

FL: Generosity is certainly what we are lacking the most in the West. Besides classical arts like painting, music, writing... it is poetry that I rediscovered during my stay with a particular flavour in Bangladesh. Vibration of words is important here, may be more than what is said: this is a country with a language. Indeed I very much appreciate Farida Parveen and Bari Siddique.

FL: What are the changes that you have brought about as the director of *Alliance Francaise*?

FL: In *Alliance Francaise* the policy was to promote a dialogue with the largest segment of the population. Although *Alliance* is always vibrating with many different events, I also wanted to pass the message that an institute like ours has also the mission to do research and development in the field of culture. It is the reason why we undertook for three years investigations on the theme of the development of the National Heritage of Bangladesh. To discover and draw the awareness of the public on the wealth of the heritage of Bangladesh is very interesting in terms of discovering the identity of a nation. On this theme we made research on rickshaw paintings, woodcarving, *sataranj* rugs etc. We organised national contests on wood carving to start the notion of label of quality of craftsmanship, in co-operation with the Bangladesh Design Centre. The best craftsman of France came to Bangladesh at that time and it was very moving to see him working carving with his Bangladeshi companions. We also did a lot of things on movie by organising jointly with our European partners, the European Film Festival. Finally, we will end our term with the construction of a new gallery in *Alliance*, to serve the need of the finest artists of this country. This opening on the future shows all our appreciation of the art scene in Bangladesh.

FL: Why do you say it is important to have knowledge of the French language? What are the difficult tasks that you faced as the director of *Alliance Francaise*? What is your impression of the students in your institution?

FL: In any country where

people speak English, French is chosen as a second or third language. It is important to my view to learn French because the French culture as the Bengali one has a universal character to share. I say universal and not global because our culture is one but diverse. To learn French is also to open one's mind on the Latin languages and cultures which have been extremely civilising in time of history. These cultures present today an alternative. The recurring problem we face and solve is the fact that French is not taught in the educational system in Bangladesh and institutions like *Alliance Francaise* have to put a lot of efforts to train good teachers. We have been very lucky these few years to work with a team of excellent teachers in *Alliance*. Our students are very eager to learn and their eagerness drives us to answer their demand with the highest possible quality. I have a great esteem for our students and our teachers.

FL: What brought you into this profession? What are the places in the east that you have been to in your job and what are your memorable impressions of these places?

FL: Life brought me in that profession. I am at the origin a researcher as associate professor in solid state physics. As many scientists I am a researcher in my soul and I am interested by everything and everybody. Therefore the future was always a source of very diverse opportunities. After 10 years spent in fundamental research in a French technopole, I spent seven years at the Asian Institute of Technology in Bangkok as associate professor in the field of energy. At that time, my area of competence spread from Pakistan to Taiwan, Mongolia to South Pacific, my work was regional. Then the Embassy of France was looking for a scientist to renegotiate the agreement between France and Singapore in the field of electronics. It is at that time that I became cultural and scientific counsellor in the Embassy of France. I had also a degree in techniques of cinematography that provides the cultural side of my profile. I must add that in my younger days I wrote a lot of articles on theatre.

FL: Do you think a woman has to work harder than man to success?

FL: Of course, like many professional ladies, I experience and suffer woman discrimination. It is a daily subtle fight to gain recognition and human respect. But I think also that whether a man or a woman you have to work hard if you want to achieve something. If a man or a woman has prejudice towards other women's work, I cannot help him or her. It is too bad for him or her. Whatever I do is to try my best in whatever I do because it is my way to enjoy life. Also as a responsible adult, I don't need the continuous approval of others to be able to evaluate my behaviour, my performances and my shortcomings. Only the gaze of my peers is important for me to notice. Now if I see a man or a woman having prejudice against another woman, I will protect this woman as much as I can.

FL: What are your hobbies?

FL: My hobbies? Take a cup of tea with people and chit-chat. Life is my hobby!

