

Side swept white wavy hair, a smile plastered on his face and a pair of eyes brimming with patriotism. Meet 65-year-old Mustafa Chowdhury - the man who dared to explore the lives of war babies, a part of the liberation war that has always been ignored by historians and social scientists of Bangladesh.

Chowdhury's quest for learning about the outcome of the adoption of the first contingent of 15 war babies to Canada began in 1972 when he left the country right after the liberation of Bangladesh. "That's when many of the war babies were born. At that time, I wanted to track down these "undesirable" war babies adopted by a number of Canadian

he decided not to any time. Rather, he chose to spend his time working on the book, which is a result of 15 years of research on war babies.

The book called '71 er Judhdho Shishur Obidito Itihash' will be published in the upcoming Ekushey Boi Mela in 2015. His book is an attempt to break the stigma that the country holds regarding war children. This would be the first investigative research on a sensitive subject like the war babies of Bangladesh. "It's sad but true, war-babies born under the most tragic circumstances and conceived as a result of sexual violence against the will of the birth mothers, remain only as a footnote in the Bangladesh's history of its war of independence. We often confuse the

Remembering the Forgotten

Mustafa Chowdhury, a freelance researcher and writer living in Canada, documents the journey of 15 war babies, their adoptive Canadian parents and the beauty of parenthood in his yet to be published historiography '71 er Judhdho Shishur Obidito Itihash'.

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couples who went out of their way to embrace the helpless war babies in need of safe homes. I was moved by their tragic birth and the "unwelcome" situation in Bangladesh," says Chowdhury.

Using a vast range of archival sources and testimonies, Chowdhury started his research in the late 1990s. The book is mainly a combination of official records collected from the Dhaka-based Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity's Home, called Shishu Bhabhan. This was one place in which many rape victims came in to give birth in secret and leave the newborns as they did not wish to keep their babies conceived through unwanted pregnancies.

After working for 34 years in the Federal Public Service in Ottawa, when Chowdhury finally retired,

term war babies with war orphans. War babies are the ones conceived as a result of rape of Bengali women by the Pakistani soldiers in Occupied Bangladesh in 1971. They were born in 1972 and were abandoned by their birth mothers as well as the society because of the circumstances surrounding their conception. Whereas, war orphans are the ones who lost their parents in the war; or their parents had abandoned them because of illness, poverty or death of one or both parents. All are collectively referred to as the abandoned babies of Bangladesh. The point to bear in mind is that all are orphans and abandoned babies; war babies, because of their conception through enforced pregnancies, are not only tragic but are also unique," observes Chowdhury.

"The circumstances surrounding the birth of these babies were very shattering, referring them as the "unwanted" or "unwelcome" babies or even as the enemy babies make their lives more miserable" he adds. This book will help to come out of that kind of narrow view about these children. It is basically a positive story, which talks about parenting beyond genetic lines. The book also takes a look at the success of the war babies of the liberation war, who are now around 42 years old.

The research was never easy. Chowdhury had to travel all over the country for information on the issues that took root over 40 years ago. How challenging was that?

"It was challenging, but my job as a public servant helped me a lot in terms of accessing information and going to different parts of the country to meet the adopters and the adoptees for my research."

In his journey of penning this book, he had to travel across Canada and Bangladesh to collect and verify information. He managed to collect rare historical records from the archives of the International Social Service (Switzerland and the U.S.A.), International



Mustafa Chowdhury

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Planned Parenthood Federation (UK) and several library and archives in Canada. Records from the Montreal-based Families for Children (FFC), a non profit organisation that made arrangements for the transfer of 15 war-babies from Bangladesh to Canada, also helped him write the historical narrative.

The book's protagonists are 15 adopted children and their parents, who live in Canada. Also a number of senior mandarins in the Mujib administration who took these cases seriously along with a number of health professionals and social workers, who worked religiously to save the abandoned babies, form a core narrative of the book.

"Given that the issue is very sensitive, there are lots of things that I had to keep in mind," says Chowdhury. "I had to grow a personal relationship with the 'war babies', who are now grown adults and make sure that they felt comfortable in sharing these stories which are very personal. In one case, once I finished my write up, the parents liked what I had written but told me that they would not want the information to get published. This meant for me often re-crafting the story according to their preference while paying attention to the truth about parenting beyond genetic and racial boundary."

"Almost all adopters were Caucasian parents with biological children of their own; and yet they expressed interest in adopting babies from a war torn country, thus giving them an opportunity to live and grow up to their full potential," he explains. "Unlike

most adoptive parents, they let their children know their origin and past and also encouraged them to search for their biological mothers, having no atavistic fear," he says

To the adopted children, as Chowdhury finds it "Adoption came to mean nothing less than endearment and unconditional love, something that they did not receive in their country of birth." With the love and care that they have received from their Caucasian parents and multiracial siblings, those war-babies now in their early forties are successfully dealing with their identity as Bangladeshi born Canadian going beyond their interracial complexity.

Chowdhury's book attempts to sum up the success story of fifteen war babies, starting from abandonment through adoption to their adaptation in their present home, Canada. As readers delve further into the book, they will discover fascinating stories of the lives of war-babies in their adopted country they call "home" and their relationship with their parents, demonstrating a parent-child bond going beyond all geographical boundaries, race and religion.

Chowdhury is currently in Bangladesh, as he is editing and proofreading his manuscript which will be available in Ekushey Boi Mela 2015. "I am happy to be contacted during my stay here in Bangladesh. If anyone is interested in this issue, they can get in touch with me," says Chowdhury welcomingly.

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