

50 YEARS OF BRAC

An education legacy lighting the way



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IT hardly needs saying that the towering personality of Sir Fazle Hasan Abed left its indelible mark on Brac’s vision, mission and programmes in all the areas of development in which the organisation has been engaged. Education, in its institutional forms as well as in a generic sense, was seen by Abed as the key to empowerment and capacity-building of people, so that they can exercise choices and make decisions in shaping their own lives.

In September 2019, I approached Abed Bhai with a request to write the foreword of a book on education in South Asia, which two of my colleagues and I had been writing. I handed him some notes with great hesitation, hoping that he would read these at his leisure and give his observations and guidance for a final text. I knew by then about his serious and potentially terminal illness.

On that September morning, he seemed to be in good spirits. The 2019 Yidan Prize for Education, arguably the most prestigious and certainly the largest in monetary terms (valued at USD 4 million), had been announced the previous day. He took a look at the first few pages of the notes, and beyond all my expectations, started to glance through the pages, making occasional comments and sometimes asking questions. He spent almost an hour on the notes, making observations and offering suggestions.

The substantive foreword of the book, titled *“Political Economy of Education in South Asia,”* published by the University of Toronto Press in January 2022, was the last piece of writing on education by Abed Bhai. Some of his thoughts and concerns are expressed in this piece.

As Abed put it:

In our corner of South Asia, in the aftermath of the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971, the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (Brac) transformed its post-conflict relief and rehabilitation operation into a rebuilding and development programme. Education was seen as a key component of our nation-building mission. Drawing inspiration from Paulo Freire’s *“Pedagogy of the Oppressed”* (1970), we launched a literacy and adult education campaign as a means to raise people’s awareness of their situation and encourage them to read the world,



not just the word. At that time, 80 percent of adults could not read or write. Interestingly, Brac’s participants, those in poverty-stricken communities, told us firmly that their priority was educational opportunity for their children, because existing primary education was not serving their children well. Almost half the children had no access to primary education, and most of those who did enrol did not complete that stage.

Seeking to design a response, in the 1980s, Brac pioneered innovative community-based one-room centres for children aged 8–14 years, two-thirds of them girls, who had not entered a regular primary school. The teachers, mostly women, were from the community, trained and supervised by Brac and provided with textbooks and teachers’ guides. This came to be known as non-formal primary education (NFPE), but its objective was the same as that of primary schools: to equip children with literacy and numeracy skills and prepare them for secondary school. At its peak, it served more than a million children at a time, becoming the largest successful non-formal primary education programme in the world. In stark contrast to the formal schools, over 95 percent completed the equivalent of primary education, and over 80 percent moved on to a secondary

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Brac’s education programme provides literacy and numeracy skills to children living in slums.

SOURCE:
BRAC

school.

Abed lamented that there was still the need for such a programme in spite of the progress made in expanding formal primary education, but Brac had to curtail the programme because donor funding dried up when bilateral and multilateral contributors began channelling all their funds directly to the government. A new programme approach in the changed circumstances could be more of a partnership between Brac—and other education NGOs with demonstrated capabilities—and the government to ensure inclusive, equitable and quality education for all children, as promised in the SDG4 education agenda.

I first met Abed Bhai and Bahar Bhabi (Ayesha Abed) in 1973, when I had the task of examining creative rural rehabilitation and development initiatives in post-liberation Bangladesh for the International Council for Educational Development in the US. I visited the projects at Shalla upazila in Sunamganj and Manikganj, which I wrote up as a case study, perhaps the first exposure of Brac in development literature, published in a book edited by Philip Coombs in 1980.

With Abed Bhai’s encouragement, an international team from Unicef (of which I was then the senior education

adviser), USAID and the Rockefeller Foundation undertook an assessment of the NFPE programme in 1992, and looked at its potential for a major expansion. The assessment report was presented at an international donors’ conference at the idyllic setting of the Rockefeller Foundation’s conference centre in Bellagio, Italy. Faruque Chowdhury, the then adviser of Brac, represented the organisation. Major bilateral agencies that were in attendance readily pledged the necessary support for a major expansion of NFPE in Bangladesh. Thus, more than 30,000 centres enrolling over a million children came into being by 1996.

The establishment of Brac University in 2001 is a testimony to Abed’s abiding faith in education. He often spoke about institutions that endured for centuries are the universities, such as Bologna in Italy, Oxford in the UK or Harvard in the US. Brac University’s undergraduate programmes and its graduate schools and institutes, including the Brac Institute of Educational Development, strive to offer an academic programme appropriate for an emerging middle-income country. Abed wrote:

We in Brac University have set goals for ourselves concerning the kind of persons our graduates should be. We want them to possess a few essential attributes. They should have good written and verbal communication skills. They should be able to think critically and apply scientific reasoning in solving problems... They should be sensitive to the changing global world. They should accept and respect diversity and the plural identities of human beings, which would serve as a moral compass for them.

In his last written piece on education, Abed Bhai sounded a sober note:

Today, in this era of post-truth and alternative reality, amplified exponentially by social media powered by digital technology algorithms, the idea of progress itself is under challenge. In South Asia and elsewhere, the upsurge of ultra-nationalism, rejection of pluralism and secular humanism, self-serving populism, xenophobic trends, and majoritarian subversion of democratic institutions and values have emerged as new threats to human progress. Education itself is in danger of being misappropriated to serve these retrograde forces. The role of quality education—and of the larger education community, including teachers, parents, and students—in reclaiming the idea of progress itself is more important than ever.

The words of caution and the spirit and the philosophy underlying them are particularly relevant in the world today. Let Brac’s legacy continue to light the way.

Women can internalise patriarchy, too



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A few days ago, a video that went viral showed a young college-going girl beating her harasser on a bus, ripping his shirt in the process, and making him beg for forgiveness. He had touched her inappropriately while she was resting with her eyes closed. Most passengers chose to remain quiet, which calls to mind Dante’s words, “The darkest places in hell are reserved for those who maintain their neutrality in times of moral crisis.” Some passengers asked her to let the perpetrator go instead of creating a scene. She was told that she should expect such occurrences and it wasn’t that big of a deal—in other words, normalising sexual harassment and strangling the voices of protest against such harassers.

In fact, this college girl was told that she shouldn’t have resorted to physical violence, but she claims that she wouldn’t have done so if others had protested in some way. She probably knew that a molester is unlikely to be brought to justice. Prof Ziaur Rahman of Dhaka University’s Department of Criminology asserts that 97 percent of sex offenders go unpunished (*Dhaka Tribune*, 2020). According to Sheepa Hafiza, executive director of Ain O Shalish Kendra (ASK), the reason why such offenders remain unscathed is because of the culture of impunity and the state’s indifference towards eliminating said culture. A glaring example of this is the fact that

victims often face further harassment when they seek justice from police. No one stopped this girl’s harasser from getting off the bus, and so she did everything in her power to ensure that he would think twice before molesting someone else.

A few days after I saw the college girl’s act of bravery, I came upon another video where a woman on a bus was screaming at a much younger girl, who was wearing a black T-shirt and a pair of jeans, blaming her for why two-year-old babies get raped. One can hear a man blaming the girl’s upbringing, while another one tells the harasser that her claims are correct, i.e. the girl’s choice of clothing is the reason why rape is on the rise. Ironically, the girl’s character was questioned around the same time when the government banned questions probing the “immoral character” of rape victims in criminal cases by amending the Evidence Act, a 19th century British law.

What struck me the most was how the girl bore it all and remained mute. In the comment section of the viral video, I saw a substantial number of people wondering why the girl didn’t utter a single word in protest, while another significant percentage commented on the clothes of the harasser. I found both types of comments problematic:

While it’s easy to say that one should have raised her voice in protest or “slapped” the “psycho,” one needs to bear in mind that unlike the college girl on that passenger bus, who was with her mother, the victim in the second story was alone in a bus full of men siding with a harasser who seemed like she would physically assault the girl if instigated in any way. Or, perhaps, she was wise enough to remain calm in that situation because some battles can’t be won, especially if you’re up against a person who is beyond logic and reasoning. After all, according to a Persian proverb, silence is the best

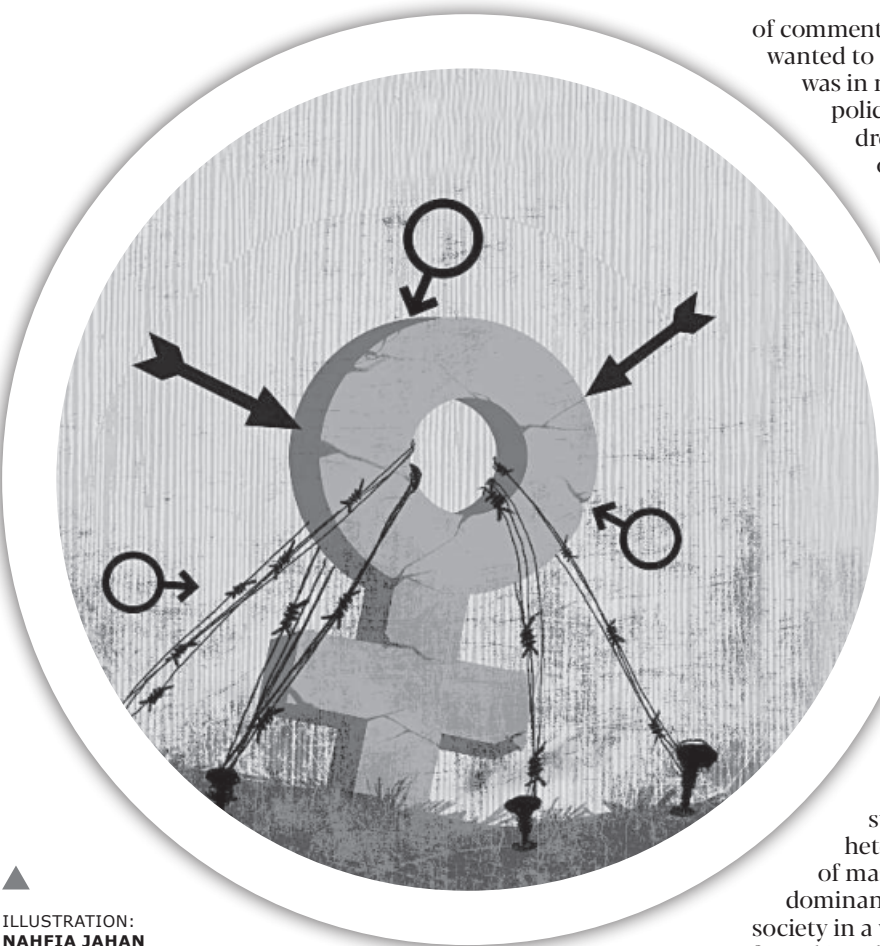


ILLUSTRATION:
NAHFIA JAHAN MONNI

to reply a fool. The harasser was dressed in a pink salwar-kameez; her orna was wrapped around her head. People took a few stills from the video, focusing on the tightness of her attire and the curves of her womanly shape. Moreover, the fact that she wasn’t wearing an actual hijab or that she was *beporda* or that her neck was exposed was also pointed out. I get where these types

of comments came from. People just wanted to point out that the harasser was in no position to be the moral police because she herself wasn’t dressed in the most Islamic of ways. However, what’s the point of commenting about the hypocrisy of the harasser? The real problem here was a woman slut-shaming another woman. When women bring other women down in this fashion, they give men the right to slut-shame women too. They make it easier for patriarchy and rape culture to thrive, and they impede the achievement of gender equality.

That being said, the root of the problem lies in the traditional form of hegemonic masculinity, which promotes stereotypical masculine heterosexual traits. This kind of masculinity puts men in a dominant position in a patriarchal society in a way where women aren’t forced into becoming the subordinate gender; rather, women themselves give consent to being dominated by their male counterparts. Therefore, the female harasser on the bus is, in essence, a victim of hegemonic masculinity. She doesn’t just advocate slut-shaming, which is deeply rooted in patriarchy, but is also of the conviction that women must have a certain “station”—or *“sthaan,”* as she put it—in a male-dominated world.