

GEETEARA SAFIYA - 2002



*Chowdhury
Chairman of
Adcomm*

She is somebody who could have been a good columnist, a successful journalist, or, maybe a lecturer in a good university – but she wanted to try something different. Geetara Safiya Chowdhury, chairman and managing director of Adcomm Limited, was born to be an entrepreneur – an extremely successful one.

Born in 1946, Geeteara completed her Honours and Masters in English from Dhaka University in 1967 and 1968. After her marriage to Nazim Kamran Chowdhury in 1969, she moved to Karachi with her husband and joined "She Magazine" – a progressive magazine for women promoting women's rights and issues among other things – as a senior editor.

This was in no way an alien field for Geeteara who had enjoyed writing essays and stories since early childhood with her first story appearing in the “Young Observer” – children’s page of the then *Pakistan Observer* – when she was in kindergarten. Soon after, she had started writing in the children’s pages of different newspapers and magazines like the *Pakistan Observer*, *The Morning News*, *The Statesman* (published from Calcutta), and others.

"My parents always told me that I would have to pursue a career and be economically independent. My

father, AFM Safiyyullah, geared me towards journalism,” says Geetara, granddaughter of scholar Dr Muhammad Shahidullah.

While working at “She,” Geetara interviewed famous political leaders but felt restricted in her ability to express her views. Disenchanted, she felt that she had no freedom of speech and it would not be possible to continue her profession in journalism. During her tenure there, Geetara also did some free-lance copywriting for a few advertising agencies. When the magazine management decided to bring out a full East Pakistan issue, she travelled to Dhaka and met potential clients and agencies. She was given a Tk 7,000 target which she easily surpassed by managing ads worth Tk 25,000. Once again when her husband was transferred back to Dhaka, she left her job at “She” and came back.

"While I was being picky and choosy in selecting a career track, I was offered a job in one of the leading advertising agencies Interspan, which is now known as Interspeed. I took that up. Little did I know that within three months, I would climb up from being a copywriter to general manager to executive vice president. After two years at this agency, I left over a difference of opinion with my boss." Some clients who worked with Geetarendra at Interspan encouraged her to start a new company.

With a lot of trepidation and excitement, she started Adcomm on July 4, 1974 with six people in a small room and an investment of Tk 10,000. But it was not an easy task. She had to manage a bank guarantee worth Tk 50,000 for accreditation with the Sangbadpatra Parishad but she had only Tk 3,500. She rushed from bank to bank as they were asking for Tk 50,000 deposit or collateral. She wanted to give her ornaments as collateral but the banks would not accept that. They were asking for a piece of land or property for this

purpose. "Finally, after arranging Tk 10,000 from family members, a managing director agreed to give me the bank guarantee on condition that the bills would be channelled through the bank," Geetara recalls. Furthermore, there were fundamental problems with advertising.

"There were no big brands at that time. Agencies used to prepare occasional supplements on February 21, March 26, December 16, and do mostly public relation jobs." In addition, apart from the two companies, Bata and Glaxo, which

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had pushed her to start a new venture, very few other companies were willing to work with a new firm where a woman was the CEO. "When I sent company chiefs my business cards, they talked to me very politely but did not want to give me jobs. Despite these setbacks, Adcomm was able to add Fisons, British Oxygen to its client list," she adds.

In 1977, a multinational company asked advertising firms to submit designs for their products and, after scrutiny, selected six – incidentally, all six were from Adcomm.

"But the turning point for Adcomm was Fisons. It was more than a client and helped us grow. In fact, each and every brand of Fisons was special and helped the firm move a step forward," Geeteara admits.

Fisons and Lever were rivals in some

categories so even though the latter was interested, it was not possible for Adcomm to provide services to Lever. The conflict-of-interest issue came to an end when Lever took over Fisons Toiletries; "I was crying at the handing over ceremony. For me, it was like I nurtured a daughter who got married and is going to her husband's house and I am also with her," she recalls.

Lever then offered Adcomm the opportunity to work with its brands hence providing the second turning point for Adcomm. "Fisons helped

from learning the trade, Geeteara also acquired a few early and crucial lessons on professional values.

"There is no shortcut to success. Values that are still the key to a successful career include punctuality, discipline, and commitment." In her business sphere, Geeteara never compromised on quality. She worked hard, but at the same time, was honest in providing services to clients. In her personal life, she mends her creative energy by growing roses, taking long walks, and caring for her cat, Benson.

"There is a lot more to be done. I want to build Adcomm to be recognised in the world as a world class advertising and communication solution provider. I love my work. It's my passion," she feels.

The brands Adcomm built – Peops Gel, Genisol, GMG Airlines, Agora, Wheel Patriotic – are her major achievements. "In fact, the brands we built are like my babies," says Geeteera, mother of two children – son Farhan and daughter Keya. She never ignored her family responsibilities – "I used to come home from work and help them with their homework." From a very early age, her children started coming with her to the office, especially during their holidays.

A careerist, Geeteara is one of the leading women entrepreneurs of the country. She received "The Leading Women Entrepreneurs of the World Award" sponsored by IBM, Fortune Magazine, United Airlines, Dior, Chase Manhattan and managed by Star Group, a US-based company in 2000 for being one of the leading women entrepreneurs of the world. In the same year, she also received the Priyadarshini Award from the Federation of Indian Women Entrepreneurs in Delhi.

Her success story is not only a matter of great pride for herself and her colleagues at Adcomm, but is also a source of inspiration for Bangladeshi women who intend to venture on their own.

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ঢাকা ইসলামিক ব্যাংকিং