

Note for Record

Visit to Bangladesh December 3-09, 2016

**By: Shoaib Sultan Khan
December 14, 2016**

Subject: The Miracle of BRAC

I have always held Sir Fazle Hasan Abed in awe. Whenever, I meet him, I ask him “Abed! Does your mind ever rest or is it always thinking of new initiatives and implementing them”? The spectrum of activities BRAC is involved, not only nationally but also internationally, are simply mind boggling. An NGO which started as a relief organisation, is today the largest NGO in the world.

I was happy to learn when BRAC decided to initiate its activities in Pakistan. On Sir Abed’s visit to Pakistan, a few years ago, I welcomed the idea and offered all possible help and support to BRAC Pakistan. I had a vested interest in making this offer because BRAC had made a name in implementing education and health programmes. As Rural Support Programmes (RSPs) mainly focus on productive sector interventions that being the glue in achieving their core mandate of organizing the rural poor to enable them to unleash their potential to improve their livelihood. Beginning with Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) in 1983, this approach had resulted in doubling the income of the one million people inhabiting mountainous region of Gilgit, Baltistan and Chitral in ten years according to the World Bank evaluation. Since 1989 AKRSP, instead of expanding itself, adopted the strategy of replicating itself as an independent and autonomous organisations like AKRSP, which was established by the Aga Khan Foundation, Geneva, as a not for profit joint stock company under Section 42 of the Pakistan’s Companies Ordinance. By 2007 when BRAC decided to come to Pakistan nearly nine organisations called Rural Support Organisation/Programme (RSP) had been set up in different parts of Pakistan, as replications of AKRSP with their independent Board of Directors. These RSPs

have now nearly 400,000 community organisations with over six million rural households as members touching the lives of nearly forty million people.

To RSPs, BRAC Pakistan could open avenues to benefit the organised communities with education and health interventions. It was this selfish motive which made me embrace BRAC Pakistan and RSPs have never looked upon BRAC as a competitor.

This relationship was further strengthened, when BRAC asked me to become a member of BRAC Pakistan Advisory Council formed a year ago. It was in that capacity because the members of the Advisory Council elected me as Chairman of the Council that I had the pleasure and privilege of attending the meeting of the BRAC International Advisory Council Members in Bangladesh from December 3 to 9, 2016.

On arrival the first thing that takes your breath away is the BRAC Tower with its Chairman's Office on 19th floor. The first four floors comprise the BRAC Inn, with amenities of 5-star hotel, where the Council members were accommodated. Although when I arrived it was late in the evening, having left Pakistan at 3.00 am in the morning and delayed for five hours by Dubai fog, I reached Dhaka after 18 hours, which used to take 3 hours by direct flight between Pakistan and Bangladesh. I was greatly touched by Mr. Jalaluddin welcoming me at that late hour at BRAC Inn.

On Sunday morning BRAC International Advisory Council Members from Tanzania, Uganda, Afghanistan and South Sudan along with me attended a Briefing on BRAC and BRAC programmes given by Executive Director Mr. Faruque Ahmad including a briefing on Safety and Security by Mr. Najmul Hasan. The Briefing was attended by other executives of BRAC also.

Each Advisory Council Member gave their views on what BRAC could do in their respective countries. I made out a strong case for one teacher non formal schools for out of School Children in Pakistan which now number according to government estimate, 25 million. Since 2007 when BRAC Pakistan initiated its activities, the non-formal school has shown the greatest promise. It is very low cost and highly effective. The first cohort of children admitted by BRAC Pakistan four years ago, have now graduated with a dropout of less than 5%. The cost of each school with 30 children has been US\$ 10,000 over that period costing no more than \$ 6 per child per month. To my mind if BRAC Pakistan wants a footprint in Pakistan, it should plan a massive surge of such schools. A million out of school children need about 33,000 one teacher schools costing less than \$ 60 million per year. A country where Donors like DFID are spending GBP 400 million on education every year, BRAC Pakistan have an excellent opportunity to propagate their model. The next day when I made the same plea before Sir Fazle Abed, he fully endorsed my suggestion. I submitted if BRAC Pakistan aims at bringing 25 million out of school children in school with a negligible dropout rate, I am confident not only donors, even Government of Pakistan would be very willing to look at the model in view of their commitment to SDGs,

After the briefing and lunch, we travelled to Savar to BRAC Centre for Development and Management (BCDM). Although the place is no more than 35 km from Dhaka, the traffic we encountered was horrendous. I had never seen such battered buses and trucks. The informal economy was bursting at the seams with carbon type roadside development of flats and industrial units littered alongside the road. Development was staring you in the face but it was chaos. The road travel was a nightmare. Dhaka was no better which we experienced in subsequent days. Short distances in the city took hours.

The BCDM would be the envy of the most illustrious centres anywhere in the world. Another master piece of Abed. Many years ago I had gone to another

place which had been dubbed as Abed's Taj Mahal. I have no idea what those people will call BCDM. It was acme of comfort staying at the Centre.

Monday morning we travelled to Manikganj. In the late fifties when I was serving as a young field officer in the Eastern Wing, Manikganj was a subdivision of Dhaka district, now it was a full-fledged district headquarter. This was BRAC Regional Office.

One of the recent initiatives of BRAC is Targeting the Ultra Poor (TUP). We visited a group. These were the poorest of the poor excluded from the Society. Each one had a heart wrenching story prior to their help from BRAC. Their targeting was done by BRAC holding a PRA exercise followed by a visit to each targeted household to verify the socio-economic condition of the family including verification of assets, children going to school, housing condition etc. On selection each household is provided a stipend for 28 to 30 weeks amounting to about \$ 600 per capita and in case of their investing in livestock, as they are landless, BRAC also helped them with concentrate for feeding animals. Within two years, this group of the households had experienced improvements in their economic status, some had even taken micro credit loans and indulged in different enterprises including fattening of animals, leasing of land, helping husbands do work like masonry etc. Their poverty was reflected in the abject condition of their housing and if they had a cow, it was kept under a mosquito net in the house because that was their most precious asset.

From this group, we went to a group which BRAC had helped for four years and had graduated out of poverty. One could clearly see the difference in housing and the value of assets and even the husband earning by leasing a Rickshaw, who prior to BRAC intervention was suffering from TB and got cured by their help.

Next we visited Post-primary and Continuation Education (PACE) programme of BRAC which helps secondary and higher secondary schools in improving quality and standard of teachers, including opening of a MULTIPURPOSE Community Learning Centre. It is like library with reading facilities and books. The headmaster stated that by giving Takka 500 donation, one can become a life member of the Centre. On his assurance that we can do so, I gave Takka 1,000 making myself and my friend from Afghanistan as life members. The Headmaster showed us a Board where names of the donors were written and promised that our names will be written on the Board.

After lunch at Manikganj BRAC Regional Office, we visited the Ayesha Abed Foundation established in memory of BRAC Founder's wife. This is a Social Enterprise where thousands of rural women come and become trained artisans and produce quality goods which are marketed at Aurang, BRAC's shopping outlet, all over the world and a source of substantial income to BRAC.

We thought we had seen enough but we had not and were taken to visit Adolescent Development Programme, locally called Kishori Club. These were evening clubs where young boys and girls gathered and indulged in socializing and cultural activities. The membership of boys was restricted to only 25%. The club was open to girls and boys between 10-19 years of age.

They came on Mondays and Thursdays only for two hours. The premises was the non-formal one teacher school during the day. They meet once a month with their parents. Most of them are studying in schools. At the club, there is a Peer Education Supervisor who helps them in social activities. They put up a demonstration in dancing and singing and group activities. It was a most heartening experience. In fact when I remember older days, the girls were not so emancipated as I found them now and much more beautiful probably because of better nutrition. We were told there are more than 9,500 such clubs with 300,000 girl member. Another feather in Abed's hat.

As I was very keen to see a non-formal school functioning, on Tuesday morning I was taken to such a school in Savar Bakhtapur. There were 33 out of school children. As we entered the school, the leaders were introduced who administered an oath which everyone took. Then a Unity Song was jointly sung. Six type of foods were defined and Sonar Bangla song was sung. The confidence of children and the happiness on their faces lively and teeming with happiness and joy was a scene to capture. This was third year of the children. Even a 16-year dropout did not feel any shame in being at school with children much younger than him. The main reason for dropout many children gave was bad behavior of the teacher. There has been only the same teacher for the last three years and the children love her. There are five new schools in the area and all told 19 schools. I thanked the teacher and the Programme Organiser.

My field visit came to an end and I must profusely thank Salam and Salique of BRAC who remained with the group throughout and made our visit so memorable. As I had been informed by Jalaluddin that the Pakistan High Commissioner to Bangladesh Mr. Rafiuzzaman Siddiqi was insistent that I should have lunch with him, so leaving my friends of the Advisory Council, I hurried with Salam to Dhaka to face the horrendous traffic jams on the road. Our expert driver somehow managed to bring us to BRAC Inn in time for lunch.

The High Commissioner had very kindly laid not only a sumptuous lunch but also invited friends from Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) and Faruquebhai and Jalalbhai from BRAC besides the Deputy High Commissioner and a Brigadier. The AKDN Diplomatic Representative turned out to be my old friend Munir Merali whom I was meeting after years. Rafiuzzaman, grandson of Choudhry Khaliquzzaman who was a great friend of my grandfather and whom I had met as a school boy in Lucknow where Rafi's grandfather was the Mayor of Lucknow. I still remember that as Mayor, he had allowed construction of a Hindu Temple in the famous Muslim area of Aminabad Park of Lucknow and Muslims

were livid with anger and dubbed the Mayor Pandit Khaliquzzaman, but it didn't bother Chaudhry Sahib the least. He stuck to his guns and the Temple remained in a predominantly Muslim Area.

On my return to BRAC Inn, I saw a lady sitting in the lounge whose face looked very familiar. The mystery was solved at Dinner hosted by Abed. The lady was India's famous actress Shabana Azmi, currently an MP as member of the Rajya Sabha. Abed had roped her in as Member of BRAC Governing Body. At dinner table when I asked her how did this happen, she replied "how could she refuse Abed". Next day at the meeting of BRAC Governing Body, International Governing Boards, Affiliates and Country Advisory Council Members, I asked Shabana why she had Azmi in her name and she came the response from Azamgarh. I told her my family comes from the same district. She was a bit critical of Rahul Gandhi saying that Modi has picked up most of the programmes Congress had started and recycled with their new nomenclature and is getting all the credit. I asked her which party did she belong, she took a sigh of relief saying none. She was nominated on reserved seats by the President of India. I asked her if she is aware what Congress did in Andhra Pradesh or the launch of National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) on the pattern of Andhra poverty reduction programme in 2011 nationally. She said Modi claims NRLM as his star programme. I asked her if she ever meets MPs Rahul Gandhi or Jairam Ramesh. On her answer in the negative, I urged her to meet them to learn what they did including UP where she was of the view that no one will ever get organised. She promised to do so on return. I gave her my card to tell Rahulji and Jairamji who has asked her to meet them. A member of the Governing Body Fawzia Rasheed, daughter of Kaiser Rasheed of Foreign Service, listening to the conversation insisted on taking a selfie of Shabana and myself. I could not dare ask her because earlier on I had heard her complaining that she was fed up of people asking for selfies. I was glad when the first selfie did not come out well and Shabana asked for another take.

Abed's dinner was a glittering affair with amazing international presence including ambassadors from different countries. I was glad to see Pakistan's ambassador also. Abed in his introductory remarks before dinner introduced everyone in his inimitable and generous way. I was overwhelmed by the words he used introducing me.

The whole day on December 7th was devoted to a very detailed overview of BRAC by the Chief Executive Dr. Musa followed by financial inclusion at BRAC, BRAC Programmes Addressing Young People Needs and Reflections on Field Visits by Board and Advisory Council Members and Affiliates. After lunch Executive Director BRAC International Faruque Ahmed gave an overview and the last session was devoted to Discussion on Development Financing in Global Donor Context Challenges for BRAC and the Strategies to address these.

I was most impressed by the acute interest Governing Body (GB) members took in every aspect of BRAC activities and so also did the Affiliates. Some of them gave a hard time to BRAC staff especially who had a Researcher's orientation. For me it was highly educative how BRAC exposed itself to threadbare discussion and did not shy away from any criticism. One concern of the GB members was the balance between BRAC's Social and for profit activities and programmes.

I remember in 1991 when at the behest of Prime Minister Premadasa, the SAARC Summit agreed to set up an Independent South Asia Poverty Alleviation Commission to recommend a strategy for elimination of poverty by 2002, I got a call from Pakistan's Foreign Secretary that Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif had nominated me on the Commission as a member from Pakistan. I was glad to find Abed from Bangladesh on the Commission besides Prime Minister of India's Secretary Venugopal so also many prominent members from other countries. The Commission travelled to all the countries. It was chaired by an ex-Prime Minister of Nepal. The Commission in 1993 submitted its report at SAARC Dhaka

Summit making an overarching recommendation that “the centerpiece of a policy framework for poverty alleviation has to be the mobilisation of the poor in order to enable them to participate directly in the decisions that affect their lives and prospects”. The Commission reasoned that public sector makes huge investments but does not commonly affectively involve poor communities when planning or delivering development.

The Commission, therefore, recommended an agenda for action arguing that implementation strategy and institutions building by Governments of South Asia should be their lead role but it can only be achieved by supporting financially and administratively the establishment of independent, non-governmental and national level support mechanisms to catalyse formation of organisations of the poor.

The recommendations of the Commission were fully endorsed by the Dhaka Summit in 1993 but the implementation agenda was not followed in letter and spirit. BRAC through support of international donors was able to achieve remarkable results. Abed also realized that Donor support has to be substituted by BRAC generating its own resources and the achievements are monumental but still fall short of the gap to be bridged between resources required and resources generated in house by BRAC. This is the challenge BRAC is now facing because Donor fatigue is setting in and GB members and Affiliates are fully seized of the challenge.

My submission to Abed was to actively engage Government of Bangladesh to take a lead role in Commission’s language by providing resources, to enable BRAC to replicate countrywide its programmes which have demonstrated on a scale how ultra-poor can be graduated, how health interventions can be implemented, how children out of school can be educated, how adolescents especially girls can be empowered and so on and so forth. Akhter Hameed Khan about whom Prof Yunus wrote to me when on his passing away in 1999, we

organised a function to celebrate his life and President Musharraf posthumous conferred on him Nishan-e-Imtiaz, Pakistan's highest civil award:

“It is not enough to say that he was a great man. He was one of the great human beings of the past century. He was so much ahead of everybody else that he was seen more as a “misfit” than appreciated for his greatness ... We have a lot to discover and a whole lot to learn from him”,

Akhter Hameed Khan used to advocate the existing Administrative and Political Pillars of State are not capable of alleviating poverty, it is only a Socio-economic Pillar, comprising institutions of the poor, what the Poverty Commission recommended, which can empower the poor to unleash their potential to overcome the obstacles to get out of poverty. Fortunately, I saw this happening in India while implementing a UNDP sponsored South Asia Poverty Alleviation Programme (SAPAP), an off shoot of Commission's recommendation from 1995. With State Government of Andhra Pradesh accepting Commission's recommendation and providing resources to continue what SAPAP had done onward of 2000, with World Bank support, 11 million poor women households graduated from poverty by 2008 and Union Government adopted the Andhra strategy in 2011 by including in 12th Five Year Plan a programme called National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) at a capital outlay of US\$ 5.1 billion to alleviate poverty of 70 million households comprising 350 million people.

In Pakistan, even before Commission's recommendation, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif decided in 1992 to set up an independent and autonomous support organisation on the pattern of AKRSP, for countrywide replication of AKRSP and National Rural Support Programme (NRSP) came into existence. Despite change in governments, public funds as endowments were given off and on for financial sponsorship of provincial RSPs and in 2000 Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund was established with World Bank funding taken by government to channel resources to RSPs and others. The response of Government of Pakistan has not

been on the scale of India but it keeps on happening, augmented by Donors.
Currently European Union is championing the cause of rural poor in Pakistan.