



DEVELOPMENT AS DISCOVERY

LEARNINGS FROM THE LIFE AND WORK OF ABED BHAI



Sunday, 8 January, 2023

3:00 pm - 5:00 pm



BRAC Centre Inn Conference
Room (1st Floor)



DEVELOPMENT AS DISCOVERY: LEARNINGS FROM THE LIFE AND WORK OF ABED BHAI

BIGD organized a roundtable discussion “Development as Discovery: Learning from the Life and Work of Abed Bhai” on Sunday, January 8, 2023 at the BRAC Centre, Dhaka.

Scott MacMillan, author of the biographical book on Abed bhai, ‘Hope over Fate: Fazle Hasan Abed and the Science of Ending Global Poverty’ shared a reading and reflection, followed by a presentation by Abu Ahasan, Researcher, BRAC History Project titled, ‘BRAC’s Ways of Knowing: Decolonizing Organizational Learning’ based on the BRAC History Project, a BRAC-BIGD Knowledge Partnership.

The discussion was also joined by a number of individuals from various sectors who have had different kinds of engagements with BRAC and Abed bhai. Afsan Chowdhury, Bangladeshi liberation war researcher, columnist, and journalist; Julian Francis, independent development and disability consultant, and humanitarian activist; Dr Samia Huq, Dean, School of General Education, BRAC University; Farzana Kashfi, Founding Board Member Founding Board

Member Bangladesh Women Investors Network; Dr Ashikur Rahman, Senior Economist, Policy Research Institute; Dr Naomi Hossain, Research Professor at the Accountability Research Center at American University in Washington DC; and Tasmiah Rahman, Associate Director, BRAC among others joined the discussion.

The discussion aimed to be a critical reflection and conversation on the life and work of Abed bhai to help us move forward. As a governance and development knowledge centre of BRAC University, a University built to catalyse the BRAC ethos for a better world through knowledge, we strongly feel the intellectual urgency to develop new frameworks, language and ideas to understand, construct, and share our own experiences and stories. This is the southern knowledge challenge and struggle of decolonizing development and knowledge itself. We want to play our part in this larger intellectual transformative agenda.

Idea of Development as Discovery

Dr Imran Matin, Executive Director, BIGD reflecting on the idea of discovery said, “In many ways the ethos and ideas of discovery, where nothing is predetermined and whatever you thought would change. That whole idea of agility and adapting to find the most pragmatic way of moving forward and moving forward itself becomes the overriding priority. I think this is one of the most important and powerful ethos that I personally have taken from my encounters with Abed Bhai and BRAC.”



“Discovery is an act of detecting something previously unrecognized as meaningful. It is learnt through attentive observation of new phenomenon, new actors, new events, and new reasoning. It is acquired through observations experienced by various senses and feelings and through attention and affection. Discovery is made by questions. There can be no discovery without the space for open questioning.

Discovery is not a mechanical act of uncovering something that exists, a given. It is a complex process involving not only the adventurer, but also the culture from which she set out and to which she returns. It is not about placing of a place on the map, but the assimilation and understanding of new ways of knowing. It's about self-transformation, not only of the mind frame, but also of the body frame in terms of its movement, and language,” said Dr Matin in his opening reflections.

Hope Over Fate:

Scott MacMillan shared his stories and interactions with Abed Bhai at the discussion. He said, “In the year 2011 I joined BRAC family, I was a freelance journalist at the time and I was in Africa working on different projects. At that time, I caught a development bug. I had this curiosity about what works and what doesn’t work in international development and poverty alleviation. I heard about BRAC and just a few years earlier it had started its operations in Africa.”

He also shared his working experience with BRAC USA and Abed Bhai.

“He was very particular about his speeches, we would sit for hours, be it either on 19th floor up here or hotel rooms in New York. I got a lot of face time with him and heard him tell stories. Many of them from his decades of experience. He was not a self-promoter; he wasn’t really good at marketing and communications. He didn’t really believe too much in self-promotion. He actually believed in keeping his head down and focusing on work and letting the work speak for itself. That is unusual for a non-profit leader,” said Scott.

“This idea of hope and confidence helping people rise from poverty is something I try to explore in this book through the lens of one man’s remarkable life. This idea that hope can help people overcome poverty. This was not a recent idea for Abed Bhai. This has its root in his early experience,” he added.



BRAC's ways of knowing: Decolonizing organizational learning

Abu Ahasan talked about how BRAC’s field work redefined the meaning of habitat, living, thinking, and understanding for BRAC staffs back then. He explained Pierre Bourdeaux’s idea of habitus, which is a socially ingrained schemes of perception. According to him, habitus is what we learn from modern institution especially from school or university. “We learn from school how to sit, stand and the ideal of postures and how to talk. People learn to become certain kind of person to occupy her place in the society.”

He shared stories of two researchers, who at that time just came back from the US after completing their studies. Abed bhai asked them to go to the field and start working there. In the first few days, they found it difficult to cope up with the living conditions. “In a very subjective and habitual way the researchers could not find a place of dwelling. They could not think about that hut (mud house), or that mat (place for sitting). They spent their entire life to unlearn bad habits like sitting cross legged on floor or sitting on mat,” he said.



He added, “We get a concept of the school of dwelling in discomfort from Abed Bhai. “These highly educated and talented people were thrown into the other world. They had to adapt with that.” When one of the researchers complained to his supervisor about living conditions, the supervisor said, “If you continue to live here, you will find this place as a perfect place to live in. His supervisor asked him to critically think about the self.”

“And this critical self-reflection helped him to adapt with the situation,” added Ahasan. “They kept continuing their work for BRAC for decades and in a very short span of time they became skilled, and they learned how to live in villages. They learned how to walk miles and miles. They followed a reflection-action-reflection methodology where they would sit at night after every day’s work at the camp and talk about field, beneficiaries, stories, and learnings. Critical reflection would end with the ritual of eating sweets and it was followed by another cultural event-which was singing. They were going to bed late but were waking up early to go to field.”

“The BRAC kormibahinis were inspired by the dream of building a prosperous country. Inside the camp everyone had the firm conviction that their work is going to bring the change. We wouldn’t be able to understand how revolutionary this trajectory of development has been in today’s neoliberal world.”

Abu Ahasan also said, “We are talking about education that people don’t acquire but grows inside mind and body. This is learnt through door to door approach, by walking and going to people, and by critical reflection. These changes thought process, and this is not cognitive. It’s a different kind of school, and the modern organizational theory is not able to capture it.”

Idea of innovating in a non-formal space

Afsan Chowdhury said, "We are not being able to construct the formality and informality. The informality does not move by ideology, it’s a functional space. Abed bhai understood that best. Abed bhai’s strength lay in understanding that he controlled a very limited space, and he disliked ideologies very much.

Abed bhai was shaped by the peasantry. It is too shocking for us to accept that the under produces the top, and we don’t have the methodology of learning to understand that the bottom produces the top. Abed bhai understood the power of the bottom, others rarely do. The formal space doesn’t have that kind of power in societies like us. We need to understand that the negotiation between formal and informal produces the non-formal, and we need to have a framework to study the non-formal space in which BRAC is primarily located. That I think is the new area of exploration."



Bhola cyclone and Abed Bhai:

Dr Ashikur Rahman said, “Bhola cyclone’s horror was a big influence in Abed bhai’s life he said, “On 12th November 1970 when the Bhola cyclone happened, Bhola’s per capita income was 25 USD only. Most people were living in fishing villages and agriculture and living close to water and were living in vulnerable homestead. When the storm happened, nearly 300,000 people died, and families and villages were wiped out. Abed bhai went to Monpura a week after the cyclone. He realized that people died in the storm but not because of the storm. He understood that people died in the storm because they were poor.”



Praising Abed bhai’s approach to solving underdevelopment, he said, “Abed bhai subjected his intervention to rigorous academic scrutiny, and this shows that he understood underdevelopment needs understanding. As I stand in both political and academic space now, I believe BRAC needs to address deprivation, inequality, and social justice by finding more synergy with the state.”

Power of adolescents

Farzana Kashfi said, “There was always discussion with Abed bhai on how do you really engage girls and adolescents and create a process where they empower themselves. Abed bhai had this deep held believe that every individual had the power within themselves to make a difference to make some sort of positive change. Abed bhai listened with empathy. He inspired and motivated us to act.”

Learning from radical failures

Dr Naomi Hossain said, “It’s very fashionable now in development to talk about failures, lot of people talk very performatively about failures, but in reality they are not really talking about failures, they are not really learning from failures. But Abed Bhai was different. He always wanted to learn from his failures. I feel that there is not much space for that radical bravery and radical experimentalism that BRAC and Abed bhai explored back in the days.



I also worry a little bit about relying on the west; it doesn’t really leave that space for the informality necessary to inform the knowledge, to listen to things and methodology we can’t really understand. We are borrowing from west all the time to understand a very dramatically different reality, so I wonder if the space for learning from radical failures now exists.”



Dr Samia Huq talking about the role of BRAC University said, “For Abed bhai, the university was about creating functional elites. He understood fairly early that there is a class structure and you have to actually intervene within the structure for this growth and development to be meaningful. So he has done quite a bit of work with the rural class structure and rural elite. So how do we from this group create a functional class, which can take the experience and knowledge of BRAC to create a different kind of pedagogy.”

BRAC University from here for the world

In his concluding speech Dr Imran Matin said, “We need to follow that plaque of BRAC University which says-'Fazle Hasan Abed from Sylhet for humanity, this university from here for the world'. I think that is the ambition-From here for the world. For that, we have to be deeply knowledgeable and embedded and anchored in our context.

I think that ethos of knowledge needs to be imbibed within BRAC University to be a very different kind of university and that really is the big intellectual challenge. I am super excited to take on this challenge,"