

History
Of
Bangladesh Institute of Social Research (BISR) Trust
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History of BISR

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1. Reflection

I first dreamed of establishing a research institute after attending the All-India Social Science Conference held at Gujarat University in 1984. There, I observed that India had many research institutes which, despite limited resources, were producing very high-quality research. After completing my PhD in 1985 and returning to Bangladesh, I joined the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS).

After joining BIDS, I realized that although it was an excellent institution for research on economic development, there was no dedicated research institute in the country focusing on social issues. Nevertheless, I joined BIDS with the intention of working there. However, after completing the orientation and beginning my work, I discovered that there was little scope for researching social issues. The institution was primarily interested in economic research, with a strong emphasis on economic development.

Seeing no opportunity to pursue my research interests there, I considered working as a researcher at the Centre for Social Studies run by Dr. B. K. Jahangir at the University of Dhaka. When I inquired, however, I was informed that no researchers were being recruited at that time. Without giving the matter much further thought, I began searching for alternative work opportunities.

Later, following the advice of my department teacher, Professor Dr. Rangalal Sen, I went back to BIDS and met Dr. Atiur Rahman. At that time, neither of us knew each other. He asked to see my PhD thesis, and I provided him with a copy the next day. A few days later, after reading it, he told me that my thesis was better than his own. This was a great source of encouragement and a moment of pride for me. Subsequently, he arranged a short-term consultancy position for me in a project under the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA)'s Poverty Alleviation Foundation. He asked me to contact him using the landline number I had provided.

When I called him from home, he informed me that my salary would be 22,000 taka and that it would not be increased. I agreed. Initially, I assumed that this amount was my annual salary, because at that time the monthly salary of a first-class government officer or a university lecturer was around 750 taka—amounting to roughly 1,000 taka per year. I therefore thought the salary was reasonable and decided to begin the work.

However, after joining, I realized that the amount was actually a monthly salary, not an annual one. In this way, I continued working as a consultant on one project after another. Over time, I began to realize that I did not yet possess the level of intellectual maturity and institutional experience required to establish a research institute. Building such an institution in Bangladesh was not an easy task.

At that stage, I devoted myself fully to consultancy work. Yet, throughout this period, I constantly reflected on how such an institution could eventually be established. I realized that guidance from someone with substantial experience would be essential, and that I would need to wait longer for the right opportunity.

While working as a consultant with full dedication, I continued to think about whether it was possible to introduce something innovative in research within my workplace. Although I could conceptualize such ideas, I rarely found opportunities to implement them. I consulted with two individuals, but within the scope of my work there was little room to pursue such initiatives. Meanwhile, time passed without producing significant publications, and I received little cooperation from the institutions where I was engaged. I had no choice but to endure this situation silently.

I wanted to be a researcher, yet I was working primarily as a consultant. I found myself in a state of confusion—unsure whether I was truly working as a researcher or not. I understood that some publications might emerge from consultancy work, particularly international ones, while much of the work produced locally was often for promotional purposes or done hurriedly. Even while working with Dr. Atiur Rahman, he focused mainly on his own publications and offered me little encouragement or support in publishing my work.

The first consultancy work I did with Dr. Atiur Rahman was for CIDA, involving an evaluation of BRDB's Rural Poor Programme (RPP). During this project, I proposed that each upazila should have a separate appellate body or institution for unbanked cooperative societies for men and women. When asked whether this was feasible, I responded firmly that it was. Until then, I had never participated in policy-level meetings with government officials. I was only 31 years old at the time.

My argument was strong because the farmers' cooperative societies established at the upazila level under the Comilla Model were dominated by wealthy farmers, leaving little space for the poor—especially unbanked men and women. During a meeting, the Upazila Rural Development Officer of Sarishabari Upazila in Jamalpur asked me, “Do you like it when all these beggars come and roam around the office?”

At that moment, I realized that when responsible officials hold such attitudes, it is easy to understand the behavior of members of the Farmers' Cooperative Associations.

Therefore, I strongly recommend the establishment of separate organizations for poor men and women in every upazila across the country. This proposal was adopted at the meeting. Today, an Upazila Poor Central Cooperative Association (UBCCA Ltd.) exists in every upazila in Bangladesh, each with its own separate building.

I continued working as a consultant in various institutions, including SIDA, DANIDA, BIDS, USAID, the Water Development Board, and LGED. While working with SIDA, I realized that there was limited scope for conducting research. In many institutions, opportunities were constrained, but I tried to utilize whatever space was available. Whenever possible, I continued revising new editions of my Bengali sociology books, although I had very few opportunities to publish academic articles. I believed that whenever an opportunity arose, it should be used rather than waiting for an ideal situation.

At that time, the idea of conducting research without funding or using only secondary data did not occur to me, as my focus was firmly on primary data-based research.

My research opportunities increased somewhat while working at the Water Development Board, where I began engaging in action research. There, I was able to undertake innovative initiatives, such as repairing canals without funds through collective effort, maintaining dams and canals year-round, developing a novel approach for the full rehabilitation of river-erosion-affected populations, and preparing a demand-based budget for the department. Many important insights and discoveries emerged from this work.

After completing five years at the Water Development Board, despite having a further two-year contract, I decided to pursue research at the Bangladesh Development Council, accepting a salary that was only one-third of my previous income. Unfortunately, little genuine research was conducted there. Most work revolved around projects where people were paid, but researchers received little encouragement or opportunity. As a result, talented individuals frequently joined and left. I spent about a year there and used my nights to revise my old Bengali books.

Later, I left and joined the Planning Commission as a consultant. There, I encountered an outstanding economist—a student of two Nobel laureates from Harvard. Although he did not engage in research himself and focused mainly on planning, I learned valuable lessons from him, particularly in economic analysis. He was keen to teach me complex analytical methods, but I felt that without a strong foundation in economics, such knowledge would not be very useful to me.

After completing that assignment, I joined LGED, where I again attempted to conduct action or practical research. Drawing on my experience at the Water Development Board, I developed a participatory development planning model that involved local people, including the collection of 10% community contributions for the development of markets, ghats, bridges, and culverts. Conducting these experiments took nearly a year.

Thus, wherever I found an opportunity, I attempted to carry out action research. These experiences later proved invaluable for theoretical research, as they allowed me to deeply understand Bangladeshi society and its development processes over an extended period. The insights gained

continue to inform my research and have been particularly useful in the preparation of national development plans.

2. About the beginning

Finally, in November 2002, I took the initiative to create such an institution for the first time. Someone gave me a job whose contract price was 80 thousand taka. I started with that, and it seemed like I got a lot of money. First, I took a room on the second floor of a commercial building called Darogar Market near Jigatola bus stand for a monthly rent of 2500 taka. Everyone I knew started asking where I could get such a large amount of rent. I was still working then, and I would sit there after 5 pm till 9 pm, then I would go home. First, to ensure that people did not come and go back, I hired a woman as a part-time peon from 4 pm to 7 pm for 400 taka. She would open the office in the market every day and let people sit when they came to meet her.

Then I hired another person who had worked under me as a supervisor on a project. He seemed quite intelligent. I hired him as a manager. He had done some awareness work on sex workers for an NGO. He was given the responsibility to write about what he saw in the sex camps when there was no work. But for various reasons, he didn't write anything for a year. He just worked on submitting proposals to various offices. I saw that working as a field worker and having the ability to write something are completely different things.

I used to see him doing any work, especially data collection, with great enthusiasm. The rest of the time, he was not interested in other things. I told him to learn computers, but he didn't learn because he couldn't do it. Maybe he thought that learning computers would require work. There were no researchers at that time. So, instead of him, I hired a fresher from DU who had just passed the 2nd class in MSS, first class, as a researcher, but on the condition that if he got a job at the university, he would go to the university. I agreed to that. I quit my regular job in 2005 because I thought that instead of trying to keep a job and do research, I should quit it and work. At that time, I was getting a salary of one lakh twenty thousand taka. The person I hired left after three months to get a job at a private university. Meanwhile, I hired a peon. I saw that there was no room

for three people in that one-room apartment. Besides, data collectors actually couldn't be given a place to sit. So later, I rented a small flat in that area that had about three rooms. I made one room a training room, and I would sit in one of the other two rooms, and in the other room, a young researcher and two assistants would sit. In this way, the research institute started its journey on a somewhat larger scale. When I started the research institute, I discussed it with many people, but they did not show much enthusiasm about it. They used to say, it is nothing but madness, it will be closed after a few days. Even after many years, some people ask me whether the one you created has been closed or not. I say, no, it is still running, and I think it will continue for a long time.

3. Tale of Moving Forward

I started a new life in the new house. After getting a job, it took two or three months to get another job in the middle. It can be said that it was progressing, but slowly. At that time, I started training mainly in research along with projects. I learned a lot from that. First of all, it was seen that one or two in every batch wanted to learn a little while the rest did not come to learn anything. They came for certificates. No matter how much I tried to teach them research methods, I did not see much interest in learning about it. One day, a female trainee dared to tell me, sir, your idea is wrong. None of them came to learn. They came mainly for a certificate so that they could get a job. Our fee was six thousand taka; some lived at home and took the cost of twenty thousand taka and spent it themselves. Some said ten thousand taka. Thus, it was a strange experience.

I tried to teach them English to write reports. But it turned out that they were not doing it. In this way, I completed about 10 batches. Among them, I found some special batches who were important, who either got the opportunity to do a PhD in a very good university abroad, or got a job in an international organization at home or abroad with a very good salary. One even got a job with a salary of 16 thousand taka to 60 thousand taka. In this way, a few students did incredibly well, and some students did not learn anything and did not even complete the course. Among them, those who came to learn for professionalism did quite well. Seeing this, some institutions or some universities in Dhaka started this course. Then, slowly, our trainees decreased. When they saw that

their students came to us to take the course, they started it, and our students decreased here.

Meanwhile, I gradually started inviting some people to give seminars on the third Saturday of every month. First, I invited Professor Imtiaz Saheb of the Department of International Relations of Dhaka University to give a lecture on Madrasa education. He gave a very good lecture, which was highly appreciated by the audience. Then I invited several people. They gave lectures; some got a good audience, some did not. Those who were famous in themselves got a good audience, and those who were not famous did not get a good audience. Meanwhile, I took the initiative to publish the journal. We moved forward with three initiatives at once. We are trying to establish it as a research institution; we are taking one step forward and then stopping again. We have had strange experiences with hiring people.

The income is not that much; there are a total of three employees, including a regular peon, a research assistant, and a computer operator. Some months they get paid, some months I have to pay from my pocket. In this way, the work is slowly progressing with them. Then I am trying to recruit another research assistant. I hired another one. He secured third place in sociology from DU and said that he was interested in research. Actually, that is not true. He sat here and learned computers, wrote an application, and got a job. This time, after he left, I hired another one. He is a research assistant.

One of the research assistants left due to family reasons. She was the first female employee, and she had to leave her job within an hour after her maid suddenly left. She had an 8-month-old baby and a 3-year-old baby. She kept these two children with her maid, and her mother's house was nearby, where she lived. Instead of hiring a research assistant, I wanted to hire a researcher. No one can be hired as a researcher because no one is really interested in working as a researcher.

I hired another one of them as a research manager who could help with project management as well as research. But after about a year, I noticed that he was gradually developing various behavioral problems. He suffered from insomnia and came to the office after 11 pm. Again, I had a hard time getting rid of him.

Meanwhile, in 2008, due to the needs of the landlord, I had to leave this office. I got a new office a little further away, next to Sonali Bank in Jigatola. There was a large room there that could easily accommodate 30-40 people. My opportunities to hold monthly seminars increased further. Meanwhile, I started organizing seminars in that office along with training. I invited many of them as speakers. At first, I started inviting more middle-class people. The elders did not want to come because of their various busy schedules. It turned out that inviting middle-class people did not get an audience. Apart from that, some people came who were not really well prepared to speak. Many presented some topics without research. As a result, if you get a good speaker one month, you cannot get one the next month. Again, I saw that it was gradually becoming difficult to get an audience. Meanwhile, I went to the Asiatic Society's lecture program and saw the same situation. As a result, I realized that this is not just our problem; it is the problem of everyone in the country. Very few audiences are found for enlightening discussions. Since there was a little more space there, I used to hold a seminar every third Saturday of the month at 4 pm. In this way, I held seminars for a total of three years. Many renowned researchers presented their lectures there. Among them, it is worth mentioning Dr. Atiur Rahman, an IT expert, and Mustafa Jabbar, who later became a minister. |

Meanwhile, I continued to try to publish research articles. It turned out that I could not do so because I did not have access to any international research journal. But I started my own journal. I got a fair amount of responses. But it was not possible to run it for a long time. Because it gradually became difficult to find quality articles. Even after receiving the last 24 articles, it was difficult to get an issue out of them. Then, everyone gradually became interested in publishing online. We brought out 6 issues in a total of three volumes and closed them because we did not get quality articles. The ones we rejected were again published in the journal of Dhaka University or in the journal of some other university or institution in the country, and my relationship with the authors of these articles also deteriorated. Our journal was blind reviewed. A professor or associate professor from the country or abroad was usually the reviewer. There was an international editorial board. Articles of a fair amount of quality were published in it.

4. Tale of Progress

In 2010, after the rent at the Jigatola office was suddenly increased by about 150%, I decided to leave it and come to Lalmatia. Because at that time, the roads in Jigatola were so crowded that no car could even park on the road. So that year, we shifted the office to Lalmatia. The expenses there increased, and the question of earning money again arose. At first, as the expenses increased, I thought that if I hired more researchers to earn money, it might work faster. So first, I hired some junior researchers. With them, a new journey began.

Meanwhile, from the beginning, BISR had been following the policy of involving others. So at this point, we are inviting some researchers to join us in our research. For most of those who came were university teachers. For them, at the beginning, a one-day workshop was organized where two experts presented their proposals. They were then asked to present their findings to the class and provide the necessary methodological development strategies. Various suggestions were given. We have arranged a grant for teachers and general researchers.

It turned out that none of them, except one or two, completed it. They took a small amount of money in advance and left. Someone collected the data and left the country. Someone tried to finish it somehow, but the quality is very poor. As a result, we have this attempt failed. Then we had to think again about how to improve it.

Meanwhile, after publishing some articles in some local journals, I was able to publish an article in a very old and important journal in India outside the country. The main problem was the lack of opportunity to read and download foreign research articles. It is not possible to publish in these journals if you cannot provide enough references or review them. But that opportunity was not available much. As a result, our research work was lagging.

At this stage in managing the activities of the institution, three issues came to our attention: 1. Fundraising; 2. International publications; and 3. Retaining promising researchers.

A major obstacle in raising funds was that government and foreign institutions usually want to give their work to consulting firms. So, they rejected some of

our proposals. As a solution, we had to open a consulting wing alongside it. Having a consulting firm would be possible to increase our income in any case. This would increase the opportunity to pay researchers and conduct research. This would make it easier for us to get work. As a result, many of the institution's expenses could be covered from there. And through this, it would be possible to increase communication with others. This would create some momentum in the institution.

A major breakthrough in increasing publications came when we recruited new researchers. They were able to collect foreign articles using various media and create references. As a result, we gradually started publishing in international journals. This was originally started around 2013. Then we started collecting it in three ways, 1. Writing from authors; 2. Writing to friends to download and send it; and 3. Downloading it in various ways. In this way, a major crisis was resolved. In the meantime, we wrote to Jester. But they demanded 5 lakh taka for the first year and 2.5 lakh taka for each subsequent year. I then thought about our financial capacity and thought of working in the conventional alternative way. Thus, this second problem was also solved.

I felt very bad about not being able to retain potential researchers. They were especially restless for jobs in universities and would leave after getting them. At first, it felt bad. Then, after talking to others, I learned that this was a problem in all institutions in Bangladesh. After that, I kept thinking about what could be done. Then I thought about how to solve this problem. First, we recruited several researchers with PhDs for this. But it was counterproductive. That is, it turned out that none of them had done PhDs for research. They were just PhDs. We had to borrow a lot of money to pay their salaries. They could not contribute anything. Instead, they were left behind. For a year, they could not publish any article in any international journal, and they could not even write op-eds in periodicals. Then, firing them became a responsibility. Firing them was another difficult task. They were given notices one by one. But we had to listen to their problems, those problems, etc. Finally, it was possible to fire them.

But the question is, what is the alternative? Then, while thinking, I found a solution. I saw that foreign research institutions also fill their shortage of researchers by hiring some part-time or adjunct researchers. I thought, if we take adjunct or adjunct research fellows, then we don't have to pay them a

monthly salary, but if we give them some money, they can do research. If they do research with us like this, then we will also have joint research with them and will also have publications with them. I saw that some of our former colleagues started working with us.

Meanwhile, we gradually started to see a rapid increase in the publication work of affiliated researchers and in-house researchers. However, it turns out that affiliated researches do not always produce the same amount. But even then, it is good or bad.

There was no cooperation from any government or private organization in running this research institute, because from the beginning, I thought that I would do it without anyone's cooperation. Later, however, I decided that if I get government or private cooperation, I will take it unconditionally. However, I get money from various government and private organizations for research, which makes it possible to keep this institute running. And whenever there is a crisis in paying salaries and allowances, I continue the activities with my own money.