

Salute and farewell, Mr Kabir

Manzoor Hasan

Mr Kabir has left us, but the anti-corruption movement that he put together in Bangladesh will remain forever indebted to him for his selfless dedication, and highest levels of commitment and integrity



Syed Humayun Kabir's work affected the lives of millions

It was late 1996, some time in October, when I received a telephone call from Syed Humayun Kabir inviting me to meet him. He introduced himself as the chairman of the board of trustees of Transparency International Bangladesh.

I had little inkling that this conversation would be the beginning of a special relationship which would influence my work -- and me -- in a very profound manner.

I had returned to Bangladesh in 1995 after a long stint overseas and started my law practice. Given the opaque nature of the profession that I had experienced, I started to explore other options.

I was already aware of the objectives of Transparency International, an emerging global anti-corruption organisation which had formed a local chapter in Bangladesh a couple of years earlier. Syed Humayun Kabir and seven other trustees (Tawfique Nawaz, Syed Aminul Huq, Muzaffar Ahmad, Khan Sarwar Murshid, Mahfuz Anam, Samson H Chowdhury, and Ruby Ghuznavi), with encouragement from TI, formed the board with Syed Humayun Kabir as the founding chairman.

Syed Humayun Kabir was actually one of the two "creators" of the trust, and the initial seed-fund had come from his own pocket, in addition to other in-kind support. Apparently, they were looking for a CEO to get the Bangla-

desh chapter off the ground.

At the first meeting, Mr Kabir gave me a full and thorough analysis of the state of governance in Bangladesh and the kind of activities that the board of trustees would expect from me. I knew very little about his background as an innovative entrepreneur, but I was sufficiently convinced by his clear and incisive explanation and expectations, and decided to take on the challenging task of TIB's executive director.

Mr Kabir made it very clear to me from the very outset that, as the chairman of the board, he would provide me with "full support and protection" to carry out TIB's activities. I have to say that Mr Kabir didn't flinch an inch from that position during the period he was the chairperson -- the critical foundational years of TIB.

TIB started its activities in 1997 and, over the next few years, we had moved offices four times as we grew to become a force in the country, and became the largest chapter within the TI family of nearly 100.

I always had full access to Mr Kabir, and he never made formality an issue. I never managed to take him to any of the annual meetings of TI as he smilingly declined such offers and suggested the names of other trustees.

He kept reminding me that I had at my disposal a formidable collection of individuals as trustees, and the work of the chapter will be strengthened if they were more and more involved. The best moments for me were the regular meetings, mostly over lunch, that I had with him when I gave him a detailed account of TIB's activities -- he used to listen intently, and ask me simple but piercing questions.

Those questions were meant to clarify my own thinking rather than his own understanding of the issues. Occasionally, he interjected with some specific suggestions, or referred to some individuals known for their expertise. After each of those meetings, I used to bid Mr Kabir farewell with a clearer vision and as a calmer person. He had that effect on me because I soon realised that this person didn't have an iota of ego.

During Mr Kabir's time there, we just didn't put together the largest chapter of TI, but received generous support from the development partners, prepared programs such as the national integrity plan and "making waves," prepared and published countless reports, and received unprecedented support from the media and gained notoriety while maintaining a high-quality governance struc-

ture within TIB.

Many individuals and organisations became members of the social movement against corruption, and TIB's byline (which he himself had picked) and its activities took root in various districts of Bangladesh.

In 2001, during one of our regular meetings, Mr Kabir dropped a bombshell: "Manzoor, I have decided to leave the position of chair as I want to create a precedent for future chairs of TIB." I was devastated, even though I fully appreciated his reasons.

Mr Kabir had nurtured and guided TIB during those crucial years behind the scenes, never coming forward to take the limelight. Only when it mattered did he step forward.

For example, after months of waiting for TIB's registration with the NGO Affairs Bureau, I reported to him that we had come unstuck.

He quietly suggested that both of us should go and meet the home secretary. We did, and in less than five minutes, the home secretary questioned: "Why didn't you come and see me earlier?" This is how TIB got its registration, and subsequently received, and still is receiving, generous support from various donors.

Mr Kabir has left us, but the anti-corruption movement that he put together in Bangladesh will remain forever indebted to him for his selfless dedication, and highest levels of commitment and integrity.

I want to put on record the fact that it was with the greatest of pleasures and immense satisfaction that I worked with Mr Kabir during the first few crucial years of TIB. I, on behalf of millions of anti-corruption fighters, take my hat off to say: Salute and farewell Mr Kabir. May your dream of a more accountable Bangladesh come true.