

## A man in full

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Syed Humayun Kabir became one of those rare men who truly walked the walk. He did not just profess a commitment to social welfare and social justice, he embodied it -



We have all heard of Prof Muhammad Yunus and Sir Fazle Hasan Abed, and both these gentlemen deserve all the praise and plaudits that they have received over the years.

But when the history of Bangladesh's development is written, there is another name that deserves to be mentioned alongside theirs, and that is of Syed Humayun Kabir, who passed away on July 7 at the age of 83 after a long and distinguished career in business and philanthropy.

Mr Kabir's contribution to social welfare and social justice in Bangladesh was every bit as remarkable as that of his better-known compatriots and brothers-in-arms, and will in the long-run, I am confident, be seen to be every bit as significant.

In fact, it is in this field that Bangladesh can truly be said to lead the world and it is this sector that we should be most proud of when we speak of this country.

We inherited a war-torn, impoverished, devastated country in December 1971, and it is nothing short of a miracle

that in 44 short years we have come as far as we have in terms of human development.

In area after area, from infant mortality to life expectancy to poverty rates to immunisation to education to empowerment of women, the list of our achievements is a long one that can stand comparison with anywhere else on the planet.

Of course, there is much left to do and a long way to go, but we should never lose sight of what it is we have achieved so far, and how and why it is that we have been able to accomplish what we have done. And it is to men such as Syed Humayun Kabir and his vision and creativity that we owe where we have come to as a nation.

His story is an extraordinary one in that any one of his achievements would have been sufficient to earn him a place of respect on the list of notable Bangladeshis of his era, but that he was able to fit so many accomplishments into one lifetime almost beggars belief.

Let us start by lauding him as a businessman, who was widely respected by his peers, both inside the country and outside, as the chairman and managing director of Pfizer Ltd in Bangladesh for over two decades and then of Renata, its successor.

His probity and integrity as a businessman are legendary, as was his acumen and ability. His business career alone provided a model for how business could be conducted in this country, and his integrity has served as a beacon to two generations of business leaders and executives in Bangladesh.

It was in recognition of his moral and intellectual authority that he was elevated by his peers to the presidency of the MCCI and FICCI, among a host of other leadership positions in industry, to say nothing of his many other board directorships, both of businesses as well as non-profits. His peers in the business community saw him as the obvious choice of leader and spokesman for the sector, a role he filled with aplomb.

In a country where business is seen by many as a by-word for corruption and criminality, he stood out as a shining example of what a businessman could be and what the sector could do for the country.

It was this reputation for probity and ability, combined with his commitment to the common good, which led to his invitation to join the board of BRAC, which he subsequently chaired for over two decades.

His long association with BRAC alone would itself serve as a mark of his commitment to social welfare and social justice. Sir Abed would be the first to point to his seminal contribution as chairman of the board in helping to bring BRAC to its current eminence.

But it was in the final chapter of his career that Mr Kabir came into his own and left a legacy behind that will serve as a lesson and an inspiration for all of us who want to make a difference and to contribute to the common good.

His achievements as a business leader or as the chairman of BRAC alone (or indeed as a founding member of Transparency International Bangladesh) would have been sufficient to cement his legacy, but he did not stop there.

And it was with the founding of the SAJIDA Foundation in 1993, a 25th wedding anniversary gift to his wife, Sajida Humayun Kabir, that he not only created his most enduring legacy, but also laid down a template for philanthropy for the future, which combined his commitment with his creativity in a unique way.

Mr Kabir had always held that business should and could be a force for the common good and ran his businesses with this philosophy in mind. But what was so remarkable

about the founding of SAJIDA Foundation in 1993, which was funded by a majority shareholding in Renata, was the explicit joining of a private enterprise (Renata) to a public purpose (the funding of the work of SAJIDA).

In doing so, Syed Humayun Kabir became one of those rare men who truly walked the walk. He did not just profess a commitment to social welfare and social justice, he embodied it. That alone should be enough to elevate him to the pantheon of great Bangladeshis.

But equally important, in the tradition of Yunus and Abed, he has created a template that others who wish to devote themselves to the common good may follow.

It is his creativity as much as his commitment that makes his contribution so noteworthy and serves as an example of the genius we have for innovative ways in which to serve our fellow men and women, in which Bangladesh truly leads the world.

We have lost a true inspiration, but we can be proud that one such as he lived among us. It is to men such as Syed Humayun Kabir that we owe it to build this country into a better place for all.