INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

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Interviewee:	Shahadat Hossain Chowdhury
Interviewer:	Varanya Chaubey
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CHAUBEY: My name is Varanya Chaubey and I am speaking with Brigadier Shahadat Hossain Chowdhury. Today is February 17, 2009. Firstly, I want to thank you for participating in this interview.

HOSSAIN: *You're most welcome.*

CHAUBEY: I would like to begin by asking you a little bit about your personal background. So would you describe the position that you hold now?

HOSSAIN: *I am Brigadier General Shahadat Chowdhury. I came here from the Bangladesh Army by request of the Bangladesh Election Commission, to be the national project director responsible for preparation of the electoral roll with photographs. I've been working with this organization since August 2007.*

CHAUBEY: Would you describe how you became involved in this election-related work?

HOSSAIN: *Once the Bangladesh Election Commission began the project for the preparation of an electoral roll with photographs, they requested, through proper channels, to have someone from the Bangladesh Army be posted here on deportation to take care of this project.*

CHAUBEY: I would like to talk to you a little bit about Bangladesh's new voter registration process with the photo roll. Would you describe what bodies were involved in creating this new list?

HOSSAIN: *The Bangladesh Election Commission is responsible for preparation of the electoral roll, so that's the main player. They thought that this enormous task could be assigned to the Bangladesh Armed Forces, particularly the Bangladesh Army. The civil administration and non-government organizations (NGOs), our donor partners, the civil society and local government and institution representatives were all involved in this process.*

CHAUBEY: Would you describe some of the challenges that you faced when you began the process and the project was conceived?

HOSSAIN: *As a matter of fact, the preparation of the electoral roll with photographs, an electronic measure to collect information, was a big challenge for a country like Bangladesh. You have to consider the illiteracy rate and the technical know-how of the people. The equipment likely to be used for this process and the very solution itself was not available. Right in the beginning, these were the major challenges. And then at a later stage there were the other challenges that we faced while we were implementing this.*

CHAUBEY: Would you describe how the technical expertise for this project was provided and what sort of technology was used?

HOSSAIN: *Basically, the Bangladesh Army took the lead in this regard. We have a handful of officers who are IT (Information Technology) qualified. They browsed the Internet to contact the worldwide IT specialists, those available within the country or outside. So they conceived the method for collecting the information electronically.*

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CHAUBEY: Were there a number of companies that offered to take on the project? How did they select the right technology?

HOSSAIN: *Initially there were a good number of offers that the Bangladesh Election Commission received from various national or international organizations. But then they listened to all the presentations and finally the presentation that was made by the Bangladesh Army was accepted.*

CHAUBEY: And would you describe the kinds of technology that were used during the registration process this time?

HOSSAIN: *We developed some software for the registration process. We used laptops and a webcam. We used a fingerprint scanner and other equipment for registration.*

CHAUBEY: You mentioned one of the challenges at the beginning was finding people with the kind of the technical know how needed to operate all this equipment. Would you describe your staff and manpower requirements and how you went about fulfilling those?

HOSSAIN: *It was really a very big challenge because we didn't have a database for the data entry operators. So the Bangladesh Army advertised for people who knew a little bit about the operation of the computers. They conducted exams to pick the operators and they were trained. This is how we chose data entry operators. In addition, the Bangladesh Army has a good number of IT qualified officers and soldiers who were deeply involved in it. As a matter of fact, we trained more than 100,000 civilian data entry operators from all over the country, plus we have about 10,000 operators from the Bangladesh Army.*

CHAUBEY: And how were the enumerators chosen to go about and reach voters?

HOSSAIN: *There is a traditional process. Normally they are chosen from different educational institutions, the schools, the madrasahs, and the colleges. The teachers are normally the data entry enumerators. Picking up the schoolteachers for this purpose is an age-old process.*

CHAUBEY: Now would you describe the process of registration itself briefly and how this particular procedure was selected?

HOSSAIN: *Previously, we had data from the numerous days visiting each and every household in order to make the list. That was our previous practice. But since this time it had to be collected electronically, we had different steps for the collection of the data.*

The first step was the traditional way of the data enumerators going door to door and filling out the forms with the help of the voters. At times, they assisted the voters. At times the educated ones filled out their own forms.

Next, the data enumerators would carry the forms with them and on a particular date the voters would come to a registration center where the data enumerators were with the forms. The voter's identity was validated by the local government and institution representatives and then the voters would go before the data entry operators where the data entry operators entered the data from the forms.

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At the same time, they would take the photograph and the fingerprint and signature so the entire data entry operation was done. After all data was collected, it was checked. Proof reading was done and then a draft list was prepared for each household again to check whether there were any errors or not. So once it was finalized, then they printed the draft voter list, which was displayed for about fifteen days to see if anybody had any objections or if there were any corrections needed. Once this process was over, the final voter list was prepared. So that's how we prepared the photo voter list.

CHAUBEY: And why was this method chosen, to first have the enumerators go to people's houses and then bring people in to registration centers?

HOSSAIN: Possibly that was the best process that could be identified.

CHAUBEY: I'd like to ask a little bit about reaching out to voters. It's sometimes difficult to reach out to certain communities and I'd like to know if any provisions were made to reach out to women and if there were any challenges in particular to registering women?

HOSSAIN: A very good question. Since the data enumerators visited door to door, the whole household was covered, whether it's male or female, whether it's a particular community, minority or whatever. So no special measure was taken to reach people of any gender or any community. So this is one. Yes, we faced some challenges particularly regarding the women who are religious minded and wear hijabs and all. We overcame this through our motivation campaign done through our religious teachers to motivate people from all walks of life including the women wearing the hijabs. First of all, we had male and female data enumerators. And in each team, there was a female so that when a woman was of a religious mind, she was taken care of. We also hired and trained some of the female data entry operators to take care of the women who are religious minded and wear hijabs.

CHAUBEY: Now Bangladesh has some difficult terrain, so would you describe some of the challenges of reaching geographically remote communities and how you overcame them?

HOSSAIN: Chittagong Hill Tracts, for example, were very difficult to reach, so to get to that area we used Air Force helicopters to bring in the data entry operators and also to mobilize the different logistics needed. We had some islands where we used the Bangladesh Navy and Coast Guard resources. Manpower from the Bangladesh Navy was used for registering in those areas. Besides, we have what we call house- marsh areas, areas difficult to reach during the monsoon. Some areas are difficult to reach during the summer. So we tried to plan that whenever the terrain was favorable for mobilization, we would use that time for the registration.

CHAUBEY; Once the Air Force or the Navy reached one of these islands or hill tracks, did you set up camps for several days?

HOSSAIN: Yes, camping was done from place to place and equipment was carried in to those areas as well. It was a little bit of a challenge, because, you see, the kind of equipment that we used also needed electricity. And in those areas, electricity was not available, so also we had to carry generators for this purpose. Mobilizing

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huge resources was a very big challenge, particularly in hard to reach areas. We used helicopters, we used naval equipment like speedboats and other resources we had and in some of the areas we just used manpower, human beings as boaters. So this is how we were able to go to each and every corner of Bangladesh.

CHAUBEY: There are some migrant communities that are never in one place for very long, were there any provisions to deal with such communities?

HOSSAIN: *Again, no special provision was made, however, anybody residing in a particular area for maybe even a week, was taken care of. So the people migrating from one place to another were also taken care of.*

CHAUBEY: Some countries have had problems with multiple registrations, under-age registration or foreigners registering. Would you describe the challenges of that nature faced here and how they were overcome?

HOSSAIN: *Multiple registrations had been a common practice in Bangladesh before. There were many instances where the people were registered in more than two places even. So it was a very big challenge to take care of this aspect. We had an awareness campaign so that people would not attempt to go for multiple registrations. And there were some punitive measures, legally, so that people would not attempt multiple registrations. Yet we found some cases where people tried, but were identified by the software that we were using. The automatic fingerprint matching took care of this aspect. Once the software was ready, once we collected the data, we ran the matching software in order to detect multiple registrations.*

              As for the second issue of a foreigner registering, since voters were visited door to door, actually no foreigner could be registered that way. However, being under age was a very crucial problem, I would say, because normally many did not have any certificates or educational certificates for proof of age, but visually, if anybody was considered to be less than eighteen, they were not registered. The local government and institution representatives could authenticate that he was under age. This is how we took care of all these issues.

CHAUBEY: And you mentioned educational certificates. Were there any other documents people were required to present in order to register?

HOSSAIN: *Yes, they were required to produce a birth certificate. Particularly those who are qualified Standard 10—in Bangladesh, we call it a Secondary School Certificate. So they had to produce their Secondary School Certificate in order to prove their age and besides that, people could produce their passports or birth certificates or marriage registration certificates, whichever is applicable.*

CHAUBEY: And are there communities that don't live in fixed addresses or permanent homes and have no documents. Shantytowns and so on and if so, what was done to take care of them?

HOSSAIN: *Bangladesh has a good number of people who have no permanent residence in a particular area. So in order to take care of all these so that they are not left off the voter list, the Bangladesh Election Commission decided that if anybody is*

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living in a particular area, even for a week and if someone else can validate that he has resided in this area then he is registered.

CHAUBEY: You mentioned that two registration audits were done. Would you describe which bodies conducted these registration audits and what the purpose was?

HOSSAIN: *There was one registration audit, funded by DFID (Department for International Development) another done through UNDP (United Nations Development Program). So there were two surveys. The first survey was when the registration process was on. We wanted to find out the credibility of the photo voter roll we prepared. The other one was done once the registration was over and this survey was done countrywide.*

In the first survey, only a sample of three areas was taken and for the second survey, the samples were from all over the country with more than half of the populous. In both cases, our main aim was to find the errors. Type one is "voters to list" and type two is " list to voters". "Voters to list", meaning that any voter who is left out, be registered on the list. People had gone to each and every household of the sample areas and they listed those who were not eligible voters and then they tried to match the list to the one we have in our office. In this case the error rate was one person, plus and minus. We tried to find out the reason and it was found that people were either not available at their houses when the registration was done or they didn't turn up by themselves.

And type two was, " list to voters". In this case, the organization that carried out this survey was given the list from us. They went to households and tried to match whether anybody was listed but not present in the household. So for type two, the percent of errors was zero. This shows the credibility of our survey.

CHAUBEY: You mentioned one of the challenges early on was the procurement of supplies to conduct this exercise. Would you describe some of the ways that you went about procuring all the needed technology and equipment?

HOSSAIN: *Understand that for such a huge task, an enormous amount of equipment was required. For example, we used more than 10,000 laptops, more than 10,000 webcams and fingerprint scanners. We imported more than 180,000 reams of office paper. These were not available off- the- shelf, we had to follow the procurement process which is defined by the government. So going through the tendering selection of credible forms for such a huge supply of the items was really a very big challenge.*

At times, we took help from the UNDP for the procurement. Our aim was to complete the registration in a stipulated time and we had gone ahead with that. So if we needed some support from other organizations like the UNDP for procurement, we sought their help as well. This is how we took care of the problems we faced.

CHAUBEY: Now how long did the entire registration process take from start to finish?

HOSSAIN: *It was conceived sometime in April or May 2007. Then we conducted a pilot project in June 2007. Until then, we didn't have our logistics. However, in August we carried out the registration of two to three areas.* Then we began a *full swing registration sometime in December because by then we had all our logistics at*

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hand. We completed it in August. If you consider only this major portion of the registration, it took only about nine months. If you start from conception to the printing of the voter list, it was about one and half years.

CHAUBEY: What were the challenges working on this timetable?

HOSSAIN: *It was too short a time for conducting such a huge project. So that was the main challenge. We could have used more time for planning.*

CHAUBEY: I'd like to ask about the procurement of supplies that you had to undertake for the voter registration exercise. What were the sorts of options you considered in terms of where to get supplies?

HOSSAIN: *Certainly we looked on the Internet to find where things were available and then also, since it was a large procurement, we had gone for tenders. The vendors used to submit their papers and from there we carried out the evaluation which met our requirement.*

CHAUBEY: Would you be able to talk about if there were any problems with the procurement process?

HOSSAIN: *Yes, there were problems, because we had to follow the government procurement regulations. The procurement regulations create some problems in terms of getting the items in the time required. For example, in our case, our time was fixed when we had to finish the project activities, so if we couldn't procure an item within the stipulated time, it hampered the overall progress of the project. So that is obviously a problem.*

CHAUBEY: How did you handle this obstacle and work around it?

HOSSAIN: *At times we had to take some risks and think "out of the box" and then go for it. At times when we found that following our normal procedure couldn't procure what we needed, we sought help from UNDP. But we kept on going and we did it.*

CHAUBEY: Were there any problems finding the volume of supplies that you needed in those short amounts of time? Who was able to supply paper that quickly?

HOSSAIN: *We found we got a good number of vendors and for that maybe at times, we had to use the person with different kinds of supplies, so that they could participate. We had a greater number of bidders, that way for us. So that is how we could work on this problem.*

CHAUBEY: Now I believe you ran a pilot registration process in June of 2007, why was that conducted?

HOSSAIN: *You know it is such huge activity, there was no ready made solution. So naturally, there was going to be mass collection of the data. So we thought it was necessary to run a pilot. That was done, basically to test our software, and the modality also. The pilot was done in Sripur of Gazipur district. It is very close to Dhaka, it is maybe about 1-1/2 hours drive from Dhaka. Sripur was chosen because Sripur had a population where you had a touch of the urban as well as rural areas, so that is why Sripur was chosen. Second issue is that it was close to*

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Dhaka so that we can monitor from Dhaka. Donors were always there to witness the whole process starting from the pilot to the last.

CHAUBEY: What were some of the changes you made based on information gathered during the registration exercise?

HOSSAIN: *We did a bit of fine-tuning of our modality and then we had to update the software also to suit the requirements. For example, at times, what we had, we entered the data manually, so we found that there were a good number of mistakes. So what we did, we tried to reduce that manual entry of the information. Instead, we tried to pick the information from the dropdown lists wherever it was possible. This was one of the major changes which we carried out during our pilot period.*

CHAUBEY: After the Sripur exercise, how long a time was it before full registration was launched?

HOSSAIN: *The first registration we did small scale, that was in Jessore in Khulna, sometime in August, so a lag of say two months. But that was also not full scale. Full -scale registration started in early December because major equipment like laptops and other gadgets necessary for registration, we could procure by the end of November. So we could start full-scale registration in December 2007.*

CHAUBEY: What sort of equipment were you using before the full registration phase began?

HOSSAIN: *It was in terms of quantity, the quantity was less. We procured a small number of computers, laptops and other gadgets. Maybe the number was around 1000 plus, but our total procurement was about 10,000 plus. So most of the equipment was procured some time at the end of November. Actually, those thousand laptops were donated by different organizations. The remaining computers, we procured. The thousand plus laptops were donated by different organizations like the Dutch Bangla Bank, maybe other banks, too. Most of the donations came by way of personal contact, after we had invited the community to make donations.*

CHAUBEY: How was the experience of registration different when it was conducted on the full scale in terms of security arrangements, were they the same?

HOSSAIN: *It was more or less following the same modality, with some fine-tuning, only. The time period gave us some preparation time for deployment and hiring data entry operators, training them, developing the software to that scale. Then once the equipment was procured we had to configure the equipment for the specific requirements for registration. The equipment was configured by resource people from the armed forces and a few of the vendors who supplied the laptops.*

CHAUBEY: I'd like to ask also a little bit about the funds for this project. How were the funds for this disbursed, what were the channels?

HOSSAIN: *Where did we get the funds? It was a project of 60/40 ratio, 60% was provided by our development partners and 40% was provided by the government of Bangladesh. UNDP actually coordinated almost all the development partners. The major development partners were like DFID (Department for International Development) and then European Union, possibly Swaziland, Denmark.*

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CHAUBEY: Was there any trouble with funds coming, being received in a timely manner?

HOSSAIN: *Not really, we got funds, because everyone was very much concerned about it. They were very cooperative. More or less we can say that we gut the funds on time.*

CHAUBEY: If you had to give advice to your counterpart in another country about a particular strategy that worked really well, what would you suggest people try?

HOSSAIN: *This process was unique for Bangladesh. Not exactly the same model can be replicated elsewhere, maybe a bit of customization would be required to meet that particular country's requirement. For example, in our case, it was armed forces who volunteered to do all these things. So who would work in place of the armed forces in other countries? Our religious teachers were utilized to motivate the conservative women. What would be done in a similar case in some other countries? So it will depend upon a lot of factors of that particular country. Exactly the same model cannot be replicated in total.*

CHAUBEY: What are the strengths of the armed forces that you think made the registration process smooth?

HOSSAIN: *The professionalism, its discipline, its managing capability, its organization and then controlling those who were involved in the process with honesty and sincerity. They worked around the clock during that period. So these are the major strengths of the armed forces worth mentioning.*

CHAUBEY: Were army personnel deployed to registration zones for the entire period of registration?

HOSSAIN: *Yes. The armed forces were deployed right from the pilot project to the very end. They registered one upazila of a particular district at a time meaning that with a total of 64 districts, the army was deployed in that particular area. When one upazila was over then they switched over to another upazila of a particular district. So they moved out from this upazila to the other one. So this is how they were deployed during the whole period of registration.*

CHAUBEY: Was it the same team that would move or would it be a fresh team?

HOSSSAIN;   *You didn't have extra manpower, it was whatever the army could spare, the same people worked in all places. It was experience also. If someone has done it once then that particular team was experienced. So that expertise was quite useful in registering since they could do it better.*

CHAUBEY: Could you also talk a little bit about the kind of incentives given to people involved in the registration process to do their jobs well?

HOSSAIN: *The incentives are very insignificant. As a matter of fact the financial incentives that were there, you cannot consider to be an incentive. The army volunteered to do that. As regards the other persons who were involved in it, it was a very insignificant amount of money. People were very interested and very enthusiastic about doing it, maybe out nationalistic feeling.*

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CHAUBEY: There were also payments given to the enumerators. Would you describe those, how they were paid?

HOSSAIN: *Yes, actually we paid the enumerators for each voter. A particular amount was allotted for each voter. The enumerators, the data entry operators, the proof readers, for everyone, pay was based on the number of voters.*

CHAUBEY: Was there a threshold limit set that you can't do more than a certain amount per day?

HOSSAIN: *As a matter of fact it was not done. Certainly if someone does a very high number, it is likely there would be more errors, so that was checked.*

CHAUBEY: In addition to what we've discussed here, are there other issues you would like to raise?

HOSSAIN: *I am very happy to be involved with this project because this is one of a kind. Now each Bangladeshi citizen above 18 possesses an identity card of this type. So a project I have been involved with since the beginning and have already completed has given me a great deal of satisfaction. In addition to the registration, completing the voter roll and getting the ID card for 80 million people, we have also passed the laptops over to them. A good number of children, present during the registration process, had been watching the functions of this magic tool. So maybe this is going to have a long-term impact on the minds of the people, in proliferating the IT. So this is an extra outcome, I would say, another benefit of this project. We picked up data entry operators from across the country, from the remotest corners of the country and trained more than 100,000 data entry operators. Maybe this will instill confidence in them that they can do data entry operation.*

Our Prime Minister has declared that we are going to have a digital Bangladesh in 2021. This is going to help. So I am very happy to be a part of this project.

CHAUBEY: That is very good. Just a quick question about the training of the 100,000 data operators you said, which institute trained them?

HOSSAIN: *It is the Bangladesh Army that trained them.*

CHAUBEY: And the Electoral Training Institute, what role did they play?

HOSSAIN: *They trained the enumerators. The enumerators and other supervisors, assistant registration officers.*

CHAUBEY: Wonderful, thank you so much for your time and for participating in this interview.

HOSSAIN: *Thank you very much.*