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## Column

### Mustafa Kamal Syed, BTV and helping children



Afsan Chowdhury

NOVEMBER 10, 2023

Last Saturday, many of us sat at the rooftop auditorium of Channel 1 to participate in a book launch, a tribute volume on TV maestro late Mustafa Kamal Syed of BTV and NTV. The guests were many, mostly middle aged and some were more, chatting and remembering in a state of collective nostalgia. What they had in common was their friendship and collegiality with the late person as well as with an era gone by.

I was not from the TV production and entertainment world but we had known each other due to my work for child immunization and other programmes. I was a Unicef staff member and he as the BTV boss helped us out in many ways. The person we were gathered to honour was one who in many ways epitomized the age of social commitment.

#### Of immunization challenges

My inter-action with Mustafa Kamal Syed began in the mid-80s. My task was to mobilize people and institutions who could be allies in pushing various child related issues. The priority programme of the UN for Bangladeshi children at that time was Immunization and the target was to immunize all children -80% - under 2 years of age.

All this sounds simple enough except that it wasn't. I was present at a briefing by international health experts who cast serious doubts on achieving the target as Bangladesh lacked physical health infrastructure to immunize millions of children particularly in the rural areas.

How Bangladesh coped with that was a story of a miracle. Government's village level health workers contacted the village matbars who readily agreed to allow their homes to be used as temporary immunization sites. And all over Bangladesh thousands of such immunization sites sprang up. It made immunization possible. Sounds simple but miracles sometimes do happen.

#### Media and children

The next challenge was to inform the villagers that such a service was available and the Government was leading this programme. There was a general fear about injections and when it came to children even more so. There was also the critical anti-tetanus shot which would save many mothers' lives but many feared that it was a family planning shot in disguise.

So the only response was to use the media and convince people that all these were safe. In those days, radio was there but TV had more clout, research said. So the heads turned towards the BTV. The hurdle? Unicef regulations forbade payment for social services, it had to be voluntary. It was here that public support was needed. But BTV was a government organization. Could it or would it help?

Our first contact was journalist Chinmoy Mutsuddi of Bichitra who put us in touch with BTV officials and producers. And Mustafa Kamal Syed, as the GM, was critical. On hearing the proposal, quite informally, he immediately agreed to air the information as announcements and TVCs focused on the immunization programme. BTV could have said "No" and we could have done little about it but people like him were of the kind that is less now. He did it for children and that made a difference. Very soon, the results of the mass airing began to show up positively as people responded to the messages and the Moni logo became a symbol for healthy children.

### **Mustafa bhai and cricket**

Mustafa bhai was a big fan of cricket but I didn't know that. However, one of my tasks involved handling goodwill envoys and one was a cricket star called Imran Khan of Pakistan, later becoming the PM quite unnecessarily. He came to visit Bangladesh to promote immunization as a cause worth following particularly for the elite and I was tasked with getting him media mileage.

Mustafa bhai was a perfect gentleman but not exactly a light hearted person. So when I proposed that BTV interview Imran Khan in his hotel room, I wasn't sure of the response. However he agreed without any argument and asked the TV crew to go there at a certain time.

That day there was an event at the hotel and Imran Khan was delayed by his many fans and admirers and I was worried that the BTV crew might leave due to the delay. We went upstairs along with Mahmudur Rahman, the anchor-commentator and the interviewer to Imran's room and lo and behold, not only was the BTV crew patiently waiting but it was accompanied by Mustafa bhai himself.

I still didn't get it till Imran Khan himself came in and sat down to be interviewed. I did a quick intro of the people in the room and it was the smile on MKS's face that told me that I was looking at a cricket fan. My anxieties went out through the window as all worked together to produce a lovely interview that was targeted at Dhaka's elite class. After it was aired, many policy making doors opened more easily as they knew we kept great company.

Thanks to Channel I for publishing the book - edited by Arif Khan -out of sheer respect and regard for this great person who till his final day did his best for the people of Bangladesh.

### Afsan Chowdhury




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