

U.C.-Berkeley Launches 1st Bangladesh Studies Center in U.S.

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Attending the official opening of the Subir and Malini Chowdhury Center for Bangladesh Studies at U.C.-Berkeley are (l-r): Ahmed Badruzzaman, a member of the center's advisory board; Subir Chowdhury, whose family foundation funded the center; Sanchita Saxena, Indian American inaugural director of the center; and Lawrence Cohen, professor of anthropology and South and Southeast Studies at U.C.-Berkeley. (Photo by Rachael Garner, The Daily Californian)



At the grand opening of the center are (l-r) donor Subir Chowdhury, U.C.-Berkeley Chancellor Nicholas Dirks and Sir Fazle Hasan Abed. (Photo by Keegan Houser, University Relations, U.C.-Berkeley)

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Berkeley, Calif. — The University of California at Berkeley’s Subir and Malini Chowdhury Center for Bangladesh Studies held its official grand opening here March 30.

Endowed by a \$1 million gift from the Subir and Malini Chowdhury Foundation ([I-W, April 25, 2014](#)), the center is the first of its kind outside of Bangladesh.

Chittagong-born Subir Chowdhury, chairman of Los Angeles, Calif.-based ASI Consulting Group, was in 2011 named one of the top 50 most influential management gurus by the Harvard Business Review.

The funding will support public lectures, conferences and symposiums, encourage collaborations by researchers and offer undergraduate scholarships and graduate fellowships.

A ribbon-cutting ceremony at the Institute for South Asia Studies, which houses the center, featured a rendition of the Bangladesh national anthem by U.C.-Berkeley graduate Wahida Rashid.

U.C.-Berkeley Chancellor Nicholas Dirks in his remarks pointed out that Bangladesh is “a nation that still struggles with all kinds of issues and challenges, but (it) is also a sign of great hope and optimism...that we will be able to explore together as we engage with our colleagues and scholars — both here, elsewhere in the United States, across the world and in Bangladesh.”

Bangladeshi Ambassador to the U.S. Mohammed Ziauddin sent a congratulatory note thanking U.C.-Berkeley and Chowdhury for the center.

After the ceremony, Sir Fazle Hasan Abed, founder and CEO of BRAC, considered the world's largest NGO measured by number of employees and people served, presented a lecture, "A Quiet Revolution in Bangladesh."

Sanchita Saxena, Indian American inaugural director of the Chowdhury Center and a scholar on labor issues in the garments sector, introduced Abed, noting improvements by Bangladesh in the garments industry and the role BRAC has played.

Abed cautioned against focusing on negative stereotypes of Bangladesh and urged the capacity crowd to recognize positive trend-lines, including the country's increased food production, a decrease in mortality for children under five years of age and increased life expectancy overall, measures where Bangladesh has surpassed both India and Pakistan.

Abed also cited BRAC's work on maternal and child health, education (especially of female children), small-enterprise building and financial services. The NGO's latest venture, "bkash," is the fastest growing mobile money transfer service worldwide, he added.

"How we made progress (in BRAC) is not a mystery. We worked very hard, drew on knowledge of others and used lessons learned along the way," Abed said.

Ananya Roy, professor of city and regional planning at U.C.-Berkeley, moderated a question-and-answer session. She noted that she uses the BRAC model in her teaching and coursework.

Energy scientist Ahmed Badruzzaman, a member of the center's advisory board, noted that Abed postponed a BRAC board meeting to attend the grand opening. He pointed out the role the Bengali diaspora played to support Bangla language instruction at Berkeley. "This support drew the attention of (Chowdhury) and the rest is history," he said.

Chowdhury admitted he considered a few other universities to locate a center, but chose Berkeley for the passion he saw in the students and from Dirks.

Raka Ray, chair of the department of sociology and professor of South and Southeast Asia studies at Berkeley, first urged Chowdhury in 1993 to establish a Bangla language program there.

"I had no money then," Chowdhury said, but he promised her if he ever did, he would "help her cause."

Saxena, executive director of the Institute of South Asia Studies, said programs already initiated at the center include an exchange program between U.C.-Berkeley faculty and students and BRAC University, summer internships for U.C.-Berkeley students at organizations in Dhaka and a summer study-abroad program at the Asian University for Women in Chittagong.

One of the center's inaugural fellows, Caitlin Cook, a master's degree student at U.C.-Berkeley's School of Public Health, has researched antibiotic resistance with the aid of researchers at the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research in Dhaka.

“Public health often knows no borders, Cook said. “For example, bacteria and pathogens aren’t limited to one region of the world... That exchange of knowledge is so critical.”

Nafisa Akbar, a Ph.D. candidate in political science and a Malini Chowdhury Fellow, is investigating why political parties in Bangladesh use violence in political campaigning.

“If we can identify the motivations behind why political parties use violence as a pre-election repertoire, perhaps we can determine solutions to deterring parties from doing so,” he said.

Saxena said research at the center will not only find strategies to solve the challenges Bangladesh is facing, but also develop models that could be used by other countries for development.

The center will become, in Chowdhury’s words, “an independent global voice positively affecting the quality of life of people in Bangladesh,” she said.

*(Edited by **India-West** from an article submitted by Elaina Provencio, staff writer, The Daily Californian; Thomas Levy, staff writer, U.C.-Berkeley News Center; and Kathleen Maclay, U.C.-Berkeley Media Relations.)*