Subir Chowdhury Puts Bangladesh Studies on U.C.’s Map

By Richard Springer, Staff Reporter

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United States

Management efficiency expert Subir Chowdhury has donated $1 million to the University of California at Berkeley to establish the Subir and Malini Chowdhury Center for Bangladesh Studies. (Richard Springer photo)

For management efficiency expert Subir Chowdhury, his gift of $1 million to establish the Subir and Malini Chowdhury Center for Bangladesh Studies at the University of California at Berkeley will help remove a blind spot in South Asian studies in the U.S. by focusing cutting-edge research on modern Bangladesh.

"Bangladesh has a population that is about half of the U.S., and it has produced the best talent, people who are making a huge contribution to America," he told India-West at the South Asian studies offices on the U.C. Berkeley campus here.

Named by Harvard Business Review in 2011 as one of the top 50 "Most Influential Management Gurus," the Chittagong-born Chowdhury is chairman and CEO of ASI Consulting Group, which have relocated from Michigan to Los Angeles.

Labeled "The Quality Prophet" by Business Week, Chowdhury is...
also the author of the bestseller “The Power of Six Sigma: An Inspiring Tale of How Six Sigma is Transforming the Way We Work” and has authored or co-authored other business management books.

Bangladesh is frequently in the news in America, but “all of it is negative — floods, (garment factory) fires and (labor) abuse,” the Bangladeshi American management specialist lamented.

Chowdhury said he chose U.C. Berkeley to fund the only center at a major U.S. university focus study and research solely on Bangladesh because “I was blown away by the humbleness and openness” at U.C-Berkeley, he said.

U.C. Berkeley chancellor Nicholas Dirks, an internationally renowned anthropologist and scholar of Indian ethno-history, said in a statement April 21 that the Subir and Malini Chowdhury Center “underscores U.C.-Berkeley’s commitment to provide our faculty and students with expanded options for engagement with global issues.

“We have a great deal of expertise to share, and much to learn from others as we confront challenges that know no national border;” the chancellor said.

Sanchita B. Saxena, executive director of the Center for South Asia Studies at Berkeley and director of the new center, told India-West in e-mail, “The study of Bangladesh has been, for the most part, quite marginalized at most academic institutions. Centers focused on South Asia are almost always heavily dominated by faculty, students and research focused on India. So the other countries in South Asia (including Pakistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka) are often neglected.

“The Chowdhury Center really tries to solve this problem by highlighting what is currently happening in the field of Bangladesh studies — everything from arsenic removal in the drinking water to understanding microfinance to literature and culture.

“Our goal of showcasing innovative research and training the next generation of scholars in Bangladesh has been realized through this gift which includes the establishment of the Chowdhury Center, but also three critical funding opportunities for students: two graduate fellowships (one to study the quality of life improvements and the other on any aspect of Bangladesh studies) and an undergraduate scholarship.”

The center will also emphasize exchange and scholarship programs between students and faculty at Berkeley and Bangladesh. One partnership being planned is with Bangladesh-based BRAC University, which is funded by the largest international, non-governmental development organization.

Chowdhury pointed out to India-West that it has been more than 40 years since the 1971 Concert for Bangladesh at Madison Square Garden, organized by George Harrison of the Beatles and other artists, raised awareness of Bangladesh in the U.S. The concert raised money for those impacted during the war for independence and in the cyclone that killed 500,000 in the
country.

Since then, he said, individuals like Fazlur Raman Khan, the designer of the Willis Tower (formerly the Sears Tower) in Chicago, have raised awareness about Bangladeshis' contributions in America.

Many center-affiliated faculty at Berkeley are experts in areas directly impacting Bangladesh, he emphasized. They include Ashok Gadgil, who is working on arsenic-free water technology at Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory (I-W, April 4); Raka Ray, who he met 15 years ago when first introduced to Berkeley; Ananya Roy, an authority on global poverty and microfinance; Isha Ray, who studies sustainable rural development and access to safe drinking water; economist Pranab Bardhan; and Saxena, an expert on the textile and garment industry.

Since 2005, the Center for South Asian Studies at U.C. Berkeley, with support from West Bengal and Bangladesh expatriates, has hosted a beginning and intermediate Bangla language program. It is expected to become permanently endowed after a recent fundraiser by the Bangladeshi community.

CSAS also has about 50 affiliated faculty and more than 200 courses on issues concerning South Asia and Bangladesh. It hosted an international conference on Bangladesh development in 2013. The Subir and Malini Chowdhury Center will host the event in 2015.

Saxena told India-West that the Bangladesh Center will have its official launch on campus in the fall "with possibly an academic event during the day showcasing some of the faculty research on Bangladesh followed by a keynote address by a prominent speaker from Bangladesh.

"In the next few years, we plan to invite speakers working on critical issues, send students to spend time at BRAC University and work on projects with NGOs. We plan to offer mini grants to faculty to infuse their curriculum with examples from Bangladesh, hold joint conference with BRAC University and Berkeley and establish a program of visiting scholars to spend time conducting research at the center."

Chowdhury said he also hopes his gift will spread the message that successfully South Asians in American need to develop the type of philanthropy Americans are known for.

He remembered the time when he first attended university in America and needed funds to continue his education. He went to a bank and asked for a loan, but the manager said he needed collateral. He said he had none. The later called him back to the bank and told him that she would be his collateral and gave him the loan.

"I promised myself if ever I made any money, I would give it back to help other graduate students with their education, and for all the support my parents gave to me for my education," he said.