

My Earth science educator story - Afia Akhtar

What I did, why I did it and what happened



During an educational field tour at Sundarban, 2009.

My dream

When I was a student in secondary school class VIII, our teacher gave us an in-class assignment to write an essay explaining the goal of our life. We submitted our essays and waited for the teacher's evaluation. Before returning our essays, the teacher said, "Only one student has seriously expressed what she wants to be. The rest of you have chosen common careers - doctor, engineer, social worker, and so on – with the only aim of securing a high mark." I noticed that we all were looking curiously at one another: who might this student might be? Then the teacher wished me all the luck in my goal to become a professor of Chemistry at Dhaka University, which was my dream career at that time. Fortunately, I found out about the less common, field-oriented subject of geology during my university admission, and spontaneously changed my mind to become a geology professor. I am very glad that I became a geologist, the first female geologist in Bangladesh.

Choosing geology as my professional career

Admission of a girl student to a geology course in 1970-71 was unimaginable in many countries, including Bangladesh. So, when I expressed my desire to be admitted to the course, the Chairman of the Geology Department, Professor Abdul Latif, was astonished to see me, a girl, applying for the course! He advised me that geology was for boys, and not for a girl. But, being persistent is in my nature, I said to him, "a subject is a subject; it does not matter whether your student is a boy or a girl". He tried his best to convince me, citing various examples. However, my sheer logic convinced him that I deserved to be a student in his department, and so he readily accepted me as one. That is how I came to be a geologist, and ever since, I have enjoyed knowing and working with many geologists all over the world. I want to express my respectful gratitude to my late Professor Abdul Latif.

I was not destined to be a professor

Being a girl geology student I had to face a lot of issues. One of the consequences was that I could not become a teacher at Dhaka University. I was offered a teaching position at the Geology and Mining Department of Rajshahi University in northwest Bangladesh. However, my parents did not want me to leave Dhaka. A number of organizations including the Geological Survey of Bangladesh (GSB) also wanted me to join them. I found it difficult to make a decision as I still wanted to join the Geology Department at Dhaka University. But suspecting future difficulties from some senior teachers, I at last joined the GSB in the hope that I could go overseas for higher studies. Being the first lady geologist, I

faced even more problems at GSB regarding research and higher studies. Although I had far better research and professional credentials, I had extra obstacles to overcome, but eventually I became the Director General of GSB, its topmost position.

How I became involved in Earth Science education

I first became involved in Earth science education and became acquainted with educators at the international conference on geosciences education (GeoSciEd-I) held in Southampton, UK in 1993. My paper at the conference focused on the importance of geosciences for Secondary and Higher Secondary education and elaborated on its syllabuses.



In Southampton during the first international conference on geoscience education, field tour, 1993.

In another paper presented at the 30th International Geological Congress in Beijing, China in 1996, I highlighted the necessity of geoscience education for our society. These two papers, published by AA Balkema and VSP respectively, were the turning point for my involvement in worldwide geoscience education activities. My third paper emphasizing Earth science museums as informal institutions for creating awareness of geoscience among the public, published by Ohio

State University as the Proceedings of the GeoSciEd-II held in Hawaii in 1997, USA, encouraged me to focus on the activities of geoscience education even more.



In Seoul with educators at the first meeting of the International Earth Science Olympiad (IESO), an educational program of the International Geoscience Education Organisation (IGEO), 2004.

The Establishment of the Geosciences Awareness and Training Centre

My involvement with the International Geoscience Education Organisation (IGEO) and the Association of Geoscientists for International development (AGID) in encouraging the spread of geoscience education, gave me the inspiration to do something for my own country. At that time, a global survey was being carried out by IGEO Council Members to develop an international inventory on the status of geosciences/Earth science education. Under this program, I submitted a survey report on Bangladesh and realized that it was important to raise awareness of geoscience among the public for the betterment of the country. With this objective, as Head of GSB, I established an educational section called the “*Geosciences Awareness and Training Centre (GATC)*” in 2006. GATC is now a part of GSB’s organizational setup and carries out a range of

geoscience educational programs such as seminars/symposia, orientation courses for GSB's own personnel, and internships for out-going graduate geosciences students. One major objective of GATC is to gradually develop strategies to attract pre-university students and teachers to

geosciences, since geology is not being taught at these levels in Bangladesh. I organized a number of international geosciences conferences emphasizing geoscience education. Many countries from six continents were represented at these conferences, and each of the proceedings had an education section.



Remarks on the training course conducted by the Geological Survey of Bangladesh (GSB) and the Federal Institute for Geoscience and Natural Resources in Germany (BGR) through the Geosciences Awareness and Training Centre (GATC), 2007.



The distribution of certificates after the training course, under GATC, 2007.



Opening address at the seminar on geoscience education, under GATC, 2008.



Briefing during the seminar on geoscience education, under GATC, 2008

My future dream

The project for the “*Establishment of Advanced Geosciences Research and Training Centre*” to stimulate awareness of geosciences through research and educational programs was initiated by reclaiming three acres of land at Mirpur, Dhaka.



Announcement of the Establishment of the Advanced Geoscience Research and Training Centre, in the presence of the Secretary, Energy and Mineral Resources.

A supplementary project was begun by using the Japan Debt Cancellation Fund (JDCE) to strengthen laboratory research facilities and to equip a conventional hall, an auditorium and three lecture rooms with modern amenities for geoscience educational programs.

The architectural design for construction works was approved by the Bangladesh Government. Establishing this Centre with a range of educational facilities is my dream. Now in retirement, I hope Bangladesh will establish this Research and Training Centre as soon as possible so that the country starts getting benefit from it soon.

This Research and Training Centre will be a great achievement for the Ministry of Power, Energy and Mineral Resources (GSR) in Bangladesh. Also I hope, it may be good example to Geological Surveys across the world. I am eagerly looking forward to the day when I can stand in front of my dream.

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