



THE YOUTH IN THE ERA OF DIGITALISATION

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Shishir and Avijatrik: Businesses led by compassion

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Social businesses can be a powerful tool to help solve these issues, while also empowering and engaging the youth.

YY Goshti was among the earliest of such endeavours—the first social business incubator in Bangladesh that offered a platform through which socially conscious entrepreneurship could flourish. Shishir Water and Avijatrik, two organisations thriving to create a sustainable future for Bangladesh, are startups incubated by YY Goshti. *The Daily Star* spoke with their entrepreneurs to learn about their visions and practices.

SHISHIR WATER

Bangladesh is considered one of the most riverine countries in the world. However, the abundance of safe drinking water is a privilege here. While 39.9 million people are in need of safe drinking water, 3.2 million people have no access to water. The country also has the problem of arsenic contamination of groundwater, causing widespread poisoning and putting millions at risk. Water supplies are further affected by river pollution,



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poor sanitation, and rising levels of saline. 41 percent of the population are drinking water from contaminated sources, according to statistics provided by the Bangladesh government.

Shishir Water, also known as simply Shishir, was founded to tackle this

pressing issue. A joint social business project of YY Goshti Incubator and the Grameen Telecom Trust, Shishir Water ensures access to clean drinking water for the underserved communities of Bangladesh. Shazeeb M Khairul Islam started Shishir Water in 2017 and currently, Shishir provides clean and safe water for over 2,300 people in the Mymensingh area.

Shishir Water partnered with Watersprint AB, a Swedish water technology company that came up with an innovative UV-LED technology to purify water. The technology uses short-wavelength ultraviolet (UV-C) light to disinfect contaminated water.

The project proved challenging at first, as the contamination level of the source water in Bangladesh turned out to be much higher than expected. The Shishir Water team tested eight different samples of water and finally came up with a solution to disinfect the water by cleaning it with non-toxic aluminium sulfate first. After an initial cleaning stage, the water is passed through the tech unit. Two units of Watersprint's technology are currently being used by the plant in Mymensingh.

"Shishir Water is a green company because the energy our technology uses is really low; it is a UV-LED water

treatment solution, friendly to the environment. We can run the plants with zero-waste. These plants have the capacity of running on solar power," shared Shazeeb, Managing Director of Shishir Water.

Convincing the rural people to buy water was also part of the challenge. Their primary concern was, "This is river water, why are you charging us?" Their unawareness of the issue at hand made it harder for Shishir to sell their products at first. But the team persisted and, by reaching out to other younger people in the area who could communicate the benefits of using purified river water better, they finally

convinced the locals. Shazeeb further explained that when rural local people got sick, they finally became convinced of the severity of the situation.

Shishir came up with a different strategy of pricing using a cross-subsidisation model to further ensure operational sustainability. For the impoverished and the disadvantaged communities, they sell 20 liters of water for Tk 10; they charge Tk 25 from small shops and restaurants; and Tk 35 from other commercial businesses, hospitals, and schools.

For their micro-franchising model, they are investing time, capital, and technology to find a local youth who can then become the entrepreneur. "At some point, the franchisee starts to give us our invested amount back. The rest of the money comes back in little amounts as the investment payment and rest of the money are the profit for the local entrepreneur. Once our money is paid back, it becomes their business. So, in a social business model, we get the invested amount back which helps tackle social problems and create valuable jobs," explained Shazeeb. Shishir targets youths who are uneducated and unable to obtain finance and encouraged them to participate in the Shishir Water Scheme.

Shishir Water hopes to open more plants, expanding the network initially to Chandpur and Sylhet. They hope to create more jobs in the local communities and to engage another 400 young retailers and resellers across the country.

Shazeeb expects more entrepreneurs to tackle water scarcity: "The problem is a big one and we cannot solve it alone," he said. "We need to inspire other people and come up with really small, scalable, yet sustainable solutions."

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