



PHOTOS: COURTESY OF CREATIVE LEE



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DEADLINE: December 18, 2020 | Grants



(L) Shoilee's journal spreads feature paintings, hand-drawn sketches or neatly penned mandala designs. (R) A 'Harry Potter' themed journal by Creative Lee.

Crafting journals of creativity

MADIHA ATHAR KHAN

While 2020 will be remembered for how difficult it was for everyone, there are some fortunate people who utilised the extra time at home effectively. Shoilee Islam, a second-year Agricultural Economics and Rural Development student at Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Agricultural University and the Founder and Artist of Creative Lee, is one such person. Creative Lee is an online arts and crafts store that specialises in handmade, customised journals.

Shoilee started journaling as a hobby in 2016. However, due to other commitments, she could not practice it regularly. Four years later, when she found herself with an abundance of time on her hands, she took to journaling once more, creating beautifully patterned pages, filled with artworks of different kinds. Her journal spreads sometimes featured paintings, hand-drawn sketches or neatly penned mandala designs.

The only constant was that whatever she used was done by hand, including the binding. To showcase her creativity, Shoilee uploaded images of her journal spreads on social media, posting them on various groups as well as her own page. Her creative outputs were met with overwhelming appreciation.

Many were surprised to find out that the journals were handmade as opposed



Shoilee Islam

to store-bought. Soon, Shoilee began to receive requests from people who wanted their own journals designed by her. This is when the journey of Creative Lee began. Given the amount of praise she received, Shoilee gained the confidence to start her own business.

When it comes to designing the journals, Shoilee does not believe in restricting herself. Most of the orders she receives are crafted according to her customers' needs and budgets - they choose the layouts, colours and featured artworks for their journals.

"If any given journal has a hundred pages, around ten to twelve of those will be designed by me. The rest are kept blank for the user to fill up as they please," she adds. Shoilee is also known to sell theme-oriented journals among which the TV show "Friends" and the "Harry Potter" series are two of the most popular ones.

"Initially, I had to explain the concept of journaling to people, as it is not a common activity in Bangladesh," Shoilee says about the challenges she faced.

Overall, maintaining Creative Lee has been a positive outlet for Shoilee. She looks forward to receiving each order and getting to work. "It is a kind of refreshment for me, amid my studies and chores," she says.

She nevertheless recognises that the e-commerce sector is highly competitive. However, she believes that she is able to stand out in the market, owing to the fact that her products are a combination of craftsmanship and artistry. "There are many competing online artist pages and crafts shops, but most of them specialise in one of three things: sketching, painting or crafting. The journals I create are a combination of all of these things," she asserts.

Shoilee believes that the first six to eight months of a business are crucial. She is still in the initial learning phase of what she hopes to be a long-term creative career. "This job energises me, and I am grateful to be able to do it in these times of uncertainty," she concludes.

6th International Istanbul Fellowship Program 2021

The International Istanbul Fellowship Program is organized on an annual basis by the Turkish Press and Publishers Copyright & Licensing Society and is made possible with sponsorship and support from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. This program brings together publishers and stakeholders from around the world in Istanbul for copyright and translation negotiations with the main aim of improving and exchanging ideas and learning from different Publisher managers, editors, copyright agencies, professional publishing associations, and publisher non-governmental organizations.

DEADLINE: December 25, 2020 | Fellowships

Special Research Fund: Doctoral Scholarships for Candidates from Developing Countries -2021

With provision from its "Special Research Fund" (BOF) Ghent University grants Ph.D. "sandwich" scholarships to promising Ph.D. students from developing countries who wish to carry out half of their Ph.D. research at Ghent University (North) and a half at a university in a developing country (South).

DEADLINE: February 4, 2021 | Scholarships



Tales of traditions, spices and herbs

SADIA TAHSIN

Songsari is a spice and herbal product venture that intends to be a part of everyone's family. Food enthusiasts Dolon Champa Dutta and Tazrin Farzana Zinia primarily started Songsari on July 15, 2020, and were later joined by Mamun Billah and Refat Hasan. Dolon, Zinia and Refat are currently pursuing their post-graduate education from the Department of Economics at Jahangirnagar University. Mamun pursued Electrical Engineering at World University Bangladesh.

While Dolon, Zinia and Refat oversee the marketing and PR, communication and customer service and IT and infrastructure departments of Songsari respectively, Mamun looks after the product chains, designs and photography. Their primary business model was based on building a readymade food venture, but their market research led them to a window of opportunity, which was a gap in the herbal and spice products' industry in Bangladesh. The young founders have been incorporating all their capacities to safely and effectively bring spices and grains to people's kitchen cabinets. They collect the spices and grains themselves without the involvement of any intermediary, to ensure the quality maintenance of their products, which is a major concern in this industry.

The core team of Songsari is made up of a group of avid travellers, which turned to their benefit, as they could build strong relationships with the locals whom they collect spices, lentils and herbs from. They get chillies from Bogura, turmeric from Bandarban and *choi-jhal* from Khulna. "Being able to travel so much is one of the most rewarding parts of the job," shared Dolon.

However, the founders faced challenges while convincing their families, as they left their stable jobs behind to become entrepreneurs. Zinia shared, "Struggles and obstacles are there, but I truly believe that they are followed by success and happiness."

Their initial plan was to launch Songsari in 2019, but it was delayed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Yet, they managed to work through the challenges and begin the distribution by 2020.

However, their production costs have increased due to the pandemic, and their product lines cannot be extended any time soon. Apart from that, the team faced complications regarding their raw product



PHOTOS: COURTESY OF SONGSARI

(L) The founders of Songsari. (R) Songsari's team provides handwritten letters along with each delivery. These letters feature traditional stories about food and spices.

supplies, which come from rural farms - the logistical limitations interrupted their pace. However, since Songsari is an e-commerce brand, their promotional activities online weren't hampered during the pandemic.

In this highly competitive e-commerce market, new ventures are always obligated to go beyond the point of parity and introduce something new. Realising the need, Songsari takes safety precautions for the customers by providing alcohol pads with all parcels.

All parcels inside Dhaka are delivered by Songsari's team, so that they can communicate with their customers directly. The team also uses traditional techniques of telling stories via letters to people - they provide yellow postal cards and handwritten letters in yellow envelopes to their customers as they want to promote local stories besides their initiative.

With the motto to draw a link between Songsari and Bengali roots and nostalgia, they brought back stories like *Monsha Mongal* and *Pak Rajeshwar*. During festivals such as Eid, Durga Puja and Janmastami, they share old, traditional recipes like *Akbar-e-Dopeyaja*, *Aviyal*, *Maach Pora* of *Kashijora Rajbari*, *Alur Dom* of *Shovabajar Rajbari* among many others in these letters, along with details about the origins of those recipes. "I write extensively about spices and food history," said Dolon, who is

in charge of the letters. "I try to inform the customers about the stories behind the spices." The founders aim to showcase the beauty of Bangladeshi culture and food habits through these stories.

"During my nine years of professional experience, I worked with several multinational and SME entrepreneurs and I want to contribute to Songsari with my experience," said Mamun.

While modeling the business, the founders of Songsari decided to especially take senior citizens into account, since they are not generally well-versed with online shopping. Bearing that in mind, Songsari introduced the point-of-sale (POS) system, where the customers can pay at home after the delivery, with their card.

Songsari also collects post-purchase feedback from customers, and uses environmentally friendly food grade packaging.

When asked about the future plans, the team shared that they intend to be a safe and secured spice and herbal supply service in Bangladesh. They look forward to opening country-wide physical branches. The founders further mentioned that among the 17 SDGs, Songsari is working towards 'Zero Hunger' and 'Good Health and Wellbeing'.