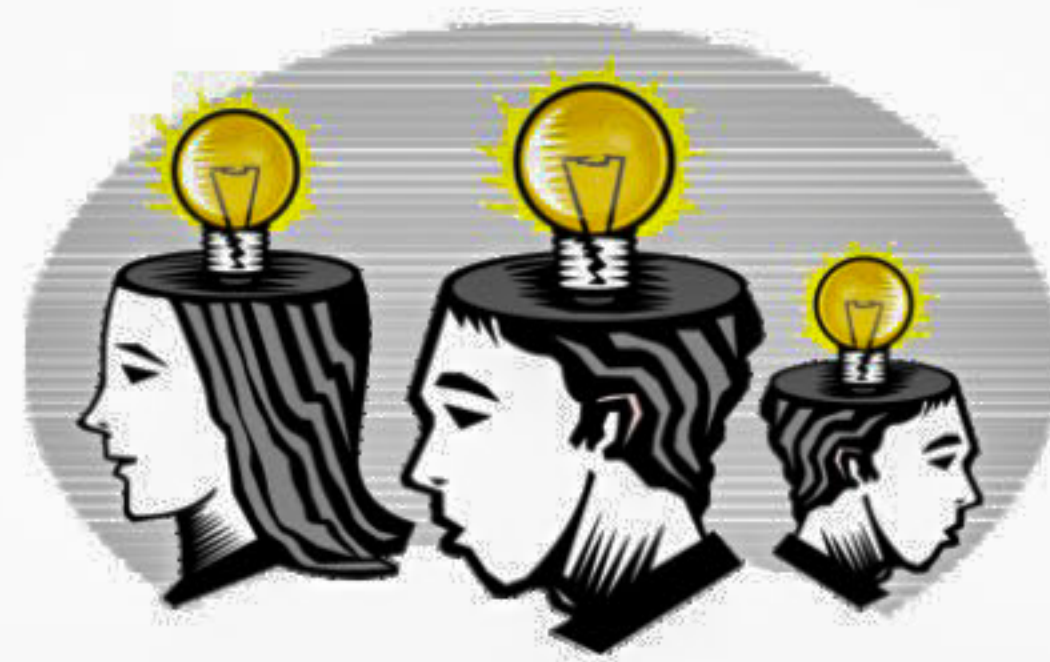


Pockets



of Change

DHAKA, MONDAY, JULY 25, 2011, E-MAIL: business@thedailystar.net

From street child to development activist

MD FAZLUR RAHMAN

AT the age of seven, he boarded a train at Pahartali Station in Chittagong in 1989. Detached from his family and alone, he didn't know where he was headed. In the next few years, Shafiqul Islam Khan worked as an urchin and was raised as a street child.

It is with intervention from a non-profit organisation that he was able to escape poverty. A self made man, he is now a development activist himself.

"When I boarded the train, I did not know my destination. I was taken directly to Dhaka at the Kamalapur Railway Station, where I stayed for about three years. I worked as a moot and used to wash utensils around the station to make a living," he told The Daily Star on Saturday.

Reminiscing his past, Khan said he has one sibling and his mother had worked in a garments factory. "My mother was always outside during the daytime. As a result, I enjoyed a lot of freedom and did not go to school."

In 1991, he enrolled in an open school set up by Aparajeyo-Bangladesh, a non-profit organisation for the disadvantaged street-children. "The female teachers of the school forced me to get enrolled."

Khan did not like the school on the first day as he could not trust the group of students there. He was scared that they would be engaged in illegal activities where people cut off the kidneys and other limbs and take blood from the street children to sell.

"I did not like studying at all as it was fun and games on the station."

After two years he began attending school regularly. In 1995, the school offered him to join a residential club, run by Aparajeyo-Bangladesh.

At first, he did not also like the club. There, he worked as a presenter on a programme at Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy, on the sidelines of a conference. "It boosted my confidence. Later, I participated in a lot of programmes."



Shafiqul Islam Khan

They shifted him to a hostel in 1997. "I passed class eight from Underprivileged Children's Educational Programme (UCEP), staying at the hostel. I also joined as a motivator at the same open school."

Khan left Aparajeyo-Bangladesh in 2004 and joined 'Apon', an organisation that deals with addicts. At the time he got in touch with his family and reunited with his widow-mother and brother in Chittagong.

The 29-year-old now works as a senior programme officer of the Chittagong-based Juganta Shomaj Unnayan Shongstha. He also runs an organisation called 'Vorer Alo' for children. It deals with 1,300 children. Of them, five girls have got admission at a nursing school.

He also managed sponsorship for another female student who is studying at a medical college. "This is a big achievement for an organisation like Vorer Alo. I know their pains, as I was once a disadvantaged child," said Shafiqul, who is a graduate now.



Wahida Banu

He plans to dedicate his life to the causes of children and help them become leaders. "I also want to expand Vorer Alo so that I can reach out to more disadvantaged children."

There are about 6.5 lakh street children in Bangladesh, according to estimates carried out in 2005, said Wahida Banu, executive director of Aparajeyo-Bangladesh. But the social welfare ministry thinks the number could be near 10 lakh.

She said more and more children are living on the streets and vulnerable due to poverty, natural disasters, a split in the family, and greedy relatives who bring them to the city and to sell them off.

Founded in 1995, Aparajeyo-Bangladesh is a national child rights organisation and is currently supporting 1.37 lakh children through open air

street schools, drop-in centres, residential clubs, emergency night shelters and hostels in Dhaka, Chittagong and Barisal.

About 10,000 children will soon be rehabilitated in society, Banu told The Daily Star.

Recently, the organisation launched a business centre with the help of skilled children, who are working as beauticians or in the apparel and IT sectors.

"Our children are running the centre. We have also opened a beauty parlour, which is run by the children."

Banu said the children in her organisation are also running a bank -- Shishu Unnayan Bank. "There are 17 such banks. The children are the managers and deputy managers of the bank. They are trained as professionals."

"We have developed a model so that a child can establish and recover their lost dreams and become skilled and efficient," she said.

"If the government increases its budgetary allocation for children and policymakers become active and support our efforts, then we will be able to continue our work."

Banu said they are still dependent on foreign aid. Only three projects are run on government funds. "I think we need more support from the government and the community to cut our reliance on donor money."

The development activist urged lawmakers to draw up a social safety net scheme for their respective constituencies. "If we can do that, no child will be left out and be engaged in risky work or illegal trade."

She said the government, politicians, local community, corporate houses, and business chambers need to work together to help the country get rid of the problem.

Banu, who has been working with Aparajeyo-Bangladesh since its inception, said her organisation now plans to work with the youth so that they can take up leadership of the organisation.

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Little steps to development



Women are seen doing embroidery work at Babu Bag House in Harinakundo upazila, Jhenidah.

AZIBOR RAHMAN, Jhenidah

SELF reliance can bring dignity and solvency to one's life. It needs only sincerity and untiring labour for which one can reach the pinnacle of success.

"I will try to organise more jobs for indigenous jobless women and girls who cannot study due to poverty," said Shirin Aktar, a BA student of Saleha Begum Women's Degree College in Harinakundo upazila, Jhenidah.

Shirin makes bags and handicrafts. At least 200 women work for her Babu Bag House.

Shirin was born to a middle-class Muslim family. Her father is a motor bike mechanic. After passing HSC, she tried to get a job in any sector but to no avail. She attended some skills training.

She bought a sewing machine and started making different kinds of bags from coarse materials. The bags served many purposes -- they were women's clothes bags, hand bags, ladies bags, school and college satchels, mobile bags and purses.

Later, Shirin bought another sewing machine with the profit. Her Babu Bag House is in Harinakundo upazila town. She started this initiative since January 2011. Within a short time, her business flourished.

Now Shirin and her mother Sheuli Rahman make bags and supply them to different markets. Besides, 200 women and girl students do embroidery work on different kinds of fabrics manually, to make sarees, wrappers, punjabis, sofa cushions, handkerchiefs, kanthas and scarves. The village women of Saratulla, Balarampur, Kulbaria, Joradah, Falshi, Chituliapara under Harinakundo upazila do embroidery work for Shirin and earn to add to their family income.

Shirin said her work may turn out to be a profitable job if there is huge capital involved. She will be able to employ an additional 200 women if she gets a loan or financial help from any organisation or bank, she said.

She sells a big bag at Tk 85-90 and a small one for Tk 20-30. She also gets Tk 15-20 by selling a mobile bag. Shirin herself supplies these bags to

different shops in Harinakundo, Jhenidah sadar town.

Shirin and her mother manage to make 30 bags with only two sewing machines. Ahead of any festival, they have to work extra hard as demand increases. If they had a few more sewing machines, they would be able to produce more and earn a lot by employing more women. Clients from different district towns throng Babu Bag House to buy bags.

Work goes on in full swing at her home but many village women work from their own homes as well. Shirin and her mother take orders from Dhaka for embroidery work on sarees,

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Sumon Biswas of Sheikhpara, Kushtia, supplies the fabrics from Dhaka. Shirin and her mother send the fabric out to the women of the village accordingly. She feels she could count heavier profits if she got the fabric herself from Dhaka, instead of through Sumon.

Thirty-five women do embroidery work for her. Of them, 25 are indigenous people. Many more women do embroidery work from their home.

Sonali Rani Sarkar, an indigenous woman, said she works after completing her household chores. She earns

Tk 1,500-2,000 a month.

Kakali Rani Biswas said they are deprived of all the facilities of the municipality. They are despised and neglected by all as being low caste Hindus. Shirin has given them hope of survival.

Shirin pays Tk 200 to a worker who does embroidery on a panjabi, Tk 500 for a saree, Tk 300 for a three-piece dress, Tk 45 for a sofa cushion, Tk 45 for handkerchief, Tk 300 for a wrapper, Tk 80 for a scarf and Tk 300 for a shirt.

Sanchita Rani, a student of class VII at Harinakundo Government Girls' School, said she does not depend on her parents anymore to buy stationery. She is happy that she is able to bear her educational expenses.

Lalbanu, a customer from Meherpur district, said she gets bags of all sizes from Shirin twice a month and sells in her district town. She runs her family with the earnings.

Another customer, Piplu Mia of Jhenidah town, said he collects bags from Shirin's shop and sells them in the market. "They bring in good profit because they are of good quality."

Shirin took training in cattle rearing, poultry rearing and tailoring. She expects to start a cattle rearing farm in future. She aims to expand her business so that a good number of distressed and poverty stricken women and poor girls can earn for their families and win respect.

Sheuli Rahman said she helps her daughter whenever required. She takes the bags and other products to the market and collects payments for Shirin. She also supervises the village women who work from home. Sheuli wants her daughter to be self-reliant and independent.

Mayor Shahinur Rahman Rintu of Harinakundo Pourashabha said organisations like Babu Bag House can alleviate poverty in the low income families. "We will look into the matter and try to arrange a loan for Shirin."

Mahmudul Islam Foton, president of Jhenidah Chamber of Commerce, said he will also look into Shirin's business and render assistance as necessary.