

Art for a living

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instead of begging, a livelihood choice for most physically disabled people who come from poor families.

Russell is third among the seven children of Babu Fakir and Renu Begum, who migrated to Dhaka in search of a living in the early 1990s from their village home in Barisal and settled in a slum by the Malibagh railway track in the capital.

Like most slum-kids growing up near railway tracks, he would roam around freely jumping in and out of running trains, traveling from one station to another. One fateful day, this very game proved almost fatal when he slipped from a train's roof in Kamalapur Railway Station.

"We had no trace of him for a whole month and six days, until a man contacted us and told us that he was recovering at the Pangu Hospital," recalled Renu, as Russell sat silently on the plywood floor of a 20-by-10 feet shanty.

By the time his parents found him, Russell's right arm was amputated a little below the elbow and the left arm a little below the armpit, and the left foot was gone too.

Russell, however, got the opportunity to continue his education, even though his formal schooling stopped. He began going to Shishu Neer, a school run by a local NGO for underprivileged children.

"His two sisters were our students, so when he came with them to our school some time in 2007, our principal decided to treat him as a special student," said Hasina

Haque or Russell's Moni Apa, who taught him to draw.

"He had difficulty remembering things and we did not want to pressure him on that, because he had 32 stitches on his head," she said. "But I noticed that he liked to draw pictures, so I taught him to hold pencils with the amputated limbs so that at least he would be occupied during the school hours."

But Hasina began to notice a change in the boy as he grew up. He started to skip his classes more and more. "He would not come to school for months and when I asked his parents they would say he went to their village in Barisal."

But it was not Barisal he had gone to.

He wanted to be useful to his family which was comprised of 11 members -- his father, mother, second brother and his wife with their four-month old baby, his three sisters and youngest brother -- all of whom lived inside the one room shanty in the congested slum built over a swamp, atop a bamboo platform.

"I used to work as a domestic help but after falling on a bathroom floor, I broke my back and I cannot do any heavy work anymore," said Renu adding how her family's income mainly depended on his husband and their eldest son.

Her husband Babu Fakir sells betel leaf near Mouchak market, earning Tk 150-200 daily while her eldest son, who works at a hotel, contributes Tk 1000 per month.

"The second son, a van driver, does not make enough money to make any contribution to the family

expenditure," said Renu adding the other children go to school.

When Russell was asked about what gave him the idea of using his drawing skills to make a living, he looked down and remained quiet. His mother answered instead.

"He told me he couldn't beg. He feels shy to ask people for money. So he thought of making use of his talent."

Interestingly, Russell never got to make a living in Dhaka. Asked how he ended up in Chandpur, he maintained silence letting his mother answer. "He was taken there by a man. He usually went out and came back to the house as he wished," she said.

Her mother said he "earns about Tk 200-300 per day" from drawing pictures by the roadside.

"People who are amazed at his talent give him whatever they please," said Renu.

But drawing such beautiful pictures with one's stumps must put a lot of stress on his body. When the conversation came to this point, he finally broke his silence.

"Yes, it aches a lot especially when the pencils are short," he said. Russell uses ink pens, crayons and wood colour pencils to draw and colour pictures.

The only time he smiled was when asked what else he would like to draw. "I want to draw village sceneries, boats in the river and people's faces. But I cannot. I wish someone would teach me how to."

But silence returned to his face as this correspondent asked him about his dream or plan for the future.

Suicide bomber targets Afghan election official in Kabul

AFP, Kabul

A senior member of Afghanistan's election commission survived an assassination attempt Saturday when a suicide bomber targeted his vehicle in Kabul, killing one of his employees and wounding two others, officials said.

No group has so far claimed responsibility for the attack on Awal Rehman Rodwal, the regional director at the Independent Election Commission, which comes after more than a month-long lull in Taliban raids on the capital.

"This morning when Rodwal was leaving for work, there was an explosion before he got into his car," Noor Mohammad Noor, an IEC spokesman told AFP.

"Rodwal escaped the attack unharmed."

Noor said Rodwal's bodyguard died in the bombing but Kabul police described the man killed as his driver.

Two others were wounded in the attack, which marks the first fatal attack on IEC staff in the heavily guarded city this year.

There was no immediate comment from the Taliban, who have been blamed for several such incidents in the past.

In March last year, just days before presidential elections, Taliban militants wearing burqas, an all-enveloping garment worn by women, unleashed rockets and gunfire on the election commission's headquarters in Kabul.

Afghan forces gunned down the five gunmen who targeted the heavily fortified building and IEC officials were unharmed after many hid for hours in reinforced safe-rooms.

The Taliban have waged a bloody insurgency against the Afghan government and NATO forces since being toppled from power in a 2001 US-led invasion.

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Definitely these are well-planned and well-coordinated acts, he said. "The government must unearth whether militant groups are resorting to terrorism for their own interests or if it's a political party trying to serve its own end or if it's both working together for a common goal."

A senior police official who has years of experience in dealing with militancy said, "The law enforcement agencies are not well-equipped either to investigate these crimes or to combat terror groups."

However, police officials cannot work freely. Referring to the August 21 grenade attack and the 10-truck arms haul (both in 2004), he said the real facts behind these incidents could not be known for years due to mud-slinging over the incidents.

"There is no scope of mud-slinging or looking right and left now," said Nur, who is now secretary to the youth and sports ministry. "They [police] should be instructed to pay attention to unearthing the incidents and it should be made clear to them that it

is not a political issue."

Describing Thursday's attack in Bogra as a "very dangerous symptom," he said it should not be taken lightly or as an isolated incident.

He does not rule out that there might be some foreign links with the recent attacks, but warned against drawing any such conclusion too quickly and without evidence.

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