

*In this issue of the Changemakers, we highlight two projects undertaken by Garbo Bangladesh Foundation, a Dhaka-based youth organisation, that works for the extremely marginalised groups in Bangladesh.*



## PROJECT DALIT

### Aiding the marginalised Sweeper Colony

AFSANA AZIZ NITOL

Ironically, people who labour to keep our society clean are considered 'unclean'. We often address them with the terms 'sweepers' and 'methors'. Also, most of us are still unfamiliar with the term 'Dalit'. In Bangladesh, this marginalised group of people who encounter discrimination based on their occupation belong to the 'Dalit' community.

To make a difference, Project Dalit began with a mission to educate the Dalit community of Bangladesh who are denied admissions in public schools. Founded by Nuheen Khan, founder of Garbo Bangladesh Foundation, the initiative has been funding a primary school for the Dalit community in Natore since 2013.

In 2012, while taking part in "UBC Development Action Plan Competition" in University of British Columbia, Nuheen and his friend Sami Muqet submitted a proposal of using human faeces to produce biogas in Bangladesh. The proposal won the first prize and Nuheen came across the terms 'Dalit' and 'Harijon', used to refer to a community in South Asia who cleaned and disposed all kinds of waste for centuries. "To a foreigner, I would use the term 'untouchable' or 'outcasts', which they are more familiar with. People are often surprised we have caste system, but the sad truth is we do," says Nuheen.

The journey of starting any development project encompasses a lot of hardships. In 2013, Nuheen took the job as a Lecturer in the Economics Department of a university to finance



the school. Initially, it was hard for him to find good teachers to run his school in Natore. Along with proper supervision, funding the school was another challenge that he faced. Nuheen adds, "In hindsight, financing the school like this was not a smart move, but I learned my lessons about sustainable development work the hard way. Making mistakes is the best way to learn. My understanding about development has increased markedly over the years."

The school used to run up to class 5, but from the start of this year it has scaled back to class 2 to save on cost. In the beginning, the school had 80 students. Currently, there are 50 students studying in the school.

The primary school provides completely free education from qualified

teachers. Project Dalit has also run an adult school for the mothers of the school children. Since the female members of the community cannot even sign their names, the adult school has taught about 10 women how to write their names, Bengali and some math.

In addition to this, Project Dalit has conducted another programme called the Dalit Alternate Livelihood Programme, funded by Vancouver's Abdus Salam. About seven women have been taught how to sew by hired trainers, so that they can switch to another profession other than cleaning. In fact, three women have graduated from the programme and also did paid sewing work within the community.

A recent case study by Nuheen Khan and Dr Habiba Zaman, Professor at

Canada's Simon Fraser University, on Bangladeshi Dalits is soon to be published. Canada's Hari Sharma Foundation has funded the study and contributed towards this purpose. Through the publication of the study, it is hoped that more attention will be drawn to the plight of the Dalits.

Having worked for the Dalit community in the past, the founder hopes to ensure a future for Project Dalit, before he leaves for Harvard next year. Nuheen expresses, "When I started my work here, I was attached to the project a lot. I did not think of an exit strategy. Every development project that is based on donation must have one. I am now trying to set up a profit primary school in Natore, which will cross subsidise the satellite schools such as those in Natore

sweeper colony. The best students from the satellite schools will get fully funded schooling from the profit school."

Dalit communities exist all over the country. Even though there lies a long way to completely change the scenario of their lives, Project Dalit's initiative to work with the Dalit community in Natore does help us acknowledge the discrimination faced by the Sweeper Colony in our society. It does help us bring attention towards a group no one talks about.

The author is a student of English Literature at BRAC University.

Anyone interested to help Project Dalit continue its future goals can visit their page [facebook.com/ProjectDalit](https://www.facebook.com/ProjectDalit)



Nuheen Khan



PHOTOS: COURTESY

## PROJECT ALOKITO SHISHU

### Lighting up a better future

SADI MOHAMMAD SHAHNEWAZ

Imagine growing up on the streets of Dhaka as an underprivileged child, without a roof above your head or a bed to sleep on. As soon as you learn to articulate your feelings, the first thing you would understand is that you will have to contribute to the family by either working or begging, neither of which a child should ever be doing. Unfortunately, this is the harsh reality for many street children in Bangladesh. Garbo Bangladesh Foundation hopes to change the fate of these children through 'Project Alokito Shishu'.

"However insignificant I may be and however little a difference I may make, but, to be able to make a positive impact in one person's life makes me feel more human," says Mithun Das Kabbo, the founder and president of Project Alokito Shishu. "One day, I had the chance of feeding an orphan street child. The experience left me emotionally moved," expresses Kabbo. Right then, he knew that he had to do something for the underprivileged and thus approached Nuheen Khan, the founder of Garbo Bangladesh Foundation. Project Alokito Shishu was initiated in



August 2015, and it started with 30 children in Rabindra Shohorobor, Dhaka.

The project teaches the children how to read and write in Bangla and English languages, basic mathematics and multiplications. Besides formal education, the children are taught important

aspects of life that include ethics and morality. In addition, the children are also taught artistic disciplines such as recitation, dance and music in order to help them develop extracurricular skills as well. Today, Project Alokito Shishu has over 600 volunteers from all over the country, each contributing 200 takas

every month for the betterment of the children they look after.

The children of Project Alokito Shishu are also given the opportunity to explore their surroundings and celebrate festivals with the help of the organisers and volunteers. The children were gifted with new clothes in the last two Eids, and also took part in a Christmas celebration last year where they were taken to a fancy restaurant for a hearty treat. On 21st February, 2017, the project organised 'Alokito Bornomala Prodorshoni', an exhibition dedicated to the martyrs of the language movement. Here, the children painted alphabets that they learned in school. Also, Campus Ambassadors for Project Alokito Shishu have been assigned in most of the major universities, who work relentlessly to spread awareness about the discrepancies between the lifestyles of street children and the better off. "I am proud to be a part of a project so selfless and noble," expresses MD Tanzirul Amin, the North South University's Campus Ambassador for the project. "Garbo Bangladesh stood out with this particular initiative

amidst many other successful projects because of the sheer response it has received," he says. Tanha Tanjin, Communications Officer of the project, adds, "We call ourselves the 'Bangladeshi Changemakers', and we truly believe we are doing something very important and substantial for our society."

"The school also functions as a child care home because most of the children's parents are day labours," explains Kabbo. "We provide the children with two meals a day. We want the parents to stay assured that their children will be taken care of." The initiative conducts regular workshops known as 'Inspire Bangladesh', which primarily attempts to motivate and inspire the Bangladeshi youth by introducing them to some game-changers who changed the society for the better. This, coupled with 'Alokito Shishu School', attempts to morph Bangladesh into a better direction, and while these are merely baby steps, the initiative certainly has a bright future. Project Alokito Shishu promises to give underprivileged children a second chance in life.

