

"In our village, we used to marry off our daughters between the ages of 11 to 13. If a girl was unmarried at 15, her parents would struggle to find an able bridegroom," says Abdur Rahman, a village elder of Maittha village of Barguna district, one of the most cyclone-prone coastal districts of Bangladesh.

No more though. Sazeda Akhter, a student of grade 11, has single-handedly stopped 107 child marriages in different villages of Barguna, and has already become a well-known name in the district for her initiatives to prevent child marriage.

"Sazeda visits every home in the village regularly and educates parents and other family members about the harmful effects of child marriage and the importance of educating female children," shares Rahman. "She has made a big difference in people's perceptions of child marriage."

Sazeda began her journey of activism at the age of six, after her family fell victim to the devastating Cyclone Sidr in 2007. "I was so horrified to see how children were affected in the cyclone that I started singing *jari gaan* (folk song) for my community to make them aware of the importance of childcare during disasters like this," she remembers.

In 2011, at the age of 10, Sazeda, with some of her friends, formed a children's club to give her voluntary efforts a structure. In 2012, she joined Adolescents' Club, an initiative by a national NGO, and started to visit the offices of government officials and elected representatives to discuss how adolescents, especially girls, could have

better access to healthcare and education.

She also began to visit houses in her village and nearby villages with her volunteers to engage parents in discussions against child marriage. In addition to preventing 107 such marriages, she has helped 87 drop-out students to re-enrol in school.

"Eve-teasing is one of the reasons behind early marriage in our area. For fear of sexual harassment, parents are forced to take their girls out of school and marry them off. So, we organised several sessions with the adolescent boys



Sazeda Akhter

PHOTO: COURTESY

SAZEDA'S STORY OF BREAKING CHAINS

ALIM BARI

of our area and tried to educate them about girls' rights," says Sazeda.

Thanks to Sazeda's efforts, she has managed to solve 72 cases of sexual harassment cases by handing over the perpetrators to the village elders for punishment. She also supported the rehabilitation of 14 young boys addicted to narcotics. These boys are now under treatment at a safe home in Barguna town. Sazeda maintains close contact with the upazila officials and informs them about any child marriage and other forms of injustice in the area demanding immediate action.

To spread her initiatives all over Barguna she has formed three organisations called Shurjo Shikha Youth Group, Shurjer Alo Youth Club, and Burirchar Youth Forum. Despite all these initiatives, Sazeda is successfully continuing her education. She is now studying at grade 11 at Barguna Government Girls College. Sazeda wants to become a development activist in the future so that she can bring an end to harmful social practices in the villages of Bangladesh.

Alim Bari is a communications specialist at Plan International Bangladesh

| ENDEAVOUR |

| EXHIBITION |



Durjog

Priyabhashini's orchestrations of carbon

AMIYA HALDER

PHOTOS: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

That Ferdousi Priyabhashini's driftwood creations are more sentient than inanimate becomes apparent the second you step into Shilpangan, a contemporary art gallery tucked away in a cosy corner of Dhanmondi 13. Her current exhibition, *Megher Shongi*, is a tribute to the monsoon, her most loved of the six seasons, and the inspiration for her woodwork orchestrations. With boats and boatsmen, long-legged water-birds, and stranded figurines, her characters and forms look like they've emerged straight out of a tempest.

When asked about her artistic process, Priyabhashini shares, "Everything I've used has been borrowed from nature, from my surroundings—a dead branch from a tree, a piece of tin from an old house, a discarded object lying around. I try not to cut away at the wood or change the materials I work with. The smallest object can be full of meaning."

Indeed, even Priyobhashini's smallest statuettes are magical in their own right. There is a trace of the occult in the crooked twigs and tattered scraps of *Hamliner Bashiwala*, as if it may come alive the moment you look away. The macrocephalic, hunchbacked *Pandit Moshai* cuts a fine figure, literal in representation, but with all the whimsy and wit of a caricature. With entwined forelimbs above a single, stable torso, *Protipokkho* perhaps portrays one's fierce inner struggle rather than that with one's enemy—the twists and knots around the head representing one's confusion and distress.

While she has depicted the atrocities of the war of independence and the sufferings of the common people in the past, she asserts that her motive for this collection lies elsewhere, "I have always tried to portray the best in people, in situations. You see so much hardship all around—a labourer carrying an



Aporanhe Nouka

unbearable load, a woman threshing vast mounds of wheat. But there is dignity in their suffering, their struggle, not only frustration—and it is this that I strive to present in my pieces."

Matrittyo is one such wondrous piece. In a single slender, winding column of wood, Priyabhashini has not only brought out the figures of mother and child, but also the tenderness of that relationship through the subtlest curves and angles. *Opekkha* has all the expectation of a waiting lover, with its downcast face and sloping shoulders. With a bend at the knees and a fold of the arms, *Chitte Nrite Nrite* possesses the poise and gravitas of a classical dancer.



Happy Bird

Bhije Pakhi, *Khudharto Bok*, *Milon Tithi*, *Srabon Pakhi*, *Badol Pakhi*, *Modhujamini*, *Chatak*, and *Shikari Pakhi* are among the many fantastical water-birds at the exhibition. Curiously shaped and with elevated beaks, robust wings, and dancing legs, Priyabhashini's avian acquaintances are among some of the most striking characters on display, perhaps second only to the *Shopno Ghora*, a chimerical, spidery, many-legged horse—the stuff of myth and fantasy.

Priyabhashini says she wants her artwork to fill people with happiness, and has already started working on a new installation, toiling away 8-to-11 hours at a stretch every day in her studio. Her organic forms possess such incredible vitality that, through jagged lines and perfect arches, they become animate. Her surrealist works not only fill one with wonder, but invoke emotions that can resonate so strongly with the beholder that they calm the mind and elevate the soul.

'*Megher Shongi*' will be open till August 18.



STRANGE HISTORY

HISTORY'S FIRST STUDENT MOVEMENT

The first student protest in recorded history took place in China more than 2000 years ago in 160 BC. According to ancient Chinese texts, the students of Imperial University were quite famous for their political activism and raising their voice against sluggish Chinese bureaucracy. Amidst tensions between the students and the bureaucracy, the emperor, under the influence of bureaucrats, passed a decree stating that the students of Imperial University would not be able to apply for civil service until their curricula was revised and updated. Government jobs were secured only for the family members of the bureaucrats. This decision infuriated the university students. Under the leadership of several student leaders such as Guo Tai, Zhan Jian and Xi Fu, around 30,000 students of Imperial University organised intense demonstrations. Their demands were revision of their extremely outdated curriculum, curbing the power of the eunuchs and bureaucrats, and allowing university students to apply for the civil service.

Ancient Chinese authors mentioned Guo Tai's name with great respect and stated that he was a man of extraordinary intellect. Although he came from a very poor family, Guo managed to get admitted to the



IMAGE: COURTESY

most elite educational institution of ancient China. According to Han texts, the student demonstrations were quite similar to the protests we see in Bangladesh today. They prepared banners and festoons, and painted entire university walls with slogans such as 'Fearless against powerful enemies' and 'A model for the empire'.

However, their demonstration did not succeed. The emperor deployed combat troops to thwart the students. Many of the protesting students were imprisoned, others exiled or even executed. As per ancient Chinese author Sima Guang, Guo Tai was exiled, Xi Fu hid in the mountains and took a laborious job in an iron mine, while his friend Zhan

Jian was arrested. Later, Zhan Jian was released and he got a job in the army and was promoted to Captain of the Guards.

Jian's old comrade Xi Fu criticised Jian for this surrender and commented, "One man might escape death but 10,000 households suffered misfortune. How could one live with that?" Although the first student movement in recorded history failed and died out, the ancient Chinese historians remembered it with great respect. They were surprised to see the courage of the students who dared to stand against the decision of the mighty emperor of China.

Source: *Political Protest in Imperial China* by Alan Baumler page 167-184, second edition, 2007.