



ASPIRING FOR A BETTER WORLD

KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

Shams-il Arefin Islam is a graduate student at Yale University, USA, studying environmental issues and challenges. He studied at Ithaca College in New York and graduated with a degree in Business Administration in 2007. After working for a non-for-profit cooperative bank in the US, he returned to Bangladesh and gained experience working at Waste Concern and Yunus Center. Islam is also a classically trained musician, and at Yale, he is currently working with a composer to juxtapose the ill effects of climate change and music. We at SHOUT spoke to this inspiring individual, who encourages Bangladeshi students to think outside the box of working for corporations and to open their minds to accept other forms of work in academia.

SHOUT: What inspired you to study about the environment?

Islam: I was greatly fascinated by the words of wisdom on the environment from past leaders. The great British Philosopher John Stuart Mill in his book "Principles of Political Economy" wrote that we should sacrifice economic growth for the environment. I also remember reading Indira Gandhi's famous speech during the 1972 Stockholm Conference on Human Environment where nations gathered to talk about environmental issues. It was there that she famously brought to light the perils of the world's poor. She asked "Are not poverty and need the greatest polluters?" In 1972, it was a brave and novel statement for the world arena focused more on the wealth of nations. This statement resonated with me to explore more about what it exactly

meant both academically and professionally.

SHOUT: How would you address the effects of climate change in Bangladesh?

Islam: It is important to note that despite the natural disasters and the myriad juxtaposition of social, economic and environmental issues, the people of Bangladesh have proved to be resilient and adaptable. The country has moved forward. However, we cannot be complacent with existing environmental policies and its implementation because problems grow exponentially. We must put our energy on technology and knowledge transfer with nations, such as the Netherlands which has done exceptionally well to keep sea water out. For example, we can focus more on coastal cross-dams and forestation projects, among other solutions. Second, the government should continue research on saline and drought resistant crops to increase food security. Third, we should focus efforts to training of people to adapt to changing climate through alternative livelihood management. Finally, it is important to note that overt gentrification, as we see in Dhaka, puts a colossal pressure on our infrastructure and the policies must be changed and enforced to reduce unplanned urbanisation.

SHOUT: Tell us about your academic experiences and how it has shaped you as a person fighting against climate change.

Islam: I was greatly influenced by Professor Todd Stern, my teacher at Yale. He was the top climate change diplomat for both the Obama and the Clinton administrations and pushed the north versus south issues forward. Without his

immaculate strides, along with the push from developing countries, the COP21 in Paris may have ended up in a stalemate.

Professor Harold Koh (former legal advisor to the US State Department) was also critical in helping me shape my knowledge on global law challenges.

Furthermore, scholarly Professor Mizan R. Khan and Professor Nurul Amin in Bangladesh helped me to wrap my head around complex climate change issues.

SHOUT: Besides the environment, what are some of your other interests?

Islam: I really enjoy working on projects that connect seemingly disconnected items. I studied western classical music in the US and proudly performed with my school at Lincoln Center and various concert halls. I often dream of putting my background in music in contrast with my innate passion to preserve nature. Thus, I spent my summer at Yale with a composer, writing lyrics for a 3-part song cycle depicting environmental issues and I hope to have it performed in the near future. Music is a wonderful medium to spread a unifying message to those listening, just go to a club and see how people are completely in tune with each other, moving in harmony. In an analogy, music has inspired generations and we need more of such in the world in disseminating environmental issues.

SHOUT: What message do you have for the youth?

Islam: An important element to remember is that the environment is vastly interdisciplinary. One can be interested in engineering, architecture, economics, business, and even music and theatre as vehicles for information dissemination. Therefore, the future

career possibilities are endless. No matter where one finds inspiration, it can be developed and applied to the exponentially increasing arena of environmental studies. Gone are the days of "boxed-in" academia. If you need to build the next flood barrier, you need both architects and engineers, but prior to that you need policy makers and environmental impact assessment specialists to see how the flora and fauna will be affected, business leaders and entrepreneurs to invest in such projects and journalists and the media to cover these critical stories. We need health specialists and scientists to research more as vector-borne diseases move further up north, agriculturists researching on the next saline and drought resistant crops. Students should be active participants in climate related projects. Back in Bangladesh, I was deeply involved in the HSBC-The Daily Star Climate Awards twice through an organisation called Waste Concern, run by two Ashoka & Schwab Foundation Fellows, which is an example of a place where students can choose to intern. Finally, can you imagine the joy seeing this country as a global hub to incubate the next big idea? Solutions to existential needs such as potable water, air quality, rising sea levels can bring positive, critical shifts in the equilibrium. In order for this to happen, I highly encourage more students to take environmental courses in school and college for you may be the next big leader, taking our world towards a better future for all.

Kazi Akib Bin Asad is a Sub-editor at SHOUT.