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BUILD BRIDGES, NOT WALLS

HUMAYRA RAHMAN MITUL

We love building walls because they give us an illusion of security. We even keep building strong walls so that, we can separate ourselves from those different from us because we feel safe behind the walls. A mother teaches her son not to trust their madrasa going neighbour. The neighbourhood English Medium student is considered "not Bangladeshi enough". The intern in the office from a Bangla Medium school is marginalised for their passable English-speaking skills. The real question is, who is to blame here?

Children begin as blank books whose stories are molded by characters in their lives. If they are raised in silos where their thoughts and perceptions aren't challenged, then societies will move further inward. Beyond our walls lie a world full of opportunities and possibilities, but, how many of us step outside our comfort zones to experience that?

I feel extremely lucky to have been able

to witness this transcending of barriers while acting as a facilitator for the eleventh Building Bridges through Leadership Training Junior (BBLTJ) programme at Bangladesh Youth Leadership Center (BYLC). Students studying between grades six to ten from various madrasas, and English and Bangla Medium schools, attend this programme for a month of leadership training. As a facilitator, I had to support and guide one group within the class throughout the programme. I remember looking at my group of eight students from completely different family and educational backgrounds on my first day and feeling daunted about how to make this group of misfits work together.

Initially, two students from English Medium schools took charge of all conversations or group work. The boy from the madrasa and the Hindu girl from an English Medium school did not say a word in the beginning. Then there was the shy Bangla Medium boy who only had a few polite smiles for his group members. As

the programme moved ahead and the participants were placed in different situations where they had to work as a team, their transformation was clearly visible. Suddenly, the madrasa student started voicing his appreciation for the girl's excellent observational skills. The shy boy had excellent ideas to offer with his smiles. The English Medium students took more time to listen, reflect and consider varying opinions. A few weeks into the programme, they hardly resembled the same children who would fill the spaces between them with awkward silences.

Once the group found their rhythm, it resulted in excellent performance during inter-class competitions and group projects, reflecting their team cohesion as well as their individual strengths. I was the proudest of their community service project, which they had to do in the last week of the programme. The group managed to build a working water filter and teach inhabitants of a slum in Notun Bazar how to make filters using materials around

them at a minimal cost. Their main focus was to promote health and sanitation in the area, so, they also taught the children in the community the importance of cleanliness and keeping their surroundings clean. It was incredible to see all they were able to achieve by the end.

Currently, a huge disparity exists in the curriculum and mode of teaching of the three mediums of education, and by the time the children graduate from primary school, they cannot relate to each other despite being citizens of the same country. In order to bring change in the children and at large in the future of the nation, we need to change the system by creating more opportunities for social cohesion so that society can learn to feel safe without their walls. Breaking down those walls built over their lifetime is not an easy task. But imagine if they were able to do it.

The write works as Executive, President's Office and Business Development at Bangladesh Youth Leadership Center.



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Bringing a Writer and His Readers Together

SADI MOHAMMAD SHAHENWAZ

A phenomenal story was widely shared on social media some time back about Mohammad Momin Uddin, a CNG auto-rickshaw driver and a father of two children, who wrote and published an English learning book in Bangla for students of Grade I to X. Mr Momin hopes to get children of the underserved sectors involved in the process of reading, promote childhood literacy, and encourage children to give back to their community. On February 21, 2018, the Lalbagh No. 2 Shorkari Prathomik Biddaloy arranged a book fair. There was an aura of joy and laughter at the programme that was hard to miss. Mr Momin spoke about and distributed his book to the school's children as part of the programme. He says, "I am an SSC pass myself, and I was not fortunate enough to continue my studies further. However, my dream was to help underprivileged children who are neglected by their parents and I noticed that most of these children quit their schooling due to their fear of English." After some immense struggles, six years of research, and resistance from his own family, he finally published his own book, but, found it difficult to sell it. Maisha Meem Noor, an English major from IUB who rode Mr Momin's CNG auto-rickshaw

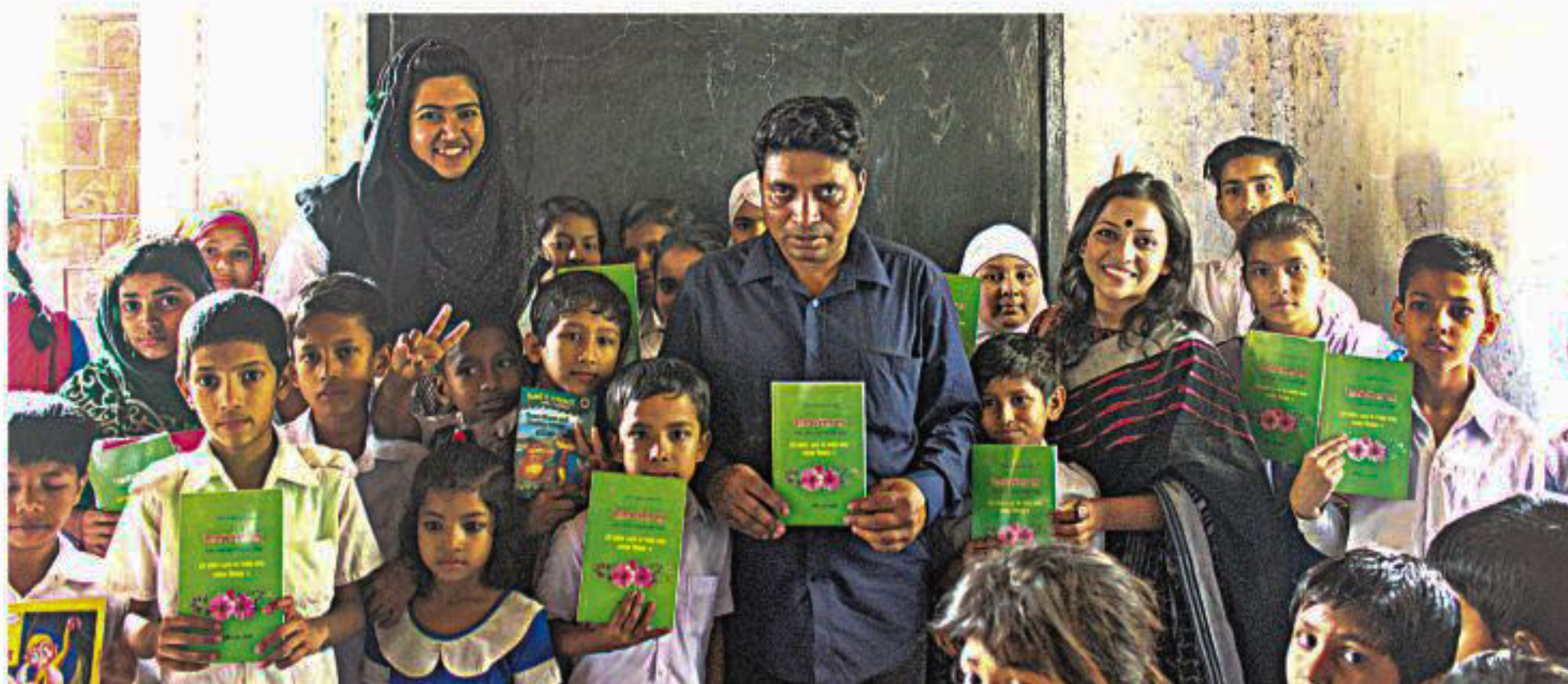


PHOTO: NAYEM SHAAN

one day, was really touched by what he did. So, she shed light on his endeavor through a Facebook post.

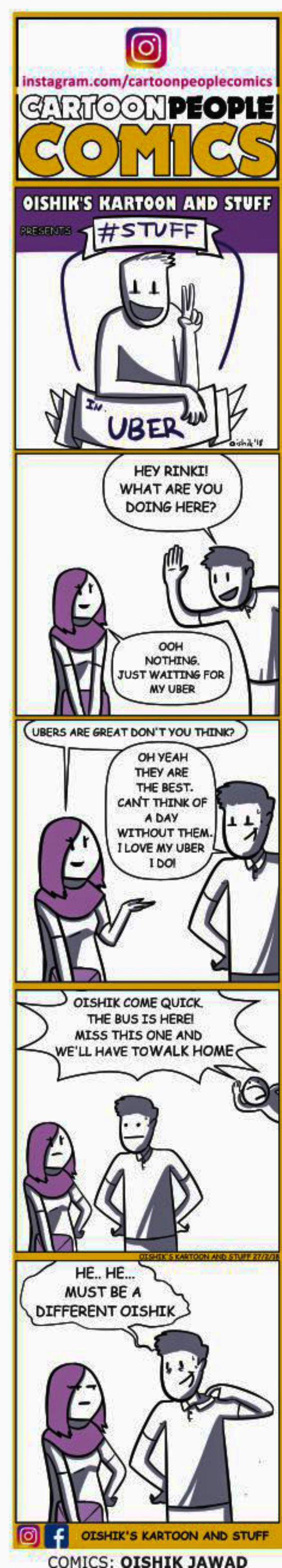
Grow Your Reader, an organisation that works as a "book bank" for underprivileged children, providing them access to different books outside of their regular curriculum, took particular interest in the story. They reached out to Mr Momin to help him bring out his book to the rightful audience. "We already have eight stations and over two thousand books throughout Dhaka, and we were very inspired by what Mr Momin was hoping to do despite his financial limita-

tions," says Amina Azad, Co- Founder of Grow Your Reader. The team of Grow Your Reader was also present at Lalbagh No. 2 Shorkari Prathomik Biddaloy's book fair. The organisation bought thirty books from Mr Momin to distribute them to students at Lalbagh and Gawair Nabin Primary School, one of the schools they are affiliated with. Amongst the enjoyment, the children who were a part of the book fair found a heartfelt appreciation for the man who made such an inspiring effort to educate them and their peers without thinking about his own hardships.



It's Humanity Foundation (IHF) organised its second Annual Charity Gala Night at the Lakeshore Hotel and Apartments on March 17, 2018. The fundraising event was held with a view to bring together all the sponsors and stakeholders of IHF, as well as potential philanthropists, to come forward and support the cause of IHF; which is to educate underprivileged children and empower women by helping them alleviate poverty through a sustainable plan. One of the highlights of the programme was cultural performances by the IHF School students.

PHOTO: COURTESY



COMICS: OISHIK JAWAD