



Gully Boy Rana with Hasan Tabib (left)



RANA

The Dhakaiya Gully Boy

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While waiting in front of the central library of the University of Dhaka, a small crowd drew my attention. I was trying to see what was happening when, within seconds, a group of students surrounded a young boy to take selfies. That young boy turned out to be the latest social media sensation—the “Dhakaiya Gully Boy”. At that moment, I realised that 10-year-old Rana Mridha had successfully been able to attract attention to the plight of thousands

of underprivileged children like him who roam Dhaka’s streets.

People used to wave him away when he knocked on car windows to sell flowers. Today, people are shaking hands and taking selfies with him to post on their social media accounts. Rana’s life changed when his outstanding talent in hip-hop, the lyrics of which criticised the government and civil society’s

failure to address the basic needs of thousands of underprivileged children in Dhaka’s streets, went viral on social media. His moniker comes from the 2019 Bollywood film about an aspiring street rapper, a.k.a “Gully Boy”, from Dharavi, Mumbai.

Like many other children who roam the streets of Dhaka during the day, Rana lives with his mother, brother, and a niece at East Rasulpur in Kamrangirchar. Rana’s father lives in their village home in Faridpur, where he makes *polo* (a kind of fishing tool made from bamboo) for a living. Rana was forced to stop his studies in the first grade, as his mother, who worked as domestic help, was unable to pay his tuition fees. He has been on the roads since then, trying to earn some money to support his family.

“I used to sell flowers in the Dhaka University area. Every day, I would buy roses worth Tk 100 from Shahbagh and sell those for around Tk 500. I would hand over the money I earned every day to my mother,” says Rana. When asked how he learned rap songs, Rana says there is a dance club in his area where young boys and girls learned to dance to hip-hop music. “I loved watching them dance to that rhythm and music. In a few days, I was able to memorise the song while watching them dance,” he adds.

That song changed his life. Those who have watched the Dhakaiya

Gully Boy videos already know that Rana was trained and groomed by Mahmud Hasan Tabib, a fourth-year student of the Department of Arabic Language and Literature at the University of Dhaka (DU). Rana met Tabib in front of DU’s Salimullah Muslim Hall (popularly known as SM Hall) of the University of Dhaka while selling flowers there earlier this year. Rana told Tabib he wished to take a ride on his motorbike. Taking him on a ride, Tabib asked him what his talents were. Rana sang a hip-hop song of the Uptown Lokolz band. Tabib, amazed at his performance and after hearing stories of Rana’s life, decided he wanted to do something for underprivileged children like Rana.

Tabib, who has been writing hip-hop songs since his school days, said he had always been interested in the stories of Dhaka’s streets. But he hadn’t been able to find a character through whom he could bring these untold and unheard stories to life. “I’m very fond of poetry and my first book of poems, published during my intermediate exams, became a bestseller for that publication. I then realised that since hip-hop is basically poetry with music composition, I can experiment with this. When I met Rana, I realised that I can implement my plan for storytelling through a real character like him. I kept him as the subject of the story and bringing in other realities of life on the streets, I wrote my first song,” says Tabib.

Tabib took only one day to write the song and Rana, who had never finished the first grade, took only two days to memorise the lyrics. Tabib composed the music and recorded Rana’s vocals in his amateur studio—basically a computer, a microphone, and headphones. Later, with the help of a friend who did the videography, Tabib completed the music video and posted it on YouTube (with 1.1 million views and counting). The next two Dhakaiya Gully Boy videos got 7.7 million and 5.3 million views respectively. These videos were shared thousands of times by netizens, many of whom said that these were not mere song lyrics but usually unheard words of protest by underprivileged children like Rana.

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