

AGENTS OF CHANGE

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ARTWORK: JAYATU CHAKMA



ARTWORK: SYED RASHAD IMAM TANMOY

How effective is art as a form of protest?

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In today's climate of fake news and alternative facts, social and political truth can be inconsistent and fragile. Artists, like journalists and activists, need to define the truth and defend it. If protesters get shut down, we need to amplify their voices. To explore the role of art in bringing social and political

Cartooning, a satirical medium, is arguably the most prominent way that artists choose to criticise, protest, and report on social and political issues. "Strong thought, simplicity and creativity are the most important characteristics of an effective political or social cartoon," explains Biplob Chakroborty, Staff Cartoonist, The Daily Star. The Covid-19 pandemic, soaring vegetable prices and the failures of Dhaka Water Supply and Sewerage Authority were the subjects of Biplob's recent artworks.

issues to the forefront, The Daily Star spoke to seven artists.

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Prominent cartoonist Syed Rashad Imam Tanmoy, Founder of Cartoon People, a community of Bangladeshi cartoonists and visual storytellers, and Associate Editor of the monthly satire magazine, Unmad, sheds light on the hurdles that people face in this field. "Cartoons can sometimes offend people. But we have to keep in mind that it is also our responsibility to be tolerant towards different opinions. In fact, that is one of the key traits of a democratic society," he says. "Not everything created by an artist is always going to be their best work. It is important to maintain an enabling environment, where our youth can express and debate freely. All that can happen through diverse media like cartoons, music, theatre or any other form of art."

What has really changed over the years worldwide is the manner in which cartoonists have been censored. Our country finds itself in an intolerant state with a disappearing sense of humour. "Art is an avenue for exercising one's freedom of expression. However, artists are so cautious about being politically correct these days that it has

put restrictions over their creativity," asserts Tanmoy. The youth movement for road safety in 2018, police brutality, the Digital Security Act, global warming and the Covid-19 pandemic were the subjects of some of Tanmoy's recent artworks.

Asifur Rahman, Concept Artist at Mighty Punch Studios and Staff Artist at The Business Standard, drew an illustration about the road safety movement in 2018, which stood out, and was even published in a story by Al Jazeera. The movement was a major protest against the corruption prone, ineffective and perilous road transportation system of Bangladesh. Photos that took over social media during the protests showed that school students in uniforms had instilled some sense of order on the roads; they checked every car and restricted vehicles that did not have licenses. Neither any minister nor any police officer was spared. In his drawing, Asifur depicted a student checking a driver's license and

a corrupt police officer. The Covid-19 pandemic, harassment, and rape culture were the subjects of some of Asifur's more recent artworks.

"Drawing cartoons about politics and issues regarding the public and sharing them on social media platforms have turned risky," says Asifur, who shares his drawings and comics on his social media page, Arts by Rats. "In recent years, people have been arrested or fired because of what they drew. These pressures have resulted in a form of self-censorship for artists worldwide."

Such censorship pushes many artists to shy away from politics and choose lighter subjects. Fatima Tanjum Tuba, a Computer Science and Engineering student from East West University, enjoys creating comics and drawing illustrations based on the daily life of an average human being. Her social media page is known as Tubelight.

"I don't normally draw anything based on sensitive issues, if it involves

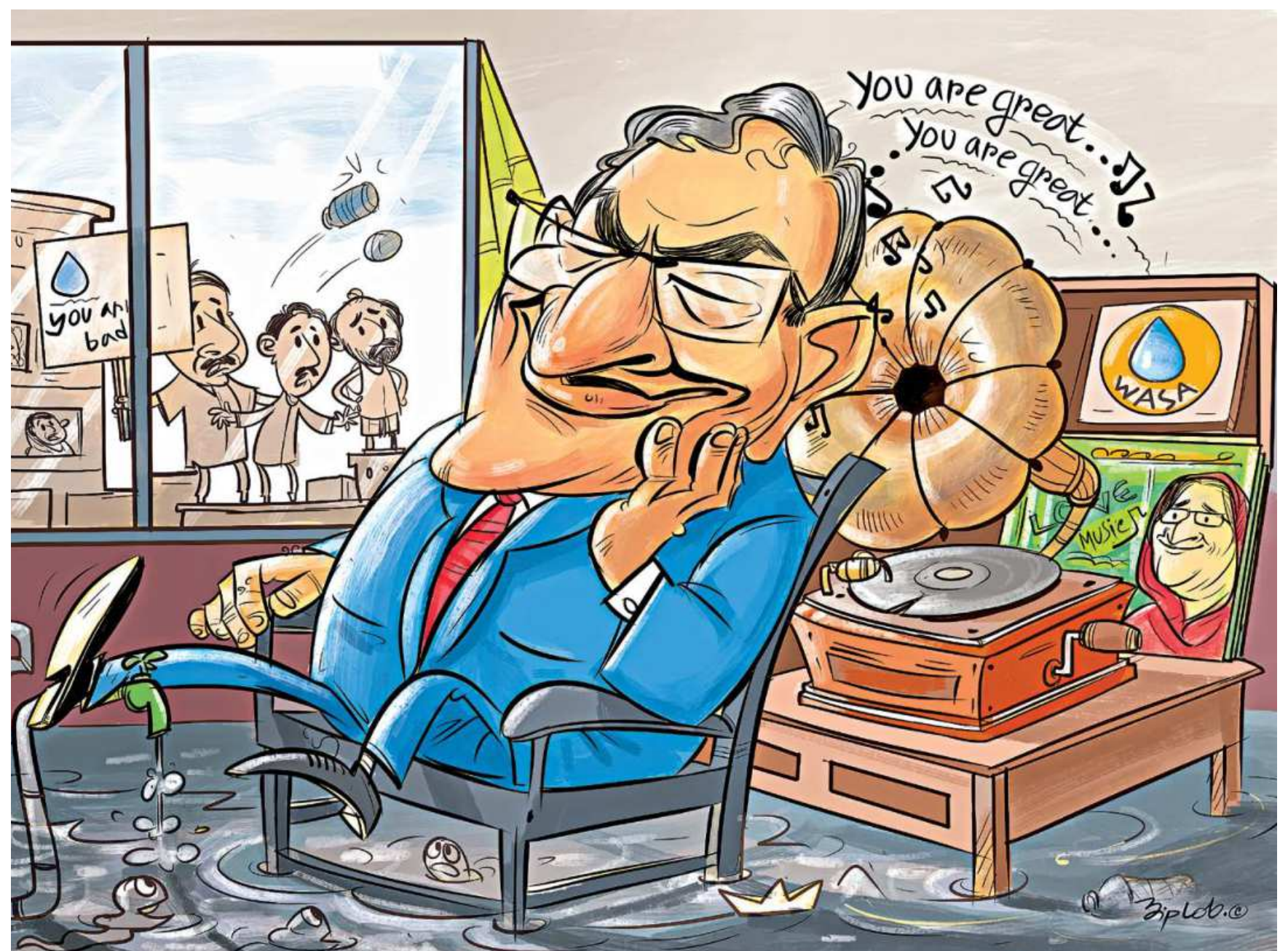
politics. It takes a lot of courage to make art about controversial topics. If an artist makes a satirical drawing about a sensitive yet important topic, it might trigger someone's sentiment, which can result in a harsh reaction towards the artist," she says. "That being said, many artists boldly speak up against different injustices through their work, initiating a silent but effective protest."

Tuba recently created some comics on topics such as the unsafe environment for women, child marriage, sexual assault and the Covid-19 pandemic. It was difficult for her to focus on drawing, at a time when reports of rape cases were flooding her social media newsfeeds. It affected her mental health. "We live in a country where the rape victim's clothes, character, age, and marital status are highlighted more than the perpetrator's crime. Years of gender inequality, misogyny and patriarchy have shaped our minds in such ways that it does

not take a second for us to shame someone," Tuba shares. "Fortunately, the vast expansion of the art community across Bangladesh has given every artist an opportunity to raise awareness about such problems and to share their opinions through their art."

The need to raise their voice against injustices is what draws many to the field of art. Rehnuma Proshoon was fascinated by newspaper cartoons, comics and animation from an early age. Her professional journey as an artist started in 2018. She is the Head of Communication at Cartoon People and a contributing artist at Kishor Alo and the publishing house, Ikrimikri. Besides drawing cartoons, she loves working on illustrations and caricatures. Her drawings reflect her personal opinions, observations and experiences. They are simple, but always carry a deeper meaning, commenting on the causes and consequences of different issues.

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ARTWORK: BIPOLOB CHAKROBORTY