



Shakil Ahmed (R) has helped other farmers in his village see the benefits of squash cultivation.

PHOTO: STAR

NURTURING DREAMS

A torchbearer for our farmers

MIRZA SHAKIL, from Tangail

Shakil Ahmed, a BSc graduate of the Agriculture Department at Noakhali Science and Technology University, successfully cultivated squash, a foreign variety of a winter vegetable, in Delduar upazila of Tangail.

He was having a tough time finding a job in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak. He returned to his village in Tangail, after his university was declared closed in March last year. "I spent my time applying for jobs online. Although I was interviewed at a few organisations, I did not get a job. I could not sit idle anymore, and I started farming on my father's land," Shakil said.

"While studying at my university, I did some research on vegetable cultivation. So, I decided to look into cultivating squash."

The best time to grow squash is usually from October to November. Shakil spent BDT 32,000 for the cultivation and sold squash at BDT

92,000 at local markets—BDT 12 per kilogram at the beginning of the season and BDT 8 towards the end.

He also wanted the local farmers to move away from traditional farming practices, and try advanced techniques.

In order to reduce costs, Shakil cultivated squashes using a mulching film, so that moisture remains on the soil and no extra irrigation and labour is required for taking care of the land.

After Shakil applied the method on his squash field, local farmers started criticising him. They said that the whole land is being covered with polythene, and they had doubts about Shakil. Eventually, local farmers showed interest in cultivating with a mulching film, after seeing his success.

Jahidur Rahman Jahid, who returned to the village from Malaysia in the wake of the pandemic, was also sitting idle for a while. Inspired by Shakil, he cultivated squash on his land.

"Shakil advised me to cultivate wheat on our land, where we previously grew paddy. He also showed me that wheat cultivation is more profitable than paddy cultivation," added Jahid.

Shakil is also assisting the Department of Agriculture Extension in their projects to garner the interest of farmers in environmentally-friendly perching methods.

He also cultivated cucumbers, watermelons and muskmelons on his land, after experimenting with squashes. He further plans to study Soil Science at Bangladesh Agriculture University.

"So much labour goes into growing crops, and yet, more often than not, our farmers do not get the right prices for their products. As a result, they lose the interest and motivation to try modern technologies, and ask agricultural experts for support," he said.

Shakil hopes to build a career in agriculture, and contribute to its development in Bangladesh.

YOUTH IN ACTION

A bookstore rooted in friendship

RASHEEK TABASSUM MONDIRA

Bondhu Library, an online and offline bookstore, was established in Cumilla by a group of childhood friends in 2019. Founders Shahedur Rahman Rony, Md Ashik, Ahmed Faysal, Tauhid Hridoy, Fahim Imtiaz Kamal, and Shariful Islam have been friends since their school days. Towards the end of their undergraduate studies, they decided to open a bookstore in their city.

Their books have reached every district of the country, despite the ongoing pandemic.

Rony noted that most places in Cumilla sell academic books only. So, they identified that gap in the market.

"In Dhaka, there are several places where you can go to read books and purchase non-academic books, but people in Cumilla hardly have such facilities," says Hridoy. "Our aim is to let people in our community enjoy reading, at reasonable prices."

The group of friends went to Cumilla Cantonment High School and Ispahani Public School & College together, before becoming business partners. "We decided to convert our collective love for books into a business, starting with our hard-earned financial resources," shares Rony. "Starting a business from scratch with my childhood friends is quite special," expresses Islam. "We grew up together, and we started our careers together as well."

Although the pandemic led to a major setback for Bondhu Library, they carried out their home delivery services successfully. "We worked tirelessly, and ensured every delivery by ourselves, despite the health risks," adds Rony.

Rony and his friends dared to

build something on their own and not go for conventional career paths, even when people around them said it was a bad idea. The entrepreneurs wanted to work on something that they all love. Subsequently, they faced different criticisms and unwanted questions.

"People criticised us for getting into the book business at first," shares Tauhid. "Thankfully, our customer response and acceptance has been great. So, the criticism and respect



Bondhu Library has one shop in Cumilla.

come hand in hand." Many others in the city were inspired to get into this business after the success of Bondhu Library.

"There is a huge reader base in our city, but due to the lack of platforms for non-academic books, people were deprived for a long time," Islam shares.

Currently, Bondhu Library has one store in Cumilla, and also operates online via social media. They plan to launch their website and expand their physical presence as well.

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Founders of Bondhu Library.

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF BONDHU LIBRARY

YOUNG ACHIEVER

An aspiring judge's uphill battle

TIASHA IDRAK

Born in the outskirts of Netrakona, Sakhina Akhter stood 15th in the Bangladesh Judicial Service Commission Examination across the country. A graduate of Northern University Bangladesh (NUB), she was recommended as an assistant judge, following her success in the examination in 2019.

Akhter is the youngest of her five siblings. Education was not a priority



PHOTO: COURTESY OF SAKHINA AKHTER

around the rural area that she grew up in. "Due to financial hardships and superstitions, my other siblings never passed high school. I was different because I loved studying," she explained.

Although she was not supported in her ambitions by her family, her teachers encouraged her to pursue her studies. Eventually, this left a positive impression on her parents.

Since her family members were prone to illnesses, Akhter initially wanted to be a doctor. However, thinking that a science background in education would be too

expensive in the end, she was not allowed to pursue it.

She enrolled into the Department of Law at NUB with a scholarship programme, once she convinced her family to let her study in Dhaka. "I have always wanted to work for the country," she asserted.

Though her academic results brought her scholarships, she still had to take another yearlong hiatus due to financial constraints. While staying home in Netrakona, Akhter took a loan to continue her studies. She returned to Dhaka, and started participating in several Moot Courts, winning a championship in 2018.

She simultaneously prepared for both the judiciary service exam and her master's. She also attended the Human Rights Summer School that year, a training platform on human rights, which intends to apprise young participants from different countries.

After completing her master's, she was awarded the President's Gold Medal in 2019. She sat for the Judicial Service Commission Examination around then. It was difficult for her to attend the viva exam during the ongoing pandemic in 2020. Despite the hurdles, she rose above it all with her brilliant success.

"Right before my exams, my father told me that he wanted to see me as a judge. I wanted to make him proud. I wanted people to know my family through me," she said. "Now, more girls in my village are becoming serious about their education."

Akhter never thought of giving up in her uphill battle so far, and plans to go much further. "To me, a judge is someone who is honest, philanthropic, and patriotic. They dedicate their life for justice," she added.

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GUIDES

Acing the admission test

MAISHA ISLAM MONAMEE

With admission tests of different public and private universities approaching and coaching centres being closed, candidates may be in a dilemma about their preparation strategies. The last few weeks before an admission test can be tiring. Here is a list of tips to ensure that you are on the right track.

CREATE PRACTICAL PLANS

In the final week before the test, allocate specific days for each subject. "For medical aspirants, a good revision plan would be spending two days for Biology and Chemistry individually, and one day for Physics. Use an extra day to go through the recurring topics in each subject," shared Shaimul Reza, a final year student of Dhaka Medical College.

BUET's admission test focuses more on conceptual knowledge. "Aspirants can prepare by practicing Biology questions from past papers," shared Shahriar Islam, a tutor and final year Civil Engineering student of BUET.

USE SHORT NOTES

Make a detailed revision plan and stick to it. "I am trying to pay attention to keywords from study materials. So, my answers have become concise and structured," shared MusharratAbirZahin. "Using short notes, chapter maps and sticky notes is another effective method. You can easily go through your notes a week before the exam," shared MaimunaAlam, an English major at BRAC University.

SET GOALS

"Self-motivation is necessary during this period. Set goals and rewards for yourself," shared LubabaMehzabeen, a tutor and an Economics student at University of Dhaka (DU). DU's D unit aspirants can expect questions that test their basic abilities in



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Bangla, English and General Knowledge. These questions generally focus on their grammar and comprehension skills and awareness of recent issues.

PRACTICE PAST PAPERS

"Practicing past papers is one of the most significant study tips for admission tests. Analysing question patterns make it easier for me to decide which topics to focus on," shared Nahid Hassan, another admission candidate. Students who are aiming for multiple universities can easily track their

progress by solving these question banks.

STAY CALM

Maintain a proper sleep schedule, eat healthy, and take breaks every now and then. "Don't compare yourself with others. Prepare in your own way," shared DrMahid Hossain, Director of SiLiCON Education, a coaching centre for admission candidates.

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