

INTERVIEW

Empowering the youth to build community service projects

MAISHA ISLAM MONAMEE

Rijve Arefin and Shomy Hasan Chowdhury were named in the Forbes 30 under 30 Asia list under the category of Social Impact. They cofounded Awareness 360, a global platform based in Kuala Lumpur that empowers the youth to build community service projects in line with the Sustainable Development Goals. Both of them have bachelor degrees in Economics from Universiti Putra Malaysia. Shomy has been selected for the Schwarzman Scholars programme, and will be pursuing her master's in Global Affairs from Tsinghua University in China. *Star Youth, The Daily Star*, caught up with Rijve and Shomy to learn about their goals, and more.

What inspired you to start this organisation?

Rijve: Being a boarding school student, I did not get to interact with people outside my institution. However, after starting university, I was exposed to a diverse group of people. With time, I started to recognise the skills that I was lacking, and wanted to establish a space for those who wished to make positive changes in their communities, but did not have the capacity. Initially, Shomy and I provided capacity-building training to young individuals. Subsequently, we conceived the idea of Awareness 360.

Shomy: After losing my mother in 2014 due to complications from severe diarrhea, I intended to raise awareness about clean water, sanitation, and hygiene. I met Rijve later that year, and we cofounded Awareness 360 to bring together individuals who want to improve the lives of others. Our organisation equips young people with the skills and resources needed to build social projects. We hold talks and workshops on personal hygiene, water-filtration methods and hand-washing, among other environmental sub-

jects. Project Score Your Goals, our flagship initiative, is an extensive workshop series on the Sustainable Development Goals.

What were some of the challenges you faced?
Rijve: I had to get multiple jobs to keep our activities financially afloat. Initially, coordinating projects of Awareness 360 while maintaining my studies, extracurricular activities, and work was hectic.

Shomy: Being a social impact entrepreneur in a patriarchal society has been challenging, as women continue to miss out on growth opportunities due to a lack of proper water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities.

What can you tell us about Awareness 360's recent projects and future endeavours?

Rijve: We launched a Facebook Live series during the pandemic. Till date, we have conducted over 90 sessions. We also started our Youth Development Programme, through which individuals will learn about different changemaking concepts and develop their skills in empathy mapping, design thinking, project management, public speaking, impact measurement, mental health and social media for advocacy. We intend to build 30 gender-balanced toilets with menstrual hygiene facilities, handwashing stations, and hygiene kits in the future.

Shomy: So far, we have mobilised over 15,00 young people across 23 countries, resulting in social action projects that have benefited over 150,000 people around the world. Moving forward, we intend to expand our activities to more regions, and continue to focus on WASH awareness campaigns.

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Shomy Hasan Chowdhury and Rijve Arefin.

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NURTURING DREAMS

Challenging taboos around sex education

ASHLEY SHOPTORSHI SAMADDAR

It was in May 2020 that Naorin Pallaby, a Physical Education and Sports Science student from Rajshahi University, founded Sex Education Bangladesh. The platform started out as a content hub, where young contributors presented educational videos on sex education for the masses.

It soon grew into an online school with over 14,000 followers. However, Naorin faced many setbacks in getting rid of the stigma around the term, 'sex education', which still persists in our country.

"The word 'sex' in sex education does

not only refer to sexual intercourse. Rather, sex education helps us to understand the various challenges of adolescence and develop values regarding sexual orientation, gender, and the biological formation of a living being," says Naorin.

She comes across several misconceptions, while working in the field of sex education. "On many occasions, people have mistaken me for a sex worker," shares Naorin.

She has been asked multiple times to change the name of her school, but she did not give in because it contradicts her purpose.

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"I got my first period at the age of thirteen. I did not know anything about menstrual cycles. I was scared, and thought that the bleeding was from an internal injury. If I had access to sex education back then, I would not have been so terrified," she shares.

This incident helped Naorin to understand the importance of sex education, and challenging taboos by not just educating children, but also parents and teachers.

Presently, Sex Education Bangladesh has eight teachers from different universities, three doctors for counselling sessions, fifteen blog writers, and many tertiary-level students as volunteers.

Five content developers work on videos about puberty, reproductive health, child marriage, menstruation, good touch and bad touch, proper parenting, and marital rape among other topics. Two content developers of the team are working on books about sex education.

Sex Education Bangladesh is set to launch their first free online course, Good Parenting and Safe Childhood, today. "Sixty children, along with their parents, have registered for the course," adds Naorin.

The school will also start three long-term courses, Parenting and Child Safety (5-8 years), Know Yourself (9-13 years), and Towards Better Life (14-17 years), soon.

Moving forward, Naorin hopes to launch a website for Sex Education Bangladesh, offering counselling services, and programmes on sexually transmitted diseases.

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Naorin Pallaby is a recipient of the Joy Bangla Youth Award 2020.

PHOTO: COURTESY

YOUNG ACHIEVER

AN ARTIST'S TICKET TO SUCCESS

MORMEE MAHTAB

Emerging artist Imtiaz Rasel won the Sovereign Asian Art Prize 2021, under the public vote category for his artwork, "Journey by Bus". He was the only Bangladeshi to get nominated for the competition among 30 finalists who were chosen from 19 countries of Asia-Pacific.

"Journey by Bus" was first presented in the Young Artist's Exhibition at Shilpakala Academy. Later, it was open for public vote till May 23 while being exhibited in Hong Kong, where it received a massive response from online voters, becoming the highest auctioned artwork in the competition. Prominent artist Tayeba Begum Lipi nominated Rasel for the contest.

After completing his bachelor's from DU's Faculty of Fine Art in Drawing and Painting, Rasel went to India on an ICCR scholarship to pursue his master's in Visual Arts.

While commuting to different places in India, he drew inspiration from the streets that a bus would go by, as passengers got on or off. The cacophonies of Kolkata found a form in his sketches.

"In the midst of cultural and geographical differences, one common aspect between Dhaka and Kolkata is the language," he shares. "I began collecting bus tickets and sketching on them regularly. I portrayed people's interactions, clothes, and behaviours in my work."

Rasel made a collage of these sketches on Fabiano paper in the form of a bus, incorporating catchy phrases. On the back, he drew a map of the streets that he had passed by during his bus journeys in Kolkata.

Rasel is one of the 15 artists to receive a grant for a virtual residency programme under Brihatta Art Foundation, titled "Brihatta



Imtiaz Rasel.

PHOTOS: COURTESY

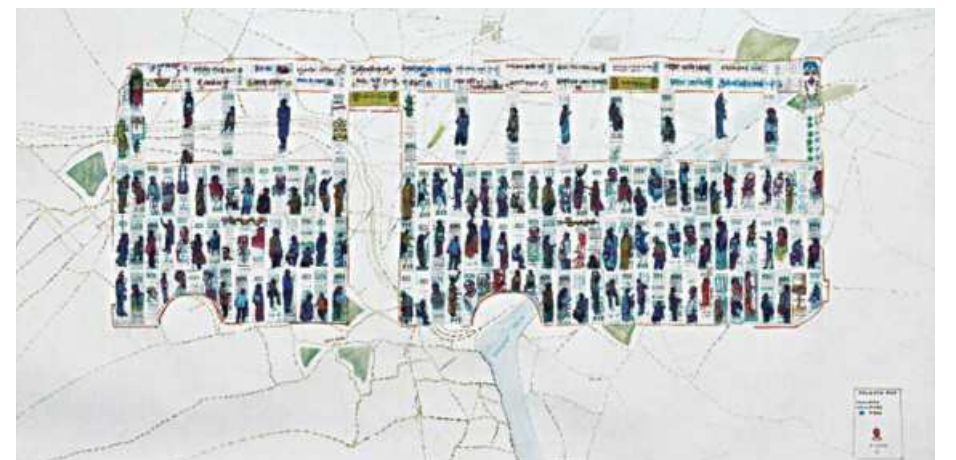
Home Art Project", set up amidst the pandemic to create opportunities for emerging artists of Bangladesh.

"The job prospects for young artists in our country are limited. After graduation, a student who chooses to pursue a career in fine arts has to face many struggles," asserts Rasel. "With dwindling job opportunities, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, the situation has worsened. Some artists are starting their online businesses, while others have switched career paths altogether."

He was also a part of a residency programme, organised by the Picasso Pupils International Art Community in Meghalaya.

Rasel currently teaches at Nalonda High School, and is a coordinator for Brihatta Art Foundation. He hopes to continue taking risks as an artist, with different mediums over the years.

The author is a freelance journalist and a potential political scientist who likes to read poems and write short stories. Email: mormee@mahtab23@gmail.com.



Rasel's artwork, "Journey by Bus" won the Sovereign Asian Art Prize 2021.