



During their 'Project LightGiver', EcoVation provided lights to households of a nameless tribal village of Sitakunda upazila.

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF ECOVATION

YOUTH IN ACTION

Lighting up lives through eco-friendly practices

AKHLAKUR RAHMAN

Shanjidul Alam Seban Shaan, founder of EcoVation Bangladesh (formerly known as Litter of Light), received the GEORGE H.W. BUSH Points of Light Awards' Inspirational Honour Roll.

He founded EcoVation in 2014. The organisation aims to address issues like sustainable development goals, climate change, renewable energy and plastic population on a grassroots level through different eco-friendly projects and initiatives.

"I watched a video on YouTube where a 60-voltage lamp was created using a plastic bottle and water, which inspired me to try it. I was surprised to see their method works," shares Shaan.

"30 million people in Bangladesh have zero access to electricity and about 18.5 million of these people use toxic kerosene lamps," points out Shaan. "Every year, the nation is burning about 2,000 million litres of kerosene, producing above 45,000 metric tons of carbon."

Initially, EcoVation ran a pilot project at a remote village with around 60 plastic water bottle lights, but the lights showed many issues like water leakage and inadequate sealing. "We stopped that project and started researching a light that was eco-friendly, easily repairable, easily assembled, and



Shanjidul Alam Seban Shaan.

uses cheap easily available materials," says Shaan.

"We came up with a solution using a plastic bottle, bamboo, solar panel, battery, and our organisation's circuit. We made two light designs, including affordable indoor lamps and streetlights for remote areas."

Shaan was the recipient of the Youth CO:Lab Startup Award in 2020, organised by United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and Citi Foundation.

Under their charity initiative 'Project LightGiver', EcoVation surveys coastal areas, slum areas, remote villages, and refugee camps to provide lights at every household.

"We find sponsors for this charity project and have our volunteers make lamps and streetlights under the supervision of our engineering

team. Then, they visit the sites for distributing the lights for free to the locality," shares Shaan.

Over the last few years, EcoVation's projects contributed to reducing 2,750 metric tons of carbon emissions.

"Our lights use plastic bottles as the cover, which helps upcycle the non-recyclable plastic," adds Shaan. "So far, we have provided our lights to 90,000 people, including families in Rohingya refugee camps. We also train our volunteers on creating solar products."

Recently, under 'Project SolarPrenuer', in partnership with Dutch INGO ICCO Cooperation and with funding from German GIZ and ACT Alliance, EcoVation volunteers taught some youths of Rohingya camps to create solar products to make a living for themselves.

They also partnered up with UN agencies to implement large-scale interventions. "Solar systems in Bangladesh are very costly because of inadequate solar companies and lack of skilled workforce in solar technology," says Shaan. "We are trying to fill the gap by producing solar-engineers."

EcoVation's 'Project Anti-Plastic' is set to reduce the annual 8,000 metric tons of plastic wastage of Bangladesh. They are also training underprivileged youths to make

household clay and bamboo products as plastic alternatives and recycle plastic materials into eco-friendly bricks.

Their 'Project Bishuddha Pani' offers free water purification systems in schools, madrasas, mosques, and public community places to ensure safe water for free. "This project started with the biggest Rohingya camp in Bangladesh, where we installed solar-powered water purifiers at different spots of the community," adds Shaan.

EcoVation also trained underprivileged women to make eco-friendly sanitary napkins, and provide them with market linkage under 'Project MyPad' as part of livelihood interventions. "The cheap and reusable napkins are the women's income source as well," asserts Shaan.

Moving forward, EcoVation plans to establish two social enterprises for bamboo and clay products as well as cloth-made reusable sanitary napkins.

"In the last six years, we have saved up to BDT 30 million in energy cost, and our beneficiaries have saved nearly BDT 15,000 annually by using our lights," concludes Shaan.

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NURTURING DREAMS

I want to carry our national flag to every country of the world

SHARMIN JOYA

Najmun Nahar Sohagi is the first Bangladeshi woman to travel to 150 countries across the globe, carrying the national flag of Bangladesh.

It took her 21 years to reach the landmark. "When I completed 135 countries in 2019, I promised myself that I would reach a milestone within the 50th year of Bangladesh's independence," says Sohagi.

Undoubtedly, Sohagi has set an example for young travellers. "I have always tried to convey the message that the world is our home. I want to carry our national flag to every country of the world," she says.

She chose São Tomé and Príncipe, an island nation in Central Africa, as the 150th country. "Although the ongoing pandemic affected many of my plans, I picked this place as it is located on the equator in the Gulf of Guinea," shares the avid traveller.

Sohagi raised awareness about issues such as world peace, child marriage, and plastic pollution among others, around the countries she went to.

She stayed at a guest house in São Tomé and Príncipe in a jungle-based area, where all civic benefits were not available.

While travelling, she got ill, and starved for long hours as restaurants were far from the guest house. She also faced language problems, while travelling with the locals by road. Due to the ongoing pandemic, the flights were more expensive than usual, and she had to get tested for Covid-19 twice, for

a single flight to Africa.

According to Sohagi, São Tomé and Príncipe is a geographically rich country. "After Iceland and Namibia, I would describe this place heaven on earth. It seems like an untouched heaven that has the history of a hundred thousand years," she says.

From the land of sunrise to the land of giant mountains, she has stories to tell about every country she visited. These stories will be told in the book she is writing on her travel experiences of 21 years.

Sohagi plans to travel to all 195 countries enlisted in the United Nations. "My target is to visit the war-raged areas soon," she asserts. "Since I travel alone, ensuring my safety is also important."

Inspired by her paternal grandfather who was an Islamic scholar, and her father, who also loved travelling, she began to explore the world from an early age. Sohagi studied at Lund University, Sweden. Her mother has accompanied her to 14 countries.

She received the Miss Earth Queen Award and Youth Conference Globe Award at the Fobana Summit, Nassau Coliseum.

She is a recipient of the Atish Dipankar Gold Medal Award, Zonta International Club Award, and Red Crescent Motivational Award. She will be visiting Bangladesh in November.

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Najmun Nahar Sohagi is the first Bangladeshi woman to travel to 150 countries across the globe, carrying the national flag of the country.

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INTERVIEW

Raising awareness through candid voices

ZAREEN NAWAR

A year ago, the youth-led platform Beyond Candid was formed with the intention of bringing stories about social injustices and gender-based violence to the forefront through candid lenses. For co-founder Masud Parvez, the platform is a means of getting to his dream of building a better tomorrow while ensuring a safer world for future generations. He received the National Debate Foundation Bangladesh's Youth Icon Award from 2017 to 2019. We caught up with him to find out more about his work.

What prompted you to establish Beyond Candid?
Back in October 2020, the brutal gang-rape incident in Begumganj, Noakhali shook me to the core. I was heartbroken and furious and I wanted to fight against such unbearable crimes. I, along with my friend and former Co-founder of Beyond Candid, Rajiul Huda Dipto, started to talk about an initiative concerning social issues with a mentor of mine Ruhun Wasata, a Senior Lecturer at the Department of Social Relations, East West University in Dhaka, who is currently pursuing her PhD in Human Behavior, School of Public Health at Indiana University in Bloomington. She is also the founding moderator of Beyond Candid.

What kind of challenges did you face in order to build this platform?

We mainly operate through Facebook. It was difficult to initiate conversations about social inequality and injustice in outspoken ways, which made designing the format of the platform tough. It is not always easy for people to open up about violence they have had to face. Moreover, as I was already an Assistant Teacher at South Point School and College, Malibagh, Dhaka, it was challenging for me to run a social platform alongside maintaining a full-time job. Even when we organised the first season of "Intergenerational Perspectives", it was difficult to find panelists from three different generations for every episode. However, my sister and current Content Lead of our team Jarin Tasnim helped me out. Some



Masud Parvez.

PHOTO: COURTESY

of my students came forward and joined conversations too. We are a small, but proactive team now.

How would you describe the mission of Beyond Candid?

The increase in gender-based violence during the pandemic inspired us to speak unequivocally about stories encompassing violence. We were able to organise three conversational series and several workshops, which resonated with a lot of young people. We have one campaign and two conversational series planned for the rest of the year. In the future, we want to establish Beyond Candid as a platform that gives weight to the voices of the unheard, regardless of who they might be. We also hope to work more with the youth, since they have the skills to comprehend different perspectives candidly.

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YOUNG ACHIEVER

Faizah's 'Moner School' making strides through global recognition

MAISHA ISLAM MONAMEE

Fairooz Faizah Beether of Bangladesh is a recipient of the 2021 Goalkeepers Global Goals Changemaker Award by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. She received the award for her work in promoting good health and well-being under SDG-3. She is a student of Business Administration from Khulna University.

Faizah co-founded Moner School, an online platform that aims to raise awareness about mental health and ensure equal access to mental healthcare across the country.

She attended a training session conducted by BRAC's youth platform, where seven participants were asked to form a group, choose a social problem, and design a community project. This ultimately led to the formation of Moner School, through which five members of the original team are still promoting mental health and wellbeing.

Launched in 2018, Moner School is an initiative to educate people as well as give them non-judgmental spaces, where they can talk about mental health freely, and get help whenever they need. "We are currently working towards equipping people with the necessary tools to help take care of their mental health through various trainings and workshops," Faizah explained.



Fairooz Faizah Beether received the 2021 Goalkeepers Global Goals Changemaker Award by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

PHOTO: COURTESY

Moner School's team celebrates World Mental Health Day through their annual event, Spreading Happiness. "In Khulna, we distribute yellow balloons, along with a positive notes. This year, we also distributed food packets amongst underprivileged communities," Faizah shared. "The balloons depict the carefree days of childhood, reminding people to keep their inner child alive even amidst their

chaotic responsibilities of an adult."

Their training sessions have benefitted over 500 people as they addressed topics like the first stage of mental health care, stress-management, mindfulness, and self-love. During the pandemic, Moner School conducted several online workshops and training sessions to address anxiety, stress and depression caused by lifestyle changes and losses due to Covid-19.

Their Facebook group and page provide active listening help through messaging. They have an anonymous sharing space, where they connect mental health professionals with patients. So far, Moner School has served around 1,000 people through primary mental health help.

Faizah addressed the fact that there are not enough skilled professionals to cater to people's mental health needs in Bangladesh. "It was difficult for us to find the right professional psychologists to help us with proper knowledge. The number of psychologists outside Dhaka is scarce. So providing proper help to peripheral regions is a major problem," she said.

Moving forward, Faizah intends to work with school children while ensuring a healthy lifestyle for them.

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