



YOUTH IN ACTION

A guiding light for the visually impaired

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AKHLAKUR RAHMAN

Masrur Ishraq founded Third Eye in 2019 to help the visually impaired students at his educational institution, University of Chittagong (CU). For his efforts, he won the Joy Bangla Youth



Award for social inclusion in 2021. So far, Third Eye has helped over 400 visually impaired students with audiobooks, recording lectures, and

stenography during exams. “I knew about the visually impaired students when I enrolled in CU,” says Masrur. “I thought the university helps them with exams somehow. But during my first-year final exams in 2018, I saw some visually impaired students searching for stenographers while everyone else focused on their exams.” When Masrur approached the visually impaired students after his exams were over, he was quite shocked to know that they had to find their own stenographers, as well as helpers for recording study materials. As a result, he wanted to create a team that would help the visually impaired students with audiobooks and exam hall stenography. With this aim in mind, Masrur posted his idea in several internal online groups of CU via Facebook, Messenger, and WhatsApp. At first, many responded to his call. However, only eight people appeared in the first team meeting of Third Eye in January 2019.

Today, the platform has expanded outside the campus of CU, reaching five districts of the country. They have over 550 active volunteers in Chattogram, Dhaka, Jashore, Feni, and Rajshahi. A 31-member executive committee is selected every six months, based on work performance to lead the organisation. They follow rules like stenographers cannot be from the same department as the visually impaired students, and one stenographer cannot give multiple exams for the same visually impaired student. Third Eye also involves visually impaired individuals in their work. “As a volunteer and visually impaired student, Third Eye has been helping me with my studies since their inception,” says Faisal Mohammad Ibrahim, former head of marketing and promotion of the organisation. “It is a harmonious platform, where we can work together with our sighted friends.”

Currently, Third Eye offers debate, computer and pronunciation training for the visually impaired, alongside other vocational and personal skill development projects. During the lockdowns in 2020, the platform utilised online content writing, workshops, and YouTube videos to raise awareness. “In 2020, I became a certified trainer with Competency-Based Training and Assessment (CBT&A) from Bangladesh Technical Education Board, in hopes to establish a vocational training centre, which could help bear the management costs of Third Eye,” reveals Masrur. “CBT&A also included lessons on how to teach individuals with special needs, which I integrated into plans for Third Eye.” Masur hopes for the day when no visually impaired person will feel like an outcast in society.

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INTERVIEW Building a space-sharing marketplace

SHANIZ CHOWDHURY

CHAYA is a novel space-sharing marketplace in Bangladesh, launched by Farhia Tabassum and Mehraab Anwar. Unoccupied and unused spaces can be listed by their owners on CHAYA's website, for users to browse and find what they need. Farhia is one of the entrepreneurs in the Dhaka Hub Global Shapers 2021 Cohort. The Global Shapers are a community of young leaders and change makers, aged between 20 and 30, curated by the World Economic Forum. The Dhaka Hub was founded in 2014. In an interview with The Daily Star, Farhia talks about the vision behind CHAYA, and more.

What was the first step to starting CHAYA? In early 2019, while searching for a place to arrange a photoshoot for a friend's company, we noticed a gap in the market. Locations and customers existed, but there was no middle man to connect them with each other. Mehraab and I came up with the idea that we could use other people's homes the same way we use our friends' houses for shoots. In October 2019, we opened an Instagram page and reached out to friends, parents, and restaurant owners in the hope that they will open up their spaces. In a month, we expanded our business to a multi-purpose space-sharing platform.

What were some challenges you faced in the early stages of the business?

It was the typical 'chicken and egg' problem – do we get people to list their properties first or do we ensure we have some customers? Eventually, we decided to focus on the supply side first, although it was difficult as we had no traction or customers.

Fortunately, after we got the initial four to five spaces, we found customers with appropriate demands.

What is CHAYA currently focused on? We are concentrating on housing for bachelors as they are immensely underserved. Single women, in particular, struggle to find proper housing in this country. We aim to access a network of housing that fulfills the needs of people who are struggling to find reliable housing in safe areas.

As a woman building a business, what has your experience been like? Sometimes in meetings, people are quick to assume that I am an intern. Even when they know that I am one of the co-founders of CHAYA, they don't consider me as their equal. However, thankfully, there are mentorship programmes connecting us to other female entrepreneurs. In our culture, there is a pre-existing notion that women are inferior, so I always feel the need to work harder than my male counterparts.

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GUIDES

Fun bookish activities for February

MAISHA ISLAM MONAMEE

Reading, despite being a solitary practice, becomes fun when it is accompanied by other activities. February brings along the Amar Ekushey Boi Mela, which is not only a tradition for our country, but also a commemoration of language and literature. Here are some fun bookish activities to try out this month.

Go on Boi Mela tours

To begin with, this month calls for some Boi Mela hangouts. Whether you are visiting the fair for a book haul, or just strolling across the stalls, get together with friends and celebrate your love for reading. While it is good to have



Read-alongs are an interactive way to pull yourself out of a reading slump. For this activity, select one book that pleases everyone's reading taste.

fun, please be cautious about the health protocols being maintained.

Conduct Read-alongs

Read-alongs are an interactive way to pull yourself out of a reading slump. For this activity, select one book that pleases everyone's reading taste. It could be a new release or a classic. Go slow with the flow and keep discussing updates with your group.

Exchange books

Ask your friends to pick a book that they enjoyed and would like to pass along. Tell

them to wrap the book and write a few phrases that describe it. Exchange these surprise packages amongst yourselves, based on those descriptions. This would help you explore a variety of genres.

Create a book journal

Maintain a book journal where you can jot down mini-reviews of the books. It could be a quote that hit you differently or a character you resonated with. In a few years, you would be going through this journal and cherishing these memories.

Start social media challenges

Participating in social media challenges is another great way to engage in literary discussions. To start off with, some ideas are pictures of your Boi Mela hauls, favourite covers, or talking about a new release every other day.

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EXPERIENCE

Aiding learners' high school transition

SARWAR UDDIN AHMED

School kids are just beginning to learn what they want their identities to be. At this age, they look toward the future and see a world filled to the brim with possibilities.

However, the transition from high school to college or university entails many challenges, and is often stressful for both students and parents. It is a crucial period when students face significant changes in their lives, with a new sense of autonomy to make their own choices.

On the one hand, some parents may feel their ability to help their children develop into better decision-makers are diminishing. Meanwhile, other guardians tend to overpower and blur students' minds with additional information, queries, and advice.

The high expectations to get accepted into good colleges and universities can further add to the pressure for students. As a result, they tend to focus entirely on doing well rather than actually learning something of value.

Although studying abroad opens up new horizons, it comes bearing drawbacks such as higher costs, cultural barriers, and uncertainty. Universal College Bangladesh (UCB) brings the benefits of international education to students here.

UCB is Bangladesh's premier transnational education institute and Monash College's exclusive partner in providing a pathway to Monash University degrees, from Bangladesh. It is the only Ministry of Education approved



PHOTO: COURTESY OF UCB

international education provider in the country.

The academic team of scholars and counsellors at UCB is dedicated to help students with their international education degrees, from Bangladesh.

The institution offers the Monash University Foundation Year and Monash University first year equivalent programmes. Monash University was ranked 55th in QS World University Ranking 2021 and earned the first place in Australian REUTERS' Most Innovative

Universities In Asia-Pacific 2019.

Upon successful completion of the pathway programme, UCB students may gain entry into Monash University in Australia or Malaysia directly in the second year.

To nurture young students into visionary leaders and innovators, UCB brings opportunities that will allow them to excel in all fields.

The author is Dean of Academic Affairs, UCB.