



PHOTOS: COURTESY

SHIKHO: Transforming lives, one student at a time

The start-up's expansion furthers their philosophy to help students "win in life," not only in SSC, HSC, admission, but also long-term career development. For example, they identified skills gaps in Microsoft Excel and began offering training courses. And their business decisions go hand-in-hand with their mission to revolutionise the educational landscape in Bangladesh.

RAMISA ROB

Tanjir Arafat Turjo, 17, hops on a bus every morning, at 6:30am from his home in Banastree, Rampura, and travels over an hour to BAF Shaheen College Kurmitola, where he's currently a first-year HSC student. Most of his youth has been crammed into commuting to and back from school, leaving little room for him to pursue his passion for programming and artificial intelligence. That changed once Turjo started using Shikho, the ed-tech app launched in 2020.

"If I didn't use Shikho, I would be doing coaching after class in Kurmitola, so I would return home at around 8pm," said Turjo. He has 13 subjects for HSC, and uses Shikho's blend of online recorded content, mock tests and live classes to study for nine of them. With this flexibility, Turjo has been able to return home right after college ends, stay on top of his courses, while also finding the time to devote himself to the robotics lab. He is now the youngest member of Team Atlas, Bangladesh's national robotics team, competing with over thirty countries in the International Science and Invention Fair 2022.

Like Turjo, many students at the SSC and HSC levels have started using Shikho to supplement their schoolwork, overcoming myriad daily challenges that previously hindered them from achieving their goals. Whereas private coaching for nine subjects would've cost Turjo Tk 6,000 per month, he pays Tk 12,000 per year for them on the online platform. Students who cannot afford private tuition, now find a support system in Shikho.



Shahir Chowdhury

The holistic impact on students' lives is what makes Shikho standout as more than a high-tech startup, but rather as a change-making initiative in Bangladesh. Launched in 2020, Shikho's operation was run by 20 employees. Only in two years, the start-up has attracted over 800,000 users, and expanded to a team of 400 members, led by two founders who share, above all, a penchant for education. Zeeshan Zakaria, co-founder and COO, attended seven schools, both English and Bangla medium, around Bangladesh. He went on to receive training in University College London's Institute of Education, which is globally ranked as number one for Education. Zakaria pursued teaching mathematics in high schools in Bangladesh, and it is his love for teaching and his students that distinguishes him as a distinct educator. "There is nothing more fulfilling than when a student tells me they understand a topic so much better now," said Zakaria.



Zeeshan Zakaria

Shahir Chowdhury, co-founder and CEO, grew up in Rajar Bajar, and was raised by a high school teacher and a Dhaka University professor. He spent twelve years establishing a successful career in finance in London — as a director in HSBC, prior to which he worked in Barclays. "But I realised I wasn't making the difference I wanted, in private banking and investment management," said Chowdhury. "I found myself wanting to marry up the experience of understanding finance, technology to my childhood of growing up with educators in Bangladesh," he added.

Before returning to Bangladesh, Chowdhury approached Zakaria, and Shikho was born out of their joint vision to make a difference in the education sector in Bangladesh. But their rise hasn't been without a hard-scrabble journey of its own.

"Ed-tech was a new concept in Bangladesh; the first challenge was finding a way to show parents and students that online learning can be useful," said Chowdhury. "And then there was the question of training teachers to produce content in an engaging way," he added.

Zakaria started approaching educators and experts — who now make their lessons — by visiting universities such as BUET. "I would just show up and ask to sit with them in cafeterias, and individually explain what we're trying to do at Shikho and how kids could benefit from their expertise," he recounted.

The app is now operated through a data-centric architecture by curriculum experts devising their lesson plans. Each of their courses are designed by experts in their fields — for example, the math courses are developed by mathematicians. Instead of hiring one tutor for all subjects, which often happens to be the case in Bangladesh, students receive specialised teaching directly from their laptops and phones.

Shikho transcends the mere advantages of studying at your own pace that comes with remote learning — by offering students relatable, gamified content to keep them enthusiastic about education itself.

Fahim Akhter, 16, an SSC student who uses Shikho, finds it easier to understand biology topics such as the functions of a human heart with Shikho's visual aids, breaking the confines of a traditional blackboard. "I used to really be weak in my science subjects, to the point that I was afraid of classes," he said, "Now, I find myself looking forward to Shikho's videos because they show me how things work."

Shikho deploys their teachers to identify peepholes into the brains of their students; the experts know students don't watch videos over seven minutes. Strategising dexterously,

the team creates lessons with the agenda of "hooking your kids," said Zakaria. To explain the chapter on profit and loss to students in grade 8, Shikho made a video, interviewing egg-sellers in a real-life bazaar.

"It's easier and more engaging for students when you walk them through a topic with real-life examples," explained Zakaria. They introduced a constellation of general knowledge videos, "Tomra Ki Jano," to keep students interested in learning new concepts through animations following a story-telling format.

These nitty-gritty innovations inside the learning platform complement Shikho's overarching goal of democratising education. They recently entered into a partnership with University Coaching Centre (UCC), to take the latter's university entrance exam preparation online and ensure wider access than the limited seats available in Dhaka.

Previously, students from rural areas would come to Dhaka and pay to stay in lodges to receive lessons from a handful of trained teachers. With this new partnership, they can avail that same privilege without the additional hassle. The goal for this partnership, said Chowdhury, "is that students in rural regions who couldn't normally think of Dhaka University as an option, now can dream of the same opportunities."

The start-up's expansion furthers their philosophy to help students "win in life," not only in SSC, HSC, admission, but also long-term career development. For example, they identified skills gaps in Microsoft Excel and began offering training courses. And their business decisions go hand-in-hand with their mission to revolutionise the educational landscape in Bangladesh.

Recently, Shikho entered into a partnership with Food Panda to offer a selection of career-development courses to riders at subsidised rates. This month, Shikho teamed up with Grameenphone, giving MyGP users access to over 70 learning videos for free.

The start-up has already secured top-tier global investment from education investment specialists Learn Capital in Silicon Valley, which has backed hugely successful ed-tech companies like Coursera and Udemy. They are currently in the process of raising a Series A investment, informed Chowdhury.

For the upcoming months, Shikho is focused on attracting more students to use their app and widening the scope of their impact. The team is now evermore dedicated to brand campaigning, to tackle the ongoing challenge of "convincing parents that Shikho and online learning is worthwhile and credible," said Zeeshan Ahmed, head of brand marketing.

In August, famed actor Chanchal Chowdhury joined Shikho's brand campaign. Though the announcement coincided with the rise of the film, Hawa, Shikho had been in talks with Chowdhury much earlier, as the actor is a former teacher himself, which makes him a trustworthy promoter for parents.

With rising living costs in Bangladesh and households reportedly cutting back on expenditures like education, Shikho's current target is directed at raising awareness of the app's accessibility. They hope to ensure that kids don't have to compromise on education due to the economic crisis, and to continue on in their pursuit of nurturing the next generation of leaders.

The trail of leaked questions and its long-lasting impact

FATIN HAMAMA

As someone who has already sat for three board exams and is currently preparing for the last one, arriving at exam halls among other students just as nervous is no longer what makes me anxious about the whole situation. However, there's usually an upsettingly common sight outside these exam halls minutes before the gates open, and that's what sets me on edge. It's the one where you see groups of examinees huddled over and hurriedly reading something off their phones while desperately rifling through test paper solution/guidebooks at hand.

Said something being leaked question paper sets, it's revolting how normalised this practice is even in a surrounding with parents and other adult guardians present, many of whom are seen assisting their children to cheat. It's not only the case with Secondary School Certificate (SSC) and High School Certificate (HSC) exams, but used to



DESIGN: FATIMA JAHAN ENA

be prevalent when Primary Education Completion Examination (PECE) and Junior School Certificate (JSC) exams were around as well, shedding a depressing light on the shockingly young age from which we're exposed to such nuisance.

In a national curriculum board exam where tons of answer scripts are often evaluated with a lot of biases, leaked questions harm all the examinees, especially the ones who have access to them. Firstly, it invalidates someone's honest efforts in academics while unfairly tilting scales towards many who put in none. Not only is that potentially capable of crushing a student's confidence, it also results in skewed grades in times when the questions are complicated/difficult overall.

And the consequence doesn't only stop here, because these very grades, in case of HSC, are an evaluation parameter for university admissions. Besides, the kids who become reliant on passing the absurd frequency of board exams by buying

It's easy to blame the students actively participating in aforementioned circumstance, but they're simply products of a corrupt education framework that's nothing more than a business at this point; and only ever glorifies good grades as a gateway to success.

these questions never learn a better perspective on education, resulting in wasted potential that naturally continue to haunt them for the remainder of their academic life.

It's easy to blame the students actively participating in aforementioned circumstance, but they're simply products of a corrupt education framework that's nothing more than a business at this point; and only ever glorifies good grades as a gateway to success.

Instead of using a holistic evaluation process that's capable of providing students with a properly efficient learning experience, our educational institutions have been using exam scores as a sole parameter for one's worth for ages. Most of our teachers promote their tutorial and coaching classes for the same cause, taking it up a notch by fuelling the suggestions for common question-pattern-in-exams culture and oftentimes even leaking question papers from school exams.

In fact, our fascination with perfect grades on a sheet of paper has gone so far, that we've found a way to invent the term Golden A+ for further categorising students who do indeed manage to secure the perfect GPA in board exams. So why is a student, who's already under crushing pressure from toxic expectations perpetuated by a corrupt system that never benefits them, to be blamed entirely for using unfair means that are so readily available?

Unfortunately, other than issuing empty promises in countless conferences and periodically making a show out of taking legal actions against people who perpetrate and sell question papers to students. The education board hasn't really been able to tackle this issue at the root as it keeps happening at some place or the other every time a board exam rolls around. Probably because it's not possible to compensate for negligence towards fixing fundamental errors with performative measures that do nothing, a concept yet foreign to the people in charge.

This article was originally published online on SHOUT