



**Bilkis Banu,**  
*Caring for the uncared for*

Bilkis Banu could have spent a life of luxury with what she and her in-laws had. Instead, she chose something bigger – to serve children who had no one to look after them.

Inspired by the services of Mother Teresa towards the poor and abandoned, she established an orphanage – Golap Kha Shishu Sadan in Nageshwari upazila of Kurigram – on a piece of land owned by her husband's family. It is now home to 75 children.

Bilkis has always been passionate about helping out children in need. She used to take care of five orphans at her home as well as providing free tuition to poor children in her neighbourhood. She was especially moved in the winter of 1999 when a mentally challenged woman came to her with a baby girl, failing to take care of the child.

Bilkis took her in and named her Pritilata.

That night, she dreamt about Mother Teresa. It was then that she and her husband Rabiul Islam decided to build an orphanage.

Bilkis provides the orphans with formal education, while they also take part in physical exercise and cultural events at the establishment.

The orphanage is funded by the earnings of the family, farmland, a hostel, and some private donors. Bilkis has future plans to construct a new orphanage complex on 2.25 acres of her family land.

"I will do everything needed to fulfil the wishes of the children in whatever field of study they choose... My aim is to raise these children as good human beings," says Bilkis, who herself could not study beyond the higher secondary school level.



**Chhobi Das Gupta,** *From worker to entrepreneur through hard work*

Poverty had forced Chhobi Das Gupta to drop out of school before completing the secondary level but her indomitable spirit and hard work made her an entrepreneur from a garment worker.

After the death of her father about 20 years ago, Chhobi started working at a garment factory when she was only 12. Though she had to support her family of seven members, she did dream of pursuing education further and become an entrepreneur one day.

She got herself admitted to the Bangladesh Open University but once again had to pause due to financial distress. This time, however, she had her target fixed in mind and thus kept on saving money accordingly.

After 18 long years, Chhobi established her factory "Sense Fashion" in Chattogram early in 2016. Initially she had six workers, 10 sewing machines, and a capital of Tk 7 lakh – Tk 5 lakh in savings and the rest from loans. With skills and hard work, Chhobi expanded the business and today has 60 sewing machines and more than 100 employees working for her company.

"There was a time when I had to wait for salary every month to feed my family. Today, I disburse Tk 6 lakh as monthly salaries to my workers."

Chhobi is grateful to her husband Amalendu Das Gupta and his friend Dipankar Dastidar who stood by her during the rainy days. "Without their support, I would not have reached this stage," she said.



**Salma Choudhury,** *Dedicating her life to children with cancer*

Salma Choudhury has seen the worst of cancer as she lost her son Ashiq Husain Choudhury to the disease in May 1993 in London. The boy was three years, three months and three days old.

But instead of drowning into sadness, she felt for other mothers going through similar situation, and hence founded "A Shelter for Helpless Ill Children" (ASHIC), Bangladesh's first NGO dedicated to children with cancer.

Founded in 1994, the charity aims to support children fighting with cancer and their parents with love, compassion, and empathy. Salma and her husband Afzal Husain Choudhury donated their familial property to set up a shelter at Dhaka's Bangla Motor and a palliative care unit in Dhanmondi.

The foundation also runs four play centres at paediatric units at the Dhaka Medical College Hospital, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University Hospital, Sylhet MAG Osmani Medical College Hospital, and Chittagong Medical College Hospital.

The shelter accommodates children along with their parents for free when they come from outside Dhaka for treatment. The palliative care unit gives comfort to the terminally ill patients.

Salma says her heart leaps with joy when children, with support from ASHIC, continue the lengthy treatment process and finally recover.

"I have suffered a lot and I know other mothers who are in the same situation. I am happy to see children surviving cancer," she told this paper.

## UNSUNG WOMEN NATION BUILDERS 2018



**Lucy Helen Frances Holt,** *A humanitarian worker who belongs to this land*

Catholic Sister Lucy Helen Frances Holt left her home in Britain in 1960 to pursue humanitarian work in the then East Pakistan. Little could she have known that through war and peace, Bangladesh is the country that would win her heart.

"I worked as an orderly at the Fatema Hospital in Jessore during the Liberation War," recalls Sister Lucy, who even attended civilian and freedom

fighter patients on days when the hospital's doctors deemed it too risky to leave their homes. On occasion she treated bullet wounds.

She was asked to leave in 1971 for her own safety but refused. "I wanted to stand beside the freedom-loving people of the delta," she says. "I was really fortunate to be able to contribute to the country's liberation."

Sister Lucy wrote to contacts in Britain to

plead the cause of an independent Bangladesh, in support of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Bangabandhu whom she greatly admired.

Sister Lucy is still engaged in social work and teaches English for free at the Barisal Oxford Mission Primary School. In February 2018 the Bangladesh government granted her final wish: to be a Bangladeshi citizen so that she can forever remain in the land she loves.



**Arifa Akhter,** *An indomitable spirit that overcame immeasurable challenges*

When Arifa Akhter sat for her Secondary School Certificate exam in 2016, she didn't sit on the bench like other children. She sat on the table and wrote with her foot. Determined Arifa was born without the ability to use her arms.

According to classmates at Fulgachh High School in Lalmonirhat, although Arifa takes a little longer to write her answers with the pen held between her toes, the script is neater than what they can manage with both hands.

"Arifa was always interested in study," says her mother Mamtaz Begum. "She keeps busy with that. I help her to bathe, eat, and dress. Everything else she does herself."

"I've never been able to provide the support she needs for her studies," says her father Abdul Ali who works as a labourer. "But she never asks for anything."

Forging her own path in a world that struggles to cater for children like her, Arifa has persisted and excelled. The most outstanding student at her primary school, she scored an unbeatable GPA 5 in her Junior School Certificate. In her Secondary School Certificate, she achieved a GPA of 4.84. As for the future, Arifa dreams to be a lawyer.



**Naznin Akhter Nipa,** *From the roots inspiring others*

Since the dawn of time, human societies have gathered knowledge of plants that heal. Much of that knowledge risks being forgotten. Some crucial species face extinction. Almost 20 years ago in Khulna's Katianangla village, Naznin Akhter Nipa established a garden that specialises in preserving and promoting herbal disease prevention and cure.

As it is with many good ideas, the garden was born of a crisis. Nipa was busy as a housewife then, caring for her two children. Her husband was a fisherman and the struggling family's sole breadwinner. When pirates attacked his trawler and stole his fishing nets, the future seemed lost.

On advice from a non-government organisation, Nipa decided to start a plant nursery. But she wasn't satisfied. "General nurseries are common," she says. "I wanted to do something outstanding."

In 2000, she decided to specialise in medicinal plants. The couple began to seek rare plants, with her husband travelling as far as India to purchase specimens. Over time, Nipa collected 81 books on the subject. "I hoped to increase community knowledge about the medicinal properties of plants," she says.

Nowadays her garden features 50,000 plants from 2,000 species. Patients routinely ask her advice. She has inspired other village women to start their own gardens.



**Safia Begum,** *A librarian who lit up the darkness*

In the slums of Narayanganj is the unlikely "Shapla Pataghar," a library founded and run by widow Safia Begum. With the motto "Reading books enlightens, not reading them leads to darkness," Safia established the library in 1990. She is intent on spreading knowledge in her disadvantaged community.

Born into poverty, Safia was married off when she was in class eight. She settled in Fatullah with her husband, and just when the weight of life's struggle appeared to be lessening, tragedy struck. In 1988 her husband died, leaving her with six children to care for.

She took a job in a towel factory. Her children were compelled to leave school in favour of employment. Two years later Safia attended a "mass education" training programme at the directorate of children and women affairs. Then she started to teach several batches of up to 120 students each, in the slum.

"Not all of them could afford materials so I began to collect books," she recalls. "I also bought books on topics like the Liberation War, novels and story books."

Thus began her library. It currently has a collection of 500 books, most of which Safia bought from her own pocket. It is housed in the tin shed that also serves as her home. The library achieved government registration in 2012. For many of its patrons, it's their only chance to read books.