



DHAKA, THURSDAY, MAY 30, 2024, JAISHTHA 16, 1431 BS | A PUBLICATION OF The Daily Star

RISING STARS

FOR YOUNG MINDS ON THE RISE

SCAN THE QR CODE TO ACCESS RISING STARS ONLINE

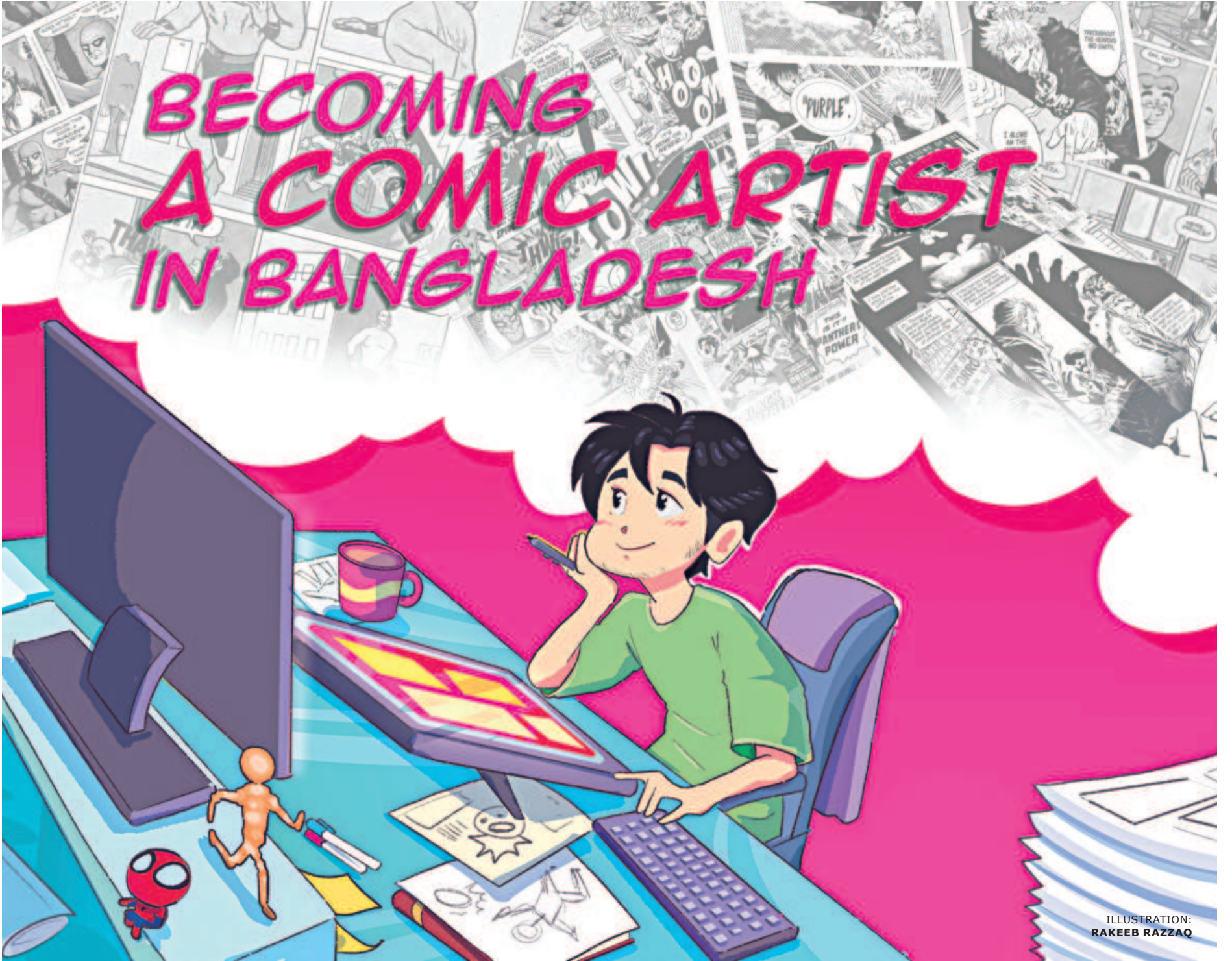


ILLUSTRATION: RAKEEB RAZZAQ



সেরা পণ্যে সেরা অফার

Digital Campaign 2024
Season-20

গনস্টপ মিলিয়নিয়ার

৩০ জনের পর এবার
কারা হবেন মিলিয়নিয়ার!!

সময়েই কোটি কোটি টাকার বিশিষ্ট উপহার
শর্ত প্রযোজ্য

08000016267 (Toll Free) waltonbd.com



WALTON
Smart Fridge



ওয়াল্টন ফ্রিজ, সত্যসত্যই, কোন ডেফ
ফ্রিজ কিনে

১০ লক্ষ টাকা

মেয়ে ৩৭ জন বিশিষ্ট উপহার
মোঃ শমসুল, পিতা: আব্দুল রহিম
দায় লালমোহাম্মদ, ফুলবাড়ী, ঢাকা



ওয়াল্টন ফ্রিজ, সত্যসত্যই, কোন ডেফ
ফ্রিজ কিনে

১০ লক্ষ টাকা

মেয়ে ৩৬ জন বিশিষ্ট উপহার
মোঃ আবু আলম, পিতা: আব্দুল মুনতাসিম আব্দুল
লাত লেইল, কোচাবাদী, ঢাকা



ওয়াল্টন ফ্রিজ, সত্যসত্যই, কোন ডেফ
ফ্রিজ কিনে

১০ লক্ষ টাকা

মেয়ে ৩৭ জন বিশিষ্ট উপহার
মাহমুদুল হকান, পিতা: আব্দুল মোতালেব
লেপসড়া, আমলপুর সনত, আমলপুর



ওয়াল্টন ফ্রিজ, সত্যসত্যই, কোন ডেফ
ফ্রিজ কিনে

১০ লক্ষ টাকা

মেয়ে ৩৬ জন বিশিষ্ট উপহার
হাসিনা হত্যার শিউ, পিতা: হোসেন উদ্দিন
শাহরিয়া, মেহরীতুলী, মেহরগাতি

ক্রোডানের ব্যাপক সাড়ায় মেয়াদ বাড়লো ৩০ জুন ২০২৪ পর্যন্ত। শর্তাবলি জানতে ভিজিট করুন: waltonbd.com/digital-campaign-20



DID YOU KNOW?

WORLD ENVIRONMENT DAY

World Environment Day, led by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and celebrated annually on June 5 since 1973, is the largest global platform for environmental outreach, engaging millions of people worldwide.

With time ticking away and Mother Nature facing a state of emergency, it's imperative that we slash annual greenhouse gas emissions by half before 2030 to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius. Failure to act will lead to a 50 percent increase in exposure to air pollution beyond safe levels by the end of the decade, and the volume of plastic waste entering aquatic ecosystems will nearly triple by 2040.

The 2024 iteration of World Environment Day will shine a

spotlight on land restoration, desertification, and drought resilience, rallying under the banner "Our Land. Our Future. We are #GenerationRestoration" in commemoration of the 30th anniversary of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD).



Editor & Publisher
Mahfuz Anam

Deputy Editor of Features and Head of Content Marketing
Ehsanur Raza Ronny

Rising Stars Team
Faisal Bin Iqbal
Syeda Afrin Tarannum
Fatima Jahan Ena
Abir Hossain
Amrin Tasnim Rifa

Photographer
Orchid Chakma

Graphics & Layout
TDS Creative Graphics

Production
Shamim Chowdhury

Send your articles, feedback, and opinion to rs@thedailystar.net
Find our content online at thedailystar.net/rising-stars

IS IT NECESSARY TO TAKE SOCIAL MEDIA BREAKS DURING EXAM SEASON?

SHAIKH SABIK KAMAL

In the frenzy of exam season, students often find themselves caught in a whirlwind of textbooks, notes, and caffeine-fueled all-nighters. The pressure to excel academically can be overwhelming, leaving little room for relaxation or de-stressing. Amidst the chaos, many decide to take a break from all sorts of social media platforms. However, is that the right way to go about things?

In today's digital age, social media platforms have become ubiquitous, offering constant updates, notifications, and all sorts of distractions. Thus, social media is widely considered to be a significant source of procrastination, particularly during periods which beg intense focus and concentration.

Taking regular breaks from social media during exam season can be a wise move. Contrary to popular belief, stepping away from social media doesn't mean you're missing out; rather, it allows you to reclaim your time, attention, and sanity.

The incessant scrolling, clicking, liking and overall doom scrolling is known to fragment the attention span, impair memory retention, and even hinder critical thinking skills. By disconnecting from social media, you can create an environment conducive for deep, focused study, further enhancing your ability to absorb and process large bits of information.

Thus, for most cases, social media breaks offer a much-needed opportunity for mental rejuvenation.

Of course, integrating social media breaks into one's



ILLUSTRATION: SYEDA AFRIN TARANNUM

study routine requires discipline and intent. It's not enough to simply deactivate notifications or set time limits; students must actively prioritise their mental well-being and commit to creating boundaries between their academic and social lives.

However, adapting a plan to turn yourself away from social media only during exam season can have its own challenges. The habitual adjustment to a period without scrolling and exploring take up excessive energy when done deliberately.

For many people, social media is a coping mechanism. They may suffer from increased stress, anxiety and burnout as the unending pressure to bring stark results in the academic scene can be a far heavier burden than one may conceive it to be.

Again, there are a number of students who have improvised ahead in this digitally oriented lifestyle; they have balanced their social media presence and opportunity to focus on themselves, academically or not. They may not necessarily need more social media breaks, so to force additional breaks on them as well as peer pressuring them into a generalised adjustment may be damaging.

In a society that glorifies hustle culture and perpetual productivity, it is important that we remember what makes our own machines run well rather than follow a general manual to higher efficiency. Taking a break from social media, or the inability to do so, are not signs of weakness or laziness.

Is A level Economics FOR YOU?

ARANYO RISHI CHOWDHURY

On paper, taking Economics for your A levels is a foolproof idea. The benefits of the subject seem to go far beyond just the report card. For people still unsure of what they want to be when they grow up, it opens up many avenues, meaning more time to decide. From understanding the implications of monetary policy, and making wiser personal finance decisions, using your knowledge of markets and consumer behaviour, to launching your own startup one day, the possibilities seem endless.

The general impression we get is that Economics gives us skills transferable to other aspects of our lives. While this may be true, there are other less taxing ways to acquire said skills.

Most students take A level Economics because of how interesting its O level counterpart felt, having taught us the basics of concepts such as supply, demand, decision-making, government policy, etc. The problem, as usual, is the leap in difficulty level. While O level papers consist of relatively short, straightforward questions that mostly test a candidate's recollection of general economic theory, A levels questions follow a very different structure.

The papers comprise broad, open-ended questions, each consisting of lots of marks. These essay questions are not only much more challenging to respond to but also require you to have in-depth knowledge of the large Economics syllabus. Candidates are expected to approach each question while considering many different perspectives and structure their answers well.

They also consist of case-based questions, a large step away from just recall, leaning more towards critical analysis and application of theory in a practical context and weighing of the impacts of different financial decisions made by the government or other entities. Not only is the format vastly different, but it also needs

greater English proficiency to organise your answers clearly and concisely.

Compared to the sciences, there's less objectivity in what is required to do well in this exam. The mark schemes are vague about the exact points you need to include in order to score marks. Similar to Literature, they do not offer detailed guidelines about how answers should be. Some teachers may also appear confused, and you may need to search a little bit more to find a good teacher fitted to your specific needs. Due to the comparatively small pool of candidates every year, there are also slightly fewer online resources available for self-studying compared to the sciences.

Difficulty levels are, however, subjective. If you are passionate about the discipline and enjoy dissecting the multi-dimensional implications of economic policy, the open-endedness is but an excellent opportunity to be rewarded for your creativity and analytical prowess. A fact-based questionnaire wouldn't allow you to stand out from your fellow examinees who are less invested and simply learned to recall the theory.

To write top-band answers, you need to keep up with the actual economy. Your knowledge needs to extend far beyond just your textbook. Regularly reading academic journals, economic reports, and even news coverage of significant economic shifts helps gain a deeper understanding of various markets, policy impacts, and financial stakeholders.

If you are someone who likes extensive reading, rigorous analysis, and would've done all that independent research either way out of a genuine curiosity to learn more about monetary and fiscal policies, expansions and recessions, supply and demand, and all that good stuff, A level Economics is the perfect match.

Aranyo Rishi Chowdhury is an A2 student at S. F. X. Greenherald International School.



ILLUSTRATION: SYEDA AFRIN TARANNUM

Is Further Math for you?

The syllabus is extensive ...



It gets much easier after the first year, once the foundational parts have been covered

Comparatively fewer helpful resources, such as solved past papers, are available online



Friends, teachers, and seniors may exaggerate the difficulty level which can make you more anxious about your performance

It is a rewarding and intellectually stimulating challenge



You'll go into Math, Physics, and Engineering courses with a rock-solid foundation

Is Psychology for you?

The interdisciplinary subject complements well with studies in the sciences, business, or humanities

Offers an extensive introduction to the core areas of human psychology, including social, cognitive, developmental and biological psychology

A helpful addition to your application to study psychology abroad

The syllabus content is memorisation-heavy

Essay questions can make grading subjective

Helps develop strong analytical, critical thinking, written communication, and research skills



**WITH BSRM FASTBUILD
YOUR HOME WILL BE BUILT ON TIME
WITH THE BEST QUALITY RODS**





PHOTOS: ORCHID CHAKMA

What makes modern-day Bangladeshi comics so interesting

FAISAL BIN IQBAL

Years ago, Bangladeshi comic enthusiasts primarily immersed themselves in the captivating worlds of comic books from DC and Marvel. Those fortunate enough to attend schools with well-stocked libraries also enjoyed classic titles like *The Adventures of Tintin* and *Archie*. When it came to Bangla comics though, many generations grew up cherishing the works of Pran Kumar Sharma's *Chacha Chaudhary* and Narayan Debnath's *Nonte Fonte*.

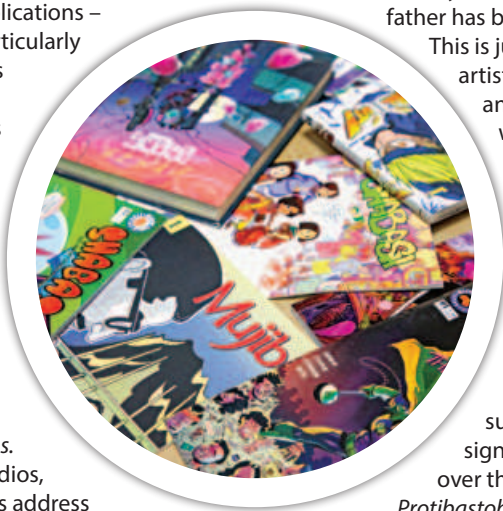
When it came to Bangladeshi comics, we typically turned to a variety of daily, weekly, and monthly publications – primarily newspapers and magazines. I particularly enjoyed reading *Unmad* and Sharier Khan's *Babu* among other favourites.

Today, the Bangladeshi comic scene has undergone a significant transformation. Modern Bangladeshi comics now feature varying art styles and captivating storytelling. As you explore these comics, you'll notice a distinct intention in the work of the artists and writers.

Using comics for socio-political commentary is not a new concept. *Unmad* has been doing this effectively for years. Recently, our very own superhero comics like *Captain Kathal*, *Shabash*, and *Ms. Shabash* – all created by Mighty Punch Studios, have continued this tradition. These comics address a range of societal and national issues, offering insightful commentary on contemporary problems.

Many local comics are now also creating their own shared universes. For instance, *Captain Kathal*, *Shabash*, and *Ms. Shabash* all exist within the same universe. While Marvel and DC have long mastered this concept, the emergence of such interconnected storytelling in Bangladeshi comics is an exciting development for local fans.

While discussing Mighty Punch Studios and its superhero universe, it's notable that the organisation is also exploring



animated adaptations of its superhero comics. Another exciting development in our local comic book industry is the introduction of our culture and history to younger generations. A prime example is the *Mujib* graphic novel by our country's Centre for Research and Information. This series vividly tells the story of our nation's founding father, making history accessible and engaging for many, especially the youth, through compelling visual storytelling. The *Mujib* graphic novel has also been translated into Japanese for its local audience.

Additionally, another graphic novel about our founding father has been created in the Japanese manga style.

This is just one instance of how our local comic artists and writers are increasingly inspired by and incorporating the manga style into their work.

Recently, *Source?* started publishing seasonal magazines featuring Bangladeshi manga, along with content on art, anime, and Japanese pop culture. *Source?* aims to deliver the authentic experience of Japanese manga to our local audience, using content from local comic artists.

Dhaka Comics has been a strong supporter of aspiring comic artists, gaining significant popularity in the local scene over the past few years. Since last year, their *Protibastob* comic has produced some of the finest work in our local comic industry, excelling in both visuals and storytelling.

All in all, it's a great time to be a Bangladeshi comic fan, especially if you're into local comics. It's safe to say that this industry has come a long way, and it has no intentions of slowing down anytime soon.

What remains to be seen is how far it can go and stretch the limits of our imagination.

Faisal is the In-Charge of Campus, Rising Stars, and Star Youth.

3 Bangladeshi comics worth your attention



SHESH RAATER SHOPNO

People often tell you not to judge a book by its cover. But it's impossible to do otherwise and not fall in love with the cover of *Shesh Raater Shopno* by Ayman Awsaf. This heartwarming collection of comic strips offers a delightful slice-of-life narrative, following the adventures of a young girl as she navigates her youth, surrounded by friends and family. If you want, you can also check out the comic on Ayman's Webtoon profile at "Double A Workshop".



CAPTAIN KATHAL

Captain Kathal is like the Bangladeshi Batman, but he's even cooler than his name suggests. With his own Alfred-like sidekick named Kuddus and a Kathal Jet, Captain Kathal stands out in the superhero world. What I love most is his creative use of "kathaler atha" to catch criminals. He tackles everyday crimes and injustices commonly seen on the streets of our country. The comic is well-written with local twists and boasts excellent character designs. At this point, I'm almost convinced that *Captain Kathal* is a clever propaganda tool to make us appreciate our national fruit.



PROTIBASTOB

Since 2022, Dhaka Comics has been publishing *Protibastob*, a captivating comic collection. Last year's edition centered around the theme of "dreams and memories," and the writers and artists truly did justice to this concept. The cover of *Protibastob* immediately drew me in, but the stories and artwork inside were what truly amazed me. I hope Dhaka Comics continues to release more editions of *Protibastob* in the coming years, as it would be a great service to comic book lovers and the broader comic book community in our country.

What it takes to become a comic artist IN BANGLADESH

ABIR HOSSAIN

In the bottomless pit of entertainment that we all seem to be sinking into, there are a few mediums that have not only stood the test of time but have also become the source of endless inspiration. In the last decade and even a few years beyond that, global box office numbers have been dominated by adaptations of comic book characters and their stories. And the numbers these adaptations have consistently attained over that period is a spectacle in and of itself.

While these trends have raised some questions regarding the state of pop culture and where it's headed, we must also be left to wonder how and why these narratives resonated with the audience on the scale that they did. Not everyone might have the same answer for it. However, there is no doubt that there is whimsy in the chaos of comic books. This same whimsy has also been prevalent in our own comics with some household titles being passed down and celebrated for generations. Inspired by the global impact of comics, coupled with a drive to tell our stories, the dream of becoming a comic artist has now become a reality in Bangladesh.

Fahim Anzoom Rumman, creator of *Nidranogor* and *Mofizuddin*, talks about how he started his journey. "I started right after I passed SSC. I got into *Rising Stars* as a cover artist but did not do any comics for them. Afterwards, when others saw my work, I was approached by Mighty Punch Studios. I worked on about five or six comics during my time there, mostly for the *Shabash* comic," he said.

"I'd say around the time when I was 14 or 15, I suddenly felt the urge to tell stories and make people laugh or gasp. I've been drawing ever since I was a baby but I never thought that I'd be pursuing comics," said Natasha Jahan, who also goes by Mohamaya Kandoo and is an HSC candidate from Siddheswari Girls College. "The very first step that I took was probably to get myself recognised by the comic community here. They encouraged me to send my work to newspapers which gave me the opportunity to draw comics for *Bangladesh Pratidin's* entertainment page," she added.

When asked about what he did to hone his skills, Fahim said that he practised drawing in large volumes since both the medium he works with (comic books and animation) requires a ton of drawings. This willingness to put in the effort and learn is vital for anyone who wishes to make it into the industry. After all, being a comic artist isn't merely constricted to just drawing. It also involves a lot of patience and discipline.

"It's the discipline that polishes your skills. A big part of being a cartoonist is just you sitting in front of your screen desk for hours like a shrimp just drawing panel after panel. You need to learn to create visually appealing characters, and backgrounds as well as be able to tell stories, script, and compose. You're not going to get there in one day," said Natasha.

"Be prepared to draw a lot. Comics come in various sizes. If one is not accustomed to drawing a lot in a given deadline, one will always have to draw short comics or remain in the anthology field. There is nothing wrong with that but if they want to draw their own series, they must be able to draw a lot," affirmed Fahim.

"Apart from drawing regularly, one should have both online and physical presence. Artists should showcase their work online so that they can grab the attention of publishers and newspapers. There are art groups on



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

Facebook like "Cartoon People" and "Akantis" where they can post their work. Publishers could come across their work and even hire them," said Junaid Iqbal Ishmam, animator and illustrator at Mighty Punch Studios and game artist at Red Thorn Interactive. "Throughout the year, there are festivals, comic cons, exhibitions, and workshops arranged by different organisations. One should participate and show up to these programmes, and meet artists and publishers who are in the comic book publishing industry. This helps to know and get the opportunity to work with a lot of people."

The current comic community has fostered an environment that not only compels young artists to learn and grow on their own accord but also gives them the platform to attain professional experience. This ability to grant them such an opportunity has emerged due to the vast array of possibilities that the scene has been able to create.

"This industry is still growing. I am not going to say there are a lot of opportunities but there are plenty. Publishers understand the demand for comics. So, they are hiring comic book artists for different projects. They are also welcoming artists to publish their own stories," added Junaid. "Publishers like Dhaka Comics are welcoming and arranging opportunities every year for young artists to

publish their comics. The demand for comics in Boi Mela is also creating more avenues for comic book artists to work with different publications."

"Now is a great time for getting into publishing comics. Multiple outlets ask for submissions throughout the year such as Dhaka Comics. There is also Cartoon People who recently started drawing their own original comics. But that may be considered big leagues by people who are just starting out," said Fahim. "In which case a better outlet would be newspapers or a small-time publisher. Of course, there is nothing wrong with going for Dhaka Comics on the first go, but be ready for criticism, changes, or even outright rejection."

The current state of the comic book industry is inspiring, to say the least. With comic artists and writers given a wide array of opportunities, it is no wonder that a career as a comic book artist appears to be so enticing. And as a nation who have revelled in telling stories, it only seems natural that the youth is drawn to a medium that enables them to do just that. As consumers of stories, it is up to us to ensure that their stories are propelled to even greater heights and that passion is celebrated.

Abir Hossain is a sub-editor at Campus and Rising Stars.

Rethinking our approach to

SCHOOL ACADEMICS

Dr Shivananda talks about effective teaching and learning strategies

AMRIN TASNIM RAFA

In February 2024, the British Council organised the “Schools Now!” conference in Cape Town, South Africa. As the sole educator from Bangladesh to present a paper at the conference, Dr Shivananda CS, principal of DPS STS school, presented his paper titled “Demystifying Teacher Effectiveness”.

Campus sat down with Dr Shivananda to learn more about the paper and his expert insight on recent educational trends.

“The country has ambitious plans for the education sector,” said Dr Shivananda. “The Education Ministry has made many reforms and is bringing in a modular-based education system where children learn credit-based skills and refining assessment by moving away from traditional rote learning to a skill-based and capability-based education system. I am specifically happy about the module on physical and mental health, which is most important.”

“This is good to know because modern society and work culture demand people with communication, critical thinking, adaptability, and creative skills,” he added.

Dr Shivananda said that he is happy with the education ministry for reforming assessment methods to continuous evaluation. However, he also pointed out that if teachers are not properly trained, these reforms will not be effective.

“Similar efforts were made in 2009 in India,” he said. “The government wanted to bring in a continuous and comprehensive evaluation. But they had to roll it back after eight years because teachers were not fully ready and fully trained.”

“In the last four years, my team and I developed rubrics to assess whether or not learning is happening in a class,” Dr Shivananda continued. “My research analyses the use of such rubrics to assess the effectiveness of teachers and also finds out the effect of training such teachers.”

Dr Shivananda wants to recognise the merits of children as the younger generation is more open-minded and open to learning, and the education policies should help them



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

develop this trait.

“The best way to prepare them is to allow them to be quick learners, quick adaptors, and open to change with various case studies, various modes of learning and also allow change to take over,” Dr Shivananda said. “Many parents say that schools should not focus on co-curricular activities, they should focus more on academics. This is where they miss the point that if your child is not a good communicator and critical thinker, he or she may not survive. So, the government, parents, and schools should be open-minded and allow change.”

“I’m happy that most young people are open to change

and understand the importance of communication,” he added. “However, they should also be away from influences which do not determine their true nature, and which focus on short-term results. I see that they are easily influenced to make decisions and though they assume that they are free from all such influences and completely independent, they are not.”

In his concluding remarks, Dr Shivananda said, “I would ask you to be proud of yourself and be you. Don’t be influenced by others. You should be your own, and think and act as per your personal preferences, not by that of others.”



3 things all teachers should know

ENCOURAGE STUDYING AS A HABIT

If a student spends at least 15-20 minutes going over what they have learned for the day, that brief time can make an enormous difference down the road in terms of retaining what is taught inside classrooms. Not only that, when exam seasons arrive, students are prepared to sit down and study for longer stretches because they already have an idea of what they are studying.

USE ACTIVE LEARNING PROCESSES TO TEACH

Learning is a process that can benefit greatly from different inputs. If a student is reading something out loud, highlighting the important bits, and especially writing them down, they will fare much better than the student who is simply reading out the notes. Using more sensory inputs for learning increases retention.

HAVE THE RIGHT ATTITUDE

Students need to know that they can come to their teacher for help if they are having a hard time with their subject matter, which requires a certain amount of friendliness from the teacher’s side.

In the absence of a light source

A.M. FAHAD

Grief is a lonely river
 Like a fisherman's song with an empty net
 Like a father walking home with empty hands
 Like a mother's existence
 Moonlight under a bamboo forest
 Birdsong or a death poem
 Today, I am an unwritten song
 A longing, a daydream, a hope
 Tomorrow, I will be the dust
 You were birthed from
 When the sun reflects off the floor tile
 There is warmth to be found at the base
 Lean on the sink, it's fragile, but it's there
 Tie together all the broken fragments piece by piece
 Cover your skin with patchwork and paint
 Quilted heliotrope- face the sun-
 Tilted posture and wilted spine
 Fat and slow cumulonimbus clouds
 Gaze at you from a distance- moving
 So inconspicuously, it's hard to see outside when
 You're so up close to the vanishing points of your vertices
 A-three-point perspective of all the lives
 You have dreamed of living but instead found yourself
 Sprawled down on the bathroom floor on a warm Thursday evening
 I promise you this
 When you stop clawing your eyes out
 You will find what you are looking for
 Even when and, alliteration for emphasis,
 Especially when
 The sun above your head is unkind
 You will start to see
 Beyond the absence of it
 In the absence of a light source
 With our sticks and rocks
 We will build a make-shift version of it
 That works just finely enough
 For us to wait out the storm outside



ILLUSTRATION: **ABIR HOSSAIN**

A Dead River is

ALL I WANT

ADRITA ZAIMA ISLAM

You know those instances when we start off in the wide, turbulent currents of a river making its way downstream? Something about them makes the tiny hairs on the back of my neck stand perpendicularly. Alert, electrified. Waiting to grasp onto a rare rock, I find myself panting, falling up and down, trying to stay afloat, pushed along in the intensity of the water's movements. I lay thirsting for the moment when the

river will dry up under the scrutiny of the tropical sun, wanting to appease the parchedness of my throat in the tiny rivulets and isolated pools that inevitably form beneath the death of the river. I want to feast upon the corpse of the river. I want you to taste every last tasteless drop on the groaning riverbed. All I desire for, is to be dragged away by the protruding bones of my ankles so I can see you in the beads of condensation trickling its way down the limbs of the screaming, crimson foliage.

HOUSE OF CARDS

WAZIHA AZIZ

Welcome, weary traveler! To my humble abode.
 Come, come. I'll show you how these cards are angled around the hollow of each room.
 Of course, to enter my house is a promise not to make yourself at home. I'll serve you airy tea at my airy table and have our airy conversation in this airy room before you take your airy leave.
 Fear not, these cards are arranged to keep the air inside.
 Pray, stay. If anything I worship the delay,
 I'm sorry. But solitude makes a woman seek God in most peculiar places.
 Tell me, who have you left? Who are you going to? Who has helped hold up your home?
 Maybe there is no answer. Maybe I will hand you a piece of me to take with you as you leave. Maybe Your exiting exhale will sustain my house of cards
 Or maybe cause collapse.



ILLUSTRATION: **SYEDA AFRIN TARANNUM**

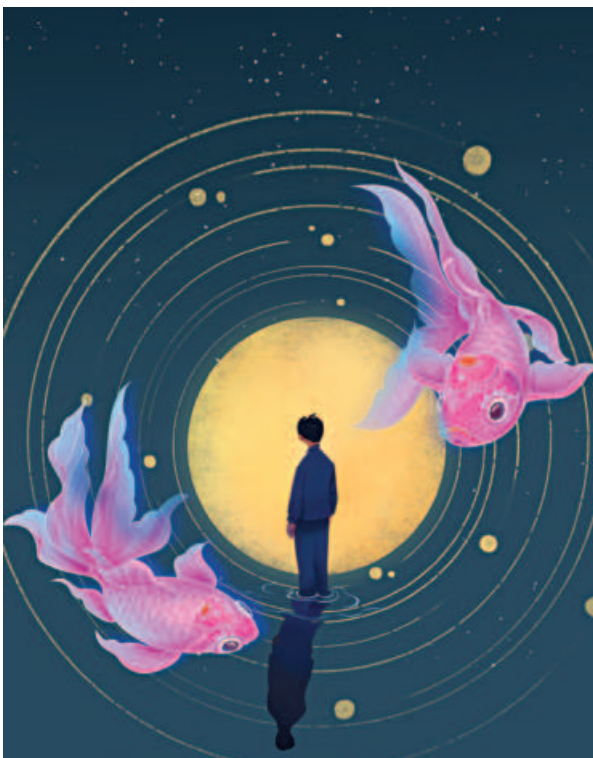


ILLUSTRATION: **FATIMA JAHAN ENA**



EXPLAINED

Panda diplomacy

PHOTO: REUTERS

How some of the laziest animals in the world became so important in international relations

AMRIN TASNIM RAFA

No International Relations degree, no Model United Nations (MUN) experience. And yet, these black and white bears are arguably some of the best diplomats the world has ever seen.

And how exactly did that come to be?

By a stroke of geographical good luck, the entire land territory of pandas' natural habitat falls within China's borders. It is quite rare for one country to contain an entire species within its territory. China utilised the fact that they have something that every country wants, but no other country has – a bamboo-eating, endearingly lazy, and insanely fluffy animal – to its full political and economic advantage.

A threatened species, a large percentage of the panda population lives under human care in captive breeding programmes in zoos and nature reserves in China. The country's large-scale investment into conservation efforts has proven to be very successful, as the panda numbers have increased. In 2021, China announced that giant pandas are no longer endangered. China deserves a lot, if not all, of credit here; their efforts in saving the giant panda are surely praiseworthy.

What is panda diplomacy?

Panda diplomacy is the phenomenon where China sends pandas to different countries as tokens of goodwill and friendship with the countries. Later, if they want to exert political pressure or express displeasure with a country's actions, they take the panda away.

Giving away pandas is not a new practice. China has been sending pandas as diplomatic gifts since as long ago as the Tang dynasty (618-907 CE). However, the country eventually shifted to long-term loans instead of gifts after pandas were declared endangered in 1984.

The host countries pay a fee of a million US dollars per panda per year, plus an additional "cub tax" of at least \$200,000 for any baby pandas born in the host country. This money is in turn invested in panda conservation efforts back home. As per the deal, the cubs should also be returned to China before their fourth birthday.

China gains multiple benefits from their giant cuddly diplomats.

Collaborating to take care of the pandas promotes mutual trust between the countries. The citizens' fondness for the bears allows for greater dialogue between the governments. The worldwide efforts boost more widespread research and development in panda conservation. China also earns a sweet amount of money which saves out-of-pocket investment into their own comprehensive conservation efforts.

Last but not least, it helps increase China's "soft power". Pandas are friendly, cuddly, lazy, and culturally iconic. Their presence can make China and its culture to also seem friendly, which helps bring in foreign money by attracting tourists.

Who has the pandas, and why?

Today, 22 countries have about 70 pandas loaned to them. Panda diplomacy experts have observed that China has a trade deal or relationship with each of these countries, increasing its own economic power.

The modern era of panda diplomacy began in 1972 when U.S. President Richard Nixon travelled to China to begin normalising relations with the country. The trip, in which First Lady Pat Nixon expressed her love for the fluffy bears, opened up diplomatic and trade relations between the two countries. Soon, the National Zoo in Washington DC received Ling Ling and Hsing Hsing, two giant pandas.

The list of countries with pandas is long, but each has the same story of a useful trade relationship. After the ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement was signed, there was a rush to send over the cuddly diplomats to Singapore and Malaysia and to give Thailand an extension on keeping the pandas it already had.

Which zoo received the pandas in the United Kingdom is very interesting. Instead of the London Zoo, as you would expect with its higher number of tourists and more resources, it is the Edinburgh Zoo in Scotland. According to trade deals worth four billion dollars, Scotland exports salmon and Land Rovers to China.

When is a panda taken away?

It is part of the agreement between the countries that panda cubs born in the host countries will have to be returned to China before their fourth birthday. A famous example of such a cub sendaway is the 2017 return of US-born Bao Bao from the National Zoo in Washington D.C.

Not all pandas are returned under friendly conditions, however. If your country signs a deal with China to get a panda, but its actions displease China in the waiting period, there's a chance you may not get to see the panda.

In 2012, China made a deal with Malaysia to loan a pair of pandas to the Kuala Lumpur Zoo in April 2014. Then, a Malaysian Airlines flight consisting of 152 Chinese nationals went missing, and the public felt that the Malaysian government could have done more to look for the missing plane and its passengers. China expressed its displeasure by delaying sending the pandas by a month.

Amrin Tasnim Rafa is a sub-editor at Campus, Star Youth, and Rising Stars.

Some concepts explored in this article

DIPLOMACY

The profession or activity by a country's representatives to maintain international relationships abroad.

GEOPOLITICS

The study of how geographical location affects politics and relationships between countries.

SOFT POWER

The ability to influence choices and preferences through cultural reputation and appeal.

CONSERVATION

The careful protection or preservation of something, in this case, nature and the earth's biodiversity such as plants and animals at risk of being extinct.

CAPTIVE BREEDING

The act of maintaining the population of plants or animals in environments controlled by humans.

