



# SHANUM SARKAR

## on winning Silver in the International Psychology Olympiad

PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

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The International Psychology Olympiad is an annual competition for highschool students interested in the fields of psychology and mental health. Shanum Sarkar graduated from Bangladesh International Tutorial in 2024 and went on to win a Silver for Bangladesh in the International Psychology Olympiad (IPsyO) this past August. With the deadline for registering for IPsyO 2025 fast approaching, I sat down with Shanum to discuss their journey of securing this achievement on the world stage.

#### How did your interest in psychology begin?

My interest in psychology, and mental health more broadly, started when I noticed that my close friends and family were struggling with mental health issues. Mental health definitely does not get the attention that it needs to in Bangladesh, and it is stigmatised to a large extent. I found that odd and disheartening, particularly because I could see how that stigmatisation created hurdles for my close ones in receiving the appropriate help they needed. I wanted to be able to address the issues that lie with discussing and tackling mental health issues in Bangladesh in the future, and that motivated me to start studying the field.

#### Can you detail the process you underwent for participating in the olympiad and expand a bit on the format of it?

IPsyO is much more accessible than other olympiads because there are no qualifying regional or national rounds, and the international round is free to sign-up for. In 2025, IPsyO will be introducing a qualification round to precede the final round. This year's exam had three different types of questions. There were eighty objective questions, three short-answer questions, and one application question. The content focused on six main areas: introduction to

psychology and scientific inquiry, biological bases of behaviour, cognition, development and learning, social and personality psychology, and mental and physical health.

#### How did you go about preparing for the olympiad?

I had Psychology as a subject during my A levels. A lot of the content I learned for my exams built up and strengthened my base and the knowledge I carried from my A level experience helped me easily grasp a lot of the concepts I had to learn while preparing for the olympiad. The olympiad organisation does have available course resources. However, those resources are behind a paywall so I opted to not use them. Besides the IPsyO materials, the olympiad organisation recommends reading *Psychology* by David G Myers and *Psychology: A Concise Introduction* by Richard A Griggs for general psychology and *Research Methods in Psychology: Evaluating a World of Information* by Beth Morling and *Research Methods in Psychology* by John J Shaughnessy for psychological research methods. These are available online.

#### What was your experience of participating in IPsyO like?

The International Psychology Olympiad really stands out from other olympiads because the event has a new theme each year and all of the questions revolve around said theme. This year, the olympiad focused on the use of Artificial Intelligence to better understand and identify mental health challenges and to devise strategies to tackle these challenges as a public health problem. I feel like the olympiad's focus on real-world applications allowed me to embrace the multifaceted practicalities of psychology and broadened my understanding of the field, something that I am grateful for. As a student who hopes to study psychology for my undergraduate degree, preparing for and participating in the olympiad have been massively helpful in solidifying my interest and expanding my

knowledge base.

#### What advice would you give to students who wish to participate in the upcoming IPsyO?

I would say, start preparing early. There is a massive amount of content to learn, much more content than A levels/ or anything a high school will ever cover. Try to get your hands on whatever resources you can find. Look thoroughly through the IPsyO syllabus provided on their official website and make sure to build an understanding of each of the topics listed.

There should be some sample papers available on their website. I would recommend you time yourself while taking the practice test since there will be a significant time crunch during the actual olympiad. The olympiad has a practical application question worth forty points so I would suggest delving into that aspect of psychology as much as you can.

An important thing to remember is that even if you don't end up winning anything, just know that you tried your best and that is enough. No medal will ever replace the learning experience you will gain. Preparing for an olympiad is no easy feat and it requires years of working hard behind it to be able to succeed. So, you should be proud of yourself regardless of whether you achieve something or not.

#### Very few people from Bangladesh are currently participating in IPsyO. What do you think can be done to change that?

I think it is necessary for IPsyO to increase outreach by connecting to different schools and other educational organisations to encourage more students to participate. Psychology is a vastly interesting field and I believe Bangladeshi highschool students will have a lot to gain by participating in the olympiad.

*Zaima is barely a functioning student these days. Reach out to them at zaima2004adrita@gmail.com*