

## INTERVIEWS

# MEET THE COSPLAYERS WHO REPRESENTED BANGLADESH IN JAPAN



PHOTO: COSPLAY INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION ASSOCIATION

### AYAAN SHAMS SIDDIQUEE

In Bangladesh, recognition is one of the most pressing problems that cosplayers face. From newcomers to seasoned veterans, everyone has suffered from a dearth of appreciation and acknowledgement from people outside of their own community. Consequently, international exposure has been few and far between, despite many cosplayers creating outfits and choreographies worthy of global recognition.

That is why it was such a milestone when two Bangladeshi cosplayers, Arika Ahsan and Khushnud Mahzabin, who go by the aliases “Akira Cozer” and “Shionchawn Cosplays” respectively, were selected to represent our country at the Pop Culture Hiroshima festival in Japan. Held from October 17 to 19, the event gave them a chance to experience the cosplay community in Japan while showcasing their own creativity to fans from around the world.

The journey to the global stage began way back in 2018 for Akira, when she started out as a casual hobbyist who loved making her own costumes. “I was a creative kid, so it made sense to challenge myself by trying to make my own costumes,” she reminisces. It wasn’t long until that creative outlet took a competitive turn.

Shion, on the other hand, still describes herself as a casual cosplayer. “I didn’t really intend to become a cosplayer,” she says. “But the support and enthusiasm I got from my friends and even complete strangers pushed me towards it. It’s still a hobby for me, but I always give my 100 percent. That’s how I show respect to the *mangaka*.”

Naturally, I was curious to know how a serious, competitive cosplayer and a casual one not only teamed up together, but also won a ticket to the big stage. As it turns out, the two didn’t start out as close friends, but became teammates thanks to their shared love for anime and craftsmanship.

“Akira had once mentioned a duo look she wanted to try out, so I watched the anime and loved the idea,” Shion recalls. “We had great chemistry because our skills complemented each other well. She’s good with foam work, and I love working on gowns. It just worked out perfectly.”

Their teamwork would eventually pay off at the Nihon Jai competition held in August, where they cosplayed as Tenjou Utena and Himemiya Anthy from *Revolutionary Girl Utena*, a classic 90s shoujo anime. Akira, recalling how she

felt back then, shares, “Since the winners of this competition would represent Bangladesh in the Pop Culture Hiroshima event, we were intimidated at first by the sheer number of amazing cosplayers who were participating. But we decided that regardless of the outcome, we would leave our hearts on the stage and make it an experience to remember.”

As fate would have it, the duo came out on top as the champions. While a large part of their victory was due to the intricate costumes they made from scratch, their on-stage performance also played a pivotal role in helping them stand out from the crowd.



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Shion, who cosplayed as Anthy, said the role appealed to both her creative and technical sides. “I loved the gown and the part where Anthy pulls a sword from her chest,” she says. “I made it a point to figure out how to recreate that seemingly impossible scene under the bright lights.”

“The following three months leading up to the main festival were equal parts thrilling and nerve-wracking,” says Shion. “We worked non-stop since this was Bangladesh’s first time participating in Pop Culture Hiroshima. The pressure to make a strong first impression was a big driving force.”

When they finally reached Hiroshima, the nerves seemed to melt away significantly, all thanks to the people

they met during their time in Japan. As Akira puts it, “The international cosplay community, for starters, was incredibly welcoming. Many of them even gave us little gifts as memorabilia.”

She continues, “The event organisers also made us feel included every step of the way. Even strangers we came across on the streets helped us with directions, translating menus, and even recommending food that didn’t contain haram items like pork.”

The actual event had multiple parts to it. Describing the itinerary at a glance, Shion says, “October 17 was rehearsal day. On October 18, there was a parade through the streets of Hiroshima where every cosplayer was in costume, interacting with the locals. Once that was over, seven out of the fourteen countries performed their on-stage choreography later in the day. October 19 started with a brief tour around some traditional local spots before the stage performances for the remaining countries — including us — commenced.”

As for their choice of costumes, the duo chose two different sets of costumes. During the parade, Akira and Shion donned the outfits of Inuyasha and Kagome, respectively, from the anime *Inuyasha*. For the stage show, they reused their costumes from the Nihon Jai event, choosing to focus on their performance and the overall production quality. Despite the need for perfection, both cosplayers took the bold decision of making nearly everything from scratch.

“Our outfits, accessories, and stage props were all made by hand over a very busy and hectic period of time,” Shion shares. “Only our swords were 3D printed and modified according to our needs.”

Being the first ones from the Bangladeshi cosplaying community to carry the flag on international lands comes with its fair share of emotions. Akira, in particular, hopes that their participation will go on to inspire more opportunities for fellow cosplayers in the foreseeable future.

“We have so many talented people here who just need a fair chance, and it’s about time the rest of the world recognised our skills,” she says. “If given the right support, we can represent Bangladesh in an overwhelmingly positive light like never before.”

*Ayaan immerses himself in dinosaur comics and poorly-written manga. Recommend your least favourite reads at ayaan.shams@gmail.com*