

Online debating: The silver bullet of inclusivity and opportunity

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Co-ordinated social media celebrations fueled by the collective adrenaline rush that comes with an international victory - are scenes spotted during the aftermath of a breathtaking performance by our cricket team tigers. With frightening consistency, these scenes are now replicated within the ever-growing English debate community of Bangladesh. Over the years, Bangladeshi debaters have won major trophies such as the United Asian Debating Championship, the Asian British Parliamentary Debating Championship, the Austral-Asians University Debating Championship, The Worlds Universities Debating Championship and most recently the invite-only Hobart & William Smith Colleges Round Robin which is a battle of all the global champions!

The Bangladesh Debating Council (BDC) is a student-led non-profit organization that has been working to spread English language debating across the nation since 2005. Despite several outreach programmes, the debate has predominantly been centralised to the Dhaka circuit, as most of the prominent debaters are stationed in Dhaka, and it's quite difficult to juggle work and academic obligations to travel across the country to get up close with prospective debaters nationally. Although substantial progress has been made through sustained efforts from dedicated debaters, the COVID-induced world of virtual debating turned out to be a gamechanger, leading record numbers of students to get involved in debate owing to increased access. Asif Mehedi Adi, Chair of BDC said, "There is no doubt that teams outside Dhaka never lacked talent - all they needed was a bit more exposure, training and practice and that's exactly what online debating gave them." Tabassum Khan Prithi, Vice-Chair of BDC said, "In our flagship tournaments BDC Pre-Worlds & BDC Fempowerment, we had participants from different parts of Bangladesh and we are glad that we could take English debate to divisions like Chattogram, Sylhet, Rangpur, Khulna, Rajshahi, etc. At Pre-worlds this year, we saw a team from Chattogram

winning the tournament which made us jump and cry out of joy." Pre-world's is the most important school tournament in Bangladesh, being one of the key qualifiers for choosing the Bangladesh National School Level Debating team. For the first time in its 17 years of history, an out-of-Dhaka school won it. Prithi added, "Moments like these remind us that it's our job as council or organisers to ensure equal access for everyone, and establish a level playing field. Online debate tournaments showed us the potential that's out there and we can't wait to implement the same offline when the world heals."

When we zoom out of the national debating scene, another silver lining can be spotted where Bangladeshi debaters now have easier access to international

money. More international judges and debaters started becoming familiar with us and recognized our abilities." Even in terms of hosting international events, the debaters from Institute of Business Administration hosted perhaps the most competitive debate of the year "IBA Nations League", where the crème de la crème debaters of the world represented their nations, leading to an intense clash of verbal repartee. Team Bangladesh rose to the top winning the championship, beating some of the best debaters from across the globe.

For both students outside Dhaka and for the overall Bangladeshi debating circuit - the digital revolution in debating goes on to prove that without geographical barriers, unexposed talents can thrive and reach newer heights.



tournaments, without constantly worrying about filling up piles of paperwork and spending heaps of money to strive for international glory. Asif said, "Going to international tournaments with a Bangladeshi passport was the biggest challenge I have come across in my debating career. The visa hassle and managing finance make you physically and emotionally exhausted." The bureaucratic and logistical constraints would exert an unfair pressure on debaters to make something out of the debate trips, in fear of wasting the copious amounts of money spent to afford these trips. Asif added, "With online tournaments, it felt nice to be able to do international tournaments without the constant worry of visa or

One can hope that the world will soon go back to normal, and when that happens, it will be interesting to see how the council and broader organizers are continuing to stay inclusive. Fardeen Ameen, Director of BDC said, "Generations of debaters have worked tirelessly to create a safe space, where every weekend, students can gather, learn and speak about topics that convention education won't approach. The vision is to ensure this culture stays alive on the biggest scale possible. Bangladesh Debate has made incredible strides, but we believe the best is still yet to come."

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