



ARE YOU TAKING THINGS PERSONALLY?

PG 3

NEW GAME OR EXIT?

PG 7



THE ONLINE SEMESTER REVIEW



ILLUSTRATION: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

EDITORIAL

It's happened again, folks. The news cycle, on a break from usual dourness, has taken a turn for the morbid. A slew of horrible things have taken place at once, at home, around the world, and in our collective consciousness. Among those with the luxury to do so, many have simply switched off, constructing a bubble of sensory insulation around them. In all honesty, who can blame them?

The news is there to point out the problems, the crimes and injustices in our society so we can be more aware. It's problem oriented. But in problem infested societies such as ours, they do often take a turn for the unbearable. The antidote, or rather, the "therapeutic" to this torturous existence may just exist in a shift of approach. Lately, I've found myself seeking out the solution oriented approach in my thinking, my perception of society, and even my consumption of content. I'm grateful for the existence of these ideas, but I do wish solutions, as opposed to problems, occupied my news feed and found viral popularity more often. It wouldn't alter reality, but it would definitely make it more palatable. Who could say no to that?

-- Azmin Azran, Sub-editor, SHOUT



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ALBUM REVIEW



THE ASCENSION OF SUFJAN STEVENS

ADHORA AHMED

For a uniquely devastating year, new music is one of the very rare good things 2020 has to offer. On September 25, prolific singer-songwriter Sufjan Stevens released *The Ascension*, his latest solo studio album under Asthmatic Kitty Records. This is Stevens' second release this year, the first being *Aporia*, a collaboration with his stepfather Lowell Brams.

The Ascension is probably Stevens' rawest work yet. The lyrics delve deep into despair and anger over the chaos that rules over the world at present, subject matters previously unexplored in the songwriter's repertoire. Songs of disillusionment and confusion alternate with those of innocent love, as though Stevens is trying to hold onto the rare instances of purity in an increasingly dismal world. But, in a time like this, even love is precarious. Sounds pretty much like 2020.

The album marks a departure from the minimalistic vulnerability of his 2015 critic and fan favourite *Carrie and Lowell*. Instead, the grandiose electronica is more reminiscent of *The Age of Adz*, which came out in 2010. Stevens' ethereal voice floats above layers of synths and insistent beats as he tries to figure out his way through this mess.

Lyricaly, we meet a different Sufjan. Throughout the album, he looks at his country through a deeply critical lens, far from the romantic and intimate gaze he bestowed upon nooks and crannies of ru-

ral America in albums like *Michigan* and *Illinois*. Stevens, now in his forties, wants to shed the sentimental naïveté from his earlier works, because the ugliness of the society he is a part of is too glaring to ignore.

Overall, *The Ascension* is quite compelling. It begins with the solid opener "Make Me an Offer I Cannot Refuse", where the singer pleads to God for deliverance, giving a feel of what's to come. "Video Game" is probably the catchiest song off the album, thanks to its 80s-inspired synths. Other notable tracks include "Tell Me You Love Me", "Death Star" and "Sugar". But, the best is saved for the last. "America", the final and longest track of the album, achieves everything Stevens wants to say in this album, accompanied by a swirling symphony. It announces his loss of faith in the state of things, but the shimmering synths at the end of the long, ominous outro signifies that there's still hope.

Although it isn't my favourite Sufjan Stevens album (it's *Carrie and Lowell*), *The Ascension* does not disappoint. My only complaint is that "My Rajneesh", the B-side to "America", should have been included. Otherwise, *The Ascension* is definitely worth a second listen, and maybe more.

Adhora Ahmed tries to make her two cats befriend each other, but in vain. Tell her to give up at adhora.ahmed@gmail.com



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Are you taking things personally?

H. RAINAK KHAN REAL

As I casually scrolled through my Facebook newsfeed, a status from a close friend of mine caught my attention: *It feels awful to be left out.*

My thoughts immediately centred on his exclusion from our presentation group, which was actually done by the course teacher to ensure random grouping of members. Thinking that his post was directed towards us, I promptly texted him explaining the whole scenario. But he was offline. As I anxiously awaited his response, I kept checking my inbox frequently and this went on for quite some time until finally I decided to call him to clear the misunderstanding. To be honest, I felt relieved and a bit idiotic after hearing that the post was directed towards his cousins who went on a trip without him.

I realized that I got worked up for nothing regarding a post that had nothing to do with me.

As human beings, we have little control over how other people view us, instead we are in full control of how we view ourselves and how we respond to their views. In social media, we tend to judge and react to issues which don't concern us in the first place. As we start taking these personally, we feel offended, anxious, ignored or even hurt, which affects our mental peace and makes us unhappy.

WHY DO WE TAKE THINGS PERSONALLY?

Instead of thinking of things rationally, we tend to focus on what serves our ego.

In psychology, the term is personalisation, - an irrational way of thinking in which an individual believes that what others say or do is directed towards them. When this hap-



ILLUSTRATION: NOOR US SAFA ANIK

pens, our focus shifts from "we" to "me". We view ourselves as the centre of the world, and, therefore, responsible for how an event went down, especially if it was a negative

one. This leads to self-blaming, even though we weren't responsible for the event in question. Personalisation may also lead to viewing oneself as unworthy and may result in inducing an inferiority complex.

THEN, HOW DO WE STOP?

Shifting the focus from "me" to "we" gives us the window to think rationally. And when we gain a clear perspective of both sides of a story, we can stop feeling offended or responsible regarding how an event went down. This also precludes the possibility of self-blaming.

Ask yourself the question, "Is it really about me?" If the answer is no, we should stop meddling with the matter immediately. If the answer is yes, then we have to speak up and state clearly how we feel. This will prompt the other person to consider our feelings and take action accordingly.

We can also counter the cognitive distortion by acknowledging the fact that we can't control what other people think about us. After all, we are not the centre of everyone's world.

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The author has utmost admiration for anime villains. Mail him about your favourite ones at rainakghanreal@gmail.com

Making it easier. *Period.*

AYSHA ZAHEEN

Periods are, for most of us, a tough business. Almost everyone has their own ways of dealing with this monthly predicament. The ways may vary, but are usually highly adaptable.

One of the most common indulgences that helps many with the lingering discomfort is gorging on comfort foods. The sense of familiarity and warmth that one gets from their favourite food is undeniable. However, most comfort foods are junks, and contain high amounts of sugar or fat.

Whilst sugar intake definitely causes momentary bliss, giving into such cravings can cause imbalance in natural blood sugar levels. This disruption very often leads to mood swings and tension in our bodies. Whilst a high level of progesterone right before periods justify the cravings, a healthier diet has proved more efficient when it comes to providing the body the strength to cope with the continual hormonal imbalance (food rich in iron, water-rich fruits, green-leafy vegetables, ginger, dark chocolate).

Many have also reported needing space in order to cope with the discomfort. Usually during the earlier days of our menstrual cycle, our estrogen and progesterone levels are at their lowest, which equates to lower energy. Thus, many enjoy watching movies, especially those that



provide a dose of nostalgia, in solitary. Many have also expressed their tendency to sleep a tad more than usual during the earlier days of their menstrual cycle, therefore slightly compensating for the lack of energy. Thus, it's wrong for us to assume we are merely being lazy when we are actually operating on little energy.

The other very sought-out option is hot water-bags. During periods, prostaglandins help the shedding of uterus linings by contracting the uterus. Strong

contraction in combination with less blood flow causes a decrease in oxygen supply to the muscle tissue. Heating pads help ease the muscle tension and open up the blood vessels, promoting blood flow and eventually remedying the pain. Avoiding caffeine, carbonated drinks, and fried food sets a strong precedent against impending menstrual cramps or bodily discomforts.

Many resort to yoga to help ease the aforementioned uterine tensions. The

easiest exercise to do is the child's pose. With knees on the floor we fold forward, extending our arms and bending down as far as possible. Another one that is helpful is the reclined bound angle pose. We lie on our backs and draw our heels toward our pelvis, letting our knees fall to the sides as we press the soles of our feet together. We can place our hands either on our belly or alongside our body as our palms face above. We place a cushion or pillow behind our sacrum, before slowly lowering upon it.

These are a variety of ways one can help ease their menstrual distresses. All of these are healthy and entail no side-effects, thus can be tried out at one's convenience.

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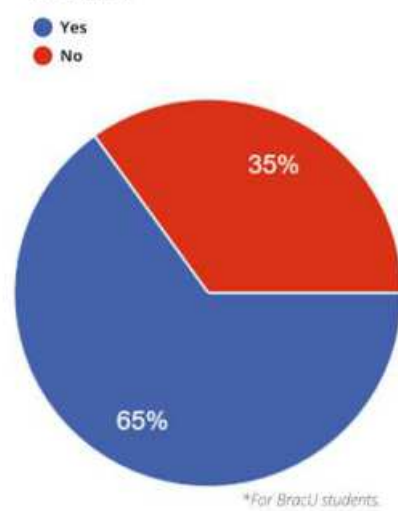
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Aysha thinks good things take time, at least a year and a half. Tell her all about how your good things took time, too, at zaheenaysha10@gmail.com

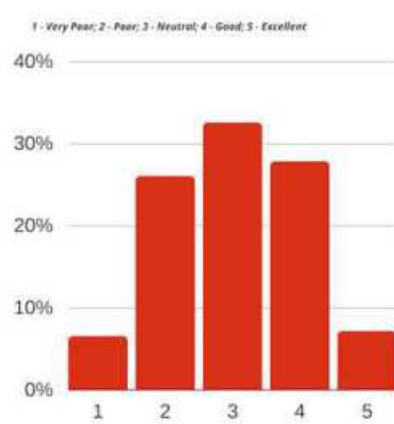
THE ONLINE SEMESTER REVIEW

Majority of survey respondents -- public college and university students -- talk about a troublesome online learning experience

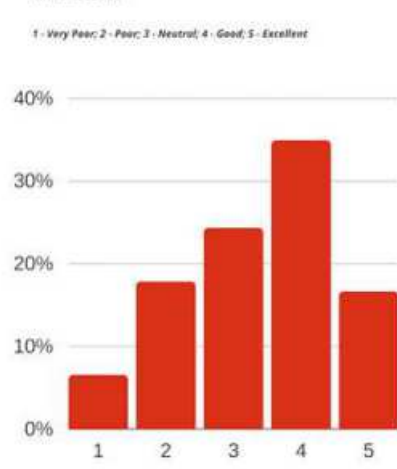
Do you think recorded lectures are more effective for online teaching compared to live classes?*



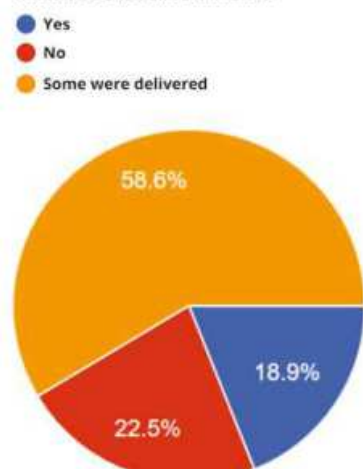
On a scale of 1 to 5, how would you rate the quality of your live classes (factors to be considered here include audio-visual quality, instructor's ability to deliver the lecture, the content covered, and so on).



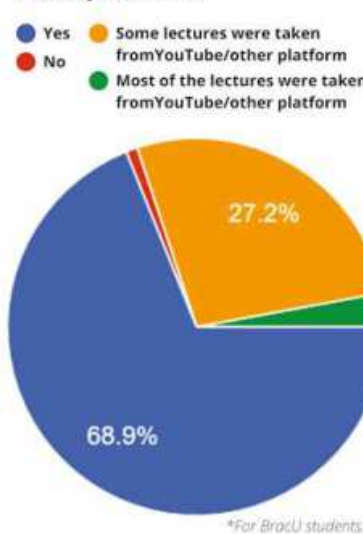
On a scale of 1 to 5, how would you rate the cooperation you got from your course instructors?



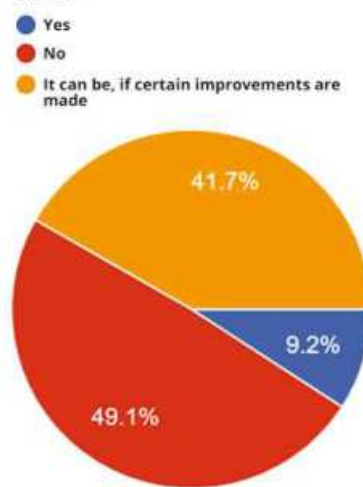
Do you think your university was able to deliver on its academic promises prior to the start of the online semester?



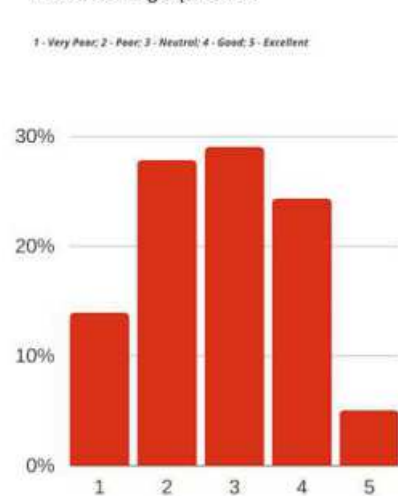
Were the recorded lectures made by your university instructors?*



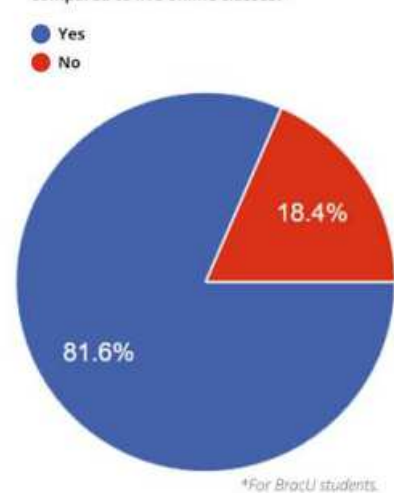
Do you think that an online semester can actually be an alternative to on-campus classes?



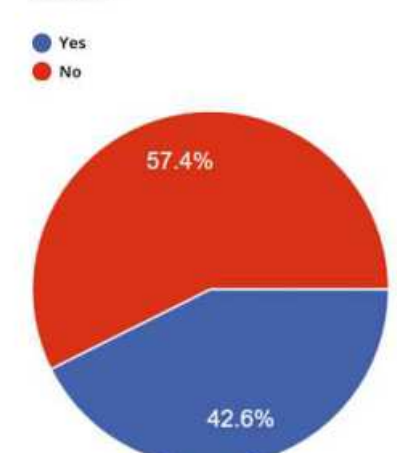
On a scale of 1 to 5, how would you rate the overall learning experience?



Do you think using an EdTech/MOOC platform like BuX allowed for a much smoother online learning experience, compared to live online classes?*



Did your instructor(s) pressurize you to use a means of communication which was unavailable to you during the online semester?



Did you try to cheat/plagiarize in any of your quiz/test/exam/assignment?

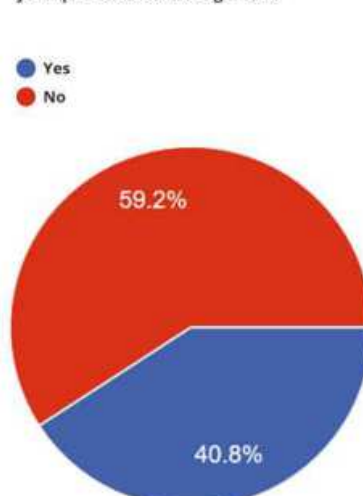


PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

FAISAL BIN IQBAL

When on-campus academic activities were brought to a halt back in March, no one knew how long we would have to wait for things to go back to normal. Assuming the worst case scenario, education institutes all over the world took the decision to move classes online, where they would interact with their students through virtual meeting rooms, over platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet and Microsoft Teams, and carry on with their lessons accordingly.

UNCHARTED WATERS

Bangladesh was no different to this novel idea. Soon enough, we too saw our universities -- both public and private -- move their academic activities online. But this was uncharted waters for most of these institutions, and their instructors, who would have to conduct these classes. While some colleges and universities made a praiseworthy effort to train and educate their faculty on how to approach online learning properly, others failed to establish a proper chain of command and communication and instead, had their faculty conduct classes with little to no training.

Fast forward to the present day, and many universities (mostly the private ones) have already finished an entire online semester, and have started a second one. If you yourself have been a part of this rather peculiar learning experience, or have closely followed someone who has, you can easily tell it was no joyride. Being able to attend classes and exams from the comfort of your home is not necessarily a good thing, especially when you are unable to understand class lectures, or facing difficulties in communicating with your instructor, amidst the constant threat of a global pandemic.

Hence, it is crucial for us to look into the different positives and negatives of an online semester from the students' point of view, and the best way to do so, is by inquiring about their latest endeavour into this new unknown. Only then can we expect academic institutes to try and acknowledge and then address these issues, and to work on them for further development of this system that will possibly be around for a while.

A QUICK LOOK AT THE NUMBERS

In the last week of October, SHOUT conducted a small-scale survey where students from different public and private universities of our country were asked questions regarding their experience of the online semester. The questions focused on the academic experience of the online curriculum, and how well institutes and their respective instructors were able to handle it.

A total of 338 students took part in the survey, most of whom were from private universities including Ahsanullah

University of Science and Technology (AUST), Brac University (BracU), East West University (EWU), Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB), North South University (NSU), and so on. Public university participants included students from Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP), Khulna University of Engineering and Technology (KIET), University of Chittagong (CU), University of Dhaka (DU), and so on.

The survey indicates that 59 percent of the students were intimidated by the idea of an online semester. Prior to the start of online classes, it was quite natural for them to worry about the lectures, having to deal with assignments and projects alone, and above all, the ongoing pandemic with an increasing rate of infections. However, once the semester had ended, that number dropped down to 50 percent, meaning that students were starting to feel comfortable with the idea of an online semester. However, it was only the start.

When questioned about the quality of live classes, we received a mixed response, with the majority of the reviews ranging between "poor" and "good". The average score for the quality of live classes stood at 3.03 on a scale of 5. However, the score varied greatly between public and private universities. For public universities, the score stood at 2.7, while that of the private ones was 3.1.

"I don't think the online semester was effective at all. The whole online system was disrupted by network issues. We have very poor network quality in rural areas, as a result my friends couldn't even join their classes and the mobile data packages are also exorbitantly priced. This is a whole new realm for teachers as well. Online and offline education aren't the same. Teachers and students need to have good interaction and to achieve that a stable network connection and the method of delivering lessons need to be modernised. We lack technological infrastructure and proficiency in using certain software," commented Nafiz Imran, student at DU.

The difference between public and private university scores in this survey is quite noticeable. The score that stands out the most is the one obtained for the overall learning experience, since it manages to paint a good picture as to how students feel regarding their entire experience of the semester. The survey suggests that only 46 percent of public university students, and 60 percent of private university students were satisfied with their online learning experiences. Students pointed out different reasons as to why their experience was like this. A common point that comes up every now and then in the case of public universities is the lack of proper infrastructure,

which is why these institutes cannot seem to make full use of their true potential.

Students were also surveyed on other important factors. 49 percent of the students were unhappy with the idea of an online semester as an alternative to on-campus classes, while 42 percent were willing to believe that it is possible, only if proper measures are taken. When asked about fair grading, 48 percent of students believe they have been treated unfairly in terms of marking by their universities.

Again, 41 percent of the students admitted to have adopted unfair means while completing assignments or sitting for exams. This is indeed a worrying number. Despite adopting different measures, universities are still failing to restrict students from adopting such unfair means. This is where students themselves need to be honest and accountable for their own actions.

"Our group chat became a discussion thread where everyone sent answers, photos and discussed and there's no way I could get a good grade if I was the only one not cheating whereas the entire class was," commented another respondent, requesting anonymity.

Another important point to note is that 42 percent of the students were pressured by their university/instructor to use a means of communication or technology which they did not have access to during online classes. This is another issue with online classes. The infrastructure needs to exist on both ends. Without proper resources, it becomes impossible to attend classes, as there is very little alternative to what is being asked for by the institutes. As a result, many students are deprived of this learning opportunity.

A DIFFERENT APPROACH TO LEARNING ONLINE

The use of EdTech or e-learning platforms in universities is not a new concept. In fact, a lot of foreign universities use these platforms to manage their students' exams, assignments, and other necessary resources that might be required by the students and teachers. Certain universities in Bangladesh also use such platforms to collect assignments, distribute resource materials, and keep students posted about the latest developments in the particular course.

However, no matter how advanced these platforms are, they have never been used as a standalone learning system for the entirety of a semester. Hence, the thought of using such an EdTech or MOOC platform as an alternative to on-campus classes seemed a bit risky, but was also a more viable option for many universities in contrast to conducting live virtual classes.

BracU has so far been the only Bangladeshi university that opted for a MOOC platform as their preferred learning system for the online semesters. BracU's "buX"

was built using the popular MOOC platform offered by EdX, and allowed students to enjoy pre-recorded classes, attend various exams and quizzes, as well as submit assignments. The university also carried on with its regular virtual classes as discussion or consultation sessions, so that students who faced problems in certain modules or lectures could have their issues resolved. BracU's unique approach sets them apart from the other universities in the country, and it is only logical to have a special look at their latest completed semester.

"buX is an amazing initiative by a Bangladeshi university, the first of its kind. It's not perfect but it made the learning process extremely convenient for all of us. It was definitely a new experience for me," said K Taen Zaman, an Economics and Social Sciences student at BracU.

Sixty-five percent of the students who participated from BracU believe that pre-recorded lectures are far better than live virtual classes (Note: Students at BracU have experienced both). They were also more or less pleased with the quality of the lectures, and the content covered in them. In addition to lectures recorded by BracU faculty members, there were also additional resources (class notes, YouTube videos, etc.) that were provided to the students. Overall, 82 percent of these students consider such MOOC platforms as the better option for conducting online classes in comparison to live virtual lectures. In total, 70 percent of the participating students from BracU were satisfied with the learning experience they had.

That being said, BracU too had its shortcomings, mostly with the quality of the lectures. While the majority of the students had no complaints regarding this matter, we cannot overlook the few that do. Learning is something that varies from person to person, and something that suits one individual might not meet the needs of another. Hence, these are issues that may seem petty, but ultimately hamper a student's interest in their studies.

CONCLUSION - IS IT WORTH THE EFFORT?

Online learning is no easy task, neither for students nor their instructors. And the first-ever nationwide online semester was bound to experience hiccups along the way. We can only learn from the errors, trying our best to not turn them into mistakes, and commit to a better learning environment for the coming online semesters. Hence, students and institutes need to reach a common ground, and establish a system where both can be benefitted.

Faisal wants to be the very best, like no one ever was. To stay home is his real test, to survive the pandemic is the cause. Write to him at abir.afc@gmail.com



A FORAY INTO EDUCATION, YOUTH AND A BETTER FUTURE

Leadership Symposium powered by Battle of Minds 2020

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Leadership Symposium powered by Battle of Minds 2020 and presented by The Daily Star was an online event where a panel of experts from backgrounds in academia, the corporate sector, government and youth engagement came together to deliver an hour of fruitful discussion with the aim of reflecting, exploring and examining the role of education in creating leaders for a better tomorrow.

The symposium was conducted by Zunaed Rabbani, in the presence of Dr. Farzana Islam, Vice Chancellor, Jahangirnagar University (JU); Mominur Rashid Amin, Additional Secretary, Ministry of Education; Rumana Rahman, Regional Head of Human Resources, Asia-Pacific and Middle East, British American Tobacco (BAT); Shehzad Munim, Managing Director, British American Tobacco Bangladesh (BATB); and Osama Bin Noor, co-founder of Youth Opportunities, an award-winning global platform aimed at empowering the youth.

The discussions started with the history of local leadership in the corporate sector of Bangladesh. Shehzad Munim of BATB had profound reflections on the issue having had a first row seat to the ascension of local corporate talent from functional heads in companies to the head, or the position of CEO. With a mention of his

organisation's role in not only fulfilling their own needs of local talent but also providing talent abroad, he stressed on the need to ensure an uninterrupted sequence of qualified individuals to occupy leadership positions in the future.

Rumana Rahman, a bright example of local talent making a mark globally, shared experiences of her own in this regard. With a gleam of pride, she counted off many other examples of individuals in key positions of the multinational company she is a part of. She shared her personal ambition of seeing a brand of competence and reliability created by Bangladeshi professionals working all over the world.

Youth Opportunities works with young talent, aiming to empower the youth by bringing closer opportunity providers to the seekers. A co-founder at this organisation, Osama Bin Noor is ideally poised to observe the needs of the local youth. His remarks circled in around the need to provide more inspiration to the youth. He focused on the crisis of role models and mentorship, the lack of proper career guidelines for students in Bangladesh. The need to involve the youth in developing education policies, the need to decentralise opportunities in Dhaka to the rest of the country, and the need to align the necessary 21st century skill set to institutional educa-

tion are also issues that were brought up.

Dr. Farzana Islam was requested at this point to weigh in on what universities have been doing to increase the employability of students in a world where unemployment, or alternatively, underemployment, is a big issue. She asked the panelists to look at the youth not as a homogenous group, but as the diverse group of different abilities and necessities that they are. She talked about the various problems she has observed among her students and the barriers that these problems create in their education and employability. She stressed on the need of government help to pull up the standards of education in a country such as ours where poverty is common. She argued for the need of philanthropic contributions that help foreign universities raise their standards, but aren't prevalent in universities here.

Asked about what the Ministry of Education has planned for the future in terms of the shifting necessities of a country whose goals have shifted with the elevation from a low income economy to a middle income economy, Mominur Rashid Amin talked about the importance of cashing in on the demographic dividend of a majority youth population that Bangladesh currently enjoys. He talked about the updates made to the education policies, the importance of

technical education, and the need to create a competent labour force that can fulfil the needs both at home and abroad. The government's efforts to create more vocational and technical training centres, of establishing universities in every district were mentioned as well. He talked about the existing efforts to extend urban opportunities to rural areas and how this will come back to help make the most of the aforementioned demographic dividend in our population.

The discussions continued further, with examination of what various companies have done to attract top talents, how they've held onto such talent, and what companies can do to create a seamless transition from academics to professional life. Opportunities created for the youth, and the need to extend these opportunities to all parts of society came back into the discussion once again, as it was deemed an important issue that has to be resolved if progress was to be had. The accessibility of quality tertiary education was reflected upon, and the possibilities of public private partnerships in talent development was also explored.

The symposium came to an end with the message of the revolutionary change that is needed to reform education to bring it into sync with the future, and to create leaders for a better tomorrow.

SOLITUDE AND COMPANY

SYEDA ERUM NOOR

The emptiness in all its glorious necromancy
 Falls prey to silence and its sole command.
 Presence of mind is what fuels insanity –
 Solitude and company, victims of blooming romance.

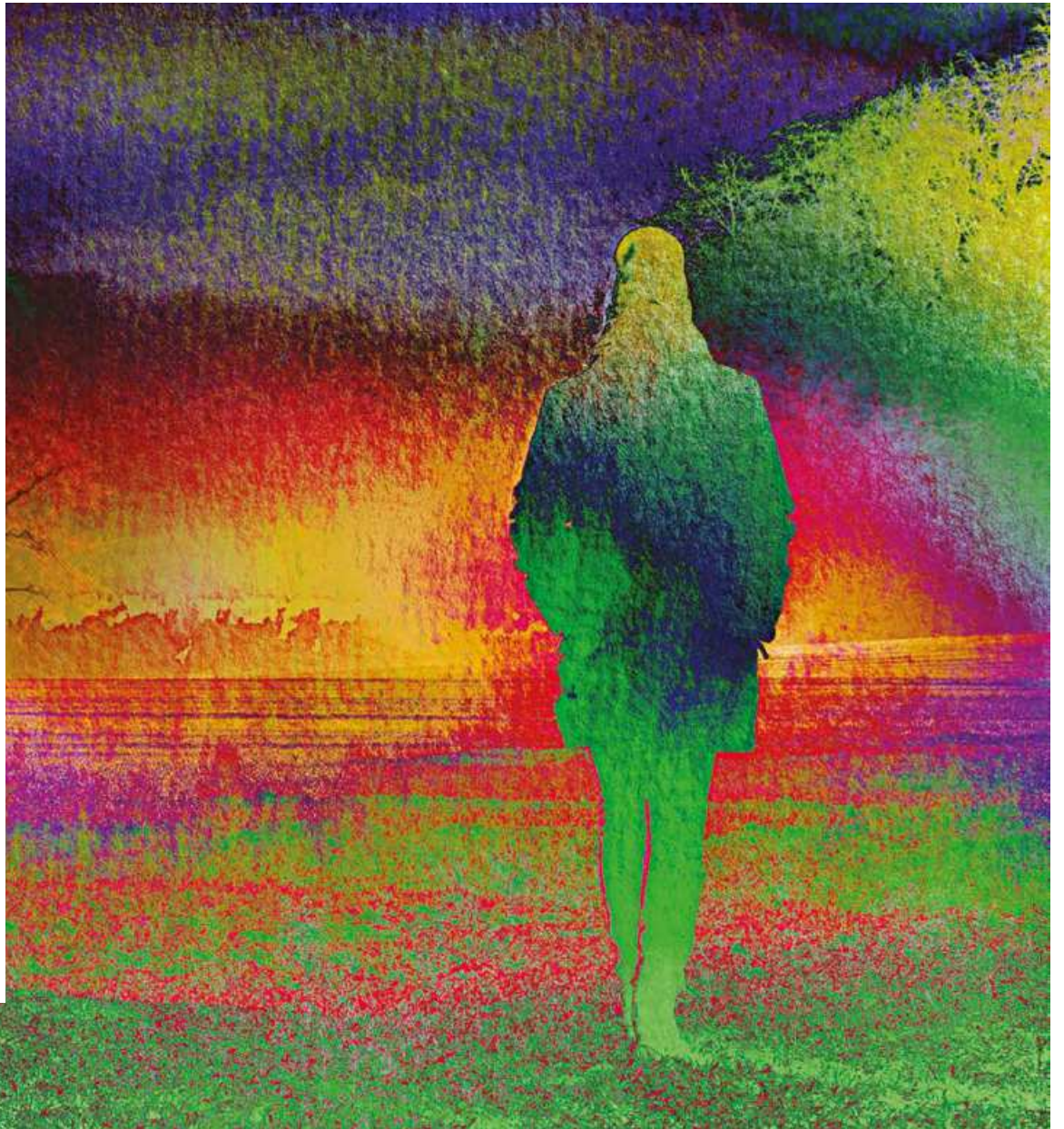
For can one truly exist without the other?
 Tongue paralysed from your smoky, cider scent,
 My noisiness however has me rediscover
 The stains on white plaster, awaiting your advent.

The quivering stillness and throbbing calmness,
 With the serene storm brewing in its wake,
 Brings warmth in its gaping, white solace
 But leaves the ground to rumble and quake.

Fleeting thoughts in darkened skies
 Are best expelled from heart and mind,
 For stewing in its compromise,
 Keep you inclined to feigned mankind.

For solitude and company
 Never thrive exclusively,
 Both having authority
 Over you and your hostility.

Syeda Erum Noor is dangerously oblivious and has no sense of time. Send help at erum.noor1998@gmail.com



NEW GAME OR EXIT?

OSAMAN BIN AHMED

Brash life decisions, addiction, and a life of crime led Al to where he was now; bleeding on the side of the motorcade as his car was left destroyed. There, laid a feeble Al, on a pool of shattered windscreen glass and fresh blood. The shards of glass pricked through his skin and his shattered ribs allowed no movement. His head flopped; Al gazed at the speeding truck that had seized his life. Tears trickled down his cheek in reminiscence of his actions but he had no God to ask forgiveness from. He turned his head and gazed at the night sky as the light of the moon began to dim and his whole life flashed back through his mind...

Al drew his last breaths as his consciousness drifted into a cold, silent, yet uncomfortable abyss. He had lived for as long as he remembered. Al started to think about all the religious sermons he had missed as a kid and asked himself, "Is this the afterlife?"

A brief few moments later, Al transitioned into a more familiar state – his physical one. He felt strange, with a hundred questions flooding his mind as he found himself in a confined tunnel around three metres across, similar to an MRI scanner. The machine, in fact, was a prototype that could simulate any reality by manipulating the neurons of the brain and by also sending the test subject to a virtual world and to any timeline, whether a real one or fantasy. It was aimed to push virtual reality gaming to its furthest boundaries.

A dozen wires untethered as his body was trayed



outside. A man dressed in a white lab coat took out his steel headband as he joked and said, "You are dead. New game or exit?" The others, similarly dressed, laughed in

euphoria as their revolutionary prototype would soon make its way into the market. One of them handed Al a glass of transparent liquid and he could feel his energy rejuvenating. He felt claustrophobic and made his way out of the room.

The rays of the sun hit his face as he rubbed his forearm and looked at the glass top of the multi-storey complex. His head ached tremendously as he tried to recall his life here. He looked around the building of what seemed to be a tech exhibition. Much to his amazement, he could see not a single being who was old. Upon enquiring a booth, he learnt that humans had overcome ageing decades back with CRISPR and the internal and external organs would undergo no such degradation with the passage of time. They could only die of accidents such as fatal injuries. He was dumbfounded and asked himself, "How long was I asleep?"

He walked through the exit and looked around – the civilisation seemed to be around a century advanced from the one he knew. His head felt dizzy again and he wobbled on the middle of the road, eventually falling hard as a car hit him from the back. The injury sent him to coma, a one-way door for him where he would never return.

Or would he?

Osaman is a curious mind always wondering about AI, simulations, theoretical physics and philosophy. To discuss nerd stuff mail him at osamanbinahmed@gmail.com



ECHOES BY
ASRAR CHOWDHURY

Pahela Agrahayan and Nobanno

I
All the months of the Bangla calendar are named after a constellation in the heavens. Except for Agrahayan, which starts in mid-November. Translated as “the first one”, the Bangla New Year was celebrated on Pahela Agrahayan for centuries. That was until Emperor Akbar decided to change the calendar to Pahela Baishakh in 1584 AD, but calculations started from 1556 AD, the year he ascended the throne.

Pahela Agrahayan is known as Nobanno - the new food (feast). Rural Bengal had two harvests: Aush and Aman. Aman was the harvest farmers prayed for. It's reaped in Kartik, a month before Agrahayan. With food surplus in their house, and pleasant weather, ancient rural Bengal was ready for a series of festivities. Durga Puja in Kartik. Nobanno, Lakshmi Puja, and Diwali in Agrahayan.

II
The Aman harvest determined the fate of farmers. When the harvest was good, there was surplus. The surplus would transform into *pithas*, *khoi*, *muri*, *mowa*, *firni*. The list continued.

The people of Bengal never needed an excuse to celebrate. With surplus food, songs and dance weren't too far away. Kites would fill the blue skies. *Nouka baich* would fill the rivers.

The fields would fill up with fairs. Artisans would bring their products to sell.



PHOTO: STAR

Kids would queue in front of the *nagordola*. The squeaking noise of the *nagordola* would leave a seal in hearts forever of nostalgia.

Villages would turn into funfairs. Bengal had its own version of the circus with animal playing, juggling, shooting, throwing rings and what not? People were happy in the breeze of Hemanta, perhaps the best breeze of the year.

Villages of southern Purba Bangla (today's Bangladesh) had one special treat. Water buffaloes. Villages with large fields would organize water buffalo races. Some

parts of Bhola, Lakshmipur still have this tradition. The icing on the cake? Buffalo yoghurt with molasses at the end of the race.

Women of rural Bengal may have stayed at home. That didn't mean they weren't playing their role. At home they were weaving *nakshi kanthas*. Each *kantha* had a story of Nobanno to tell in their tapestries. And that wasn't the end.

The night was always too young in Agrahayan. The evenings would see *jatras* - a tradition that's now almost lost. Mystic singers would sing in the light of *pidims*.

Poets would recite their *puthis*. The party would go on till wee hours of dawn.

III
Nobanno had a dark side. The weather from the heavens could destroy farmers. If the Aman harvest was a waste, so was the fate of farmers for the rest of the year. Farmers would find it hard to pay crop taxes to landlords. And the vultures came to prey. The poor farmers entered an inescapable bondage with money lenders.

There was another dark side. Farmers who had daughters living in far-off villages couldn't invite them for *naiyyor*. There weren't messengers in those days. The helpless daughter would wait, gazing at the path to her parents' house.

IV
Emperor Akbar may have changed Pahela Agrahayan to Pahela Baishakh centuries ago, but people don't give up traditions easily. Times have changed, but never the spirit to party when there's an excuse. Maybe celebrations of today won't be what they were in yesteryears. But they do give an inkling. People of this side of Bengal did know and still do know how to celebrate festivals in festivity.

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The students in an online class

As told by a teacher

NAFISA NOWSHIN

This pandemic has changed many things in our lives. In the lives of teachers and students alike, this pandemic has also added an extra woe called “online classes”. The last few months have seen the rise of online classes everywhere from primary school to universities. In-person classes always had all kinds of students ranging from goody two shoes to the absolute brats. Online classes are no different, though the types may have changed a bit. Let's discover some common categories of students in this new era.

THE “VIDEO ON” GUY

This person will always have his video on during the Zoom class. However, it would focus on anything in his room but his face. On rare occasions when he would actually face the camera, it would be at a strange angle. The worst angle I've

seen is a student focusing the camera at his nose, while he was picking his nose!

THE MUTE GUY

The opposite of the “video on” guy. This student will always mute his microphone, even when you're asking him questions. He will enter and exit the class silently and will never contribute to the class discussion.

THE EXCUSE SHOP

This type of student will always have excuses ready to deliver for any kind of situation. Whether it is the case of missing a viva voce or not submitting an assignment on time, this person will always come up with ways to defend himself. They're also the philanthropic ones as they not only make up excuses for themselves but also supply their friends when the need arises.

ALL ABOUT THE ATTENDANCE

While many students participate in

online classes only for attendance, there is always one person who is extra serious to make sure their attendance is noted. They would interrupt the teacher every five minutes to ask about it. If the teacher puts them on mute, out of annoyance, they will email the teacher after class asking if their attendance has been counted.



THE RESOURCE HOARDER

This one doesn't bother with what is going on in the class. The only thing they care about is when and where the slides and class recordings will be available. They won't let the teacher finish talking before asking about it. They will keep asking for those resources to be supplied immediately as if the world would end if the material is delivered one second late. Another characteristic of this kind of student? They will never study said material.

Adjusting to the new normal has been tough for everyone. The world is changing and so are we. The traditional classroom may have taken a break for the time being. But students, the life of the classroom, are managing to leave their mark even in this new reality.

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