A brother and sister come home from school in the afternoon. After a short break at home, they are back to coaching classes. The classes are not close to home, and these children have to travel through the Dhaka traffic to get there. They are not tutored one on one, but are part of a huge group of boys and girls, all in it to glean the best methods to score high in their upcoming final exams. However, coaching classes start earlier for the school children, they are required to go to them at least from class nine, otherwise they may not make the grade, so to speak. Ergo, all parents who have children in public schools will enroll them in a coaching class. The child's after school time revolves around coaching classes. In a family with working parents, the parental schedule revolves around coaching classes.

As a result of this relentless pressure to make good grades, the children are robbed of a childhood. Just as the poor children who work for a living, sacrificing their childhood at the altar of family needs, so do these relatively well-off kids sacrifice their formative years at the altar of competition and good grades. What are the children who get shunted from coaching class to coaching class missing? They are missing a chance to participate in sporting activities, interact with family and neighbours, meet friends, and, in general, having unstructured time to think, pursue hobbies, read, or maybe even volunteer for some good cause.

These activities are important to the creation of balanced individuals in any society. Therefore, we are creating a generation of youth who are dependent on computers, cell phones, and electronic gadgets for their recreation, and have no time to think and expand their horizons to become well adjusted adults. The little time these youngsters do get from their "studies," they channel mostly in the path of least resistance, i.e. in gobbling up passive entertainment from the revered sanctuary of television or electronic video games. Not all the images and role models these youth are exposed to in television are desirable or ideal for their impres- sionable minds.

Thanks to satellite television, the Bombay film industry has a riveting appeal for many of these children. They are blown away by the styles of clothing that the stars wear, and aspire to wear the same, not to mention their ideas about the opposite sex that are shaped by these experiences -- all in a fictional world little grounded in reality. This exposure, per se, has its own consequences down the road for these children, who often become somewhat disconnected from their family values. There is very little parent child interaction at home, except at mealtimes and perhaps in the car en route to and from coaching classes.

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The blame lies squarely with the school educational system that is prevalent in Bangladesh. A culture has been created whereby teachers in the majority of public schools are not required to teach what they ought to in the classrooms, they hold students to ransom by compelling them to attend coaching classes in which many of these same teachers are the coaches -- a major conflict of interest if there ever was one! There appears to be no accountability of teachers' performance, no mechanism in place where they can be evaluated and encouraged to undergo professional development.

Now that the country is undergoing a major "clean up" of sorts to shed the yoke of pervasive corruption, maybe this is a good time to take a fresh look at primary and secondary education in Bangladesh. Not only is there a three-tier system -- Bengali medium schools, English medium schools, and Madrassas -- their curricula vary widely, leading to the wide disparity in the quality of education delivered. The small percentage of the population who can afford to send their children to English medium schools often do so with the aspiration of sending their offspring abroad for tertiary education after completion of O and A levels.

Although the standards for these examinations have changed over the years; they, nevertheless, still remain quite rigorous in the knowledge base and independent thinking that is required to obtain good grades in exams. The operative phrase here is "independent thinking" -- a concept that is sorely lacking in the day to day teaching that goes on in the majority of our schools. The emphasis is on rote learning and regurgitation from memory, without much thought to whether a concept has been grasped and can be applied appropriately.

I can recall meeting a physician from Bangladesh, who was one of the top students in his class, coming to a prestigious hospital in the U.K. for further training, only to be fired from the program shortly thereafter because of incompetence. This did not happen overnight. The root cause of this is the rickety, hollow, educational framework that is the bulwark of primary and secondary education,