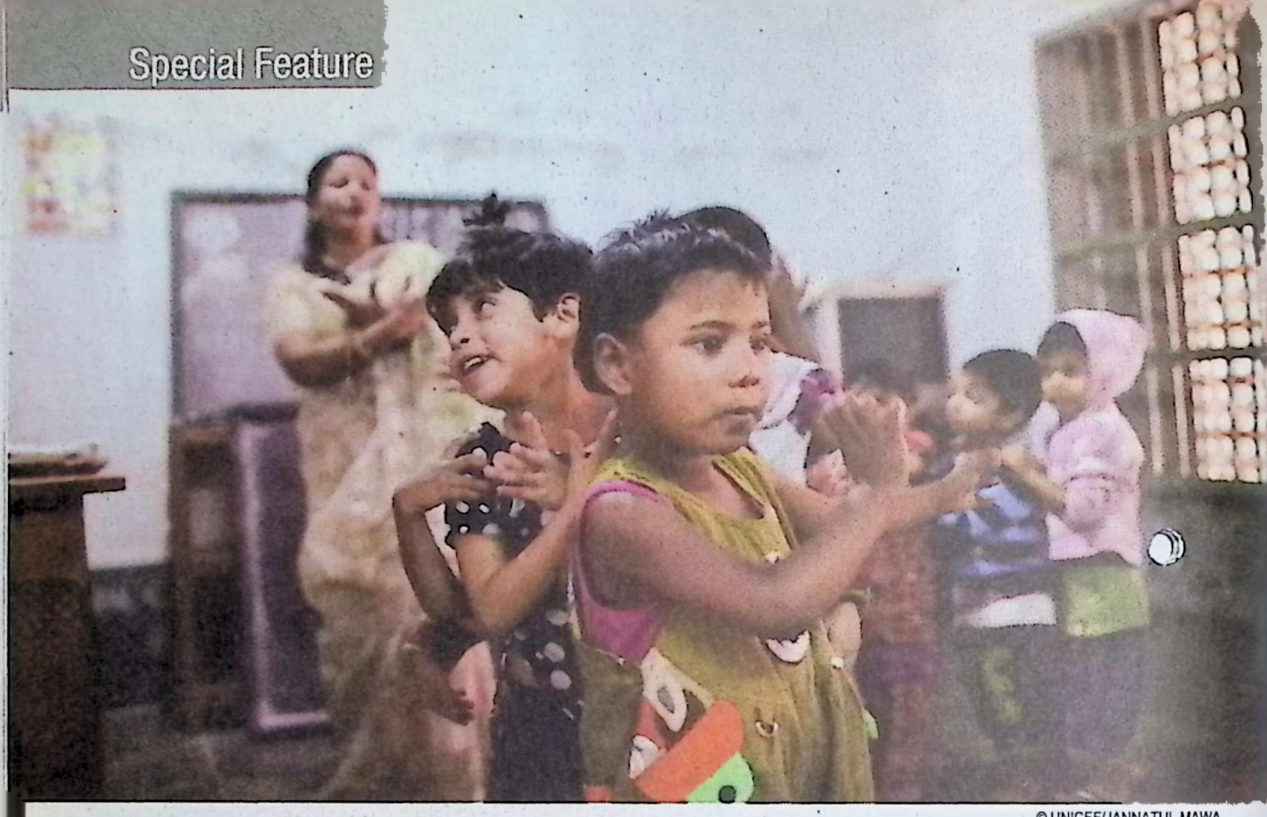


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AS GOOD AS IT GETS

RAFFAT BINTE RASHID

Exactly at 7 am, just as the big dong-like bell clangs, Shanto's morning starts off with a glass of warm milk. Then, with some light exercise and singing of the national anthem the adorable four-year-old begins his day at the day care centre; his two – and – a – half – hour study time, play time, bath time, lunch – his daily ritual follows a particular pattern in sync with the tolling of the bell. And exactly at 5 pm he returns to his mother.

From afar it may seem a little regimented for a day care centre to maintain such strict timing but that is how everything works at Dhaka Central Jail where he temporarily resides with his mother, as she awaits her court orders.

Confined yet happy

Children in Dhaka Central Jail spend 10 hours, from 7 in the morning till 5 in the evening, in the day care centre situated inside the jail premises. The airy, spacious room where the children spend their study time is clean and sunlit – although the high walls and heavy metal grilles frame the verandahs, but the atmosphere inside the day care centre is a positive and happy one. Children in their usual boisterous manner sing out their favourite rhymes and show off their drawings, eager to draw attention.

"My name is Suha and I can sing", "My name is Mim I have a red car", "I am Laboni",– they let you know their presence and are keen to impress as they sing out aloud while queuing for play time.

The play corner is a big room carpeted with floor mats, the room is filled with child-friendly plastic cars in the shape of various animals, but the star attraction is the small yellow slide that plunges the children into a pool of bright-coloured balls. There is a red see-saw, a pink doll house, puzzles, cricket bats. "My favourite ride is the slide but I love to drive my red bunny car," a well-dressed Shanto chirps, adding that play time is his favourite hour of the day.

"I came here when my child was only six months old and now he is three – and – a – half – year – old. He has never seen the world outside these walls but he is a happy child and I feel relieved when at night he recites his rhymes for me. I know that at least he is learning things. This