

Growing up, I was always told to be prepared when embarking on something new. Sometimes, however, there is very little one can do to prepare for the bumps along the journey we call life. That is what unfolded after I was accepted to a leading Australian university as a PhD student. I believed that it would be fairly smooth sailing both academically and socially as I had lived and studied overseas before. I was in for a rude shock.

they did it out of concern but it did not help me in the long run.

At times, I would ask myself what possessed me to come here. I could not see beyond the difficulties. I realised that I should have practised doing things on my own well before leaving home, and that is a message of value I can pass along to young people going out into the world.

When it was time for me to start looking for housing, I found that

"We were not ready for someone like you." However, blind students studied here too and required more. I was literally shuffled from one authority to another. I felt overwhelmed.

I would not get my books, which often had to be transformed into electronic copies, on time. Although the disability unit and library staff soon started assisting me, my disability advisor behaved indifferently. One former blind student who I met later admitted that she left the university because of lack of support.

It would not be long before I met Antoni from Indonesia, who was pursuing a PhD and had been in a wheelchair all his life. I confided in him about my troubles and how unapproachable my disability advisor was. He told me that he had received similar treatment and referred me to two faculty members who had worked on disability issues. I contacted Professor Fisher and he reassured me that things

one that placed greater stress on community, so people seemed unfriendly at first. My PhD colleagues were naturally interested in discussing thesis topics and asked me about mine, which was fine but I found myself repeating that conversation a lot... even at lunchtime! I felt that they were too focused on academics while wondering why they were not interested in getting to know me. Furthermore, at this level, many students had families and were unable to spend time with me. I found myself feeling very out of place. I started seeing a counsellor and took anti-depressants and that may well have saved my life at the time.

After a month at a friend's place, I moved into a shared house with Chinese students who initially were unsocial and spent most of their time in their rooms.

It started turning around after six months, when I moved into a residential college on campus. Among students from all over the world, I was made to

|| PERSPECTIVE |

DOUBLE TAKE



KARIM WAHEED

DHAKA THE BEST AUDIENCE

Joseph Nye, American political scientist and cofounder of the international relations theory of neoliberalism, described 'soft power' as the ability to appeal to and persuade others using the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies. Examples of potent cultural influence include Hollywood (USA), Bollywood (India), Anime (Japan), K-pop (South Korea) etc.

A strong cultural influence creates a favourable impression of a country globally. To our benefit, we have realised the importance of cultural influence and post 2000, Dhaka has been seeing major international cultural events that are slowly but surely putting our capital city on the map.

I recall being excited when the first edition of Chobi Mela, the largest festival of photography in Asia, rolled out in Dhaka. There was nothing like it in my working memory as a Dhakaite.

Then came Bengal Classical Music Festival which mesmerised and enthused with its larger than life scale and execution. It made South Asian classical music "sexy". Let's be real: before this annual event happened, did you – in your wildest dreams – ever imagine teenagers thronging a concert where sexagenarian and older musicians perform all night?

And of course this rumination won't be complete

without mentioning Dhaka Art Summit, the latest edition of which ended last week. To quote a renowned international newspaper's coverage, "Dhaka Art Summit is the most unusual 'must-see' on the global art circuit". Starting in 2012, each edition of the summit seems to outdo its predecessor. The idea that anyone can walk into this venue that gives them access to both locally and globally celebrated artworks and functions as a launching pad for up and coming Bangladeshi artists deserves all the appreciation it's receiving. There were so many remarkable displays but I'll mention two that have been haunting [in a good way] me for days. The first was the CGI animated video installation by Singaporean artist Ho Tzu Nyen called "2 or 3 Tigers"

labours of love but without one component none of these endeavours would have been successful: the Dhaka audience. Sure, this city is one of the most overcrowded in the world and we have 99 problems but a massive, exuberant turnout isn't one. Bangladeshis are inherently overeager; crowds form around regular snake oil salesmen on the street on any given day like it's a Pink Floyd reunion concert. Naturally, when we have access to something extraordinary we go all out and express our appreciation in the most profound way. Besides the loyal, erudite art connoisseurs and enthusiasts, there were visitors [particularly teenagers] one wouldn't generally expect at art shows. Many of them were perplexed by the art pieces and performances; perhaps

SEARCH FOR SIGHT AND COMMUNITY IN SYDNEY

TAHREEN AHMED

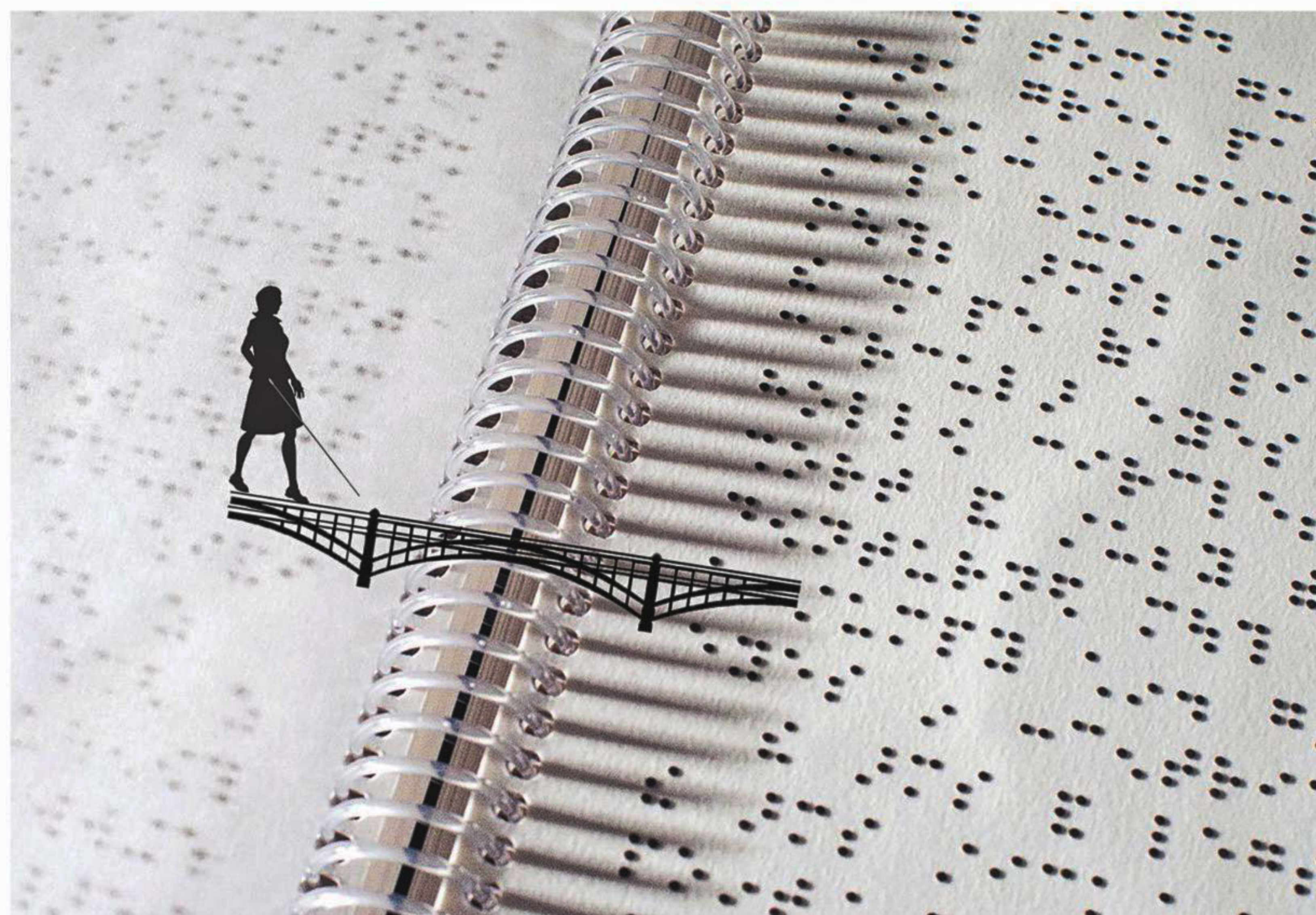


IMAGE: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

One would be surprised, but my university did not have adequate facilities to meet my needs. Apparently, this university had one of the better disability units in the country but it would take four months for them to figure out ways to help.

In late August 2015, my plane landed at Sydney Airport, where I was greeted by an old high school friend from Bangladesh. As we travelled by train towards her home, somehow, it all felt unfamiliar and—I was in the 'West' again after a long time and Sydney just did not seem like the cities I had once known.

Before university started, I would be home alone and was reluctant to venture outdoors, because I am visually challenged (near-sighted). I was scared even to cross the street unassisted. Back home my parents did the most essential things for me—like going to shops and banking errands—or they would at least accompany me. I do not blame them as

properties were either too unhygienic, the rent too high, or they simply were not to my liking. One landlord actually told me that I could only cook boiled food!

Meanwhile, university started and that is when all the real problems began. With low vision, I required certain assistance related to my studies. These included getting access to eBooks and reading software. One would be surprised, but my university did not have adequate facilities to meet my needs. Apparently, this university had one of the better disability units in the country but it would take four months for them to figure out ways to help. My disability advisor said one day:

were going to be alright and referred me to the second faculty. I remember Dr. Smedley with great affection because I would not have coped without the assistance and guidance this kind soul gave me.

My growing circle of friends taught me to use an ATM machine, send money home, and do online banking. Based on my experience, I strongly believe that there should be an induction programme for even international higher degree research students, especially those with disabilities.

Then there were the cultural hurdles. In Australia, the culture is so individualistic, whereas I had come from

feel welcome there and we ate our meals together. Hanging from the ceiling of the dining hall were flags of the countries that the residents hailed from. At long last, I felt like a part of a community.

As time went on, I worked hard on my research and made more friends. I met Bangladeshi families who became my companions. We would visit the pristine beaches of Sydney. Furthermore, I started doing things on my own. I was 'mobile' for the first time in my life thanks to the kindness of my Mobility Trainer, Margret, from a wonderful charity organisation called Vision Australia.

The crippling struggles I faced initially and my eventual deliverance have taught me lessons I will never forget, and I know that now I will be better prepared.

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PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

which recounted a folklore about the first recorded meeting of a white man and a tiger in Singapore in 1835. The other was the room [I'm calling it "The Throne Room"] designed by Anglo-Indian artist, Raqib Shaw. The wallpaper of the room alone deserves an extended conversation. Then there was the used kimono, the regal peacock chair with two shawls [perhaps an allusion to Shaw's Kashmiri roots?], and the stars of the show – the dazzling, enigmatic paintings that are very contemporary and yet bear the classic opulence of Hieronymus Bosch.

The organisers of these cultural behemoths rightfully deserve national and international acclaim for their

some had no idea what was going on. Quite a few were probably there for the selfies and the check-ins, and were shamed by the "cultural gatekeepers" on social media for this supposed social faux pas.

But when has internet induced social change? More and frequent exposure to art, cinema, music and literature can only be a good thing; Dhaka audience is ready for it and hungry for it, and we show up with our best positive energy and create a buzz that's unrivalled. I don't think it'd be an overstatement to say that Dhaka has THE BEST audience in the world.

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STRANGE HISTORY

THE MYSTERY OF THE BARISAL GUNS

A mysterious phenomenon rocked the southern coast of Bangladesh in the 19th century. It was a phenomenon which was experienced by hundreds and thousands of people but nobody could identify its actual cause. It is still regarded as one of the top unsolved mysteries of the world. This phenomenon was named Barisal Guns after Bangladesh's Barisal city, whose dwellers first documented this incident. This phenomenon refers to a series of deafening loud sounds that rocked Bangladesh's southern coast without any earthquake or without any incident of associated explosion. It was first documented in 1870 AD in the district gazetteer of Barisal. The then British administration, at first, considered those as explosions from cannon fires. But repeated investigations did not find any major battle which could produce such a loud sonic boom. According

to Asiatic Society reports, this sonic boom had been heard by the inhabitants of Noakhali, Khulna, Barisal and even in Narayanganj. Various witness accounts informed that sometimes it was only one loud bang and sometimes repeated loud bangs used to create panic among local inhabitants, however, no hazardous outcome had been reported after the phenomenon. Eminent poet Sufia Kamal also mentioned this phenomenon in her autobiography where she says that this mysterious bang was last heard in the early 1950s. According to one theory, the sonic boom was created by sound waves which were broken up by the local topography, but this theory could not be proved. This incident is now considered as an example of skyquake—which refers to an unexplained sonic boom without any corresponding earthquake.

— MD SHAHNAWAZ KHAN CHANDAN

